Why can’t all park engines be this good?

Story and photos by Steve Glischinski

Mason City native Meredith Willson gained international fame for his musical “The Music Man,” which tells the story of Harold Hill, a traveling con man. He arrives in River (Mason) City, convincing the locals to purchase uniforms and instruments from him in order to start a band. He then intends to flee as soon as he receives their money, but instead falls for librarian Marian Paroo, which forces him to rethink his plan and win over Marian.

Like Hill, you can’t help but like the residents of Mason City, in particular the members of the Friends of the 457 committee. These concerned citizens have taken a derelict steam locomotive in East Park, Minneapolis & St. Louis 2-8-0 No. 457, and turned it into one of the finest park display locomotives in the U.S.

A large sloping roof shades and protects the gleaming Consolidation from sun and snow, while an elegant wrought-iron fence surrounds the display. Outside the fence are interpretive signs with the history of railroading in Mason City.

On weekdays, when the fence is closed, you can learn 457’s history at the touch of a button. Push the yellow button on signage near the fence and hear a 3-minute history of the locomotive; press the red button and hear recordings of the Nathan five-chime whistle; while the green button plays bells, steam, and engine sounds.

On summer weekends, visitors can walk inside the fence and use their smartphones to scan codes to learn more about the exhibit. They can climb in the cab, sit in the engineer’s seat, pull on the whistle cord, and haul back on the throttle — and the locomotive roars to life. Fog machines give the illusion of smoke and steam. You might think, “Why can’t all park locomotives be like this one?”

As incredible as it seems today, No. 457 was once derelict and on the verge of being scrapped. But one man took it upon himself to do something to make it presentable again, and then passed the baton to a group of volunteers who far exceeded anyone’s expectations.

MAKING MIRACLES HAPPEN IN MASON CITY

No. 457’s “Music Man” (although he is no con) is Gene Green, who grew up in Chapin, Iowa, across the street from the M&StL main line. While attending college in Mason City in 1959, he overheard talk about a steam locomotive being moved into East Park,
Smoke from special foggers installed in M&StL No. 457 billows, creating an illusion of an operating engine; a sound system plays recordings of the engine's whistle.
and watched as it was moved into its final position. Green served in the Army from 1960-87, modeled the M&StL, and even wrote a book about the railroad. In 2003, he got permission to measure 457 for a computer-aided-design drawing. By that time, 457’s future was uncertain; it was in horrible condition, and some community members wanted it cut up.

"While inside the fence taking measurements, I would see parents bringing their small children to play on the playground near 457," Green says. While some bypassed the engine, others stopped to talk to him. "They wanted to reminisce about the fun they had playing on good ol' 457 when it was still possible to do so. They had genuinely fond memories and wanted to see 457 stay in East Park. Eventually, I concluded that if all these people would do what they were reputed to have offered, 457 could be restored at no cost to the city. I went before the park board and proposed exactly that."

Working with City Parks Superintendent Mark Suby, Green set up his camper next to the locomotive and began work. During 2003-04 he alternated spending three months in Iowa and three months at his home in El Paso, Texas. He began to clean up 457, advertising for help, but working alone.

He visited various businesses to beg for materials and borrow tools. He cleaned out about 18 inches of compost from the tender's coal space. "You can imagine the rust caused by that wet vegetable matter after all those years," he says. He got the tender top covered and painted the engine. He used a razor blade to scrape paint layers off the side of the cab, exposing original M&StL stenciling. A woman traced it onto Mylar film so the letters and numbers are authentic.

**STEPPING UP TO HELP**

He worked alone until August 2004 when, one Saturday, three men showed up with everything necessary for welding and set to work. The next to arrive and offer help was Cliff Hagman, who was faithful to the project until he moved away. After that, more volunteers began to show up. But on Sept. 19, 2004, Green suffered a heart attack while working on the engine, and his days of working on 457 were over.

Luckily, volunteers Dennis Wilson and Hagman took over. They and others founded the nonprofit Friends of the 457 committee to guide restoration and preservation work, in cooperation with the Mason City Parks & Recreation staff. While Green had simply hoped to enclose the tender, paint the engine, and get a roof over it, the friends had bigger plans.

