THE ORANGE BELT RAILWAY

Peter Demens conceived the idea of building a railroad across the state, connecting the St. Johns River with the Gulf of Mexico.

Demens - his correct name was Petrovitch A. Demenscheff - was born in Petrograd, Russia, in 1860. Demens could be described as a born promoter. He had the vision necessary to launch "impossible projects" and the determination to put the projects through. This was proved in the case of the Orange Belt Railway. Even after he knew the road would bring no financial gain, he continued on to the West Coast; and the town of St. Petersburg came into existence.

In 1880 he left Russia and made his way to Florida, first locating in Longwood, where he organized a sawmill under the name of Demens, McClain, and Cotter. To bring logs to the mill, he constructed a narrow gauge road with 16 pound rails. In 1885, after a heated discussion with the City Fathers of Longwood about his logging operation, Demens decided to give up the mill and to build a railroad on a larger scale.

After raising about $35,000.00, he purchased the charter of the Orange Belt Railway, incorporated April 20, 1885, by T. Arnold, H. Miller, and H. Hall (Miller and Hall were Real Estate Agents and Surveyors with offices in Longwood). He proceeded immediately to construct his road, narrow gauge, using the light 16 pound rails from his log road and making

the eastern terminal at Monroe, about four miles west of Sanford.

Not long after the work started, Demens' funds began to run low. With his attorney, Andrew Johnson of Orlando, he secured $20,000.00 from Josef Henschen, $15,000.00 from Henry Sweetapple, and $2,000.00 from A. M. Taylor, his storekeeper in Longwood. These gentlemen incorporated the Orange Belt Investment Company, whose main business would be to build the Orange Belt Railway. All along the proposed right of way the railroad received donations of land. A half interest of 200 acres was given the road by Judge J. G. Speer on the South side of Lake Apopka. On this 200 acres of land the investment company surveyed and layed out a town which Judge Speer named Oakland. This was the headquarters of the railroad and also of the investment company.

To permit completion of the Orange Belt into Oakland, $50,000.00 worth of bonds were issued. With this money, the 16 pound rails were replaced with 25 pound rails and the road completed into Oakland.

This section of the road from Monroe to Oakland, a distance of 35 miles, was in operation from November 15, 1886, to December 7, 1893.

The completion of the road did not satisfy Demens. He wanted to push on to the Gulf. Josef Henschen opposed the idea, but Taylor and Sweetapple helped Demens outvote him.

The railroad began having difficulties right from the start. Arrangements were made for the sale of bonds and for cash advances for the necessary 25 pound rails. Contracts were let for grading and for laying ties.

The funds that were promised the first month never came in, and only a small amount came in the second month. Employees and contractors began to clamor for their money. The only thing Demens could do was borrow more. This loan provided only temporary relief. To make matters worse, the suppliers failed to ship the rails as promised and the entire construction program was delayed. On top of this, the rainy season was unusually bad, and the work of grading was interrupted. Late in the summer, yellow fever broke out, and the working force was demoralized. The affairs of the company reached a crisis early in September, 1887. The creditors demanded their money and the properties of the road were attached. Engines and equipment were locked to the rails. This was such a shock to Henry Sweetapple that he suffered a stroke and died instantly.

Demens succeeded in raising more money from his brokers, and a compromise was made with the creditors. However, the financial situation of the company became steadily worse. Despite desperate pleas for more money, Demens did not get the help he needed in time. The road was not completed, and many land donations were lost because most donations were contingent upon the railroad being completed by December 31, 1887. Demens was forced to borrow more money at ruinous terms from a syndicate

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of Philadelphia and Chicago capitalists and so place the fate of the railroad in their hands.

On April 30, 1888, the 117.68 miles of road from Oakland was completed into St. Petersburg, and operations continued until December 7, 1893.

In 1889 Sanford became the eastern terminus of the road, a connection being made at Monroe.

