

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Howard Grounds**

Interview Date: 07/06/2007

Interviewer: John Walker

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

Comments: This is an interview with Howard Grounds, who followed his grandfather and his father as a railroad employee. As the last Engineer for the Sugar Land Railroad, Howard had the honor of driving the train on its last run.

14 Pages



This oral history is copyrighted 2017, by the Fort Bend County Historical Commission. All Rights Reserved. For information contact: Fort Bend County Historical Commission, Attn: Chairman-Oral History Committee, 301 Jackson St., Richmond, TX, 77469.

Terms and Conditions

This file may not be modified or changed in any way without the express written permission of the Fort Bend County Historical Commission.

This file may not be redistributed for profit.

Please do not 'hot link' to this file.

Please do not repost this file.



Howard Grounds, Engineer on the Sugar Land Rail Road, before the route was abandoned.

Transcript

WALKER: I'm interviewing Mr. Howard Grounds today while reviewing photos as he is telling me about them and about his years as a railroad engineer. Let me ask you about the Highway 6 Sugar Land railroad. Was it a steam locomotive?

GROUND: Yea.

WALKER: When did they retire that?

GROUND: That happened during World War II.

WALKER: After World War II, was it all diesel?

GROUND: No, no, it wasn't. They run steam way up into the 1950's, maybe 1957.

WALKER: Okay.

GROUND: [referring to a photo of his father] This one was from 1941. Daddy was a conductor and took this photo. It says on the side, "No Japanese allowed to ride on your train."

WALKER: That's the way it was in those days. Don't lose the train to the Japanese.

GROUND: That's a Casey Jones look-alike engine. It wasn't his engine, just one like it though. (chuckling). Here's a picture of my Daddy...a Boy Scout got to ride the train with him. This is the round house bunch, out here. This is the engine out of Galveston on a turntable. You've seen it down there at the museum? It used to be down at Trinity.

WALKER: Did you ever get to cross the causeway with cars?

GROUND: Did I! For 40 years, I had the job, regular for ten years.

WALKER: Did they run another train or an older car but not the train?

GROUND: It pulled everything it had behind it. This is only a Texas State railroad here.

WALKER: Did you ever run across the old Brazos River bridge going to Freeport? Remember the swing bridge in Freeport that cars and trains shared? Then there was another one that cars and trains shared. That's when they crossed Bastrop down at Hoskin's Mound. [Walker offers this link to what they are discussing:

www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/2179911898/]

GROUND: Well yea, down there at milepost 4, I didn't know...that never turned. I never did see it turn.

WALKER: No, it never turned, I don't think. The one I'm talking about that went over Bastrop Bayou, you know where both car road and train tracks came together to share one bridge over Bastrop Bayou? Do you remember the rails after Hurricane Carla hit them?

GROUND: Yea, it was known as the junk pile after that.

WALKER: Down at Hoskins Mound when they put up the railroad bed to keep it from becoming a levy, they engineered a trestle every half a mile or so to allow the water to flow underneath it. During hurricane Carla wherever the water went underneath the tracks all the logs from the beach stopped against the rails at each trestle and the waves of the storm pushed on the logs that bent the rails down... bent the rails together still nailed to the cross ties.

GROUND: How about that, this is the old feed mill. [Referring to a photo] Do you remember the old feed mill that used to be out there?

WALKER: Yea, and the best I can tell right now, it's where the Firestone Tire place is.

GROUND: Um-hum. (Sound of pages turning). This is my last day on the railroad; I took my grandkids, my daughter. Let her run the engine. She said, "Daddy you're liable to get fired." I said, "Let them fire me, I don't care."

WALKER: (laughing) So this Allen Johnson, is he...?

GROUND: That's my Mother's first cousin. Did you ever know him?

WALKER: No, but the Johnson's are at Trammels.

GROUND: Now this is our little boudon girl, she's a Johnson. They are Fraddie Parson's twins and she was a daughter of one of the twins.

WALKER: Do you know where Walker Depot was?

GROUND: There at Trammel was a little depot for freight, you know. They used to come off at Rosharon and go around to the top cattle ranch out there, then go on down to Anchor and they had a depot there. Then you go straight to the river.

INTERVIEWER'S NOTE: The Sugar Land Railroad ended at Anchor. To continue to Velasco, you had to change trains. The Columbia Tap RR, The Houston Tap RR and the I & GN RR all used the original right of way and went from Houston to East Columbia on the Brazos River. There was probably a Y in rails to allow the trains to turn around at Anchor. There was a depot on Oyster Creek near Anchor on the I & GN line. All these lines were purchased by Missouri Pacific eventually. Follow the link for details of the SLRR <http://lifeonthebrazosriver.com/Sugar%20Land%20Railroad.pdf>

GROUND: Is that old building still there? That old depot?

