

Iowa's Passenger Rail Experience... Continues

By Beth Wilson

Positioned along the 42nd parallel, Carroll, Iowa, was destined for a mention in American rail annals. Half of the entire county was included in a federal land grant aiming to advance the country's western expansion. When the eastern terminus of the Union Pacific Railway was designated by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, railroad builders and their investors aspired Iowa to be a link in the illustrious transcontinental connection.

In its wake were transformed spaces, new emerging places – the same scenario playing out in the rest of America's westward expansion. By the mid-20th Century, most railroad companies had abandoned passenger rail, and many communities were left with disconnected depots. Some were lost. Some stand forgotten. But some are becoming 21st Century destinations – not necessarily passenger rail connections but community connections in all manner of forms.

As Iowa continues its present-day exploration of and distinct role in an emerging modern, high-speed passenger rail network, the state's railroad past – its tracks, its structures, its communities, its legacy – still marks its future in mobility.

Connecting Carroll Again

The Cedar Rapids and Missouri Railroad pushed through Carroll in 1867 in its sprint toward Council Bluffs and its place in history. Almost immediately, the Chicago



& Northwestern Railroad Company – a line that had similarly emerged through the gradual assemblage of smaller railroads – negotiated a 99-year lease on the line, eventually incorporating it into its own system.

The Chicago & Northwestern was a big player, ultimately stretching across nine states with 9,000 miles of track – 1,022 of them in Iowa.

The C&NW became known for its thrifty operation. Management purchased a great deal of second-hand equipment, earning the line a nickname to match its acronym – Cheap and Nothing Wasted. Through successful expansion and consolidation, the line became the largest and most profitable of the Midwestern railroads.

Following the Civil War, as railroad competition resumed, many lines set

out to polish their public image and expand ridership. By the early 1890s, the railroad had arrived at what would become its easily recognized ball and bar emblem. The company matched it with its new slogan – The Best of Everything. Sleeping cars, dining cars, reclining chairs, an observation lounge – complete with attendant and telephone – electric lights, steam heat, shorter, faster trains, partnerships with connecting railroads to create through service, improved steam locomotives and motive power investment in heavier steel rail, hardwood cross-ties, automatic signals, new bridges and double tracking on high-volume routes.

While attention to operations, equipment, infrastructure and customer service was extensive,

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C&NW officials recognized the importance of not only the transportation connection but the face of that connection – the depot. The railroad hired architect Charles S. Frost, whose major client for the next three decades would be the Chicago & North Western Railroad. Frost's designs were behind some 200 C&NW stations.

His work in Carroll, Iowa, resulted in a grand brick and stone design that replaced the much simpler original wooden depot. The classic Victorian Romanesque-style buildings completed in 1896 – a passenger depot, a baggage room and a Railway Express Agency freight room – greeted 18 passenger trains a day.

In subsequent years, several remodeling efforts eliminated signature details of Frost's work – the corner turret and original slate roof were lost, and modifications to the dormers changed the roofline. The depot's diminishing grandeur paralleled dwindling passenger

service. The last passenger train stopped in Carroll in 1959.

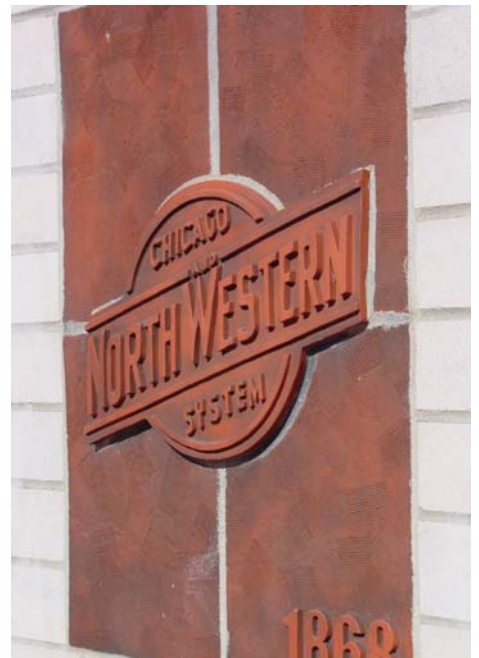
The C&NW Railroad continued to utilize the Carroll structures as office space until the mid-1990s, when parking, storage and circulation needs led the company to seek an alternate location. The depot had already been rescued from the City's most recent urban renewal efforts and even achieved federal preservation status after a 1987 architecture study brought it attention. But it now stood empty, purposeless. The C&NW even considered demolition.

