



BIG RAILROADING IN A SMALL TEXAS TOWN

Big Sandy

BY STEVE SCHMOLLINGER/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

LITTLE TOWNS often come with big surprises. Driving through the many small towns of east Texas, you wouldn't expect much excitement, given the leisurely pace of local folks and their unruffled demeanor. But appearances can deceive. Big Sandy, a town of only 1360 souls, is a crossroads for two important main lines on the Union Pacific: the former Cotton Belt, now known as the Pine Bluff Sub, coming west out of Texarkana, Ark., and continuing on to central Texas as the Corsicana Sub; and the ex-Texas & Pacific (T&P), later part of Missouri Pacific and now called the Mineola Sub, which leads to Shreveport, La., and

Texarkana to the east, and Dallas, Fort Worth and the West Coast in the opposite direction.

Just a Small Texas Town

Big Sandy had its beginnings shortly after the Civil War when the T&P arrived and called the spot "Big Sandy Switch." The surrounding town hasn't grown much since then. However, it has grown in importance as a railroad junction, especially since the St. Louis Southwestern or "Cotton Belt" showed up. The T&P built its line through the area in 1873, and the Cotton Belt (originally incarnated as the narrow gauge Tyler Tap Railroad) built through Big

Sandy around 1880. The Tyler Tap converted to standard gauge in 1887. Thus was the genesis of perhaps the most important railroad interlocking in all of east Texas. In 1891 the Tyler Tap was reorganized as the St. Louis Southwestern and acquired by Southern Pacific in 1932.

With the merger of the UP and Mopac in 1982, and the later merger with rival Southern Pacific in 1996, the crossing became an all-UP affair. When UP tried to absorb the former SP and change its operations to its own liking too swiftly, a major slowdown occurred, starting at Englewood Yard in Houston and radiating out until it caused the

OPPOSITE: With little warning of its approach, UP 7851 West leans into a tight curve as it races through the forest just west of Big Sandy, Texas, on the Corsicana Sub on December 10, 2011. ABOVE: Looking east down Gilmer Street, a short UP "Z" train out of Pine Bluff, Arkansas, departs Big Sandy for Dallas with a BNSF Dash 9 as the only power on November 14, 2011.

entire UP system to nearly crawl to a stop. In a word, it came to be known as the “meltdown,” and it took months and months before the railroad was operating smoothly again. Part of the fix was to institute directional running between Texarkana and Big Sandy, virtually eliminating meets on those lines and making them more fluid. UP designated the ex-Cotton Belt as the westbound line, and the T&P as the eastbound.

Current Operations

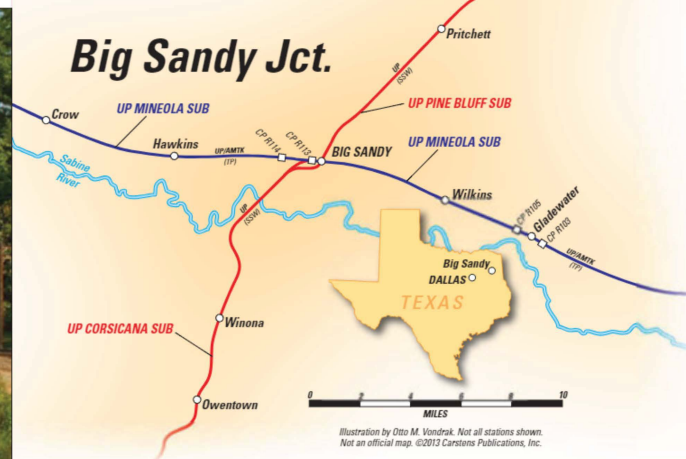
As it stands today, virtually all traffic on the Pine Bluff Sub is westbound. Between Big Sandy and Marshall, Tex., the lion’s share of traffic heads east, and virtually all traffic between Marshall and Texarkana (on the Little Rock Sub) is northbound. Westbound “through” trains coming off KCS’s Meridian Speedway, as well as empty UP rock trains headed for Chico, Tex.,

(northwest of Fort Worth) use the Reisor (pronounced “ree-ser”) Sub between Shreveport, La., and Marshall and continue on through Big Sandy on the Mineola Sub. Amtrak trains Nos. 21 and 22, the *Texas Eagle*, run between Chicago and San Antonio, Tex., and use the Mineola Sub in both directions.

