

## Goin' where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog

'Yellow Dog Blues' – Sam Collins (1927)



### CHAPTER 5

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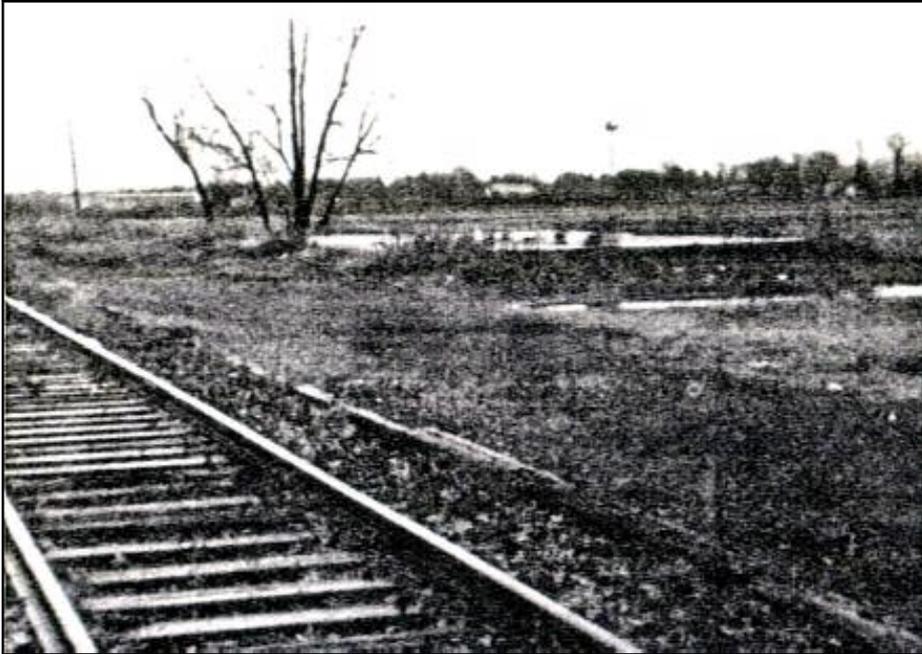
#### THE YAZOO & MISSISSIPPI VALLEY RR, FREIGHT TRAINS AND THE BLUES

The reefer also contributed to one of the most famous — and certainly the earliest — icons in the blues, the 'Yellow Dog'. It was at the depot in Tutwiler, Mississippi that the well-known bandleader/composer, W.C. Handy heard this, the first blues we have any knowledge of, in 1903.

After some nine hours of waiting for a train, Handy had dozed off, only to be woken up by a peculiar sound: 'A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularised by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly: "*Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog.*" The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind.\* When the singer paused, I leaned over and asked him what the words meant. He rolled his eyes, showing a trace of mild amusement. Perhaps I should have known, but he didn't mind explaining. At Moorhead, the eastward and the westbound met and crossed the north and southbound trains four times a day. This fellow was going where the

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\* Handy was to compose his 'Yellow Dog Rag' in 1914, which soon became 'Yellow Dog Blues'. The most famous recording of this song was made by Bessie Smith in 1925 [Columbia 14075-D].



All that was left of the depot at Tutwiler in 1993 was the concrete base surrounded by scrub vegetation. Sadly, the old Y&MV/IC track has seen no rail traffic for many years.

Southern cross the Dog, and he didn't care who knew it. He was simply singing about Moorhead as he waited.'<sup>1</sup>

There can be little doubt that the phrase 'yellow dog' originated on the railroads. A string of empty box cars was often referred to as a 'dog' and, by extension, a train of empty reefers would qualify as a 'yellow dog' (in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, 'a yellow car was sure to be a refrigerator car'<sup>2</sup>). By the same token, a train running through the Delta hauling tank cars — which usually carried gasoline or oil — was known as the 'black dog', since these freight vehicles were traditionally painted black. Indeed, Mississippi's Rube Lacy and white hillbilly guitarist Bayless Rose both recorded a 'Black Dog Blues' in 1930. We can only surmise the content of Lacy's Columbia recording\*, as it was never issued and is probably now lost; Rose's record [Gennett 7250] was a fine slide instrumental.

