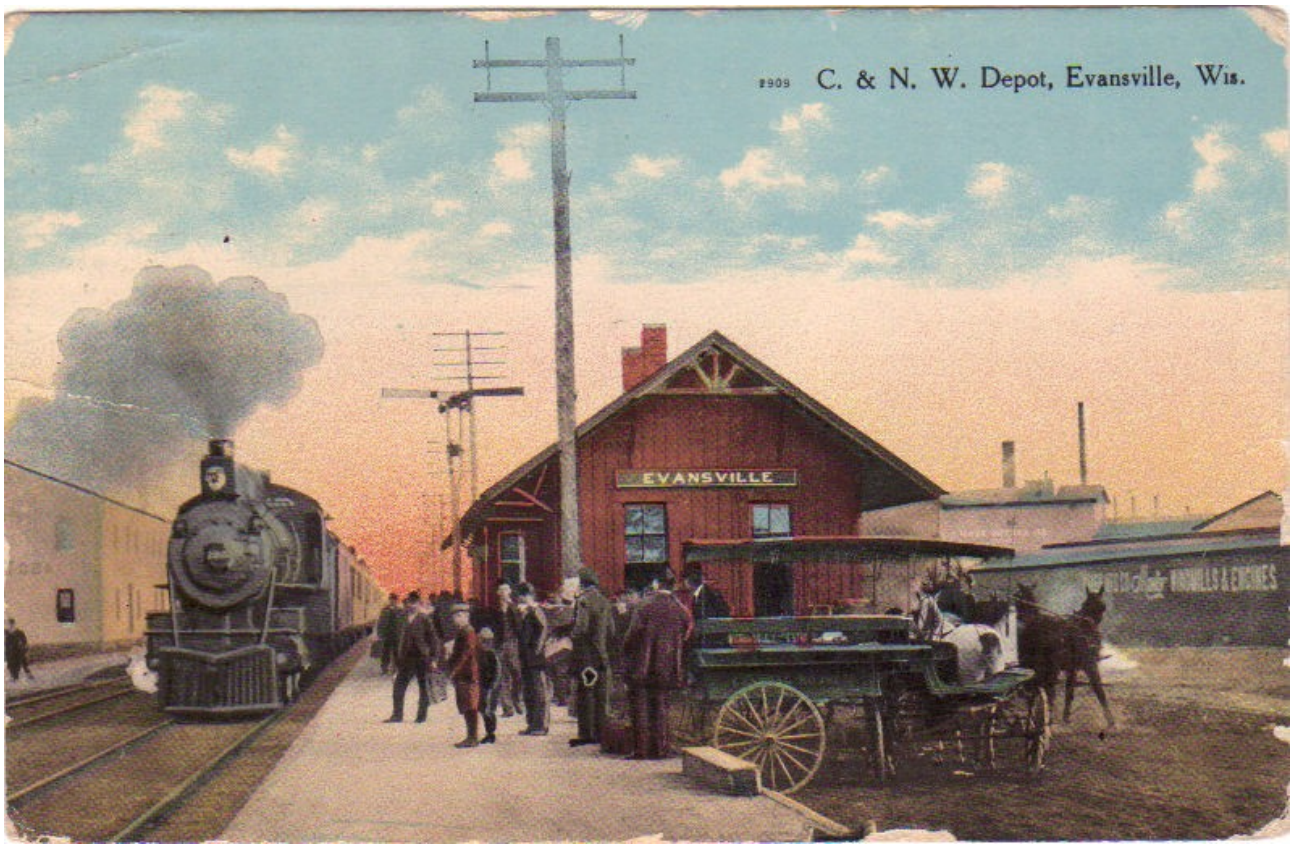
Interviews with Railroad Employees and Enthusiasts
June 6, 2013, Creekside Place, Evansville, Wisconsin
Transcribed by Ruth Ann Montgomery



Evansville Wisconsin Depot before 2012

Participants: John Ehle, David Fellows [Author of The Cut-Off and Fellows Station], Mike Nelson, Mark Nelson, Richard Luers, John Decker, Janis Ringhand, Daryll Disch, John Rasmussen, John Sornson, Glenn Fairchild, Matt Koser, Gilbert Wiedenhoeft, Ruth Ann Montgomery, Gina Duwe, Janesville Gazette reporter.

Dave VanDerHaegen: We'd like to go around the table starting with John and maybe do a quick introduction.

My name is John Ehle. I'd like to welcome everybody to our round table discussions today. We have been doing these round table discussions for eight or nine years. We started with the World War II veterans, fortunately, because we have lost most of them.

I'm John Sornson and I used to work for the Chicago North Western railroad and Union Pacific railroad.

Daryll Dish, I retired from the Union Pacific Railroad.

I'm Glenn Fairchild. I'm from Beloit Wisconsin. I'm just interested in railroads and wish they were still going.

Matt Koser, System Trainmaster, with the Wisconsin and Southern Railroad.

I'm John Decker. I first hired out on the Milwaukee Road in June 1970 and worked there three summers and worked another summer up on the Alaskan Railroad. I was very involved in the Mid -Continent Museum and became a steam locomotive fireman. I was the last one to qualify when they had steam and I was president up there for a year.

Dick Luers, I have a life-long love for trains. I was the Police Chief and I was the one that called the North Western all the time to tell them their gates weren't working.

John Rasmussen, a lifelong resident of Evansville and just interested in the railroads.

John Ehle: John also has a G scale railroad in his back yard.

Dave Fellows: Well, I'm Dave Fellows, author of this book, part of the subject that we will be talking about today and I'm really happy to be here for this event. It's been coming up on us bit by bit and I keep consulting John and Dave and Jim about this and that. It feels good to finally be here and doing this. I'll talk to you more about the book after awhile.

I'm Ruth Ann Montgomery and I do local history and I've also been recording these interviews with John since we started.

I'm Gina Duwe, a reporter at the Gazette, here to do a story.

My name is Dave VanDerHaegen. I'm the executive director here at Creekside. I want to welcome everybody and thank you all for coming today. This is an amazing event. I'm looking forward to the big show in July.

I'm State Representative Janis Ringhand, and I'm also a lifelong Evansville resident. I grew up, my early days, I grew up kitty corner from the railroad, where Citgo is now. My grandfather owned that corner back then and I used to watch the trains out the bedroom window before we went to bed.

I'm Mike Nelson and he's my twin brother Mark. We had a Dad who worked for the Chicago & North Western when he was the Depot Agent in Cuba City in 1943. We were born there. Probably when were about 5, in 1948, we moved to Janesville when he took the South Janesville yard. We've been around trains since we were knee high. So we love trains.

I'm Mark Nelson: I wasn't going to be the first one to say I love trains, but since Lefty said it first, I'm the second one.

Richard Luers: Look out for those guys they'll switch the signs on you.

Mark Nelson: We did that to our elementary school teachers. We don't do that anymore. We have an older brother Charlie that had intended to be here, but unfortunately he cannot.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft, formerly agent for the Soo line (also served as railroad telegrapher at various stations in Wisconsin, Illinois and upper Michigan.) I worked for the Wisconsin PSC . (The Public Service Commission was responsible for the Transportation Commission regulations at that time and later became the Office of Transportation Commissioner). I also bought a couple of maps and an article about the Evansville Depot being closed. I was trying to figure out why I saved that article, because I wasn't from Evansville and I've been saving it since 1976. It was one of the first cases that I did on my own when I was in the regulatory bureau. I have a copy here of

the train order. It's called a "29." Nowadays they call it the "31." It is from Waukesha, Wisconsin from 1899, if anyone wants to take a look at that. I have the original at home, but I don't carry it around because it's rather brittle.

John Ehle: This is my brother Steve Ehle and Steve is going to take some photographs today so we have a visual record of our interactions. Just kind of off the cuff; years ago, let's see, I was in kindergarten in 1951 and Mrs. Rivers was our teacher. She was the kindergarten teacher for many, many years in this town. Our big field trip of the year was to come down to the depot and get on the train, take the train to Chicago, eat lunch and turn around and come back. That was really exciting for a 5-year-old kid. That was part of the kindergarten curriculum for years. I don't know if you did?

Janis Ringhand: No, I didn't do that when I was in kindergarten. I had Mrs. Rivers as well in 1955. No, no train trip. But I did ride the train a lot. My grandma lived in Illinois and we used to ride it all the time down to Illinois.

John Ehle: The reason we have gotten together is to give everybody an opportunity, as we have with all the roundtables, to tell their story and what their affiliation is with railroading. Whether it is just a deep and abiding interest in railroading or whether it was your profession. I know there will be some interesting stories coming out today because we probably got an accumulated, just with railroad employees alone, we have hundreds of years experience on the railroad. That's our job today is to tell your story, and make sure that it gets down on paper so that it's not lost. It's important. So, don't hold back. I'm going to start today with Dave Fellows. I would like to say something about Dave's presence here. I'm glad that he was able to make it. He has been hidden away in his basement writing a book for how long Dave?

Dave Fellows: Well, the last one took me all winter. In fact I just finished up in April.

John Ehle: So we lured him out here.

Dave Fellows: I had another that took the same amount of time. This was my first book back in 2004, this was published and I still have a lot of them.

John Ehle.: Well, one of the things that I would like you to know is that Dave has these books here for a reason. If anyone is interested in his book about Fellows Station, I think they are being offered for a very moderate price, so you can haggle with Dave.

Dave Fellows: A very modest price, zero. Anybody that doesn't have a book already and would like one, would be very happy to make you a gift of it. So come and see me, if you are interested in it, sometime during our break times or whatever. I do that because I'm very grateful for your presence here today, too and I don't think you would be here if you didn't have a pretty good interest in railroading, past and present. I think we are needing to head in more of an of an emphasis on railroading in the years to come. I think the highways have got all the freight they can handle, and then some. We have got lots of rail lines that are sitting idle. There are moves being made locally to try to get access to Madison again, through the old line here, the old Northwest line. I'd love to see that too. There are a lot of facets to what's going on now. I don't want to dominate but I am very much interested in seeing this program that was very nicely outlined in the Gazette recently, to take off and go places. We are thankful to our local media. We are thankful to Creekside for giving us this place to meet and I think we are all going to be caught up in a lot of interesting things today and next month when we have a bigger, broader round table.

John Ehle: This event is a little bit different than what we have done in the past. In that, in the

past, we have looked backward only, World War II veterans. Dave was one of our Korean War veterans and so was Dick Luers. Today we have two jobs to look backward about railroading and ideally to look forward to possibilities. I know that John Decker is knowledgeable and very interested in that. John will talk about that further. I'm sure that Janis knows about the study committees that have met in '08 or ''09.

Janis Ringhand. Before that, because I was mayor of Evansville. In 2004-5 and the village president of Oregon and Fitchburg and DOT sat down several times and talking about the northern portion of the rail from Evansville north to Madison and that's back on board again.

John Ehle: So we are going to try and look backward and forward. So that's why it's good to have historians here and one of 'the things that we are going to try to do in the beginning is to deepen the context of the 150 history of the railroad's presence in this town and I've asked John Decker and Ruth Ann to give us a snapshot of the rich history of the railroad in this town.

John Decker: I've looked at the early history as has Ruth Ann. It's kind of an interesting story. I think we have learned from the Civil War observances that back in the 1860s, this was the frontier country. We don't necessarily appreciate that now, but travel facilities were pretty primitive. There were some unimproved roads around, but if you really wanted to carry freight any distance you had to have either a plank road, or a canal, or a railroad. The initial ideas in Wisconsin were to build a system of plank roads. I grew up in Milwaukee and one of the main streets in Milwaukee still is the Watertown Plank Road, so there was that history and I'm aware there were dreamers and schemers who wanted to systems of canals. One of which would have connected the Kinnickinnic River in Milwaukee with the Rock River, probably near Janesville or Fort Atkinson. That sort of got under way, but then the railroad technology came. That immediately made the plank roads and the canals obsolete.

The problem with the early railroads was that they were incredibly capital intensive. In today's dollars you who have had to spend hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars per mile to construct a line and there wasn't capitol available like that available in the United States or Europe. The way these things were financed was stock agents would go out across the country and talk with farmers and say, "Look, you are going to be the source of the capital for the railroad and you are going to get two advantages out of that. One of them is that you are going to get the railroad here so you can ship your goods to market for much lower cost than you otherwise could and we can offer you a phenomenal return on your investment. They were promising a return of 8-10-12 percent a year for returns. So the farmers would mortgage their farms and the stock agents would sell those mortgages out East or in Europe and that's how they got the capital. So the problem was that if the investment didn't work out, the farmer lost his investment and that happened often. It was a great deal if it panned out and a terrible deal if it didn't.

The other thing that was interesting to me was the different groups of promoters around the state would try to organize and get a railroad built. They would start out at a place that was a natural transfer location. Milwaukee was one obvious transfer point and that's where the first railroad in the state was started.

John Ehle: What exactly do you mean by transfer, John.

John Decker: I mean, to transfer from one type of transportation to another. Milwaukee had the best natural harbor on Lake Michigan. So, the Idea was to build from Milwaukee, with that natural harbor over to the Mississippi River at Prairie du Chien. The ingenious part of that was the shippers would have the option of shipping East to Milwaukee and then by boat through the Great Lakes or West to Prairie du Chien and down the Mississippi to New Orleans. So, they could find

the best rates by shipping either East or West and that remains a factor today. They figured that out very early on.

Evansville got into the picture because Beloit was viewed as a transfer point, the state line. So the railroad had charters issued by the state legislature. So they would stop at the state line. So Beloit was a natural gateway. The railroads had Beloit as a natural gateway and the idea was that the railroad would be built between Beloit and Madison. Well, they got a start at it but what Ruth Ann and I have both found they started in 1852, but got no farther than Footville in 1855 and things just stopped. There was an economic recession that started in 1857. The panic of 1857, you will remember, which didn't end until the Civil War was underway. The economy picked up and the railroad was completed to Evansville in 1863 and up to Madison in 1864.

But then there are all kinds of competing roads being built and put into operation at the same time and there was scandal up in Madison when the infamous Byron Kilbourn purchased the governor and most of the legislators in a railroad promotion scheme. It's still one of the most infamous stories in the history of the state. Kilbourn, I think was asked, "What did you pay the governor." He said: "Well, I paid him what he was worth, but no more." It was something like $50,000 which was a fortune in those days.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: I did a lot of research on that when I was at the Transportation Commission and he also paid each legislator $1,000. There weren't as many legislators in those days, but $1,000 would buy a very nice farm, it was pointed out. So that was one of the big ones. He got a lot out of it, for what he paid. I think he was using stockholders' money.

John Decker: If I recall correctly, his scheme was to build a railroad from La Crosse to Milwaukee, those being two kinds of gateway points.

John Ehle: Ruth Ann, in your history of railroading in Evansville can you bring in some local figures, names of people, descendents of some who are still in this town. Would you like to pick up where John left off?

Mail Arrangements.

Go'ng East, closes.....9.45 A. M.
Going North, closes..... 8.30 P. M.
Office open on Sundays from 8.30 to 9.00 A. M., also from 12.00 M. to 1 P. M.

J. R. WEST, P. M.

C. & N. W. Railway—Time Table.

TRAINS GOING SOUTH.

Passenger..... 9.06 A. M.
Freight ..... 4.00 P. M.
Freight ..... 10:22 P. M.

TRAINS GOING NORTH.

