



The LANTERN

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NEXT MEETING

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L FAN'S DREAM WEEKEND by Eric J. Taylor: On Friday, May 2nd through Sunday, May 4th, Larry Benson, Brent (my brother) and I experience a weekend of rail fanning that can only be described as a "dream weekend." Four of us attended the joint ACL/SAL and Central of Georgia Historical Societies' meeting in Albany, Georgia. Events of the weekend were the two rail trips over rail that have not seen passenger traffic in at least 30 years.

The first day was dedicated to former ACL/SAL rail lines. We left Albany by bus to Cordele to meet the SAM Short Line, or "SAM" for short, excursion train. "SAM" standing for the "Savannah, Americus, and Montgomery" Railroad. Original name of the railroad from Savannah to Montgomery that was later acquired and made a part of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad. After having been abandoned or spun off by the CSX, the State of Georgia purchased the rail line. The final SAM from Vidalia, Georgia to the present end of the line in Mahrt, Alabama. As described below, the line between Vidalia, Georgia to Mahrt, over a lift bridge on the Chattahoochee River, is under rehabilitation by Georgia. It is to be back in action.

A number of Georgia citizens, including former President, and now Nobel Peace Prize winner, Jimmy Carter, went to Albany and requested the State start an excursion train and Georgia did. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources is the agency in charge of this train. To create this excursion train, the State purchased from the Maryland DOT, 11 surplus commuter coaches for the train. These coaches originally began life as sleeper cars for the Pennsylvanian before being converted into commuter coaches. The SAM also acquired a "streamlined" observation car from Florida East Coast "Bay Biscayne." Power for the train is provided by the freight short line operator HOG (Hog) ("HOG"). Except for the locomotive engineers and a few SAM employees, the majority of the personnel operating the excursion are all volunteers. The train had a food/drink car and concessions were served in the observation car.

We left Cordele and traveled through Americus to Plains. A few miles west of Cordele was fresh evidence of new industry and track. A long-standing industry was convinced to bring in aggregate by rail so a passing track was laid, with sidings, where the HOG can set out the cars and the industry can unload the aggregate. It was unclear if the industry is also shipping finished product by rail yet. Upon arriving in Plains, we detrained for lunch for one hour. Then we went west to Archery, the boy-hood home of Jimmy Carter and now a national historic park. After an hour in Archery we headed back east to Cordele. Before returning to Albany by bus, we did some train watching in Cordele at the crossing of the CSX and the Norfolk Southern. The CSX tracks were the main line from Atlanta to Jacksonville. The old ACL through Manchester, Cordele, Fitzgerald, and Waycross. The NS line is the former Southern main line from Atlanta through Macon, Cordele, Tifton, and Valdosta. We did not see in that 45 minutes any NS trains but we did see CSX freights - two heading for Jacksonville and one for Atlanta. After the trains, we headed back to Albany where we were put on about the respective older railroads.

The second day was dedicated to the former rail line of the Central of Georgia. The Central had as one of its main lines from Macon to Albany. About 24 miles north of Albany, there was a switch off of the main line at Smithville, Ga. This led to a fairly substantial line that went, in the Central's heyday, from Smithville all the way to Montgomery, Ala., through Dawson and Cuthbert, Georgia and Eufaula and Union Springs, Alabama. The State of Georgia purchased this line, having purchased the line in 2001 from RailAmerica. This rail has been leased by the State and is operated by the Georgia Southwestern Railroad, owned by Georgia businesspersons to bring back service in this area. In addition to adding from the number of locomotives and freight cars on the rails and sidings, they are doing a very good job of bringing back rail service to these small towns.

Upon arriving in Smithville, the 150 railfans taking this trip were first treated to a sight very few have ever seen in the South. GSWR has acquired two FP-9 diesels. They were built by GM in Canada and first operated by CN. The FP-9 is a VIA, Canada's version of Amtrak. The GSWR bought them in 2002 and had them painted in the 1940-1963 Central of Georgia. It was a sight to see.

The passenger equipment consisted of a total of three cars. The coach was exactly like the coach's used by the GSWR. The GSWR coach actually belonged to the State and was leased from the SAM; a dining car that started life as a hospital car and then converted by Amtrak into a "Le Pub" car, and, finally, a Long Island RR commuter car that has been converted by the GSWR into an entertainment car with an observation deck (ala 1920's) where you can sit out in the open and watch the rails go behind you.

The trip was like all rail trips - peaceful to watch the scenery go by. The train made two stops for photographic "runs." Originally, the train stopped in Eufaula for 30 minutes after turning on the "Y" for more photos of the train and the area of the Central in Eufaula.

One very interesting information to come out of this weekend was the news that Georgia is proceeding with it plan to bring back rail service to southwest and west Georgia. (You may want to find an old railroad atlas to follow my story line as the line is continuing with its rehabilitation west from Plains all the way through Lumpkin and Omaha, Georgia to the end of the line in Mahrt, Alabama. Thus service will be restored from Vidalia to Mahart. No news on whether Alabama will be working with Georgia to rebuild the line all the way to Montgomery.

There is even more exciting news that has not been widely published in the railroad press. First, the tracks of the line between Bainbridge and Cuthbert still in place are to be rehabilitated, as will the present tracks from Columbus, Ga. to Dawson to Sasser on the old SAL line from Columbus to Albany. More surprising is the fact that Georgia is LAYING the torn-up track in that old SAL line between Cusseta and Dawson and Sasser and Albany. This will bring the line back to life. Additionally, Georgia will be relaying track on the former SAL line between Cuthbert and so that old SAL line from Tallahassee to Columbus will also be back in complete operation. When this project is completed, Richland, in the center of the project and now completely without rail service, will again be a junction point known for the past 20 or more years.

In all, it was a wonderful weekend. I was able to ride on rails that were all but abandoned a few years ago.

Ja and that trucks are not the end all mode of transportation.