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\* The East Coast guitar genius Blind Blake recorded a 'Black Dog Blues' for Paramount around March 1927, but his title is a rare — if not unique — use of the term for a rival lover, usually referred to as a 'mean black snake' or 'mean black cat'. Referring to the late Eighteenth Century in England, Gerzina notes that a 'deliberate confusion of black men and dogs appeared in literature as well as in real life towards the end of the century. William Goodwin, known for his radically liberal views as well as for his son-in-law Percy Shelley, repeatedly demeans black people in his 1799 novel, *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century*, and draws a scene of a black servant weeping over the corpse of a black dog with whom he feels a racial kinship. Maria Edgeworth, in her 1802 novel, *Belinda*, portrays a handsome young West Indian, whose black manservant and black dog are both named Juba.'<sup>3</sup>

The term 'dog' also referred to short railroad branch lines, and many of these were simply known by names originally bestowed upon them by black logging workers at the turn of the Twentieth Century, particularly in the state of Mississippi. Dummy trains were also called 'short dog trains' and the dummy lines (*Chapter 2*) 'rickety short dogs'. Writing in 1948, McIlwaine noted that: 'In the Mississippi Delta these short-dog trains were so ridiculed and appreciated by the lumbermen that they nicknamed them the Black Dog; the Biggety Ben (its engineer was a pompous old coot with a yard-long beard); the Pea Vine, an all-Negro train; and the Yellow Dog, made famous by W.C. Handy.'<sup>4</sup> In due course, the term 'peavine' passed into general railroad slang for any winding branch line (White Mississippian Betty Carter noted that 'mules by the carlot were delivered to sidings of the peavine railroads that followed the meandering contour lines through the river-built land'<sup>5</sup>). The name derived from the twisting and turning of this particular crop, which adorned the edges of a 1929 Paramount ad for Charley Patton's 'Pea Vine Blues' [Paramount 12877].



Charley Patton ad, *Chicago Defender*, 1929.

While there is a paucity of recorded blues about the 'Black Dog', this is understandable: few singers would care to bum a ride on such a train, simply because of the dangerous inflammable cargo it carried! The reasons for the same scarcity of blues featuring the 'Yellow Dog' are not immediately apparent\*, but digging a little deeper reveals a darker origin than merely a string of reefer cars. While McIlwaine's 'Biggety Ben' singles out a particular train and engineer (who would have been white), the 'Yellow Dog' phrase appears to refer to the actual railroad company itself.

Lucille Bogan gives more than a gentle hint where the trouble lies on her heartfelt 'Pay Roll Blues' [Brunswick 7051]:

\* Bertha Lee's 'Dog Train Blues' [A.R.C., unissued] might be a song about the Yellow Dog, or at least make reference to it. Recorded on 31 January 1934, this recording has never been found.

Pay day on the Southern, pay day on the Yellow Dog. (x2)  
An' I want to meet that payroll an' try to make a water-haul.

Mens out on the Southern, they make dollars by the stack. (x2)  
An' I have money in my stocking when that payroll train gets back.<sup>6</sup>

Ms. Bogan's payroll train invokes the phenomenon of the pay-car which, it seems, first appeared at the end of the Civil War. This car would be hauled for many miles to rendezvous with workers on the track far from the railroad company's offices. Often almost literally 'stuffed with money' which might constitute a couple of months' wages for the section gang, 'the pay-car, a joyful sight in the days of old, for obvious reasons did all of its traveling in the day-time.'

Inevitably, payroll trains also attracted unwelcome visitors from time to time. On 11 October 1866, an incident occurred which 'involved the wrecking and subsequent robbing of the L&N pay-car at Bristow, Ky. — about five miles north of Bowling Green.' Overturning the train, 'the wily daylight robbers... disappeared into the shrubbery with some \$8,264.70.' The relevant Annual Report from the Louisville & Nashville relates that, 'through his judicious conduct', the paymaster, G.W. Craig, 'saved \$6,222.65 of the funds aboard.'<sup>7</sup> This indicates a payload in the region of \$15,000 in wages — a vast sum back in 1866. These 'daylight robbers' appear to have been precursors of the Jesse James gang who specialised in train robberies in the following decade.

But, with the advent of stronger, more secure pay-cars, by the 1890s they were not such an easy target. Herr refers to 'an unsuccessful attempt to wreck a pay-car in the fall of 1893 on the high fill south of Mt. Vernon, Ky.'<sup>8</sup> So, other ways and means needed to be found to get hold of the contents.