"That's when we became concerned," explains Rick Hunsaker, executive director of the Region XII Council of Governments.

Hunsaker had been invited to a local meeting where discussion among members of the Chamber of Commerce, the Carroll Area Development Corporation and other interested community members led to action.

"We immediately started working on protecting it," says Hunsaker,

recalling the fate at that time of another historic rail station in Jefferson, Iowa. "I had recently driven past the depot. Then, a few weeks later, I drove by and glanced over to take another look. It was gone. Wiped off the face of the earth. Our concern was that this could happen in Carroll. Boom! The buildings could be gone in



an instant.”

Barry Bruner had himself seen buildings disappear. A life-long resident of Carroll, he remembers city’s urban renewal project in the early 1970s, when progress replaced the historic court house and opera house.

“When I saw those come down, that, I think, was a turning point,” says Bruner, a lawyer with Bruner & Bruner. “When the next urban renewal project came up, and it looked as if the City was going to acquire all this land and tear down these other buildings around the depot, that’s when a bunch of us starting talking and got involved.”

Their early efforts laid the groundwork for a future depot vision. Making a case before the state historical board in 1990, supporters won a designation on the National Register of Historic Places, giving the depot special preservation status, and making it eligible for federal investment. The unofficial “Depot Group” began conversations with C&NW representatives in Chicago, exploring renovation possibilities.

This ad hoc committee of locals committed to action in order to save and renovate the C&NW depot – or “the gang,” as Hunsaker refers to them – formed a non-profit organization to focus restoration efforts. When Union Pacific acquired C&NW in 1996, the Carroll Depot



Centre, Ltd., acquired new interest from area businesses shipping on UP’s lines. With a strong voice, determined visionaries negotiated a 99-year lease on the depot for one dollar.

“It was the work of a lot of local volunteers,” says Hunsaker of the important step. “They brought local skills to the project. One guy in construction understood materials and cost. Someone was involved with banking. We had attorneys.”

The next stop was pursuing grants. Region XII was successful in directing federal transportation, state, city and county dollars toward restoration efforts. Corporate donors, utility companies, Union Pacific and private individuals stepped forward. WalMart, in whose parking lot the depot now sat, donated a portion of the adjacent land immediately surrounding the depot. Along with land donated by the City of Carroll, the original railroad park has now been recreated.

“It was a matter of knocking on a lot of doors,” remembers Hunsaker. “We tried to overturn some rocks here and there.”

Exterior renovation of the passenger terminal, baggage room and freight building – including walkways, lighting and landscaping – was completed in Fall 2004. Original Chicago Northwestern blueprints helped hired architectural firm JEO Consulting Group recreate the depot’s original roofline, complete with turret and gables. A second federal grant has been secured, and a local company has already donated furnace equipment. While the historic character of the original depot will be preserved, Hunsaker notes necessary deviations.

“We’ll maintain the feel that it’s a depot while we provide for the necessities of the modern office.”

Because, he explains, salvation and renovation make up only a portion of the Carroll Depot Centre’s vision.

“We always wanted to see the building in use,” says Hunsaker, enthusiastic that the Chamber of Commerce and the Carroll Area Development Corporation are seriously considering relocation

to the depot. “It’s part of our wish for the heritage of the community to come out, and, also, for historic preservation to be seen in a good light. Not just a pretty building but a viable one.”

Hunsaker adds that the renovation project had reverberations beyond the depot. Once change commenced at the rail station, the transformation began to spill over into the adjacent business district.

“One of the things that’s happened that I feel we should take some credit for is that Carroll redid its downtown – tore down the ugly 1970s canopies that hid storefronts, improved lighting, lots of community beautification. The depot restoration pre-dated all that. The depot was the catalyst, the spark.”

