

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE GULFPORT BANANA TERMINAL

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Destruction of the Gulfport Banana Terminal on August 17, 1969, was substantial and an event of significant economic importance to the residents of Gulfport, the State, and Standard Fruit and Steamship Company.

A modern banana terminal is a highly specialized facility generally suited only to the handling of boxed, perishable fruits such as bananas, pineapples and plantains. A four hatch refrigerated ship containing 140,000 forty pound boxes of such fruit can normally be unloaded in less than ten hours - an average discharge rate of 280 tons per hour or 70 tons per hatch per hour. Normal break bulk general cargo discharges utilizing pallet boards and ships gear operate at a rate of 15-25 tons per hatch per hour. The discharge efficiency of a specialized banana facility such as the Gulfport Terminal is thus two to three times that of a conventional general cargo operation. However instead of a conventional 16-20 man cargo gang per hatch, the banana discharge utilizes about 30 men.

Banana terminals used by one or more tenants exist on the east, west and Gulf Coasts. These terminals are of various ages and degrees of sophistication. The Gulfport facility, completed in 1963 is one of the more modern and probably the most efficient terminal in the United States. The matter of efficiency is one encompassing both the adequacy of materials handling equipment and the willingness of labor to maintain high standards of performance. Gulfport labor is considered to be of high caliber in this regard.

The Gulfport Banana Terminal was constructed at a cost of approximately \$2.3 million. It was designed and constructed initially in an effort to attract business from either or both of the two major American banana importers, United Fruit Company and Standard Fruit and Steamship Company. The terminal was constructed during the time of the transition from imports of stems to the current method of box imports and all materials handling equipment was capable of receiving both stem and boxed fruit. Unfortunately for Gulfport neither of the two major importers took advantage of the availability of the new Gulfport facility and its use in early years was restricted to the smaller importers maintaining somewhat irregular schedules. Although the revenues generated by these smaller companies were not large and could not justify the Port's investment, their operations

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proved the efficiency of the terminal and the acceptability of Gulfport as a distribution point for bananas. The larger Companies began to take notice and in 1964 Standard Fruit began discharging one ship a week in Gulfport.

It is ironic that Hurricane "Betsy" in 1965 was one of the major factors in the total move of Standard Fruit terminal operations from New Orleans to Gulfport in 1967. "Betsy" caused tremendous damage in the New Orleans area, including the banana unloading facilities at Desire Street Wharf. Standard Fruit was able to make temporary repairs and to be back in business in 10 days on a scheduled but less efficient basis. During the interim, Standard utilized the Gulfport Terminal. The New Orleans operation was never returned to its previous degree of efficiency although equipment was being designed and constructed during the months following the storm to make this possible. In the meantime Standard Fruit reevaluated its decision to relocate to Gulfport and in April, 1967, moved its complete terminal operations.

This relocation had a number of ramifications. The Port of New Orleans, the nation's second largest, lost a valued, long time high tonnage customer and a considerable amount of "face." (The Chairman of the Board of Standard Fruit had recently been appointed to the Board of Commissioners of the Port of New Orleans.) The State Port at Gulfport gained a customer whose volume more than paid the debt service on the bonds issued for construction of the banana terminal; whose stevedore requirements exceeded 40,000 man hours per month; whose exports amounted to one ship per week and whose tonnage represented over 40 per cent of the total Gulfport volume. The Gulf Coast economy was very substantially sweetened by this event.

By the time Hurricane "Camille" hit Gulfport in 1969 the Port was being billed as the biggest banana port in the Gulf. (It was actually second only to the Port of New York in the entire United States.) Of the 32.9 million boxes of fruit imported by Standard Fruit in 1968, 15.3 moved through Gulfport. In addition, 76.4 thousand tons of general cargo moved through the Port bound for Central American ports.

At the time "Camille" struck it is evident that the banana terminal at the State Port was a very significant portion of the Port's business and a substantial contributor to the total economy of the area.

Before discussing the hurricane damage to the banana terminal and its reconstruction, it might be appropriate to describe the facility as it existed prior to "Camille." Figure I shows a general layout of the terminal and indicates the major elements of the material handling system -

the heart of the terminal. Basically it shows that boxes were removed from each of the four hatches through a pocket type gantry onto a wharf conveyor belt paralleling the ship. This wharf belt then fed onto a bridge belt extending from the wharf, to land. The bridge belt then fed directly onto the shipping belt which delivered fruit for refrigerated railroad cars and refrigerated trucks. The material handling system was relatively straight forward and uncomplicated except for two factors.

