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Eastern North Carolina Claims Longest Straight Railroad Track

The longest length of straight railroad track in the United States is on the Seaboard Air Line Railroad in Eastern North Carolina, exactly 78.86 miles without the slightest curve—and had it not been for one insignificant bend, the tangent would have continued another 19.20 miles before departing from a straight course.

This track is laid through the very flat and pretty country of the North Carolina coastal plain, and on clear nights the loom of a locomotive's headlight can sometimes be seen as far as 30 miles away. Old-time railroad engineers who have worked on this straight stretch of track say that now and then they have seen the actual gleam of an oncoming engine's headlight 20 miles down the road. This is rural country and the nights are usually "dark."

People who live along the length of this straight section of the Seaboard rarely have to worry about whether the train is on time or not. By stepping down to the track they can see the train coming over the horizon and judge how much time they have before it rolls into the station.

A man who once worked on a rail gang along this straight section said he would quit work when he saw the headlight of the local passenger train two or three station stops down the line and some 20 miles to the east, go home, wash up, and then walk two or three blocks to the station in time to board the train.

On one occasion an unusual series of events occurred because of the exceptionally good visibility in clear weather on this straight section of track. A local freight train bound east took a siding late one night at the little town of Bladenboro to let the westbound night local freight pass. The westbound train's headlight could be clearly seen standing in the station at Clarkton, eight miles away. Clarkton is only 46 miles from the Atlantic Ocean.

Fire Noticed

While the eastbound train was waiting the conductor noticed a red glow in the sky near Clarkton and telephoned to the westbound train to inquire about it. The conductor at Clarkton said it was a tobacco warehouse burning and added that more firefighting equipment apparently was needed. The eastbound conductor, then called the Seaboard division dispatcher in Atlanta and told him about the fire in Clarkton, N. C. Atlanta is 390 miles by rail west of Clarkton.

The dispatcher in Atlanta telephoned a night operator at Pembroke, N. C., 34 miles west of the fire. The night operator there notified a fire department in Elizabethtown, 11 miles north of the burning warehouse, and additional apparatus was sent at once. It took about 10 minutes to complete these calls.

Heavy fog, especially in the



This shows the location on the Seaboard Air Line Railroad of the longest straight stretch of railroad track in the United States — 78.86 miles in North Carolina between Wilmington and Hamlet. Had it not been for the slight bend of the track at milepost 340.85, the continuing section of 19.20 miles, which also has no curve, would have made the total distance 98.06 miles without a bend.

spring of the year, was sometimes a bother to locomotive engineers in the days of steam—they possibly could get "lost" on the long straight section of track because it has no identifying curves and little or no dips or rises, and not too many trestles. The average change in elevation on the straight section is only six inches every 100 feet, hardly discernible with the naked eye.

Learned by Sound

"What we had to do then," said A. B. Edwards, of Hamlet, N. C., who began working on an engine along this straight section of Seaboard track in the days of cabbage-head woodburners, "was to learn the sound of every siding switch along all that straight track, and the sound of every trestle. I got so I could tell exactly where I was by the noise the wheels made going over a switch, and I could have stopped on a chalk line in a pea soup fog anywhere along the whole length of that line at any one given place."

Edwards worked on one locomotive that set nine miles of the

straight section of track on fire one day, and then put it out without help. The engineer on the locomotive directed that heavy resin knots found at a turpentine still near a wood-loading stop be thrown into the firebox to make a bigger fire in a faster time.

The train had gone nine miles down the track before it was discovered that hot turpentine drippings were running through the grates and out of the ash pan down onto the ground, setting the crossties on fire. As far back as they could see, Edwards said, the track was nothing but a long lane of curling smoke in a chasm of trees.

"We put the cars on a sidetrack, turned the injector so the water from the tender tank ran into the ashpan and overflowed onto the ground. Then we commenced backing up, putting out the fire like a sure enough fire engine. It took us half a day to get it all out because we had to run back now and then to a water tank down the line and fill up the tender tank. We made a pretty good job of it, but I must say when the section master found out what we'd done to his track he got hotter than his own roadbed had been. We never fired her any more with resin knots."

Built Before War

This long tangent of track was originally a part of the Wilmington, Charlotte and Rutherford Railroad Co., which had its principal offices in Wilmington. Construction commenced on New Year's Day in 1857, and the length from Navassa, a little place just across the Cape Fear River from Wilmington to Rockingham, which is not far from Charlotte, was completed on April Fool's Day in 1861, right in the face of the War Between the States. The line was quite an important piece of property during that war.

In 1873, the Wilmington, Charlotte and Rutherford ended a period of receivership by being sold to the Carolina Central Railway Co., and this line in 1880 became the Carolina Central Railroad Co. In July of 1900 the line was acquired by the first organization of the present Seaboard Air Line Railroad Co.

Many people have wondered about the slight bend in the straight length of track that prevented it from being 98.06 miles long without a curve or bend. Since there were no lakes, big rivers or hills—and the controlling grade for the whole length is only one per cent, or a rise or fall of one foot in every 100 feet—curves were unnecessary, and there seems no logical explanation.

The little curve itself is only enough to cause the track to deviate about 11 feet from the original course in a bend 500 feet long. It might have been due to an infin-

Answers to Quiz

(See Questions, Page 4, Section 2)

1. Civil War.
2. Southern women during the Civil War laid flowers on the graves of both Southern soldiers and Northerners who had died in the South.
3. Gen. John A. Logan, commander in chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, sent out orders that May 30 of that year (1908) should be set aside for strewing flowers on soldiers' graves.
4. No. It's a legal holiday in
5. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.
6. World War I.
7. No. Many civilian graves are decorated too.
8. It was the date of the discharge of the last Union volunteer of the Civil War.
9. He places wreathes on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.
10. Half mast until noon.

timesimal error in cross-country calculations—or it could have been, as some railroad civil engineers would say, that "somebody forgot the plumb bob that day!"

northern states but Southern states have their own days, ranging from April 26 to June 3.

11. The Great Republic, listed as the largest clipper ship ever built was 325 feet long, had four decks, could carry 6,000 tons of cargo and drew 24 feet of water.

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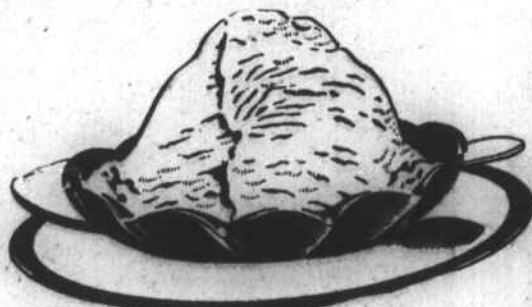
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