

Surprising MoPac Survivals in South Texas

A 2008 Vacation Turns into a Research Project

By Ron Goldfeder

While on vacation in Harlingen, Texas, and vicinity I was surprised to find a well preserved M.P. freight station as we drove over a grade crossing. We later visited the kind folks at H&H Golf Carts & Outdoor Power, who told us they bought the building from the railroad in 1986. At that time it had been abandoned, and as a result of no maintenance for some time it had a leaking roof and rotten window frames. They have taken great care to make repairs in keeping with its design. For example, the railroad had replaced some ground floor windows on the north end with glass blocks when they made earlier repairs, so the new owners did the same. There are five M.P. buzz-saw heralds clearly visible on it, and they have metal lettering spelling out "Freight Station"

on the north wall facing Harrison Street. The owners thought the building dated from about 1928.

I went through the glass swinging door of the public entrance and found this had been built into the opening of one of the building's sliding freight doors. The door was still there, intact in its wall pocket in the open position. A second freight door into the same room was also still there with a window built into its opening. A floor scale was near the wall between these doors, although they had removed the parts that stood above the floor and were in their way. The original public entry on the north end had been blocked off. There were former offices on both floors and a walk-in vault on the main floor. When the owners called the local maintenance firm

whose name was found in the vault two men came to see them. The older man had installed the vault in the new building and provided the 1928 date from his records.

The building is also on the 1929 Sanborn fire map for Harlingen, which shows it measured about 40' by 160' in size. The north half was a two story office and the south end was a one story freight house. It had platforms around three sides with the south one extending about 40' from the building. The platform along the west side (track side) was about 20' longer than the one on the street side. There were two tracks along the west platform at that time, although they are now gone. Over the years both platforms on the sides of the building have been shortened to allow direct truck access to



Former Harlingen freight station from the Commerce Street side, looking northwest. Ron Goldfeder photograph.

loading doors. There was another track on the centerline of the station that ended just short of the platform at the south end of the building. A loading shed was between this last mentioned track and the one nearest the west wall of the station. This platform was removed by the city when the railroad revised its tracks when use of the freight station ended. This allowed the cross streets blocked by the platform to be extended through its location, improving traffic flow.

The railroad got to Harlingen on April 20, 1904, when the first train of the St. Louis Brownsville & Mexico (St.LB&M) arrived. It then kept building enroute to Brownsville. In May 1910 it came under the control of the Frisco through its New Orleans, Texas and Mexico subsidiary and the Gulf Coast Lines. In January 1925 these railroads came under the control of the Missouri Pacific. This would account for the prominent buzz-saws on the building, built just a few years later.

The freight station is located at 115 W. Harrison St. in Harlingen.

A greater surprise was found in Brownsville. The Historic Brownsville Museum was located in the nicely restored 1928 Southern Pacific (Texas & New Orleans) depot. A new addition housed an 1871 steam locomotive from the isolated Rio Grande Railroad, a 42" gauge line that was built in 1872-73 to connect Point Isabel with Brownsville on the Mexican border, a distance of 22 miles. The locomotive was Rio Grande No. 1, a Baldwin originally built as a side-tank 2-4-2T. It was shipped from Philadelphia in January of 1872, along with its twin No. 2. It had 40" drivers, 9" by 16" cylinders, held 450 gallons of water, and weighed 17,000 pounds. Its fuel was wood and it cost \$6,500. The engine lost its side tanks and was equipped with a tender some time after the line bought its No. 3, a Baldwin 4-4-0 in 1877. It continued in service until at

least 1917, through the reorganization of the company as the Rio Grande Railway in 1911. By 1905 the line came under the control of the St. LB&M, providing the first M.P. connection to this story, although it returned to local control in 1914.

In 1921 a new line was built into Point Isabel to eliminate more than four miles of trestles and bridges over marshes and parts of the Laguna Madre Bay. The choice of the original route was a miscalculation by the railroad due to the amount of work required to maintain many trestles and bridges. The exposed nature of the area so close to the ocean offered no protection from storms. During the first eight years of operation the line spent over \$83,000 repairing hurricane and other storm damage, which continued on a regular basis. The new route was 28.44 miles long and only had one 56'-long trestle over a drainage ditch. As it was declining it received some publicity from the visit



Looking south from Harrison Street. Ron Goldfeder photograph.

of President-elect Harding to Point Isabel in November 1920, as his party used the railroad to get there. In 1925 the railroad was converted to standard gauge, and in 1928 it was again reorganized as the Point Isabel and Rio Grande Valley Railway. This company operated until December 1940, when it was abandoned. In 1941 nine miles of its route from Point Isabel to Esoes was sold to the M.P.-owned San Benito and Rio Grande Valley Railroad, which had built a three mile extension to Esoes in 1940. San Benito was on the St. Louis, Brownsville & Mexico (St.LB&M) main line, 21 miles west of Esoes. In 1956 this merged into the M.P. but the ex-Rio Grande Port Isabel branch was abandoned in 1969. Also in 1941 the St.LB&M bought six miles of this line leading out of Brownsville to serve the Port of Brownsville, where development started in 1934 and opened in 1936. This route went with it to merge into the M.P. in 1956, then the Union Pacific in the early 1980s, and part of it is still in use.



Former public entry on Harrison Street, north end of building, tracks to the right. Ron Goldfeder photograph.



View looking north on track side of building. There once were two spur tracks next to the loading dock. Ron Goldfeder photograph.