

AUSTIN TEXAS CENTRAL

A Day as a Gandy Dancer *By Bill Laird*

At the invitation of Stephen Balkum, I recently paid a visit to his 7 1/2" gauge, Austin and Texas Central, currently under construction in Thrall, Texas.

The drive for me was 100 miles and took two hours. I arrived about 9:45 am and the work crew was hard at it clearing brush and using a chipper to produce a lot of mulch. Stephen graciously stopped his work and gave me the grand tour. The railroad is being constructed on 20 acres of heavily wooded fairly flat land. Almost the entire railroad will be in the woods providing welcome shade from the Texas



April 2023: Tim Boswell and Ken Rhodes take a break from the panel jig on the left to supervise John Oglesby and Jason Brownlee rebuilding a switch.

All photos and captions provided by Stephen Balkum

sun. The railroad is being constructed in four phases and when complete will be a 7,500 foot long point to point layout. In addition to the trackage there are plans for unloading facilities, a 24 foot turntable with lots of steaming bays (I forget how many), RV spots with electrical service, a camping area, a large shaded and at night lighted "social area" in the center of the railroad for gathering to watch trains, visiting together, eating a meal or a snack, etc. Stephen has gathered a lot of materials for construction, some of them from his grandfather's track that was in Manor, Texas and will be fondly remembered by the older group of live steamers. Stephen intends to host Southwestern Live Steamers meets.

Currently, a lot of ROW has been



April 2023: Steven Tacconelly and Jason Brownlee laying track. This is the industrial area of Bexar which will have 3 tracks with a ground level turntable for engines to turn and run around.

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May 2023: Stephen Balkum dumps the first load of ballast in the White Aggregates ballast tippel.

cleared, lots of grading done, and track is being laid. There will be an interesting bridge, currently in place, with an intersecting rail line crossing the mainline at one end of the bridge necessitating a lift bridge. An interlocking challenge.

There was a crew of workers numbering about eight. Stephen only let them clear brush and chip for about an hour because of the heat and humidity. After that they broke up into groups to work at other tasks such as surveying the track alignment, building track panels, and laying and ballasting track. I managed to help build a couple of track panels on a waist high track panel jig on a covered carport like structure that thankfully had a breeze.

At noon a delicious, bountiful lunch was served inside the

welcomed air conditioned house. Cooks had prepared smoked tri tip, corn on the cob, rolls, green beans, mashed potatoes, and watermelon. It was served at a large dining room table where everyone enjoyed conversation as well as the great meal.

After lunch, as the crew returned to work, I said my good-byes and headed home. The Texas heat had gotten me as in my mid eighties I no longer

have much stamina. However, I do plan on attending future work days and help out where I can.

We are fortunate to have a large, well designed railroad being constructed in Central Texas.

Bill Laird

All photos and captions provided by Stephen Balkum



June 2023: Toughing out the Texas heat, Alexander Balkum, Tim Boswell, and Sam Hytovick are in the shadow of the White Aggregates ballast tippel in Coleto prepping a switch on the track from Bexar to access the tippel.