Freight..... 11:46 A. M.
Passenger, ... 2.55 P. M.
Passenger,..... ..... 10:22 P. M.

☞ Trains going South, 10:22 P. M., will run daily Saturdays excepted. All other trains depart daily Sundays excepted.

The 10:53 train mak s close connection at Chicago with morning trains for the East.

Sleeping car attached to night train.

☞ Trains leave Caledonia for Belvidere at 10:55 A. M., on arrival of train leaving here at 9:06, A. M

Tickets for all prominent Eastern and Southern points for sale at the ticket office.

E. S. WATTS, Agent.

H. P. STANWOOD, Div. Sup't.

Provident Insurance Tickets, against Railway and General Accidents, for sale at the office.

Ruth Ann: As John was saying, agents would come in to ask farmers, merchants, and local business men to purchase stock. They wanted $15,000 in three days and that's a lot of money. But there were some major investors who put in. Henry Spencer, Isaac Bennett and John Winston, put in $1,000 each. They also sent off letters to Civil War veterans, or people who were serving in the Civil War, asking them for money too. So, John Evans, our namesake of our village, sent $300 to purchase six shares of stock at $50 a share. By July 1863, the trains were coming to Evansville. They'd come in at 8:20 a.m. hopefully , if everything worked out all right, and would be back from Chicago at 4:25 in the afternoon. So there was just one train going out and one train coming back.

Train schedule from Evansville Citizen
March 20, 1867

This allowed the merchants to shift the city that they were doing business with most, from Milwaukee to Chicago. If they went to Milwaukee, they had to go over these terrible roads. Sometimes they were so muddy that the wagons would dump and they would lose all of their products. This was a wonderful advantage, for both the farmer to get his stuff to market and for the merchant to purchase goods from Marshall Fields, who had a warehouse at that time, and bring stuff back. Hotels, liveries, warehouses, and lumberyards all prospered near the railroad then.

One local newspaper reported in 1875 that there were 26 trains going through Evansville at that time. It also allowed the U. S. Military to send troops out to the Dakotas. In 1876, there were several regiments of cavalry that went out to Bismarck, to join up with General Terry after Custer's battle with Sitting Bull at Little Bighorn. It was used, not only for economy, it also brought many important visitors. The first President to make a whistle-stop here in Evansville was Rutherford Hayes . The people thought it was a fine sight to see a live president. It also brought nationally known speakers, like Belle Boyd, the Civil War spy; William Jennings Bryan, and Susan B. Anthony, the famous woman suffragette, to Evansville. It allowed musicians, actors, theater productions, vaudeville performers to come into Evansville to go to the Magee Theater to perform. So, there were a lot of social activities that came into being because of the railroad.

They also had some less welcome guests. The tramps came in and village residents thought they would be overrun and so they started a vigilante committee to protect the citizens from the tramps. They also built the Stone Jug, the jail down by what are now the grounds of the City Hall. By the 1880s, they were building additional tracks to go the manufacturing along the railroad. The side tracks were being built. So that Evansville became a very industrious city for the railroads to come through.

It also allowed people from Evansville to take vacations that people still do today, going south, to spend time in Georgia or Florida or going west to California. Also, the businessmen from Evansville would go out in special cars that were running out to the West to invest in land and businesses out there. So you had cheese, tobacco, windmills and grains that were going out of Evansville and you had animals from the West coming into Evansville being fed at the local farms and Dave will probably talk about this, how they were marched out to the farms, and then marched back in when they were fed and ready for market.

John Ehle: I don't know who told me this, but apparently Evansville and Lancaster were the busiest depots in the state in terms of moving livestock in and out of those places. It seems odd that much bigger towns than Evansville and Lancaster became the focal points. I think that's a fact.

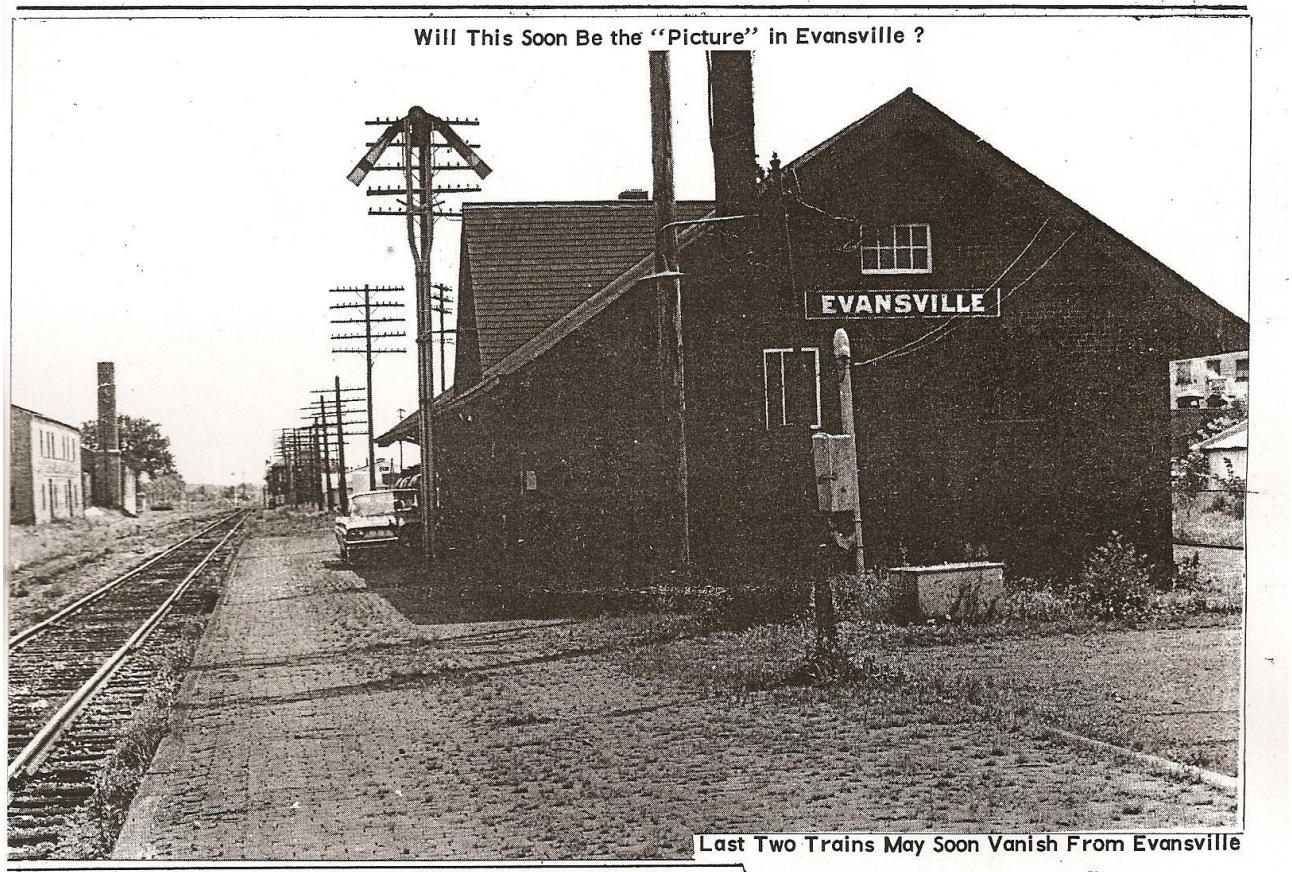
Ruth Ann Montgomery: By the early 1900s, thousands of sheep were coming in and then shipped out again. The same was true of feeder cattle. It was a very, very busy place. By the 1920s, Highway 13 from Janesville was coming from Evansville. At that time the railroads were so powerful that they wouldn't let the highways cross the railroad tracks if they could avoid it. So, that was the reason that the viaduct was built over the railroad and the reason that Union Street was built so it would bypass the railroad.

John Ehle: At the same time it was bypassing the business district in Evansville.

Ruth Ann Montgomery: Yes. So truck transportation became more popular than the railroads because it was door to door. The farmers no longer had to march their stock in. The merchants no longer had to have a dray from the railroad to the business. It was door to door. So by the end of World War II and with the development of the interstate system, it was the demise of passenger service from Evansville by the 1970s.

Volume 99 EVANSVILLE, WISCONSIN THURSDAY, AUGUST 12, 1965 SINGLE COPY 10¢ Number 32

Will This Soon Be the "Picture" in Evansville ?



Last Two Trains May Soon Vanish From Evansville

To Eliminate Evansville Trains

Two Chicago and North Western trains will be discontinued on Sept. 6, if plans of the Northwestern Railway Co. are realized.

The pair of trains is being discontinued because the two, used primarily for the handling of mail between Chicago and Madison, have resulted in increasing losses now exceeding $300,000 a year, the company has announced.

The "paper train," known as No. 507, leaves Chicago nightly at 11 pm. (DST), arrives in Madison at 2'30 am. The other leaves Madison as No. 510 at 8:15 pm., arrives in Chicago at 11:45 pm., except on Saturdays and Sundays when it leaves Madison as No. 508 at 7:30 pm., arrives in Chicago at 10:59 pm.

The railroad said that only a few passengers ride the trains and that losses continue to climb because of a steady decline in the volume of mail handled while cost of operating the service has increased.

It points out that the number of passengers getting off the train at Madison averages less than four a day. The average number borading the train soughbound at Madison is less than three a day.

The railroad stated that it has been informed that the post of fice department will not object to the discontinuance because it is considering transferring the movement of mail to the highways.

Persons objecting may write to the Interstate Commerce Commission, Washington, D.C.

August 12, 1965, Evansville Review, Evansville, Wisconsin

Dave Fellows: The subject that you just brought up on sheep raising or sheep feeding, I had a section in here. I wrote a chapter on that in this book. Let me see if I can find that before we get away from this.

John Decker: While Dave is looking for that, Harold Abey remembers driving sheep up and down Main Street. Their farm of course was out at the corner of 104 and County C. They had a feed operation there. The sheep would get delivered to the stockyards next to depot in Evansville and they'd drive them out Main Street to the feed lot and then when they were ready for market, drive them back down Main Street to the stockyard.

Richard Luers: Forest Brigham had the local trucking. Every Fall he'd take his 3 semis and go to Lewistown or Havre to load feeder cattle and because I used to drive part time for them. We'd get out there. You had to know Forest, I guess, but we'd get out there anyway, and it would take us two days to get out there with the trucks. Then they'd buy sheep, Forrest and Fred Luchsinger, Wilbur and Marv's dad. Anyway, they would buy sheep. They would buy 30 carloads of sheep and we'd load sheep all one day. Then drive the trucks back home with cattle. We'd get back here with the trucks before the train got back here with the sheep, because the train had to stop and water the sheep along the way. Woodworth's got them up the road and Ringhand would get them. Forest always said, the sheep was the only animal he knew that was born looking for a place to die. Because they'd get in those cattle cars and if you didn't keep them moving, they would suffocate. They would get on top of one another die. I can tell you all about bringing the sheep back. They'd take them down here to the stockyards. Then Forest would get around and hit up all the farmers, Ringhand and Woodworth and I think Louie Croft. I think they all ran sheep. They were doing that yet into the mid '50s, the late '50s. They quit running them up the road when Forrest started hauling them in one of the trucks. They stopped. They wouldn't let them run them up the highway anymore. That goes back to the mid '50s they were still doing sheep.

Brigham Trucks

John Ehle: Phil Woodworth's dad, Maurice, was a big sheep farmer.

Richard Luers: Phil sheared a 128 sheep in one day. I said, "Man, how did you straighten out?" He said, "It took 2 hours." But 128 sheep he sheared in one day.

Daryll Disch: Did he do that himself?

Richard Luers: Well, he said, he stood in a pen and the planks were about that high off the ground and one guy would slide a sheep in and he would push that sheared one out. So they were bringing them to him and he did all the shearing. That's a lot of sheep in one day. He said he had the smoothest hands in town. They were soaked in lanolin.

Dave Fellows: In chapter 4 of my book, titled, "Local Commerce along the Cutoff" it gives a lot of figures, numbers and so forth. It's really an eye opener. A couple of comments I wanted to make about it is that Fellows Station was also a depot that they could load and unload cattle of any kind or bring sheep in from the west. They wouldn't have to take them all off here in Evansville. They could run them out to Fellows Station and unload them there into the paddocks. They would divide them up among the farmers by driving them down Fellows Road (It was called Fellows Station Road at that time) or bringing them up the highway. It was not Highway 14, it was highway 13 and then east and west from the Fellows Farm, cutting off a certain number, purely by guess work to each farm that had ordered some of these Western lambs. If they were a few head off, then each farmer would figure that out over the next few days.

If they had too many or not enough, then the old 8-party telephones would be humming. They would get their numbers straight and they'd say, "Ya, I've got a couple more here than I should have. Do you want to come and get them or want me to bring them to you?" and all this and that. So, it was a very amiable situation. There was never any angst about it. It was just, let's get the numbers straight. Nobody wanted to be short one and they didn't really think that they wanted to be long one either. So they'd load them in the back of their Model A or T and take them to the farmer that they belonged to.

This was a big deal with farmers back then. It came at a time of the year, you see, they came in the Fall of the year, oh, usually late August or early September and they were just lambs. They were Spring lambs from the West. They needed to put on, I don't know, the figure is in the book here, I think. I think they had to put on about 20 pounds on them before they would be ready to go back to market in Chicago Union Stockyards where they would be offloaded and slaughtered. Well, that was all fine and good but it was necessary to keep a lot of farmers in business and this was the gem that did it, was feeding out some of these Western lambs. They had the feed and so why not put it on these poor little Spring lambs that were the victims, and reload them on the cars and send them to Chicago.

They needed that money. It was at the time in the winter when they didn't have a lot of income. Milking wasn't what it is today. At the time there were lots of people milking cows, but there wasn't a lot of cows to give them the yields in milk like we have today with the super dairies and so forth. I encourage anyone who wants to digest a lot more about this Western lamb feeding to refer to Chapter 4 of the book and read it for yourself. It's a fascinating subject. I think you'll feel that way too once you've seen it. I'm sure a lot of you already know these things.

Mark Nelson: When I think about Evansville, knowing what history I do, I realize up until 1911 when the so called New Line was completed from Clyman, I think up to Necedah. All the traffic through the Dakotas, the Twin Cities, Duluth-Superior, basically, most of it would have been funneled this way through Evansville and up to Elroy and on to these other areas then. Again, that

would have siphoned off some business but it still was an extremely busy railroad line. I'm not sure when it occurred, of course, but they completed the double tracking from here to Elroy, I'm sure, in the early 1900s. As an aside, we had an aunt and uncle that lived in Winona. So with Mother, riding on Dad's pass, in 1953 when we rode 519, the Dakota 400, as far as Winona, it was a double track railroad. When we made the second trip in 1955, crews were out single tracking this track from Evansville on up to Elroy. Obviously at that time, once they got beyond WWII, the traffic had continued to diminish and there was no reason for two tracks with the amount of passenger trains, which was about five each way at that time, and the freight traffic that was left. I have fond memories of it.

