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Missouri Pacific Brownsville Depot Writings - History revision 2

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The Missouri Pacific Railroad's Passenger Station in Brownsville
By David N. Currey
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The railroad passenger station in Brownsville, Texas that saw service through the Depression, World War II, and the twilight years of rail travel in the United States was a unique structure in many ways. For many of Brownsville's residents, this building was the prime example of the beautiful architecture which abounds throughout the city. What brought about the need for this station and its construction is an interesting story, and begins with the history of the railroads in south Texas.

The first railroad in Brownsville was the Rio Grande Railroad, completed in 1872. It connected Port Isabel with Brownsville, and had the slightly oddball gauge of 42 inches--the most popular narrow gauge in the United States being 36 inches. Its quaint two-story Victorian station was the first depot in Brownsville. Its location is unclear, but was probably no more than a mile from the MP depot site. This railroad transported a lot of products imported at Port Isabel and bound for Mexico. When another railroad was built to Laredo, this source of revenue more or less evaporated. The railroad went through several projects that provided a drain on its pocketbooks, including a line relocation and conversion to standard gauge. Always seemingly in financial difficulty, it eventually wound up in the Missouri Pacific fold. It is now mostly abandoned.

The Brownsville and Gulf Railroad, chartered on May 10, 1883, was constructed to connect the ferry landings on the Rio Grande River at Brownsville with the Rio Grande Railroad, a distance of five miles, however, only one mile of 36" gauge track was built. It is thought that this is the line that came down 12th Street to the Missouri Pacific depot site, and on down to the river. The street trackage was ripped up at some point before construction of the mission style depot, and the remaining trackage acquired by the St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexico. None of the B&G is left today.

The third railroad to reach Brownsville was the St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexico. It was originally conceived as a link in an international rail route from Chicago to Mexico City. It was chartered in 1903, and built south from Robstown, arriving in Brownsville in 1904. The railroad was completed to Algoa, Texas in 1907, about 24 miles south of Houston. Original plans to build into Houston were scuttled, and after initially connecting with the Santa Fe at Algoa, the railroad secured trackage rights over the Santa Fe into Houston. The railroad soon found itself owned by the St. Louis--San Francisco in 1910, but eventually arrived in the fold of the Missouri Pacific in 1925. Texas had a law requiring railroads to be headquartered within the state's boundaries, and the StLB&M was one of several MP subsidiaries headquartered in Texas. Another notable such subsidiary was the International Great Northern serving San Antonio and Laredo. The Missouri Pacific was a large regional railroad serving its territory quite adequately, and spanned from Omaha in the north, to Pueblo and El Paso in the west, to Laredo, Brownsville, Galveston, and New Orleans in the south, and Memphis and St. Louis in the east.

The first station built by the SLB&M in Brownsville on the site was to a standard design that the railroad also built in such towns as Sarita, Kingsville, Bay City, and probably Refugio, Vanderbilt, and possibly other towns along the line. It was a handsome brick structure whose architectural style was reminiscent of many such moderately sized stations built across the nation. Its typical design included a ticket

and waiting areas in the center of the building with a trackside bay window, a baggage area on the wye end, and a pavilion on the Levee Street end. An express building of similar architectural style was built directly next to the passenger station, and next to it, a small "oil house".

The Brownsville area was booming, however, and the new station soon found itself undersized, and it wasn't long before photos of the structure show that the open-air pavilion area of the depot that opened onto the "Railroad Park" had been enclosed to make more interior room. This enclosure, however, provided little relief to the congestion, because while increasing the interior space, it decreased the exterior under-roof space.

The SLB&M was considered the main money-maker among the Missouri Pacific's Texas subsidiaries. The area served by the SLB&M provided revenue from varying sources such as fruits, vegetables, rock and gravel, chemicals, and manufacturing, as well as transportation links with the ports at Port O'Connor, Corpus Christi, and Brownsville, and to the Mexican railroads at Brownsville. Judging by the result, the railroad evidently decided it wanted to make an architectural statement with its new station at the southernmost terminus of its system, so it outsourced the design and construction of the building to the Kelwood company of San Antonio instead of going with an inhouse SLB&M or MP design.

