

A Ride On the Bartlett Western Railway in 1933

Cal Breeden And A Ride On The Bartlett Western

By Murry Hammond

This is a story that ties in some of the anecdotes and oral history that I have collected on the Bartlett Western. It is accurate, except for one thing - it has the train making its schedule, something that the BW mostly rarely did. For purists, I would not only have to make the train late to many of its stops, but possibly have it derail along the way, call upon the passengers to help re-rail the Model-T, or even help push it up a hill! So for the sake of the safety of our driver Cal Breeden, our passengers, and the U.S. mail, we'll go ahead and make this trip without any of the usual hitches.

7:10 am, Bartlett Depot Fall Ginning Time, 1933

In the still morning air at Bartlett, Texas, a freight train pierces the solitude of this town of 1700 people. A mighty steam

locomotive of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroad muscled a south-bound freight train past an elegant little country depot on its way to Granger. Though the grip of the depression has already set in on this little community of cotton and cattle farmers,

Across the Katy mainline is another railroad depot, two-story, mud-colored. The need for a coat of paint is apparent, as underneath the pitch of the roof, above the two second story windows, faded letters can be seen, spelling out the words "Bartlett Western Ry."



Depression years meant that railroad passes had to be modified rather than reprinted. This was especially so on the Cronin Route.
Courtesy of: E.A. Lehmer Collection

the depot and the surrounding businesses have the appearance of health and prosperity.

This is the depot building and the entire railroad yard of the Bartlett Western Ry. The two-story rectangular structure sits on the north end of what functions as the Bartlett Western railroad "yard", and the entire property occupies no more than a small city block. Inside the low fence that surrounds the perimeter of the property are reminders of better days on the little railroad. A little teakettle of a steam engine sleeps permanently on an inner storage spur while nuzzled behind it is an ancient green passenger coach with the word "Margaret" emblazoned on its side. Behind Margaret are a few of the company's remaining boxcars. Alongside the depot are two boxcars occupied by BW



By the early 1930's passenger and freight traffic at the M-K-T depot in Bartlett had diminished to only a small percentage of what it had been during the Katy's earlier days. The depot was very typical of those built by the Katy throughout Texas.

Photo Courtesy of: DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University; H. D. Conner Collection.



A cameraman in a low flying airplane took this photo of the rail yard and businesses south of downtown Bartlett about 1920. The BW depot is the white building with the words GRAIN written on it. Two BW cars sit on the track beside the depot. The M-K-T depot is across the tracks from the BW headquarters. The cattle pens and several cotton gins can be seen at the upper right.

Photo Courtesy of: Murry Hammond Collection

employee L.D. "Tod" Seale and his family. The Seale family's kitchen and living room occupy one car, while their bedrooms occupy the other. Tod drives the Fordson tractor mainly in the fall months, while Cal Breeden drives the Model-T truck with the mail year-round.

Just twenty years ago this railroad was the talk of the town, but now has lost the interest of the townspeople. Rumors are that the bridges are unsafe west of Schwertner and Jarrell, and Marie Cronin and William Branagan are talking about getting out of the business. The subject now draws only the jokes of "Better Walk" and of kids looking for something to get into - the little flatcars are easy to push down the track, and it doesn't take much to get the Model-T started, when it wants to start. Back on graduation night in '27 or '28, a group of girls and boys got the "T" all the way to Jarrell, and when they couldn't get it started again, a girl in the group had to telephone the mayor of Bartlett who sent a friend of his to Jarrell, who got the group and the Model-T home by 2 am, without anyone being the wiser.

But on this fall morning in 1933, the business of railroading is still on, as a Model-T flatbed highway truck, fitted with railroad wheels, is warmed up and idling on the spur in front of the depot. Immediately behind the "locomotive" is a small 20-foot wooden 4-wheel flatcar, roofed, but open

on all sides. Two benches run down each side, and other than a canvas canopy that can be rolled down during inclement weather, not much in the way of passenger comfort can be found. This little contraption will be our "Pullman" car for the day.