Just As It Once Was

When the Chicago & North Western Railroad drew up town lots in a tiny settlement called Carroll City, “it was nothing more than a hamlet of 11 residents and prairie grass,” writes Marilyn Schirck Setzler in her book *This Place Called Carroll County, Iowa*. By the turn of the century, three railroads ran through the county seat, moving passengers, farm and mill products and manufactured goods, and laying the tracks to Carroll’s future.

“Rail had a real tie to the city’s beginnings,” says Hunsaker. “There are still people that remember things at the depot.”

Bruner finds his passion for the Chicago & North Western depot restoration is tied to another piece of Carroll’s rail history. The “other” depot – that of the Chicago Great Western – was torn down during the City’s first urban renewal project.

“I suppose my love for trains started there, as a 5th or 6th grader, and a big fan of the Baltimore Colts. Dad and I would get on a train – it was two passenger cars, an engine and a mail car – and we’d take off at 11 o’clock on a Saturday night, and get to Minneapolis about 7 in the morning. We’d go to a Baltimore



Colts-Vikings game. Then hop on a train and take it back home. And those are some of the greatest memories I have.”

Bruner says the Carroll community is destined to build new memories, that the rebirth of the Chicago & North Western depot is an opportunity for it to serve the community in its 21st Century role. He hopes to see the park area in front of the depot become a popular public place – an area for farmers’ markets, art festivals and other community activities.

“Depots had parks. And people came and used them, relaxing and waiting for the trains to arrive. That’s where they held their send offs for the troops,” says Bruner. “It was the center of the community, and I’m hoping that it can be again.”

And trains will still be a part of the experience. While freight traffic under the C&NW had fallen to 5-10 trains a day, the UP trains are projected to increase in future years to over 100 a day.

“Most people’s contact with trains today is waiting at a crossing,” laments Bruner. “If we’re ever going

to have a shot that people here understand the significance of rail to Carroll’s legacy, it would be in preserving a building like this . . . It’s important in the fabric of the community, knowing something about its history, knowing that the trains were an important part of that history. People are going to know where they came from.”

Conduit to History: Railroad Fever and the Race Across Iowa

The transfer of county records and offices was made under cover of night. When residents of Carroll County, Iowa, awoke the next morning, a relatively unknown collection of crude buildings constituting the town of Carroll – laid out by the Chicago & North Western Railroad just months earlier in the Summer of 1867 – was their new county seat. History was on a new track.

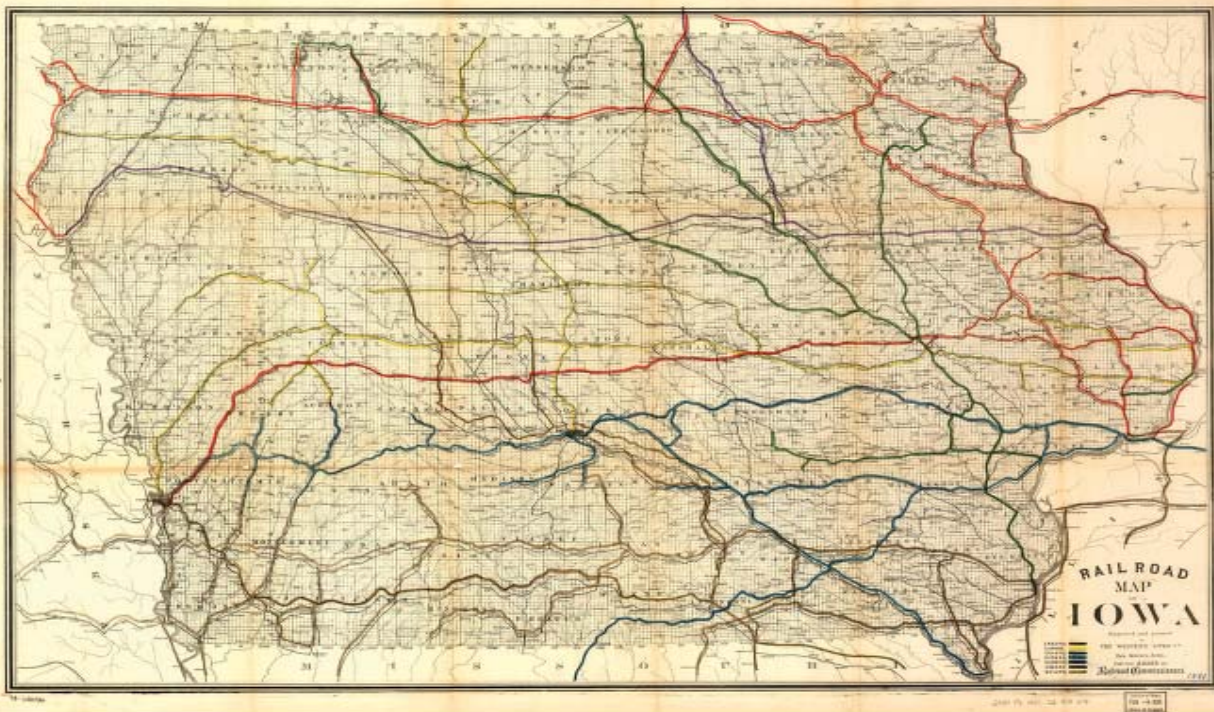
Railroads were transforming the Iowa prairie in the second half of the 19th Century. The U.S. Congress in 1856 granted to the state a tract of land to advance the westward