UP dispatchers control the entire Mineola Sub using Centralized Traffic Control (CTC), transferring track au-

thority to train crews via wayside signals. Likewise, they control virtually the entire Pine Bluff and Corsicana Subs using CTC; the only exception is a four-mile “island” of automatic block signals in Tyler, where dispatchers use track warrants to give trains authority. The Pine Bluff Sub approaches Big Sandy generally from the northeast, and the Mineola Sub slices through town approximately on an east-west

RIGHT: The engineer of an eastbound UP rock train in the hole at Big Sandy checks the left side of his power, watching out for another eastbound the dispatcher is running around his train on January 17, 2008. **BELOW:** With a block of reefers at the front of its consist, UP 4669 West roars out of Big Sandy on the Mineola Sub behind four EMD SD70M’s on August 4, 2007.



ABOVE: Just west of Big Sandy UP 7625 West passes deciduous trees retaining full autumn color in early December 2011. East Texas is heavily wooded, and the area around Big Sandy can present spectacular fall colors.

railroad, and the countryside is heavily wooded. This is certainly true of the area surrounding Big Sandy, and it can be difficult to tell if a train is approaching on either of the two lines through town. A reliable indicator of a train approaching on the Pine Bluff Sub is the arrival of a crew van from Longview at UP’s trackside office (Longview is 23 miles east of Big Sandy). With a crew waiting at the office, a train can’t be too far off.

When a train arrives, the real fun begins — the guessing game of which line it will take out of town. Sometimes the dispatcher will call the train over the airwaves and reveal its route. More often the only indications are the way the switch is lined just west of the crew office and the aspect of the signal on the Corsicana Sub. If the signal is anything but red, the train is headed west on that route; otherwise, it’s going to take the Mineola Sub toward Dallas. Often

axis. If this will be your first visit to the area, it would be wise to become familiar with the lay of the land and routes of the rails using one of the many map sites on the Internet beforehand. That way, you can hit the ground running. The Pine Bluff dispatcher is UP Dispatcher 18, transmitting on AAR channel 96 (161.550). For the Corsicana Sub it’s Dispatcher 20 on AAR channel 14

(160.320). For the Mineola Sub between SP Junction in Dallas and Big Sandy it’s Dispatcher 27 on AAR channel 69 (161.145), and from Big Sandy to Longview, Texas, it’s Dispatcher 29 on AAR channel 90 (161.460).

Railfanning in East Texas

The east Texas landscape is generally rolling with lots of hogbacks on the



the dispatcher will set up the signal and switch just moments before a train highballs, so you have to be ready to act quickly.

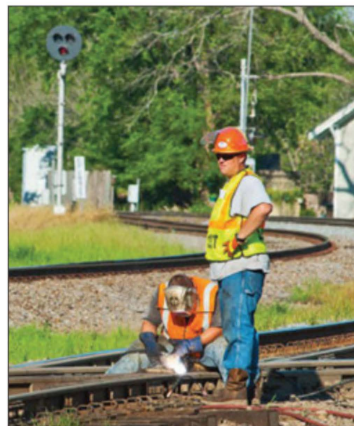
It's amazing to watch a big stack or vehicle train accelerate out of town. Depending on weight and priority, trains will have as few as two — or sometimes just a single unit — and as many as five or six locomotives up front. Some stack trains and manifests will have Distributed Power Units (DPU's) on the rear, especially those taking the Mineola Sub. Although UP's modern GEVO's and ACE's don't put out the smoke of their predecessors, their big prime movers and exhaust can fill the town center with the sounds and smells of big-time railroading. In fact, when you consider the pounding it takes, it's surprising the point where the Corsicana crosses the Mineola Sub doesn't see more maintenance and rail welding than it does. However, track inspectors make it a habit to constantly check this and other critical points in Big Sandy.

When traffic is heavy, three or four trains will stack up just east of town, so that immediately after one leaves, the next one will show up. As some of the trains are run-throughs off NS and CSX, foreign power is not uncommon. If Amtrak or another train on the Mineola Sub is close, the dispatcher will hold a westbound train coming off the Pine

ABOVE: With the switch lined for the former Texas & Pacific route out of Big Sandy, UP 7861 West changes crews before proceeding onto the Mineola Sub on May 29, 2010. **RIGHT:** On March 26, 2012, a UP welder and his helper repair the crossing of the ex-Cotton Belt and ex-T&P in Big Sandy, as a westbound prepares to depart down the Corsicana Sub (the very line these men are working on). This busy junction takes a pounding and requires constant maintenance.

