

From Engine #9 to Engine #238, by Ed Ridolph

Adequate railroad service played an important role in the early development of the Port of Palm Beach, and it continues to play an important role in the operations of the Port today. Number 238, the diesel switch engine that busily moves rail cars around the Port and over to the Florida East Coast Railway interchange every day is just the latest in a long line that reaches back more than 35 years.

Although switching rail cars to the various industrial sidings around the Port has always been important and is now the main function of the Port railway, at one time the Havana Car Ferry service was the most prominent rail operation at the Port.



In its heyday, the ferry offered a quick, reliable carload freight service between the U.S. mainland and the Cuban capital. Box cars, up to 26 at a time, were switched aboard the sea-going ferries for the overnight trip to Havana, where the cars were rolled off the ship and turned over to the Cuban railways. On the return trip, other freight cars loaded with Cuban

products were brought back to the Port, where they in turn were unloaded and sent on to their destinations via the FEC connection. Ultimately, this service became so popular that a fleet of five vessels was necessary to handle the traffic, which sometimes saw up to 80 cars a day leave the Port.

The car ferry service was operated by the West India Fruit & Steamship Company headquartered at the Port. The company originally began operations at Ft. Lauderdale's Port Everglades in 1946, but the proximity of the FEC main line and the superior rail and yard facilities at the Port of Palm Beach soon prompted West India to transfer operations here.

For some 15 years, the car ferry remained the principal freight link between the U.S. and Cuba and the heavy traffic between the two nations helped Palm Beach become one of Florida's leading Ports. Rail traffic reached an all time high in 1957, when West India handled more than half a million tons of freight between the two countries, but the totals began to decline as the Cuban revolution and its resultant economic disruption began to spread throughout the island nation.

Although the rail yards and sidings at the Port were the property of the Port itself, a separate company, the West Palm Beach Terminal Company, had been established to oversee the actual rail operations. Throughout most of the company's history the switching duties in the yards and around the Port were handled by two oil burning steam locomotives, numbers 9 and 11. These two veterans had originally been built for the U.S. Army in 1942, and when they became surplus after the war, the West Palm Beach Terminal bought both of them for use at the Port.

The sight of engine #9 chugging across busy U.S. 1 under a plume of black smoke as she backed a string of box cars aboard one of the car ferries was a long familiar one around the Port. Its sister engine, #11, was used occasionally, but for some reason, she didn't see nearly as much service as #9, and was usually found parked on a siding near the car ferry slip.



Around 1955, the Terminal Company became the proud owner of a third steam locomotive. This was #210, which the Florida East Coast had used as the local switch engine around the West Palm Beach depot for years. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough rail traffic at the Port to require the services of three steam locomotives and this engine saw little, if any, use before she was scrapped.

By the end of the 1950s, the two steam engines still putting around the Port everyday had gained a rather unique distinction. The diesel engine, much more economical to operate, had become so popular and made such rapid inroads on the nation's railroads that the once common steam locomotives seemed to vanish overnight. Motorists whose travels along U.S.1 were delayed by one of the locomotives switching cars across the highway probably weren't aware of it, but they were watching a small bit of vanishing Florida history in action.



By 1959, old #9 and #11 had become the last steam engines in regular service anywhere in Florida, and they were actually among the very last steamers running anywhere in the United States. However, a combination of declining traffic, increasing maintenance, and a lack of spare parts meant that both locomotives would follow thousands

of their predecessors into oblivion.

Despite their rarity and a half-hearted attempt to save at least one of them for posterity or a museum the two old-timers, among the last of their breed, finally went to the scrap heap.

In order to replace the steamers, the West Palm Beach Terminal then bought two diesel switch engines, numbered 238 and 239, from the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern, an Illinois railroad. The diesels, which had been built in 1940, were actually older than the steam engines they had replaced.

In October 1960, the U.S. government, alarmed at the increasing communist influence in the Castro government, imposed an embargo on most exports to Cuba. The effect on the car ferry service, which had already declined drastically as a result of the revolution, was almost

immediate. Trade and traffic between the two nations disappeared, and finally, on August 7, 1961, the West India Fruit & Steamship Company formally terminated the rail service, and with that, one of the most interesting phases of the Port's rail operations came to an end.

After the embargo eliminated trade with Cuba, even the two diesels proved more than adequate to handle the remaining rail traffic around the Port. One was sold to a sugar company in the Glades, and in March 1963, #238 became the property of the Port or Palm Beach.



Local switching with the FEC interchange and to the various industries around the Port has always been important, even when the car ferry was in service, and in recent years it has become even more important. In an average year, some 2,500 rail cars will move in and out of the Port, and in 1980, a busy year, more than 3,000 cars entered the property. This, combined with the switching necessary to move cars around the 5 ½ miles of sidings in the Port, is enough to keep the engine and crew busy five days or more a week. Diesel switcher #238, which began life on an Illinois rail railroad over 40 years ago, helps carry on the tradition of more than 35 years of railroading at the Port of Palm Beach.