

## Bananas: Once the Railroads' Golden Cargo

By Frank Dewey



In this 1903 photo of unloading a United Fruit ship in New Orleans, you can see just how labor intensive the work was as the banana stems were passed off of the ship from one man to the next and then carried either into the FGC refrigerator car or onto the dock for local shipment. There appears to be at least three banana ships tied up at the dock for unloading. New Orleans was one of the first banana ports in the United States to be mechanized.

*Shorpy photo*

There are more bananas sold in the United States than any other fruit. You very well might have had a banana as part of your breakfast this morning. The average American will eat 28 pounds of bananas a year and 96% of American households will buy bananas at least once a month. Yet, none of those many bananas were grown in the United States. They all have to come into the country

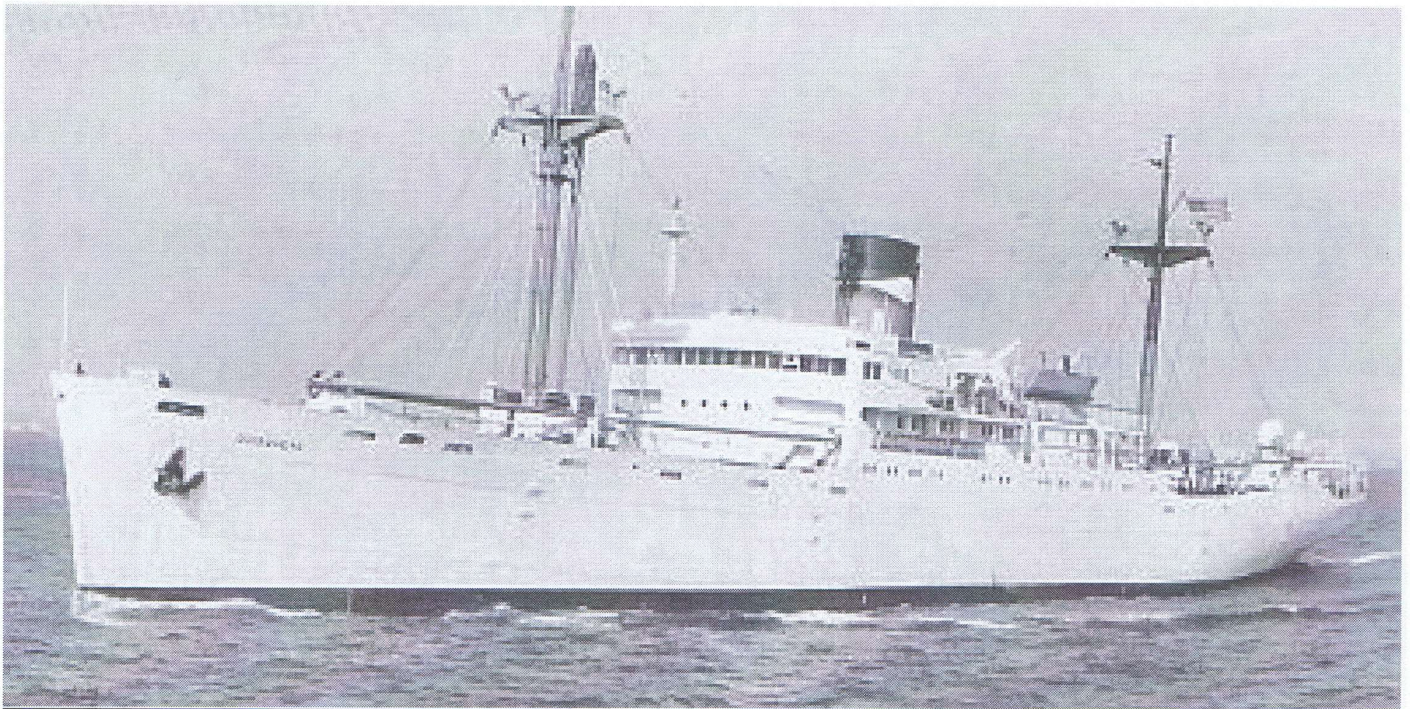
by ship and, at one time, were a prize cargo for the American railroads. Unfortunately, none of the bananas we eat in this country today move by rail. But the story of bananas and the railroads is an interesting tale and one that the Baltimore and Ohio had a long history of success and, as judged by some, failure.