In the last few weeks there, when I close my eyes. Many of you, of course, would have ridden those passenger trains. There wasn't continuous weld rail. There were the 40 foot sections, but it was well maintained. Of course, if there was a bad joint, the crew members there would note that and then of course they would have the section crew out there repairing it. The gentle sway of the cars, of course there when you were going down the track. This was signaled, of course. So the employee timetable, basically, you were allowed 79, so it was an 80 mile-an-hour track. I suspect, of course, that if the Dakota 400 was running a little bit late, they would steal a few miles per hour. Or through our friend Paul Knutson, from Lodi, 507 coming up in the wee hours there, he got west of Leyden, and then he opened her up to 120. You'd only do that for a couple of miles and you'd have to brake of course or you'd end up on the ground in Evansville. It was a well-maintained, fine piece of railroad.

Growing up in Janesville, I don't ever recall, I think there was a fender bender down in Tiffany once. But there really weren't any serious accidents with passenger trains on this line. It's a credit to the North Western. It was well maintained. Occasionally freight trains derailed but I don't remember any wrecks with fatalities, or anything serious like that. So, it was a fine piece of railroad. As far as when the trains were discontinued, July of 1963, the through trains were removed. The Dakota 400 and I think 510 and 511 the Duluth - Superior Limited. It was 1965 that the 507 and 508, basically the mail trains were taken off between Chicago and Madison. So that's when it was discontinued there and it was just freight only after that.

John Ehle: Darryl and John, you fellows worked those tracks. How did you spend the majority of your time when you were working on those crews?

John Sornson : A lot of times we were putting in ties, replacing ties. They had, what was it the 483, the passenger train?

Darryl Disch: It was the 83. Oh, passenger train? They never had a passenger train when I was working.

John Sornson. When I first hired out, they had the 483, because I caught hell. They gave me a switch key when I first hired out. They said, "Now, don't ever stop a train." I thought, OK, right. It was snowing and I had to go clean a switch, right back of Gisholt in Madison. So, I looked up at the signal and the signal was cleared. I went to clean the switch, threw the switch back and all of a sudden I heard the old siren, the old horn went. Here come 483. Nobody told me about 483 that it was right behind the other guy.v I let the train go by and I thought the signal was clear. Well by the time you're done cleaning it, you've got 15 minutes to clean the switch. Here the train stopped. Well, the boss comes out and he says, "Give me your key." Right away, "Give me your key. You can't have it no more." I thought, "Ah, hell, he's going to fire me." Well, they didn't fire me. He told me more about what was going on. That was my first day working on the railroad. They gave me a switch key and they took it away the same day.

John Ehle: Was that the exact language they used?

John Sornson: Well, close.

Richard Luers: Referring to that same thing that Mark was talking about. We around here were blessed with too many railroads. There was the Burlington, the North Western and the Milwaukee all trying to compete with one another. That's what really sort of put them down. Then the Great Northern came along and they jumped in there. They were all virtually bankrupt most of the time trying to make ends meet. You talk about the high speed. I think it was around Mauston somewhere. You were with the Soo that used to be the old Milwaukee Road. Up around Mauston somewhere, they had a 20 mile stretch of track up there that they were scheduled to run 120 miles an hour on that. There was a sign along the way. I think I've got a book at home with a picture of the sign that told the engineer to slow to 90. They were doing that with steam locomotives in those days, back in '36, '37 and '38.

Another thing I've chucked about all the time, you talk about getting old and retiring. Seniority ruled the railroads. I was a little boy growing up across the street from the main line of the Milwaukee. Those engineers would go by waving and they were all in their 70s and 80s. You thought, "Here's this guy running that steam engine at 100 miles and hour and he's 67 or 75 years old." You think, "Holy smokes can he see down to the end." In those days the trains did well, but competition got them.

Mark Nelson: Adding to what Dick said, not on this line, but on that New Line that was well engineered and put in, basically between Milwaukee on up to Necedah and Wyeville?. There were straight stretches on that railroad, so in our time table collection, what would you think, course there in the horse blanket time table, if you know the older ones there, they were lengthy then. On that line, in steam day even, steam days, when it would tell the head end true of course there. I'm going to invent this. From mile post 114.0 to 129.3, what speed? N O N E, speed restriction. "None. " So basically, run as fast as you can.

Richard Luers: It depended on what kind of guts he had, was what it was.

Mark Nelson: I'm glad I was born when I was, but on the other hand I wish I could savor the moments of course, in the early 1900s up to 1950, basically of course, when we had such a fine passenger train network.

Richard Luers: The Burlington had the Zephyr and that was diesel. The North Western had the 400 and that was steam. The Milwaukee had the Hiawatha and that was steam. The 400, that referred to getting you from Chicago to St. Paul in 400 minutes. In those days, they moved out. I always chuckle at that. The Hiawatha was a brand new steam engine in '36. One of my relatives, her granddad was an engineer. He set a couple of speed records on the Milwaukee Road. Those steam engines listed in one of the books. They thought nothing about running 100 miles an hour with those things.

Mark Nelson: They felt safe.

Richard Luers: He was 70 years old when he was doing it. Now they make you retire. An airline pilot has to retire when he's 60 and that's all computers.

John Ehle: Daryll, how fast did you get up to on the trains?

Daryll Disch: I don't know how fast they were on the trains. We didn't ride the trains.

John Ehle: You were running around in trucks?

Daryll Disch: Yes.

David Fellows: Is there anyone here that lives in proximity to Brooklyn?

Daryll Disch: Proximity? It's pretty close here.

David Fellows: They had a milk run back in the '20s, '30s, I don't know exactly what years. I have an artist's concept of the Brooklyn depot. I've got two views, actually and you'll be able to see those next month when I get them up on display. I have some pretty good photos of that depot and one of them is an artist's concept that was painted. It's really quite attractive. It's in color and the other one is black and white. The one that isn't a photo is almost more fun to look at. They called it the milk run and it was something they did every day, was load cans of milk onto the train and take them to Madison.

Mark Nelson: One of the items that we brought along. Dad hired out on the North Western in 1929. So as a young operator of course, you can't hold a job. You are going to give fellows their vacation time. You are going to fill in if somebody is ill. That type of thing. He took it seriously. When he first worked the Evansville tower, and he didn't write it out, he typed it. Such that he could be very efficient of course at throwing the levers there, switches and signals. He has the typewritten item. At the bottom of it here, what is says on the very bottom, the final paragraph, this other stuff here. Number 522 daily and number 520 Sundays, pick up milk cars. So there's your milk run, probably. From East track, engine cuts off train at station. Goes down to the coal shed. While engine is at coal shed, throw levers to normal and line up for east track 24 to 0, levers, 18, 17, 8, and 24. As soon as engine enters east track , throw 24 back and pull 23 2/3 over, so time lock will run down, while engine is coupling onto car. When run down, pull over and give them signal 5. Get back on main line. There's your milk train.

Richard Luers: You talk about that. John's Grandmother told me she lived at Brooklyn and she rode the train down in the morning and back up to Brooklyn at night to go to school

John Rasmussen: Yes, she graduated from Brooklyn High School, when they had a high school in 1902. Then she rode the train from Brooklyn to Evansville from '02 and graduated from Evansville in 1904. They wouldn't let her ride in the engine. She had to ride the caboose.

Richard Luers: She had to ride the caboose. She told me that story many times about how she would ride back and forth. That was her school bus.

David Fellows: Who was that, Blanche?

Richard Luers: Yes, the train would stop and they'd let her jump on the caboose

John Ehle: It's interesting to me, the trains connected everything agricultural, around. My grandfather, Leon Patterson, our grandfather, hauled canned milk for 41 years and farmed, so he basically took his cans up to Brooklyn and I'm trying to think. Who was it? I think it was Quint Johnson was a milk tester up in Brooklyn. That was the only way they had to find out if the milk was any good. Quint would taste it. If it tasted bad, out she goes. If it tasted good, get it off.

Thursday, Sept. 22, 1960

Leon Patterson is shown here as he started unloading the last load of milk he hauled into the Bowlman plant at Brooklyn. He finished up Tuesday, after hauling milk for 41 years. Helping him is Richard Harding. Patterson hauled into Evansville for six years, then for 35 years took milk in to the Brooklyn plant. His route and equipment will be handled in the future by Ray Bund. Mr. and Mrs. Patterson, with his cousin, Miss Leila Shreve, will leave next week for a 5 week's vacation trip to Yellowstone Park, Salt Lake City, and a visit with relatives in Portland.

Just how many millions of pounds of milk he has hauled over the years can't be calculated, but Patterson recalls several times that he brought in 20,000 pounds a day. This might not seem to be too much with bulk trucks, but with 86 pounds of milk to a can, 20,000 pounds is a lot to handle.

Patterson is modest about his 41 years of service, preferring to point out the 50 years of hauling done by Orrin Alme, who retired several years ago; or the Lamb family who have now been hauling milk to the Brooklyn plant for three generations.

September 22, 1960, Evansville Review, p. 8, Evansville, Wisconsin

David Fellows: I think that's something that a lot of people don't know about, maybe all of you do. There were two lines going through Evansville back at the time that the cutoff was built from Janesville to Evansville. The other one came up through Beloit, Afton, Hanover, Footville, Magnolia and on into Evansville. Somebody already commented about that.

Richard Luers: That was the Belvidere line wasn't it. They called that the Belvidere. It came up through Belvidere.

David Fellows: The Janesville business men had gone after the C & NW to put this cutoff in between Evansville and Janesville. A lot of people don't understand why it's called the cutoff. I try to explain it in the book, but I didn't do a real good job of explaining it. You can write in your own definition, if you want. It really was an irksome thing to the people in Beloit. Their nose was so far out of joint when that line went through. This was known as "Cutoffville" instead of Evansville for awhile. You know how those things work that way. It is really interesting how much human feelings were displayed lavishly, in these days. I guess it was a minor revolution going on. You see, this cutoff came in here in 1886, '87.

John Ehle: What exactly is a definition of a cutoff?

David Fellows: OK, I was afraid you would ask.

Mark Nelson: A short cut.

Richard Luers: The railroad ended in Janesville. The North Western ended in Janesville when they came up that way. That just continued it up here. That was the main line.

David Fellows: The Belvidere was really an old line. That originated with a strip of iron on a wooden rail when it was built. Can you imagine the comfort of riding something like that? I'm sure they had lots of spinal readjustments when they rode on that thing. I guess this was really considered a major leap forward in progress on the railroads, what the C&NW had done in building this short cut. It really was an item that was a big topic. As a result of that, C&NW said, "Quick, we have to appease these people in Beloit. " They started the Bobby. Now, the history of the Bobby is in here. That's an interesting aspect of what it took to tone down the people in the Beloit area. They had their passenger capability almost taken away from them with this cutoff. All they got was freight, so the C&NW had to appease them by putting on the Bobby so that they would have the ability to ride that old rail wherever they wanted to go as passengers. It's quite an interesting story, very colorful.

John Ehle: Do you think we could get Sandy to propose a name change back to the Cutoffville?

Richard Luers: Mike and Mark and I were talking earlier about the North Western was unique in that it was the only American railroad where the engineers sat on the left side of the cab.

Mark Nelson: You said that. The engineer didn't sit on the left. He always set on the right. It was just that they had left hand drive on the double track.

Richard Luers: He sat on the left hand side of the cab in the old steam engines. They called it the left handed railroad.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: When I handed up orders to North Western trains where I worked joint agencies. We always handed them up on the right hand.

Richard Luers: Diesel or steam?

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: Diesel and steam.

Richard Luers: Well, whoever caught them, but the engineer I'm almost certain always set on the left hand side. The diesels it didn't make any different.

Mike Nelson: I wonder if you would be handing up orders to the fireman on the left side. It wouldn't be safe to do it on the right.

Richard Luers: The signals on the North Western were on the other side the track weren't they? The fireman wouldn't be reading the signals, the engineer would.

Glenn Fairchild: I heard both.

Mike Nelson: We need an old engineer.

Mark Nelson: Looking at Evansville, I'm just thankful that we have the grain dealership out east of town, because if it wasn't for its presence the track probably would be stub ended in Janesville or Leyden . I think we should be thankful for that. On the other hand, having grown up in Janesville, when you look at the fact, of course, that General Motors is gone down there. The former North Western/Union Pacific basically isn't the active railroad in town. It's of course the Wisconsin & Southern. You just have to go down to the Pearl Street facility, of course, and look at the activity around there, or the Arch Street yard, as you know, Matt. Thankfully of course, there may be an opportunity, perhaps sometime, to bring this line through to Madison. It never would have occurred, of course, if we didn't have such an active grain facility here, just on the east side of town there.

David Fellows: The cutoff was only 17 miles long and a lot of people don't realize that there was a point, early on in the construction of the line, that the C&NW had plans to doubling that track, all the way from Evansville to Janesville.

Mark Nelson: You look at the abutments for the Look at the underpass west of the golf course there at Riverside Park.

Mike Nelson: At Leyden.

Mark Nelson: Or Mike says, even at Leyden. The little trestle at Leyden and of course the stone work. It's built for double track. They were anticipating that they might be doing sometime. That's kind of interesting.

David Fellows: You know having a book of this, what the power was in Leyden. Remember the picture in here of what I refer to as the Leyden Lilac Ladies that were crowded around the depot there at Leyden.

Mark Nelson: Refresh our memories. I've read the book, but again, a senior moment, please Dave refresh our memories.

David Fellows: To this day I see this picture and that was the only thing that I could get out of anybody that lived in the Leyden area, that would contribute anything about the Leyden depot. I couldn't get anything and I don't know why. I think I could probably get more today if I went around and tried again. That one picture of the Leyden Lilac Ladies was priceless.

Mark Nelson: I'll look for it when I look at my book tonight.

David Fellows: When you get down there east of Leyden and then it starts to make that turn over to the right, to the south, that overpass there, over that Three Mile Creek, is two tracks wide. When they put that overpass in there, they had a terrible mishap occur. But I don't think anybody was killed. But there was a frightful mishap, when, I don't know how many, cars went down into that 3-Mile Creek, loaded with ballast. It would have been a mess and it took them a long time to clean up.

Mark Nelson: It would have taken a lot of fill, a lot of fill of course, that build that double.

Richard Luers: Pioneer Railroads, Chapter 34, says, "Notes on the south paw railroad." The one peculiarity that distinguishes this line from all other railroads is the mark of the rugged individual that they ran on the left side and it says here. "In speaking of the construction of the Chicago and North Western railway there is the one fact that cannot be omitted. The North Western is the only railroad in the United States that is left handed in its operation."

Mike Nelson: Because it was laid out by the English.

Richard Luers: Well, they got it from the English, doing everything on the left. That's all that the North Western was. They went by English Rules. Then when they had double track, the train operated on the left hand track instead of the right hand track.

John Ehle: Wasn't the width, the distance between the rails, approximately the same as the axle of a chariot?

Richard Luers: A wagon, 4 feet 8 ½ inches.

Gib Wiedenhoeft: They had a lot of narrow gage rails in Wisconsin. Hillsboro was a narrow gage.

Richard Luers: Yes there were. There were a lot of narrow gages up north.

Gib Wiedenhoeft: The reason I brought all these maps. I don't think anybody born after 1950 realizes how many railroads there were and what an impact it had and what some of these people were bringing up, what it did for industry. Being interested in economics, if you look at that map which is the turn of the century and the current one way over there, you'll see that we have lost a lot of railroads. But in the old times, there was just about enough space between the various railroads for a half-a-day's journey with a horse and wagon. So, you could go out from your farm to any railroad in your neighborhood and get back. The impact, as John was saying with more railroads coming after the Civil War. The price of things fell precipitancy in the out areas.