Once the day's mail is loaded into the flatbed, we will be on our way. Along with the mail are various groceries, hardware, dry goods for the merchants of the towns, and firewood for various vendors along the way. In 1933, only Bartlett had natural gas, while wood supplied the heating needs for everyone else along the BW.

Our driver is Cal Breeden, one of those fellows that everyone seems to know up and down the line. Cal lives in Jarrell, and has made the trip to Bartlett in his own Model-T to operate the BW's railcar ever since he got out of military service in World War I. Cal is also one of those fellows that always carries a pocket watch, and boasts that the time service set their clocks by his watch.

While being on time was very important to Cal, he was a hunter at heart and often carried his .22 rifle onboard the Model-T to take advantage of the local quail and dove that make the many sunflower patches their home. The story is told around Florence about the time last summer when Cal was extremely late to make the meet with the mail transfer wagon, and Florence depot agents Bill Ed and wife Sarah

Hudson called all the farmers up and down the line asking if anyone had seen the train. A farmer along the right-of-way named Mr. Collier phoned back and said "Yeah, I seen the train - the car stopped and the driver got out and took a shot at a flock of quail on the ground. The flock flew up and landed further away and the driver followed them down... And I seen them do this before!" However, this morning's train will make at least the first part of the schedule.

7:30 am

With a concerto of snorting, sputtering and popping Cal eases the Model-T and its "train" slowly away from the depot and along "the line", which is the local term for the ramshackle housing and businesses that line the west side of the BW and Katy tracks. Once past George Hair's gin we ease around a sharp curve and head west. The large cotton compress can be seen clearly about 200 yards to our left. This compress is the destination of nearly all the cotton brought in from Schwertner, Jarrell and Florence. The cotton will be processed and loaded onto waiting Missouri-Kansas-Texas cars for eventual transport to Galveston and markets beyond. Once past the compress we ease by a small red double-door section house and a large public cotton yard, then we leave the city limits and head for cotton country.

The truck picks up some speed, rolling along at a brisk 20 m.p.h. The road that will one day become Highway 487 gradually angles alongside to our right and will be our companion for the next six miles. The little open car is a wonderful way to experience what is beautiful about this country. Here the terrain is flat, and it seems like every field is planted with cotton that is in some stage of harvest. Otherwise, sunflowers are the most striking presence along the right-of-way, and in a few miles, along the banks of the Donahoe Creek.

Along the railroad right-of-way on our left is a line of old cedar telephone poles serving the farm houses along the south side of the railroad. Not long ago, the poles were located on the opposite side of where they are now. In those early days of telephone service each household was responsible for hanging their own phone line, and since there were no guidelines for doing so, lines were often hung anyway that would get the cable from one side of the tracks to the

other.

This hazardous situation was the culprit in a terrible tragedy that occurred on the BW in 1919, during the days when the BW operated a daily mixed train. The conductor/brakeman that day was ill and so the BW fireman "Note" Surber was called on to ride atop the freight cars and man the brakes. Heavy rains the night before had caused some of the telephone lines to hang to just a few feet above the boxcars on which he was riding. Unaware of the hazard, Note was dragged off by a low-hanging wire and fell under the wheels of the train, severing his legs. He died shortly thereafter at the sanitarium in Temple.

The company was extremely angry over this situation, and on the next day's train the crew snapped every telephone line that they could reach, hooking the cables behind the vertical brakewheel on the boxcars and pulling forward, sometimes taking down poles and all. That day's mixed train crew did this all the way to Florence, knocking out dozens of telephones, but

making the right-of-way safer for the brakemen on top of the train. The problem was solved when the telephone right-of-way was moved to the other side of the tracks.

