Sad End to Railroad Depot

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The response by Roberta Lee to the VMS picture (10/28/04) of soldiers boarding a train in Harlingen filled a gap in the city's history. The Robert Runyon photograph was likely taken in 1916-17, a period when regular army and state national guard units were stationed in the Valley and Harlingen to quell border cross-border disturbances. Those in Harlingen included personnel of the 6th U.S. Cavalry; the 26th Infantry with its Companies A, D, F, G, J, and L together with a band, Field Hospital #5 and Ambulance Company #5; the 3rd Texas Infantry of the Texas National Guard with its Companies C, E, F, and H plus Field Hospital #1.

Mrs. Lee notes that in 1979 she purchased the wooden building in the background of the picture. She tells us it was the yard office of the railroad, initially the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway then later its parent company, the Missouri Pacific System. With the information available to her at the time, she is correct in making that connection. Two Robert Runyon photos taken around 1909, however, reveal the building was initially the Harlingen Depot.

In mid-1904 when the railroad first arrived, it used a boxcar as its first station. Perhaps in the latter part of this year or in 1905 the more elaborate wooden building was erected between the tracks going north and south. The photograph indicates that the building had a brick chimney likely to exhaust smoke from a wood–burning stove needed to warm the waiting room on cold winter days. A metal filigree ornament decorates the peak of the roof and is one of the few artistic architectural elements on this utilitarian structure. A ten foot tall pole topped by a light is on the south side platform to illuminate it at night. Next to the two steps leading to the platform is a small handcart to move luggage. A ladder resting on a dormer leads to the base of a semaphore signal used to communicate with the locomotive engineers. The uppermost sign on the building designates the station as "Harlingen". The eye-level sign between the windows appears to provide the time schedules for passenger trains. On the building's west side is a telegraph/telephone pole.

By the time Runyon took his two 1916 photographs of embarking soldiers some minor changes had been made in the building. The light fixture on the platform had been removed and the semaphore signal has been relocated to a taller pole alongside the building. In the background is seen the two-story wooden Ogan Hotel with its verandas. With their three children Ben Franklin and Cora L. Ogan had come to Raymondville from Sedalia, Missouri to manage the railroad hotel there. In 1908 C.S. Moore had purchased the railroad's hotel in Harlingen. This year the Ogans moved to town to manage this hotel, which would become to be known as the Mooreland. That same year however they commenced to build the 22 room wood frame structure set back at 321 W. Jackson Street. It was razed in 1945. While Mr. Ogan had died in 1922, his widow not only still owned the hotel property in 1945 but also four adjacent lots.
Use of the wooden depot for passenger service was discontinued when a larger, handsome stucco covered depot was put up at Van Buren Street where no railroad track street crossing had yet to be constructed. This depot construction took place in the 1909 or early 1910. This is confirmed by the presence of the building in a Runyon photo but the absence of the city hall structure started in March 1910. The brick Lozano Building has also yet to be erected when the photo was taken. Various Runyon pictures of the new depot show it being landscaped and later when it is in use. The former depot was then put to use as a yard office.

Mrs. Lee moved the old yard office to a location on South Palm Drive 2.4 miles south of Business 83. Together with an old railroad passenger car and an old baggage/mail car, both set upon tracks, the complex was called Arroyo Express and served as a restaurant/gift shop. When arsonists, who had earlier burned out the two rail cars, then burned the depot building in August 2003, they destroyed what was likely Harlingen's oldest extant wooden building once used for commerce. This was a sad commentary for our community.