

The White River Line

Lead and zinc discoveries ignited a race to transport the minerals to markets. Floods and droughts made steamboats unreliable for much of the year.

Fifty mine owners and stockholders began applying pressure on Congress for improved **upriver navigation**.



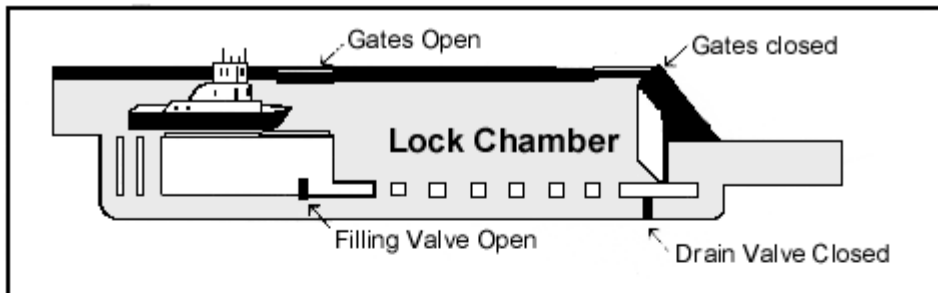
In 1879, railroad tycoon **Jay Gould** was combining small railroads in the Southwest to bring agricultural products to eastern markets. Gould died in 1892 before he could build a **transcontinental railroad**. His eldest son, George, took the helm.

The **White River Line** was added to the Iron Mountain Railway to shorten the route from Kansas City to Memphis.

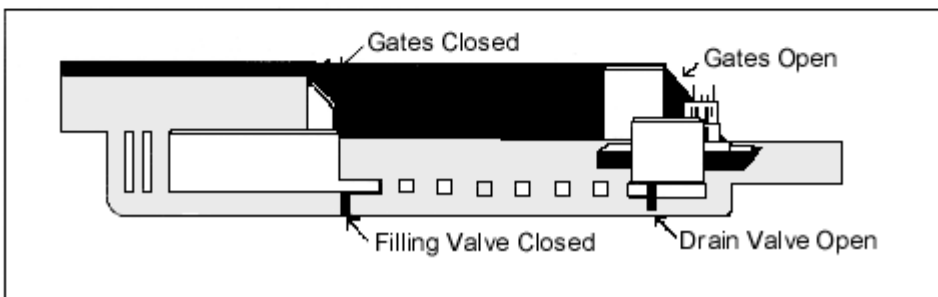
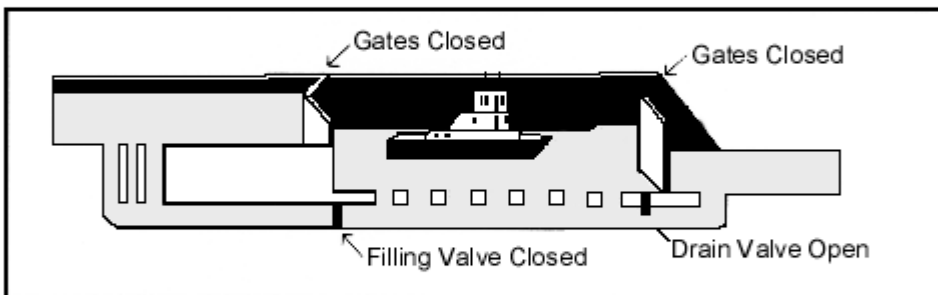
It couldn't have come at a more opportune time. A devastating drought in 1901 would have bankrupted everyone had it not been for loans from the **Bluff City Bank**.

A Race for Profits

A federal survey of the White River was conducted. A proposal to build **ten locks and dams** along the White River from Batesville to Buffalo City was made. These would make the river a deep-water channel that could be traveled year round.



In 1901, construction began on **Lock and Dam #1** at Batesville. It was completed in 1903. **Lock and Dam #2** was built eight miles upriver at Locust Grove. **Lock and Dam #3** was built at the mouth of Lafferty Creek downriver from Guion.

