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The Railroad Depot: A Photographic Essay

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From 1830 through the 1950s railroads were the tie, the sinew, that bound our country together. Pioneers first traveled by using the lakes and streams. Eventually, roads were cut, canals dug, and finally track was laid to connect the seaboard towns and cities with the interior of the country. This transportation revolution had little effect on Florida until after the Civil War when two Yankee railroad builders, Henry Bradley Plant and Henry Morrison Flagler changed the landscape of central and south Florida. Their investments and foresight brought ribbons of track down the west and east coasts over the next few years, sparking an economic boom. In 1883, Plant’s South Florida Railroad came into Tampa, and the west coast began to grow in earnest. Before long twin rails extended down to Venice, Boca Grande, Naples and Everglades City.

The visible, ever-present evidence of the railroads, those important industrial giants of America’s wealth and mechanical genius, was the railroad station. In virtually every Florida community, from the largest city to the smallest flagstop, the station was a hub of activity and a source of local pride. Both freight and passengers were handled with equal precision, care and thoughtfulness. These depots became the community social center, the place where people stopped to set their watches at the foot of the grand station clock called a “Regulator.” They also gathered to catch up on the latest local gossip and listened to the telegraph chatter with state and national news. In short, for many adults and children alike, the station was their window on the world. Like Alice’s mirror in the child’s story, you could occasionally step through the “Looking Glass” and catch a train to far off places with strange sounding names. In the days of the Florida Crackers, the depot was the only source of current worldly communication for inland communities. In seaports, the station was an important link in the chain of commerce between sea and land.

The arrival of the train was the highlight of the day or week. Strangers and friends would come and depart. Mail was tossed onto the platform for distribution to the townsfolk. Newspapers and supplies for the general store or mercantile marts cluttered the freight and baggage areas. During horse and buggy days, wagons and stagecoaches might be crowded around at train time to carry passengers and goods to the surrounding area. Later, after the coming of the horseless carriage, trucks and taxis waited impatiently to be loaded or unloaded.

Railroad employees were an essential element in all of this activity, selling tickets for honeymoon trips, summer camp for the kids, family vacations or business trips. They made sure the steamer trunk got on board, the cast iron stove was stoked, telegrams were sent and all the dozens of tasks were completed even though they seemed to occur at the same time.

Over the years, communities changed, but the railroad stations seemed to remain the same. After World War II travelers got used to lunch in New York and dinner in Chicago. When trains could not measure up to our love of speed and the convenience of air travel, we abandoned them.
The station was no longer needed for passengers, and even our freight deserted trains for trucks using the new federally-built highways or planes landing at huge tax-financed airports. Many of our stations were torn down or rotted away in the last thirty years. Fortunately, we have belatedly realized our railroad depots have new uses, and many are being renovated and preserved for another generation to love as we loved those pictured on the accompanying pages. Some stations still slumber, waiting on a community to devote the time, effort and money necessary to recreate a social center like that which existed in a bygone era. Perhaps a motel, restaurant, office center, library, museum, or even a drive-in bank will again enliven those once active walls and cause the adjacent town to swell with pride at the “new” town center down by the old station.

This 1922 photograph shows passengers in front of Tampa Union Station. It was built in 1921 by the Tampa Union Company headed by Peter O. Knight, to serve the Seaboard Air Line (SAL) and the Atlantic Coast Line (ACL). Its plan is unique. Some of its sheds, the Railway Express and Pullman offices are gone by today.

Photograph courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
The ACL station in Clearwater was built on the route of the old Orange Belt Railroad. It and the trackage were removed with the ACL/SAL merger in 1968.

This and subsequent photographs courtesy of the author.

Bradenton’s ACL station is a standard brick and stucco design. It is still in use as a railroad office.
The station at Punta Gorda in Charlotte County was built by the Atlantic Coast Line. Constructed of brick and stucco, it is similar to others found in Florida cities of similar size, such as Bradenton.

Unlike the standardized designs frequently used by the railroad companies, ACL’s Fort Myers station is one-of-a-kind. Unfortunately, it had seen better days by the time of this 1969 photograph.
The SAL built the station at Arcadia on the line begun in 1906 as the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railway Company, which connected Plant City timber and phosphate with deep water at Port Boca Grande. The station’s plan and stucco construction is similar to that of others in Dade City and Polk City, dating to the boom era.

The station at Polk City was a standard Seaboard Air Line stucco design. It was gone by the 1960s.
Dade City’s station was built by the SAL and is another “Boomtime” stucco design. It stood across from the Edwinola Hotel and was razed in 1970.