Bananas require stable, warm temperatures and lots of water to

grow. Therefore, they grow best in a wide band close to the equator. Our bananas come primarily from Central America.

They first came to the United States on sailing ships as deck cargo. The crews ate them as they ripened on the trip. Any bananas left when they arrived in port could be sold for very high prices, since there would not be many that had not ripened during the voyage.





A ship of United Fruit Company's Great White Fleet. Some of the ships going between Central America and the larger United States ports could carry up to 100 passengers in ocean-liner comfort and were the way to go from the United States to Central and South America. The ships that called in Baltimore could only accommodate 12 passengers.

Thus, it was New Orleans and Mobile that first experienced bananas.

This all changed with the coming of the steamship. Because they were faster and did not depend as much on tides and winds, bananas started to flow into ports and areas along the coasts. While still dependent on the seasons for shipping into the northern United States ports along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts, bananas began to appear more and more in American homes and restaurants, but still only in coastal areas.

Henry Meiggs, an American who built railroads in much of South and Central America and his nephew, Minor C. Keith, constructed a railroad in Costa Rica and acquired 800,000 acres of land along the railroad. The railroad was a financial failure for transporting passengers, but turned into a gold mine from the growing and transporting of bananas. After Meiggs' death, Keith merged his

banana holdings with the rival Boston Fruit Company to form the United Fruit Company in 1899. By 1930, the company had absorbed numerous competing companies and was the largest employer in Central America. At one time, it controlled more than 80% of the banana business in the United States.

United Fruit was a true vertical company. It owned the plantations that grew the fruit; it owned the railroads that carried the bananas to port; it owned the ships that brought the fruit to the United States; and it owned the trading company that sold the fruit to grocery chains and distributors throughout the United States. It was so powerful in some of the Central and South American countries where it operated that they were called "Banana Republics". While the company did much for the economies of the countries, it was not above getting

involved in the politics to get favorable governments.

The ships of the United Fruit Company were called the "Great White Fleet", because they were, obviously, painted white. The first ships, acquired in 1899, were surplus U. S. Navy ships left over after the Spanish-American War. The fleet grew to more than 60 vessels. In 1903, the company got its first refrigerated ship. Because the ripening of bananas can be slowed when the temperature is held between 55 and 60 degrees Fahrenheit, the introduction of refrigeration on the ship meant that spoilage while in transit on the seas could be sharply reduced.

After the Civil War, refrigerated box cars were developed primarily to haul meat and later, fruits and vegetables. A sharp marketing/sales man on the Illinois Central, General Southern Agent Colonel James T. Tucker, saw the possibility of the railroad using refrigerated box cars to introduce





This 1905 photo shows bananas being unloading in Baltimore off of the pier side of the ship. Bananas for shipment out by railroad would be loaded into refrigerator cars on carfloats on the opposite side of the ship.

*Shorpy photo*

the banana into areas of the country that had never had them before. New Orleans, at the southern end of the IC, was the largest port for importing bananas. It was only 2½ days travel by ship from the banana growing areas as opposed to New York City being 6 days. Starting in 1880, the IC, New Orleans and bananas were big business. By 1900 and for several decades after that, New Orleans handled a third of the bananas coming into the United States. From New Orleans, bananas were shipped to the mid-west, south and western states. In the summer, the bananas would move inland in refrigerated cars that had been iced down to maintain the proper temperature to retard ripening; and in the winter, heaters would be installed in the cars for the same purpose. The IC

was given the nick-name of the “Banana Road”.