Things like brick houses and you have a lot of them around here. Some of the brick houses were built with local brick. If you were going to have cream bricks from Milwaukee or Portage, for instance, hauling bricks in wagons for a house would just be prohibited. Lumber sawed to dimension, local sawmills didn't do a good job on their dimensions for some odd reason. Lumber sawed to dimensions for these big houses here in town, that stuff had to come in by rail. Simple things, cast iron stoves, pianos, that stuff was prohibitive by horse and wagon coming on a boat from the east to Milwaukee and then horse and wagon down the plank road, or the other roads, as he said. The price fell to 1/10 for transportation for what it was before the railroads got here.

Of course the same thing with grain going out, you could get 100 bushels on a wagon, at best. You can imagine a two-day trip to Milwaukee with a wagon load of grain and what that would cost. If you put it all in a freight car you could put, even in the early freight cars, you could put 30,000 pounds in a freight car. That was 500 bushels and that would reduce the price by a great amount. There were railroads all over. The other thing that struck me, even when I started on the railroad and this was in the mid '50s, there were still grocery warehouses in all the small towns. Janesville had one. Milwaukee had dozens of them. Appleton had a couple. Marshfield, Stevens Point, Ashland, Bessemer, Eau Claire and they would send out grocery orders. It would say, "15 boxes of miscellaneous groceries" on the bill. They would send them out to these little stores out like at Leyden. Halfway between here and no place there were little stores. There would probably be a store and the tavern and a dance hall, all tied together. Sometimes the store and the tavern were separated. You had them scattered all over. You look at Attica, for instance, and all these little places. I'll bet there used to be a store just a few miles out of town this way, along the highway someplace. Every Road had one every few miles.

John Ehle: And a gas pump.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: Later, when the cars came around, a gas pump. This was an important thing. All these people came in on a certain day of the week to the depot with the horse and buggy or horse and wagon, to pick up their freight and take it back to their business. So, the depot was a real gathering point for that kind of stuff. In addition, the depot agents, in the early days, had ready information. They talked to each other by telegraph. A while ago, for the Brooklyn Depot Days, I and another fellow who was a telegrapher, put on a demonstration about telegraph. The young people just couldn't understand how this worked at all.

John Ehle: Now you were a telegraph operator?

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: Yes. I had two posts and a wire between them, and a picture of a depot at each end. And I showed them if this depot wants to talk to that guy in that depot. He'd send it to me and I'd write it down. The depot agent had up-to-date information. There was a national weather program that was started in the 1880s, I think, somewhere back there. These people reported the weather three times a day to each station. They got the weather back on what was likely to happen. They got the news, the local newspapers would get news in and they would be the first person to see it. In addition, if something happened in Janesville or Chicago they would hear it. There was a lot of gossip. Let's face it. Depot agents weren't busy every minute of the day. It was very easy to get on the wire and say, "How's the family?" They knew each other. You had a lot of friends up and down. There was a lot of impact at the depot and the fact that the railroads got busy. As many as there were, it caused a drastic reduction in the price of commodities and the availability, big commodities that never could have happened with a horse and wagon.

Dave Fellows: Gib, where was the Soo depot that you worked at?

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: I had the honor to be the extra man for eight years. I worked at 57 depots and I worked over 70 jobs, because some people had more than one job. So, I'm writing a little report for my children about the different depots and stories. This was all on the Soo line, in Illinois, Wisconsin, Upper Michigan and into Minnesota. That was my usual beat. When somebody would get sick, or be on vacation or they fell down and broke a leg or something, they'd call me up and say, "Can you go over there and handle that depot?"

David Fellow: Was there a lot of cooperative work between the different rail lines in those days, or not?

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: Cooperative would be a sketchy term because they were always competing. But, they did look out for each other equipment wise, as far as safety. We were talking about the levers, lining up the levers at a station. I worked at the station where we had a crossing with the Milwaukee Road, up towards Green Bay. There were definite rules and you looked out for the Milwaukee. If your train was coming, my train was a local train on the Soo line. The Milwaukee trains were through. They were from Chicago to Milwaukee, to Green Bay, and up into northern Wisconsin. They really did move along when they came. Our railroad said, don't get in any other railroad's way. Our local can wait. So if our local had to stop and wait for the other train, they really did move along when they came through.

You started lining up these levers, they were talking about. There were nine levers for one single crossing. The levers were a long metal rod that went out like 1,000 feet for advanced signals. They were on little rollers, and in the wintertime they'd get filled with snow. They'd get hard and you'd have to put your foot up and grab it. You had the unlocking lever first. This unlocking lever turned everything red, so that you couldn't let somebody in by mistake. Then you decide which path you were going to open for a train. Was it going to be this train that way, this train this way? Your train this way, and your train this way. There was one down by PVC junction down by Milwaukee that had four tracks, two going this way and two going this way, with some sidings off. I thought, "How did that guy keep all that straight?" There must have been 50 levers across that building. You had to throw the unlock lever, then throw the, I can't think of the name of it. It says what you are going to do and then you threw the actual lever. That way you couldn't have somebody stumble in there by mistake.

John Ehle: It sounds to me like there was danger involved every day. Daryll, John what was the most dangerous aspect of your jobs maintaining?

John Sornson: I tell can you one that I almost had a heart attack once and it happened right here in Evansville. They have what they call the end engine that could come out and they have a lineup. The lineup tells you every day where the trains are coming and what time they would come out. They also have a rule that they can send an engine out and you have to be prepared to stop. So, when we had the overhead bridge here that they took down, I was the signal maintainer here. I got on my motor car and the signal went red. I looked at my lineup and thought "Ah, there was nothing coming." I'll go out and fix whatever trouble there is.

So I get on the motor car and I'm going around the curve. There is the engine, all of a sudden. And he goes "AHHHHHH" and I go "AHHHHHHHH." I set the brake on the motor car and I jumped and I ran like hell. The motor car is sliding and here comes the engine. I stopped about this far from him (holds hands to indicate 1 foot). I come walking back. He gives me a roll of toilet paper. I said, "I'd sooner have that." That's something that, you know, they were prepared to stop. They were only going 10 miles an hour but I met right on the curve. I went, "I could have had a heart attack." I mean I could have had one. I set that motor car and the brake on that thing and it's going. I thought "I'm going to be fired."

Daryll Disch: They were barreling through.

John Sornson: I met him right on the curve. I didn't even know he were out there. We had no radios at that time.

John Ehle: I don't have any sense of time. When you guys started did you have those hand cars?

John Sornson: No.

Daryll Disch: We had the motor cars.

John Sornson: When I first started out we had a six-man motor car and it took six men to move that motor car and turn it around.

Richard Luers: Talking about station agents talking back and forth. You probably know the date, but the railroads are responsible for the four time zones because time was confusion back then. One railroad ran on one time. Another railroad ran on that time. Finally, in 1880s, I think it was, in Chicago, they set up the four time zones and midnight on one day, or something like that, everything stopped and it started all over again with the four time zones so the railroads could dispatch and all be on the same time. They may be a time zone apart but they were on the same minute. That's how the four time zones became a reality.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : When they put in the daylight saving time, if you had a station where you had a passenger train, you could expect people to be an hour late or an hour early. Because for years the railroads ran on standard time, period, and different areas, even like in Indiana.

Richard Luers: I was going to say, Indiana never did change.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: Half of it went one way. Half of it went the other way.

Glenn Fairchild: Arizona don't change at all.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : So that was a real mess. The Nelson brothers were talking about the timetables. They were talking about the speeds on the railroads. I've got a book here that tells (this is from 1930), The Official Guide when passenger trains ran and what time. You had 13 passenger trains in Evansville at that time. We were looking the line between Merrillan and Wyeville and down in that area. You've got to figure that these trains made occasional stops for just a few minutes. There was one place that I noticed on this one train that they mention, the Limited. They went 60 miles in 60 minutes , a couple minutes less than 60 minutes. Now if you are going to make a station stop that raises the amount of speed that you were ok to go by quite a bit. Station stops for those trains were probably 5 to 8 minutes at the most. If it was more than that, the conductor would be on your tail.

Evansville's coal shed

Razed in May 1959

John Ehle: A station stop was for the purpose of taking on water?

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : They might take on coal and water, but it was to load and unload passengers, possibly mail and baggage, express. Those days, you remember, the depots handled Western Union messages. Express was a big thing, because the agents got a 10% commission on all the shipments that they forwarded and received. So that was a nice little side thing in your pocket every year, especially around Christmas. Then you had your regular rail freight and rail freight might be something huge or something small. Express would handle anything**. I** handled shipments of cows and pigs to Puerto Rico in the '50s. There was more paper work than there were pigs**.** You have veterinary reports, government reports from the Ag department, and government reports from the Commerce department. You had a package of papers along with the way bill, which the form you used to forward the shipment was this thick. Everybody had to have an approval to send those pigs and cows to Puerto Rico. It was some kind of a program, it was before Eisenhower. There was some kind of a program to help lesser countries get up in the world with farming and livestock and stuff like that. So we had quite a few. The railway express company would hand elephants if you wanted to ship it and they did sometimes handle elephants.

Richard Luers: My uncle was a baggage man on the Great Northern. He said they hauled bodies.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : That was common

Glenn Fairchild: I've seen that in Beloit quite often.

Richard Luers: He used to go to St. Paul, I forget how far out he went. He was on the Empire Builder on the Great Northern. He said they would haul anything they could get in the door.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : I had a case at Marshfield one time. Our passenger train came in late at night. Soo Line passenger trains were usually late, in addition to running at night. We were waiting for the passenger train and there were rural route mail deliverymen that picked up from the station and took it to the various post offices up around from Wausau all the way around Marshfield. The train was late and they didn't know what to do. It was a big station and there were clerk's desks all over. They were lying on the clerk's desk snoozing, you know, waiting for the train to come.

The undertaker came down. He could have been a movie undertaker. He was a tall slim guy with a black jacket and Hamburg hat . He just looked the part and he had a sense of humor you just couldn't believe. We met him a lot because we had a lot of bodies coming in and out of Marshfield. There would be one every couple of days.

John Ehle: In other words, don't move to Marshfield.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: Yes. He came in this office. He looked at all these guys sleeping on these desks and he said, "What a wonderful place to set up business." One of the truckers just got furious. He thought that was a terrible thing to say.

Richard Luers: My uncle said that the worst thing to haul was chicks. They would put them on in the spring of the year. Somebody would stick them off in the corner somewhere and somebody else would throw stuff on them and they would suffocate.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : At the best, in the spring you'd get paper boxes about this square and they'd have little paper hoops in them. And they'd be piled up three or four high with a strap around them. And you'd get 500 chickens. Each of those boxes had 4 squares in it and there

were little holes all the way around. They had sawdust and stuff in them. By the time they got to Northern Wisconsin from Indiana, for instance, they smelled pretty chickeny.

Daryll Fuchs: We used to get them in the mail, baby chickens.

Glenn Fairchild: You talked about the freight animals, this and that and everything, and on and off groceries. I've seen something on that probably about 10 or 12 years ago. The Canadian Pacific, now they run from Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario to Agawa Canyon all the way to Hearst. That's all through the resort area. That was very interesting. There were 7 freight cars on that train we were on and three passenger coaches. And every place they stopped there was something coming off, either boats, fishermen going fishing, people getting on and getting off, and supplies.

We went all the way to Hearst and stayed. It took all day to get there and we came back the next day. It was very interesting watching. The engineer got off and he came back and helped unload some box cars, and everything else. The brakeman and the conductor were all out there doing it. If you had a little resort along the way, the train came through sometime between nine and ten. If you wanted to take the train, you sat out on your little porch. You sat there and waved and we'd stop and away you went again.

Richard Luers; Now it's a money maker. They are running 20 cars a day up to the Agawa Canyon with 2 diners for feeding the tourists.

Glenn Fairchild: I rode that too.

Richard Luers: I've done that many times.

Glenn Fairchild: One thing I've wanted to do, and never got around to it. They are still doing it. They've got that caboose that they made into a cabin. You can take it up and they drop you off at Agawa Canyon and back in. You could stay there all week long and keep track of the trains going back and forth.

Richard Luers: Stay away from the winter one. You can see all the snow you need in the first twenty miles. All the windows freeze over.

Glenn Fairchild: That was interesting going, all the way up.

Richard Luers: I've been on the Agawa Canyon train maybe 10 or 12 times.

Glenn Fairchild: I went all the way to Hearst on. It was interesting at Hearst that time.

Richard Luers: The snowmobilers stay up there all week.

Glenn Fairchild: They are telling about the resorts. The lakes froze over in the wintertime. That's when they get their fuel, gasoline for the boats and stuff. They'd have to get that in the wintertime. So the train would go up.

Richard Luers: The track goes over that dam and around that big curve.

John Ehle: John, would you mind telling a little about the concept of what they called eminent domain. Didn't the railroads go basically anywhere they wanted to across the country. Didn't they build track and take farm land on either side of the track?

Richard Luers: They took government land and gave it to people is what they did. If you went out there and homesteaded then you could have 160 acres. The government gave the railroads that land to give away if they could build the tracks.

John Ehle: I think that's a piece of history that most people don't understand or are curious about. I think it might be something interesting to put into the record

Richard Luers: Before they all get going, a long time ago, when we had the Cold War here. I can remember a news commentator. Of course America had cross country railroads that started during Lincoln's time. They were talking about how we feared Russia and all this. How can anybody be afraid of a country that only has one transcontinental railroad. That's all Russia had. It proved out. We beat them down because they didn't have the transportation we had.

John Ehle: They also had eleven or twelve time zones.

Richard Luers: What is the name of that, the Red Bird, or something like that. It goes up through Istanbul and all through there. It takes 3 days to make the trip.

Mark Nelson: Not the Orient Express?

Richard Luers: No, this is the Red Bird or something like that. I've got the book. I'll dig the book out.

John Decker: John, you asked about different ways railroads were constructed across the continent. The best known is the Union Pacific. Which was sort of a public works project authorized by Congress. Lincoln was very proud of that. He had a background as a railroad lawyer. So he was interested in the industry. What they did to help finance the Union Pacific was, the government owned all the land from Iowa out to the wilds of Nevada and California. What they did to provide an incentive to railroad construction is Congress agreed to give the Union Pacific alternating sections of land all along its right-of-way. As you know, a section of land is 1-mile square.

So what they did was they set out one section on the north side of the track and the next section would be on the south side of the track. The railroad owned them, then, as they advanced across the prairies. The idea was that the railroad would then sell or give that land away to promote development. It did two things. It helped finance construction of the railroad and it encouraged development of farms and industries and cities along the way.

There were a few land grants like that. But in the main they were financed privately. In fact, for many years, beginning with the first constitution, Wisconsin had a prohibition against public financing of what were called internal improvements, like canals or railroads. They had to be privately financed.