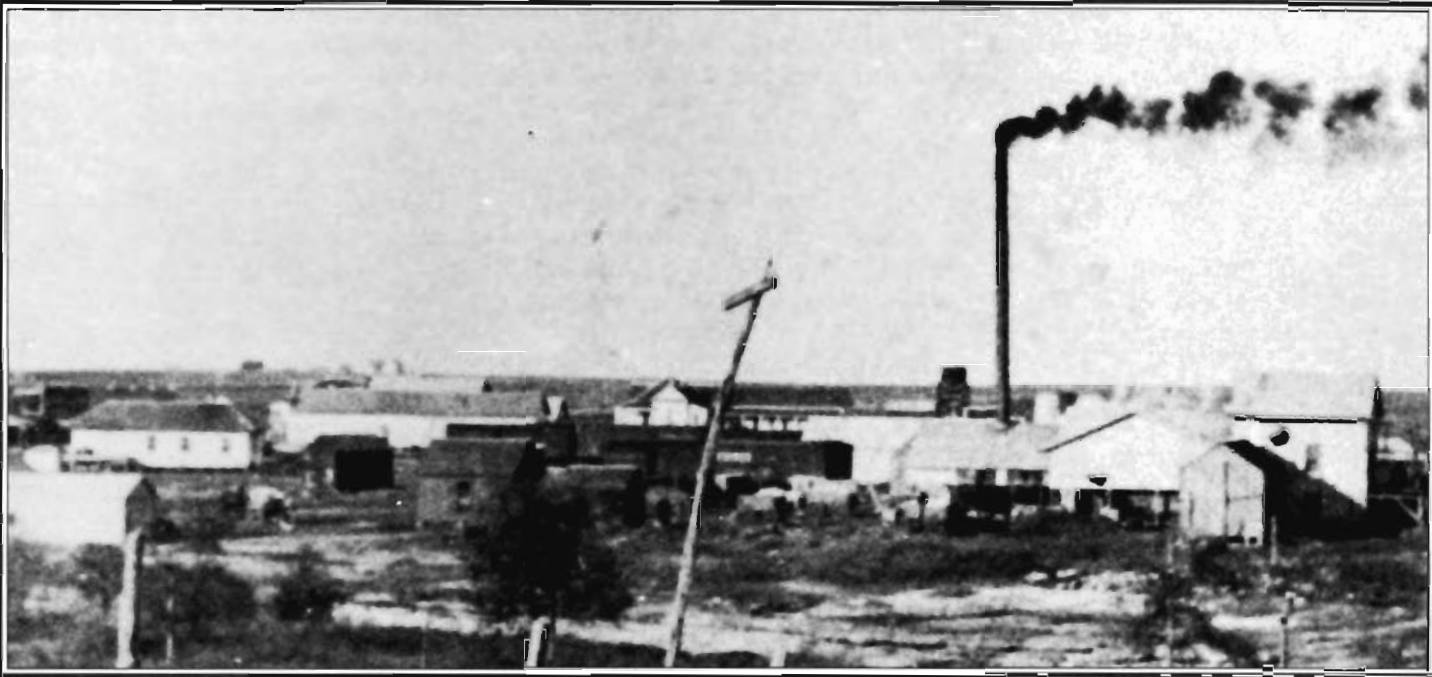
8:05 am

Our first stop is at Schwertner. Here the mail, some firewood and a supply of miscellaneous freight for the local drugstore is dropped off. As he has on every morning's run for years, Cal lingers inside the depot to enjoy a cup of coffee courtesy of the station agents Claude and Alma White. The Whites have been agents here for several years, and reside in the passenger section with their son and daughter. Behind the depot a few empty flatcars are spotted on the siding to the Adolph Schwertner Gin. Throughout the day the cars will be loaded with ginned cotton bales until the Fordson tractor, manned by Tod Seale and Heber Rossin or James Brown, collects them later this afternoon. The Fordson crew will make the trip to Jarrell and possibly Florence if the order comes over the



When the B-F was constructed, farmers from the whole region brought their baled cotton to the large compress at Bartlett for processing. In good years, over 35,000 bales would be compressed before shipment to Houston or Galveston along the Texas coast.

From Bartlett Tribune, Industrial Edition, October 25, 1912.



In 1913, the Schwertner cotton gin was in full production. The BW spotted numerous box cars on its siding ready to be filled with baled cotton to be carried to the compress at Bartlett. The white building in the center left is the BW depot that served Schwertner.

Photo Courtesy of: Stanley and Melba Schwertner Collection

wire that flats are loaded and ready to be brought to the Bartlett Compress. With another sputtering of the "T's" motor we leave the Schwertner depot and head for Jarrell.