Individual volunteers took on projects to make 457 whole again. The Friends of the 457 sought out gauges for its now complete cab. Vandals stole the originals when it was unprotected in the park. The Friends of the 457 assembled interactive displays to illustrate the history of the locomotive and railroads in the Mason City area.
Hagman became co-chairperson and took on the cab floor and tender. Volunteer Owen Currier rebuilt the front and back headlights, using his wife's stainless steel mixing bowl as the front headlight reflector. Others offered to track down gauges and find a bell, while an industrial arts teacher put his class to work forming the jacketing for the cylinders and a new number plate. A retired locomotive engineer welded in new metal in rusted out areas.

On May 14, 2005, the cosmetically restored engine was reopened to the public, but that was just the beginning. In 2006, Phoenix Sound Systems donated a model railroad sound system, and local sound engineer Ron Schacht installed it; the speakers are inside the boiler and give the illusion of operation, right down to the air compressor “thump-thump,” the whine of the dynamo, and the hiss of the blower. Workers removed 457’s original whistle, took it to a steam-threshing show, mounted it on a steam tractor, and made a recording. Now the whistle visitors hear is the genuine article.

The friends’ additional fundraising allowed for construction of a $118,000 passenger platform and roof shelter in 2007. It was built in the style of a 1910-era trainshed with a brick platform and period lighting designed by local architect Ken Wind.

In 2008, a local company donated materials, and the Clear Lake High School industrial arts department built a small sales kiosk. In 2009, a Brainerd, Minn., church camp donated an original Louie locomotive bell. The friends still needed to replace missing boiler jacketing. In late 2011, the friends hired metalworker Dave Novak to construct a custom jacket. In addition, workers raised the body of the tender and replaced the rotten deck planking. The jacket was finished and the engine repainted in June 2013.

Details make the difference. Union Pacific and its employee club donated labor and materials to lay new track in front of the engine, including a crossing and operating signals. Brick replaced grass that once surrounded the engine, and planters filled with flowers sporting M&StL and Friends of the 457 logos sit outside the fence.

To stay in front of the community and raise funds, each June the friends sponsor “Cannonball Day.” The event includes a Cannonball Kids Fun Run, free stage entertainment, a talent contest, inflatable playgrounds, and amusement train rides with proceeds going to support 457. The Mason City Evening Lions Club holds a barbecue and donates 10 percent of the revenue to the friends.

Volunteers spruced up the area around the engine too, with the friends sponsoring Cannonball Gardens, a landscaping project that included new plantings, terraces, and walking paths to stabilize the site and prevent erosion.

Volunteers regularly inspect the engine for rust, and wash and wax it three times a year because the chemical makeup of dust and grime that settles on No. 457 will actually eat away the finish.

When asked how they achieved so much when other groups have failed in their restoration projects, Friends Chairman Wilson, who had a 40-year career with the Milwaukee Road, Soo Line, and Canadian Pacific, mostly as a conductor, said: “No. 1 is get the community involved. If you can’t tell the community how it’s going to benefit the population of that community, what they are going to get out of it, then you might as well forget it. You have to get them to get behind you. Without that you aren’t going to get volunteers and financial support.”

As part of the process of rebuilding the front headlight, volunteer Owen Currier used his wife’s stainless steel mixing bowl as the front reflector.

The bell on No. 457 is from 1910-built M&StL 2-8-0 No. 413.

Friends of the 457 Chairman Dennis Wilson poses in No. 457’s cab.

The show in the park

It has to become an active venue, which helps when trying to obtain grants, Wilson says. “We wanted this to be educational and entertaining. We decided we would restore it to what it was like when it came out of the shop. It won’t be running, but we will make it as close to reality as possible and be a complete cosmetic restoration. That’s why we put the foggers in to create the illusion of smoke and steam, and recorded the whistle, and have steam locomotive sounds.”

Last, Wilson says, is a preservation plan. “[The restoration] took us close to 10 years and cost probably $245,000, raised through grants and donations. But how are you going to preserve it for the next 50 or 100 years? So we are trying to develop a preservation plan to get people to get involved and volunteer.” Wilson says the friends are trying to get a groundskeeper, a locomotive caretaker, an event planner for Cannonball Day, and a publicist.

