

History of the Evansville Railroad Depot

Researched and Written by Ruth Ann Montgomery



Evansville's railroad service began in 1863 and continues to the present. The railroad depot served as a transfer point for people and goods and for many years the Evansville depot was a hub of activity.

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 way to transport 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.

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".

The rails were completed to the Rock County village of Afton in 1854 and a depot was built in that village. Crews graded the line to Footville and the railroad company purchased the wooden ties. However, completion

of the line was delayed when the iron rails manufactured in England did not arrive. The 1855 financial panic stopped progress on the road and eight years passed before the first train arrived in Evansville.

In 1862, the railroad company reorganized and the stock agents of the Beloit and Madison line asked the residents of Union, Magnolia, Porter and Brooklyn townships to raise funds. The company promised to lay tracks to Evansville when the subscription of \$15,000 was complete.

The company offered investors who purchased railroad stock in the 1850s seventy cents on the dollar and issued new preferred stock on promissory notes. Those who purchased the new railroad stock paid 40% down on each share and 10% a month until 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 and maintain the iron rails.

The agents selling the stock canvassed Evansville area 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 change the route to pass four miles east of the village, or possibly west through the Sugar River Valley.

The new transportation route meant more opportunities for marketing and receiving goods. Shipments of grain and livestock to Chicago markets could increase the income of local farmers and decrease the produce lost in shipment over muddy and sometimes impassable dirt roads. The new route offered opportunities for merchants to purchase goods from Chicago and eastern wholesalers.

Evansville men serving as soldiers in the Civil War received frantic letters requesting funds. The soldiers and the community responded to the railroad's threats and raised the money. Local residents Henry Spencer, Nelson Winston and Isaac Bennett each purchased \$1,000 in stock. Dr. John M. Evans was serving as Wisconsin's 13th Regimental surgeon. Through his financial agent, Dr. Evans paid his subscription of \$300 for six shares of railroad stock.

The financing scheme worked and on July 27, 1863 Emma Evans wrote to her husband that the 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. A wood frame depot was built to accommodate the freight and passenger services.

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

Evansville's depot agent, E. S. Watts advertised the train schedule in the 1867 Evansville newspaper. One passenger train and two freight trains went south everyday and the same number arrived at the depot and headed north. Local merchants purchased goods in the Chicago markets and shipped them to Evansville for distribution to their customers. Hotels, liverys, warehouses and lumber yards prospered near the railroad depot.

Railroad transportation improved steadily in the 1870s. By 1873, the railroad placed ads in the Evansville newspaper that they were the shortest route to San Francisco and the "short and direct line" to New York, Boston, and all points in New England and Canada.

The local newspaper reporter spent several hours waiting for a train in December 1873 and described the interior of the station. "A large coal stove sends out heat and well trimmed lamp on the wall casts a cheerful light over the nicely scrubbed floor and clean ceiling." The outside platform extended beyond the north and south side of the depot to make it more convenient for passengers to get on and off the train.

The depot was a busy place. The same 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 installed a side track, east of the depot for the safety of its crews and the passengers.

Steam powered trains needed to refuel with coal and water at nearly every depot. The Evansville railroad yards had a coal shed south of the depot and a pump house and a windmill to supply water for the steam engines. In 1875, increased traffic required more water and a new well was dug. A steam-powered engine pumped water from the well to the water tower.

