

I Remember Old Tuscaloosa

By Fred Maxwell

"I've been working on the railroad all the livelong day."

In my opinion no lad has ever sung this song with more gusto and feeling of satisfaction than I when I was about 7-8 years old. I felt that I had really helped in building the M&O Railroad through Tuscaloosa when the line from Artesia, Miss., to Montgomery was constructed.

My unique position was that I was a friend of the general superintendent for construction—a Mr. LaLand, who incidentally was a friend of my father.

It was Mr. LaLand's habit to ride horseback up 6th St. at about 10 a.m. to the White Elephant saloon on the corner of 6th St. and 24th Ave. (corner of the old McLester Hotel) to get a cold glass of beer.

It was my habit to be out in front of our house (corner 6th St. and 27th Ave.) at about the time he rode by. Learning of my love for horses, he would frequently pick me up and let me ride behind his saddle to the saloon. I would sit in the saddle and hold his

horse while he went inside.

Occasionally, especially on Fridays, he would take me on his overall inspection of the job.

We would start at the depot where construction of a passenger depot, a freight depot, dispatcher's office, roundhouse for locomotives, coal tiple, repair shop and quite a network of track in the switchyard was under way.

Our next target was the area where a deep cut was being made toward the Black Warrior River. This cut is spanned by overpass bridges at 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th Streets. The heavy grading for this area was quite a sight. There was no bulldozers, pans or motorized equipment in those days so the work was accomplished by mule power.

First the earth was loosened up by a huge plow pulled by a team of four mules. I soon learned why the mule driver was called a "mule-skinner." However, the crack of his whip was more often over the mules than applied to the animals. It helps to cause all four mules to start in unison.

The loose dirt was picked up and hauled to its destination by a two-wheel, two-mule "scrape," but an extra team of two mules were added during the loading period. The dirt was hauled two or three hundred yards in the two-wheeled scrape and then dumped over the end to build up the ground to the desired elevation. The dirt was dumped just as the scrape went over the end.

I often wondered what would happen if the scrape and the loose dumped dirt outran the mules (and the driver) as they went down the steep slope of loose dirt. But they never did! That is, not to my knowledge.

The next area of interest was the large pile-driver for placing the high piles to support the trestle. (Counting the part of the trestle in Northport, it was reported as being the longest wooden railroad trestle in this country.) Although there was a sameness in driving piles, it was fascinating to watch the complete sequence of dragging in a creosoted pile, picking it up, placing and driving it at the proper pitch (vertical or at a slant) and then driving it home.

The next theater of operations was a changing scene. That was the erection of the steel bridge over the Black Warrior River. The first scene consisted

in placing a coffer dam at the site for one of the bridge's stone piers. After the coffer dam was completed the water was pumped out so that the workmen could prepare and connect the pier foundation to the solid stone below the level of the river bottom. The piers were constructed of solid blocks of quarry stone and the erection of these stone piers was an interesting part of the job.

Last but not least was the erection of the steel superstructure of the bridge. Derricks were perched in precarious locations in order to hoist and place the steel component parts.

I noticed that the bridge was fastened securely to the north pier while on the south pier it rested on steel plates with steel rollers between the bridge and plates. I was told that this was to take care of the expansion and contraction due to temperature changes. I noticed, after the bridge had been in operation a year or so, the marks on the plates showed a travel of 6-7 inches. It was not until about 15 years later that I found that the temperature change accounted for less than one inch while the camber (upward arch) made up the remainder as the arch leveled out between no load

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and full load.

When I visited the job alone (which I was seldom allowed to do) I was never ordered off the job by a foreman, as some boys were, but I was sometimes shown a safer place to watch from. I attributed this to the fact that the "big boss" (Mr. LaLand) sometimes rode me over the job on horseback and I would hold his horse when he dismounted for close inspec-

tions. Probably all the foremen and straw-bosses recognized me.

I was glad to work (?) on the railroad without pay but I felt greatly overpaid when Mr. LaLand had his blacksmith shop make me a slip-scrape out of a coal shovel for use with my goat as my mule. I helped the city keep the gutter drainage ditches clear in the neighborhood by grading the sandbars with my goat and scrape.