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SHAY DINKY IN THE PINES

by *Kenneth Morgan*

The old timers say if you have ever seen a Shay locomotive thrashing its way up a steep, piney woods grade and pulling three or four cars heavily loaded with virgin pine logs, you will remember the sight as long as you live. The little engine with three sets of cylinders, crankshaft, and gear box mounted on the right, and the boiler off center to the left, lacked beauty when compared with the bigger, more powerful piston-and-rod main-line engines, but its performance and durability was never questioned. Some of these little work-horses of the timber industry still brought in log trains after three or four decades of service.

Ephraim Shay, a white-pine lumberman in Michigan, was responsible for the design of the locomotive. He first took his plans to the Lima Locomotive Works in Ohio in 1880 where the design and specifications were drawn up. In the course of more than sixty years, the company turned out about 2700 of these steam-powered engines. On a flat, level surface they could pull a long string of loaded cars. Several inches of slack, built into the couplings between the cars, enabled the engine to start the first car to rolling; then the second car, third car, and so on, until the whole string was in motion. However, in hilly country they could move only three or four loaded cars because their light weight allowed the wheels to spin on the track.

Many of the Shay locomotives found their way into East Texas late in the 1800s and early in the 1900s during the great logging bonanza instituted by such men as Simon Wiess, Alexander Gilmer, David R. Wingate, Henry J. Lutcher, G. Bedell Moore, John Henry Kirby, Joseph H. Kurth, and Thomas L.L. Temple.

John Henry Kirby built his Gulf, Beaumont, and Kansas City Railway from Beaumont to Roganville in 1895, then in 1902, under the name Gulf, Beaumont, and Great Northern, extended this line northward through the magnificent longleaf pine forest to Jasper and San Augustine. A year later it was extended to Center.

Main lines branched off the railroad at various points to enable the big lumber company to cut and transport the prime timber to their mills efficiently. One such main line left the railroad at a point between Roganville and Jasper and extended westward, crossing the Spring Hill Road approximately seven miles south of Jasper, near the double-pen, split-log house of my great-great-grandfather, David Dunn, and just to the north of the Dunn-Olds Cemetery, known later as Olds Cemetery. The line continued westward with spur lines branching off approximately every half mile or so into the company's holdings. These tram lines were hurriedly constructed with little grading and without benefit of a built-up road bed. The cross-ties, usually oak or pine, were laid flat on the ground by the steel gang, with many crooks and turns to

miss obstructions along the way. Then came the sections of rail, laid and spiked precisely four feet, eight and one-half inches wide and connected together with bolted splice bars. Kirby did not use narrow-gauge rails (three feet wide), on his spurs and main lines. Any rolling stock that could move on the trams also could travel on the main railroad.

The steel gang, usually consisting of twelve black men, had their quota of spur line to lay each day. The work was difficult and required much strength and teamwork. They sang together to set the pace or rhythm of their work and perhaps to relieve the drudgery of their repetitious tasks. Normally two men would drive the steel railroad spikes together, alternating their blows with nine-pound hammers. After eight rails had been picked up and laid on a new spur by each man in the twelve-man gang, their day's work was completed and they could sit and relax until the train took them home in the evening to the mill town or logging front.

My mother, Dollie Olds Morgan, remembered the steel gangs well. As an eight-year-old girl, she and her family traveled by wagon to a logging front near Manning in Angelina County, Texas, where her father, Amy Olds, took a job as mule tender and blacksmith for the Carter-Kelly Lumber Company. On one occasion she saw a black man break his leg while attempting to jump on the cowcatcher of a moving train that was taking the work crews home in the evening. She will never forget his screams of agony when the large bone snapped between his knee and ankle.

Early in the 1900s steam skidders and loaders came into use on the tram lines of East Texas, relieving the mule and ox teams of some of their hardest tasks. It still fell the lot of these beasts of burden to drag big logs from places out of reach of the 800 foot cables played out from power-driven drums on the steam skidder. Many mules, oxen, and a few men were crippled or killed when struck by a log being skidded through the brush and timber.

A pair of big mules could pull a twenty-foot log with an average diameter of eighteen inches and weighing approximately one ton when freshly cut. Larger logs were pulled by two or three yoke of oxen. Bulls were used rather than steers because they developed more massive necks, chests, and shoulders. Unlike mule teams, the oxen normally had no lines attached to them for guiding. They worked by voice commands alone, and most "bull punchers" spoke softly to their animals.

"Uncle" John Bevil was one of the best known locomotive engineers in the Jasper-Kirbyville area. His young flagman was killed instantly when he leaned far out of a locomotive to check the track ahead as they approached a crossing on Big Creek. Apparently his head struck a tree or some other obstruction near the track. A bad wreck occurred near this same area when some heavily loaded log cars got loose from the locomotive and piled up at a trestle crossing.

I recently walked to the old tram crossing on Hurricane Branch near my home, attempting to recapture a feeling for the history of this land where my

ancestors lived and toiled. The trestle timbers have been gone many years but the road bed is still visible on both sides of the branch. Traces of the bar ditches remain where slip teams scooped dirt to build up low-lying areas of the right-of-way. It has been eighty-five years since huge virgin pine logs passed over this spot on their way to Kirby's big sawmill in Roganville, but sometimes late in the evening, when the only sound is rippling water below and a wood thrush's soft call as he seeks a safe haven for the coming night, I can almost see a Shay locomotive under a cloud of black smoke, slowly thrashing its way up the steep grade beyond the branch, with a heavy load of logs and a weary crew looking forward to supper and a little rest before returning to the piney woods at daylight.