

The MKT Passenger Depot, Greenville, Texas
by Judy Woods

The first railroad arrived in Greenville in 1880. Prior to that time, the settlement was a quiet little village, without much commerce. Building materials and trade goods had to be hauled by ox-drawn wagons from Jefferson, more than 100 miles away.

Although the town was surrounded in all four directions by rail lines in the 1870s, each was about thirty miles distant.¹ Greenville was connected to the rail outlets only by horse drawn stage lines. Freight was hauled by oxen to and from the railheads. The service was interrupted by wet weather, when the wagons became stuck fast in the black gumbo mud. Even the local newspaper, the *Greenville Herald*, had to halt publication one winter when impassable roads interfered with the shipment of paper needed to print the weekly news.²

Banking was done by courier. Merchants had to send a rider on horseback to the nearest bank in Terrell for deposits and withdrawals. Markets were so difficult to reach that only small quantities of agricultural products were exported from the tiny community.

According to the *Greenville Banner*, "Business was dull in Greenville, the prospects gloomy and town lots could be bought for a song."³

All of this changed with the arrival of the railroads.

The village that boasted 1100 residents at the time the first steam engine belched into town had grown to 4330 by 1890.⁴ The cotton that was too costly to ship by ox-drawn wagon to railheads thirty miles distant became the county's major crop after the railroads arrived. The few thousand bales of cotton shipped from Greenville in 1880 became ten thousand bales in 1881 and more than twenty thousand bales in 1882.⁵ Thousands of acres of blackland prairie were planted to cotton, while gins, compresses, and oil mills were built to process the crop. The booming town soon had a bank and a three-story brick hotel.

The "Katy" started it all.

¹ *Greenville Independent*, August 15, 1879.

² W. Walworth Harrison, "Hunt County's First Railroad," Texas Historical Marker Application, February 21, 1972, p. 1.

³ *Greenville Banner*, July 4, 1883.

⁴ "Hunt County's First Railroad," p. 4 and Mike Kingston, ed., *Texas Almanac '92-'93*, (Dallas: Dallas Morning News, 1991), p. 172.

⁵ *Greenville Banner*, July 4, 1883

In February, 1880, the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway Company contracted with a group of Greenville businessmen to extend their line from Denison to Greenville. The eighteen men advised the railroad that “We, for the citizens of Hunt County, guarantee to you the right of way for your road through Hunt County and suitable depot grounds, and grounds for cattle pens at Greenville, all of said land and five thousand dollars in money, provided said road is completed to Greenville by October 1, 1880 and suitable rolling stock put thereon.”⁶

Daniel Upthegrove, N. I. Ross, A. Cameron, Edward Schiff, M. M. Arnold, J. W. Hawkins, W. C. Jones, J. C. O’Neal, J. J. Cooper, Fred Ende, J. T. Jenkins, M. H. Wright, A. B. Watson, F. P. Alexander, W. G. Perkins, Sam D. Stinson, I. N. Harrison, and J. C. Edmonds affixed their signatures to this challenge.⁷

The railroad delivered. Hunt County’s first train pulled into Greenville on October 1, 1880. One of the witnesses to its arrival, six year old A.W. Defee, feared the fire-breathing “monster” would leave the tracks and run him down. He ran for the nearby woods where his older brother later found him and coaxed him to come back and look at the now quiet locomotive.⁸

Most of the right of way for the new rail line was donated. Hunt County Deed Records show that several landowners, including the City of Greenville, were paid (sometimes very little!) for lots occupied by the depot and freight office (site of current depot building). T. B. Clark received \$10 for three parcels deeded to the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Extension Railway in 1880.⁹ David Cameron was paid \$200 the same year¹⁰ and J. C. Edmonds realized \$10 on the transfer of a lot.¹¹ In 1887, City Alderman Nathan Anderson deeded the railroad a parcel of land for \$100¹² then, acting as agent for the City Council, sold an adjacent parcel owned by the City to the MKT for \$100.¹³

The three-story brick hotel built by Fred Ende soon after the railroad reached Greenville burned to the ground in 1883, leaving commercial travelers no lodgings when selling their goods

⁶ “Hunt County’s First Railroad,” p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸ *Greenville Herald Banner*, June 30, 1965.

⁹ Hunt County Deed Records, Deed #42, filed July 28, 1880, Book Z, pp. 336-8.

¹⁰ Hunt County Deed Records, Deed #41, filed July 26, 1880, Book Z, pp. 323-5.

¹¹ Hunt County Deed Records, Deed #40, filed July 28, 1880, Book Z, pp. 334-6. This is almost certainly the J. C. Edmonds who was a guarantor. The difference in spelling is a puzzle.

¹² Hunt County Deed Records, Deed #112, filed February 2, 1887, Book R1, pp. 132-3.

¹³ Hunt County Deed Records, Deed #113, filed February 15, 1887, Book R1, pp. 231, 233-4.

to local merchants. Another consortium of businessmen purchased several lots between Lee and Washington Streets, east of the depot, and offered to deed them to William J. Beckham if he built a forty room hotel at Lee and Oak Streets (just west of their parcel). The 50 room Beckham hotel opened October, 1885.¹⁴ It later grew to occupy the lots Beckham “earned” in his bargain with the businessmen. Now the Town House, a residential hotel, the Beckham still stands.

