

# SSW: Narrow-gauge to mainline link

Cotton Belt was an SP subsidiary after 1932, but it was kept separate for a reason • **By Mike Condren**



It's train time in Mount Pleasant, Texas, September 19, 1954, and we look north-northeast as SSW FP7 306, a unique "Daylight" in SP's world, waits to head for Dallas with train 107 at 2:10 p.m. (assuming on-time performance), 10 minutes after overnight St. Louis-Tyler train 7 has left.

R. S. Plummer; Louis A. Marre collection

**W**hat became the St. Louis Southwestern Railway, "the Cotton Belt Route," began as the Tyler Tap Railroad in 1877 to connect the east Texas town of Tyler with Big Sandy, 12 miles north. The railroad was built to the then-common 3-foot gauge to keep costs down.

The Tyler Tap then extended northeast 105 miles to Texarkana to deliver cotton to the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern, which would forward it to St. Louis. StLIM&S ("Iron Mountain") was an 1874 consolidation of two railroads. One, the St. Louis & Iron Mountain, chartered in 1851, went southwest through Missouri's iron-ore country and Arkansas. The other, chartered in 1854, was the Cairo & Fulton; it ran southwest from Bird's Point, Mo. (opposite Cairo, Ill.), to Fulton, Ark., 20 miles short of the Texas border. C&F met the Texas & Pacific at Texarkana in 1873. In 1879 Jay Gould bought the Missouri Pacific (west from St. Louis) and then added several roads, including the merged St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern.

The Tyler Tap soon encountered the Gould monopoly, whose Iron Mountain was quoting a high tariff, and decided to build a parallel line of its own, diagonally across Arkansas to Missouri's southeastern "boot heel." The Tyler Tap reorganized in 1879 as the Texas & St. Louis, under the leadership of St. Louis financier James Paramore, who was seeking an economical way to move cot-

ton north from East Texas.

T&StL built in 3-foot gauge to Bird's Point also, but passed through no major towns. At Bird's Point, T&StL — like the Cairo & Fulton — connected by ferry to Cairo, on the standard-gauge Illinois Central but also on the 3-foot-gauge St. Louis & Cairo (later part of the Mobile & Ohio). By 1885 a continuous string of narrow-gauge railroads stretched from Toledo, Ohio, to Houston, Texas.

T&StL soon entered bankruptcy, and in 1886 was reorganized as the St. Louis, Arkansas & Texas. The distinctive "Cotton Belt Route" emblem, designed by Charles Ware at the railroad's request, dates from about this time, when it replaced an image of a cotton bale.

As heavier trains evolved, the economical 3-foot gauge began to create problems. Through the 1880s T&StL extended southwest from Tyler 175 miles

through Waco to Gatesville, Texas, and built branches to Fort Worth and to Shreveport, La. Bowing to the inevitable, it was standard-gauged in the late 1880s.

The road took on more debt to rebuild with heavier rail, forcing another bankruptcy in 1889. Reorganized as the St. Louis Southwestern, it was acquired in 1891 by Jay Gould, who surprisingly did not try to merge it into Missouri Pacific.

SSW added several short lines in northeast Texas, and soon gained access to Memphis, Tenn., on Iron Mountain trackage rights. A breakthrough occurred soon after 1900 when Cotton Belt gained rights over the Iron Mountain on its newly built line on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River to reach East St. Louis, Ill. These rights were in trade for letting MP (Iron Mountain) run on SSW between Illmo, Mo., and Paragould, Ark. Starting in 1905, trains of both roads



No. 805, one of SSW's 10 Baldwin 4-8-4s, departs Greenville, Texas, with train 317 in 1949.

R. S. Plummer

avoided any Mississippi River ferrying in the area when their new bridge between Thebes, Ill., and Scott City, Mo., opened. (Gould's empire began falling apart in the 1880s, and the Iron Mountain would enter receivership in 1915.)

Cotton Belt established a freight house in St. Louis, reaching it via the Eads Bridge. The Eads opened in 1874 under control of the Terminal Railroad Association of St. Louis (TRRA), founded in 1889 in a deal orchestrated by Jay Gould and initially owned by six trunk lines. An easier access into St. Louis proper for SSW was created in 1917 when the city's Municipal Bridge, downstream from Eads, opened after 8 years of construction, the city's goal being to break the TRRA's monopoly. Cotton Belt built its own yard and engine facilities in East St. Louis. (Municipal Bridge, also known as the "Free Bridge," would be named for Gen. Douglas MacArthur in 1942.)

