

New Albany Wanted Rail Service To St. Louis, But First A Tunnel Had To Be Dynamited Through The Knobs

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New Albany and Floyd County subscribed \$395,000 to help build the "Air Line" and dig its tunnel back in the 1870s. It took several re-organizations – and more than one life – before first train passed through the tunnel October 9, 1862.

To the casual motorist driving along Indiana 64 and Indiana 62 through the knobs near Edwardsville, the sight of smoke rising from a thicket beside the highway may cause wonder and alarm. To area residents it is a familiar sight which indicates a Southern Railway train is passing through "the tunnel".

The tunnel, referred to variously as the Great Tunnel, the Edwardsville Tunnel, or the Duncan Tunnel, extends for approximately a mile under Edwardsville Hill. Completed in 1881 and first used in 1882, the tunnel proved no small job to the several railroad companies which sought to establish rail service between New Albany and St. Louis.

Officials of the Southern Railway admit that to trace the exact history and development of the section of track including the tunnel is difficult since several different companies were involved in the construction. One company would build a segment of track, go broke, reorganize and build another portion.

Bradley President In 1869

The first company to envision rail service between New Albany and St. Louis was organized in 1869 with Augustus Bradley, a New Albany businessman, as president. Seventeen months later, on July 1, 1870, the company changed its name to Louisville, New Albany and St. Louis Air Line Railway. The term Air Line caught the fancy of the population and the road was commonly called that, no matter which company was financing the venture.

This road was to be a direct connection between Louisville and St. Louis. Its founders thought of it as a link to unite two great roads, the Chesapeake and Ohio in the east and Central Pacific in the west. They envisioned increased commerce from joining the Ohio River at Louisville and the Mississippi at St. Louis.

Biggest problem of construction was the tunnel, and it took 10 years to complete it. The railroad was to follow the Middle Creek valley, but its abrupt termination at Edwardsville compelled the company to undertake the tunnel.

Construction Started In 1870

Actual construction began around 1870, but financial problems delayed completion of the road. However, New Albany subscribed \$300,000 and Floyd County, \$95,000.

By the time trains were actually running over the Air Line, the company name had been changed again – to Louisville, Evansville & St. Louis Railroad. In 1889, it became the Louisville, Evansville, St. Louis Consolidated Railway. And on Jan. 1, 1901, the Air Line passed into the hands of the Southern Railway – and with it the great tunnel.

The tunnel is 15 feet wide and 24 feet high. Cost of it has been estimated at a million dollars. Records indicate that it is 4,689 feet long and that but 20 feet of this distance remained to be dug when the first company was forced to abandon the work for want of funds.

“This tunnel was commenced several years ago, when the first company was formed for the purpose of putting this road through. That company did a great deal of work on it – in fact nearly completed it – but failed before the work was wholly done,” a description published in 1882 says.

That same description mentions that “This township (Edwardsville) is favored by the passage through it of the New Albany and St. Louis Air Line railroad, which is at this time in process of construction, a large number of workmen being employed along the line in this and New Albany townships. The well known tunnel on this road is wholly in this township, and furnishes exit through which the train will escape from the valley enclosed by the knobs.”

That the people of this area were interested in the progress of the Air Line is evident from the running account which appeared in the papers of the early 1800s. A prediction of greatness was made by one author who records, “All along the line of the road through Edwardsville township is heard and seen the busy notes of preparation for the laying of the track for the coming of that great civilizer, the railway train. Very soon the steam of the locomotive and the thunder of the rushing train will be heard in the land, and the Air Line, that has for so many years been in the thoughts of the people, and which has failed and come up through much tribulation and labor, will be an accomplished fact.”

But there were the usual complaints, too. One news account mentions "Some parties through whose premise the new line of the Air Line road has been run between New Albany and the tunnel complain . . ." The writer assures the readers that the Air Line has every intention of dealing fairly with all property owners.

It was in April, 1881, that work on the Air Line was renewed in earnest. The Louisville, Evansville & St. Louis Air Line Railway hoped to have the entire line in operation by January of 1882. It hoped that by October of 1881 trains could run from New Albany to Albion.