Fulton, Kentucky, located along the IC between New Orleans and Chicago, was a re-icing station. Here, heaters could be installed in the cars for the movement into colder climates. Here, also, was a major re-consignment location for bananas that had not previously been sold. Fulton became known as “The Banana Capitol of the World”. Even today, they hold “The International Banana Festival” each year highlighted with a 1-ton banana pudding, deemed the world’s largest.

Either United Fruit pressed the other ports and railroads or the ports and railroads saw the success of the IC and quickly every railroad and port wanted to move bananas. Mobile, Alabama and the Gulf, Mobile and Northern (later Gulf,

Mobile and Ohio) competed with the IC for traffic from the Gulf to the mid-west, south and west. Los Angeles opened a dedicated banana pier in 1927 and took much of the western traffic from the Gulf ports. On the east coast, Baltimore, New York and Boston were the ports that brought bananas to the eastern part of the United States. On a smaller scale, Charleston, South Carolina and the Southern Railway had jointly owned a banana pier. There was also some traffic through Miami carried by the FEC. Reports in some industry publications mention the following CSX predecessor railroads operating special banana trains: AB&C, ACL, AWP, B&O, C&O, Georgia, L&N, NYC, RF&P and SCL. Other railroads shown were AT&SF, CB&Q, CN, GTW, KCS, NP, PE (a subsidiary of the SP and





The B&O tug *George M. Shriver* takes a carfloat with empty refrigerator cars to the United Fruit Pier 1 for banana loading. A Pennsylvania car float is visible in front of Pier 1 and a United Fruit ship from the Great White Fleet can be seen at the pier. Today, the *Constellation* is berthed about where the United Fruit ship is tied up.

*Photo from the B&ORR Historical Society collection*



The B&O tug *Baltimore*, a steam-power tug, unlike the diesel-power *George M. Shriver* in the picture on the left, is shown with a carfloat of Fruit Growers Express refrigerator cars on Carfloat #73. Each carfloat could carry five cars on each of the two tracks. Based on the clothing on the deckhands, it must be warm weather and probably in the 1930s.

*Photo from the B&ORR Historical Society collection*

therefore probably the SP), S&A and T&P. This list is by no means a complete list of all the railroads that were part of the banana trade, but it does show how much the industry was a part of getting the fruit to the American table.

The gulf ports of New Orleans, Mobile and Galveston were mechanized shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. In the late 1920s, Los Angeles opened a new mechanized banana pier. That gave them an advantage over Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York and Boston. Those eastern ports required the labor intensive effort of being unloaded by manual labor. This not only was more expensive, but also tied up the banana ships for a longer period to unload.

United Fruit in Baltimore located in the "basin" on Pier 1 at the corner of Pratt and Light Streets. Today, that would be about where the *USS Constellation* is tied up. Banana ships were scheduled to arrive Baltimore harbor on Monday and Thursday of each week. When a ship would arrive for unloading, swarms of men would carry the 85-100 pound stalks of bananas on

their shoulders off of the ship. Sorters on the ship would determine the ripeness of the bananas and send the ripest to stores and distributors in the Baltimore area. They would be carried off the ship on the pier-side to waiting wagons or trucks. Bananas that still needed further ripening would be sent off the ship to the water-side where carfloats holding ten refrigerator cars for most distant locations would be loaded. Since the inter-harbor was

open to all railroads by water, both the B&O and PRR could take advantage of the banana business.

The men unloading the banana stems would be paid by the piece, i.e. by the number of stems they carried. It was hard, back-breaking work. It could also be dangerous since it was not unusual for tarantulas and snakes to be living in the banana stems. Needless to say, when one of them was found, all work stopped until the spiders or snakes were killed.

The B&O's operation was to prep the refrigerator cars at Locust Point and load them on the carfloats that held a total of ten cars on the two tracks separated by a walkway that was the height of the car doors. The carfloats would then be moved from Locust Point to Pier 1 using the B&O's own tug boats. A typical carload was 300 stems (10 to 12 tons) and more than 200 refrigerator cars were needed to unload the large post-World War II ships. Bananas going to local points by wagon or truck would mean there was probably never a ship that loaded all 200 cars, but you can see that the tugboats would



The interior of a refrigerator car with banana stems being loaded. Note that the stems are loaded upright.