Cotton Belt in 1912 moved its Memphis passenger trains off MP's line and onto Rock Island's, out of Brinkley, Ark., for 68 miles; freights made the shift in 1921. SSW built its own freight house and small yard in Memphis, while its passenger trains shared Union Station with Louisville & Nashville; MP; Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis; and Southern Railway. In later years, SSW would run its own intermodal yard in Memphis, conduct run-through freight service with Southern, and make connections with Frisco and L&N in their yards. Cotton Belt freights operated out of Illinois Central's South Yard until it closed.

## SP control, and a Blue Streak

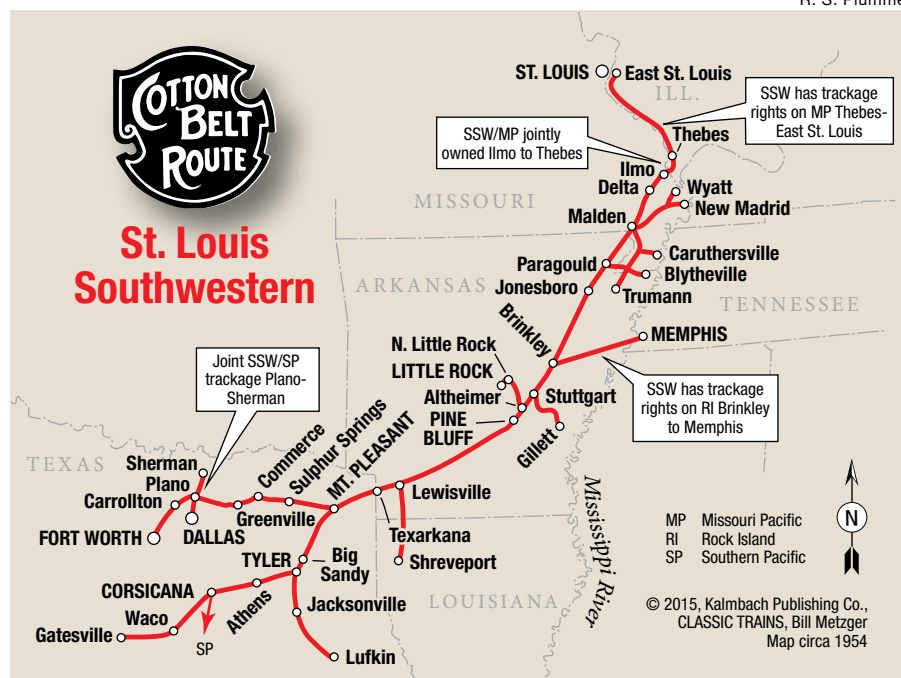
After World War I, Cotton Belt's overhead traffic began to increase. The Rock Island bought a controlling interest in the road in 1925 but almost immediately sold it to the Kansas City Southern. KCS proposed a regional system to include itself, Cotton Belt, and Missouri-Kansas-Texas ("Katy"), but that idea was seven decades ahead of its time and the Interstate Commerce Commission would not approve it. KCS lost interest in the Cotton Belt, but about the same time, Southern Pacific was looking for a connection to St. Louis.

Cotton Belt's relationship with SP as a western connection dated from 1919, and SP applied to the ICC for control, which was granted in 1932. SSW remained a separate subsidiary, however, because in 1923 when the ICC approved SP control



An FT A-B-B trio powers train 126 at Tyler, Texas, in 1950. SSW's 20 FTs eventually would get SP's "Black Widow" livery. No color photos of this first gray-and-yellow scheme have surfaced.

R. S. Plummer



of Central Pacific, it imposed the condition that SP solicit freight traffic for movement via Ogden, Utah, and Union Pacific, in preference to SP's own route across Texas. Cotton Belt, though, was not governed by that agreement, and its salespeople could solicit traffic to move SP-SSW all the way to East St. Louis. So the St. Louis Southwestern continued to operate as a separate corporation.

A new type of freight service began on Cotton Belt in 1931 with the creation of the *Blue Streak Merchandiser*, providing fast less-than-carload merchandise service from East St. Louis to Pine Bluff, Texarkana, and Shreveport. At first, LCL from north of Pine Bluff was carried there in separate trains, gathered there, and continued on a single second-class

train on a leisurely pace south.