I mentioned Byron Kilbourn, a man that bought the legislature. The reason for that was you could not build a railroad without a charter from the legislature. That authorized construction of the railroad between particular points. But it also gave the railroad company essentially power of eminent domain for acquisition of right-of-way if the landowner didn't want to sell to the railroad or was looking to charge an exorbitant price. The railroad could effectively pay a fair price for the property and force the sale of the right-of-way. Well, as I mentioned before, there was an incentive to have a local railroad. So for many people that was not an issue. People were eager to right of ways to the railroads to get the transportation.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : In Wisconsin there was a plan after the Civil War because we were at odds

with Great Britain, and Canada may invade us. This was from the old headlines. When I worked at the PSC I had to do some research. There was some kind of a case in north central Wisconsin. It seems like the early Wisconsin Central Railroad was chartered from Portage to Ashland to Bayfield. They were given every section they went through, unless it was occupied, and then they had to make some payment to the people who occupied it and every other adjacent section out seven miles. You were saying how everybody was getting on the land grant thing, apparently at the federal level. Cornell University in Cornell, Wisconsin was given a huge piece of land up there. It was completely wild. If you look at the old maps. I've got one from 1860. There is nothing much up there except lumber camps. Anyway, their grants overlapped each other by quite a distance. There were still, and this would have been in the '70s. There were still cases trying to clear a title of property. Because Cornell University and Soo Line and the Wisconsin Central had that same piece of property given to them during that time. The plan was that they were going to have the Illinois Central from New Orleans through St. Louis and up was going to meet the Wisconsin Central at Portage. This was very early days, 1870s probably. A friend of mine, he was an old timer, was the traffic manager at RayoVac and was a rail fan. He had pictures of this. The IC was going to build up through where Broom Street is and that Isthmus and go around to Portage and meet up with the Wisconsin Central. In the dead of night, on a weekend, somebody bribed a whole bunch of legislators to give what is now the Milwaukee Road, the land on the Isthmus. The Milwaukee Road built their tracks through on the weekend. So, the IC couldn't cross because the Milwaukee Road already had it. When the IC got there, if you know where the IC Depot was, it was just on the short side of the Isthmus there. It showed the Milwaukee Road tracks, really rough, and there were still telephone poles between the ties. The Milwaukee Road had built through there in the dead of night so the IC could not get in there. So we never had a connection with the IC and we never had that military railroad from New Orleans to Bayfield to protect our country from Canada.

John Decker: Well, speaking of dreams and schemes, you mentioned the Union Pacific as a transcontinental railroad. There was a promoter by the name of Stickney who was trying to develop a transcontinental railroad that would start at Milwaukee; go through Winona, Minnesota; and then out through Minnesota and North Dakota to the Pacific Northwest and that never got off the ground.

Speaking of midnight deals, I've got some property up at Wisconsin Dells. It used to be named Kilbourn City and I think some of you may know that another deal that Byron Kilbourn pulled. He was a promoter of the Milwaukee Road. He let it be known that the Milwaukee Road was going to cross the Wisconsin River at a place called Newport. If you are familiar with the Lake Delton area, that's where the River's Edge bar and grill is located. There used to be a settlement there by the name of Newport and the word was that the railroad was going to cross the Wisconsin River right there at Newport. So of course the real estate values went sky high at Newport.

What Kilbourn did is, through agents, he secretly bought up the land near what is now Wisconsin Dells and in the middle of the night ran the railroad along the north bank of the Wisconsin River across at what is now Wisconsin Dells. Here, he and his buddies had bought up all the land near what is now Wisconsin Dells. He had the further temerity to name the town after himself, so it was Kilbourn City for many years. That's the kind of shenanigans that went on.

Richard Luers: You talk about the Union Pacific out West, they show where the two tracks came together at Promontory Point. That isn't the way it happened. The way it happened was they got paid by the mile. They just kept on going like that. The government paid them for every mile. So, when they came together they just kept laying track because they got paid for it. Of course, you see the two locomotives setting there. That was an aftermath. They'd laid another 15 miles of track. I think the record was that they laid 10 miles of track in one day, the crews did.

John Ehle: Didn't they used to call that featherbedding?

John Decker: That was different.

Richard Luers: We all know the history of the railroad barons.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: One of the things that, when I was working at the PSC, [Public Service Commission] we had to answer. People would send in stock certificates. I kept a big file on this. Because they wanted to know if they found it in their grandfather's will or someplace in a safe in the house, was this railroad certificate still worth anything. Usually they weren't. Once in a while they would really pay off.

I did a lot of research on what happened to these railroads. When you look at all these branch lines going off and the main lines too, they would build a section from say Madison part way to Milton or from Milwaukee part way to Madison and they would sell stock in this. It would be a separate little railroad.

That railroad never stood a chance of surviving. Because A: the stockholders, which were those farmers you mentioned that bought the stock. The bondholders were the railroad people. They were the old timers who knew what was going to happen here. As soon as this happened they controlled the revenue for the line. The railroad barons controlled the revenue.

So, within 2 years, those lines would all be bankrupt. The bondholders would take over from the stockholders. The stock was made worthless. The bondholders took over. The railroad would be merged in with the Milwaukee Road or whoever, Chicago, Milwaukee, La Crosse, whichever one it happened to be. That's the way they built a lot of their railroad. The stockholders never had a chance. There were only a couple of them, I think the Green Bay and Western, and I think one other one that really gave the stockholders any kind of a chance.

Richard Luers: You talk about the Isthmus, when they did finally cross one another there. That was the only place in the United States where two railroads cross in the middle of a lake. It was up in Madison. What was it the Milwaukee and Illinois Central or the North Western?

Mike Nelson: The North Western, the CN&W.

Richard Luers: That's the only place in the United States that they crossed on a lake.

Mike Nelson: It's kind of hard to believe, isn't it, in a country this size.

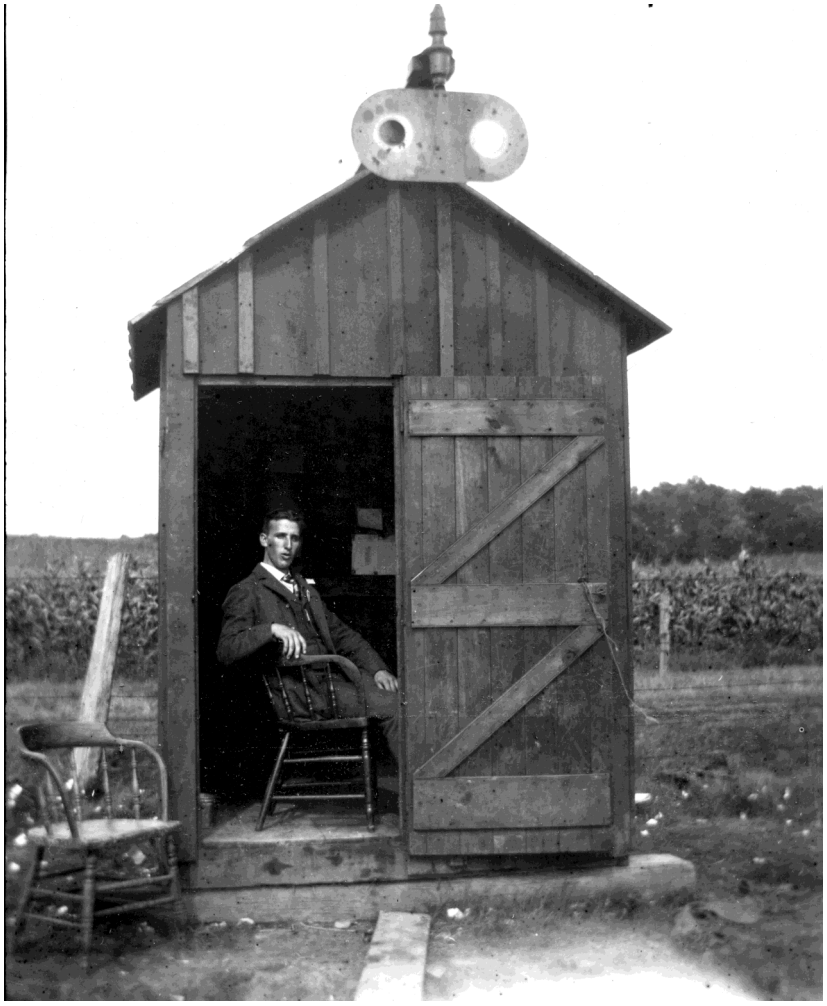
Richard Luers: Now they fish on it.

John Decker: John, before you asked about safety and danger. I have a couple of thoughts on those lines. I worked as both a brakeman on the Milwaukee Road trains and as a switchman at the yards. We had different dangers depending on which service you were in. When you were the least senior brakeman, back when they had brakemen in a crew, on a freight train you would ride on the head end. So you were up in the cab of the locomotive. It was just the opposite on passenger service. The junior man would be the flagman and ride the last car on the passenger train.

On the head end, the three things that you did not want to see crossing at a grade crossing in front of you, was a school bus, for obvious reasons, or a gasoline tanker or a loaded gravel truck. Because if you ran into a gasoline tanker or a loaded gravel truck, there were likely to be fatalities on the engine and the thing you were concerned about if you were the flagman on a passenger train

was being overtaken by a train.

John Ehle: What was the role of the flagman on the train?



Flagman at Evansville Crossing

John Decker. It was literally to provide on the spot protection against following trains. You would be issued a flagging kit that you had to have with you all the time. If your train slowed down, what you had to do is grab a fusee (or a red flare) out of the flagging bag, go to the back door, and light the fusee and throw it off at intervals, as one signal. Because the fusees would burn five, ten, or fifteen minutes and the idea was to maintain a ten minute space between trains. If you stopped either at a station or unexpectedly you had to get off the last car and hoof it back and hope the train didn't leave without you. Generally, the engine crew would be looking back to see if the flagman was out. Then what you would do is you would have a red flag by day or red light by night and you'd have fusees. You would also have devices called torpedoes, which were little explosive devices, that you would strap onto the top of the rail and you'd put down two, 150 feet apart. And if it was snowy weather you'd put down duplicates, one on each rail. When you were recalled by whistle signal from the engine you could go back to your train, having left the torpedoes and a lit fusee. That's the way you provided backend protection for the trains back in those days. You'd do the same thing on freight trains. If there was a caboose, the flagman would get off and provide that kind of protection.

Then the danger you were worried about working in the yards was getting on and off moving equipment, which I gather is forbidden officially now on most railroads.

Matt Koser: Not all of them. It's coming back. There actually are recent studies that injuries are more likely to occur by climbing on and off the ladders using the arm muscles, versus letting the

car pull you on. So our railroad does not allow getting on and off moving equipment. The CP now and some others have started to allow that again. Other railroads are following suit. So it is coming back.

John Decker: That's interesting. Really, once you got the hang of it, it's not difficult getting on and off. As Matt says, the movement of the train helps you get on. It's really easy to get on and off, if you know how to use your footwork properly, in both cases. But there was some risk to that, particularly if you had an engineer in the yard who liked to open up the throttle and let her go. I mean, I have gotten on and off of moving equipment at 10 miles an hour and that's a hair-raising experience in both cases.

The other thing you worried about in the yard is equipment on nearby tracks. One night I got injured in the hump yard in Milwaukee. I was on a job where you would pull cars out of the hump yard. You know, it's the dead of night, blacker than a stack of cats. Somebody had left a door operating rod sticking out on a box car. I came along without seeing it and almost got knocked off. I've still got the scar on my left arm from that.

The other close call I had was in applying brakes, handbrakes on a cut of cars that that had been kicked in flat switching. What you are doing in flat switching is the switch engine will shove a cut of cars and one of the switchman will uncouple the last car in line, or several cars in line, and just let them drift on their own down onto the track where they belong. I was doing that up in Alaska in the yard at Anchorage. We had three or four or five flat cars that we had cut off and were drifting down a yard track. I was on the head car and would have to apply the handbrake to stop the movement. The thing on flat cars is the handbrakes can collapse, so you can get the brake wheel down flush with the deck of the flat car. As I was tying onto this handbrake, the mechanism collapsed. I had to push myself off to the side of the movement, so I didn't fall underneath the cars. So I took a tumble but I was able to get myself off and clear.

John Ehle: I spent a summer at General Motors unloading railroad cars on the north dock and it was a really interesting job. Those of us who were summer help used to just snicker when we'd see the sign on the end of cars that said do not hump. It always did. Motor cars, you know, with motors, big V-8s, floor to ceiling and whatever.

Daryll Disch: A lot of frames.

John Ehle: Ya, but it was an interesting job. The thing you didn't want to get was the spring car. They were springs for the seats. Because they didn't say, "do not hump" so they could hump. Then these things are all entangled and disentangling a whole spring car was really hard work.

Richard Luers: When I was a kid we'd go down to the railroad yard and sneak in the caboose and get torpedoes. Of course, I grew up in Chicago. Then we'd take and put them on the streetcar tracks and scare the begeeses out of the motormen when they'd hit one of those torpedoes. I think they thought the whole front truck was coming out from under that thing. That was great fun to stand there. Kaboom, you know when they go.

Daryll Disch: It was dangerous too.

Matt Koser: Up until, it must have been two years ago, we still had to carry them on the locomotives for flag protection, even though nobody ever used them, other than if you wanted to play a trick on one of your buddies and put a torpedo out in the middle of nowhere.

Richard Luers: You guys would know that. Why the railroad lantern has that big hoop. So you

can put it on your arm and hang it on the side of the car. Otherwise what do you do with the lantern. You can't put it in your pocket.

Mike Nelson: In the last four or five years there was a book published by a fellow who had worked for the Chicago & North Western, "10,000 Days on The North Western." I think he worked in the engineering department. I see one of the many, many stories that he would chronicle in there was an accident in the South Janesville yard where a switchman had fallen. Whether he lost both legs or one leg. I can remember Dad coming home from the yard. You know he was working the night operator's job. He had called the ambulance for this gentleman. I think with his settlement he used it to open up a jewelry store in Janesville. I'm having a senior moment. I can't remember his last name. It could be dangerous work.

On the other hand you mentioned the rear brakeman. When they took off his night operator's job in 1958, he was in the station agency at Woodstock in the commuter district below Harvard. There was a very foggy morning when the Rochester Special, Number 514, on the triple track he had stopped down around Barrington. The rear brakeman didn't get out of that back car and walk back. Whether he was asleep, which he shouldn't have been, but I see here a commuter train ran into the back of the train in the fog and I see he perished. Again, railroading can be deadly.

John Ehle: Were you Chief, Lefty, when the man was run over down here, I think just north of the depot.

Richard Luers: There were a couple different incidents with people here. I remember I was working that night and the conductor put a drunk off the train. Evidently he sat on the edge of the platform and was resting his feet on the rails.

Do you remember Herman Oscar? Remember Herman, he worked on the section. Herman comes up to the corner. I was sitting up here and he says "There's somebody moaning down by the railroad track." So, I go down there and here this poor guy was lying between the tracks and the platform. It had cut off his toes on both feet.

Then a lady got killed just a little north of town. She walked in front of a train. I can't remember when that was anymore. I had thought about what you were saying about safety and being outlawed. They outlawed poling cars a long time ago didn't they? You can't do that anymore. That they said was really dangerous when they did that.

John Ehle: What does that mean, Dick?

Richard Luers: If you look at early railroad cars and the engines. On all four corners, there's an indentation, concave. They had a long oak pole with knobs on each end of it and when you were working in a yard, the tracks are all next to one other. If they wanted to move some cars and they couldn't get at it. On the locomotive that pole was hanging there and they'd take that off and put it the socket on the car that they wanted to move. On the engine they had a socket too. That's the way they pushed those cars. That thing would jump out of there. They outlawed that a good long time ago.

Matt Koser: You can move a car on an adjacent track separate from the locomotive, push them.

Richard Luers: The guy had to walk along with it and hold that thing. Because when the car got to rolling, of course, the pole would fall off.

Matt Koser: I read a book one time, back in the day, before all the safety rules came into play in

modern railroading, you could go in a bar and tell who the railroad employees were because they were missing fingers.