Leaving the Schwertner depot we also leave the road that parallels the BW and head out into open country. Within a mile of Schwertner is one of the largest trestles on the line - what folks there call the "big" bridge over the Donahoe Creek. The Donahoe is one of those pretty Central Texas / Hill Country limestone-bottomed creeks. They are a great place for picnics, swimming or peaceful contemplation, but get a good rain in the area and the Donahoe transforms into a swirling mass of water that washes out everything in its path, be it crops, homes, livestock, or railroad bridges. This bridge has been rebuilt several times. Because times on the BW are hard, money is especially short in supply. The bridge has had to be repaired with the minimum amount of materials and engineering. Therefore it hasn't been repaired correctly, so it sways in the wind or under the weight of any train that crosses it. Even the BW crews don't trust the bridge, and sometimes, if the train is especially loaded down with cotton or oil, they will cross the bridge in the following manner:

Upon approaching this trestle, the train will stop allowing one man to disembark and walk on foot to the other side of the

trestle. The other crewman will disembark from the Fordson, set the gear and the throttle at the lowest possible ratio, and let the Fordson and the train slowly crawl by itself across the bridge. Once past the trestle, the crewman stationed on the opposite side will then climb aboard, stop the train, and wait for his fellow crewman to follow the train across the trestle on foot, where he will reboard and the train will continue on its way.

As we cross Donahoe Creek, the bridge indeed sways, creaks and groans under the weight of our "T" Model, but ultimately we are no threat to it. The bridge and its horror stories are now behind us.

8:15 am

Another couple of miles down the line, we pass our first of the four BW "Gospel" stations - St. Matthew. There's not much to see around here anymore, and the Model T doesn't stop unless a farmer flags the train down, as St. Matthew's population is zero, save for the cattle that enjoy the low grassy hills along the Donahoe.

8:40 am

Once we cross the Donahoe again, just on the other side of St. Matthew, we begin the climb into Jarrell. Jarrell is approximately 100 feet higher in elevation than Bartlett, and the grade, while minimal, is long and unrelenting until we pull alongside the Jarrell depot. Cal explains that this sloping stretch of tracks provide many

hours of amusement for the youth of Jarrell and Schwertner.

The brake systems on these cars utilize a rather simple system. The brakewheel is connected to a leather strap that wraps around a wheel axle. Thus, the brakes can easily be released. Once this is accomplished, the cars are of such weight that even a couple of twelve-year-olds can get a flatcar rolling out of town at such a gait that it will sail all the way out of Jarrell, past St. Matthew, past the Schwertner depot, until it finally comes to rest when it encounters a slight incline and rolls to a stop about two miles beyond Schwertner. This activity is also a favorite pastime for several Florence youth as well, but the grade there doesn't generate nearly the drama that it does on the long descending grade from Jarrell. Many Schwertner folks can tell you about the awful din created by these runaways as the clanking monsters emerge out of the woods at speed and rattle their way through peaceful downtown Schwertner, until they finally disappear to the east. Cal Breeden is always the first to encounter these strays on the mainline, usually between Bartlett and Schwertner where a slight incline puts an end to their journey. By now, Cal is unphased by this mischief and simply pushes the wayward cars back down the line to their rightful destinations.

8:45 am

Climbing out of the grade, and having to push no stray flatcars back to Jarrell, we make good time as we hit the final straight-away that takes us into the Jarrell depot. The Jarrell depot is a typical but beautiful little country depot, dwarfed by the complex of the Harrison Gin and the BW's large cotton platform. Until just a few years ago, the Gorden Lewis gin also sent its cotton over the BW but that gin burned and was never rebuilt.

Next to the depot is the BW's only turntable, about 20 feet in length, just large enough for the Fordson and Ford Model-T, and small enough for one man to operate. This is used when the Fordson needs to come only as far as Jarrell to pick up cotton from the Harrison Gin. Were it not for the little turntable, the Fordson would have to back the train all the way to Bartlett, increasing the risk of derailment.