The Orange Belt failed to make money in the first year of operations. It continued to go deeper and deeper into debt. It owed $900,000.00 to the syndicate. On July 1, $55,000.00 was due in interest, and the money was not on hand. The Orange Belt Investment Company owned about 200,000 acres of land, but no one wanted to buy it. There was nothing for the original backers of the Orange Belt to do other than accept what terms the syndicate cared to offer. After negotiations were completed, Henschen received $8,850.00, Taylor received $2,000.00, and Demens received $14,400.00. These payments represented only a small part of the capital that they had invested. It gave them nothing for their three years of service to the road.

About all that could be said about the road at this time was that it was in bad shape. The tracks had been laid in a hurry; and as a result, they were uneven and needed constant repairs. Most of the rolling stock was in as bad condition as the roadway. Some of the cars and locomotives had been purchased, second hand, from the South Florida Railroad; a few

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locomotives came from an abandoned narrow gauge road in Alabama; and the Orange Belt had built a few of the cars in its shops in Oakland. Nothing was first class. The main claim for distinction was that it was the longest narrow gauge railroad at that time in the country.

When the syndicate took over the railroad, it also acquired all the holdings of the Orange Belt Investment Company. These holdings included one-half interest in the townsite of St. Petersburg. Efforts were made by the syndicate to develop St. Petersburg and to bring settlers along their right of ways, thereby increasing business. However, both ideas failed; and the railroad continued to lose money. On December 7, 1893, the road was leased for ten years to Henry Plant, who operated it as a part of the Plant System. Its name was changed to the Sanford & St. Petersburg Railway. The only important improvement on the railroad during the Plant control was the widening of the tracks to standard gauge from Trilby to St. Petersburg. This improvement was made about 1897.

The Sanford & St. Petersburg Railway was absorbed by the Atlantic Coast Line on April 1, 1903. In commenting on the purchase, the St. Petersburg Times stated in the April 12, 1903, issue, "It is not very difficult to satisfy one's self that if any change at all follows, it will be beneficial."

In 1903 that portion of the Sanford & St. Petersburg Railway's main line, which extended from Sanford via Monroe

to Paola Junction, was abandoned and taken up by the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, with a connection to the Atlantic Coast Line's Road from Sanford to Tavares being installed at Paola Junction.

In 1967 the Atlantic Coast Line merged with the Seaboard Airline, to become the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad Company.

ROBERT F. HAMMOND
SEMINOLE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Railroads in Seminole County

Railroads in what is now Seminole County arrived about fifty years after the first beginnings of the rail transportation industry in the United States. Railroads and the United States each created the other. First, the nation created railroads by generous land grants. Then, the railroads united the states.

Railroads were also the nation's first infrastructure, even before roads, and became America's first big business. In 1884, when the Dow industrial security rating (now called the Dow-Jones) was formulated, there were only 11 securities of which 9 were railroads. The way we keep time was also a railroad contribution. Before the iron horses, each town set time according to the location of the sun, leading to 56 different sun areas. To correct this railroad standard time (Eastern Standard, Central Standard. etc.) was introduced in 1883 and is still observed.

In this room starting on the North wall opposite the entry door, our Seminole County railroad exhibits proceed in chronological order around the room. Beginning with the 1880 South Florida R.R.; there follow the Plant System, 1883; the Orange Belt, 1885; the Sanford and Indian River, 1886; the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West, 1886; and the Florida Midland, 1886. There is no display of the 1887 Sanford and Lake Eustis, because the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West used their regular rolling stock on this division. The 1892 map of the Sanford Grant on the closed door position in this room shows the initial routes of five of these early railroads. Also, in the hall outside this room the same roads are imposed on a current map of Seminole County.

