

REMEMBERING

THE

HY&T

Remembering

The

HY&T

by

Fred South
Prophetstown Area Historical Society
July 2025

Introduction

It is usually true that when a railroad came to a town it stimulated that town's growth. A good example is what happened to Prophetstown - in 1871 the railroad came to town and Prophetstown began to grow. In 1870 our community had a population of 276. By 1900 we had grown to 1,143, a huge increase in 30 years. Portland, on the other hand, which was once larger than Prophetstown, lacked a railroad and there is not much left of the original Portland.

Hooppole is an exception to the rule. It got a railroad, but it never stimulated the hoped for growth.



From the *Moline Dispatch*.
May 1938.

The Hooppole, Yorktown & Tampico Railroad

From the Moline Dispatch, August 1968.

They called the hard working little train “The Dummy,” probably in derision after they realized it would never live up to their original high hopes. But when the gallant little railroad died, an era ended for Hooppole, about 30 miles northeast of Moline, and points northeast to Tampico.

In the beginning, the citizens of Hooppole had such faith in the dream that was built around the railroad that they turned the entire town around in 1909 to be ready for the boom that was sure to come. They held on to the railroad for 46 years. But when it finally quit in 1954, the turned around town was not much bigger than it was in the beginning and the high hopes were worn as thin as the weedy, cinder blackened roadbed that held the gleaming rails of the shortest railroad in the Midwest.

Today, it’s all just a memory. The rails were ripped up and sold for scrap iron; farmers dug up the cross ties and used them for fence posts; the roadbed was plowed up and planted to crops. The engine and boxcars were turned back to the Burlington Railroad. And someone burned the once bright little red caboose.

“It’s the end of the line for all of us who were in on it in the beginning, I guess,” Howard Mathis of Hooppole, said nostalgically. “The first engineer is dead, the guy who promoted it was up in years when he sold us on the thing, and the people who bought the first stock are dead. Even the railroad is gone.”

“I’m about the only one left, except for George, the station agent in Tampico, and he’s not working for the railroad there anymore.”

The dream was born in 1908 when a big city promoter, J. J. Burns, turned up in the Hooppole country selling stock to build a railroad across country from Tampico to Galesburg. The proposed line would connect the Burlington Railroad in the north with the Rock Island lines to the south. It sounded great to many of the farmers and townspeople in Tampico, Yorktown and Hooppole, and \$100,000 worth of stock at \$100 per share was sold [that would be the same as \$3,494 in 2025]. The Hooppole, Yorktown and Tampico (HY&T) Railroad Co. was formed with Oberg Mathis, a relative of Howard’s, president, and R. H. Mathis, secretary.

The investors began acquiring a right of way and the glittering dream of the HY&T hit its first snag. Many of the farmers along the planned route owned stock in the company, and some of them sold or donated land for a right-of-way. Other farmers wanted no part of the venture and refused to let the railroad cross their fence lines. So the HY&T wound through the country as best it could. The route was a crazy pattern that felt its way across the land of friendly farmers until it could connect with other compatible land holders.

It ran straight for a while, then curved in great, looping arcs, and in one place just outside Tampico, zig zagged sharply back and forth across the highway (Route 192), three times in a four mile stretch.

The tracks entered Tampico down the main street, a pleasant thoroughfare lined with large, gracious houses and great spreading trees.

Contracts were let and horse drawn machinery bit into Illinois prairies and rich farm land. The dream stirred to life as gleaming rails snaked from Tampico toward Hooppole.

Meanwhile, people in Hooppole realized their town would be the end of the line for some time to come and the idea grew that it was destined to become a bustling railroad center in the near future. In those days, the main street ran east and west and the business district was somewhat removed from where the depot was being built and the trains would enter the town.

The people decided to turn the town around, run main street north and south to make the new railroad terminal the hub of the city they felt was someday soon to be. So they did.

The tracks were laid and HY&T officials went scouting for rolling stock. They got an engine from the Burlington Railroad, on loan, came up with a couple of box cars and a bright red caboose. They also had a rich freight contract with the Burlington and the future looked rosy indeed.

On April 24, 1909, amid great pomp and circumstance, the first train rolled out of Tampico, headed for the end of the line, newly turned around Hooppole.

The caboose held the passengers. The engineer, Ed Anderberg, also fired the boilers. The train rolled through railroad points like Aliceville and Love Station. The dream was reality. Next would be its growth into the commercial giant that J. J. Burns had convinced them was bound to be.

The railroad consisted of one train with an engine, one to two boxcars, and the caboose, which also doubled as passenger car. It ran six days each week, knocking off on Sunday so the engineer could go to church in Tampico, where he lived with his family.

The train left Hooppole in the neighborhood of 8:30 to 10 a.m., depending on when the passengers were all loaded and the freight was in the boxcars. It returned anywhere between 3:30 and 7 p.m. depending on how much stuff there was to pick up to haul back and how many passengers were late catching the train.