WALKER: No, it's not. The dump [RR beds are called dumps] is there but you can tell where it went. The Sugar Land Railroad that ran west from Sugar Land towards the river went to Hickey. Did you run that far?

GROUND: No, Sugar Land is as far as I ever went.

WALKER: Sugar Land is where you started and then you went south, right? Then you went to the feed mill and after the feed mill, where did you go? Did you go by Johnson store?

GROUND: Yea, we come by Trammel. We called it Trammel and then go down through the Scanlan Plantation and up to the old highway (FM 521 at Hawdon and north to Holmes Rd in Houston) out there you know?

WALKER: You're talking the old highway, the other road that went across Miller Road? There wasn't a line to another road? That's kind of what I figured they'd pulled that up...

GROUND: You see those old tracks were taken up years ago because they used to run practice trains down here, you know.

WALKER: Houston built the terminal in Sugar Land and they took the railroad there.

GROUND: Right after World War II or during World War II they had this flood down there in Freeport and Velasco, you know, they had to run freight trains out of there to get the people out. Did you know that? In fact a lot of diesels couldn't make it. Diesels were much more in existence then anyway except for switching it. They brought those people out of Freeport and Velasco in boxcars.

WALKER: There was a flood in 1913 that was a big flood.

GROUND'S: Yea, that was a big one. It had a little island out there. The tracks went out there into the water to load a ship where the water is deep. They'd wash away. I forget what they call that. They had a name for it. When it washed away they never put it back.

WALKER: Was it a camp or did they call it a town or what?

GROUND'S: Yea, some kind of point they called it.

WALKER: On the Freeport side?

GROUND'S: Yea, it wasn't Freeport though. It was down below Freeport, a little further down, I think. I never did see it, I just heard about it.

INTERVIEWER'S NOTE: Howard may be talking about INDIANOLA, TX – Texas State Historical Association <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/eqi02>

WALKER: Okay. There is Quintana.

GROUND'S: I made lots of trips down there to the Hoskins Mound to weigh those sulfur cars. We had a Hoskins junction and it went on to Angleton and the other track would go down. We used to run those practice trains out through Hoskins Mound (this was a sulfur dome where the sulfur was melted with hot salt water, pumped to the surface, and allowed to cool, forming a city block size area of pure sulfur) to take them workers to the sulfur plant.

One old engineer, he was an extra man; he didn't know where the holes were. The regular engineers they could make the time pretty good, they'd get to where the holes were and they'd slow the train down with the breaks...it rolled pretty good and then the next hit again so they'd run on schedule. Where the extra engineer come down and my twin brother was with him and it was hard to make the schedule because of those holes. This fellow didn't know where the holes were and he couldn't make the schedule. Then people on that train said, "If that man runs this train tomorrow we ain't going because we are NOT driving with him." Even at a slow rate when he hit them holes you could see them old coaches doing this. [mimics rocking/jerky motion]

WALKER: Swaying back and forth.

GROUND'S: (laughing) On that mile post four where that first bridge is coming out of Freeport going out toward the Mound, there was an old engineer. He and Dad were both engineers and he had a reputation for making the time. I was just kidding.

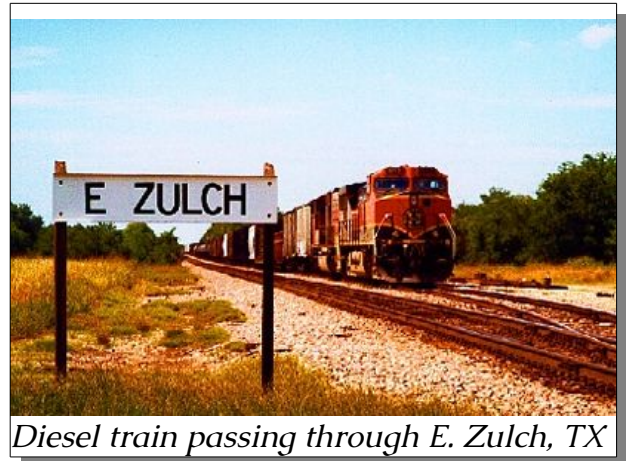
It was pouring down rain, you couldn't see the front engine from the back, it was really raining. I said, "You're going to make the time today aren't you?" He didn't say nothing, he pulled that throttle back and I guarantee you we made the time. We got on that milepost 4 where that first bridge is in an old steam engine and the wheels started slipping on that bridge. I thought we was on the ground, it scared me half to death; I thought we was gone. That old engine really went to dancing when them wheels start slipping on the bridge.