Cal glides the "T" alongside the depot, pulls the brake, grabs the mail bag and heads inside. He is greeted by the Jarrell depot agent who is Cal's own sister, Mary Cromeans. Like the Schwertner agents, Mary and her husband Lee live in the passenger section of the depot and take care of what freight comes over the BW. The bulk of today's freight is destined for Jarrell, including much firewood for the local vendor, hardware for the large Stokes-Blair

Hardware store, and an assortment of goods for the Condra Drug Store and Glass Hotel. Cal unloads the freight from the truck's flatbed, hauling it through the depot's large freight door for his sister. From there, Mary will sort the freight and notify the local merchants of its arrival. Cal then receives a small sack of mail bound for Florence, deposits it in the truck's front seat next to him, and we're back on our way.

9:00 am

Heading out of Jarrell we again make a wide curve that takes us out of the city limits and into open country. This stretch is not so much cotton farms as cattle ranches. Within a couple of miles we pass by a little shed with a sign that reads "St. Mark". St. Mark looks like a wooden bus stop, and like St. Matthew, its population is zero. The countryside is gorgeous, but the remote location makes this stop seem more like a good place to get on the train, rather than get off.

We come to a fence, where a gate has been installed over the tracks. The railroad made an oral agreement with many of the local land owners to save the cost of cattle guards and install regular fence gates. Cal stops the Model T, gets out, opens the gate, then gets back in the Model T and pulls through. Cal stops and closes the gate and

we're on our way again. Just as this car we're riding in is no Pullman, this is no ordinary railroad.

We soon angle alongside the banks of another creek, the Salado. We cross the longest bridge on the line here - more than 400 feet in length. This bridge is another trouble spot on the BW, being very tall and spindly, and susceptible to frequent washouts. Slowing down to just a few miles per hour, we have no trouble navigating its length.

9:15 am

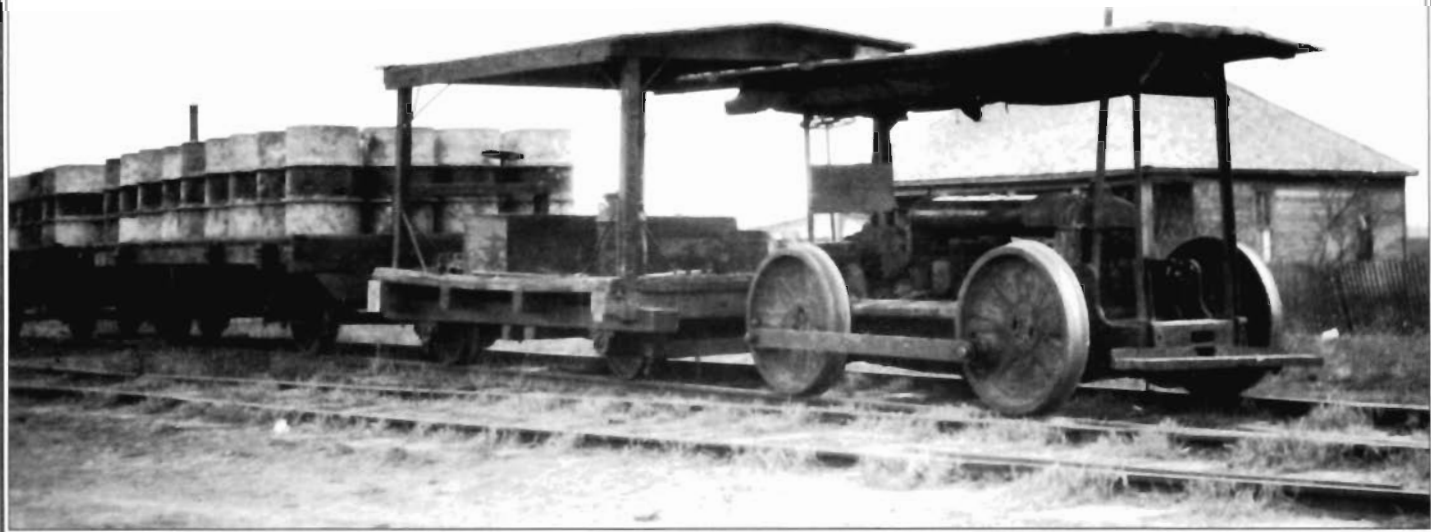
After emerging from the Salado Creek bottoms we travel a short distance through a wooded area and emerge into a meadow. This is the site of St. Luke, located on the property of the William Anderson Wilson farm just a few hundred yards from the boyhood home of "Pinky" Wilson, who is famous for composing the Texas A&M "Aggie War Hymn."

