

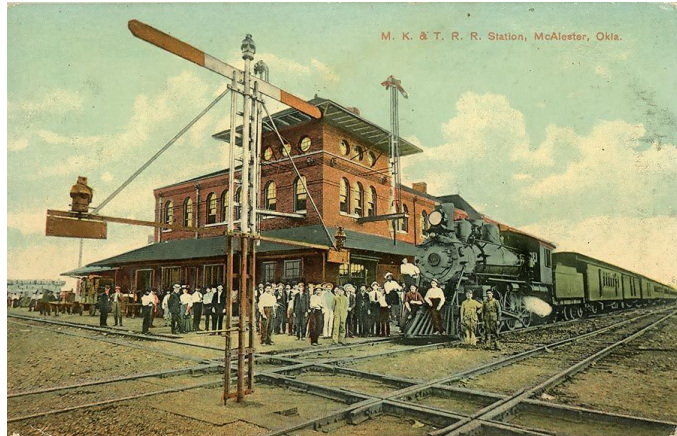
A Brief History Of Oklahoma Railroads

A Scene at the Missouri, Kansas, & Texas Railroad Depot in McAlester, OK

A LATE START

Railroads came late to the part of the country now known as the State of Oklahoma. Even before the first rails were laid, the American Civil War had ended, the Transcontinental Railroad had been completed, and the surrounding states (Texas, Arkansas, Missouri, and Kansas) had established rail systems.

This is not to say there was no interest in putting down rails across the eastern part of what would eventually become Oklahoma. A north-south line would offer northern states a more direct route to southern Gulf ports. Moreover, Oklahoma's relatively flat terrain seemed to invite a possible southern route to the Pacific. As early as 1853 the federal government surveyed an east-west route through the Indian Territory. Two railroads made plans for such a route, but the outbreak of the Civil War postponed any actual construction.



A Scene at the Missouri, Kansas, & Texas Railroad Depot in McAlester, OK

At the conclusion of the Civil War, ideas were again put forward. The major impediment seems to have been that the desired routes passed through Indian Territory, which by treaty was owned by Native American tribes. Here it should be noted that during the Civil War, some of the tribes in the territory had sided with the Confederate States. It then transpired that, driven by greed, a desire to develop rail connections, and possibly to punish the tribes, previous federal treaties were voided. The tribes were forced to accept a new treaty, drawn up on July 16, 1866, which required the Native Americans to allow the construction of two rail routes across their lands: one north south route, and one east-west route. The Tribes, having watched how Native Americans in Kansas had lost their lands to railroads, were not anxious to give up their territory. Many worried about the effects on their culture and way of life. However, others bowing to the inevitable saw the coming of railroads as a possible economic boost.

Several rail companies soon vied for the right to build into Indian Territory. Congress decreed that the first to build to a certain point on the Indian Territory boundary would be granted permission. While it is unclear who actually won this race, in the spring of 1870, the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad (the "MKT" or "Katy") was allowed to cross into Indian Territory. The first spike was driven on June 6, 1870. Moving from northeast to southwest, the railroad crossed the Red River into Texas, reaching Denison on December 25, 1872. [Editor's note: this was the line from Parsons, KS to Denison, TX, which passed through Muskogee, OK.]

A second line, the Atlantic & Pacific, connected to the MKT at Vinita, OK on September 1, 1871, forming the beginnings of an east-west route.

EXPANSION AND STATEHOOD

For the next fifteen years no new railroad companies were permitted in Indian Territory. The MKT used their line to send coal and Texas cattle north and grain to the south. Meanwhile, the Atlantic & Pacific extended their line westward from Vinita to Tulsa and beyond. Then in 1876, the A&P became part of the St. Louis & San Francisco (Frisco) rail system.

By the 1880s, the lack of railroads through the future State of Oklahoma was considered an impediment to expanded commerce between the surrounding states. Thus, in 1885-1886 the federal government began to allow more railroads to build in the area – and build they did. In 1886-1887, the Frisco constructed a line from Arkansas to Texas. The Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe (ATSF) constructed a line in 1887 passing south from Kansas through the Unassigned lands to Guthrie and the future Oklahoma City. In fact, during the famous Land Run of 1889, many of the new settlers arrived on ATSF trains. [Editor's note: this line is still in use today.]

By 1892, the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific (the "CRI&P", "Rock Island", or "The Rock") had completed its own north-south line from Kansas to Texas following the Chisholm Trail. [Editor's note: this line went from Wichita, KS to Fort Worth, TX, passing through Enid and El Reno, OK.]

The Kansas City, Pittsburg, & Gulf (later the Kansas City Southern) and the Kansas & Arkansas Valley Railroad also built new lines in the territory.

The period between 1897 and 1907 is considered the boom of railroad construction in Oklahoma. Regional companies began many new branches, and by the time of Statehood in 1907, the area was covered by a dense network of rail lines – which led to much over – construction. (Note that 75% of railroad mileage abandoned before 1940 was built during this period.) The end of large-scale construction occurred in 1907 due to a financial panic and a provision in the new State Constitution preventing interstate companies from acquiring intrastate railroads.

THE DECLINE OF OKLAHOMA RAILROADS

The constitutional ban on acquisitions did not last long, and rail networks continued to grow, at least for a short while. The Kansas City, Mexico, & Orient Railroad and the Wichita Falls & Northwestern Railroad both pushed forward. A 1911 Oklahoma Railroad Map shows the routes of fifteen right-of-ways in the State. Three main factors contributed to this growth: discovery of oil, the expansion of agriculture (primarily wheat), and population increases. During this time Oklahoma products and people all used the railroads for transportation. By 1920, rail networks had grown to include 6,572 miles, quite an increase from the meager 289 miles of 1880. But oil, gasoline, and the development of trucks, buses, and automobiles would soon result in the abandonment or merger of many Oklahoma railroads. Pipelines began transporting oil, while the expanding road system was carrying goods and passengers.