march of rail – and progress – and to settle the remaining frontier. Vital connections to markets and possibilities were long in coming for many eager Iowans.

Four railroads had by that time laid track stretching to the Mississippi River. The Chicago & Rock Island had reached Rock Island, across the river from Davenport. The Galena & Chicago Union had made it to Fulton, across from Clinton. The Illinois Central was poised in Dunleith, looking toward Dubuque. And the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy had finished a leg to East Burlington, sister town to Iowa’s Burlington.

New ventures in Iowa – with public land grants and private investment – continued on the western side of the Mississippi. The Mississippi & Missouri, the Chicago, Iowa & Nebraska, the Dubuque & Sioux City and the Burlington & Missouri River all began to redefine fortunes and futures.

Recognizing the revolutionary impact of rail connections, every community in Iowa was eager to be a destination, and many courted the railroad companies. As progress on



the Mississippi & Missouri inched westward toward the then-state capital Iowa City, the company split the line, offering a branch to Muscatine. Fearful of wavering commitment, Iowa City offered a \$50,000 bonus if the city's rail connection was effective by the New Year. The distance to Muscatine was shorter, and the first passenger train to operate in the state of Iowa departed Davenport on November 20, 1855, rolling into the small town amid jubilation.

But the builders had no time to waste celebrating – not with \$50,000 hanging in the balance. It was 30 degrees below zero that New Year's Eve when the railroad found itself only 1,000 feet short of their Iowa City target. Despite the frigid weather, the crew picked up the pace, dropping ties and spiking rails and watching the clock. With only minutes to spare, the triumphant signal was given for the train engine to parade into the capital.

Westward rails slowed as civil war captured attention and resources. But as strife tore the nation apart, the transcontinental railroad transformed from aspiration to necessity. It would join the Union to the western territories, and Iowa was a critical

conduit. When President Lincoln signed the Pacific Railway Bill in 1862, he established Council Bluffs as the eminent railroad's eastern terminus. Up until this point, only the Mississippi and Missouri had been laying track toward that destination on the Missouri River. But now four frontrunners emerged, each hoping to claim their role in history.

Greenville M. Dodge was an east coast civil engineer who had moved westward with the expansion of the railroads. When he led the M&M survey party across Iowa to Council Bluffs in 1853, he discovered his new home. From there, he would lead the 4th Iowa Infantry and eventually gain fame during the Civil War for his skill and speed in rebuilding the bridges and railroads destroyed by Confederate forces. He resigned his Union Army position to return to Council Bluffs in 1866 and accept an appointment to serve as chief engineer for the Union Pacific Railroad.

Meanwhile, a new contender had entered the race across Iowa. The Cedar Rapids & Missouri River Railroad began laying track in 1861, pushing through numerous Iowa communities – including Carroll – as it headed for Council

Bluffs. On January 22, 1867, the connection from Chicago to the designated eastern terminus of the Transcontinental Railroad was complete. And on May 10, 1869, Iowa took its deserved place in history as Dodge and others drove the golden spike at Promontory Summit.