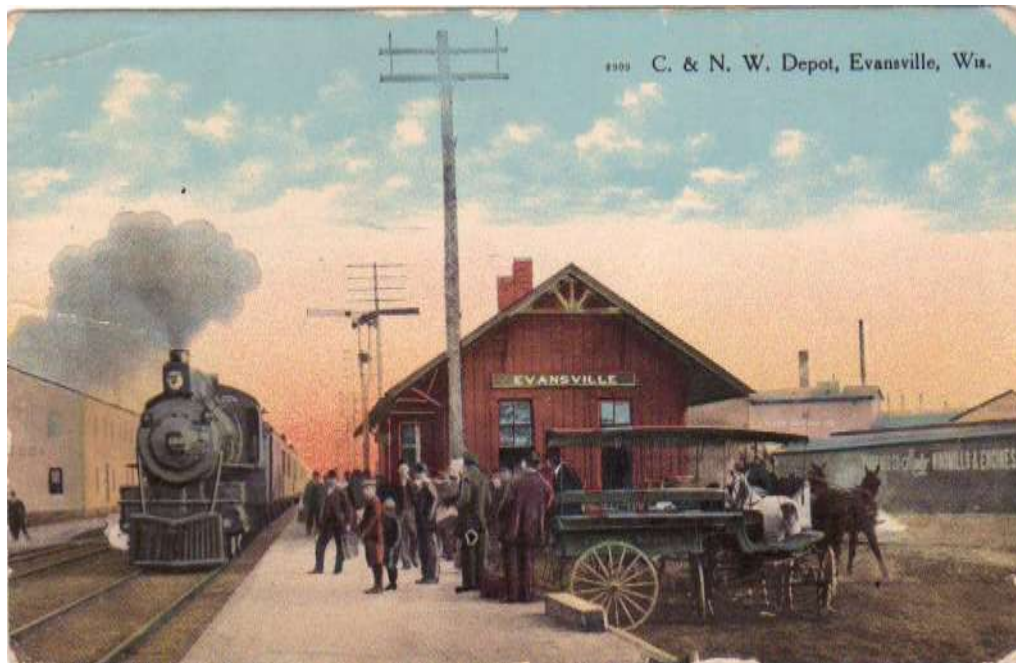
A fire destroyed the 1863 depot on January 26, 1882. The depot agent, Mr. Gosselin, was moving kerosene barrels in the freight room when he saw fire coming up from the floor. The cause of the fire was thought to be a spark from a passing engine that had ignited the oil saturated floor of the depot.

When the depot floor caught fire so did the barrels of kerosene. Gosselin tried to use a broom to extinguish the fire but he failed. The Evansville fire department, with their new steam engine, was called to the scene. There was little the firemen could do to save the depot, so they concentrated their efforts on saving the railroad's coal shed and the warehouses that were adjacent to the burning depot.

The 1863 depot was gone and some businessmen lost items stored at the depot. George Potter lost record books and some personal items and Almeron Eager lost several cases of tobacco. Within a few days, Allen Baker, of the Baker Manufacturing Company and James Powles, engineer for the fire department, went to Baraboo to plead with railroad officials to rebuild the depot.

The Chicago and Northwestern officials agreed to rebuild and by May, the new frame depot was near completion. The railroad carpenter assigned to the work was William Elliott. The company's painters, Palmer and Flemmings painted the outside "dark drab" with darker trimmings.

This frame building served as the Evansville passenger and freight depot until 1913. Rail traffic continued to increase and by the early 1900s there were 11 northbound trains and 12 southbound trains, including the "Bobby" that ran from Evansville to Afton every day except Sunday.



W. A. Gardner, the new President of the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad and several other high ranking officials of the company came to Evansville in November 1910 to meet with Mayor T. C. Richardson and local businessmen about building a new depot. According to a news report, "they promised that if things were as favorable then, as now, Evansville would get the long looked for new depot next summer."

However, the depot was delayed for nearly two years. Construction began in September 1912 when the railroad contractor and his crew arrived in Evansville. The depot plans were similar to one recently built at Harvard, Illinois. The one-story brick depot, 90 feet in length and 24 feet wide, included a baggage room on the south side of the building, a furnace room 12 x 20 feet.

On the north side of the building was men's waiting room and a women's waiting room. The office and ticket window, on the east side of the building, was a 10 x 11 ft. room with a bay window facing the track. Because Evansville had installed a sewer system the previous year, there was a men's toilet and a women's toilet on the west side of the new depot. The 1882 depot was maintained as a freight depot.