Rolling Stock In 1881

The New Albany Ledger-Standard comments on April 6, 1881, that the outfit of rolling stock for the Air Line is complete and of high quality and the "laying of steel track makes this a first class railroad." Several days previously, the Air Line had announced contracts for \$360,000 worth of cars and 15 locomotives. They also were expecting the first installment of steel rails, 12,000 tons, to arrive by the end of April.

"Ed Codman and Frank Sweeny with a fourth corps of engineers start on the Air Line tomorrow," says the paper April 6, "and John Doherty and a son of George Smith are the New Albany boys to go with the corps."

About a week later, Marshal Morris, chief engineer, advertised for bids on the remaining sections of track including the completion of the tunnel.

D. J. Conger, of New Albany, was given a contract for sections 1, 2, 3, 4 west of New Albany, and Hay Meyer and Company, of Louisville, was to build sections 5, 6, 7. They also received a contract for the tunnel. Work on the tunnel was sublet to Murphy and Bradford, of Edwardsville. George Cummings, the first contractor, who worked for three years on the tunnel in the 1870s, was apparently rehired to help complete the job.

On May 14, 1881, Conger put on a big force of laborers between New Albany and the tunnel, and Cummings began with a large force on the tunnel on section 23.

The drilling and blasting were done by a force of about 30 men without machinery. The work was in some places 89 feet below the surface, and two air shafts over 70 feet long were run from the top of the hill. It is through one of these air shafts that exhaust from the present day diesel locomotives escapes to astonish casual motorists driving through Edwardsville.

Difficulties were encountered all during the completion of the tunnel, especially at the west end. Workmen were hampered by mud which was carried into the west end of the Edwardsville tunnel by floods in the creek near which the tunnel opens.

Two Workmen Killed

On Oct. 15, 1881, two of the workmen were killed when a huge stone dropped from the roof of the tunnel and crushed them. So large was the rock that exit from the tunnel at the west end was blocked. This accident occurred after the work of blasting had been completed and the men were dressing up the top and sides of the tunnel.

Accounts of the accident stressed the care taken by the company and by the men themselves to prevent accidents. Killed were Thomas Sullivan of Scott County and Robert Decker of Floyd County. Joseph Wier, a laborer from Louisville, was injured in the same accident. And just a few days later, on Oct. 22, Jack O'Bryan was knocked from a ladder at approximately the same spot when more stones broke loose and fell.

Even though there were accidents, the press of the era was laudatory of the accomplishments of the engineers and contractors. "The grade being made between New Albany and the tunnel is a most excellent piece of railroad work," said one account.

Officials at the Southern Railroad office in Louisville said the grade near the tunnel which extends into the tunnel itself is 2.9 per cent. Grades of 1 per cent are common, and in mountain territory they often reach 2.2 per cent; grades steeper than this are uncommon. The steepest main line grade in the U.S. is in the Blue Ridge Mountains and is 4.7 per cent.

During the days of the steam locomotives, a special locomotive and crew were added to the trains to assist on the uphill run. Today's diesel engines are able to traverse the grade without additional aid. They do however "double on the hill" which means they break the train and take part through, then go back and pick up the rest of the train.

"Pullman Palace Cars"

Although daylight shone through the Edwardsville to Duncan Tunnel on September 2, 1881, it was not until October 9, 1882, that the first train made a commercial trip through it.

In anticipation of the opening, the Louisville, Evansville, and St. Louis Railway ran the following advertisement in The Courier Journal:

"Louisville, Evansville & St. Louis Railway will inaugurate their system of Double Daily Trains between Louisville and St. Louis on Oct. 9. New Day and Smoking Coaches, Pullman Palace Sleeping Cars on all night trains. Pullman Palace Parlor cars on all day trains. Either train runs through to St. Louis without change. Only line running Pullman cars and solid trains between Louisville and St. Louis."

At the present time the Southern Railway system operates between six and eight freight trains daily over the old "Air Line" tracks. At one time the "staff system" which required the train engineers to take a staff from a machine at one end of the tunnel and place it in the machine at the other end was employed to assure that trains would not meet in the tunnel. In 1949, a manual block system and an automatic staff system which protected the trains were replaced with electronic equipment.

Safety devices such as the dragging equipment detector, the hot box detector, and the broken flange detector are located at the west end of the tunnel, near Georgetown. These devices combine to insure that trains will not break down or derail within the tunnel itself.