The concept took hold, and soon Cotton Belt considered its "Blue Streak Freight" a significant merchandise service, with enough business to run dedicated, named freight trains. By 1940, this fast service had been extended to Los Angeles over SP west of Corsicana, Texas. By 1962 there were three trains westbound: *Blue Streak Merchandise*, *Advance Blue Streak Merchandise*, and *Memphis Blue Streak Merchandise*, each providing three-day service to L.A. Service deteriorated in the 1970s, with delivery time lengthened by half a day, and the traffic eventually segued into today's intermodal service.

Delays to the *Blue Streaks* were not tolerated. The service lasted for 60 years,



With one each GP35, GP30, and GP20 up front, a Cotton Belt freight (top) passes Dallas Union Terminal eastbound on June 13, 1965. A month earlier (above), on May 1, two "Alligators" and an F7B are about to ease off MoPac tracks into SSW's Valley Junction yard in East St. Louis.

Two photos, Mike Condren

across several generations of railroaders, and it worked only because everyone involved was dedicated to its success.

The Great Depression of the 1930s hit the Cotton Belt hard, and while the *Blue Streak Merchandise* helped, it alone could not make SSW profitable. Like many railroads in the era, SSW entered bankruptcy at the end of 1935 and would not emerge with profit until 1941.

### From 4-4-0s to 4-8-4s

Cotton Belt had locomotive shops at Pine Bluff, Ark., and Tyler, Texas, and roundhouses at Commerce and Waco, Texas, and East St. Louis. At Shreveport, SSW and SP's Texas & New Orleans shared a roundhouse, and SSW had an engine service facility in Texarkana.

SSW's post-Depression steam roster was typical of the region and era, with 4-6-0s, 2-6-0s, and 2-8-0s, plus a few 4-4-0s and 4-4-2s for passenger service. The road's last bought-new steam engines were 10 Baldwin 4-8-4s, 800-809, for freight service beginning in 1930.

They shared many dimensions with SP's GS-1 class Northerns. In 1937, although bankrupt, SSW bought five 4-8-2s from Florida East Coast, using them in both freight and passenger service; SSW also

got seven 4-8-2s from the Rock Island.

Cotton Belt's final steam locomotives were 10 more 4-8-4s, home-built at Pine Bluff in two batches of 5, the second in 1943. In late summer '52, 13 of the 4-8-4s were transferred to SP for use in New Mexico and California. They got train number boards and numbers in SP's 4400 series. In May 1953 they were put in commute service on SP's Coast Division, but by fall 1956 all were in dead storage.

Like many roads, Cotton Belt dieselized gradually, getting its first yard engines, 3 VO1000s, in 1942. The Baldwin fleet would grow to 28 (including five DS-4-4-1000s), plus a dozen EMDs through 1952. Its first road diesels were three A-B-B-A FT sets in 1944, which came because an order for more 4-8-4s had been canceled by the War Production Board. Three more quartets arrived in 1944. SSW bought one large Baldwin center-cab unit, DT-6-6-2000 No. 260, in 1948 for the Waco-Gatesville branch, selecting the model so there would be no need to turn it at Gatesville, which had no wye or turntable. All units until 1949 were delivered painted yellow and gray.

Dieselization gathered speed in 1950 with the first of 26 F7As and 17 F7Bs, which, along with 17 Alco RS3s and 3

RSD5s, killed off steam by 1953. Six EMD GP9s followed in '57, and the last FTs were retired in September '61. The yellow and gray succumbed to SP's "Black Widow" livery for road units (switchers were black and orange), and Cotton Belt's diesels mostly were built to Southern Pacific specifications.

With SP's new gray and red scheme of 1959 also came the integration of Cotton Belt engine numbers with SP's, SSW's three-digit series being replaced with slots in the parent's four-digit system. The "next generation" of units, during 1957-65, included 17 SW1200s to replace the Baldwins, and for road work, EMD GP9s, '20s, '30s, and '35s, plus 10 Alco RSD15 low-nose "Alligators" in 1960. After the mid-'60s, the fleets became truly integrated, with COTTON BELT on the gray flanks and "SSW" on the nose being more of an accounting exercise than a reflection of assignment.

### Varnish, and growth

Cotton Belt was never a major passenger hauler, with only two "name trains" of note: the *Lone Star* and *Morning Star*. The former linked Memphis and Dallas, with connecting trains to Shreveport and Waco, while the latter ran St. Louis-Dallas. All three end-point terminals were Union Stations. Early branchline trains employed General Electric gas-electric motor cars, eventually replaced by secondhand Electro-Motive gas-electrics from SP.