Connecting Iowa Tomorrow

Gary Billmeyer waxes poetic about the Union Pacific's dome liners, about the City of Los Angeles, the City of San Francisco and the Burlington Northern's California Zephyr. He remembers sitting in his travel office on the fourth floor of Younkers department store in downtown Des Moines in 1970, making arrangements for Iowans on their way to Denver, some all the way to California. Others heading east to Chicago, with a few making a connection to warmer climates.

In his 36 years as a passenger rail specialist, Billmeyer – vice president of the Iowa Association of Railroad Passengers – has watched the industry evolve. Union Pacific's departure from passenger rail. Amtrak's arrival in 1971. Vince, the Burlington Northern ticket agent in the Osceola station. Handwriting rail

tickets on airline stock. The 1973 oil crisis. The onset of the Computer Age. Iowan skiers booking trips on the Rocky Mountain Rocket. Through it all, he says his passenger rail business has remained relatively steady. He might book 10 train trips a month, and leisure travel continues to dominate. He's helped passengers who don't like to fly, and with those who can't due to disability.

"And not a day goes by when someone doesn't ask, 'When is the train going to go through Des Moines?'" says Billmeyer.

The answer lies in a work-in-progress: *The Midwest Regional Rail System*.

"It'd be the first train service we'd have in the capital city in over 25 years."

Over the past decade, Iowa and eight other Midwestern states have advanced a 21st Century passenger rail network from concept to strategy. A Chicago-anchored hub-and-spoke system stretching 3,000 miles across nine states aims to deliver competitive service for short- to medium-distance trips, expanded choice for underserved communities and individuals unable to drive, an attractive selling point for workforce recruitment and an option for regions addressing heavy congestion.

The idea was hatched a decade ago when member state Departments of Transportation met at a Mississippi Valley Association conference and began sharing concerns.

"Each state was dealing with Amtrak on its own and trying to determine where they wanted to go relative to rail. Directors said, 'Wait a minute. We need to take a regional approach to providing state-supported services,'" recalls John Hey, executive officer with the Iowa Department of Transportation's Office of Rail Transportation. "More frequencies, better service, safer equipment – all of those things that you'd get from a regional system."

Sharing existing rights-of-way with freight (and in some areas commuter rail), achieving volume discounts through system-wide

fleet procurement, operating with advanced train equipment capable of high speeds, swift run-through service and endpoint turnarounds (resulting in more train miles per hour of service), and utilizing strategically located maintenance facilities (that pool service costs), the regional system is designed to take advantage of economies of scale. Offering reduced travel times, increased frequencies, improved reliability, an accessible travel option and intermodal connectivity reaching underserved communities, the regional system – say supporters – is destined to succeed. A 2000 economic analysis concluded that except for Amtrak's Northeast Corridor, a Midwest passenger rail system offers the highest level of economic benefit associated with rail investment anywhere in the nation.

For Eliot Keller, it isn't calculation. It's observation.

"I live three blocks from Interstate 80. I hear the roar all night long," says the Iowa City resident. "Clearly, that's a transportation corridor."

The proposed Iowa route, says Keller, excursion chair with the Iowa Association of Railroad Passengers, matches the state's travel patterns,

with heaviest traffic between major metro areas – Omaha, Des Moines, Iowa City, the Quad Cities.

The Midwest Regional Rail System's path from Chicago to Omaha will connect Iowa along the tracks of the old Rock Island Railroad – what is today the Iowa Interstate Railroad – running through Davenport, Iowa City, Newton, Des Moines and Atlantic. Feeder bus service will further connect the outlying communities of Sioux City, Fort Dodge, Ames, Cedar Falls and Cedar Rapids. The system layout is designed to provide a rail station within a one-hour drive and/or a feeder bus station within a 30-minute drive of 90 percent of the population.