Bluff Sub at Big Sandy until it passes. If, on the other hand, a low-priority freight is approaching, the dispatcher will sometimes put it in the siding (if eastbound) or hold it out of town (if westbound) until the train coming off the Pine Bluff has departed. With all these choreographed moves possible, it's wise to carry a scanner to keep abreast of developments. About a half-mile west of the crossing on the Corsicana Sub is a siding in which UP sometimes parks entire trains, a cut of cars, or maintenance equipment.

Once trains depart Big Sandy on either sub, they quickly reach speeds up to 60 m.p.h. and above. If you plan to follow a hot westbound "Z" or stack train out of Big Sandy on the Mineola Sub and photograph it, you better get a head start. Otherwise, it's liable to be



quite a spell before you catch up unless it has a meet because of the speed limits and stop lights in the many small towns along the line.

For the first few miles out of Big Sandy westbound, the Mineola Sub heads virtually straight through the forest along U.S. Highway 80. In contrast, the Corsicana Sub negotiates tight and meandering (and some super-elevated) curves south of town and



LEFT: One crew coming, the other going with the van as UP 8201 West waits to depart Big Sandy in the late afternoon on December 10, 2012. **BELOW:** As UP 4019 West departs Big Sandy on March 26, 2012, it passes a crew repairing a broken rail at the crossing of the Corsicana and Mineola Subs, and the workmen will watch carefully as the westbound's wheels tread the interlocker.



crosses the Sabine River; Highway 155 follows the railroad. If photographing south of town, be mindful of the fact that the forest tends to deaden the sound of an approaching train and even a powerful locomotive horn. Trains appear almost without warning around tight curves in the forest, making operations around Big Sandy both interesting and ominous. I speak from experience. Staying constantly alert of your

surroundings is therefore a wise policy. Speaking of the forest, these are the famous Piney Woods of east Texas. They contain a wide variety of trees, from tall shortleaf pines to stately broad-leaved sycamores — and everything in between. Some of the trees that abut the rights of way near Big Sandy are simply enormous, and dwarf the trains. Because of their height, they throw their shadows across the tracks

for a good part of the day. UP regularly trims the trees along the right of way, especially those that are already encroaching, sometimes doing a shaped cut that allows a train to pass just barely untouched. In some places in these woods, it's as though a train is passing through a tunnel formed by tree branches.

Except for rare times of drought, most of east Texas in spring and sum-





mer is a luxuriant green due to its plentiful rainfall. Like most of the South, most of the rain comes in the summer, but rain can fall any time of the year. This is another reason track inspectors keep a sharp eye on the right of way in and around Big Sandy: heavy rain leads to "mud-pumping," especially in the little town's many rail crossings, and mud can quickly destroy the effectiveness of the track structure in draining water and holding the rails firmly in place. In fall, many of the trees turn orange, yellow, or red, and although not as spectacular as autumn in the Northeast, they provide a beautiful backdrop for railroad photographs.

The Big Show in Big Sandy

On one occasion while waiting along the Corsicana Sub just south of town, I got a good taste of just how heavy east Texas rain can be, summer or not. It was mid-November, and as my son and I waited for the train, rain started to fall. As the train approached, the inten-

RIGHT: With huge trees bracketing the right of way, a westbound UP intermodal train drops downgrade from Big Sandy toward Hawkins on the Mineola Sub on November 10, 2008. **BELOW:** UP 7875 West departs Big Sandy coming off the ex-Cotton Belt and heading for Dallas on the ex-T&P on November 14, 2011. The close track in the foreground is the Corsicana Sub main line.



TOP: With evidence of springtime all around, UP 8168 West departs Big Sandy with a fresh crew on March 31, 2010. **ABOVE:** On a sultry August afternoon in 2007, Norfolk Southern's four F9s lead a UP office car consist at track speed westbound through Big Sandy. The officers' special was symbolized SSHDA (Special, Shreveport to Dallas). **LEFT:** Foreign power is common, such as these CSX and Ferromex units leading a manifest train through the west end of Big Sandy at CP R113.

sity of the rain increased. I waited in the car until the train was fairly close, and then stepped out to get a series of shots. Although I wasn't out long, by the time I jumped back into the car I was soaked. What started as a shower had quickly turned into a torrential downpour, and looking through my medium telephoto I could barely see the train, the rain was so thick!