The gate across the tracks is already open for us, as it is the job of Mr. Wilson's young grandson to twice a day have the gate open for the train. Cal slows the "T" past the little enclosed shed, freight platform and siding that make up the St. Luke station. Here the Wilson family leases their land to anyone wishing to harvest the timber. Family member Lonnie Wilson then cuts the wood on a small sawmill that he operates just



A number of disastrous floods in the early 1920's weakened all the trestles on the BW. The BW locomotives were too heavy to use on the line so alternative power and freight cars had to be built. Cal Breedon, engineer for the company's model "T" Ford, unloads mail and freight at the Bartlett Western depot in Jarrell, Texas. Part of the Harvell cotton gin can be seen at the left north of the depot.

Photo Courtesy of: Railroad and Pioneer Museum, City of Temple, Texas



By the early 1920's, Bartlett Western trains moving heavy loads of cotton and oil used this modified Fordson tractor for power. The BW train crew consisted of an engineer and brakeman. One man would drive the tractor, while the other would sand the tracks to give the Fordson more traction on steeper grades. Passengers could ride in the plush coach pulled behind the tractor.

Photo Courtesy of: Murry Hammond Collection

down the track where the BW crosses the road to Florence. From Lonnie's mill, the wood is moved to the freight platform where it will be loaded onto a BW flat and moved by the Fordson sometime in the next few days. The wood will eventually be trucked to area vendors.

Quail and game are plentiful along this section. During the fall quail season, Cal would often allow hunter friends from Bartlett and Jarrell to ride along with him. The hunters would shoot from the train and pay high school kids to run out and collect the birds that they would shoot. The train literally moved slow enough where a boy could fetch a bird at some distance and still catch up with the train.

The BW's reputation for slow speed was not entirely undeserved. Back in the 1920's the Bartlett Brass Band would hire the BW to take them through the towns for "booster" trips, to promote the summer community fairs. The members of the band knew that they could get off the train, run out to some farmer's delicious-looking orchard, steal some peaches and plums, and catch back up to the train and reboard.

As we leave St. Luke behind us, a Model-T greets us at the road crossing, ready to stop and let the train pass. Cal recognizes the driver and stops the train and motions the man on the road to pass. The man waves as he cross the railroad and we continue on toward Florence.

9:30 am

As we approach the little St. John station, the fenced gates across the mainline are behind us, having been replaced by proper cattle guards. During the steam days, St. John was once a water stop, complete with a wooden tank and a pump house, and the siding here tells of the days when the BW housed a full time section crew in a string of four or five crew cars. The railroad schedule notes that St. John has a population of 56, but from the looks of the neighborhood one gets the impression they must have included livestock in the count. In actuality, there are several families close by that benefit from the BW service to this little flag stop.

St. John is also a notorious trouble spot for flooding on the line, where the railroad tends to not only lose the St. John bridge, but a healthy stretch of the right-of-way. The water collects on one side of the grade, then pours over in spots, moving the maximum amount of earth, and keeping the BW's skeleton maintenance crew hopping.

The rest of the way to Florence is on a slight grade, which like at Jarrell, provides the Florence youth with a nice ramp for unleashing the BW's flatcars. The grade is slight, and the Model-T scales it easily.

10:15 am

We can see Florence for a good mile or more away before we arrive. As we near the city limits we pass the railroad's other wye, used to turn the trains around for the

return trip to Bartlett. Just beyond the wye to our right we pass a set of cattle pens and a large cotton platform that today is well used by two of the railroad's major customers, the Hare Gin and the J.B. Smart Gin of Florence.

