

AIR LINE

The blaring air-horn of Diesel locomotives, strung together tandem fashion and easily pulling 80-car freight trains from New Albany up the Edwardsville hill cause hardly a lifted eyebrow today from the casual bystander. But to the struggling promoters of the Louisville, New Albany & St. Louis Railroad 85 years ago, such a sight would have been a veritable miracle – success far beyond their wildest dreams.

October 9, 1882 was a day of excitement in New Albany. The first passenger train on the “Air Line” was about to set out on its 320-mile journey to St. Louis – a journey which meant that 12 long years of struggle and hope was at last to be rewarded. The railroad from New Albany to St. Louis was at last completed.

In those days when travel was limited to the surface of the earth, “air line” meant simply the shortest distance between two points – the distance “as the crow flies”. The New Albany promoter had proudly tacked this name to their new railroad to proclaim to the world that theirs was the most direct route from Louisville and New Albany to St. Louis.

Local enthusiasm ran high when plans for the new railroad were first announced in 1870. Augustus Bradley, a prominent New Albany citizen, was president and the City of New Albany subscribed \$300,000 to the cost of construction. Floyd County added \$95,000, and the city of Louisville, with an eye to western commerce, also took a block of bonds while private individuals along the route put their name on the list.

Soon construction crews were busy grading right-of-way and pushing the rails west from New Albany. Then, with 80 miles graded but only three miles of track completed, financial troubles hit. The cost of construction had been higher than estimated, and a tunnel through the Knobs near Edwardsville was a particular headache. With the nation's economy in a temporary recession, it proved impossible to raise more cash and in 1872, work stopped completely.

For some eight years the weeds grew undisturbed on the right-of way and the three miles of rails turned red with rust. Then, when construction finally was resumed, a complete change in location was made on the section from New Albany to Edwardsville. The old right-of-way, with its deep cuts and the old tunnel were abandoned, and still remain today high on the hillside by State Road 62 as a mute testimony to a false and expensive start.

Construction went rapidly the second time, though tragedy marked the building of the new tunnel, the one still in use. Part of the roof collapsed, killing two workmen. Despite this minor setback, the road was ready for operation in October, 1882 – ready to haul freight and passengers on an “air line” to St. Louis.

As that first train started its historic journey through Marengo and Milltown, Eckerty and English, Birdseye and Huntingburg, crowds of curious onlookers thronged the track at every station. The engineer amused himself at many stops by shouting to the crowds – “Look out! I’m going to turn it around!” Bystanders scattered in every direction.

When the “Air Line” was first opened, it terminated in New Albany and here were the yards, roundhouse and shops along the riverfront. With the opening of the K & I Bridge in 1886, the road was connected with all railroads throughout the South and became an important traffic link between the West and the Southern states. So important, in fact, that in 1901 it became a part of

the far-flung Southern Railway which acquired the line as its own funnel for this vast traffic.

Fond memories still linger of the passenger trains pulled by handsome green locomotives whistling melodiously through the Southern Indiana countryside. They once were an important source of revenue and the arrival of the train was a major event of the day at small towns along the line. But on a June day in 1953 the last train made its nostalgic journey, a victim of the automobile and paved roads.

The steam locomotives are gone, too, and Edwardsville hill no longer resounds to the thunderous exhaust of three locomotives struggling up the grade with one short freight train. Today modern Diesel-electric locomotives haul twice the load with ease and the grimy pusher engine is a thing of the past.

It's not as glamorous as it used to be, but it's much more efficient . . . a tribute to the foresight of New Albany citizens whose determination built the "Air Line", a steel-ribboned link with the West.

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