The Railroads graetly benefited from land grants. The Orange Belt received over 88,00 acres; the South Florida, over 75,000 acres; the Florida Midland, over 12,000 acres; and the Jacksonville, Tampa, and Key West almost two million acres. Also involving high numbers were the wood burning locomotives of these roads: it is estimated that nationally such locomotives devoured 4 to 5 million cords of wood per year. In addition, a record in speed was registered when in 1893 New York Central's #999 was clocked at 112.5 mph.

Eventually, between 1883 and 1899, the Plant System bought out all the early local railroads. By the spring of 1884, Henry B. Plant had two locomotives, which had been delivered by schooner to Tampa, making regularly scheduled runs in 4 1/2 hours over the 115 miles between Sanford and Tampa. In 1902 the Plant System, itself, was absorbed into the Atlantic Coast Line, which in 1967 merged with the Seaborad Air Line as the Seaboard Coast Line, and was merged in 1980 into the CSX Corp. as the present Seaboard System R.R. This current combine is a consolidation of the Chessie System and the Seaboard, thus the letters CSX, C for Chessie, S for Seaboard and X the old failiar railroad crossing sign. The Atlantic Coast Line and the Seaboard Air Line each, prior to 1967, had existed for about 65 years.

In the middle of our railroad exhibit, we must metion the earliest mode of non-military land transportation in Florida and Seminole County - OXEN. To illustrate this, we have included in the lighted exhibit case a pair of ox shoes. Observe that since the ox has a cloven hoof, like a cow but unlike a horse, the iron ox shoe is in two pieces. In addition, you will see miscellaneous early railroad artifacts in the same exhibit case.

In the lower adjoining exhibit case, note the open engine data book used at the second local engine repair yard, from 1951 to 1982 located near the present Amtrak station in Sanford. The book is opened to the page covering the specifications of engine ACL #1603, displayed on the short wall near the lighted exhibit case. One of the specification shows that #1603 was equipped with a Schmidt superheater, an outline of which is shown on the open pages of the 1917 ***Enginemen's Manual*** in the same exhibit case. In the same exhibit case is a refrigerator freight car ice loading record book showing the activity of the Rand Yard ice plant, the largest in its time, located between the community of Lake Monroe and Sanford. On the lower portion of the short wall in this room are a large ice tong and ice hook pole used in this ice plant. Also in the same exhibit case are several railroad Rule Books, the oldest being the Atlantic Coast Line 1903 and 1907. On the wall to the right of #1603 is a large blueprint of the government 1917 survey of the first Sanford repair yard, located where Scotty's and Gregory Lumber Co. are, made as part of World War I mobilization of USA rail facilities.

This repair yard works was started by the South Florida R.R., as can be seen as one of the numbered items on the 1890 bird's eye view of Sanford in this room. Also of interest on this early view are the Orange Belt station, the South Florida station, the south Florida R.R. hospital, and the 1887 PICO hotel and restaurant. The letters P, I, C, O stand for Plant Investment Company. Pictures of the Plant System hospital and PICO Building can be seen on the Plant System display board here. The Byzantine architecture of the PICO Building with its Moorish tower was followed a few years later by Henry Plant in his extremely more elaborate Tampa Bay Hotel, which is now the University of Tampa. Sanford architect W.T. Cotter (No. 44 on the 1890 view) was in charge of the Tampa Bay Hotel construction.

In the hall opposite the door upon entering this room is another bird's eye view--this one of Longwood. Also pictured is Demens' residence and sawmill. It was through the sawmill's timber hauling tracks that Demens became interested in building the Orange Belt railway, for a time the longest narrow gauge rail line in the USA. It eventually ran from Sanford (originally from the town of Lake Monroe) to St. Petersburg, which Demens named for his native city in Russia. Demens was an Anglicised spelling of his Russian name Piotr Dementieff. E.W. Henck, the first president of the South Florida R.R., was also a Longwood resident.

As part of our railroad collection we have over 100 books on railroad history, rules governing traffic operations, and technical instruction on equipment maintenance.

Prepared by Arthur E. Francke