The principal architect of the Kelwood company was Robert Bertram Kelly. He was the "Kel" in "Kelwood". The "wood" part was Harry C. Wood, an accountant who served as secretary-treasurer of the firm. A. A. Seeligson was president of the company.

Kelly was a prolific architect of great abilities. At least three of his buildings are on the national register, including the famed Aztec Theater in San Antonio where he was one of several architects. He designed the San Antonio Light Building and also designed many residences and apartment buildings throughout the city, such as the Landa home and The Bushnell.

His company concentrated its business ventures across south Texas from Kerrville through San Antonio south to Laredo, Corpus Christi, and Brownsville. In Brownsville, other Kelly designed buildings besides the station include the First Presbyterian Church, the El Jardin Hotel, and the Chamber of Commerce Building.

The new station to be built in Brownsville had restrictions on its design which led to some of its uniqueness. It had to be built adjacent to the site of the original SLB&M station, therefore its construction could not interfere in the day-to-day passenger train traffic that would be maintained throughout its construction. The position of the "wye" to the southwest of the site, which stood at the foot of the freight yard and was where the passenger trains were turned, meant the tracks could not be lengthened much. This was because they could not then come together before the switch at the east end of the wye. Building a stub station, therefore, would require that the tracks be shortened, which would sort of defeat the purpose of building the new station. It would be ironic if, while increasing the capacity of the station for people waiting on trains, the capacity of the station's tracks in number of cars were decreased.

Kelly found a partial solution to the problem by designing the structure so that the outermost platform track extended along the side of the building all the way to the distinctive arches at the front of the building that separated the new pavilion from

the curved drive. This meant that at least one of the platform tracks could hold a seven-car train. The other platform track could not extend as far, and stopped at the back of the pavilion area, which was in line with the rear platform that extended across the back of the building providing baggage cart access to the baggage room and to another circular drive on the far side of the building. This second platform track could handle a six-car train. The original track would remain in place and once the new station was completed, would become the baggage and express track serving the Railway Express Agency and a milk company. (In the early part of the twentieth century, milk was often transported on express passenger trains.)

It does also appear that the east leg of the wye was pushed westward a bit to allow some room for the platform tracks. The inclusion of a double slip "puzzle" switch also helped to alleviate the space issue. At some point, the puzzle switch (a high maintenance item) was replaced by two conventional switches, which required another pushing of the east leg of the wye even further west, and a slight relocation of the south leg of the wye. The switches in the wye were spring switches, and under normal circumstances, the wye switches did not need to be lined by trainmen as the passenger trains arrived and departed. Due to the pushing westward of the east leg of the wye, this track did not have a constant curvature in its final two orientations--the track extending more or less straight down from the end of the freight yard, and then having to curve sharply into the station area.

Several additional tracks flanking the two platform tracks were included in the design. These probably served as a coach yard. Unlike larger big city stations which had separate yards from the stations for servicing the cars between runs, the tracks in the M.P. station in Brownsville did double duty as a coach yard. It is very probable that the old station assumed the duty of being a maintenance facility for servicing the cars, as well as possibly providing office space for local railroad officials.

The station was designed with a large pavilion area on the left side of the station from which the track platform extended. Pavilions were a common feature of stations across the country and particularly in Texas, Arkansas, and the southwest, but the Brownsville station's pavilion was unusually large as train stations go. While a typical station's pavilion might encompass as much 400 square feet (conceivably 900 square feet to the eaves), the Brownsville station's pavilion covered over 3,200 square feet of area. This does not include the areas under the train and rear platform sheds.

The interior size of the main waiting room was 1568 square feet. Auxiliary waiting rooms also existed off to the side along with the restrooms. Across the back of the building were ample ticket office and baggage areas, as well as a women's waiting room. Access to the main waiting room was through two sets of double doors under the ornate and decorative front main entrance, and at least one set of presumed double doors opening onto the pavilion. There was an arched entrance to the baggage room from the waiting room. The ticket office had doors opening onto the pavilion and main waiting room as well as a ticket window.