The first MKT depot in Greenville was a wood frame building on the southwest corner of Lee and Wright Streets. The Katy shared this depot with the East Line and Red River Railroad after it was purchased by MKT in November, 1881.¹⁵

Construction began on the permanent two-story brick depot in 1895. It was completed in June, 1896 at a cost of \$24,849, less contents.¹⁶ The building plan by Stephen W. Dodge, Architect of Brooklyn, N.Y. cost \$250. The St. Louis firm of Thompson & Gray was the contractor.¹⁷

The building has a limestone foundation with walls of red pressed face brick with cut sandstone wainscoting. The original slate and copper roof has been replaced with asbestos and composition shingles. The 40' x 148' building had a 52' high rotunda centered over the main waiting room.¹⁸

Wooden benches provided seating in the two waiting rooms. The main waiting room boasted a stone and brick fireplace on the south end, flanked by doors to the Men’s Smoking Room and the Women’s Room. Restroom facilities were connected to these lounges at the south end of the building.

The ticket and telegraph office was north of the main waiting room on the west side. The east side had lunch counters serving the two waiting rooms. Since meals were not provided on the early trains, passengers purchased refreshments at the station to eat on their journey.

The colored waiting room was on the north side of the office, with restroom facilities adjacent to it. (The station remained segregated through most of the years it was in use.) The mail and baggage room occupied the north end of the depot.

¹⁴ W. Walworth Harrison, *History of Greenville and Hunt County, Texas*, (Waco: Texian Press, 1976), p. 301.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 219 refers to the “second story” being used to “spot the semaphores of incoming trains.” None of the floor plans show a second floor or catwalk and none of the anecdotal evidence supports this.

¹⁶ C. W. Gasaway, “Interstate Commerce Commission Bureau of Valuation Report, M. K. T. Ry.,” Form #68R, April 3, 1920, pp. 80-95.

¹⁷ K. M. Manger, “Notes on the Greenville Passenger Station,” MKT St. Louis office, May 4, 1951.

¹⁸ *History of Greenville and Hunt County, Texas*, p. 219.

A staircase indicated on the floor plan may have led to a basement housing a steam boiler for central heating. A photo of the main waiting room shows radiators. John Charles, grandson of a Katy conductor, rode trains in and out of the depot many times. He remembered being told the building once had a basement for the heating plant. (No documentary evidence for a basement has been found.)

Interior walls were covered with wood panels and beaded wood siding. Decorative wood lintels trimmed the fireplace and window and door openings. Floors were concrete. Vitrified Coffeyville brick pavers were laid over a bed of sand for the passenger and baggage platforms.¹⁹

(The four restrooms were remodeled in 1920. The concrete floor was overlaid with hexagonal ceramic tiles. The beaded siding on ceiling and walls was replaced with painted plaster and tile. Restroom partitions of Texas marble with oak doors were installed.²⁰)

The Katy depot quickly became a city landmark and one of the busiest places in town. “Before the highways were built 12 passenger trains a day rolled into this . . . station, on the East line from Shreveport to McKinney, the Mineola branch and the Main line to Denison to the north and Dallas southward.”²¹

Special excursion trains carried Greenville area residents to the Fair in Dallas each October. Standing room only crowds took advantage of the \$1 round trip Sunday fare. Greenville historian W. Walworth Harrison had fond memories of riding the Fair Train “when every car and vestibule was jammed with people carrying Concord grapes purchased at the fair while small boys clutched gaily colored gas-filled balloons.”²²

The city’s first street paving in 1906 extended along Lee Street from Stonewall Street at the courthouse square to the MKT depot.²³ In the 1920s the railroad maintained a small park in the block south of the passenger station. Complete with fountain and flower beds, the park provided a pleasant spot for city residents and out of town passengers to pass the time waiting for their trains. (Some time after passenger service to Greenville was discontinued, the City of Greenville

¹⁹ Original floor plan, Greenville Passenger Station, M, K & T Ry. Co. (original date has been obliterated and comments added on possible closure of depot, dated 1957).

²⁰ Missouri, Kansas and Texas Ry. of Texas, blueprints, “Enlargement and Rearrangement; Toilet Facilities in Passenger Station Greenville, Tex.,” Dallas, Texas, February 21, 1918, corrected as built July 29, 1921.

²¹ *Greenville Herald Banner*, July 18, 1958.

²² *Greenville Herald Banner*, June 30, 1965, p. 9.

²³ *History of Greenville and Hunt County, Texas*, p. 103.

leased the park area from the railroad and paved it to provide loading space for commercial buildings west of it.)²⁴

Well-known politicians were greeted by their constituents at the Katy depot, including Harry Truman, who stopped at the Greenville station during his 1948 “whistle stop” campaign tour. He gave a short speech at the station after an introduction by House Speaker Sam Rayburn. He concluded his visit by presenting his wife, Bess, and daughter, Margaret, to the crowd.²⁵

Famous entertainers booked for performances at the King Opera House arrived at the Katy passenger station. Confederate veterans attending three day reunions in 1913 and 1914 rode the Katy to the Lee Street depot. Celebrities, salesmen, merchants, and ordinary citizens came and went via the Katy station for decades.