Freight included harvested crops, ice, sand, gravel, lumber, road building material and anything else folks needed the train could carry.

There was no roundhouse at the end of the line, so the train ran forward on the run to Hooppole, then the engine was switched by hand and the train ran backward back to Tampico.

As the railroad grew in stature along its 14 mile line, so did its problems. The housewives in Tampico were up in arms. The train puffing in along the main street begrimed their crisp white curtains, made their clean houses stink, and the noise alarmed the children. Their outrage was so great pressure forced the HY&T to rip up the tracks and move over two blocks for a different entry route.

A disgruntled farmer vowed the HY&T had made its last trip across his land and pounded a line of stout posts right down the middle of the tracks, removing them only under threat of dire court action and promises of other less ordered reprisals.

A feud developed between the tiny HY&T and the behemoth Rock Island Line that made railroad history in a wild sort of way. The Rock Island refused to let its cars roll over HY&T tracks. Freight destined for points north was unceremoniously dumped on the ground at the end of the Rock Island tracks to be laboriously reloaded on "The Dummy's" box-cars, Mathis recalled,

In revenge the HY&T routed all possible freight business to the Burlington. Businessmen along the route ordered out-of-state shippers of lumber and other large items to by-pass Rock Island cars and use those of other railroads and ship via Burlington lines.

Problems compounded when the engine house in Hooppole burned down. But the little railroad continued to thrive. Large corn storage cribs sprouted along its tracks. The train would stop whenever it was flagged by farmers along the tracks to load newly harvested grain. Livestock pens sprang up and cattle, horses, sheep and swine were hauled along the shining rails.

Passengers, in spite of the erratic timetable, continued to put down 50 cents for fare from Hooppole to Tampico, and 25 cents from points closer in. [Gladys Miller, our neighbor in Brook Haven, rode the train every Saturday with her mother from Hooppole to shop in the "big" town of Tampico.]

It was a custom for passengers to tip one engineer on the line \$1 at debarkation. These gratuities were called "dice tips." It seemed the engineer loved to shoot dice while he was waiting for the train's return trip from one point to another.

Then the railroad went broke.

"By this time a fellow named E. L. Toby, from Monmouth was running the railroad. It unloaded at my elevators in Hooppole, which were the end of the line," Mathis recalled. "One Saturday, the engineer and the crew, by this time there were two other fellows helping him, told me, 'the jig's up.' 'There isn't going to be any more railroad after today because the money is used up. There's no more for pay.'"

"I told them to roll that engine on Monday morning as usual and I would see what I could do to keep the railroad operating."

The ultimate solution to that black week in 1943 was that Howard Mathis took over the defunct line, assumed \$26,000 in back debts and kept it running. Was he declared president of the railroad, or chairman of the board? "Heck no," he chuckled, "I was just the guy who took it over and kept it on the rails. There wasn't any board of directors anyway. I was all of it."

Mathis kept the HY&T alive for 11 more years. Then, in 1954, "The Dummy" made its last run. "Lots of folks turned out for that last run," Mathis remembered. "It was kind of nice that it didn't just fold without anybody caring. Lots of folks cared and lots turned out to wish it farewell."

Mathis' next concern was for the stockholders. He could have legally folded the railroad and bankrupted the stock. "That was never my way of doing business," he said. I bought the stock at \$83 a share, which wasn't bad considering it was sold at \$100 a share back when the railroad was thought to be a potential goldmine."

Little evidence of the HY&T exists today. In places, the old roadbed shows briefly at the ragged edges of fields, behind buildings in old shipping points, and along the banks of a broad drainage ditch in Fairfield Township in Bureau County, which the crazy right-of-way followed until a friendly farmer let it cross the land. A few worn ends of cross ties show behind Mathis' elevator in Hooppole. A short length of its old standard gauge track can be found in the Tampico yards, where the old depot is now an ancient, crumbling shed.

But for these faint things, the little "Dummy" has disappeared from the face of the earth. It's memory is now as misty as that long-ago dream that so inspired the people that an entire town was turned around to enjoy the lush prosperity of the boom that never came.

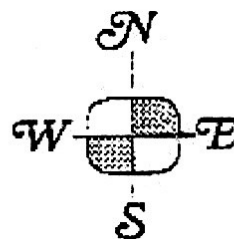
ILL.	1908
IN CONSIDERATION of the construction of a standard gauge railroad, by the Dixon, Rock Falls & Southwestern Electric Railway Co., from the C. B. & Q., at TAMPICO to HOOPPOLE.	
to be laid with steel rails of not less than fifty six pounds to the yard, either new or Hunt's inspection re-laying; to be operated by electricity and motor; and the benefits to be derived therefrom:	
hereby subscribe for	dollars of
the Common Stock, to be issued at rate of \$15,000 per mile, of the Dixon, Rock Falls & Southwestern Electric Ry., Co., and agree to pay the Railway Company for the same in the following manner: Eight per cent. on each mile of road, between above points, payable as each mile is graded, track laid and car running thereon. This agreement to be null and void if road is not constructed within one year from date.	