The baggage room had either a door or large opening to the ticket office, a larger sliding door to the rear platform, and a side loading door opening onto the side driveway. This side door is one of the unusual elements of the building, as it was not at ground level, but high enough to be level with the floors of trucks and baggage carts. This implies a raised floor inside the depot at this door. Conceivably the raised floor may have been only large enough to hold a truck or two's worth of transport. Baggage carts could be positioned alongside the raised floor inside the

baggage room and loaded directly from the raised floor.

Recent evidence from an unusual direction suggests that all or much of the baggage room floor may have been raised. This is postulated because of the existence of a "sister station" to the MP Brownsville depot in the form of the Frisco (SLSF) passenger station in Pensacola, Florida. The Frisco station has two entryways that are virtually identical to the front entryway of the Brownsville station. The similarity is so exact, it cannot be a coincidence. A Frisco company publication of the time of the Pensacola station's grand opening described the baggage room floor as being raised above ground level. It's quite possible, due to the similar design of the two stations, which even includes a tower and dome, that the similarities could have also extended to the height of the baggage room floors.

Whether or not Robert Bertram Kelly designed the Pensacola station is open to conjecture. At the very least, his company was consulted about the entryway design, and probably provided the Frisco's architects information and plans on that. It's possible that the Brownsville and Pensacola passenger stations were in design before the Frisco divested itself of the STBL&M. If so, that may be the reason for the obvious connection between the two depots.

Due to the configuration of the circular drive on the side of the depot, trucks could not be backed up to the door without great difficulty, so it is presumed that trucks unloaded out of a side door. The biggest clue supporting this truck side door hypothesis is that there was a bumper along the outside wall of the building that extended well on either side of the door. If trucks backed in, they would not need to extend that far along the wall, but a truck maneuvering in so that its side door could load or unload might accidentally contact the wall at any point within ten or fifteen feet of the door. Possible uses of the door might include the passing of mail to and from post office trucks, and possibly milk from other companies not located near the station.

Probably the most noticeable architectural feature of the building was the dome. The octagonal dome itself sat on a square base which appeared to be a possible third floor of the building--the dome then becoming a fourth floor. In actuality, the building had only one floor--the dome being purely ornamental, though it probably had a floor that was inaccessible. The octagonal portion featured small arched portals. The domed roof that sat atop all this was a perfect half globe, and was painted a light sky blue or turquoise. The actual color varies from photo to photo, and it is certainly possible that it may have been repainted periodically to other than the same exact shade of light blue. Between paintings, it sometimes deteriorated to a dirty light tan color.

The other most noticeable feature of the depot would have to be the arches on the front of the pavilion. Three of them spanned across the front with the area of the wall near the waiting room also containing a doorway with a swinging wrought iron door. In large letters on the front wall above the arches was spelled the words, "MISSOURI PACIFIC LINES".

The building was of a light tan stucco exterior with a darker ornate carved stone "cantera" entryway. In later years, this darker colored stone was painted the same color as the stucco parts of the building. It can be guessed that over the first twenty or so years, the probable limestone stonework perhaps became discolored or dirty looking as the material is prone to do, and was painted in an effort to spruce it up and halt the deterioration. This sprucing up of the depot may have happened in

conjunction with the inauguration of the streamlined "Valley Eagle" train in 1949.

The aforementioned Frisco publication made references to the exterior of the Pensacola building's entryways as being constructed of semi-glazed terra cotta, and having "bright, attractive colors". If so, it seems possible that the Brownsville depot may have also had such colorfulness, but early black and white photos and colored post cards do not suggest that.

