

Evansville's Railroads

by Ruth Ann Montgomery

In the 1840s and 1850s Rock County was situated perfectly as a cross roads between several developing markets. The east-west routes connected Milwaukee to Dubuque or Galena, Illinois. The north-south routes linked Chicago to Madison and points west.

Transportation was the vital link between these markets. For Evansville residents, the Beloit and Madison Road, the northern branch of the Chicago and Galena Railroad seemed the most promising vehicle for transporting goods to market and receiving merchandise from Chicago.

In 1848, the Wisconsin Legislature chartered the Beloit and Madison Railroad and the company's engineers plotted three possible routes. Once the charter was complete the Beloit and Madison agents began selling stock in the company. By December 1849, all stock available for sale to the public had been purchased, mostly on promissory notes.

Of the three routes planned, the one favored by Evansville residents passed through Union township. From Beloit to Footville to Evansville to Brooklyn and on to Madison, the route bypassed Janesville, much to the chagrin of the county seat's politicians and businessmen.

By 1854, the rails had reached north to Afton and a depot built in that village. Crews were grading the line to Footville and the wooden ties to support the rails had been purchased. However, the iron rails that were manufactured in England had not arrived and the railroad completion was delayed.

The right-of-way for the rails had already been settled in Evansville. In 1854, local businessmen, Henry and George Spencer and Lorenzo and Cyrus Preston sold land along Allen's Creek in Section 27 and deeded it to the railroad for \$1 per transaction. The Janesville Gazette reported that Evansville would be "one of the best stations on the road, settled with an enterprising and industrious people".

A financial panic in 1855 stopped the road at Footville and it was eight years before Evansville would see its first train arrive in the village. In 1862, the railroad company reorganized using the same name as before.

The stock agents of the Beloit and Madison line asked the residents of Union, Magnolia, Porter and Brooklyn townships to raise \$15,000. When the subscription was complete, the company promised to lay tracks from Magnolia to Evansville.

The company offered to take the old stock purchased in the 1850s at seventy cents on the dollar and issue new preferred stock on promissory notes. Stock buyers were to pay 41 down on each share and 10% a month until after the road was built. It was expected that the stock would be paid in full within one

year. The Beloit-Madison Railroad agreed to lay the iron rail and maintain the road.

The agents for the sale of stock canvassed the citizens for three days and failed to raise the necessary \$15,000. The Beloit-Madison Railroad officials then threatened to abandon the Evansville link and take the road four miles east of the village, or to the west through the Sugar River Valley.

Frantic letters went out to Evansville area residents serving as soldiers in the Civil War. The soldiers and the community responded to the threats of the railroad and raised the money. Local residents Henry Spencer, Nelson Winston and Isaac Bennett each purchased \$1,000 in stock. Wisconsin's 13th Regimental surgeon and Evansville resident, Dr. John M. Evans, sent back his subscription for \$300 for six shares of stock.

By July 27, 1863 trains were through to Evansville. The day express left Evansville at 8:20 a.m. and arrived back from Chicago at 4:25 p.m.

In 1864, the Chicago and Northwestern Railway Company consolidated with the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad Company, owners of the Beloit and Madison line.

The new transportation route meant many changes in the way farmers and merchants marketed and received their goods. Shipments of grain and livestock to Chicago markets increased the income of local farmers and decreased the produce lost in shipment over muddy and sometimes impassable dirt roads.

Local merchants purchased goods in the Chicago markets and shipped them to Evansville for distribution to their customers. No longer did they need to rely on wagon loads of material. The rail cars offered a safer mode of delivery. Hotels, liverys, warehouses and lumber yards prospered near the railroad depot.

Railroad transportation improved steadily and in the 1870s, Evansville was one of the main stops on the Chicago & Northwestern railroad. A local newspaper reporter counted twenty-six trains in twenty-four hours in 1875.

By 1879, there were so many trains scheduled to meet in Evansville that the railroad company had to install a side track, east of the depot. The route was well traveled and Evansville was the half-way point between the depots at Baraboo, Wisconsin and Harvard, Illinois. Increasing business required that the railroad make accommodations for these trains.

On the property owned by the railroad in Evansville, there was a depot, a pump house and a windmill tower to supply water for the steam engines. A well was sunk and pipes laid to a tank. When the windmill failed, a steam-powered engine supplied power for pumping water. There was also a coal shed as the trains needed to refuel with coal and water at nearly every depot.

The Chicago and Northwestern Railroad continually expanded its routes, north and west of Evansville. The new rail lines enticed new settlers in the West, primarily, Minnesota and the Dakotas.

The lines also supplied the U.S. military troops that drove out the Native Americans and made room for settlers. A July 1876 report noted that regiments of cavalry had passed through Evansville on their way to Bismarck, Dakota Territory, to reinforce General Terry after Custer's battle with Sitting Bull at Little Big Horn.

The railroad brought many visitors to the village. President Rutherford Hayes made a whistle stop appearance at the Evansville depot in September 1878. "It was a fine sight to see a real live veritable president", according to one local resident.

Less welcome guests were the tramps, homeless men who rode the railroad cars from city to city. Village residents feared that Evansville would be overrun with "this hoard of worthless human beings." A vigilante committee was appointed to protect the citizens. When the village could afford a law enforcement officer and a small jail, the tramps were taken to the lock-up.