First, the banana gantries are of special and particular design. This type of machine was designed originally in the early twentieth century to handle banana stems and examples of these early designs are still being regularly utilized in some Central American ports. More modern examples currently are operating in more than a half dozen east, west and Gulf coast ports. As shown on Figure II the gantry consists of a Tower structure, main boom, auxillary boom, and marine leg. Parallel continuous chains are connected with cross bars at thirty two inch centers with pockets of neoprene or teflon lined cotton suspended between the cross-bars. Upon the advent of boxed fruit certain modifications were made to the traditional gantry design to provide support for the box during its transit through the gantry to prevent boxes turning over and fruit being damaged. The gantry is a major element of the terminal.

The second element of the original "pre-Camille" banana installation of peculiar design was the belt system. As noted earlier it was designed to handle both boxes and stems and belts were designed to be either flat or troughed - the former for boxes and the latter for stems. Since the industry is now totally converted to boxes, this sophistication was eliminated in the reconstruction.

Upon being warned of the possibility of "Camille" hitting the Gulfport area, Port officials took all possible precautions to minimize damage to the Port. At the banana terminal gantries were lashed down to the dock structure and marine legs lashed to the gantry towers; gantry drive motors located only a few feet above wharf level were removed and stored inland; conveyor belts were lashed to their supporting structures; stevedore equipment was stored inland; and the area cleared of material that could become wind borne projectiles. Much of this preparatory work was accomplished at great personal sacrifice by Port and Standard Fruit personnel who that night lost their own homes and belongings.

The records indicate that "Camille" is the most devastating hurricane to hit the Gulf Coast in modern times. No one, seeing the coast on Monday, August 18, 1969, would argue the point. Winds exceeding 150 miles per hour and waves 20 feet above mean low water battered the Port into an almost total wreck.

State and local officials reacted quickly with clean-up and reconstruction starting immediately. It is fortunate that they did. Just as Hurricane "Betsy" had been a factor in relocating Standard Fruit to Gulfport, it appeared that "Camille" might be responsible for driving the Company away. A meeting was held at the Terminal site on Wednesday, August 20, 1969, the damage assessed and a schedule for reconstruction established. The commitment of State officials at that time to stand behind 24 hour a day construction operations until the terminal could be put back into operation is probably the only reason that Standard Fruit is in Gulfport today.

The damage was incredible. All conveyors, 2400 linear feet in all, were destroyed. The four bridges connecting the wharf with the truck and rail car loading area were in the water and appeared bent beyond repair. Of the buildings and sheds nothing remained but the structural frames and, in many cases, these were bent beyond possible repair. As the result of careful preparations the gantries were only slightly damaged.

At the meeting of August 20, the State agreed to exert every effort to meet a deadline of September 8, only 19 days away.

It might be well to recognize that at that time Highway 90 paralleling the Coast was impassible and would remain so for 10 days; that phone communication with the outside world was almost impossible - and would remain so for almost two weeks; that power lines were down and power would not be available for more than two weeks; that local craftsmen were busy repairing hospitals, schools, and community facilities and that housing was extremely limited for skilled workers from outside the area; and that local residents all had personal problems - some of great magnitude.

In spite of these problems and many more the job was done. A spirit of cooperation and esprit de corps was evident among the contractors and material suppliers not common to the industry. Electric starters were found in Baton Rouge, Lake Charles and Pascagoula. Eighteen hundred feet of conveyor, normally requiring six to eight weeks for delivery was ordered and received from Pennsylvania in eight days. Conveyor belt was found in New Jersey and received in ten days. Temporary lights, metal siding, structural steel, paint, construction equipment, and other materials all had to be found and brought in over Highway 49, the only artery serving the area.

In the meantime Corps of Engineer officials let contracts for dredging the debris filled harbor and checked the 12 mile channel for obstructions. Mississippi Power

and Light personnel ran new power lines to the Port. Telephone Company workers installed the telephone and teletype equipment necessary to the banana terminals operation.

During this time Standard Fruit was forced to operate elsewhere. Bananas do not stop growing just because of a storm in Mississippi. Most of the fruit was brought in through New Orleans and Galveston. In both cases Standard was forced to work around schedules of competitors. Ship schedules were disrupted, distribution patterns upset and customers made unhappy. The banana business is a high volume, low profit type operation and under the circumstances imposed in the three weeks following "Camille" it has been estimated that Standard Fruit lost in excess of one million dollars.