The architectural style of the building is known as "Mission Revival", similar to but distinct from "Spanish Colonial" (exemplified by the still existing Southern Pacific depot in Brownsville), which tends to be a little more ornate than Mission Revival. Being situated in San Antonio, Robert Kelly probably consulted the best possible source for the inspiration for his design: namely the five missions in that city. Several features, including the arches, dome, and the more ornate main entry, remind one of some of the missions in San Antonio. The way the front entry is framed by a stepped design on each side is almost identical to details on his Aztec Theatre in San Antonio.

The building was constructed in 1925 to 1926 as part of a large project that included the El Jardin Hotel. The Chamber of Commerce Building was also built at this time. All three buildings were dedicated in a single ceremony in 1927. Such a project of the time would have been to Brownsville like an airport and adjoining hotel complex would be to a city in today's time.

The 1930 Official Guide of the Railways shows three train departures and three arrivals at the Missouri Pacific depot each day. The Southern Pacific station had but a single departure and arrival each day. The Missouri Pacific also had its own bus lines, sometimes being a part of the Trailways system, and as many as eight or more departures a day left the depot along with the returning arrivals. This train and bus schedule would have entailed a lot of activity around the station as people came and left to and from the trains and buses along with the accompanying well wishers and greeters.

From Brownsville, train travelers could travel to Houston and San Antonio without changing trains. In the twilight years of comfortable train travel, the station was served by two trains: the overnight "Pioneer", and the daytime "Valley Eagle". Both trains featured dining/lounge cars, and the Pioneer featured Pullmans as well, though it lost its dining/lounge service in later years. Through Pullmans went to Houston, St. Louis, and San Antonio by way of connecting trains at Odem and Houston. The "Valley Eagle" became the premier train on the route when it was introduced as a streamliner in 1949. The Missouri Pacific only had six streamlined trains (including two Texas Eagles) with its prestigious Eagle moniker (seven if you count the M.P. subsidiary's Texas and Pacific's "Louisiana Eagle"), and Brownsville was the terminal for one of these.

After making fare cuts in the late fifties to try and woo back train travelers, eventually the exodus of rail travelers to the automobile and the airplane was too much to ignore. The Valley Eagle was discontinued in mid-1962. It maintained its dignity right up to the end and still had its diner-coach. It's last consists usually numbered only a baggage car, the diner-coach, and a coach. This left the overnight Pioneer as the only passenger service on the line. By 1965, the Pioneer was bereft of sleepers, the diner/lounge, and even its name, thus becoming a coach-only affair. Still overnight--sort of, at least on the southbound schedule--it's northbound schedule had the train arriving Houston at 2:30 am, not a convenient time for long distance

travelers. It's schedule only makes sense if one now considers it a commuter train serving Brownsville. You could arrive Brownsville and do a full day's work, then return north at the end of the work day. Thus, in its last incarnation, it still acknowledged the importance of Brownsville as its southern terminus.

Finally, in the late sixties upon receiving permission to discontinue this last train, the Missouri Pacific cut its losses as quick as it could by closing the passenger depot at 1154 Levee Street and having the last several departures leave ignominiously from the freight station a few blocks away. Now gutted of its passenger trains, and the buses long gone as well when Missouri Pacific exited the bus business in the late fifties, the Brownsville architectural landmark became a sad monument to the past. Probably influenced by vandalism to the now closed edifice, and the fire hazard it also posed situated right there on Levee Street next to the El Jardin, the Missouri Pacific decided to raze the structure. Not having much time to act, a preservation effort was unable to halt the destruction of the soul of downtown Brownsville, and the building became fodder for the wrecking ball and bulldozers in the late 1960's. Brownsville's pride was no more. In proportion to the size of the city of Brownsville, this must rank as one of the most tragic train station demolitions of all time.

Robert Bertram Kelly did not live to see his beautiful masterpiece destroyed. Several years into the Great Depression, he committed suicide, no doubt due to the drastic reduction in requests for his architectural talents as south Texas and the entire country struggled to survive those lean years. He left Kelwood several years before his demise, not long after the depot had been built, and his projects became less numerous as the depression deepened. In photos and memories, though, his unique vision of a Brownsville Mission Revival railroad passenger station a stone's throw from the Rio Grande still survives.

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