A star attraction today, 457 was once an anonymous engine on the “Louie.” It was one of 12 Consolidations, Nos. 450–461, built by American Locomotive Co. in December 1912. The Louie dieselized in 1951. No. 457 retired in September 1950 and was sold to American Crystal Sugar for switching at its Mason City plant until 1957.

It’s likely 457 would have been scrapped if it weren’t for Mayor George Mendon and the city’s Noon Rotary Club members. In spring 1958, Mendon met with A.G. Quamme, Mason City Crystal Sugar manager, and Herbert Jacobs of the Milwaukee Road, to propose preserving a steam locomotive. Crystal Sugar donated the engine, and the Rotary Club oversaw the move and refurbishing.

On Aug. 25, 1959, Chicago Great Western and Milwaukee Road moved No. 457 to the Milwaukee roundhouse where it was cleaned and painted. The Mason City Globe-Gazette held a contest to name the engine, and 8-year-old Marcia Combs won with the name “Rotary Cannonball,” a name still in use today. The engine was moved into East Park on Aug. 31–Sept. 1, and presented to the city in a ceremony on Oct. 12, 1959. Its unofficial caretaker became retired CGW switchman Leo Danehy, who opened the fence and gave tours until he died in 1964.

It was downhill for 457 from there. While it was periodically repainted, and its boiler jacketing and asbestos insulation removed, over the years, vandals stripped its cab interior, tore out woodwork, smashed glass, and stole the bell. It was at this low point that Gene Green came on the scene. Green sums up the 457’s success: “I’m willing to take credit for getting the project started but, luckily, I had to leave, and it was left in hands of persons far better qualified to see it through. The present state of 457 is merely the start of even greater things to come. Mason City, from my earliest childhood memories, and long before, I am sure, has always been a strong community that could come together to accomplish great things.”

www.TrainsMag.com 35
It’s a hot summer afternoon in the sleepy South Georgia town of Pitts. A typical southern town, Pitts (population 306) has a neat row of brick buildings alongside the steel rails to which the community owes its existence. Those rails, laid in the 1890s, were jettisoned by CSX Transportation in the 1980s and subsequently served and abandoned by a short line.

One might expect the rails in Pitts to be rusting and unused, but a distant air horn and the rumble of approaching EMD prime movers signal otherwise. Soon, two brightly painted GP40s move through town, heading east for Vidalia, Ga., with a long string of double-stacked containers. Unsuspecting visitors might think they have seen a ghost, but in reality it’s an everyday occurrence in one of Georgia’s most successful shortline comeback stories.

Georgia railroads find short-haul intermodal success

Story and photos by Nikos Kavoori
The years following the CSX merger were not kind to the former Seaboard. The Montgomery line was one of many victims of CSX's line rationalizations. In 1989, the line was severed west of Cottonton, Ala., home of a large paper mill. The remaining track between Vidalia and Cottonton was then sold to the Georgia Southwestern Railroad, which put together a web of castoff former Seaboard Air Line routes throughout its namesake territory. The railroad operated a north-south line between Columbus and Bainbridge and an east-west axis between Rochelle and Mahrt, Ala.

The railroad enjoyed initial success with steady traffic from the paper mill in Mahrt to Columbus and Bainbridge on the north-south line. However, by the mid-1990s a decline in traditional agrarian and wood-products traffic, compounded with the loss of the paper-mill business, led to drastic measures. The railroad abandoned the western end of the Montgomery line between Preston and Mahrt and the mid-section of the north-south line between Cuthbert and Cusseta in favor of trackage rights over Norfolk Southern from Americus to Albany, Ga. It also abandoned the easternmost segment of the route between Rochelle and Rhine, Ga., which was devoid of traffic.

Seeing the potential value of the Vidalia-to-Mahrt corridor and seeking to prevent its removal, the state Department of Transportation purchased the abandoned sections of the line in 1996. The state also purchased the Vidalia-to-Rhine segment, out of service for several years and facing abandonment, from Georgia Central. Despite Georgia Southwestern abandoning the Rochelle-Rhine segment just a few years previously, its new general manager, Brad Lafevers, saw that line’s potential.