WALKER: Yea, all they can do is stop and start again.

GROUNDS: Oh yea, they catch on, they'd drop a little sand and they'd catch up with you. Anyway I wasn't expecting that, it really took me for a thrill. I got the fellas stuff, just sit tight and I'll find it.

WALKER: How many railroads did you work on?

GROUNDS: About five or six. I started out on the Union Pacific in North Zulch, Texas.



WALKER: Where did it run?

GROUNDS: Well it run to St. Louis. It'd go up to Huntsville and Trinity and Palestine then it run over towards Taylor up that way, Riley Junction and then they'd run north to Longview and then up towards St. Louis. I worked on it from Zulch City. It was tied on to Houston terminal so I worked on the Belt, too, the new Belt...

WALKER: Where did it go, from Houston to...?

GROUND: The Belt didn't go nowhere. It stayed in the yard...terminal. Then I got cut off and went to work on the Southern Pacific. I made some trips down to the Brazos River to a place called Echo and changed crews there. Then I worked on the Houston Port and Terminal. I didn't get a paycheck from them but I did get over on their property and switch cars...called them transfers. Down here around Country Drive and down through that way is a lot of waterfront. I worked with them and let's see what else did I do? I worked on five or six different railroads. I am what you call a boomer. You ever worked on a motorman railroad and you're a boomer. I was a deluxe boomer, I guess. The best railroad I ever worked for was the Union Pacific, they treated employees nice, they really did.

WALKER: Where did you run on the Union Pacific?

GROUND: I had 650 miles of each, I'd could go to Longview, I could go to Taylor and I could run to Galveston, Freeport, Sugar Land all them varieties.

WALKER: But you still ran in Texas?

GROUND: Yea, I stayed in Texas.

WALKER: What about the DeWalt Barn? Do you remember that?

GROUND: I remember it had a store at DeWalt.

WALKER: Remember, what they stored cotton in? The FHA boys stored their cotton and hay... it was built for cotton but it ended up for hay.

GROUND: Most of that cotton business was all gone before I ever got over down there.

WALKER: Did you ever see sugar cane growing? In the 1940s was when they quit running sugar cane.

GROUND: You see in the 1940's I wasn't working on the railroad. I didn't start until 1946. I think this is what I was trying to find for you. This fella has got a ranch; his ranch is on a Spanish land grant. It wasn't granted to him. Now Laura Bushhall, that bunch, their property was Spanish land grant. This is the fellow ranching out there now. You might read this and maybe make some copies because he tells about the railroads. (sound of photos being shuffled) I'll make you a copy and you get hold of him.. He's a railroad buff.

WALKER: Oh, is he? Okay.

GROUND'S: He's out there in that area, Columbus.

WALKER: Down where Alex is?

GROUND'S: Okay, he shows address somewhere other than. I met him in Columbus and then at one of those Rotary meeting things. He's involved in Rotary.

WALKER: This is probably his telephone number?

GROUND'S: Yea, evidently. You tell him I'm the fella that met him at the cafeteria down there in Columbus and he was putting the flags he had for the Kiwanis Club away. Right now I imagine he's busy getting his cattle out of the water.

WALKER: Yea, the Colorado River would be up over there.

GROUND'S: [looking at photo] See my three-corner hat I was wearing? My daughter made that freedom run up there to Washington and seen all that early stuff, so she brought me back this three-corner hat and I wore it. (Paper shuffle) This is taken in Galveston, but I come through League City there. They had built this Gazebo by the railroad tracks and they had a man there and I come up there. They didn't know I was coming with a big flag on the engine. I didn't know they was going to have a ceremony out there on that gazebo. Them people seen that big flag and they went crazy! All of them pitched their hats up in the air. It was something. They took some pictures of the engine. Some of them got in the car and they took pictures ahead of the train with them big flags flying. The only pictures I could get of the thing was after I got to Galveston. I got off the engine and I had this friend of mine who took the photo. I want you to have a copy.

WALKER: Did you ever know Hal Vilman in Stafford?

GROUND'S: I didn't know anybody but kin folks out here. Uncle Frank has a little store out here. Do you remember that old store? It stayed there for many years. I guess it done rotted down. He had a little gas pump.