More successful than the train robber, the prostitute could derive a steady income from this source. Lucille Bogan is known to have worked in this profession for at least part of her life in Alabama, and her second verse, where she brags that she will have money '*in her stocking*' when the pay-car/payroll train arrives back in town, confirms her superiority over '*daylight robbers*'.

Her reference to a '*water-haul*' draws on a railroad scenario for some sexual symbolism where '*water*' signifies semen. Back in earlier times, when the major railroads were still being constructed — particularly across desert terrain — the workers would often find themselves in locations far from the nearest source of water. The train crew living in a tent or a box car as temporary accommodation 'had to haul it on their cars, in barrels, from springs thirty to fifty miles distant.'<sup>9</sup> Indeed, even as late as the first decades of the Twentieth Century, water would still be hauled — if only for a few miles — for the section gang waiting for the pay-car.

Another blues which alluded to the Yellow Dog without including the name in the title was 'Green River Blues' [Paramount 12972] by Charley Patton. Like Bogan's 'Pay Roll Blues', this also had earlier connections with roustabout songs on the river. Patton reputedly worked in a logging camp (or more likely sang in its barrelhouse for the other lumbermen) at some point in the 1920s. With his magnificent gravelly vocal and the rolling rhythm of his guitar, he generates a flowing, 'bobbing' feeling as he sings the very lines that Handy heard some twenty-six years earlier:



Charley Patton, Father of the Delta Blues, 1929.

I'm goin' where the Southern cross the Dog.  
I'm goin' where the Southern cross the Dog.  
I'm goin' where the Southern cross the Dog.

Another verse refers to the earlier log camp operation of 'rafting' (*see page 58*) on the river before railroads became widespread:

I'd rather be up Green River floating like a log.  
I'd rather be up Green River floating like a log.  
I'd rather be up Green River floating like a log.<sup>10</sup>

By the time he recorded this song in 1929, Patton was working at Dockery's plantation, some ten miles north of the Yellow Dog's famous crossing with the Southern Railway at Moorhead. As already stated, the 'Yellow Dog' referred to a particular railroad company which ran through the Mississippi Delta. This was the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, which ran its first tracks in 1884 from Yazoo City, in the county of the same name, to Jackson, Miss. As a chronicler of the time related, it was 'built as a feeder to the Illinois Central RR.'<sup>11</sup>

Construction had started as early as 1882, and some three years later the Delta town of Moorhead was founded at what was to become the site of the best-known railroad crossing in the blues. The Y&MV on approaching



Yazoo City station sometime before 1900.

Moorhead connected up with a small independent line built by one Chester H. Pond who, with some financial support, had laid ‘some twenty miles of track’. Pond named the site after a nearby bayou called Moorhead, itself named after a lumberman who had passed through the area sometime prior to 1885. This stretch of line, according to DeCell & Prichard, (as with the Y&MV) soon became known as the ‘Yellow Dog’. Pond’s railroad is thought to have reached Sunflower to the north and Markham to the south — both in Sunflower County. His short stretch of line also soon became known as the ‘Yellow Dog’ because of ‘a chain of flat cars pulled by a second-hand locomotive.’<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, the Y&MV line reached Greenwood, Miss. and — presumably in the same period (1884-86) — ‘branched off from Yazoo City slightly to the northwest on its way north to Tutwiler.’<sup>13</sup> It was around this time that Pond’s line was merged into the Y&MV. By 1892, the successful ‘Yellow Dog’ had come to the notice of the IC, who duly took it over but to all intents and purposes ran it as an independent line. It was also in this year that the IC bought out a line running from New Orleans to Jackson, Miss.. This was the Louisiana, New Orleans & Texas RR. which was then renamed the ‘Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad’.<sup>14</sup> The IC then commenced extending the Y&MV ‘to Tutwiler on the north and to Belzoni on the south’.<sup>15</sup> It was in the latter town that Charley Patton sang about being jailed for drunkenness in his ‘High Sheriff Blues’ [Vocalion 02680] in 1934.

In 1893, about a year after the IC pushed the Y&MV to Tutwiler, the railroad’s land commissioner, Edward P. Skene, changed the wording of land adverts to encourage purchase by potential customers from the West and North: ‘On all railroad circulars advertising the Illinois Central’s Mississippi lands, he changed the name “Yazoo Delta” to read “Yazoo Valley”, believing that the term “Delta” had connotations of a place continually flooded.’<sup>16</sup>