*NYC RR photo*



BANANA SPECIAL  
BALTIMORE TO TOLEDO

Schedule

Operated from Baltimore on days when twenty-five or more cars of Perishable are offered for points west of Cumberland via Central Region	Lv. Baltimore (Locust Pt.)	8:00 PM
	Ar. Brunswick	11:00 PM
	Lv. Brunswick	11:45 PM
	Ar. Cumberland	2:45 AM
	Lv. Cumberland	3:15 AM
	Ar. Connellsville	6:15 AM
	Lv. Connellsville	6:45 AM
	Ar. New Castle Junction	10:15 AM
	Lv. New Castle Junction	11:30 AM
	Ar. Willard	4:00 PM
	Lv. Willard	4:45 PM
	Lv. North Baltimore	6:15 PM
	Ar. Toledo	7:30 PM

TRAIN CLASSIFICATION

From	Symbol	Grouping
Baltimore	B-1	Cumberland and Cumberland to St. Louis and Indianapolis reclassified at Cumberland for dispatchment various sections of 97
Baltimore	B-2	Connellsville and Morgantown
Baltimore	B-3	Pittsburgh, Wheeling and Buffalo Divisions
Baltimore	B-4	New Castle Junction and Youngstown
Baltimore	B-5	Akron, Cleveland and Canton
Baltimore	B-6	Willard, Columbus and Zanesville
Baltimore	B-7	Toledo, Detroit and beyond

CONNECTIONS AND WORK

From	To	
Baltimore: Steamship Lines	Connellsville - Fairmont	80
	Pittsburgh - Parkersburg	197
	Pittsburgh - Buffalo	104
	Youngstown - Set off	
	Akron - Set off	
	Willard - Newark	88
	Toledo - N.Y.C. (M)	MC-2
	Lv. Toledo	12:01 AM
	Ar. Detroit	3:00 AM
	Toledo - C.&O.	97
	Lv. Toledo	12:01 AM
Ar. Detroit	2:30 AM	

Schedule of the Banana Special in the B&O Freight Working Book of July 1, 1954. *Frank Dewey collection*

be kept busy moving carfloats to and from the United Fruit pier.

Once the refrigerator cars were unloaded from the carfloats at Locust Point, they were made up in trains and sent west. The B&O's Freight Working Book contained a Baltimore to Toledo train called the "Banana Special" that was scheduled to depart Locust Point any day there were twenty-five or more cars of perishables for points Cumberland and west.

Cumberland, Maryland, had a large icing facility where Fruit Growers Express would check the temperature of the cars and add ice or adjust the heaters as needed. Cumberland was also a reconsignment point where bananas that previously had not been sold could get further billing.

The "Banana Special" was scheduled to depart Locust Point at 8:00 PM with the following blocks: B-1 - Cumberland and Cumberland

to St. Louis and Indianapolis reclassified at Cumberland for dispatchment on various sections of 97; B-2 - Connellsville and Morgantown; B-3 - Pittsburgh, Wheeling and Buffalo Divisions; B-4 - New Castle Junction and Youngstown; B-5 - Akron, Cleveland and Canton; B-6 - Willard, Columbus and Zanesville; and B-7 - Toledo, Detroit and beyond. At Toledo, it had scheduled connections to the New York Central and the Chesapeake & Ohio for furtherance to Detroit. The railroad thus handled fruit to a territory in the United States east of a line from Detroit through Toledo, Columbus and Huntington and from Richmond on the south to Canadian points on the north.