WALKER: In Stafford?

GROUND'S: No, in Rosharon, no Trammel.



Johnson's Store in Trammel, Texas. The railroad was just to the left. This was a must stop for 'refreshments'.

WALKER: Johnson store is still standing.

GROUND: I bet it's in pretty bad shape, isn't it?

WALKER: Yea, but I just went by with Joe Fenn the week before last and it's still standing.

GROUND: It's not supposed to be. They are not using it, no way.

WALKER: No, but it's still there.

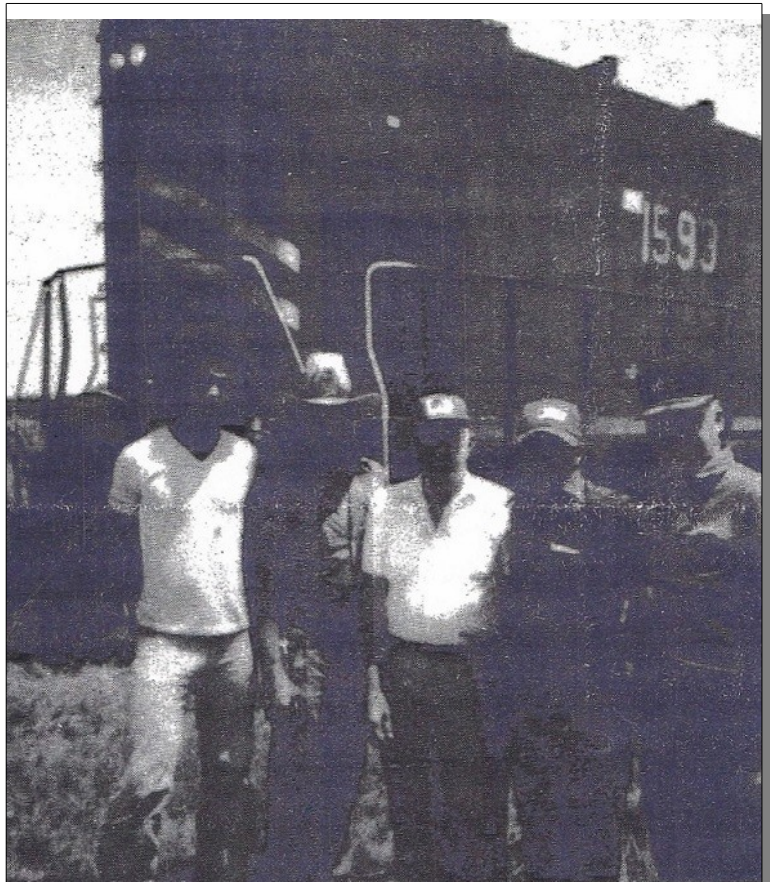
GROUND: Anyway, when I was a kid he had one gas pump. That's his granddaughter, she married somebody named Bodice. She was daughter of one of the twin boys, Brady Parce.

GROUND: That's July Fourth 1976, had to have special permission to put that flag on the engine. These are some of the original pictures.

WALKER: You know, now I am going to get greedy about these photos. That's one of the things that I have never seen a picture of. I know it was there and I know what it was. This is the feed mill. That's a picture of the feed mill.

GROUND: This is right here at Trammel, where Uncle Frank's store used to be. This is the last crew that worked in Sugar Land. That's Johnson standing right there in the middle, Allen Johnson. Do you know Allen Johnson?

WALKER: I never did know him.



Last Run – Missouri Pacific Railroad Engine 1593 freight train ran from Sugar Land to DeWalt, Fresno, and Arcola areas until the sugar mill closed in 1953. Pictured are Brakeman Beard, Conductor C. E. McFarland, Alan Johnson, Brakeman R. T. Bishop, and Engineer H. M. Grounds. The train and its regular trips to the sugar mill are now just another piece of Fort Bend County's rich history.

GROUND: You heard of him, haven't you?

WALKER: Yea, because I know the Johnson's. You know the Fosters? Barbara was a Johnson before she married Gene Foster. They ran the Viking Den in Stafford.

GROUND: You might want to take this photo. This is telling Sugar Land goodbye. My last trip to Sugar Land.

WALKER: Do you have any pictures of the DeWalt store something like that?

GROUND: I didn't know Frank's old store was still standing. I was out in California and I took this picture. Santa Fe come out and I snapped it. By the time I got my finger off it was gone. Good gosh, I missed him. Well, I didn't miss him, I caught him. This is my Daddy's last trip before he retired. This one here is the same day. He was running an Eagle. This is a sunshine special. That's an old, old time passenger train. This is taken on the same day. Of course, they don't mean a thing.

