



Veterans' Association of the Chicago & North Western Railway

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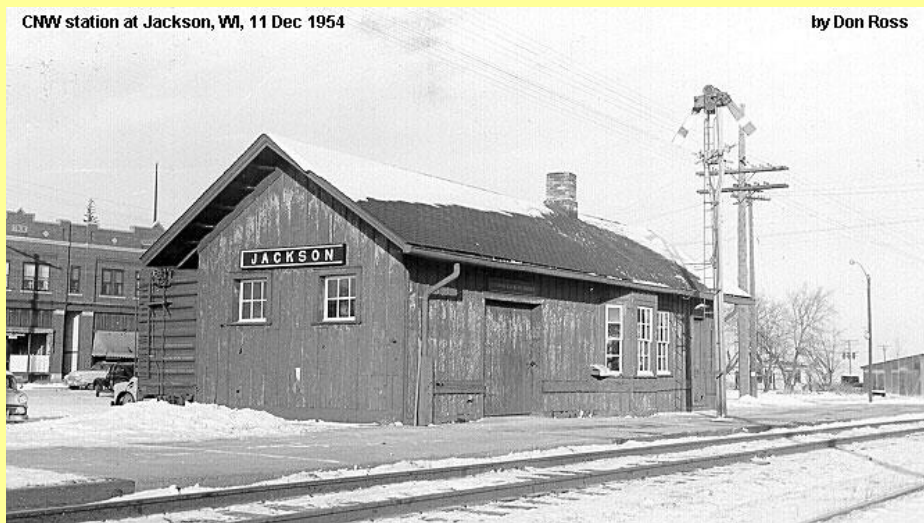


The Chicago & North Western Railway comes to Jackson

By Reuben J. Schmahl

This article originally appeared in the February 2010 issue of *The Church Mouse*, a publication of the Jackson, Wisconsin Historical Society, and was written by life-long of Jackson resident Reuben J. Schmahl. It is reprinted here with permission from both Mr. Schmahl and The Jackson Historical Society. The photo of the Jackson depot is courtesy of Don Ross.

ALL ABOARD!



The hamlet of Riceville developed on a 400 acre tract of land owned by Franz Reis. Today this would be in the center of Jackson south of Highway 60. When the Chicago & North Western Railway was built through his land, he gifted a part of that land for the construction of a new depot. The depot's lobby had a pot belly stove, benches for waiting passengers, and a large board showing the arrival and departure times for the trains.

The railroad agent in his central room office would sell tickets, control some of the railroad signals, and send or receive telegraph messages. An added responsibility of his was delivering the messages to local recipients.

Stored in the south room of the depot was freight waiting to be sent by rail, as well as recently received cargo. Freight and milk to be shipped was placed on a cart, its base being the same height as the floor of the train car, thereby expediting the loading and unloading process.

In 1873, Reis took advantage of his gifted depot land by building a general store and saloon in the area of today's Hoge and Gumm Building and a grain elevator south of these buildings along the railroad track. Many other businesses followed including a hotel, blacksmith, hardware store and another grain elevator.

Over the following years the area with its railroad access attracted many more businesses and residents resulting in the community being incorporated as the Village of Jackson on March 12, 1912. At about the same time, a new post office was established within the Wm. Froelich General Store located at one time just west of the Jackson Bank Building. The Froelich's owned the store, post office, and in 1915, he established a car and machinery dealership in the red brick garage located across the road from the elementary school (presently an auto repair shop). In addition, the Froelich's also owned the Jackson State Bank which would fail in 1923 during the depression years. Later the bank was reopened as the Bank of Jackson by Dave Rosenheimer of Kewaskum.

The trains coming through Jackson were important to the delivery of mail. Each day one of the trains had a mail car staffed with people who sorted the mail while enroute. Locally, a postal employee placed the outgoing mail in a canvas bag and hung it on a wooden arm extending from a pole within easy reach of a mail clerk on board the train who would haul it inside while the train was passing. Incoming mail in another canvas bag was dropped from the train onto the depot's platform, and picked up by the local postal employee who in turn delivered it to the post office. Around 1930, the post office was moved to the Hoge and Gumm General Store located right across the street from the railroad, today housing Soyna's Rose, a flower shop.