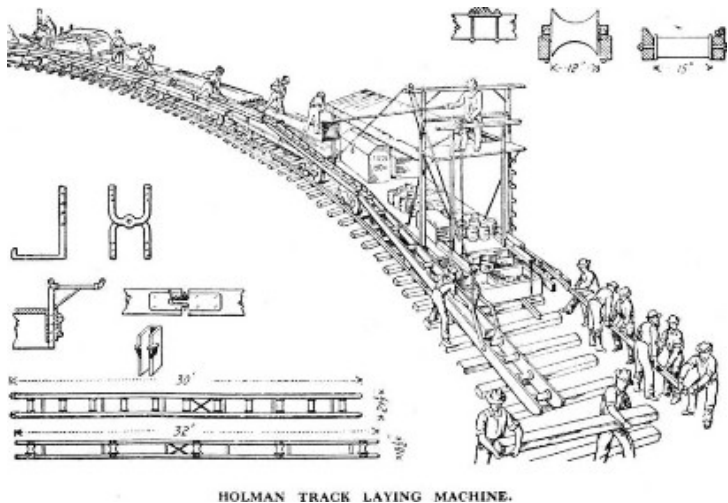


By the time Lock and Dam #3 was completed, the White River Line had opened and the river navigation plan was **abandoned**.

Building the Railroad (1902-1903)

Construction on the 239 miles of track from Batesville, Arkansas, to Carthage, Missouri, began in 1902. The workers were **Greek and Italian immigrants** along with local men. As many as 2,000 railroad workers lived in a tent village along Calico Creek for several months.

Railroad workers with tools, standing on tracks, no date.



In the beginning, construction was at a fast pace. Using the patented **rail-laying machine**, up to two miles of track could be laid in a day. Workers followed behind driving spikes and **ballasting** the rails.

Steamboats were used to carry supplies ahead of construction so bridges and masonry work were complete by the time rails got to them. This made the process much faster and more cost effective. Things were moving along.

Blasting the Rock

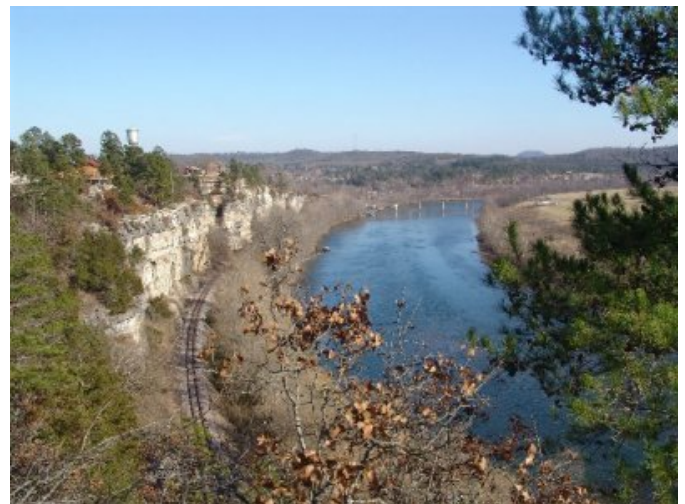


Trouble began when rail workers reached **Soldier's Rock**, between Mt. Olive and Boswell, and Calico Rock. The heavy blasting delayed construction by **six months**.

The bluffs had to be blasted away to make way for the roadbed.

The section through Calico Rock was one of the most expensive and nearly bankrupted Gould's son.

To save time, "**Sowbelly**" **Burke** decided to blast off the entire bluff at once. The crews drilled holes twenty feet away from the bluffs and filled them with dynamite. They blasted away **53,000 yards** of rock at one time. Much of it came down in huge boulders that remain at the river's edge today.



Fire in the Hole

Everything went fine on the east side of Calico Creek. When they got to the west side, the crew got careless and the charges were set too closely to the dynamite storehouse.

The blast was set for 12:00 noon when most folks would be indoors. The call was given, “**fire in the hole.**” The blast ignited the explosives. The ground shook. Debris rained in the air. Windows shattered, ceilings and walls fell, and people were injured. It was felt 40 miles away.



The **Stoner Hotel** was badly damaged as were most buildings in town.

Economic Impact

When railroad construction began, men were tired of crop failures and flooding. They were ready for **steady income**.

A man could earn \$1.25 per day. “**Hammer men**” made better pay swinging a sledgehammer drilling holes for the dynamite up to 12 hours a day. As one man slung the hammer, another held the drill. After each hit, the drill was turned. This was called “**churning**.”

A man with a team of mules could earn \$4 to \$5 a day.

The rails were laid in sections, or three mile strips. The men working on laying the rails were called the “**section gang**.”

Wives and older daughters were hired to cook for the hired hands.

Tent cities were erected throughout the area.

The first train arrived in Calico Rock on **August 24, 1903**. The White River Line was completed on January 21, 1906 at a cost of **\$17.9 million**, or **\$75,000 per mile**.