WALKER: With snow on the ground. (chuckle)

GROUND: Yea, it looks like a little snow there. This is my Daddies' old crew. That's his porter and his engineer and his brakeman and this is his fireman down at the Union Station.

WALKER: I am looking at those pictures of steam engines.

GROUND: You're interested in steam engine pictures? I'll show you some good ones. This is a modern shop that I use to work out the city. This is my twin brother and I together.

WALKER: You both worked?

GROUND: Both 18 years. They use to call him, Wetgrass, they called me Drygrass. He's a pretty good drinking man. Here's the Belt Terminal, this building the Galaxy lived in. This is my daddy's last trip, 1957. This is the one when I'm making my last trip.

WALKER: You haven't got a chance to read that book of Mona Fenn's, Glimpses of Our History?

GROUND: I am going to. Right, I'm glad you done that. She is a nice little gal isn't she? She is just full of joy. It tickled me, she said, "Howard you know your responsible for all this." This diesel of ours, a passenger train, hit this truck out here on Westfield and the

engineer and fireman were both killed. The engineer jumped off, got a stick through his head and the fireman ran back to the second unit and sucked all that fire and it burned him up. They had a flash fire in the engine. They would have survived had they stayed on the engine.

WALKER: Where is this?

GROUND: Down at Westfield going out toward Palestine, toward Conroe.

WALKER: And it hit something?

GROUND: A butane truck, ah-ha. (Rustling paper) Here is that old Texas Eagle. They had got away with this thing. Look right there coming out on Highway 59. We used to go underneath it.

WALKER: I think it's still there.

GROUND: I think this part is gone.

WALKER: Oh, is it? Because they put that overpass on it. I thought they were building right around it but I don't know if it works.

GROUND: This is a picture of the old General, a Civil War thing. That's a lookalike picture it's not the engine. Okay this is out at the Galveston Railroad Museum. I volunteered out there 15 years ago in Operation Lifesaver. Trying to keep kids off the railroad track and getting killed or hurt. That's the old Bessie Jones, its lookalike engine. They never did rebuild this engine.

WALKER: You got the book that tells the story?

GROUND: No, I don't think I do. You know people really talked about what happened. We had all kinds of warnings and he hit the torpedoes, he passed the Flaggman, never touched the brake. That's what they was out there for. To let him know he had problems. He ignored it, he's the one that got them fellas full of piss and vinegar. He was a depot man, he thought initially it wasn't his job. He was going to show them.

He was running late and he was going to make the time up. So he told his fireman to jump, He was a black fireman and he did jump. (Papers rustling) That's one thing we had out in Galveston. This is where I started out on the UP.

WALKER: So what's different now than then?

GROUND: All the things. Everything is so different for some reason.

WALKER: Right, you used to be able to change your own switch right?

GROUND: Well, they still do a lot of that especially on switching areas. I was telling you about this Virginia Company, used to be a few years back. Big Boy they called it.

WALKER: You used to cross the Frost Ranch? That's where you went, that's where the Mill was. You had to cross the Frost Ranch to get there?

GROUND: Ah-hum, these bulkheads have grown. That's how long I've been retired. My conductor bought me a barbecue dinner for that last trip. (Rustling paper) Oh, here's my daughter running the engine. These are some of the people I worked with.

WALKER: You know a steam engine is noisy.

GROUND: Oh, yea, hot, too.

WALKER: Yea.

GROUND: This is some postcard pictures of some pretty engines. This is not the right one but I've got another book. I have a bunch of engines there.

WALKER: So you didn't know too many people from Sugar Land?

GROUND: I just knew my family out there. Uncle Frank and his wife Helen and their daughters and their two sons. That's Jessie Jones' old home. They moved up there to Jackson, Tennessee.

WALKER: Were you just interested in a straight Casey Jones or you kin to it or what?

GROUND: No, just a little bit of knowledge. There is something here, same Operation, Lifesaver. You ever take that ride up at Palestine that runs...?

WALKER: No

GROUND: It's interesting that they are trying to close it. That's some of their engines.

WALKER: That's still a steam engine, isn't it?

GROUND: Yea, oh yea. It's all steam they don't run nothing but steam that I know of.

WALKER: You can't get the fun part right on the engine. You can't get where all the noise is at.

