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The Planter's Railway

by Paul Harncourt

This is a book about the first railroad to bring the Mississippi River Valley and the East Coast of America together—the Memphis & Charleston Railroad (M&C). The excitement of seeing a railroad being born is followed by the pains of being caught in a Civil War and eventually absorbed by the Southern Railway. Most of the details given are from newspapers of the day and the Annual Reports of the M&C.

The book starts out with what is called the 'Excitement Period,' where many of the unknown details about the beginning of railroads in the North Alabama, Southern Tennessee, and North Mississippi areas are brought together. We read how the M&C builds two separate railroads to come together into one. One extends from Tuscumbia to Stevenson Alabama (to link up with the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad being built at the time), and the other from Memphis eastward toward Tuscumbia.

We see the final spike driven on the M&C, in the year 1857, just five years to the date of its beginning. There are actual details on how the railroads were surveyed and then built in those days; with oak stringers and with half inch straps of iron nailed to wooden rails, before iron "T" rails were introduced from England. We learn how they were operated by "Captains," or "Runners," and how the railroads were powered before there were locomotives—with mules and horses pulling the cars. Ultimately with technology they overcame the problems they faced.

The Civil War literally and physically almost destroyed this fledgling railroad. The details of this period are taken from the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion as compiled by the government in the late 1800's, and the Annual Reports of the M&C.

Both armies alternately destroy and rebuild the railroad, fighting along its length, a stretch called "The Great Vertebrae of the South" by Southern generals. There is the capture of Huntsville, without a shot being fired in the town. Skirmishes between warring parties, in the countryside along the railroad, abound. The populace of the areas managed their lives in the face of these deprivations, and the railroad survived.

The book ends with a section on the post war era. There we see how the troubled times of the late 1800's affected the fortunes of the M&C. Attention is called to the shortsightedness of the minority M&C stockholders, and the ultimate destruction of the profitability of the railroad, until in 1897 it is absorbed into the Southern Railway System.

For railroad buffs there are any number of railroad firsts that will surprise you as you read the "Excitement" section. And for the Civil War buffs, you will be pleasantly surprised at some of the important events that transpired along the M&C line. The book contains a reference section and composite charts of the locomotive roster of the M&C for those looking for reference material.

Railroad enthusiasts and Civil War buffs will want to add this novel account of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad to their collections.