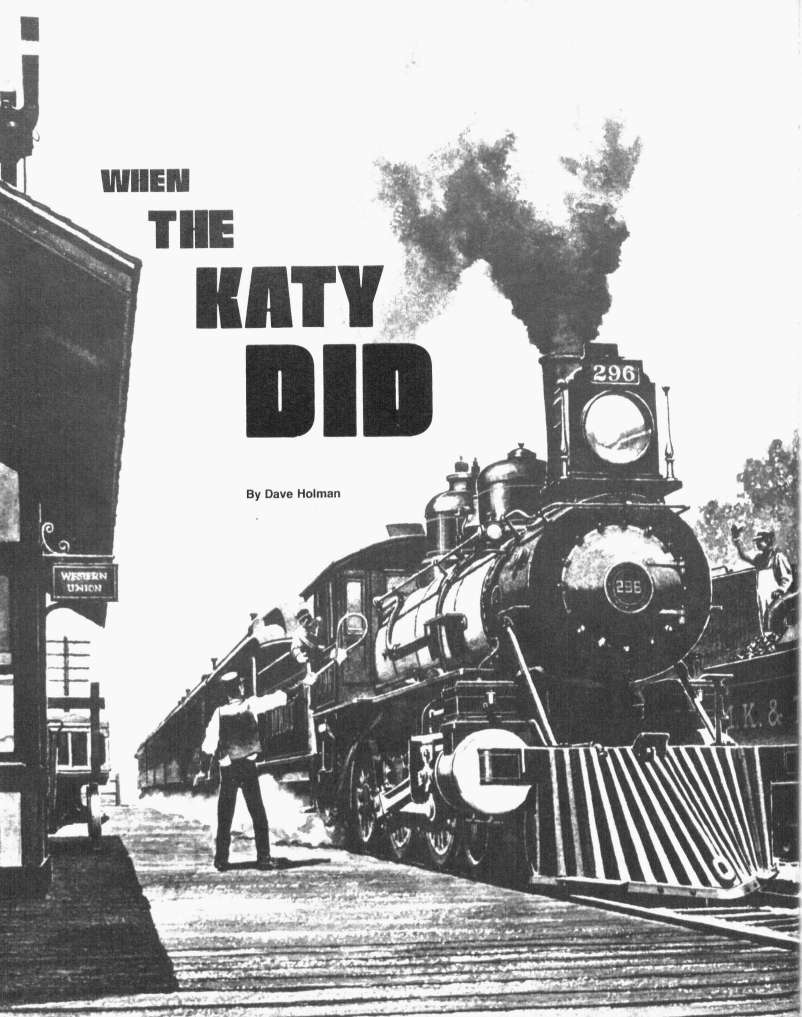


WHEN THE KATY DID

By Dave Holman



POOR KATY. TO SEE HER today, you'd hardly believe she's the same railroad that built the elegant red-brick station on Broadway back in 1908 when Columbia was "the Coming City of Central Missouri." An eight-mile branch line joins Columbia to the M.K.&T. Railroad's main line at McBaine. The fine little station at the end of a branch line was a token of optimism about the future of commerce in Columbia and on the rails.

There was reason for optimism in 1908-09. Business triumphed over populism at the polls as William Howard Taft beat William Jennings Bryan by more than a million votes in the November 4 elections. Special trains crowded the tracks December 11 at both the Katy and the Wabash depots as hundreds of guests came to the inauguration of the new University president, A. Ross Hill. A week later, the first basketball game was played at Mizzou and the Tigers trounced Warrensburg in a doubleheader. Hickman High School, the YMCA building, the Guitar Building, the University's white campus, and the new county courthouse were all in various stages of construction. The new journalism school had started business, publishing the *University Missourian*.

THE TOWN COUNCIL was studying an ordinance regulating overcrowding in nickelodeons. Students had just built "a fifth nickelodeon, for Negroes" near the new Katy station. The Prince of Wales had "gone on the water wagon" and found his shooting much improved. The University was sponsoring a contest for a new school song because "Old Missouri" sounded too much like the Cornell alma mater. Apparently nobody won. And Wilbur Wright set a new speed re-

cord for aircraft — 46 miles per hour. That was an ill omen for the railroads, but nobody seemed to notice.

Columbians accepted the new Katy station as their due, and used it as a lever to pry better local service from the Wabash. Within a year, the Wabash improved its rolling stock serving Columbia and built a new limestone depot at the end of its branch line on Tenth Street.

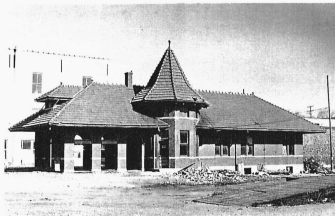
Townpeople came to the stations the first day of the school year to see the trainloads of students pouring in. Both railroads ran special trains for students at the beginning and the end of the school term and for the Christmas holidays.