From 1872 until the connector line was built between Janesville and Evansville in 1886, there was a constant cry from Janesville leaders that they wanted a connection with the Chicago Northwestern Route at Evansville. The new line was called the cut-off and saved 15 miles of travel for trains arriving in Janesville that were bound for the north and west. A fast train could make the trip in less than thirty minutes.

By the 1880s, Evansville was linked to cities from coast to coast. The farmer and manufacturer in Evansville, through his agent, the buyer or salesman, had access to markets on both sides of the continent. At the same time, the industries and businessmen became dependent on the railroad to ship goods in and out of the village. Baker Manufacturing, the village's largest industry added side tracks to its foundry in the 1880s. Hand trucks were used to get materials from the main track.

Surrounded by warehouses, lumber yards and factories, the depot was the center of transportation activities. In 1882, the Evansville depot caught fire. Fierce winds and bitter cold hindered the work of the firemen and though they spent long hours trying to control the blaze, the depot was a total loss.

Village trustees, Allen Baker and James Powles contacted the railroad administrators immediately and were assured they would rebuild the structure. A birds-eye view of the city drawn in 1883, shows the restored depot at the eastern extension of Church Street.

The railroad company built a new coal shed along the Janesville cut-off. The new shed was the site associated with Evansville's first ghost story. On May 31, 1887, James A Flowers, a railroad employee was thrown from a coal car he was riding into the shed. He was crushed beneath the wheels of the car and killed.

On still nights through the winter of 1887, the railroad men said they could see the ghost of Flowers moving through the coal yard with a lantern. The spirit wandered near the tracks, even when a train was coming and train men were afraid of hitting the ghost. The following February, the coal shed mysteriously burned to the ground.

The railroad had helped bring prosperity to village businessmen and industrialists. By the 1880s, many could afford to travel for pleasure and spent winter months in the south or California. Anxious for the revenues generated by these travelers, the railroad created attractive vacation packages. Trips to Yellowstone to see the geysers were also popular with tourists.

Special rates also were given to potential land investors along the new routes in the West. Tobacco buyer and local entrepreneur, Almeron Eager, traveled on one of the excursion trains and found the railroads so busy that they were running double cars and the accommodation were still crowded.

It was the income producing transportation provided by the railroad that interested businessmen and farmers most. Cheese, tobacco, sheep and cattle, windmills, butter, and grains were shipped from Evansville.

The livestock buyers kept railroad shipping yards busy as they loaded freight cars with livestock for the market in Chicago. By the 1890s, cattle and sheep were being brought to Evansville farms from the Dakotas and Montana. Farmers and stock buyers unloaded the animals at the depot and herded them to local farms to be fed until they were ready to send to market.

Businessmen and tourists were also provided income for the railroads. Passenger service became more luxurious as trains were lighted with electric lights and hotel-like accommodations were created in the traveling cars.

The palace drawing room sleeping cars were added to passenger trains running out of Chicago. There was a buffet, smoking and library car where "gentlemen can while away their spare hours." Meals were served "which cannot be surpassed in any hotel in the United States," according to advertising by the Chicago Northwestern Railway.

By the early 1900s there were 13 northbound and 14 southbound passenger and freight trains arriving at the Evansville depot each week day. Some trains did not run on Sunday.

Evansville business and political leaders began to agitate for a new depot, based on the large numbers of trains passing through the city. The railroad promised a new depot by 1911, but it was not started until 1912. The reports of shipping to and from the Evansville rail yards in the years prior to the building of the new depot gave the railroad company ample reason to keep the Evansville community happy with their facilities and service.

The new building was constructed of brick on railroad company land directly north of the 1883 depot. The new structure was ninety feet in length and twenty-four feet wide. There was a waiting room at the north end of the building, a baggage room, smoking room and ticket booth. The old depot became the storage area for freight.

In the early 1900s, railroads held sway over the major transportation routes. When owners of automobiles, buses, and trucks began to demand better highways, the railroad companies lobbied for routes that did not cross rail road tracks.

In the early 1920s Highway 13 from Janesville to Evansville (later named Highway 14) was built and state law required that the road avoid crossing railroad tracks wherever possible. Evansville's Union street was created so that the highway turned north before reaching the tracks.

Truck transportation meant that farmers could transport livestock and grains directly from their farms and the use of rail transportation began to decline. Railroad companies complained that the trucks were unregulated but the popularity of the trucks for shipping continued to increase.

Major manufacturers, including the Baker Manufacturing company relied on the railroads to bring in pig iron, coal and other materials. However, truck transportation proved more efficient and gradually replaced railroad transportation.

After World War II, with the development of the Interstate Highway system, demand for rail service declined dramatically and the railroad companies began to abandoned services and eventually railroad tracks.

In 1977, the Chicago and Northwestern Railway abandoned the line from Beloit to Evansville. An early attempt to close service and abandoned the line had failed. This time, although there were protested from manufacturers in Footville and other locations, the company was allowed to stop rail service on that line. This meant rail service to Evansville from Chicago traveled the route established in the 1880s through Janesville.

In the 1990s the railroad company planned to abandon the line from Evansville to Madison. Some wanted to see the tracks turned into a bike route, similar to the Sugar River Trail which was built along an abandoned rail line west of Evansville. Others would like to see the rails maintained, so that there could be a return of passenger or freight service along the route to Madison.

Today there are two customers for rail service in Evansville. The Landmark Services Cooperative ships several hundred railroad cars of grain produced locally each year. The Nelson Young Lumber Co. receives building products by rail.

Evansville's 150 years of railroad service continues.