“When I joined [Georgia Southwestern] in 1996,” Lafevers recalls, “I worked with state legislators and leased the line from DOT. There was rehab money available, and we opened the line in 1998. Although there was no rail traffic, we had a viable corridor.”

Shortly after the line to Vidalia reopened, Georgia Southwestern’s parent company, RailTex, began merger negotiations with RailAmerica. Lafevers saw an opportunity to incorporate the Vidalia-Mahrt line as an independent short line.

“I recognized that by combining the two current DOT properties [Vidalia-Rochelle and Preston-Mahrt] with the segment between Preston and Rochelle,” Lafevers says, “it would create a rail line that, in conjunction with Georgia Central, would cross the entire state and terminate in Savannah. At this point I approached...
RailTex, Rail America, and DOT to suggest that during the merger RailTex would sell the Dumas-Rochelle segment to DOT, and I would form an operating company to provide service on the combined rail line.”

The negotiations were successful and in April 2000 the new Heart of Georgia Railroad began operations over the line.

The new railroad inherited a traffic base of about 2,500 carloads per year. The track between Preston and Rochelle was generally in good condition, with the majority of the rail rated FRA Class II. However, the line from Preston to Mahrt was out of service. The line from Rochelle to Vidalia was serviceable, thanks to its recent rehab, but was without traffic, save for sporadic carloads from Milan Molded Rubber Products in Milan, Ga.

In 2001, Lafevers and Duane Broxterman, then Heart of Georgia’s vice president (he became president and chief operating officer in 2015), presented a proposal to civic and business leaders in Cordele, Ga., to revive traffic on the railroad’s dormant east end, leveraging the direct-rail route to the port of Savannah and proximity to Interstate 16. With local interests committed to help, Brad Lafevers and his son Jonathan incorporated Cordele Intermodal Services in January 2010.

Construction began in July 2010, but before operations could begin, the Heart of Georgia had to rehabilitate the 90 miles of track east of Rochelle, Ga., which was devoid of customers, required brush cutting and track work after being dormant for several years. In addition, two large wooden trestles over the Oconee and Ocmulgee rivers needed extensive work. This was completed with a $2.75 million grant from the state of Georgia.

Operations began in December 2011 with a shipment of eight containers of kaolin (a clay needed to make porcelain, among other uses) to the port of Savannah. Operations fell into a regular pattern of empty westbound containers moving from Savannah on Monday and Wednesday and full eastbound containers leaving the inland port on Tuesday and Thursday. The intermodal cars typically move on the head end of Georgia Central train L783 west out of

As Georgia Central’s day ends, the Heart of Georgia’s begins. Georgia Central’s U23Bs have just cut off from train L782 in Vidalia, Ga., as the Heart of Georgia units wait to couple on and make the overnight trip to the Cordele Intermodal Services facility.

A pair of blue-and-yellow Heart of Georgia GP40s lead a westbound double-stack train near Ailey, Ga., over the hogbacks typical of the former Seaboard Air Line route.

Georgia Central’s signature (but since replaced) former Norfolk Southern U23Bs lead the Cordele intermodal train, L783, across the half-mile Ogeechee River bridge in Meldrim, Ga.

A CSX plan for an intermodal resurgence on the route was undone by an unlikely factor: one low bridge in Americus, Ga., that the city repeatedly refused to raise. After years of failed negotiations, CSX gave up and severed the line at Mahrt, seemingly eliminating its use as an intermodal artery.

However, local and state leaders were highly interested in the Heart of Georgia proposal, both as a way to generate traffic on state-owned tracks and to remove trucks from Interstate 16. With local interests committed to help, Brad Lafevers and his son Jonathan incorporated Cordele Intermodal Services in January 2010.

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Savannah to Groveland, Ga. Here, the train swaps with its Lyons-based counterpart, L782, which takes the cars to the Heart of Georgia interchange in downtown Vidalia. Heart of Georgia then moves the train to Cordele overnight, arriving in the early morning. Originally, outbound containers left Cordele on Tuesday and Thursday on the Heart of Georgia and interchanged in Vidalia the following day with the Georgia Central for the trip to Savannah. Currently, traffic has increased to the point that a third day of service is required. Heart of Georgia hopes to start daily service later this year.

