

THE MILWAUKEE ROAD DEPOT By Doug Johnson

There used to be two railroads going through that east-west corridor: the Milwaukee Road along the south side where there still are tracks, and the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railroad along the north side where the bike trail is now. The MStL depot was between the two lines, close by the Milwaukee depot, and it burned down in the 1960s.

Passenger trains would stop right in front of the depots for the people to get off and on, and local freight trains would stop in front to quickly load or unload small shipments from a boxcar or refrigerator car.

The west side of the Milwaukee depot was a passenger waiting area.

The east side of the building, with the larger door, was used for small incoming and outgoing freight shipments. All sorts of small freight shipped by railroad through the local depot's freight room. Railroads were like what UPS and Federal Express are today. In fact express companies like UPS and Fed Ex were invented in cooperation with the railroad companies, see the sign for "Well Fargo & Company Express" in the first MNHS photo.

Incoming shipments would include:

- Merchandise individuals ordered from catalogs, like bicycles and furniture, that wouldn't fit in the mail.
- Merchandise the local stores wanted to sell, like dresses and candy.

Outgoing small shipments could be:

- Farmers products like eggs or baby chicks.
- Cartons of small products manufactured locally.

The center of the building had the agent's office, with his desk by the windowed area sticking out from the building, where he could see up and down the rail line. The depot agent did many things;

- Sold passenger tickets.
- Accepted small freight shipments from individuals and business to be sent out by train from the depot.
- Turned over small incoming freight shipments to their recipients.
- Kept track of railcars being delivered to local business:
 - Empty cars for local businesses that needed to ship products out to the world.
 - Full carloads of materials for local businesses that needed them to build or sell products.
 - The depot has some of these records telling what St. Louis Park businesses received empty or full cars during the 1960s. Some had their own sidings to park the cars on. Smaller businesses shared a common place, called a "team track" or "ramp," where a car would be parked and they would come with a wagon or a truck to load or unload

- it. The agent kept track of where every car went, how long it stayed there, and when it was ready to be taken somewhere else.
- Communicated with the wider world using telegraph. Before the telephone was invented Morse Code was used to send messages by wires on poles, like telephone poles today. The railroads had their own private networks strung along their tracks.
 - The company would send instructions for their trains to all the depots along the track and the agents would make sure the train crews received them. The agents would also send messages back to the central dispatchers reporting every train that went by. This was very important to control train movements and prevent collisions.
 - Their telegraph system even carried messages for everyone else, because they were the only ones with the equipment. The local depot agent would receive a message for someone in the town, they would write it out and give it to a boy to deliver it to the house or business it was meant for. People could send out private messages from the depot too. Like Wells Fargo Express, unique companies were created, for example Western Union, cooperating with the railroad to coordinate that kind of message.
 - The agent kept track of all the money involved paying for these cars, freight shipments, passenger tickets and telegraph messages.
 - The agent probably had at least one helper for loading and unloading those small freight shipments.

After the telephone became common, the telegraph stopped being used for private messages. Eventually the railroads started using radios to communicate with the trains themselves and didn't need depot agents to pass messages to them anymore.

First as streetcars reached suburbs like St. Louis Park, and later as highways got better and cars got more reliable people stopped taking the train for short trips, like to downtown Minneapolis and back, and the railroad ended local passenger service, so the waiting room wasn't needed anymore.

Also as highways got better and trucks got more reliable all the small shipments shifted to using trucks, and the local depot's freight room wasn't needed anymore. Team tracks were also not needed anymore.

Then the larger businesses, those with their own sidings, moved away or closed locally, and an agent wasn't needed to keep track of their car deliveries. When the railroad discontinued service they didn't need the building anymore didn't want to be responsible for it. It had to be either torn down or moved. The St. Louis Park Historical Society was able to get it moved to nearby Jorvig Park.