An HT&Y Stock Certificate.

HOOPPOLE, YORKTOWN & TAMPICO RAILROAD CO.

C.B. & Q.
to
Prophetstown

Tampico



Graham
Crossing

Loves
Station

Rt. 172

Yorktown

Rt. 92

Rt. 92

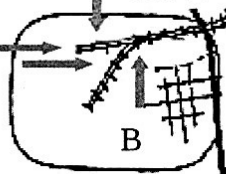
Aliceville

Rt. 78

Hilger
Crossing
Hooppole

Scale: 0 1
Miles

A
D

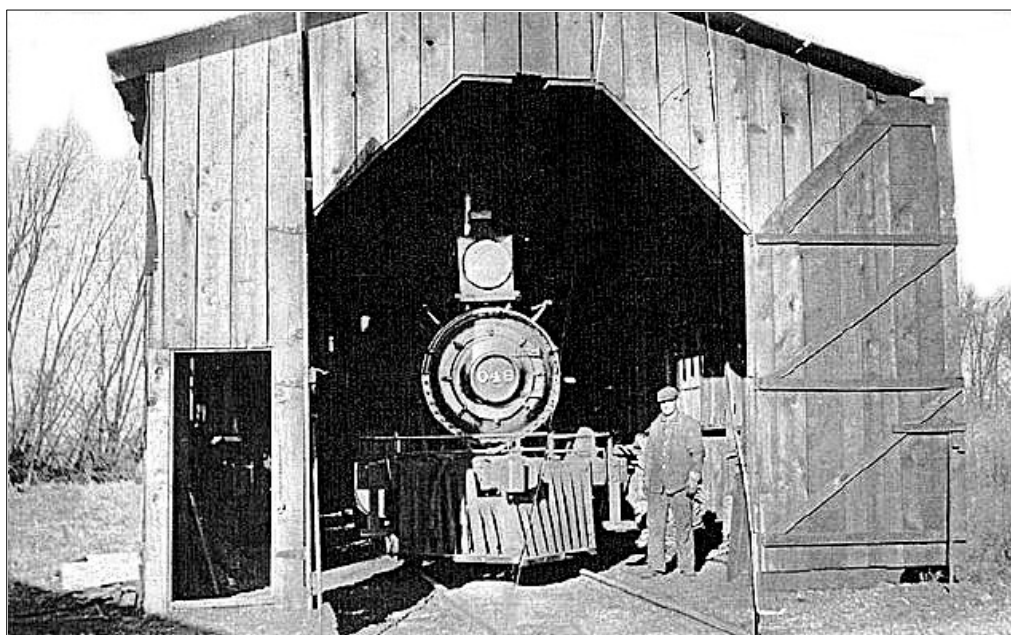


- A - Engine House
- B - Station
- C - Combined Coach
- D - Coal Tender





The HY&T Crew.



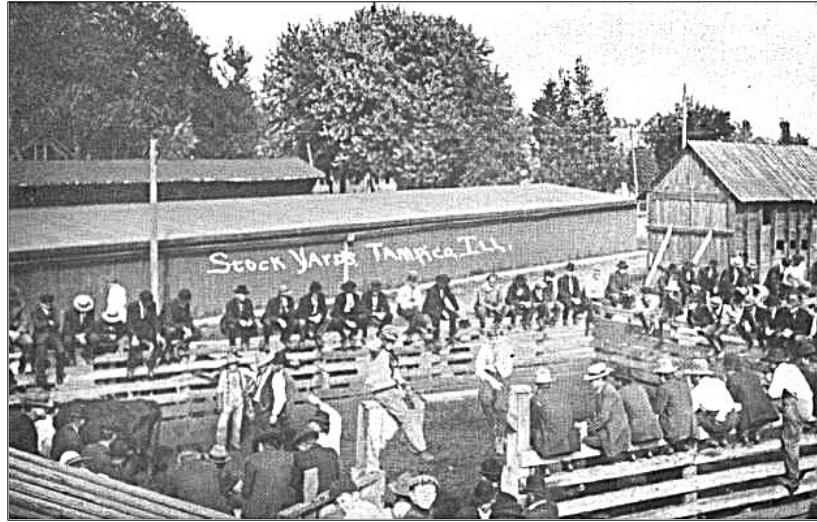
The Hooppole engine shed.



