

MEMPHIS, OHIO AND LOUISVILLE RAILROAD

In late 1859 and continuing into 1860 the

Memphis, Ohio and Louisville Railroad was engaged in the construction of the railroad through Big Sandy and the north end of Benton County. Several hundred Irish laborers worked on the road bed and the bridge across the Tenn. River at Danville. This railroad ran from Nashville to Memphis and passed through Big Sandy. This road was later called the Nashville-Northwestern Railroad and still later the Louisville-Nashville Railroad, L & N.

During the early days of the Civil War the railroad played a very important role in moving goods and men for the Confederate army. On Oct. 13, 1861 some 15,000 union soldiers and 3,000 horses crossed the Danville bridge into West Tennessee and began to burn and destroy the railroad and the houses between the Danville bridge and Paris. On Feb. 5, 1862 the 48th and the 51st Tenn. Cavalry units encamped at the bridge and disabled it. It was not usable until several years after the war.

The bridge was rebuilt and repaired in the 1870's and then in the early 1930's it was again reworked and upgraded. It served the Railroad until 1941 when the T.V.A. started work on the Kentucky Dam. The bridge had to be raised some 20 feet to account for the higher water levels. The bridge was to be out of service

several months and to prevent discontinuing service of the railroad during the war a Temporary wooden bridge was erected just below the old structure. It was constructed of heavy timbers and piling and allowed the railroad to operate uninterrupted while work was underway raising the old structure. The engineers in charge of the project were fearful that driftwood and debris would collect on the piling and crisscrossed braces for the temporary bridge and cause it to fail. They devised wings that were made of steel cables and oil drums that were designed to funnel the driftwood through the center span and not collect against the pilings.

A few days before Feb. 19, 1944 heavy rains



The Danville Bridge

400 feet of the center section was washed out. A major disaster was averted by the quick thinking of Engineer Sullivan. He was probably only a minute or so from losing his train and all the troops into the river.

The old structure was not ready for service and some said it would be several months before it would be completed and ready to use. It was wartime and the railroads were vital for the war effort. The construction engineers and crews worked around the clock for a week and had the bridge usable for light service. Many said this was an engineering and construction miracle.

The raised and rebuilt Danville bridge served the railroad until the late 1970's when the railroad ceased to operate through Big Sandy.



Bridge leading to Danville Bridge

fell in the Tennessee, Duck and Buffalo River watershed. The Duck and Buffalo quickly reached flood stage and carried downstream vast amounts of driftwood, cornstalks and other debris. Among this debris floating down stream were thousands of pumpkins. The wings that was built to handle such an emergency failed to work. All this mass gathered on the upstream side of the bridge and restricted the water flow to a point that the level began to rise very rapidly creating terrific pressure on the wooden structure.

On Feb. 19th the passenger train No. 104 crossed the bridge without incident. About two hours later the No. 101 passenger and mail train with over 5,000 soldiers bound for Camp Tyson at Paris approached the bridge. The engineer, Mr. Don Sullivan started his train out on the bridge and was well out on the bridge when he noticed a strange shaking of his engine. He then noticed a very large bow in the bridge with the center section leaning downstream making a big curve in the tracks. He stopped his train and slowly began to back off the bridge. Just as he cleared the bridge it gave way. The water pressure was just too great for the wooden structure. Mr. C.B. Christopher who was the conductor on a freight that had pulled off on a siding to allow the passenger train to pass saw the bridge give way with a mighty rush of water.

The center section of the bridge was removed intact and moved to Alabama by barge and put into service there. Only the old unused roadbed and the approaches to the bridge remain today.