



ROY BLANCHARD

In the wake of M&B's big derailment, some new details

Investing in track is a big step for short lines

May 2, 2007, started out as a quiet typical day in Myrtlewood, Ala., a dot on the M&B Railroad about 30 miles east of the Mississippi border. Fog and haze hung in the air, temps hovered in the high 70s. About 9:30 a.m., the quiet ended abruptly as a 14-car run-through train off the Kansas City Southern with a pair of Union Pacific SD70s up front derailed when a trestle collapsed under it.

This wasn't just any train, however. It was a special carrying space shuttle rocket boosters from Corrine, Utah, to Cape Kennedy, Fla., on its usual route: Union Pacific-KCS-M&B-CSX. (An alternate route through New Orleans lacks clearances needed for the oversized boosters.) Both of the locomotives, an escort passenger car, and one freight car carrying a rocket booster fell on their sides when the 10-foot-high trestle collapsed. Twelve cars remained upright and didn't overturn because the trestle sank evenly to the ground.

Immediately questions turned to the M&B's safety record and the

fact that just two years prior, on June 1, 2005, shortline holding company Genesee & Wyoming had acquired the line. According to the Federal Railroad Administration's Web site, M&B was tied for third place in number of reportable accidents in the period from January 2005 through May 2007, with 16 occurring in 2006 and eight (including the Myrtlewood bridge) in the first five months of 2007.

What was going on? For one thing, Hurricane Katrina had a big impact. The storm hit Aug. 29, 2005, putting New Orleans off the map as a railroad interchange, with the CSX-UP connection being one of the biggest to suffer. KCS immediately came to the rescue, offering its Shreveport-Meridian route with the M&B to link to CSX at Montgomery. Even though from the outset G&W launched into an aggressive program to replace much of the old track structure, add yard tracks, and strengthen bridges and trestles, the 1920s-era M&B was suddenly handling 21st century mainline trains. And lots of them. Where first-generation GP7s and GP10s had been the order of the day, modern six-axle units now dominated.

Consequently the track took a heavy hit, triggering the 2006 spike in reportable accidents and leaving it vulnerable for the May 2007 trestle collapse. To put this in context, SD70 locomotives weigh about 190 tons each — 32 tons per axle. Boxcars of the 1920s were designed to carry 40-50 tons of freight and weighed a lot less than today's 286,000-pound capacity cars that weigh 60,000 pounds (or more) when empty. And the railroad load of just one SD70 is the equivalent of six 40-foot cars compressed into the 70-foot length of an SD70, not something anyone envisioned 90 years ago.

Of course, the M&B was never intended to be a mainline rail-

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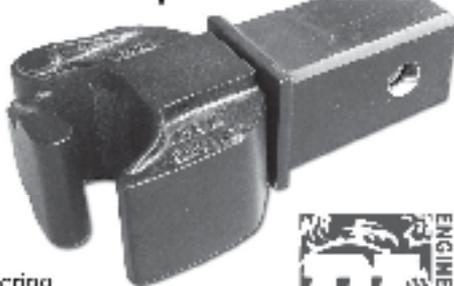
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road, having been incorporated in Meridian, Miss., in January 1917 as the Meridian & Bigbee, extending 50 miles east to Myrtlewood (just across the Tombigbee River, hence the second name) and a connection with the Louisville & Nashville's line east to Selma. Full operations began Oct. 15, 1935.

By the 1970s, American Can Co. controlled the line and had a mix of rail between 75 and 115 pounds. Two decades later, ownership shifted to the James River Corp., and rail weight had been upgraded to at least 110 pounds. By the time G&W arrived in 2005, M&B had acquired the ex-L&N line into Selma plus overhead rights on CSX into Montgomery, giving it 147 route-miles. But the track

THE LESSON HERE IS THAT TO WIN BIG CUSTOMERS, SHORT LINES MUST INVEST BIG BUCKS IN TRACK ... IN THE RANGE OF \$5,000 PER ROUTE MILE.

needed work. As G&W noted in its November 2006 progress report to the FRA, the line had 125 miles of 10-mph slow orders, so one of its first moves was to upgrade the track and overcome years of deferred maintenance. G&W's initial budget called for \$4.5 million in work in 2005 followed by an additional \$4.6 million in 2006.

So when Katrina hit in 2005, G&W was caught with a work in progress: Money had been allocated, but it hadn't reached the railroad. This wasn't a patch job either. According to the November 2006 FRA letter, the M&B got, among other things, 36,000 ties

(about 10 miles worth), 17,800 tons of ballast, 14,000 linear feet of rail, 30,000 rail anchors, 46,000 new track bolts, five wayside rail lubricators, and 144 miles of surfacing.

All this was done with no personal injuries, while reducing slow orders to 27 miles. But that was just the first step. Through August 2007, M&B put in another 60,000 ties, spread more than 32,000 tons of ballast, changed out 350 Sperry-detected and other rail defects, added another 44,000 rail anchors, saw four track-geometry-car passes, and had a third-party engineering firm inspect every bridge. And that's not even a complete list.

The \$17 million track tab through 2007 shows G&W's commitment to make the M&B the major overhead route it ought to be.

Unlike Norfolk Southern, CSX has no direct western gateway in the Deep South other than New Orleans. The CSX-BNSF intermodal connection runs Atlanta-Birmingham-Memphis; the CSX-UP Pacer train runs Atlanta-New Orleans with the New Orleans Public Belt connecting the two. But with the M&B connection, CSX can get to KCS at Meridian and the UP at Shreveport.

The lesson here is that before short lines take on big payload trains with big power to haul them, they must invest big bucks in track — in the range of \$5,000 per route-mile per year to keep FRA Class 2 track up to standards. G&W is making that commitment and CSX, UP, KCS — not to mention G&W — will all be the better for it. It's all a part of running 21st century trains. **I**

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