The SAL St. Petersburg station south of Central Avenue was built in the 1960s. Its stark exterior contrasts vividly with the ornate designs of earlier eras. It was abandoned by 1968 after the SAL/ACL merger, but found a new use as a lumber company office.
This miniature stucco structure is the Bay Pines station. It was built by the SAL specifically to serve the Veterans’ Hospital at Bay Pines.

Barrel-tile roof over the waiting area distinguishes Venice’s unique SAL station. It was abandoned by Amtrak when passenger service was discontinued south of Tampa. The stationmaster offered my wife and myself bed and breakfast at his home when we arrived by train with our bicycles to tour the local beaches.
Lake Placid in Highlands County aimed at becoming a winter home for the rich, so it obviously could not be satisfied with a standard-design building. It was serviced by the Atlantic Coast Line and has just begun its new use as a museum.

The Sarasota SAL station was so centrally located that the tracks ran unprotected down the center of a major street. It was abandoned and razed with the creation of the Seaboard Coast Line in 1968.
The Auburndale station is another standard brick design used by the ACL. The station was painted in their trademark – color purple with white trim. The building was demolished in 1968.

Palmetto’s ACL station is of a non-standard brick style.
The main lines of both the Atlantic Coast Line and the Seaboard Air Line crossed in Plant City. The depot, built in 1908 to serve both companies, was recently placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Trilby was an important junction on the oldest route from Tampa to St. Petersburg. Trains took twelve and a half hours en route before the construction of the Gandy Bridge. Ringling Brothers used to stop their trains at Trilby to water their animals in the nearby lake. The ACL station was built in 1902, partially destroyed by fire in 1925, and rebuilt in 1927. By the 1980s it had been relocated at the Florida Pioneer Museum in Dade City.
Bowling Green’s building shows the standard design serving the ACL’s smaller communities and used brick and wood.

Waverly in Polk County exhibits yet another standardized ACL design, this time of wood.
The ACL’s Brooksville station is a standard wooden design with an extra wide platform for farm implements.

The ACL depot at Immokalee in rural Collier County has a utilitarian wooden construction and contrasts with the more glamorous West Coast stations.
Palmdale’s station was built by the ACL using their standard wood plan for smaller flag stops. The line opened just after World War I to connect the Sebring/Haines City line with Moore Haven, where steamboat connections across Lake Okeechobee carried passengers for West Palm Beach.

Dover, a small stop on the ACL to Tampa, was one of several standard wood designs, this one with the freight end enclosed for security. It had been razed by the 1980s.
Wimauma shows a standard wood design and was built by the SAL.

Highlands City’s structure (ACL) was built of wood. Doodlebug #2900 of the combined SCL passes with a single coach for Naples. This rare combination engine/freight car had itself been retired and scrapped by the time Amtrak took over the passenger service.
Croom’s ACL station was small but had character. It overlooked a large rail yard in a once busy phosphate and pulpwood area. It was levelled by 1980.

The depot at East Tampa, built by the ACL, typifies the smallest of the standard wood designs which was used to serve a single industry or a small town.
Elfers, between Tarpon Springs and New Port Richey, had a depot built by the SAL. The line began in 1909 as the old Tampa and Gulf, known locally as the “tug and grunt.” The building was a standard small wood design. It has been used as a lumber company office.

Valrico in Hillsborough County has a non-standard, indeed curious design. This SAL structure had been removed by 1980.
By 1958, there was no station at Felda in Hendry County, only a sign to designate the side track. Station Number VC 948 was built by the ACL, and its tracks could hold nineteen cars.
SMUGGLING AT TARPON SPRINGS: A PROTEST

Editors’ Note: Smuggling is undoubtedly as old as the practice of taxing imports, and the illicit liquor trade along the Gulf Coast certainly predates Prohibition, as the following 1901 protest makes clear. Written by a Tarpon Springs businessman, it also contains some interesting information about life in that town at the turn of the century. The other fact worth noting is that this document was found in the National Archives where a wealth of original source material on local history is housed. The exact location of this document is Record Group 36, Treasury Department, “Custom House Nominations – Tampa,” Box 79. It should also be pointed out that the file contains an official response from an Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Department who answered that the federal government could not afford to appoint a customs officer for Tarpon Springs to police traffic at the mouth of the Anclote River. Perhaps most remarkable is the fact that the reply from the Washington official is dated August 27, 1901, a mere eight days after the following complaint was written.