

## CANE BELT AND SANTA FE RAILROADS

by William Loocke

Little did William Loocke know when he was a kid fishing under a Santa Fe Railroad trestle, that years later he would develop a great interest in local railroads. When he was sixteen years old, he worked at the local grain elevator loading grain cars for rail transport. Years later as an owner of that same elevator, his business was the last shipper to use the line running through Wharton, TX. With the railroad gone, the Wharton Southern Pacific Depot, one of two last standing passenger stations in the county, was near its final days and in much disrepair. That's when in 2000, days before Union Pacific Railroad was scheduled to demolish the Wharton Depot, Dr. Merrill Barfield enlisted William to co-chair his efforts to fight the demolition and work on its restoration. With the time, help, money, and expertise of many volunteers, the Wharton Depot was restored to its former beauty.



Through this long and tedious process, William acquired a great deal of interest and information about the railroads that crisscrossed this area of our state.

Currently, William is a volunteer curator for the Wharton Depot, volunteers on the Kansas City Southern Railroad Holiday Express, and serves as the Vice President of the Kansas City Southern Railroad Historical Society.

William shared his research about the Cane Belt/Santa Fe Railroad's history from its creation. Per Wikipedia, "The Cane Belt Railroad was chartered in 1898. Formed by a group of businessmen from Eagle Lake, the short-line railroad was intended to bring the area's sugarcane to market. By 1904 the line was in operation from Sealy to Matagorda on the Gulf of Mexico. That year the company's stock was bought by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway and the line continued operations under lease to the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway starting in 1905. By the 1920s, the local sugarcane industry collapsed but the railroad was saved by the discovery of two nearby sulphur mines. In 1948, the Cane Belt was merged into the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway. In the 1990s most of the original line was abandoned after the last sulphur mine closed. By 2013, only a small portion of the line south of Bay City was operating as part of the BNSF Railway." Loocke showed where the rail lines were built to service the various businesses in Wharton and Matagorda Counties and how the Cane Belt/Santa Fe competed and cooperated with the other railroad companies in the area. His first-hand experience with railroads and their operation was truly enlightening.