**A HIVE OF ACTIVITY IN CORDELE** The fenced gravel lot on the east side of Cordele doesn’t look like much at first glance, but inside the gate it’s a hive of activity. A red Kalmar stacker maneuvers through the containers, unloading the previous night’s large 81-container train onto waiting trucks. Currently, empty or full containers are shipped via rail from the port of Savannah to the Cordele Intermodal lot. They are then trucked to their destinations.

Customers are as close as two blocks away and as far as a plant near Pensacola, Fla., more than 250 miles distant. Cordele Intermodal Services operates 25 to 30 trucks and 250 chassis, delivering containers directly to and from customers. In addition, the company maintains a 38,000-square-foot warehouse to facilitate transloading. Cordele Intermodal also serves as a designated container yard for Maersk Line and CMA CGM, although it can source containers from any steamship line that calls at Savannah.

The company has been able to recapture the traditional agricultural traffic that has shifted from rail to trucks over the past few decades. Primary export commodities include peanuts, seasonal cotton, kaolin, lumber, pecans, and plastic pellets. Cordele Intermodal Services also recently began importing for a furniture and linens company in South Georgia.

The current yard is 40 acres with a single rail spur capable of holding 13 well cars. The company is in the process of expanding the spur to connect with the CSX Fitzgerald Subdivision, which backs the south side of the property. The double-track extension will increase the loading capacity to 6,500 feet and enhance Heart of Georgia’s interchange capabilities. Eventually, the company hopes to reposition empty containers from other depots in the South via CSX. Track construction is underway, and Cordele Intermodal Services hopes to have the interchange operational by spring 2016.

The Cordele Intermodal activity has had a dramatic effect on Heart of Georgia traffic, which has risen to 8,000 cars per year from 2,500 in 2000. To handle the traffic, the railroad is rebuilding two GP35s to GP38-2 standards, is leasing additional power, and has hired an additional train crew.

That impact is underlined on the outskirts of Rochelle, Ga. With Pitts behind it, the eastbound intermodal train meets a solitary GP35, which has picked up five cars from R.W. Griffin Industries. It’s a convergence symbolizing how Cordele Intermodal Services has transformed the Cordele-to-Vidalia line from a quiet, once-a-week operation to a vital corridor connecting South Georgia to international markets.
An $18 million Central California facility creates continuous welded rail for Union Pacific

Story and photos by David Lustig

On the far western end of the Port of Stockton sits a series of structures that look like the framework of industrial buildings past. At a glance, they appear roofless, sideless edifices, their bare steel beams weathered from exposure to the elements.

But look carefully and you will find thousands of steel rails, stacked one on top of each other. Next to this outdoor storage yard is a slender, silver-covered, corrugated metal building with long, thin extensions protruding out of either end. This is Union Pacific’s new, $18 million rail-welding plant, and contrary to initial appearances, it is a fully functioning, state-of-the-art complex, designed to create 1,440-foot-long sections of continuous welded rail. When completed, they will be shipped throughout the railroad’s 23-state, 32,000-mile system.

Given the nature of international commerce, the geographical choice of the Port of Stockton as the site for the rail-welding facility was a natural fit. Stockton, 75 miles east of San Francisco, sits on an inland, deepwater channel that sees domestic exports and international imports from nations all along the Pacific Rim and throughout the world.

Situated on the southwestern edge of a city once known as an agricultural rail hub in the northern San Joaquin Valley, the port received its first international vessel in the 1930s, and contributed to the war effort in the ’40s as a U.S. Navy supply depot that regularly saw cargo ships, destroyers, and submarines. It transitioned to a hub for ore shipments, automobiles, agriculture, and durable goods in the ’50s, and when seagoing containers came into vogue, management actively converted its physical plant to accommodate them. Today both BNSF Railway and Union Pacific through their joint facility railroad, the Central California Traction Co., serve the port. As one of the most active ports in the state today, its strategic location to both railroading and mainline railroading makes it ideal.