By the diesel era, SSW needed only four mainline passenger units, but what a fleet it was! First, in 1949, came two Alco PAs, 300 and 301, in SP's "Daylight" red and orange but lettered COTTON BELT; in 1955 they were relettered ST. LOUIS SOUTHWESTERN. In 1950 one each FP7 (No. 330, later 306, then SP 6462) and GP7 (No. 320, later 304) arrived, also in Daylight livery, the only examples of those models on SSW's roster and the only F and Geep on the entire SP system known to wear those colors. The F was quickly relettered ST. LOUIS SOUTHWESTERN, in April '50; the Geep arrived in June. Three of the RS3s delivered in April '52 came with steam generators but were painted in SP's black and silver freight colors; they regularly hauled the Lewisville, Ark.-Shreveport connection.

All SSW passenger service in Texas ended in 1956, and its last passenger train, a St. Louis-Pine Bluff coach-only local, made its final run November 30,



Posed as if for a company photographer, GP9 825 shows SSW's unique emblem, while 1948 DS-4-4-1000 1027, the road's last Baldwin, chortles at Texarkana on the last day of 1964.

Louis A. Marre

1959. As with Cotton Belt's 4-8-4s, the passenger diesels and 10 streamlined coaches moved west for use on SP.

In 1945 Cotton Belt operated 1,600 miles, which in the "modern era" changed only with branchline abandonments. Meanwhile, parent SP always had its eye on reaching first, St. Louis (hence its SSW purchase), and second, Chicago.

SSW in 1973 bought the half interest in Alton & Southern, an East St. Louis belt line, held by Chicago & North Western (Missouri Pacific owned the other half). SP had long been trying to get the southern half of the Rock Island system, in which case UP would get the northern half, but that protracted battle came to naught in the well-known ICC case.

In 1980, as the Rock was being liquidated, SP got to Kansas City, using the Cotton Belt (again owing to the Ogden traffic agreement) to acquire the portion of the Golden State Route to K.C. from Santa Rosa, N.Mex. Some tagged the line the "Cotton Rock." Included was RI's dormant K.C.-St. Louis line, which never saw complete service in post-Rock Island times, but as an alternate, SSW got rights on UP's ex-MoPac main to St. Louis. Two years later, Cotton Belt acquired RI's Brinkley, Ark.-Memphis line.

On April 1, 1988, SP finally reached "Chicagoland" on its own when it purchased from the bankrupt Chicago, Missouri & Western the former Gulf, Mobile & Ohio/Illinois Central Gulf route between East St. Louis and Joliet, Ill., with ICG rights into Chicago. But SP didn't use SSW for this, instead creating SPCSL Corp. (SP-Chicago-St. Louis). Two years hence, in late 1990, SP did use SSW in securing overhead rights from Kansas City to Chicago over Burlington Northern via Quincy, Ill. All these additions brought Cotton Belt's total route-mileage to over 2,300, but in reality, SSW was

merely an on-paper subsidiary of SP. Cotton Belt ceased to be a separate company in 1992, and four years later, Union Pacific swallowed the SP, somewhat roughly in places.

Perhaps the most significant surviving vestige of the Cotton Belt is its last 4-8-4, home-built No. 819. Long displayed in Pine Bluff's City Park, she was moved in 1983 by the Cotton Belt Rail Historical Society to the shop where she'd been built 40 years before, and restored on the same track on which she'd been constructed. She operated in excursion service out of Pine Bluff on several occasions during 1986-1993, including trips to Tyler and to St. Louis Union Station for the 1990 NRHS national convention. She remains on display at the Pine Bluff shop, now the Arkansas Railroad Museum. ■

## Cotton Belt fact file



(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1983)

**Route-Miles:** 1,809; 2,375

**Locomotives:** 248; 307

**Freight cars:** 8,458; 17,407

**Passenger cars:** 168; 0

**Headquarters city:** St. Louis, Mo.

**Special interest group:** Cotton Belt Rail Historical Society, P.O. Box 2044, Pine Bluff, AR 71613-2044; [arkansastrailroadmuseum.org](http://arkansastrailroadmuseum.org)

**Recommended reading:** *Cotton Belt Engineer: The Life and Times of C. W. "Red" Standefer 1898-1981* (AuthorHouse, 2011); *Cotton Belt Locomotives*, by Joseph A. Strapac (Shade Tree Books, 1977; reissued by Indiana University Press, 1999)

**Source:** *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2014)