



HIGHBALLING THE HIGH IRON



DENNIS J. POLLEY

“There’s gold in them thar hills!” That gold was in the Sierra foothills at Sutter’s Mill. The San Francisco newspapers reported the 1849 find, triggering a massive, internal migration of all kinds of Americans to California. The starting point was San Francisco for supplies. It was the event that would eventually launch the beginnings of the St. Louis-San Francisco Railroad, more commonly called “The Frisco.”



The Missouri state government wanted a path to the gold find, so they had the Pacific Railroad of Missouri lay rails to the Missouri-Kansas border. Work began in 1851. The South-West Branch was begun in 1855, eventually extending to Springfield in what would become Oklahoma.

In 1865, the Pacific Railroad of Missouri and a companion railroad went bankrupt and were sold to John C. Fremont, son-in-law of Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton. With this political connection, Fremont acquired a federal franchise and land grant for his Atlantic & Pacific Railroad, to extend the South-West Branch to San Francisco, but it never made it to there. Fremont ran into financial trouble in 1868, and the South Pacific Railroad Co. acquired the line from the state of Missouri. The South Pacific Railroad Co. pushed the South-West Branch to Lebanon, MO in 1869, and through Springfield, MO to Pierce City, Mo in 1870. The land leading to Seneca, MO on the southwest border of the state adjacent to Indian Territory was graded and ready for the tracks to be laid.



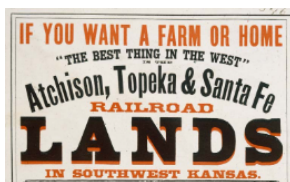
It was also in 1870 that the South Pacific Railroad Co was again under control of Atlantic & Pacific Railroad, which controlled Fremont’s St. Louis-San Francisco organization and the Pacific Railroad of Missouri. Under this business arrangement, track laying accelerated to Vinita in Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). The railroad stalled there due to the US Government honoring a treaty

with the Cherokee Nation. That and the Panic of 1873 drove the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad into bankruptcy in 1875.

Finally, in 1876, the Pacific Railroad of Missouri's southwest branch of railroad lines was purchased by the newly organized St. Louis & San Francisco Railway Company which soon was permanently nicknamed "The Frisco."



This is a good point to discuss the unique Frisco logo. It is shaped to mimic a stretched coonskin hide tacked to the wall of a Neosho, MO depot station in the late 19th Century.



1879 saw the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad purchase The Frisco, and get rights to build through Indian Territory to Southern California. However the railroad divested itself of the Frisco lines, eventually leading Frisco into bankruptcy 1896.

Prior to the 1896 bankruptcy, while under all the changes in ownership, Frisco was laying an impressive network of track to the south and southwest of St. Louis. Frisco, however, did not reach St. Louis until 1883 when a line from Pacific, MO to St. Louis was completed.

The railroad reorganized after the 1896 bankruptcy, and under the guidance of General BF Yoacum, at last found long-term solidity. It was now known as the St. Louis and San Francisco Railroad. Frisco doubled its reach under Yoacum all the way to Oklahoma—but not to San Francisco. Its maximum westward expansion was to Floydada, Tx.

Having achieved financial stability, the railroad built the 13 stories tall, massive Frisco Building between 1902 and 1905 at 906 Olive St. in Downtown St. Louis, MO. The architects were Eames and Young. They were responsible for other major Downtown buildings. It is an impressive, beautiful building with extensive terra-cotta and ornamental brickwork, as seen in the below photos. Each door had a custom-cast "FRISCO" doorknob. It is still there.