In the early years of the railroad, there were many freight trains and passenger trains passing through the village. This being prior to the days of public school transportation, most high school students from the Jackson area daily took the train to attend West Bend High School.

The train's consistent schedule and routine served another purpose for me personally. I remember while working in the fields on our farm located about ½ mile east of the tracks, I would hear the train's whistle at 12:00 noon, as well as 5:00 pm in the evening - each being my personal alert that it was time to head home for a meal.

Once a year I had the thrill of riding the train with my mother to Appleton to visit my grandmother. The friendly conductor punched my ticket and clipped it to the side wall of the car to show that I had paid my fare as well as showing my destination. I listened intently as he called out each upcoming stop, thereby allowing passengers' time to gather their things for their final destinations. The brakeman was also available to help anyone who entered or exited the train.

Another annual thrill in the summer was to watch the circus train with its colorful circus wagons and cages of wild animals rambling through the village toward its next stop.

The railroad company also built a side track just west of the main rail in Jackson. This provided a livestock loading area as well as other facilities to aid in the transporting of sugar beets grown locally by area farmers, unloading of livestock feed, and the filling of railroad freight cars with grain from the local grain elevator.

Between Schneider's Hotel and the railroad tracks, an elevator was razed and a metal shed erected to store coal brought in by railcar. Tony Ziegler, who owned the lumber yard and sawmill, delivered coal to patrons. During the years of the depression, people with buckets would walk along the tracks picking up coal that was spilled while filing the steam engine from the coal tender.

In the summer months of the 1920's and beyond, empty railroad freight cars had another cargo - hobos - who came to town to beg for food from area residents. Obviously, when the cold weather arrived, there were fewer hobos to be found. I remember rumors being circulated around town that the hobos marked the mailboxes of residents who were willing to feed them. Our mailbox must have been marked because I can still picture my mother feeding many hobos on our back porch.

The maintenance of the railroad tracks and property was performed by 2-3 railroad employees. Using a hand propelled rail cart that also carried their tools and supplies, they would daily travel along the tracks from Rockfield to several miles north of Hwy. 60 making needed repairs as well as cleaning the adjacent railroad property.

During a very severe snowstorm in early February 1936, a passenger train equipped with a V-plow got stuck in the snow about ½ mile north of Hwy.60. The passengers walked to Schneider's hotel in Jackson where they were provided lodging for a couple of days until hired help freed the train by shoveling away the deep snow. Feeding the passengers resulted in most food supplies in the village of Jackson being completely exhausted.

In my judgment, I believe the demise of the railroad started about 1940. It was after World War II that the public's preferred method of transportation became the automobile. Bus transportation, both intercity and interstate, was common. Trucks came directly to the farms to haul the fresh milk to the dairy, as well as transport livestock to market. Other freight and store purchases were delivered directly to the consumers' door. Oil and later gas replaced coal and wood as fuel for heating units. Mail delivery was made directly by the postal department. Fertilizers, farm supplies and machinery - each could easily be delivered by truck to its final destination. All of these factors, I believe, caused the eventual reduction and in many cases the end of the rail service as we once knew it.

I am pleased to have been a participant and witness of this railroad period in our area. It is with a sense of nostalgia that when a lonely train occasionally makes its way north of Jackson for only a few miles, that I remember and hear the whistle of the trains of days gone by.

Reuben Schmahl is a lifelong resident of Jackson born in 1914. He served 44 years on the Town Board, 38 years as Town Chairman. He retired in 1987. Reuben also served 45 years on the Washington County Board including 22 years as County Board Chairman and Administrative Coordinator. He retired from Washington County in 1994. He has not only lived a lot of Jackson's history; he has helped create it. With this account, he is sharing some local history with us

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