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Southeast Chapter

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MEMORIES OF BYGONE DAYS ON BESSEMER'S RAILROADS

By Southeast Chapter member Lyle Key

Bessemer was a blue-collar town situated 11.4 miles southwest of Birmingham Terminal Station via Southern Railway's main line to New Orleans. In a sense, railroading in Bessemer was a microcosm of railroading in Birmingham since with just one exception, every Class I railroad that operated through Birmingham also operated through Bessemer. That one exception was the Central of Georgia. Bessemer had quite a bit of industry, but the single biggest attraction was the huge Pullman-Standard plant that built railroad freight cars. In addition to the seven Class I carriers that operated through Bessemer (ACL, Frisco, GM&O [overhead trackage rights only], IC, L&N, SAL, and Southern), Birmingham Southern served Bessemer, and Woodward Iron used trackage rights on ACL's line through Bessemer to reach its Pyne Mine.



In June of 1977, the northbound *Southern Crescent*, Southern Railway train #2, was photographed at the former site of Birmingham's classic old Terminal Station. While this wasn't the *Pelican* of the late '40's, the *Southern Crescent's* diesel units had been repainted in Southern's traditional green and white/imitation aluminum with gold fine stripes, and both trains terminated in New Orleans on the south ends of their runs. *Photo by Lyle Key*

By some quirk of fate, I spent most of my early childhood along Southern's rail corridor between Birmingham's West End and Bessemer. Our house on Munger Avenue in West End was across the street from the railroad, and when I visited my great-grandmother's house on Pearson Avenue, I could watch streetcars in addition to trains on the same Southern Railway main line. We also made frequent trips to Bessemer to visit Aunt Patsy, Aunt Judy, and Aunt Sallie, my three elderly great-aunts who lived on Clarendon Avenue. Their house wasn't too far from the Southern passenger station, but it was even closer to the ACL main line that crossed Clarendon Avenue and the parallel streets on a high fill. Years later, that ACL fill would save Bessemer from considerable destruction by deflecting a tornado that was bearing down on the community from the southwest.

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When Louis Newton took this photograph at Bristol on June 18, 1948, train #41 was about to be handed off from Norfolk & Western to Southern Railway. Southern normally assigned diesels to the *Pelican* by the summer of 1948, but N&W Class J 4-8-4 #609 had brought the southbound train into Bristol. *Photo by Louis M. Newton*



Louis Newton took this shot of the southbound *Pelican*, Southern Railway train #41, at Knoxville on January 24, 1948. The *Pelican* normally would have come through Knoxville behind diesels, but it was pulled by Class Ts1 Mountain (4-8-2) #1469 on that frigid and snowy day over 65 years ago. *Photo by Louis M. Newton*



Southern Railway’s old passenger station in Bessemer now serves as a local museum – the Bessemer Hall of History – but back in 1949, it was a daily stop for three northbound and three southbound passenger trains. In fact, the only passenger train that didn’t stop in Bessemer was the streamlined *Southerner*. One of the trains that served Bessemer was Southern #41, the southbound *Pelican*, and it was scheduled to make its nightly run from Birmingham to Bessemer in 26 minutes. That was much faster than it sounded since #41 had to back out of Terminal Station ‘til it reached the main line on the other side of Sloss Furnace.

The *Pelican* wasn’t one of Southern’s premier streamliners, but back in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s, it still was quite an impressive train. When #41 left Birmingham for its overnight run to New Orleans, its consist included through coaches from Washington to New Orleans and through sleepers from New York to New Orleans, New York to Shreveport (via a connecting IC train west of Meridian, Mississippi), Washington to New Orleans, and Atlanta to Shreveport (from a connecting Southern train east of Birmingham). The southbound *Pelican* was due to arrive in Bessemer at 8:56 in the evening, and several minutes typically were required for the station stop. A few passengers might board and detrain, and some checked baggage might be loaded and unloaded, but most of the time spent in Bessemer was devoted to handling mail and express. In any event, a Bessemer resident could leave home around 8:30 in the evening, climb aboard one of the *Pelican*’s sleepers, and sleep until around 6:30 when the Pullman porter would announce “We’re coming into New Orleans.” (continued)

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In February of 1972, the northbound *Southern Crescent* had office car *Virginia* on its rear end and another business car just ahead of the *Virginia* as it left Birmingham for Atlanta and Washington. The *Virginia* was one of less than a dozen survivors of Southern's once extensive office car fleet, and it was assigned to company president Graham Claytor. Photo by Lyle Key



In March of 1973, the northbound *Southern Crescent* was photographed departing Tuscaloosa, Alabama en route to Birmingham. The train's consist included an ex-Wabash parlor-dome and a transcontinental sleeper that ran between New Orleans and New York. Photo by Lyle Key



“Would the boy like to come up in the cab?”