Not surprisingly, the Great Depression of the 1930s resulted in further weakening of Oklahoma railroads. While rail companies attempted to modernize with diesel locomotives and railcars, the decline was inevitable: lines were abandoned and passenger services was greatly restricted. World War II brought a brief reprieve with a huge increase in rail traffic. However, after the end of hostilities, Americans discovered their love affair with the automobile. Passenger service was discontinued, and more lines were abandoned.

By 1965, only 5,570 miles were still included in the Oklahoma rail system. The 1974 Railroad Map of Oklahoma lists seventeen rail companies as operating in the State, most of which were short lines. However, in 1978 the Oklahoma Department of Transportation published an eight-page list of railroads (or portions thereof) which had been abandoned.

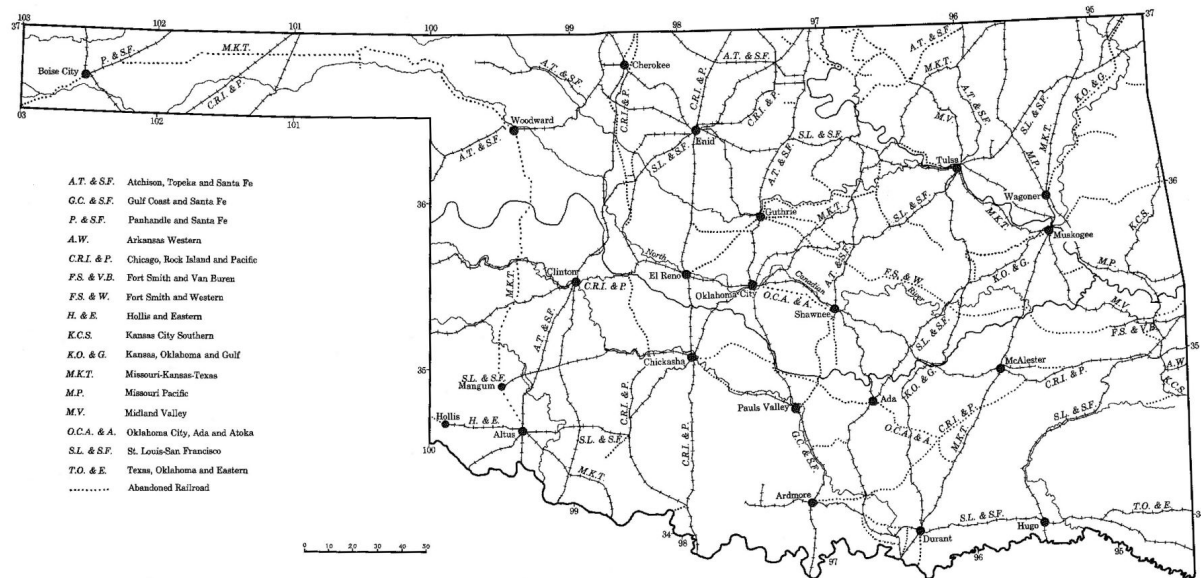
The nationwide consolidation of major interstate rail companies resulted in many lines being considered superfluous. The mighty Rock Island became insolvent, and it was liquidated in 1980. In the same year, the Frisco was purchased by the Burlington Northern Railroad, which in 1987 merged with the AT&SF to become the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF). And in 1989, the Katy was absorbed into the Union Pacific/Missouri Pacific system. Oklahoma rails, in 1995, covered just 3,434 miles.

Railroads, however, are not gone from Oklahoma. In 1999, Amtrak began passenger rail service between Oklahoma City and Fort Worth, TX. The 2018 – 2020 State Railroad Map shows three Class I lines operating in Oklahoma: BNSF, Union Pacific, and Kansas City Southern. Also included are eighteen Class III railroads, including the Stillwater Central, Farmrail, and the Kiamichi. Rail fans have plenty of opportunities to see and even ride the rails in the Sooner State.

Article by Steve Kamm

Edited by Andrew Reynolds

This brief history of Oklahoma Railroads was compiled from several sources (listed below) as well as input from railroad historians.



Railroads in Oklahoma, 1870-1974 (Source: Morris, Goins and McReynolds, *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma*, 2nd ed., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976, map 64)

1974 Oklahoma Railroads Map

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Franks, Kenny A., *Oklahoma Trains, Planes, and Riverboat Map*, Oklahoma Hall of Fame, 1990
- George, Preston and Sylvan R. Wood, *The Railroads of Oklahoma*, Bulletin No. 80, The Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, 1943
- Hofsommer, Donovan L., ed., *Railroads in Oklahoma*, Oklahoma Historical Society, 1977

Hoagland, Bruce W. and Danny Goble, "Chapter 55, Railroads, 1870-1907," Historical Atlas of Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 2006
Veendendall, Augustus J., Jr., "Railroads," The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture, Oklahoma Historical Society
Early Map of Indian Territory, Oklahoma Historical Society, 1876
Map of Oklahoma and Indian Territories, 1901
Railroad Map of Oklahoma, Corporation Commission of Oklahoma, 1911
Railroad Map of Oklahoma, Oklahoma Department of Transportation, 1974
Oklahoma 2018-2020 State Railroad Map, Oklahoma Department of Transportation