After WWII, the B&O was doing well financially and saw a way to cut its costs and also cut the Pennsylvania out of the Baltimore banana business. In April, 1957, the railroad started construction of a new \$4,300,000 fruit pier at Locust Point near McComas Street. The facility required the dredging of 500,000 cubic yards to connect the new facility with the Ferry Bar Channel of Baltimore Harbor; the construction of new tracks into the building to hold 63 cars being loaded; and support tracks for Fruit Growers Express to repair and prepare the railroad cars. It was designed to be able to handle the United Fruit Company's most modern vessels. The target was to get all of the 10,000 carloads of bananas that the railroads were moving out of Baltimore.

When the pier opened on December 1, 1958, the actual cost of construction was \$5,500,000. By today's standards, a \$1,200,000 cost overrun might not seem bad, but it probably caused much hand-wringing at 2 North Charles Street at the time. The railroad and fruit





Aerial photos of the “Ultra-Modern” Baltimore & Ohio Locust Point Fruit Terminal

*B&O photos from the Baltimore Museum of Industry collection*



Photos of the machinery used to unload the ships and the “curveyors” used to carry the bananas to the railroad cars for loading.

companies did share in the cost of construction, with the railroad building the pier and the fruit company paying for the loading machinery.

The loading machinery included four gantry cranes that were 80-foot high and moved on 400 feet of rail. The cranes could be lowered into the holds of the ships, where bananas stems were loaded onto canvas pockets that connected to conveyer belts that carried the stems throughout the building for

loading. If going out by rail, there were spots for 63 railroad cars and indoor loading berths for 42 trucks, with an additional 12 trucks that could be loaded outside. Outside, there were cleaning tracks that could hold 166 cars and prep tracks for either preheating or cooling 108 cars.

At the December 1, 1958, dedication ceremony, the railroad, city and state rolled out the red carpet. Howard Simpson, the B&O President, Maryland Governor

Theodore McKeldin and Baltimore Mayor Tommy D’Alesandro watched as United Fruit Vice President J. Arthur Marquette threw a switch that started the conveyor system. There were 250 business and civic leaders of Baltimore and eastern cities present for the ceremony. The railroad even highlighted the new facility with the addition of fried bananas and banana shortcake to the dining car menus.





Above is a photo of a modern Chiquita Brands container ship that is now used to carry bananas.

All went well for a while. Unfortunately, it probably was not long enough for the railroad to recoup its expenses. In the 1960s, the banana companies, including United Fruit, radically changed their way of preparing the bananas for shipment and sale. While bananas had been moved to the consuming countries still on their stems, they started to remove the hands (10 or more bananas that grow together on the stem) from the stem at the banana plantation, wash the fruit and box it in the familiar banana box that you can see in today's grocery stores. The boxes were able to fit in the canvas pockets on the unloading cranes on the new pier, so it was not quite as big a deal as the next change. That was loading the boxes onto pallets that were lowered into the holds of the ships. There was no machinery on the B&O pier that would unload a pallet. So there was still the manual process of unloading the pallets onto the gantry cranes in

the hold of the ships. But finally, the last straw that really made the pier obsolete was loading the pallets into refrigerated containers that were then placed on container ships.

By the end of the 1960s, United Fruit moved their operation to Wilmington, Delaware. The B&O sold or leased all of the Locust Point rail-water facilities. In the spring of 1985, the Maryland Port Authority, unable to find any use for the unused banana pier, had it demolished.

Oddly enough, Wilmington continues to handle bananas and, in fact, in 2011 handled close to 1 million tons of bananas, making it the largest banana port in North America and second only to Antwerp in the world. The other United States ports that handle bananas are Gulfport, Mississippi; Galveston and Freeport, Texas; and Hueneme and San Diego, California.

United Fruit is now Chiquita Brands International; and while it

still imports bananas, it also sells pineapples and "Fresh Express" salads. Through the years, its main competitor in the banana trade was Standard Brands. Standard Brands is now Dole Fruit and has surpassed Chiquita in the sale of bananas. The other major company in the worldwide sale of bananas is DelMonte.