My grandfather, Tom Scruggs, hadn't followed his dad into railroading, but he still loved to watch and ride trains. He often took me to visit my great-aunts in Bessemer in the evening, and it seemed that he invariably said “Good night” to them just in time for us to get down to the passenger station for the *Pelican's* arrival. Long before the train came over the vertical curve to the north, one could hear its whistle blowing and see its Mars Light oscillating through the darkness. The anticipation would build as #41 got closer, and finally, two sleek green E-units would come roaring out of the night and spot the train alongside the platform amid the sounds of ringing bells, melodious whistles, and groaning brake shoes. The conductor and Pullman porters would step onto the platform to greet passengers, and men with baggage carts would set about loading and unloading baggage, mail, and express. From my vantage point, there seemed to be a well-orchestrated sense of urgency about the whole exercise.

One balmy summer night, after witnessing the *Pelican's* dramatic arrival in Bessemer, I was standing beside my grandfather near the front of the train's lead unit. The engineer looked down with a smile and said, “Would the boy like to come up in the cab?” I was struck speechless, but granddad knew the right answer. “He sure would,” he said as he handed me up to the fireman. The engineer gave me a quick tour of his domain, and then he asked a fateful question, “Would you like to blow the whistle?” “Yes sir,” I said with great excitement, so he lifted me up to pull the whistle cord. When I pulled the cord, the sound of the whistle seemed to penetrate every fiber of my being. Simply stated, the noise scared the heck out of me, and for a fleeting moment, I wondered if it had blasted out my eardrums. My eardrums were still intact, but I wanted to get out of the cab before anyone blew that whistle again. Departure time was at hand in any event, so the engineer obligingly handed me down to my waiting grandfather. (continued)

Moments later, the conductor gave the highball, traps folded shut, and the old engineer gave two short blasts on his whistle. He eased out on his throttle and then gave my grandfather and me a last wave as the train slowly began moving forward. The train accelerated very quickly, and it was rolling along at a rapid clip when the lighted markers on the last Pullman flashed by us. The show was over for that evening, but it would play out again the following morning at 6:32 when the northbound *Pelican* arrived in Bessemer.

WWII Troop Sleepers by Bill Howes

WWII generated unprecedented demands on the railroad industry in the United States. Nowhere was this felt more acutely than at the Pullman Company. It has been estimated that 125 million passengers traveled 98 billion miles in Pullman cars during the conflict. Troops accounted for a large percentage of this traffic and were generally given priority in securing scarce accommodations.

The building of new Pullman cars had just started to revive following stagnation during the Great Depression of the 1930s when the war's mobilization placed a huge burden on the fleet. Retired and bad-ordered cars were returned to service, sometimes following a remodeling to increase their capacity. Pullman's car-building division, the Pullman-Standard Car Manufacturing Company, was temporarily placed under the control of the U.S. Defense Plant Corporation to build equipment in support of the war effort. This included 2400 troop sleepers to be operated by the Pullman Company. Resembling box cars with windows, but equipped with trucks suitable for passenger train operation, these cars provided very basic daytime seating convertible to 10 rows of three-tiered berths by night to accommodate 29 soldiers and a Pullman porter. The ride quality of the cars left much to be desired, but Pullman personnel did their best to provide for the comfort of the troops.

Following the war, many of the troop sleepers were acquired by the railroads and converted for mail and express service or used as maintenance-of-way camp and tool cars.

Help Wanted:

Southeast Chapter member, Gary Cassels, has been trying to obtain a picture of the railroad depot that existed at Falmouth, Florida on the SAL until the 1920s. This has been confirmed by several books and timetables, etc. Gary is looking for assistance in finding any photos (national or local), of this station. If you can help, please contact Gary at the following email address: gcassels@bellsouth.net.

Florida East Coast Exhibit - "The Great Days of Rail Travel on the FEC"

The Bienes Museum of the Modern Book, located on the 6th floor of the Broward County Library System's main library in downtown Fort Lauderdale has announced that its exciting new exhibit, "The Great Days of Rail Travel on the Florida East Coast" will open on October 1st, to be followed by a grand opening on Wednesday, October 9th. FEC Vice President and General Counsel, Robert Ledoux, and representatives from All Aboard Florida are expected to present the opening addresses.

The exhibit is being furnished and curated by FEC Railway Company Historian Seth H. Bramson and will present items and memorabilia beginning with the company's predecessors and going through to the modern day. Among the items that will be on display will be a model of the "Randleigh," the private car of FEC President and Henry Flagler brother-in-law William Rand Kenan, loaned by longtime FEC buff and collector Jonathan Nelson. In addition, there will be brochures, booklets, timetables, maps, an FEC passenger trainman's uniform complete with cap, an FEC lantern, dining car china, silver and menus, FEC tickets, on-board passenger train stationery and more including photographs, prints, an FEC oil can and other items germane to the exhibit, all from The Bramson Archive. The Florida Citrus Model Railroad Association will have FEC models on display.

For more information, please contact Seth Bramson at seth.bramson@fecrwy.com, mrfec@yahoo.com or by phone at (305) 757-1016.