

This Burlington Passenger Station, located in Beatrice, Nebraska, has become the Gage County Historical Society Museum.



# Along the tracks - DEPOTS

by Dorothy Rieke

Years ago, after Dad refused to give me an allowance, I determined to earn some money, so I agreed to carry the **LINCOLN JOURNAL** newspaper to customers in the village across the road from our farm.

Train personnel dropped off the bundle of papers as the train passed the depot. Early weekday mornings, I walked to the depot to retrieve the papers to deliver to about 15 customers.

One early winter morning before the sun rose, I rushed several blocks to the depot where I planned to pick up my papers. I searched along

the tracks looking for the bundle of newspapers. Nothing was there. I thought maybe someone left them in the depot. I rushed to the depot door and threw it open. To my surprise, I saw what I thought was a bundle of rags near the pot-bellied stove in the center of the waiting room. Horrors! Then, I realized a body was on the floor. Was it alive? I did not know nor care at that moment!

I slammed the door and raced away from the building. Panic-stricken, I sprinted three blocks to our driveway and then dug my feet in to race up the hill to our farmhouse. Heart pounding, legs screaming pain, and breath coming in gasps, I





Brownville, Nebraska, known for its many displays of past life, now has this depot on display.

sped up that hill.

Entering the house, I yelled at my dad telling him what had happened. He quickly put on his hat and coat, and we jumped in our old farm truck and returned to the depot.

No one was there! Nor were my papers along the tracks. The tramp must have rushed to vacate the premises. Actually, he may have been as frightened as I was, but I doubted it. I never did locate the papers for that day.

If one takes time to research train depots, that person will discover a rich and vibrant history. First, freight and people were carried by wagons. Of course, inclement weather, accidents, and road agents often interfered with delivery of goods, mail and passengers.

Several important men dreamed of a railroad that would cross the Great Plains to the Pacific Ocean. At first, this seemed an unattainable idea, one that could never be pursued. However, as time passed, many educated, intelligent men began to perceive the idea of a transcontinental railroad spanning the country.

Once tracks were built, railroads became the key to the rapid economic growth of western United States. They not only represented social and economic gateways to communities, they

influenced growth and promoted importance.

As soon as rails were in place, depots were built every 10 miles. These early so-called depots were simply portable sheds or shacks or box cars, where farm produce was stored until it could be picked up by trains and ordered supplies left.

As traffic increased and passengers were involved, better accommodations were built. Depot interiors often were fitted with oak benches and a pot-bellied stove. Stencils often admonished, "Don't spit." An office with a ticket booth, freight room, waiting room, and telegraph area were standard equipment for early depots. Later, water fountains and restrooms were added. Some stations had living quarters for the station master; later, station masters lived in nearby houses.

These newer depots were generally identical in appearance with all services under one roof. However, keep in mind that these early depots represented the first impression of the community for those arriving on passenger trains. They were often proof of business "booms" in some regions.

Railroads became "Kings" in the mid-1880s as the main mode of transportation. One depot serviced 44 passenger trains and 17

freight trains in one day.

There were often signs listing prices for transportation. For example, one sign listed the following: (see next page)

There were classes of accommodations to choose from during early times. First class travelers reclined in luxury, second class passengers weren't much worse off, but third class rode in open-top wagons seated on hard wooden benches drilled with holes to allow the rain water to drain away.

Early trains did not have dining cars, so passengers carried their own food or hoped for a nearby cafe in a town where the train stopped for about 20 minutes. Soon, there were Harvey Houses to feed train personnel and passengers. This chain of restaurants was first in partnership with the Frisco Railroad Company. Beginning in 1898, these restaurants "fed people quickly."

Harvey Houses consisted of three rooms, the kitchen, dining room, and the lunch room, all heated by pot-bellied stoves. The dining rooms were elaborate with tablecloths, napkins, china, silverware, and fresh greenery to decorate each table. Elegant chandeliers hung from ceilings. Men who ate in these dining rooms were encouraged to wear jackets.