Iowa is currently served by two daily Amtrak trains operating between Chicago and the West Coast. The California Zephyr on the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe route passes through the southern portion of the state, and the Southwest Chief serves Fort Madison in the state's southeast corner. Iowa ridership broke a record in FY2005, with 61,418 passengers making connections on the national rail carrier. An analysis prepared for the nine state Departments of Transportation in

MIDWEST REGIONAL PASSENGER RAIL SYSTEM





Photo Courtesy Chigao & Northwestern Histori-

the MWRRS. “Other states’ plans are to expand or extend [existing] service, but in Iowa it’s an entirely new and different route. The help it would bring to the state in terms of intermodal capacity and service is really large.”

And economic growth is on Keller’s mind. As general manager of KZIA radio in Cedar Rapids, he wants to see area development that expands the company’s listening audience and customer base. Passenger rail, he says, is a vehicle for long-term growth. Rail service and rail stations together can create a stimulus for economic development. And that’s good for business.

“We’re faced with a situation in Iowa where either we’ve got to add this regional system, and continue to support the national system, or we’re going to become a Third World transportation state,” says Keller, whose company stays involved with the region’s chambers of commerce, convention and visitor bureaus and economic development organizations. “From an economic development standpoint, that’s a potential formula for disaster.”

Keller points to passenger rail success around the country – in ridership figures, in transit-oriented development. But, he adds, success also comes in a much simpler form.

The routes and service on the table offer Iowa important mobility options. Keller sums up the purpose of the MWRRS succinctly, as “offering people more choices.”

That’s particularly pertinent today, with Iowa facing rising gasoline costs and reduced air service through airport and carrier loss. An effective passenger rail system, Keller points out, comes with the added attraction of service in between hubs.

“The little towns in Iowa – places like Creston, Osceola – could never have air service based on point-to-point.”

Connections. Opportunity. Economic development. Choice. All on the same track. But it’s a \$7.7 billion track, and the 10-year implementation plan depends on significant federal investment. Hey and Keller agree that plans for a regional rail system can not proceed without a federal program.

Hey says the MWRRS members will continue to prepare for the project’s initiation – finalizing an environmental analysis, updating forecasts, performing risk analysis – while decisionmakers debate of the necessity of a federal commitment.

“A lot of people support [the

MWRRS] – from the politicos, the governors, the representatives – but I think everybody is realistic, saying, “This needs to have some kind of a federal focus,” says Hey. “The question is, is there the funding available and does Congress want to make this a priority?”

Kliewer is hopeful that Iowa will soon join other Midwestern states in the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Compact – a legislative action among Midwestern states that aims to coalesce the strength of elected officials. Using the success of the Council of Northeast Governors in the Northeast Corridor as a precedent, the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission brings together governors and state legislators, as well as the private sector, to speak with one focused voice. While state DOTs perform the necessary technical preparations, Kliewer says the Commission is working to [lay the necessary investment track.]

“State elected officials are the most effective at working on members of Congress and others to both educate and obtain better funding for passenger rail,” she explains. “It takes federal responsibility. And that’s what we are trying to educate people to understand – that passenger rail is an integral part of an intermodal system

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that would best serve our region. And that it currently doesn’t have the kind of funding that other modes of transportation do.”

“We’ve made the mistake in this country of allowing the modes to be addressed separately, and not looking at the whole transportation infrastructure as a single system,” he says, pointing to the intermodal nature of modern life. “That’s really how the transportation system is used. When you look at that broader basis, passenger rail just fits right into a transportation system that our state, our region and our country needs.”

What some might regard as cliché, Keller – again, from where he sits – deems realism.

“I live about an hour from the Field of Dreams,” he says, referring to the baseball diamond in the middle of an Iowa cornfield made famous by Kevin Costner. “If you build it, they will come. We’ve seen this again and again and again. Look at the Trinity Railway Express. Texans are getting out of their vehicles, and they can’t build the [park-and-ride] spaces fast enough. All around the country. If a transportation system is built well, run well, promoted well, it gets significant usage.

With a future regional rail network in place, Billmeyer says rail travel bookings will see a significant increase, as Iowa business travelers head to Omaha, Chicago and Milwaukee, as Iowa State and University of Iowa students head home on break, as residents in Iowa’s smaller communities tap into a new mobility option, as elderly and disabled individuals see their choices expand, as the state’s Capitol sits walking distance from the Des Moines station.

“This will open a lot of doors.”