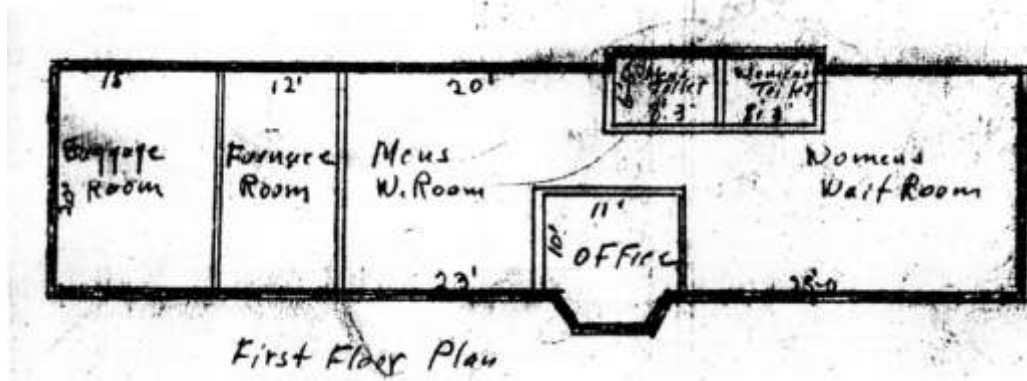


Diagram of the interior of the Evansville depot from 1918

Four months after construction began, a grand opening was held on New Year's Day 1913. Although the new furniture for the building had not arrived, the office was open for business. Station agent E. P. Colton, with Mayor Charles J. Pearsall and E. E. Nash, superintendent of the Madison Division of the Chicago and Northwestern, welcomed the public to the new depot.

Railroads were the primary transportation route through Evansville for the next few years. The depot also provided employment. When agent A. T. Smith arrived in 1921 he supervised three operators, the cashier, baggageman, a clerk and a janitor.

By the early 1920s, the passenger and freight service began to taper off and the local service was reduced. Automobiles and buses were beginning to take a toll on the number of passengers served by the Chicago and Northwestern.

In a January 1927 report to the Evansville Review, the depot agent, A. T. Smith, said, "If people continue to travel by bus and their private cars, there is no question but what they are going to force the railroad companies to discontinue their service, in fact, many trains have already been taken off from branch lines. Evansville never had better train service than it now has. At the present time it is benefited by five south bound and four north bound passenger trains daily together with four regular south bound and five northbound daily freights."

In the 1930s, the Chicago and Northwestern continued to improve service with faster trains and better accommodations for eating and sleeping on the trains, as well as observation and lounging cars. A passenger could get breakfast for 25 cents, lunch for 30 cents and dinner for 35 cents.

During 1934 Chicago World's Fair additional trains were added to accommodate the increased traffic. The railroad advertised that the train fare, \$2.15 round trip, was less than the cost of driving and eliminated the need for parking and driving in traffic.

The 1930s Depression took its toll on the railroads. The truck lines and airplanes were beginning to take freight and mail service away from the trains. A. J. Smith told a reporter: "The railroads are making a hard fight against the encroachments on their business by the truck lines and air service and if good service will bring back the lost business of the past, they will win." When Smith retired in 1937, the size of the crew at the Evansville depot was reduced to two operators, one clerk and the agent.

In the 1940s, railroad traffic increased with gas rationing and the transportation of military personnel. When the war ended, the rail traffic decreased and in 1953, the double track between Evansville and Madison was reduced to a single track.

In March 1959, hundreds of railroad depots were closed in Wisconsin. The local depot agent, Lewis Mittness announced that he was in charge of three depots, Evansville, Brooklyn and Footville and divided his time between the three.

In 1965, the Northwestern eliminated all passenger trains to and from the Evansville depot. Loss of passengers and mail service were given as the cause. Fewer than four passengers a day used the train to Madison and less than three passengers returned. Financial losses were climbing.

A depot agent remained at the Evansville station until 1976 to handle freight service. Once the building was vacant, the unmanned station began to deteriorate.

It was purchased in the late 1980s by Roger Berg. His first goal was to replace the roof of the depot and clean up the grounds.

Berg called together and interviewed a group of men who remembered the past history of the building. Ray Knapp, Leonard P. Eager, Sr., Burton Janes, John Montgomery and Roy Sarow reminisced about the train trips, freight shipping, cattle stockyards, and the "Dog Wagon", a restaurant that served trainmen who wired ahead for food.



Berg sold the building to Tom Dolan, who operated the Capital Elevator business. Dolan remodeled the interior and divided it into two offices with bathrooms and a kitchen.

In 1995, Dolan sold the old Depot to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 6905 for \$68,000. Gordon Ringhand, Al Hurst and John Petterson were primarily responsible for funding the project. They invited the public to their new home.

The notice appeared in the May 24, 1995 Evansville Review: "This year's Memorial Day observances won't end at the cemetery. The VFW Post will host a community open house at its new clubhouse, the former railroad depot, following the cemetery ceremony."

Since Tom Dolan had recently remodeled the building. There was little that needed to be done before the building was ready for the new occupants. Ringhand purchased the railroad station safe and donated it to the VFW. Today, the old railroad depot is used for meetings and activities of the VFW Post and every Memorial Day the Rally in the Alley continues on the grounds of the old depot.