On the morning of September 8, 1971, the Augustenburg arrived in Port with 110,000 boxes of bananas. Power was finally turned on at 3:00 A.M. that morning and millwrights who had been on the job for almost 24 hours started up and adjusted conveyors. The last conveyor was adjusted at 7:50 A.M. Stevedores who had been without work for three weeks reported at 8:00 A.M. and at 8:30 the discharge of fruit began. As the morning wore on the tempo of the discharge picked up and it was evident that conditions had returned to normal.

That afternoon Governor Williams with members of his staff, local officials, and Standard Fruit representatives rededicated the Gulfport Banana Terminal and reinstated to the State Port at Gulfport an essential part of its operation. The economy of the Gulf Coast was revitalized by the \$50,000 weekly payroll and Port revenues were again generated to help service the Port debt and pay for its operations.

The restoration of the Gulfport Banana Terminal is a shining example of the way Mississippi State and local officials have learned to work hand in hand with industry to the benefit of all concerned.

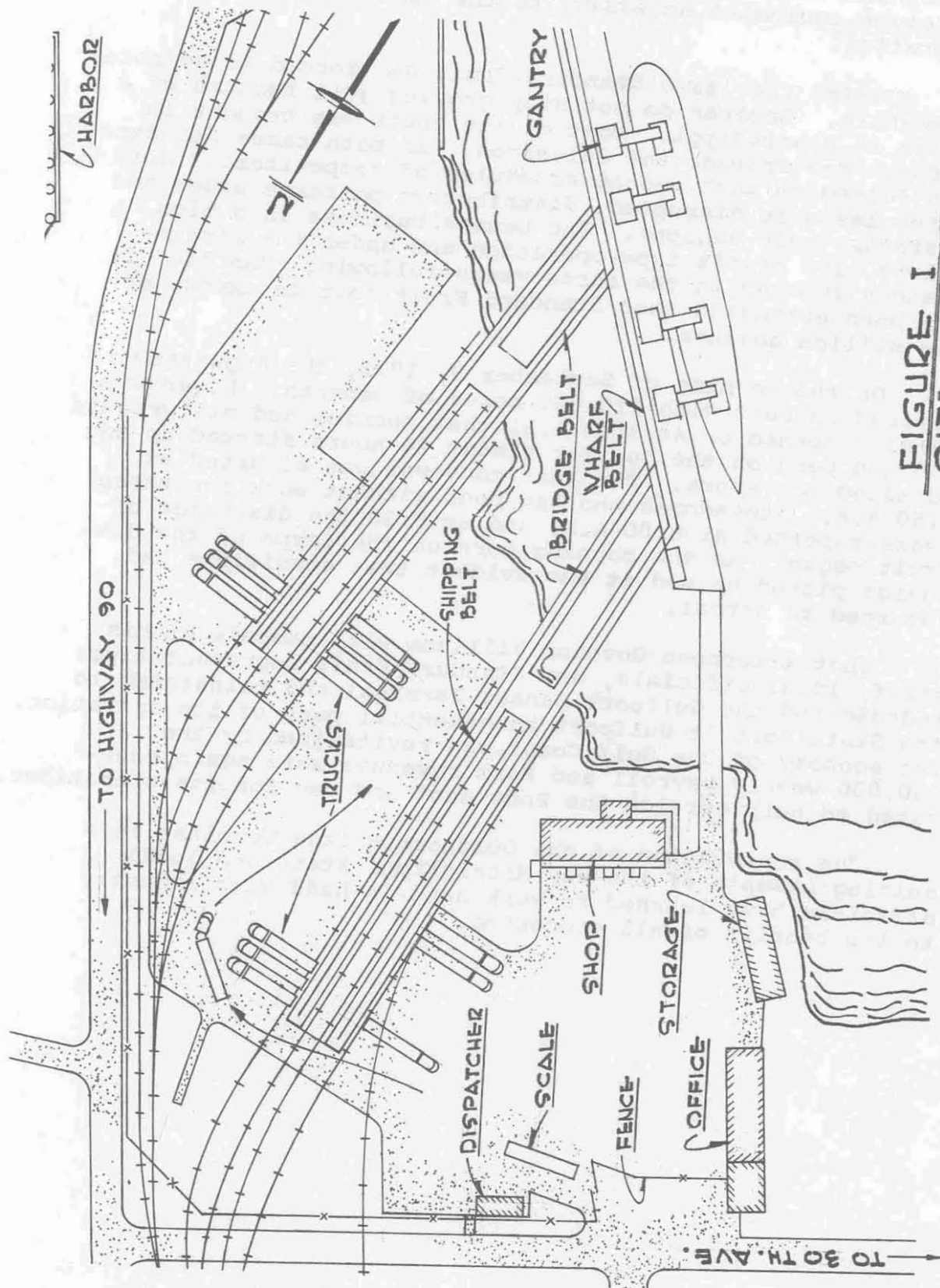


FIGURE I
SITE PLAN

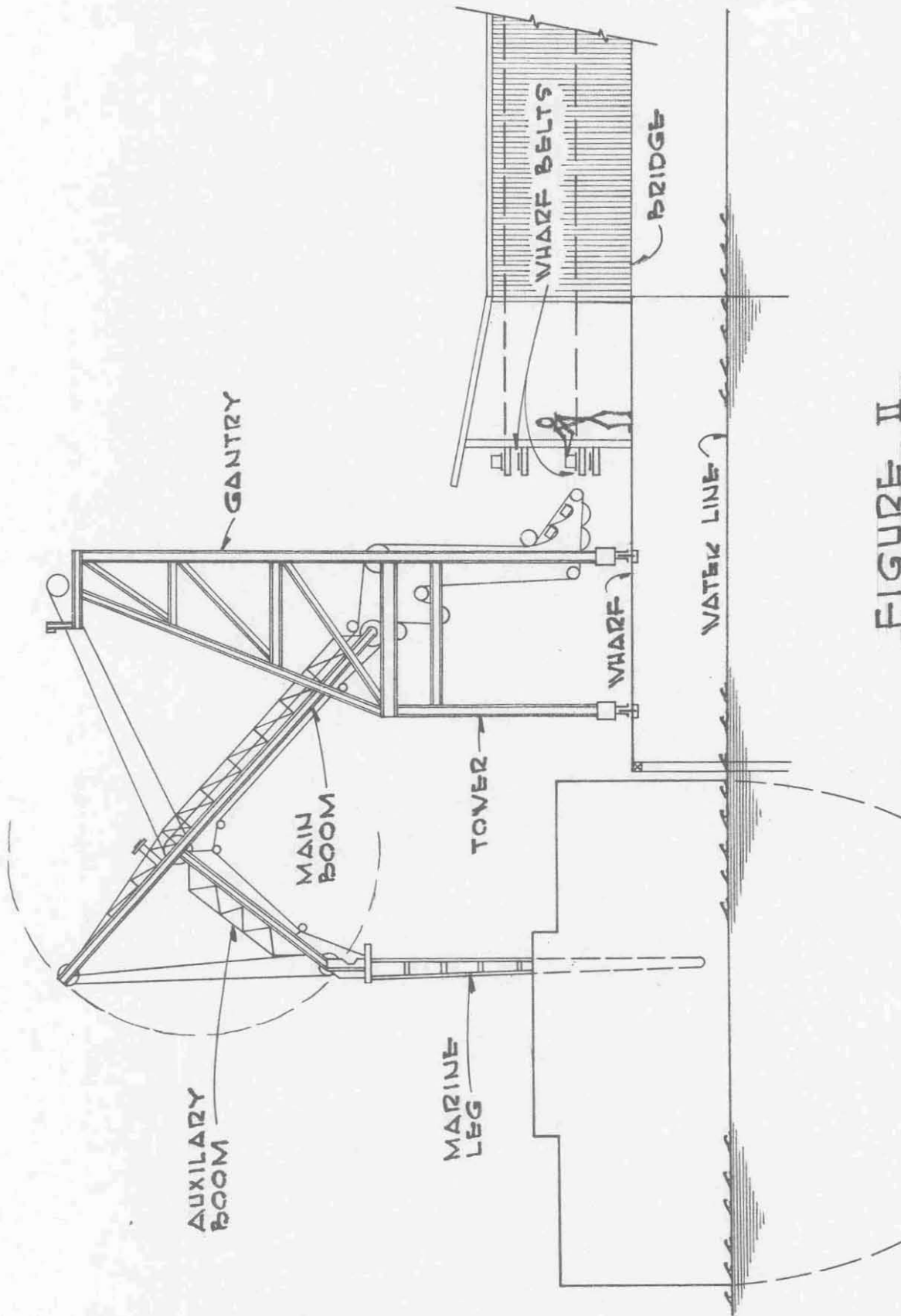


FIGURE II
SECTION THROUGH WHARF