The Florence depot is a small country affair with a bay window and a platform, very typical and appropriate for this pretty little town. Just beyond the depot the mainline track extends across the highway to a small loading dock of J.B. Smart's feed store, operated on the same property as the Smart Gin. When Mr. Smart purchased the gin building he requested railroad service, but the BW railroad said if he wanted a siding he was going to have to pay for it himself, for which he spent the hefty sum of \$2,300 dollars. This increased the BW's mileage by 100 feet, and enabled Mr. Smart to receive goods directly at his store, though his cotton still goes out from the cotton platform.

Cal eases the Model-T to a stop and is greeted by Sara Hudson, who along with her husband "Bill Ed", functions as the depot agent here. The Hudsons, like the other agents along the line, live in the passenger section of this depot. The man who transfers the mail from the depot to the post office is already here waiting for our arrival. This is Mr. Todd who comes down here every morning with his mule team and wagon. The service he provides yields an extra \$20 per month for his family.

Once again, mail sacks are exchanged, freight is unloaded, and a few items are loaded onto the Model-T for delivery to Jarrell and Bartlett. While Sara moves the mail and small freight through the door into the depot's freight section, Cal pulls the "T" Model across the highway to deliver the remaining goods to the platform of the Smart store.

Having accomplished this final chore, Cal backs the entire train back past the depot, past the cotton platform and cattle pens, to the wye. Cal throws the switch that will allow us to back onto the wye, and once having accomplished this, resets the switch, then backs on to the peak of the wye and repeats the process until our train is turned around and pointed east on the mainline toward Bartlett. Once the final mainline switch is reset for the next day's train, we pull away from Florence for the trip home, having completed more than 23 miles of travel over the little Bartlett Western. We'll hit Jarrell about 12:30 pm, stopping there for a "meet" with the Fordson cotton train, which today will be busy all the way to Florence, judging from the congestion on the cotton platforms

Bartlett Western Railway

J. W. JACKSON, President Bartlett, Texas.
 E. J. FITZGERALD, Gen'l. Manager Bartlett, Texas.
 E. D. PERKINS, General Passenger Agent Bartlett, Texas.

READDOWN			Miles	STATIONS		Popula- -tion	READ UP	
No. 3 Daily	No. 1 Daily	Feb. 12, 1913. American Express Co.		No. 2 Daily	No. 4 Daily			
4 00 PM	8 00 AM	0	Lv. BARTLETT Ar.	1815	12 10 AM	8 05 PM		
4 25 "	8 25 "	5.3	Schwetzer		11 45 AM	7 40 "		
4 55 "	8 55 "	11.2	Jarrell		11 15 "	7 15 "		
5 10 "	9 13 "	13.6	Jno. Camp		11 00 "	7 00 "		
5 25 "	9 25 "	16.3	Atkinson		10 45 "	6 40 "		
5 40 "	9 40 "	18.4	Armstrong		10 30 "	6 30 "		
5 55 PM	9 55 AM	23.2	Ar. FLORENCE Lv.	363	10 15 PM	6 15 AM		

This BW timetable issues Feb. 12, 1913, shows the names and locations of the various stations along the line before Thomas Cronin renamed some of the smaller flag stops for the "Four Gospels". The BW was unable to maintain this schedule under E.J. Fitzgerald's management.

along the way.

We will arrive in Bartlett at about 1:30 pm, at which time Cal Breeden will turn the train again on the wye at the cotton compress, and back our train past "the line", and finally bring it to its usual resting place alongside the freight platform at the Bartlett Western depot. The mail and freight will be unloaded, transferred to the post office, the Katy depot, and stored in the freight section of the depot for the Bartlett merchants. Once this is accomplished, Cal will finish up his business in the office, likely give his hands a good

washing, then pile into his own Model-T and make the 12 mile trip to his home in Jarrell where he'll have a good meal, rest his feet a while, and sleep very, very well.

Cal Breeden continued working for the BW until the line was shut down in 1935. He stayed in Jarrell working for the Harrison

Gin as a grain sheller until he moved his family to Channelview, Texas, in 1944, to work for the public utilities there. He died in 1961, at the age of 76.