Richard Luers: Link and pin couplers.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : Talking about Link and pin couplers, both my great grandfather and my grandfather worked on the railroad. Just what you were saying, "Stub" that was a common nick-name for people.

You had to push the cars together and then throw the link over the hooks. They had bumpers and if you didn't get it lined up right. Somewhere I saw a picture. It was in a yard. The old yard people just looked at that picture and cried because it was a picture of a child pinched between two bumpers. This would have been in the '60s when I was working in the yard. Anyway, that had to go quick because they didn't want to spend all day doing the switching.

The other thing, there were any number of hazards for railroad people. One of them was they used to have walkways along the top of the cars. The brakeman's job was, he had a club and he'd go down there. There was no air on the trains, so each car had to be braked individually. The engineer would blow. The brakeman could brake the cars. He'd have to run down the walkway. You can imagine it covered with ice and snow in Wisconsin and Minnesota, and then put that club in the socket and wheel for the brake and go along and tighten up a whole bunch of cars when they were going down a hill. Then when they started going up a hill, he's say: "Oops, now I've got to get the slack back." So they'd go back. They had signals. I've got an old consolidated rule book and they had the signals in there for the brakeman releasing and setting the brakes.

The other thing and this I had happen to me. Section men would see this as a danger too. When a train went by you never knew what was going to be hanging off the edge of that train. There were wire straps and once the last load was taken off, the guy had the straps and he didn't raise them up. They were flopping along. I will have a story about this later, this guy handing up an order.

When I was at Marshfield and they had an aluminum post with hoops out and you put strings in them. You put the message to the train in the string with knots. The conductor and the engineer would go by and they'd lean out the window and grab the hoop and open it up and "Oh, here's my train order."

The train went by. It was the middle of the night, about 2 in the morning. The 24, the fast train from Minneapolis to Chicago and it went flying by. I was standing back a ways to watch. We were always inspecting the train for problems, flaming wheels, sticking brakes and that kind of stuff.

I am looking at the train. It is darker than pitch. All of a sudden the train went by and "poof" the air cut. Now what happened? You didn't want to stop the 24. I went in and told the dispatcher. They cut the air. I could just barely see the caboose down the track. I didn't know why.

When I looked up, I could see why. My train order stand was completely gone. All there was a hole in the blacktop. Had I been handing up the order by hand, I'd have been gone. It happened that fast. Something was hanging out the side of that train and ripped it right out the blacktop. The section men used to get clipped that way. On a fill they can't get a long ways from the rail. If the train overtakes them, they can't get a long ways from the rail. Things are hanging out from the side.

Richard Luers: The railroad didn't invest in air brakes and couplers because employees were a lot

cheaper than couplers and air brakes.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: That's right.

Richard Luers: The Brotherhoods forced the railroads into putting in automatic couplers. Westinghouse, he developed the air brakes and they didn't want to buy it. It cost too much to put all that stuff on. But the brotherhoods, because the brakemen were getting killed. You know what it was riding up there. They forced them into it. The same with the automatic coupler, they didn't want to do that either, because could buy help cheaper than they could the couplers. If a guy got his hand cut off, they gave him 200 bucks and he was done.

John Decker: Gib, your story about the equipment hanging over reminds me that one of the things we always did on the moving trains is if you were going to meet a train passing in the opposite direction. If you were seated on the left hand side of the caboose or the locomotive you'd get up out of your seat and be no closer to that side of the train than the center of the cab or the center of the caboose, for fear that there would be something hanging off and you would not have time to react and get out of the way. The other thing, you mentioned inspecting the passing trains, one of the things the flagman always did is when you knew you were coming up to a place that was manned by an operator, you'd get to the back door and look for him to give you a highball or to give some other signal like that to indicate that there was a problem. At night you were always very happy to see that white light giving the highball.

Richard Luers: How did you signal with the train brakes, signal the engineer that you wanted to stop? They had some way of doing that didn't they? What would you do crack a valve and he'd see it on the gage go back and forth or something?

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : The brakes would start dragging. Now a days with the automatic units you can't do that.

Richard Luers: In those days, the rear brakeman could signal the engineer to stop by doing something with the air.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : You could turn on the brakes.

John Decker: The caboose would have an air valve.

Richard Luers: They had a whistle they used to hook on back there too didn't they?

John Decker: There was whistle, but that was used for grade crossings.

Richard Luers: I thought the engineer could some way blow that whistle.

John Decker: No, Gib's got it right. What you would do, if you wanted to stop the train, you would make a brake pipe reduction with the valve on the caboose. Not much of one. The engineer would recognize that and make a controlled stop. You didn't want to put it into emergency and make things worse.

John Ehle: So the caboose had more purpose than to designate the end of the train. People, employees would be in the caboose, is that correct?

John Decker: Right and what you would do was you would keep a lookout on both sides of the train. Because you usually had two men back there, the conductor and the flagman and so they'd

be watching each side of the train. They'd be watching for signals from agents and operators.

Richard Luers: On some railroads the caboose was home to those guys. They lived in the caboose going back and forth and they'd be in it four or five days at a time. They had stoves and they just used to live in the caboose.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : They had stoves and refrigerators. When a train met another train it was inspected because you had a number of things that could happen. You could have stuff hanging over the edges. You could have hot wheels from brakes dragging and you could have hot journal boxes. Now a days its roller bearing, but in those days it was a wheel where it was a big flat plate of hot lead. What do they call that stuff they make bearings out of?

Richard Luers: Babbit.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: Babbit. There were rolling axles under it. There were rags underneath and it was filled with oil and so when the train would stop at the station, the car men would go along and they'd open the door and stab that cotton and make it oil up so the wheels would stay oiled. Those wheels would run dry. I've had any number of hot boxes.

There were all kinds of signals you gave the guy when he went by. If everything was ok, you highballed him. But if there was a hot box, it smelled bad. Was it the middle of the train, the head of the train, was it the rear of the train, depending on where you put your hand across so that you could tell the person where the problem was. Dragging brakes were the same thing.
I remember at Park Falls we had a broken wheel one time and it broke the track every three and ½ feet for two miles. This was before automatic equipment that came in and did all this. The section foreman was just furious because the train was limited to something like five miles an hour until he got two miles of track on one side re-laid. That took him a couple of days, you know. It neatly cracked the track. Every time that flat part came around it broke the track.

Mike Nelson: Coming up this Sunday at the Kane County Fairgrounds down at St. Charles they have a railroad meet. I think they have been holding this for 30-35 years. Probably 20 years ago Mark and I started our day out at DeKalb, probably hit McDonalds and then we are going to see some main line trains. Here comes an eastbound like one of the automobiles racks. They had the end doors for getting the automobiles out. One of these had rotated out and it was fouling the other opposing main. So the good thing is that back then they had cabooses. So we gave them kind of a washout sign there to the caboose as it went by. They stopped and they sat the car out.

Mark Nelson: If it had met the opposing train, maybe it would have taken the windshield out or something.

Mike Nelson: Later on the day you had a photograph of the cars sitting forlornly there between the siding and DeKalb. It was our good deed for the day.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : One of the thing that we should probably clear up, if we are talking railroad. There is no north and south on the old railroads. You had eastbound and westbound. East and South was East and North and West was West and that was the only way it was. If you look at all the time tables in this whole book, you have east bound and west bound.

Mike Nelson: I didn't know that.

Richard Luers: It's like the interstate highways.

John Decker: I think, Gib, there were maybe two exceptions to that in the country, the Illinois Central and the Alaska Railroad.

Gilbert Widenhoeft: That could be.

John Decker: Alaska I know was North-South

Matt Koser: As far as I understand that started in Chicago because everything either went west of Chicago or east of Chicago.

Richard Luers: And met in Chicago.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: It just made it too complicated. I mean, when you had train orders, train orders had to be succinct and short because they had to fit on one little piece of paper. So, you had to say this train, extra 203 east, meets number 215 west, or whatever, at a certain place. You couldn't have all the different directions in there. It just got too complicated, I suppose. It was long before my time.

Richard Luers: Is it true that the engineer, when he wanted to tell the station agent something he would wrap the train order around a chunk of coal and throw it out at him?

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : I've had that happen. I don't know how many of you know this, about handing up orders with an order stick. It was a long stick and it had a Y on it and you put your string in there and you put your message in your string. You had a short stick for the caboose and a long stick for the engine.

When I was working at Owen, I was a greenhorn. I probably was working two months. It was cold. It was snowing. Snow was sticking on my glasses. It was a miserable night. At Owen the depot was at an angle to the tracks because years ago the tracks used to run a different direction there. The main line went to St. Paul and there was a branch line that went off to Superior. Because there were two tracks there and two passenger trains, it was all a smooth platform. They had lug rails so you didn't have the rails sticking up. You couldn't get express carts and mail carts over them. So the whole platform, except for these little indentations of the rails, was perfectly smooth. The object was. You went out and you put the stick on the rail. You tipped your stick and you held it up at a 45 degree angle for the engineer. That would be just right for the engine to come by. So number 143 going to Superior comes out. They had big headlights and then they had what's called those Mars headlight. I don't know how many of you have seen those. They were big. It was hard to look into those and see anything.

And so I'm out there, green as grass, and it's snowing and sticking to me all over. I clean a spot. Yep, there's the rail. So, I stepped back. I put my stick out. I hold it up. The engine comes flying along. The next thing I remember I'm sitting at the end of the depot with my stick in my hand and lying up against the end of the depot. The train has stopped and the brakeman is running back to see if I'm all right.

I had gotten the wrong rail. I was probably 10 inches outside of the near rail instead of being three or four feet out of it. And with the snow all over everything, you know, I just cleaned the rail and thought I had it. I was afraid to tell anybody for fear I was going to get fired. So I never said a word to anybody. I was a little shook up.

Well, it's funny, because about eight days later a message came out from the Superintendent: "Engines will extinguish their Mars headlights and reduce their other headlight when approaching

a station at night." Somebody knew about it, you know. I can just see the Superintendent's office, the Assistant Super and the Road Master and Superintendent sitting there, "Should we keep that idiot? Will he make it?" "Aw, keep him. If he gets through that one, he might make it."

What saved my life was it was one of the big high old diesels and it didn't have grab irons and steps right on the front corners. The step was back a ways and the grab iron, right in front of the engine, was back a ways. So, I just got hit by the smooth part of it. I think it was the elbow.

Richard Luers: The viaduct that was here in town had lights going all the way up it and down again. When they built that they opened that in '32 or 33, something like that. The engineers collectively made them get rid of the middle light because when they were coming up the track that street light up there looked like a locomotive headlight coming at them. People would say, "There's a light bulb out on the viaduct." There never was. They took everything out of there. They couldn't put a bulb in it. That was so the engineers didn't think there was a train coming at them. You remember that John.

John Rasmussen: Yes, I've got one of the lights from it.

Construction of the viaduct in Evansville 1931

1940s Photo by Don Every

Richard Luers: I've got the plaque off that viaduct, the bronze plaque, the builder's plate. It was built the year I was born. They tore the thing down and that builder's plate was there. I knew the guy that was tearing the viaduct down. I said, "Can I have it?" And he said, "You betcha." So he gave it to me.

He tore the viaduct down. I can't think of the name. It's right up in the Madison area, a big construction outfit. When he got the successful bid to tear that down, they gave him the blue prints out of archives in Madison . I gave the blue prints to Ruthie, didn't I? You've got the blue prints to the viaduct, so that they are preserved. He said, "You might as well have these too."

John Decker: You didn't want to see a white light at night in an unexpected place. I can remember being on a freight train on the Racine and Southwestern Division. It ran from Racine down through Beloit. I was sitting up in the cab and the engineer all of a sudden makes a brake application. He said, "There's a white light where no light should be." We kind of crawled up to it and it was a couple of kids, with a lantern, fishing from a bridge.

The other thing about handing up train orders, as Gib knows, you'd have two sets of orders, one for the engine crew and one for the train crew. So, you'd hand up the engine crew orders when the engine was coming past and then for the train crew you'd have that for the caboose on a freight train or for the conductor or one of the trainmen on the passenger train. You'd open up the top half of one of the Dutch doors and hang your arm out to catch the set of orders for the train.

I was on a passenger train between Milwaukee and Chicago one day. It had been drilled into me by a conductor. "You've got to backstop me as the flagman looking out for orders. Because, if I'm distracted and I don't pick up the set of orders for the train crew, flagman you have to be hanging out the window to pick them up." I had a different conductor on this particular trip and he got preoccupied or forgot that Rondout was a train order station. As you come eastbound there is a left-hand curve and so I looked out the window on the fireman's side. I saw, sure enough, the train order signal was yellow, meaning pick up 19 orders. You could do that on the move. So I went over to the engineer's side of the train and opened up the door. Sure enough, I could see the engine crew getting their orders but I didn't see any arms hanging out the train. So I snagged the orders on the last car of the train and went walking forward. I get into a coach and the conductor is on the run through the middle of the car and I held up the orders for him. I've never seen a guy get a quicker expression of relief on his face than that conductor because otherwise, we would have had to stop. I would have been the guy to hoof it back to the station to pick up the orders.

Matt Koser: We still catch orders at Rondout that come out of Chicago.

Richard Luers: That's a big transfer point yet, Rondout.

Matt Koser: I think we are one of the few railroads that still do that.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : You have paper orders yet? I would have thought everything was done on the radio.

Richard Luers: I would have thought so, too.

Matt Koser: We take track orders or bulletins, or whatever we need. We catch them on the way out of Chicago.

John Decker: I think that was the thing. Going westbound you always picked orders at Rondout, particularly if you were going to take the Janesville line. Going east it was very unusual to have

orders issued at Rondout.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : Train orders to an engine were something that you needed to keep your wits about you. If you had a doubleheader and we used to have them out of Fond du Lac regularly. Because as you come out of Fond du Lac yard there is a very steep hill to a little town called Byron. Then they don't need it beyond there.

During the Korean War you had a lot of heavy trains coming out of Fond Du Lac and they'd put double headers on. Sometimes the engines went through and sometimes they cut it off and send it back when it got to the top of the hill. You had to have it just right to get those orders out for both engines. Both engines had to have a set of orders when they went by.

John Ehle: Why were there heavy trains coming out of Fond du Lac?

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : Fond du Lac was the yards for the trains. During the war you had trains coming out of the Twin Cities and Manitowoc and Neenah, Menasha, Appleton had a lot of industrial machine building sites. You had a lot of stuff. There was a lot of war equipment being made in Wisconsin. The trains were heavy and there were a lot of them. They'd run extras every now and then because they'd have extra cars, and of course the regular trains.

Mike Nelson: When our Dad worked either Poplar Grove or Caledonia he got some old train orders. This is back, probably in the early 30s, he got train orders out of the wall of the depot. But back then, it was like, so and so, you run as a wild train looking out for trains ahead of you. So you are doing it visually.

Mark Nelson: W-i-l-d. 1886, 1887, 1888.

Mike Nelson: You did it with your eyes there. You just were just very careful running for trains.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: I had an acquaintance when I worked at Phillips. He was retired, but he had been a fireman on the line that ran from Phillips over to Willow Lake. The reason he worked on that one was because he was inclined to get thirsty and he had been fired on the Soo Line. His story was that they didn't have any operators or agents out there on that line. So they would leave a message for the next train. They'd roll it up and stick it in the switch stand, but any bum going by could pull it out and look at it and forget to put it back.