GROUND: Come on in, I'll show you something (going to another room). This is my daddies KKK card. In 1900, 1915, something like that, they had this revolt out here, where these blacks, the ones doing all the planning, they actually started a shooting war over there. Every red blooded white man in Houston joined the KKK. I told my daddy, I said, "Daddy, why don't you tell me about it?" He said, "I wasn't very proud of it."

WALKER: Yea, Things were different. Is this a railroad watch?

GROUND: Well that's an emblem. I've got four or five railroad watches. In fact I used to keep an old Delay. It's got a little choo-choo on the back. This will run, it's a Westclock. Most people look at it and think...

WALKER: Well they wouldn't know the difference.

GROUND: I got Daddy's lines. These are mostly railroad belt buckles most of them.

WALKER: Son of a gun.

GROUND: When I retired they gave me this.

WALKER: Were you and your twin brother in the navy?

GROUND: Yea, world War II. That's one of the ships I served on. I served on three Navy cruisers.

WALKER: Where were you stationed at, just at sea?

GROUND: Went to San Diego, Blue Cap we stayed in the South Pacific all the way. From Wake Island to Tokyo Bay. Thirteen major invasions and we was in Japan when they... There's a boot camp picture. This is a 1940 adding machine I've got. I've also got a 1940 LG Spur; it's a typewriter. LG Smith Corona.

WALKER: You could tell it would only go to a thousand dollars.

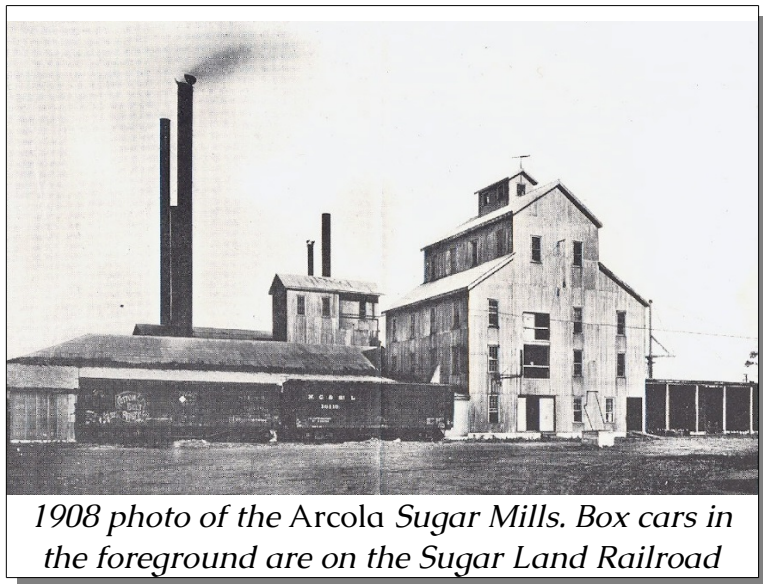
GROUND: I didn't know. It will add up though.

WALKER: I mean the maximum. You got the cents and then you got only 900 dollars and that's it. If you had \$1,000 dollars you were over capacity of the machine.

Interview ends.

INTERVIEWER NOTES: The original SLRR went from Sugar Land to Duke, Texas under the direction of Colonel Cunningham. It was funded in 1893 and completed in 1894 or 1895. Mr. Eldridge took over about 1896 and the line was completed from Sienna Plantation and McKeever Rd. through Sugar Land Junction and to Anchor. By 1912 the line from Sienna Plantation and Duke, Texas had been abandoned.

In 1908 there was a spur of the International and Great Northern at Hawdon to the Arcola Sugar Mills in House, Texas. The International and Great Northern became the Houston Belt and Terminal and then Missouri Pacific. When Missouri Pacific purchased the Sugar Land RR in 1956, it didn't go any further than Arcola Sugar Mills. This location is not to be



1908 photo of the Arcola Sugar Mills. Box cars in the foreground are on the Sugar Land Railroad

confused with Arcola's location today. By this time Missouri Pacific had already purchased the International and Great Northern's spur from Arcola Sugar Mills to Hawdon. Today this spur is referred to as part of the Sugar Land RR but it never was.

In the 1960's and 1970's the engineer, Howard Grounds, drove the train from Sugar Land to the Arcola Sugar Mills in House, Texas, to Hawdon and into Houston on the tracks beside FM 521 that are there today. He would return the same day. By 1970 people would say the Sugar Land RR ran to Houston, when really it was no longer the Sugar Land RR. This makes it confusing when someone mentions the Sugar Land RR route.