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g expansion, placing a big emphasis on passenger service.
passenger liner, operated with the Missouri-Kansas-Texas



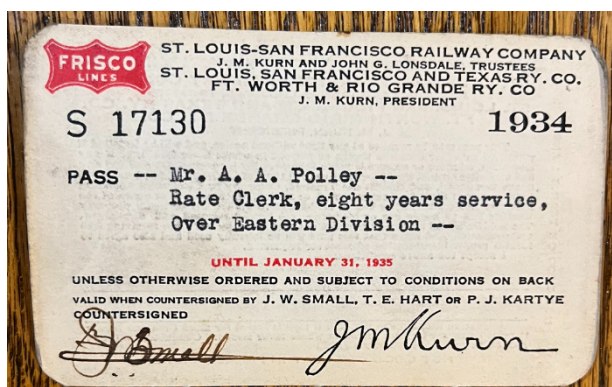
World War I caused an interruption in Frisco's operation. There was a disastrous attempt to nationalize the railroads, which thankfully ended in 1920. The Great War ended in 1918, the same year my Grandfather Albert A. Polley joined Frisco as a 16 year-old office boy. Everyone called him "Al." He stayed with the railroad for 44 years until his passing in 1962.

Far right: Al Polley



Under President JM Kum, The Roaring 20s was a good decade for Frisco. The railroad experienced southward growth in the 1920s, reaching Pensacola, Florida in the late 1920s. It had always been a goal of Frisco to reach the Gulf of Mexico. In 1929, with the unseen Great Depression getting ready to decimate business in the United States, Frisco had 880 locomotives, 669 passenger cars and 34,009

freight cars riding the high iron on 5735 miles of mainline track. In the jargon of railroad men, Frisco was "highballing." Pictured is a typical, powerful Frisco steam locomotive.

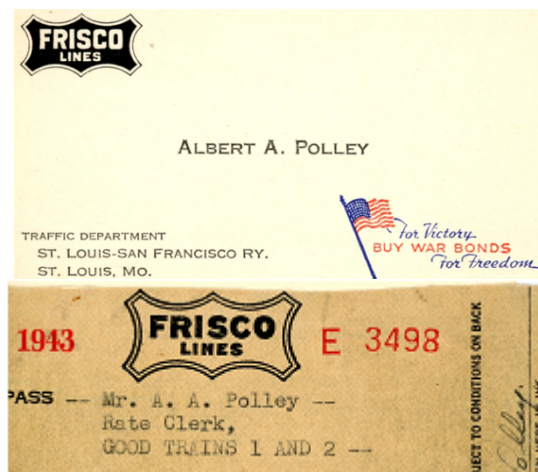


The stock market Crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression crushed business and The Frisco during the 1930s. The railroad went bankrupt, but managed to fight through with belt-tightening measures. My Grandfather Al

was able to hang on to his job at a reduced salary. My Grandparents and their family, my Dad Cy and my Aunt Audrey, managed to get through the Depression. It was tight, but they fared a lot better than other families.



A beautiful 1940s streamlined Frisco locomotive named *The Firefly*, propelled by six big driver wheels. It was their first streamliner, and it served St Louis, MO, Tulsa and Oklahoma City, OK, Kansas City, MO, and Fort Scott, KS. Its maiden run on March 29, 1940, running until May 22, 1960. Frisco was known for its fast, efficient passenger service. *The Firefly* was no exception.



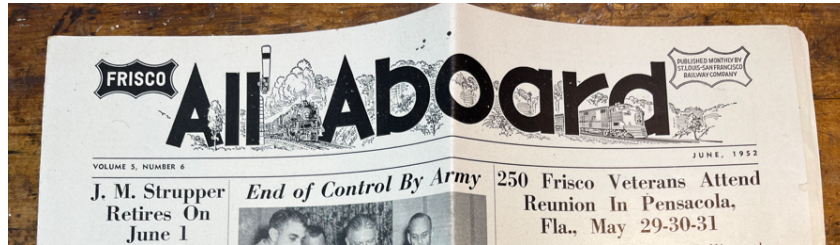
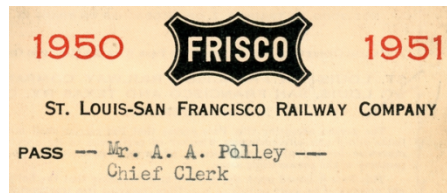
The World War II years of 1941 through 1945 saw Frisco bounce back in a big way from the Great Depression. German submarines had closed up the east coast ports, so Frisco profited by moving oil from its Oklahoma sites to the east coast. The railroad was also involved with troop movements to the various army camps within the USA. Frisco did its “bit” during these critical years, as did all the railroads. “All United for Victory” was the railroads’ wartime motto.