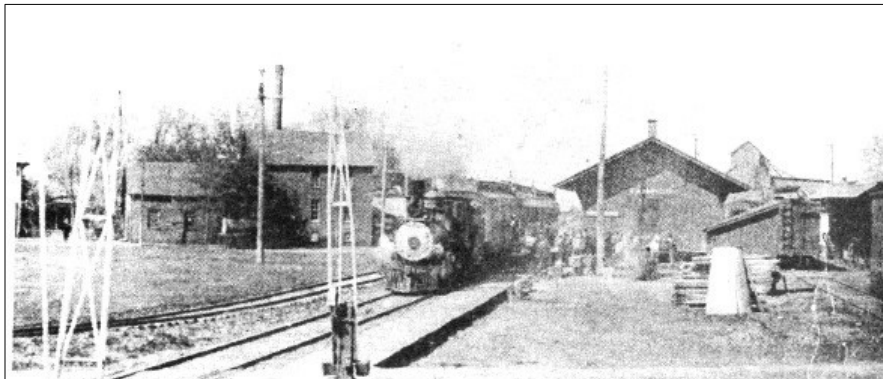
1909 - The First Tampico to Hooppole Trip.



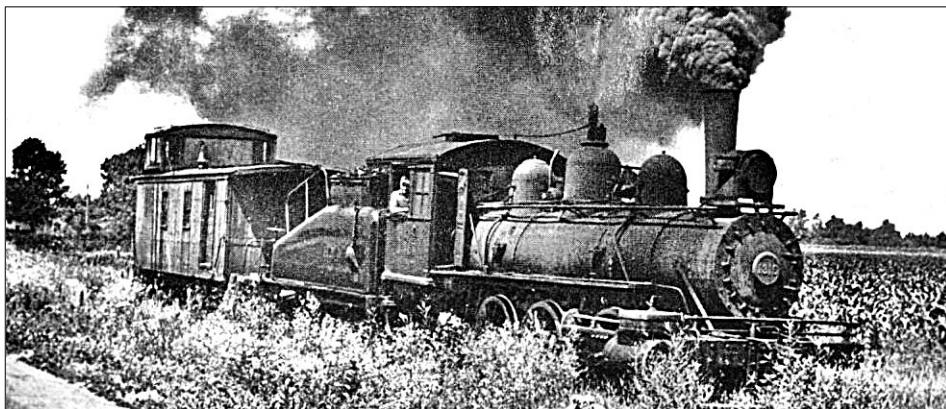
The yard and depot at Hooppole.



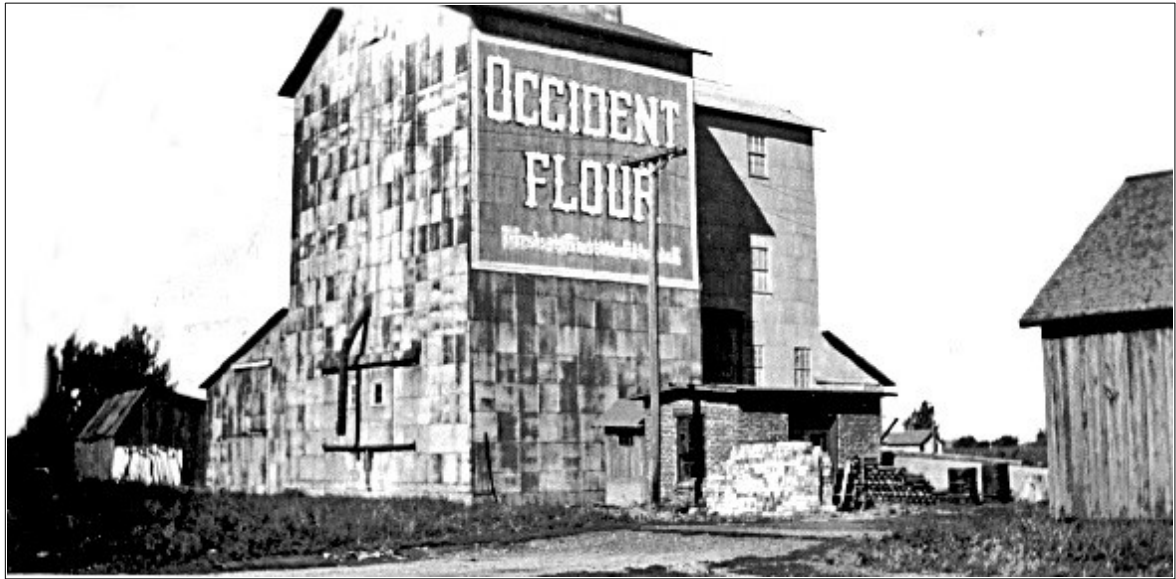
The Tampico stockyards.



The Tampico train station.



On the way.



The Hooppole elevator.



The Hooppole stockyards.



The HY&T section car.



The HY&T section crew.



The former Hooppole HY&T Depot in 2021.