Most of these restaurants served good food with good service. Girls were hired as waitresses. At this time, women could work as domestics or as teachers. This gave women a new occupation.

In order to qualify for a job at a Harvey House, the waitresses had to have an 8th grade education, be of good moral character, and have good manners. They had to be neat and articulate. They had to agree not to marry for the length of their six-month contract. Once hired, they were given free railroad passes to their work destination.

Harvey Houses fulfilled a





This depot once served the residents of Glade, Kansas, located south of Phillipsburg, Kansas.

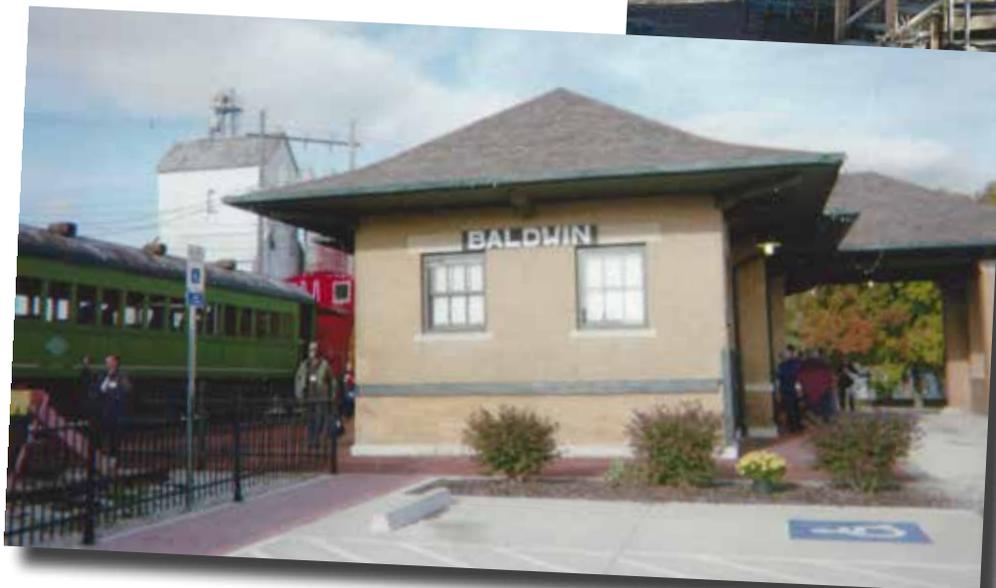
The smaller the community; the smaller the depot. (The largest train station in England is as long as six football fields.)

This depot, seemingly built to last, continues to appear serviceable.



From Morristown to Newark  
75 cents  
From Madison to Newark  
62 1/2 cents  
From Summit to Newark  
44 cents  
From Chatham to Newark  
50 cents

*Note: American half penny coins were first minted in 1793 and last minted in 1857. For an additional 50 cents, one could sit behind the engineer and breathe fresh air and smoke.*



the sadness of departures. All in all, they generally were scenes of excitement in communities.

In some communities, after church was attended and Sunday meals eaten, families walked to the local depot to watch the trains come in. It was a treat in early days to see people as there was no television or easy way to travel to populated places.

Each depot is of historic significance as depots represented the link between the agricultural sector and those who processed those products.

Today, many communities have seen the advantages of restoring their depots. They gather to preserve these storehouses of history. In doing so, they are promoting economic growth, creating a tourism draw, making available employment, and showing pride in their community.

great need from 1885 to 1917. At their peak, there were 84 Harvey Houses. These were the first "chain restaurants." Later, trains were equipped with dining cars. As railroad traffic declined, the Harvey Houses took on other roles.

Train depots served many purposes. As rail traffic declined, many of these depots were abandoned to be boarded up, left in

a state of disrepair, or turned to other uses. Some became restaurants, furniture stores, spice stores, electronic stores, toy stores, living quarters, and other uses. Some were restored to become museums.

Preserving our nation's depots often relates our nation's stories. Depots were scenes of joyous greetings and often represented