Greenville’s infamous sign, quoting “The Land Man,” Will N. Harrison, spanned Lee Street at the depot. Harrison, a local promoter and land developer, coined the phrase “Blackest Land - Whitest People” to describe his hometown. It was meant as a compliment; at that time “white” denoted “fair,” “generous,” “sincere,” “dependable” for many people. And few places could claim

soil as black as Greenville’s. The Chamber of Commerce adopted the slogan after it gained Harrison an audience with President Woodrow Wilson. In 1921 the Chamber erected the sign, with Harrison’s slogan, where it was seen by everyone who traveled through Greenville on the MKT railroad.²⁶ Long after removal of the sign in the mid-sixties, local residents visiting out of town were asked by former passengers if “the sign” was still there by the depot.

The depot was also a personal landmark. Families began and ended their vacations at the station. A.W. Defee, the youngster who had run in fear from the first locomotive, took his bride to Tyler on the Katy in 1896. He “really got a kick out of the ride. It was really going some place.”²⁷ Others took summer trips to Galveston and to the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904.

Greenville resident Adele Luhn remembers taking her children to the Fair in Dallas in the ’50s. The children were impressed by the marble walls in the restrooms, she says, and insisted on buying “goodies” at the lunch counter. Her most vivid memory of the station, though, is the deafening noise the baggage carts made as their iron wheels rolled over the brick platform.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 271.

²⁵ *Greenville Herald Banner*, September 26, 1988, p. AA3.

²⁶ *History of Greenville and Hunt County, Texas*, pp. 330-1.

Before four-lane highways and fast automobiles made the trip to Dallas a short one, Greenvillites took the train to the city to go shopping. As a teenager, Patsy Clark rode the train to shop at Nieman Marcus. She remembers the separate entrances to the segregated waiting rooms.

Mary Virginia Duck, now 85, took the train to visit relatives in Missouri when she was 11 years old. She bought food at the snack bar, then her father asked the conductor to look after her on the trip.

Some personal memories of the depot are more poignant. Many residents remember going to the depot to eagerly await local soldiers returning at the end of World War II. Some remember their first sight of the station when they arrived in Greenville on the orphan train. And for some, the Katy depot was the place to wait quietly for the coffins of relatives who had died away from home and had returned to Greenville for the last time.

MKT passenger service to Greenville ended in 1965, after many years of declining passenger loads. Katy President John. W. Barriger said that “of late, the average patronage on the trains has been about 10 persons a train on the long Kansas City-Dallas route.”²⁸ Passenger trains had been replaced by the family car. When the last train left the Katy station on July 1, 1965 there was no fanfare to mark the end of an era. Witnesses included 94 year old A.W. Defee, who witnessed the arrival of the first Katy passenger train and the departure of the last one.

When passenger service ended, the depot’s neighbors included an auto dealership and service station. Automobiles had moved in on the railroad’s territory as well as its trade!

Later in the 1960s, the City of Greenville pushed for demolition of the depot and freight stations, as their dilapidated condition was “causing a severe pain in the neck of civic pride.” Downtown merchants favored tearing down the buildings and paving the area for downtown parking.

In February 1968, Katy Vice President of Operations Raymond B. George sent authorization for the City to remove the freight building. The City financed the demolition in exchange for a ten foot strip of right of way along Wright Street. Freight operations were moved into the former passenger station.²⁹

²⁷ *Greenville Herald Banner*, June 30, 1965, p. 9.

²⁸ *Greenville Herald Banner*, June 30, 1965, p. 9.

²⁹ *Greenville Herald Banner*, February 21, 1968.

The Katy became part of the Union Pacific Railroad in 1988. For some time prior to the merger, freight operations were housed at the Greenville Yard, near the western boundary of the city. While the UP continued to serve the industrial park, the former MKT tracks adjacent to the downtown depot building were unused until 1992, when the Dallas, Garland and Northeastern Railroad (DGNO) began freight operations.³⁰

Violent weather severely damaged the depot roof in 1950. When the slate roof was replaced the rotunda was removed “to avoid possible danger in the event of extremely heavy storm.”³¹

The floor plan has changed little since the removal of the rotunda. The lunch counters have been removed. The former colored waiting room now serves as an office for the building’s current owner. A partition from the northeast corner of the ticket office to the east wall (the site of the colored lunch counter) now completely encloses the room. A simple mantel has been built for the fireplace to replace the original (date of removal unknown). The remainder of the building is unchanged. Most of the paved platform adjacent to the building is intact.

The depot hosts the Greenville Chamber of Commerce’s holiday promotion, the Christmas Train Express. Beginning the day after Thanksgiving, artists, antique dealers, and local merchants display their goods in the main waiting room and women’s lounge area, surrounded by artifacts from the old station.

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³¹ Manger.

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