FROM ITS BEGINNING in 1901, the Katy had a reputation for service in Columbia.

"It was a very friendly railroad," remembers R. B. Price of Boone County Bank. "John Day was one of the conductors back in the early days, about 1910. In the fall you could ride to McBaine and say 'John, let me off at Turner Station. I want to hunt quail. And when you come back at three o'clock, don't run off and leave me.' The conductor was usually accommodating."

Many people from Columbia rode the Katy to fish at Brushwood Lake, just north of McBaine. Successful fishermen could usually barter their catch to the train crew for a free ride back to town. Brushwood Lake, like the Katy branch line, is almost completely dried up now.

Kitty Claxton grew up near McBaine and rode the Katy to Columbia every day to attend her last two years of high school. She fell in love with the baggage man on the train and married him. In the early '20s,



Old Katy station is being renovated into new Columbia restaurant.

Kitty, then McBaine's postmaster, rented boats to students who went to McBaine for outings. Many young men used to go rowing on Perche Creek with their sweethearts, she says.

In the late '30s and early '40s, the Katy figured in another popular college date. Beer-laden students would pay the 38-cent round-trip fare, board the night train at 1:10 a.m., ride to McBaine and return at 3 a.m., just for a lark. The train ride may have been an excuse to meet the real challenge: getting the girls out of the dorms and back in again during those days when alma mater stood *in loco parentis*. The students undoubtedly caused some discomfort to the regular passengers on the one-coach train. And they gave conductor Bob Kearnes fits. Kearnes was an elderly gentleman, not noted for his tolerance of frivolity.

Bill Toler, BS BA '48, remembers one foray to McBaine when Kearnes had all he could take. "I don't think we were doing anything wrong," Toler says with a grin that suggests he may not be telling the whole story. "He just figured we were being a little too rowdy. We heard him call ahead to have the police waiting for the train in Columbia. In those days there was a bridge at Stewart Road, and the train stopped there to let off people who lived in the southwest part of town. So, all the students got off at the bridge, and when the police met the train at the station—if they did—there wasn't a student on board."

IN 1920 ANOTHER STUDENT named Don Faurot rode the Katy to Columbia for the first time from Mountain Grove, Missouri. He had to change trains three times enroute, but it was the only way to get here from there. He was going to become one of Katy's best Columbia customers during his years as a football player and coach.

"The trains weren't just fun," says Faurot. "They were the only way we had of traveling then."

The Katy was the main connection to schools in the south and southwest. Tiger teams rode the Katy to SMU and to Norman. And visiting teams arrived in Columbia the same way—often with special trains just for the teams, fans and alumni. Up until the early '50s, specials from SMU with dining car, lounge and several Pullmans would park at the Katy station. Fans and teams lived on the cars during the football weekend.

The federal highway system reached Columbia about 1925 and air travel became popular 20 years

later, but the rails remained the Tigers' favorite mode of transportation for several more years.

"It was about 1954 before we started flying our teams," Faurot says. "The only plane we had available for a while was the DC3, and it wouldn't hold everybody."

RAIL TRAVEL may have been considerably slower, but it was probably more valuable to the players than football trips today.

"Travel was exciting then," Faurot says. "The boys were not very well-travelled in those days, and they really looked forward to those trips. We got to stay over in the town where we played. The boys got acquainted in the fraternity houses on other campuses. They got to go to the dances and got to know the other players. And if we were playing in Colorado, we'd go do the Rockies on Sunday and get back home Monday noon. Everybody took their books and studied on the train. And the meals on the diner were delightful, and served with style. Now we fly out of town after the game and get home in time for supper."

During her heyday, Katy served Columbia with six trains daily, but no longer. Trucks and jet planes were the beginning of the end. Some local Katy watchers believe government policies and a period of company mismanagement just about finished her off. Katy ran her last passenger train in 1958. Freight service continues, but business declines. The railroad has lost money nine of the last 10 years. The ties on the Columbia branch line are bleached and weathered like old bones, and the occasional car that does bring freight into town creeps at five miles per hour over a hazardous road bed. And Katy has sold her little station to Columbia businessman Ron Westenhaver.

Even though Katy doesn't live there anymore, the station may continue to contribute to "the Coming City of Central Missouri." Westenhaver is building a restaurant there, named—what else?—Katy Station. The station is being restored and Westenhaver is trying to be as faithful to the original plans as possible. He will decorate the restaurant with railroad souvenirs and memorabilia. Westenhaver hopes the place may serve as a sort of museum as well as a restaurant and lounge. Bad luck has slowed construction, but Westenhaver hopes to be in business in time for the Missouri-Illinois football game September 18. □