The end of the steam era for the Southern Railway

By Clinton Smoke

Editor's note: Inspired by Tom Sink's interesting and informative presentation at our August meeting, we researched Southern's history for more on the last days of steam. Here is what we found.

The Southern Railway was an early convert to diesel power. The transition started in the late 1930s. While the economic challenges of that decade faced all of the railroads, Southern had cash and was desperate for new power. They had not purchased a new steam engine since 1927 and much of their power consisted of World War I era USRA 2-8-2s and similar equipment.

Southern first experimented with diesels in 1939, starting with passenger trains. Several two-car trains were assembled using older coaches pulled by an 80-foot power car propelled by an 800-horsepower diesel engine. (GM's RDC vehicles would not appear for another 10 years.) Finding success with these trains, Southern took a significant step and purchased EMD diesels for several of their highly-visible passenger trains, namely *The Southerner* and *The Tennessean*, and Alco units for *The Ponce de Leon*, a Chicago-to-Florida train. After these orders were filled, wartime restrictions on diesel engine production halted this project for several years.

At the same time, Southern also started to convert the power used in several yards. In 1940, Southern placed several diesel switchers in service. While wartime restrictions limited the production of road engines, these restrictions did not apply to switch engines: Southern took advantage of this opportunity ordering 24 more switchers. They spread the order to include products from EMD, Alco, Baldwin and General Electric. These efforts were successful and within a period of just over a year, Southern placed 50 diesel switchers in service, replacing an ancient fleet of 0-6-0s.

In spite of the wartime restriction of diesel power, EMD was able to produce some road engines, and Southern got a share of that production. Between 1941 and 1945, Southern received some 60 EMD FT road engines. These were well matched to Southern needs, and proved valuable in hauling freight during the hostilities.

Following the close of World War II, the major locomotive manufacturers able to get back into the business of making railroad locomotives and many railroads were ready to buy. Southern had already seen what diesels could do, and was eager to buy more diesel power. The first order was for 12 new EMD E7's for their passenger trains. More purchases followed. By 1948, 300 diesel engines made up a third of Southern's locomotive roster. But these engines were earning their keep: 50 percent of all Southern freight trains and 60 percent of Southern passenger trains were pulled by diesel engines.

Continuing into the early 1950s, Southern purchased more diesel power, adding some 300 diesels to their locomotive roster. Meanwhile, steam power was being retired. The economies of the diesel were clearly apparent, and Southern was making the change over as fast as they could. Southern management was looking was ways to improve efficiency and reduce costs. Rising labor costs was a major factor. The conversion was accomplished in a very logical manner, systematically eliminating the need for many of the facilities needed to support steam operations.

By the end of 1952, the steam locomotive roster was down to 200 engines. They were not getting much work, for by that time 90 percent of Southern's freight trains and nearly all of their passenger trains were pulled by diesel power. Additional purchases of diesel equipment and schedule adjustments speeded the process. On June 17, 1953, the last scheduled steam-powered train pulled into Chattanooga marking the end of steam for Southern. {This is the scene shown on page 1. In the center is steam engine #6330, flanked by the *Best Friend of Charleston* and Southern F-3 (later designated as an F-7) #4157.)}