If you like watching the UP and want

to get away from the big city, this small town is the right place. Just park under a shade tree and wait for the trains to come to you. If you find yourself in the middle of a dead period, there are places to get food and drink on Highway 80 as well as photo locations in the immediate area to explore. Get your photo gear ready to go before the trains show up, because oft times the first train to appear isn't the last.

Big Sandy Train Symbols

Some of the freight symbols on the Corsicana Sub are as follow. These are not necessarily daily trains.

- ZDTMX** – Expedited, Detroit – Mexico City (interchanged to KCSM at Laredo, TX)
- ZYCLD** – Expedited, Yard Center (Chicago, IL) – Laredo, TX
- ZYCMX** – Expedited, Yard Center – Mexico City
- ZYCMXB** – Expedited, Yard Center – Mexico City, second departure
- AASMX** – Automobiles, Alton & Southern – Mexico City
- ADEWF** – Automobiles, Detroit Terminal – Westfield, TX
- MPBEG** – Manifest, Pine Bluff – Eagle Pass, TX (interchanged to Ferromex)
- MPBMX** – Manifest, Pine Bluff – Mexico City
- MPBSA** – Manifest, Pine Bluff – San Antonio

The list for the Mineola Sub is longer since it includes both east- and westbound trains.

- IHJNS** – Intermodal, Hanjin (Long Beach, CA) – Atlanta
- ILBMN** – Intermodal, Long Beach – Marion, AR
- ILXMN** – Intermodal, ITCF Long Beach – Marion
- IMNLB** – Intermodal, Marion – Long Beach
- ITIMN7** – Intermodal, Terminal Island, CA – Marion, Sunday departure
- KGSMN2** – Secondary Expedited, Global South (Terminal Island, CA) – Marion, Tuesday departure
- KLBNS** – Secondary Expedited, Long Beach – Norfolk Southern
- ZAILC** – Expedited, Atlanta – Los Angeles Transportation Center
- ZDUMQ** – Expedited, Dupo Yard, IL – Mesquite, TX
- ZG4MQ** – Expedited, Global IV (Joliet, IL) – Mesquite, TX
- ZLAME** – Expedited, Los Angeles – Memphis (At Memphis, this train becomes CSX Q144 to Atlanta.)
- ZLAMN3** – Expedited, Los Angeles – Marion, Wednesday departure
- ZLCAI** – Expedited, LA Transportation Center – Atlanta
- ZLCMN2** – Expedited, LA Transportation Center – Marion, Tuesday departure
- ZMNLA** – Expedited, Marion – Los Angeles
- ZMNLA2** – Expedited, Marion – Los Angeles, Tuesday departure
- ZMOG4** – Expedited, Mesquite – Global IV
- AARWX** – Automobiles, Arlington, TX – Waycross, GA (CSX as Q208 via New Orleans, LA)
- AMEML** – Automobiles, Memphis – Mira Loma, CA
- AMNLB** – Automobiles, Marion – Long Beach
- ASMAR** – Automobiles, Salem, IL – Arlington, TX auto parts
- MDALI** – Manifest, Dallas – Livonia, LA
- MFVBT** – Manifest, Ft. Worth – Beaumont, TX
- MFVLI** – Manifest, Ft. Worth – Livonia
- MFVNL** – Manifest, Ft. Worth – North Little Rock, AR
- MLJFW** – Manifest, Livonia – Ft. Worth
- MPBDA** – Manifest, Pine Bluff – Dallas (Miller Yard)
- MPBFW** – Manifest, Pine Bluff – Ft. Worth
- MSHFW** – Manifest, Shreveport – Ft. Worth

I've included this list of train symbols not only to show which trains run through Big Sandy, but also to demonstrate the variety of their origins and destinations. Although the preponderance of these symbols run between the Southeast and West Coast, there are also a fair number that run between Texas and the upper Midwest, and from the Midwest to Mexico City. There are also a fair number of trains that run between the Southeast and Texas.

— Steve Schmoltinger