United Fruit has had a hard time in recent years. In 2007, it sold its twelve remaining ships of the Great White Fleet and charters them back to carry its bananas. This is something like the sale and leaseback used by the railroads and other companies.

Do not feel like the B&O was the only railroad that built a modern banana pier only to lose the business a few years later. The New York Central built a pier in Weehawken, New Jersey, in 1953. It replaced a very similar float operation to Baltimore's that operated out of Pier 3 in lower Manhattan. The NYC pier could hold 72 cars inside and had





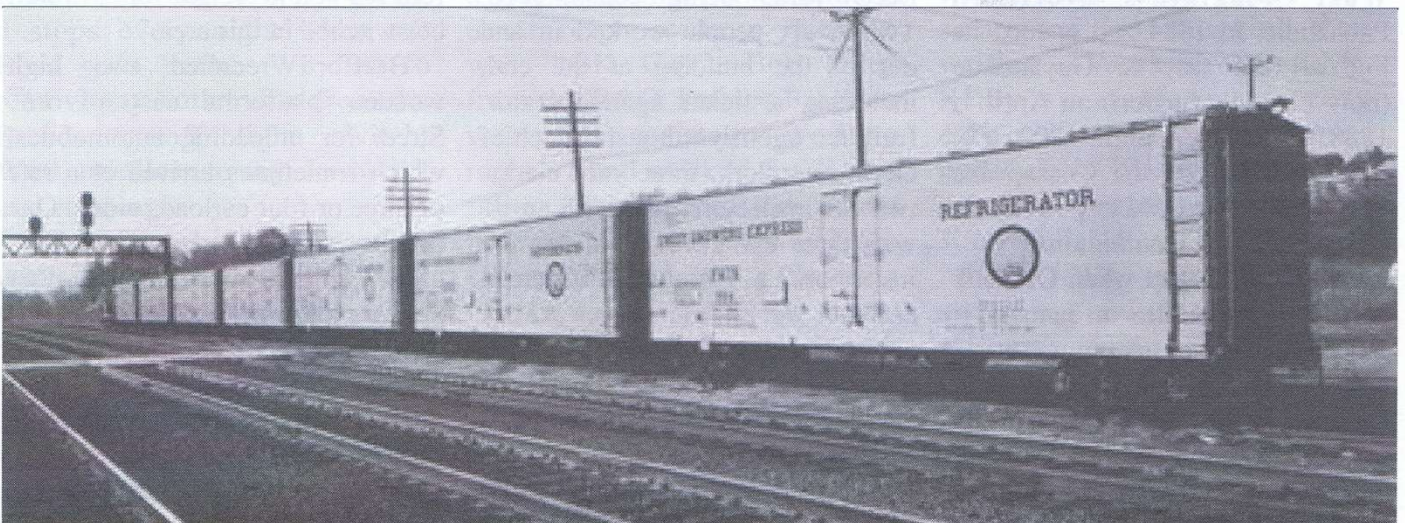
The photo on the left shows unloading a modern banana ship at the port of Wilmington, Delaware. On the right, is a photo of the Chiquita Brands facility. Unlike the B&O's Baltimore facility, it now looks like almost any other container port in the world.

storage track for another 144 cars. That pier's business was lost to Wilmington, Delaware, just as the B&O's.

Was the building of the B&O Banana Terminal at Locust Point one of the railroad's biggest wastes of money? Many think that it was. However, how was the management of the railroad to know that the shipping method of United Fruit and the other banana importers was to change so quickly after the pier was

constructed? The construction of the pier did sharply reduce the cost of loading the bananas and marine operation of the railroad in Baltimore. It got some of the Baltimore banana business away from the Pennsylvania Railroad in the pre-Staggers era when there were no contracts to protect keeping business away from a competing railroad. What do you think?

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A string of seven specially-marked banana reefers is shown probably at the Fruit Growers Express facility in Alexandria, Virginia. The car markings included a box that said the cars were to be returned to the B&O Agent at Locust Point, Maryland for banana loading.