Bartlett Western Railway Statistics In 1933

Mainline - 23.22 miles, Siding - 2.2 miles

Track Weight

3.7 miles of 35 lb., 1.8 miles of 40 lb.
 10.7 miles of 52 lb., 6.8 miles of 56 lb.
 and 0.2 miles of 60 lb.

Depots 4

Employees

General Officers 5

Engineer 1, Brakeman 1

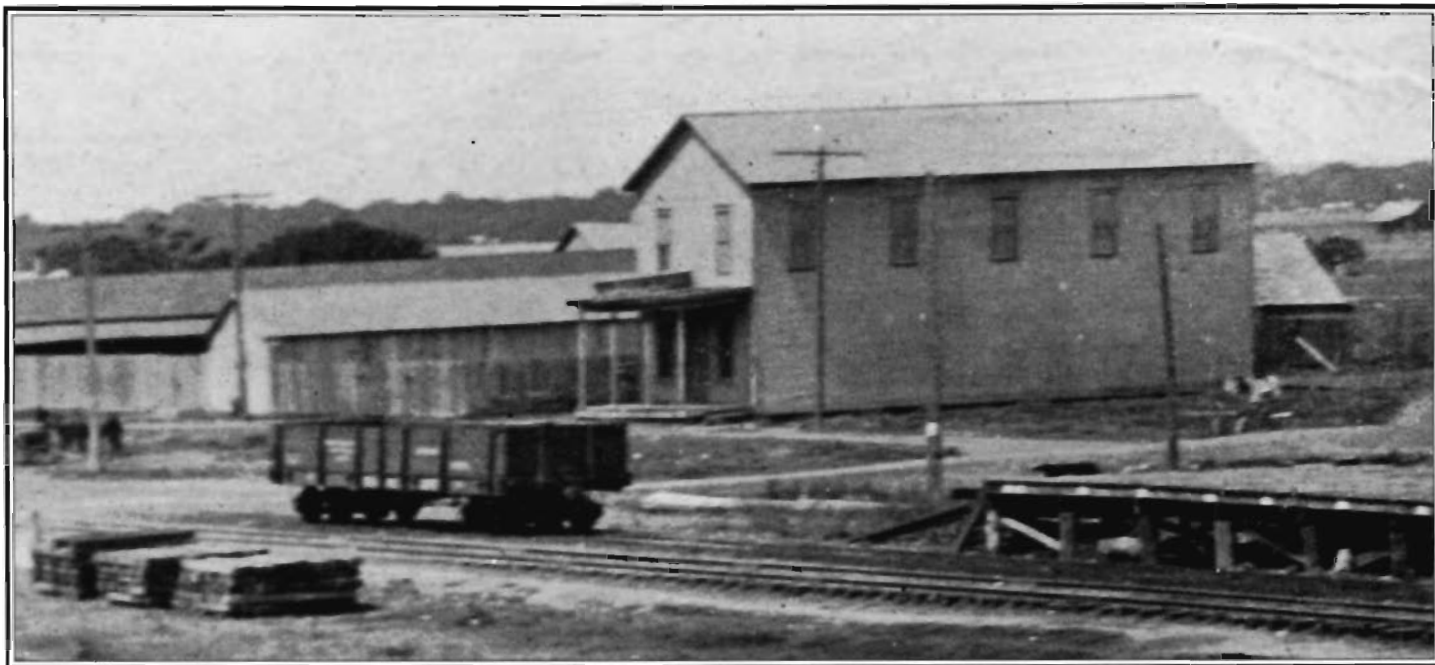
Section Man 1, General Laborer 1

Revenues

Freight - 63 carloads, Revenue \$1,240

Equipment

Fordson tractor 1, Model T pickup 1
 boxcars 3, and flatcars 20



This building along the M-K-T railroad in Bartlett was originally used by a lumber company. It later became the headquarters and depot for the Bartlett and Western Railway Company in November 1911. It was completely destroyed by fire in 1935.

Photo Courtesy of: Bobby Hill Collection