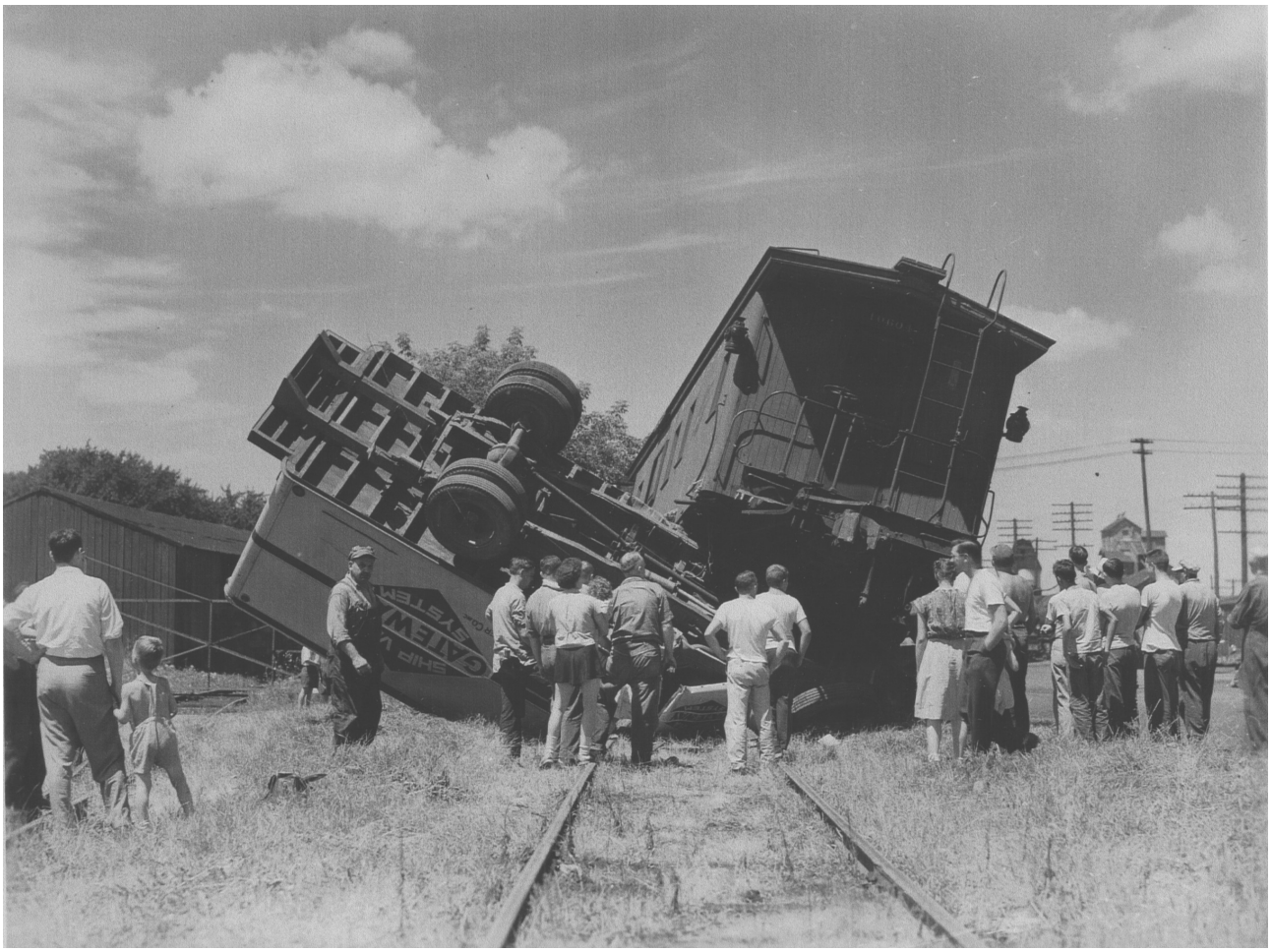
The other thing was they would carry a supply of pine roots. It was a gear driven engine instead of the shays. There were shays out there. They would carry a supply of pine roots, which were plentiful in those days because the pine had all been cut several years earlier. If they had any doubt about whether there was another train in the area, they would throw a lot of pine roots in the firebox so they would get a lot more smoke. They could see each other further in the woods. If you look at that, it's a pretty wobbly trail across that track. It runs east of Phillips. He had a lot of railroad stories, most of which I couldn't repeat.

Richard Luers: The secret was, when a car was stuck on the railroad tracks, and you knew you couldn't stop any way, don't give a full brake application because it flattened all the wheels out. It cost more to money to machine the wheels than it did to pay off the lawsuit.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : There was a recent court case, I think it was in California. Because the engineer had not made a full application and it was a high speed train moving through an urban district. He said that a complete application would have increased the risk of him leaving the rails and going off the rails and into houses, stores, and buildings. So, it was only one car and he didn't

know how many people were on it. But it was a long court case. There were all kinds of ethical people testifying and all this kind of stuff. Should they have flattened all the wheels and taken a chance of derailing a high speed train into the city environment or should he have hit the car?

Richard Luers: My uncle, on The Empire Builder, he said the most dangerous thing was some sodbuster would be coming out of a grain elevator with his tractor pulling two wagons full of corn about the same time that the Empire Builder was going by at 80 miles an hour. That's a heck of a clatter when it hits one of those wagons. Corn goes right up over the top. You have a picture of one of them doing it?



Train wreck in Evansville near Baker Manufacturing Company
July 19, 1949
Don Every Photo

Mike Nelson: This is the second American Eagle [Illinois Central bicentennial engine]. The first one was on its maiden trip from Chicago to New Orleans. As you said, here they run up against a tank truck. So I think they had maybe a couple of officials in the cab and the head end crew. They all three were killed. They made up the second one. The first one, I say, unfortunately didn't.

Richard Luers: About 15 years ago, right near Northwestern University in Chicago, a school bus didn't get the back end off the railroad tracks. A new driver on the bus, a lady and she stopped and it killed 15 kids. That train was coming down through there at 70 miles an hour and wiped out the whole rear end of that school bus.

Matt Koser. We always say the three things you don't want to hit are a school bus, a hazmat tanker or a septic truck.

Richard Luers: I imagine that would be a little foul too.

John Sorenson: I was working in Barrington one morning. I had just come to work and we got a call on the radio. Some woman got hit by a train in Barrington. I was with my foreman. He said, "If the ambulance is still there, she's dead." I thought, "Well, ok."

Well, we got there and I looked. Here she was lying right in the track, right where she had hit the train. They stopped the train right there. There are 500 people getting on the trains going and there she lays. I said, "Why didn't they cover her up or something?" They are stepping over her. I said, "What is going on? This is terrible." They said, "They can't." The federal government has to look at why she got hit. Everything has to be photographed. They can't move her if she's dead." I thought, "Well, this is kind of nuts." What happened was one train coming this way and she was going to get on her train over here. Her train was coming and she never looked for this one. She walked right in front of this one.

Richard Luers: They got a car at the depot one time. There were two trains going both ways. The guy waited for one train and then he drove in back of the other one and got nailed. The train was coming the other way. That lady we were talking about that got killed, the crew didn't even now they hit her. Somebody was walking the tracks in the morning and said, "There's some awful stuff on the railroad tracks." We went up there and here were body parts lying all along the railroad tracks.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : The coroners in the State of Illinois and the police departments, they really didn't want anybody touching anything until they made their investigation. Sometimes it was weird you know.

John Sorenson: That's what this was. They said, "Nobody can do nothing. They have to take pictures. They have to find out exactly what happened." They can't do nothing.

Richard Luers: Nothing to do with trains; it has to do with truck stops and trucks. They may have the pictures up at the police department yet. A guy committed suicide down at Green Bros. He went down in the middle of the night and laid down and put his head under the rear duals of the semi. And then waited for the semi-to leave, we assume. Because I had the pictures and you could see the two tire tracks. The semi driver evidently got in his truck and drove away. There again, another trucker walking through the parking lot saw the body laying there. He had laid right there and there were the two duals and one of them went right over his head. He did that purposely. I wonder if a lot of people do that with trains when they wanted to commit suicide.

Matt Kuser: They do. I don't know all the stats in my head, but the federal government doesn't differentiate between suicides and accidents. What people don't think about is the impact on the train crews too. For some reason people that think about doing that like to use trains to do it. I don't know if it's something quick, or historical and happened in the past. It happens a lot and a lot of the time it is not reported in the news or it's not on TV because the railroad company doesn't necessarily want to make that public knowledge either. So we get into our investigation and at that point the lawyers are called. We don't put it in the newspaper or put it on TV.

Richard Luers: When I was a little kid growing up in Chicago, the guy that lived next door to us was a street car starter. If you know what that is, they had a little green shack. They stood on the corner and got the street cars running on time. This was during the Depression. He said, "The best think you could do in Chicago in the fall and early winter was to get hit by a street car." Because then you could spend the winter in the hospital down there. Those guys, down in skid row

would try to get hit by a street car and then go to the hospital for a couple of months.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : Matt's story about not hitting a septic wagon brings to mind something that happened. I was the agent at Dale which is just a little town out of Appleton. There were miles of flat track through the woods and farm country towards Neenah. One day our train, Number 43 came through. It was hunting season. It was in the fall. A farmer had cattle on both sides of the track. Hunters left the gate open. There were 27 cattle standing on the track. The train, there were three units, A, B & C units, they were covered wagons, plowed through these 27 cows, at, I don't know how fast, but probably 50-55 miles an hour. At that time I had leased a piece of land and I lived in a big trailer house right next to the railroad tracks south of the depot in Dale. There was a main line, the passing track, a grassy space and my house. They came in there and the front of that engine, and the spring hangers and all the stuff on the sides were just hanging with cow insides, and cow parts and it smelled. One of the brakeman, I will never forget, he was hanging out of the back window upchucking. They cut the engine off because no one could stand to ride in it. I had a lot of garden hose and they ran the engine way down to my house and they took the garden hose washed the engine down there. Even the windshield wipers had the cow manure sticking to them.

Mark Nelson: We should have talked about this after lunch.

Richard Luers: I betcha when they settled the lawsuit it was the best milkers in his herd that got killed. They always said it was the best cows that got killed on the railroad tracks.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : I was good friends with the railroad detective and he said, "Every cow that got hit was the best milker in the herd." It was one of the worst messes I ever saw.

Daryll Disch: The section crew would take care of it.

Richard Luers: When I ran the ambulance, I got out on a half a dozen different bad accidents, one over at Albany and another one east of town. In fact, in one of the automobiles 3 or 4 people got killed in that and they parked the smashed up car down by the water and light department. They said the engine crew was coming up the tracks everyday and they saw that car setting there. They finally asked them to move that car out of there because it tore them apart to see that smashed up automobile. I think that was the one east of town. He thought he could beat the train. That's how I buckled my knee up. I got a fence post and lifted the car off the little baby that was underneath there. I laid that fence post on my leg and held it up. I was the first one out there and then the ambulance came out.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : It always amazed me, and I had a case when I was in Dale again. An old guy went to the post office and picked up his mail and drove back across the tracks. Number 24 was late and hit him at probably 50-55 miles per hour. He had a '50 Ford. The train stopped and I looked through the train and the car was spinning around on the roof. It was just spinning around in a circle in the middle of the road. He wasn't hurt that bad. The ambulance came. The wrecker guy came. He never looked left or right. He crossed that track without looking. Several other cars I watched and people were looking out of curiosity to see this accident. They never looked left or right to see if another train was coming. Number 24 had left, you know. They never looked left or right to see if there was another train.

Richard Luers: This was carelessness. The corn was 8 foot tall and he lived in the neighborhood. He knew there were trains going through there. You don't come up on a railroad track at 40 miles an hour in the summer time. It was an unmarked crossing. When you grow up there, you sneak up on a railroad to make sure there isn't a train coming. You don't go whistling down there,

but he did. That car was something else. It killed his wife and child. I forget anymore now. It's all history.

Then there was the family over at Albany. That was when the Milwaukee was still going out that way. They went to Monroe and up in through there. Where the bicycle trail is now, they got a whole family, six people in that one. Statistics prove locomotives are not afraid of automobiles.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : One of the things when I worked for the Minnesota DOT, we had a speech on safety and one of these safety engineers, his wording was: "Vehicular traffic and rail traffic do not interface well." Somebody put their hand up and said, "What the heck are you talking about?"

Mark Nelson: I think speaking for everybody here at the tables. When my twin brother Mike and I come up on a railroad crossing, we are basically looking both ways for a train. I say, the normal populace, no.

Richard Luers: If I can't see the track both ways, when I come up on a track, I look both ways. I picked up too many things out on the railroad tracks, through accidents

Matt Koser: Part of my everyday job is spreading the Operation Lifesaver safety message. It's dedicated to promoting safety on or around railroad property. When I go in and talk to people, especially drivers ed. groups or bus driver groups or truck driver groups. It is common knowledge that I'm going to hear the train or they will activate the warning devices to let me know there's going to be a train there. I can worry about what I'm doing, driving down the road, talking on the phone, eating my doughnut or whatever I'm doing. Somebody else is going to warn me before a train intersects with that crossing there.

We try to get the message out there that we have to listen. We have to look. We have to pay attention to what we are doing. It's unbelievable. I don't know what the word is to use, but drivers out there rely on somebody else to get the information. Operation Lifesaver has shown that over the years, we're effective in reducing collisions on or around railroad property, but there's still a lot of work to do yet.

One thing that I am going to try to do in this area is to maybe get into the schools or the driver's ed. schools and spread the Operation Lifesaver message. Because train traffic is rather low in this area, but if things progress like we want them to and train traffic increases, it's going to be kind of a rude awakening for a lot people. Especially in our area here where they haven't seen a train in so many years, or seen a train moving at speed, now all of a sudden you have the train going through the community now and drivers aren't aware of it. Hopefully we can get that message out there that we need to start thinking about that.

Richard Luers: Talking about that, are they going to open it up through Brooklyn, going to put her back, have you heard?

Matt Koser: I don't really have any other inside information, other than I'm sure what everyone else knows, that has been publicized.

Richard Luers: They wanted to get at that gravel pit didn't they?

Matt Koser: Yes.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : The operating people here know that the old consolidated rule book, the operating rules for the railroad. The first rule was: trains may come on any track, in any direc-

tion, at any time. That's one of the first questions that they ask you. You'd have to renew your rules exam every year or two. That would be one of the first questions, "When can you expect a train.

Matt Koser: The train name for that is situational awareness. You need to know what's going on around you all the time. I bring up the Lifesaver stuff as a plug for Operation Lifesaver. If there is anybody here that has an interest in having an Operation Lifesaver presentation done for a civic group or church group, a family reunion or anything like that, I can give you my information and I will be glad to come out. I can bring a power point, slides, or photos and things like that too. It's always out there. It's totally free and it can be short presentations from five minutes to ten minutes, to an hour or two hours long, depending on what you want. It's always out there so if you have an interest in that just let me know.

John Ehle: If it's for kids bring pictures.

Matt Koser: We do. We do all groups. We do fire fighters, police officers, school-age children, preschool children up to senior centers and things like that. We can cater our message to any group.

John Decker: If you want to see something breathtaking, there is a video on UTube right now. You remember, a week or so ago, there was an explosion, a freight train derailment and an explosion in Baltimore. It was in the news.