The rail-welding facility is situated on 25 acres of the port’s western end of what was part of the former Navy supply depot. Rail arrives from Japan in 480-foot sections on the Pacific Spike, a 24,000-ton, 623-foot ship launched in August 2014 by the Onishi Shipyard of Shin Kurushima Dockyard Co. for Sky Tree Shipping S.A. for one purpose only; to haul sections of 136- and 141-pound, head-hardened, steel rail from Nippon Steel of Japan’s Yawata Works near the city of Kyoto to the western United States. While its primary destination is the Port of Stockton, the Pacific Spike occasionally delivers shorter sections of rail to the UP at Portland, Ore.

Cranes unload rails from the Pacific Spike (right) at the Port of Stockton while another ship passes on the left on May 12, 2015.

Pacific Spike’s three synchronized onboard cranes lift the bundled rails out of the hold and onto the waiting cars below.
This is it: The moment of fusion as the flash-butt welding machine makes a weld so strong that it is literally unbreakable. Everything you see here except for the rail is the machine. The blocks just above the rail are clamps to make sure the rail doesn’t move. This part of the process is normally covered by a spark shield.
Railroad officials say they looked at many options for procuring rail, including domestic steel manufacturers, before selecting the Japanese company.

Once the rail arrives at Stockton, a trio of onboard synchronized cranes offloads the rail, transferring five lengths of 480-foot rail at a time. They are gingerly loaded onto one of four sets of six 89-foot shuttle cars, permanently assigned to the port. All are older container cars modified for their current job. The rail is stacked on the shuttle cars, four bundles high or eight bundles to a shuttle set. The entire ship-to-shore unloading process takes eight days.

Central California Traction Co. transfers the loaded shuttle cars from dockside to the rail-welding facility. Union Pacific owns two-thirds of the railroad; BNSF owns the other third. Initially, CCT was equally owned by Western Pacific, Southern Pacific, and Santa Fe. Mergers created the current ownership split.

“We handle the rail from the ship to the welding plant with the shuttle cars,” says Dave Buccolo, CCT’s general manager. “The longshoremen unload the ship and move the shuttle cars into position under the hooks on the ship’s crane with their car mover.” After, the cars are returned to CCT and moved to the rail plant, with the short line coordinating their movement between the two with the rail-plant personnel and the stevedore company, SSA Marine.

To accomplish the eight-day window to unload 26,000 tons of rails, Buccolo says his crews work around the clock, one crew from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. and another from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Motive power is any combination of EMD SW1500s and a pair of Tier 4-compliant Brookville BL12CGs.

“It’s about a 1-mile journey to deliver the cars to the west end of the port,” he says. After

Central California Traction provides port switching services. CCT General Manager Dave Buccolo performs a last-minute inspection aboard one of the railroad’s Brookville BL12CGs.

At Stockton, 480-foot rails await their turn through the welder. Three make one finished piece of continuous welded rail.

CONTINUOUS WELDED RAIL

Continuous welded rail is the end result of a series of shorter lengths of rail welded together to form one long piece that in some cases can be several miles long. Although the initial expense of installation over traditional jointed rail is higher, throughout its life on the right-of-way, continuous welded rail is stronger, allows for a much smoother ride, requires less maintenance, and, in many cases, allows trains to travel at greater speeds. First introduced in Europe in the 1920s, the concept migrated to this country a decade later and attained general nationwide acceptance here in the ’50s.

When installed in the field, continuous welded rail is welded yet again to perform in even longer lengths. While the initial creation of welded rail uses the flash-butt electrical process as practiced in UP’s Stockton facility, railroads use either in-track flash-butt welding or the Thermite welding process, which uses a crucible to contain the molten iron, in the field.

Workers install continuous welded rail at what is known as a “rail neutral temperature,” which is calculated at about 30 to 40 degrees below the maximum rail temperature expected at the location. Rail neutral temperature prevents the rail from buckling in extreme heat or separating in extreme cold. As with traditional shorter rail, as continuous welded rail begins to wear, it is turned around to increase its service life.
spotting cars at the plant, which J.B.S. Cranes & Accessories Inc. of McMurray, Pa., designed and built for the railroad, the crew will wait the hour or so it takes to unload the rails. "We'll continue shuttling back and forth until the Pacific Spike is empty."