During the Post World War II years in the late 1940s, Frisco began shifting to streamlined diesel-powered locomotives. By now, Frisco, under the leadership of Clark Hungerford, was running first-class, fast passenger trains called the *Texas Special* and *Meteor*.



Pictured above is a streamlined Frisco diesel locomotive. Although rail fans love the old steam locomotive, the newer diesel locomotives were easier to run and maintain.

In the 1950s, Frisco developed a tri-level, auto-rack rail car for hauling automobiles from manufacturers to the parts of the country where they would be sold. This was a way to regain business from the growing trucking industry riding the new interstate highways. That rail car is still in use today. The railroad continued to modernize its equipment, locomotives and cars. (I recall taking a trip to Springfield, IL on a Frisco passenger train around 1959 with my Grandparents. Of course, we rode for free on my Grandfather's railroad pass!)



“[Albert] Polley has been with the Frisco since 1918, beginning as an office boy and holding numerous clerical positions in the Traffic Department, before being named a chief clerk.”

The above paper is the June, 1952 Frisco newsletter. The above text and photo to the left are from the newsletter.

Louis W Menk took over in 1962 and moved a good portion of Frisco's railroad offices from St. Louis to Springfield, MO. Sadly, after 44 years as a proud Frisco railroad man, my Grandfather Al Polley passed away in 1962 on a Friday evening.

The 1960s found the railroads' passenger service struggling. This included The Frisco. The Government was heavily regulating the railroads and freely promoting air travel. The interstate highway system was being built, and people were using their own cars as their main form of travel. By 1967, Frisco ceased all passenger service. Gone were the great streamliner trains with colorful names like the *Texas Special* and *Meteor*. Not all change is great.

Richard C Grayson was Frisco president in the 1970s. During this decade, Frisco was known as a leader in developing new shipping techniques. In the background, there was a lot of financial/stock maneuvering and the beginnings of merger talks.

By 1980, Frisco was half of its size in 1929. It merged with the Burlington Northern system in November, 1980. After over a century of quality service, the name Frisco disappeared from the books.

Although Frisco has ceased to exist as a business entity, its memory certainly lives on. Its history is commemorated on web sites, in books and in the minds of rail hobbyists and fans, especially in St. Louis. The Frisco Train & Toy Store in Valley Park, MO, located in the 1880 Frisco Inn, is great shop with a huge, wooden rail display set up for kids to enjoy. They sell all kinds of Frisco memorabilia.



While driving around St. Louis, many traces of the railroad still exist. The Gravois Road Overpass in Affton bears the Frisco name. The structure was begun in 1940. There is a very similar overpass on Chippewa Street between Morganford and Gravois Roads in the city, however, it carries a Missouri-Pacific plaque.



The Frisco Railroad Underpass was built in 1931 in Shrewsbury, Mo over Watson Road which was then part of Route 66. The original signage, "Ship It on the Frisco," can still be seen on the side of the underpass. The approaches have been recently rebuild, but the rest of the underpass is original.



Map of Frisco railroad's lines. It never did reach San Francisco, but nevertheless, the name stuck.

Below is more Frisco memorabilia.



There are many illustrations of memorabilia in this article. Most of them were casually collected over the years by my Grandfather Al Polley during his years with Frisco. Years after my Grandfather's passing, my Grandmother, Helen Polley, gave them to me. The picture to the right is my Grandpa and Grandma Polley in 1949 at my Mom and Dad's wedding. This article is dedicated to my Grandparents.

Sources:

The Great Railroads of North America, by Bill Yenne, Dorset Press, 1992

FRISCO ARCHIVE: [ABOUT THE FRISCO RAILROAD » Frisco Archive](#)

Pam Lowe

My Grandfather Albert A. Polley and Grandmother Helen C. Polley