At the plant, the newly arrived steel will join an average of 3,000 pieces of rail — about 15 million pounds — waiting to be welded into continuous welded rail.

To make the finished quarter-mile section of rail, each piece is positioned on a rail-feed bed. Workers will grind the ends clean of grit and then send them through to the welder. The process of creating continuous welded rail is called flash-butt welding, where a strong electric current is driven through two unjoined rail pieces without the use of additional material to complete the weld. The facility's electric flash-butt welding machine will bring the temperature to about 1,250 degrees centigrade.

At the right moment, the two pieces of rail are then pressed together, forming a fusion weld that is as strong, if not stronger, than any other part of the rail. Upon completion of the process, three 480-foot sections will become welded together to form a stick of continuous welded rail. The process takes about 30 minutes per weld. Workers make about a dozen finished pieces each 8-hour shift.

After the rail processes through the welding machine, it is cooled and inspected, before moving to the other end of the building, and stacked for loading onto specially designed UP welded railcars. Once a train is loaded, a Central California Traction crew will pull it from the facility to an interchange track in the port to wait for a Union Pacific crew to arrive and take it on its way to wherever the railroad needs them on the system.

Once empty, the Pacific Spike heads back to Japan, returning fully loaded to Stockton two months later, with another load of rail to start the process all over again. I

A UP train hauling 10-mile sections of continuous welded 136-pound Rocky Mountain Steel rail departs Pueblo, Colo., and shows off its spaghetti-like nature, conforming to the track curves. Frank Orona
Venice and those bridges

A city with a charming Italian name owes its existence to railroaders, but has lost its rails

by Scott A. Hartley

**Venice, Fla., is a city** with 21,000 residents on the Gulf of Mexico. Seaboard Air Line reached the area in 1911, with a branch from Tampa and Sarasota to tap the region’s agricultural and timber resources.

Business changed in a big way during Florida’s 1920s land boom, when the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers union invested in Venice as a planned community. Today’s street layout and much of the city’s architecture can be credited to BLE planner John Nolen. Curiously, Nolen chose to move the railroad out of downtown. New York architectural firm Walker & Gillette designed a large Northern Italian Renaissance-style station that was built east of the city in 1927.

The flat, mostly straight line had few scenic highlights other than a pair of long woodpile trestles, spanning Dona Bay and Roberts Bay just north of Venice. Most photographs of trains on the branch seem to have been taken at the attractive depot or on these bridges.

Venice was a passenger train city, and was served in a classy way by sections of Seaboard’s mainline trains that split off at Tampa. The faculty and cadets at the Kentucky Military Institute, which had a winter campus in Venice from 1932 to 1970, bolstered revenues. Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus made Venice its winter headquarters from 1960 to 1992, as well.

Seaboard and competitor Atlantic Coast Line merged in 1967, and the new Seaboard Coast Line continued to run passenger trains to Venice until Amtrak took over the national passenger network in 1971. The last train to
Venice was a section of the *Champion*, an ACL name.

Freight service to Venice kept rolling under SCL and successors Seaboard System and CSX Transportation. In 1987, Seminole Gulf Railway purchased the tracks and infrastructure (while CSX retained ownership of the underlying property) from Venice north to Bradenton.

The completion of Interstate 75 through southwest Florida and the region’s increasing focus on tourism and residential growth hastened the inevitable. Seminole Gulf’s last customer at the Venice end of the branch was a small lumber distributor in nearby Nokomis. The railroad pulled the last empty car north in 2002, leaving Venice without trains for the first time in 91 years.

Local historians fought to save the long-abandoned and rapidly deteriorating Venice station. Following purchase by Sarasota County and a thorough renovation completed in 2003, the station now serves as a transfer station for regional buses and houses a museum. The county later purchased 12.5 miles of the railroad between Sarasota and Venice. The right-of-way now is the paved “Legacy Trail,” with new trail bridges crossing the two bays. As a nod to the trail’s railroad history, mile markers use SAL distances from Richmond, Va.

Seminole Gulf retains perpetual rights to operate future rail service over the Venice line. But for now, one can only walk or bike along the right-of-way that once carried shiny stainless steel trains that brought visitors from the North to the sunny city that owes its start to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers.
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