Well, there is a video out on UTube from a security camera at a truck terminal that was right next to this main line railroad track. It's aimed right at the private railroad crossing. The video starts just a couple of seconds before the collision. You can see the semi tractor coming up and making a right hand turn and proceeding across the tracks without even slowing down. As soon as the tractor is across the rails, "Boom" along comes a freight train and catches the back end of the tractor and the trailer. It throws them off to the side. The freight train is probably running about 40 miles an hour.

Just watch how long it takes for that train to stop. It's a very long freight train. I'm sure the engineer put it into emergency immediately. It probably took him a ½ mile or more to stop that train. Then you watch guys coming out of the trucking terminal to see what the commotion was. They are kind of wandering around until obviously the explosion happens and boom, the picture goes out.

Richard Luers: Tankers are supposed to stop at tracks, but this one didn't?

John Decker: It wasn't a tanker. It was a dry van.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : There is a site called the National Transportation Safety site that you can go into and get descriptions of all these accidents. I've been searching for a couple that happened close to me while I was working for the railroad. It is very rare that tank cars will rupture. They are built for safety. For some reason the tank car ruptured and there was what they called a BLEVE [boiling liquid expanding vapor explosion]. It's a set of initials which means the whole thing ignited as an explosive and started burning linearly, in a line like you would normally get. There is another one of those in some town in Mississippi that the whole town got wiped out.

Mike Nelson: The TP&W Toledo, Peoria & Western, at Watseka, Illinois, where it basically took out the whole business district and there were seven to ten fatalities, too. It's scary. It's terrible when something that major happens. When were you agent at Dale?

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : I was at Dale from 1959 to 1963 or '64.

Mike Nelson: We have a friend in town, Scott Sasse. He teaches music in Janesville but he's a train buff. And he showed us a pristine shot of the depot at Dale. It's just one of these handsome structures with the big elevator there.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: It was 2-story and there were living quarters upstairs. I chose not to live there. It was funny living next to the tracks. We had a really bad storm and a washout. The trains quit running. It was 2 o'clock in the morning. We woke up and something's missing. We didn't have telephones. The section foreman came down and said they need you up at the depot. There were no trains running and both my wife and I woke up. It was also nice because the trainmen just loved waving at the children. They'd be out playing and they had strict rules about not waving beyond a certain point. The trainmen just loved to wave at the children when they went by. We had three children.

Mark Nelson: We still enjoy watching trains at Dale. They still enjoy come through at 60. They fly.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : This was long before my time at Dale. The railroad goes through Dale at kind of an angle and there was a pretty deep cut. Especially during the 1917 to 1924, there were a lot of really big snow storms. You probably got snow storms like that here too. There was this railroad cut got full of snow and the Soo Line sent down a snow plow to clean out the cut. When it came down, it was two steam engines, a snow plow and six gondolas full of rocks and a caboose at the end. They came down and everybody in this little town, it was probably 200 people or so. Everybody lined up along this fence to see them clean out the cut.

Then the train comes down and they went maybe 100 feet into the snow and stopped. Everybody said, "Ah, they're not going to get it." Then they whistled back up. The train backed up to refill. When that train came back they were really pumping steel and they opened that cut in one shot. The people standing by the fence went from being to their knees in snow to their shoulders in snow. The guy who told me that story said that he had to push the snow and it was wet snow and when it came down, it came down, big lumps and everything . It was funny nobody got killed, because they cleaned that cut in one shot and they just kept right on going.

John Ehle: That's a great story.

John Decker: John, I've got one from the summer of '72 when I was working up in Alaska. I got an email about a book, Alaska Far Away . It's about the settlement of Matanuska Valley in the 1930s. It was a Depression relief thing and a bunch of farmers from northern Wisconsin and Minnesota got moved up there to settle this Matanuska Valley. It was a very fertile place. They grew pumpkins this big around in a very short growing season. Palmer is the name of the town that was the principal settlement up there.

I worked on a local train that went up to Palmer and back, Anchorage being the starting point. It was about a 35-40 mile trip to get up from this little branch line to the valley to Palmer. It's an agricultural area. So we had a flat car with two or three tractors on it that we were to set out at a loading ramp and I was the junior guy on the crew, as usual. The conductor and the more experienced brakeman went to downtown to get a cup of coffee. They told the engineer and me to set out the flat car with the tractors on it to the loading ramp. It was a little loading ramp located at the end of the tracks so somebody could just go up and drive the tractors off the end of the flat car down the ramp and away you went.

Well, the siding to this ramp was covered with weeds. You couldn't even see the rails. We were going at a slow speed maybe three or four miles an hour. I gave signals to the engineer to slow down. I could hear he applied the brakes, but nothing slowed down. Then I could see, "oh, oh, I better give this guy a wash out and have him put on the emergency brakes. The emergency brakes came on and the wheels slid and I swear that flat car and that engine took off like a rocket, smashed into the loading dock and tractors went flying up in the air. There were two young boys watching us, maybe ten or twelve years old. They see these tractors flying up and the air and they hollered, "Mr. do it again. "

The front trunk of the flat car came off and got buried under the ramp. The company just left the flat car right where it was. They made some modifications with a cutting torch, but they ended up with an extension to the loading platform, essentially. Sandy and I went up there. I think it was four years later on our honeymoon, and I had to what see the situation was in Palmer and sure enough that flat car was still stuck there.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: If you go to the state historical society in Madison they have an hour or hour and a half movie about the Wisconsin settlement of Palmer. I saw it on Channel 21, several months ago. It was interesting.

John Decker: Of course with an accident you expect an investigation and that sort of thing. I explained to the conductor what happened. The engineer said "He was giving me stop signals in time for me to stop but there were weeds on the rails." We never heard another word about it. He corroborated that the thing just took off. So we never heard another thing about it.

John Ehle: How was it that you got involved in railroads as a college student?

John Decker: I enjoyed the Nelson's photograph of "the boys looking out of the cab of the locomotive."
That's really what got me hooked on this railroad thing.

My dad would take me around to see what he considered interesting stuff. He was a Navy veteran so if a Navy ship came to make a port call, boom, we were down there to visit the ship. Back in the '50s there was an observation deck at the airport. Can you believe that? You were invited into the airport on this balcony to watch the planes landing and taking off and taxiing around.

One day he took me down to the North Western yard at Butler. There was a locomotive just like that sitting in the yard. My Dad went over to the engine. I was probably about three years old. He says to the engine crew, "Hey can we come up and have a look around." "Sure."

I'm sure my Dad had to hand me up like you'd hand up a grip to the engine crew. They grabbed me. My Dad climbed up. They said, "Do you want to take a little ride?" "Sure." We ran up and down the yard lead. I think the engineer let me ring the bell or something like that and boy, from that moment I was hooked. That was the greatest thing ever.

Mark Nelson: So much for airplanes!

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: Actually, it was good work. I worked at Stevens Point and we had a yard there. We had a big crew board there, engineers, firemen, and conductors. The College students, especially the ones from Stevens Point area, would have instant employment in the summer time. A lot of them figured out schedules so once they got some seniority they could have night runs to Fond du Lac and back or to Chippewa Falls and back. So they could work that with their college. I went to college working as a telegrapher. I worked nights and went to school in the daytime and

it worked out, not great, but it worked. We had a lot of college students working, especially during the summer time, working, braking and yard work.

John Decker: When I was a senior in high school, I had this idea that I would like to get into railroad management. So I wrote to the personnel department to every railroad headquarters for which I could find an address. The response I usually got was "Well, yeah, we have a management training program, but only for college graduates why don't you write to us in about four years." But I got a little note back from the Milwaukee Road. It said, contact G. A. Jonasson, Assistant Trainmaster at Milwaukee. Here was his city telephone number that was to distinguish between the Bell City telephone system and the Company telephone system.

I called up and made an appointment to see this guy, Jonasson. To my great surprise, here's a guy in his mid-20s and looked nothing like the railroad management guy that I had pictured. He seemed to be kind of amused by my story that I would be interested in going into railroad management. He said, "Yeah, we can take you on. You'll be on the extra list, so it won't be steady employment. You will be subject to call 24 hours a day. When you get the call from the caller, you have 2 hours to get into work and you'll have a training period.

The training back then was nothing like it is today. I think I had two days of classroom instructions, part of which was viewing a film strip where one of the safety demonstrations they had was they took a sand bag and held it over an open coupler of a stationery freight car and then coupled another car into that joint. Then they pulled the car. Of course, all the sand in the sand bag came out. They said, "Now, you can imagine what that would do to a human body."

Then I was to have three student trips, which is a standard thing. I'll tell you more about that later. I got the job. I found out years later that both the personnel guy I had written to and this Assistant Trainmaster had, as either college students or high school students, done exactly what I had done and gotten hired. I was just following in the footsteps of these guys.

John Ehle: So they were predisposed to a guy like you?

John Decker: Yeah, "You're our guy."

I was interested in Gib telling the first day on the job stories you told, because I had one like that. After you did the classroom stuff, you were supposed to have three days of on the job, out in the field, training. It's called student trips. It was in the yard or over the road. You work for nothing, back then. You go out with a train crew or you'd go out with an experienced switchtender and you sort of learn the ropes from those guys.

The first student trip always on the Milwaukee Road was to work alongside the switchtender at the place called Five Rings. It's right down below the main yard office. The superintendent sits up in this glass enclosed tower so they can see every move that you make.

You were stationed in this little 5' x 8' shanty with a coal stove in it and a telephone and there was also a squawk box. It was a loud speaker combined with a microphone and you'd push a button to activate the microphone. So they could call you either on the squawk box or on the telephone and you knew the telephone was for you because it would ring five times, hence Five Rings.

They had a little piece of paper up next to this wall mounted telephone that listed the signals for the different points on the telephone system. There were five rings and then the Cut-off switchtender he had another signal and the North lot switchtender had another signal and the stationmaster down town had another signal. You cranked the phone the requisite number of times to call who-

ever you wanted on that list.

Well, it was the third shift. They wanted you to get used to idea you were working at night and in all kind of weather conditions. So, you went in on the third shift. I was out with this old crusty switchtender, who didn't have much to say. He was kind of explaining to me to line this switch and line this switch and if it's a crossover switch you have to line both of them at the same time, this that and the other thing. I'm at that for about two, or two and half hours and the squawk box goes off to the switch tender. "You got that student down there with you?" "Yeah" "Send him up to the crew caller's office."

So I go inside the building and there is a heated argument going on between the superintendent and chief crew caller. One of the guys on one of the transfer jobs that took cars from one yard to another had gone home sick. The crew caller was taking the position that the next man on the extra list had to be called to replace this guy who had gone home sick. The superintendent was saying, "Nonsense, we've got a man right here, ready to go to work, with this student." Well, the superintendent won the argument. The crew caller, in the midst of all this, is appealing to me and my opinion of the fairness of cheating this guy out of his pay. I say, "Look, I just got this job. I'll do what I'm told."

So sure enough I get ordered by the superintendent to go down and join this crew on one of the transfer jobs, which was two switch engines and one of these little cheese box on a raft transfer cabooses.

We get out there and we are going to start tying on to cuts of cars and moving them around. I swear the conductor was 80 years old and the other switchman was probably in his 70s. "Kid, you got a lantern? Do you know how to make lantern signals, give car signs; slow 'em down; stop 'em; get 'em to go ahead, backup? Ok you can do that stuff." So I'm out on this transfer caboose giving signals to the engineer under the watchful eye of this old yard conductor. I'm going too fast and this guy barks at me, "This ain't the Hiawatha. Slow her down." We got through the evening and we even got an early quit that night, which is what you always aim for in the yard. Once you get your assigned work done, you can go home. You don't have to sit around until the end of the shift. So we got an early quit out of it and went home. I was marked up that night and never took another student trip in the yard. So, that was, you know, you are just thrown in the deep end.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : One of the things about working in the yard, you reminded me, when it got really cold and it used to get really cold at Stevens Point and up at Ashland. The guys all had the electric white lamp with the two bulbs in the bottom and the bail on the top. When it got really cold, after about 20 minutes those lamps would get so dim that you couldn't see them at 20 feet. So they issued everybody with an oil lamp, the round oil lamps. If you were sitting in the yard office and you looked down the tracks, they winked when they would make their signs. The flame would go up and down and they called it a wink. Those guys could read those winkies better than even the light. It was something to look out and see those little white winkies here and little white winkie there, and way up here a little white winkie would be winking back. Everyone was making signals.

I remember one night at Stevens Point there was two switch engines ran together, head on, at probably five miles an hour, right in front of the yard office. It was hard enough to switch the draw bar on one of the engines. I was the operator. You have accident reports. You have to send a report to the superintendent and the paymaster, two or 3 people in Minneapolis, the locomotive department had to get a copy. So I looked at these two sheets. Each switchman had his own accident report and both of them were "standing" when the accident happened.

Glenn Fairchild: On the railroad yards happening there, I had a great-great uncle that was station master for the Milwaukee Road in Beloit. I was a young puppy, probably back in the '30s, probably '37, or '38, somewhere in there. He was at our family reunion and he was already retired and he was telling how they used to park their freight cars, all along there. There were 9 tracks across there at one time in Beloit, the Milwaukee Road.

They knew that one of the cars had barrels of whiskey . He said, "You know, they were old wooden floor railroad cars. We thought we were going to get some of that. We went down there, about four or five of us, and we had a five-gallon pail and a bit brace. We got down there and drilled them up. We had to drill three holes before we hit a barrel. We just set our pails there and filled them up. When we got our pails full then we walked home. I don't think you'd find that today.

What year he did it I don't know. He died in 1940 and it was probably 1937-38 when he was telling this story. He was probably down there about 1918 or something, maybe before World War I, I have no idea. He never told the year.

Of course, I heard a guy tell me he worked for the railroad. He knew my great-great uncle. He said, " I went to work there at 18 years old and I was 21 before I knew I was realized I was doing my work and his work too. He stood around and talked all day." So, if I'm a little windy, I'm probably taking after him, God Bless him.

Mark Nelson: If I have to tell a favorite train story from having grown up in Janesville. Mike might have said that Dad worked from 11 o'clock at night to 7 in the morning. He was expecting 595 coming up from Proviso. The normal thing was they would stop and come in the east end of the yard and they were going to make their set out, which probably would have been auto parts for General Motors.

Dad is sitting in the office there and he looks out the window towards the main line, of course. There goes 595, just rolling right along. Well, basically, the crew woke up when they hit the Monterey Bridge. So the head end crew was asleep and the rear end crew was asleep. So they hit the bridge there, of course. Later on the 514 would have been arriving to go east via Clinton Junction to Harvard and Chicago.

He said, in those days, of course, there wasn't a yard master on at night. So when they hit the bridge down there of course they brought the train to a stop. They backed out to South Janesville, past GM of course, up on the embankment. Backed out, did come up in the yard, there. But again, he sure didn't tell any authorities about it of course and the crew members surely didn't. In those days, as long as nobody got injured or hurt or anything like that and there were no authorities around to report it. They just swept it under the carpet there. But still how you can have a five man crew and they were all sawing lumber.

Mike Nelson: I think in the caboose, if the conductor is awake there, he could have set the air on the train and stopped it. But like Mark said, nothing was done. They just kind of sailed merrily along.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: Drinking was culture of the old railroad days.

Mike Nelson: It might have been sleeping and drinking, you don't know.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : People got promoted to superintendents and assistant superintendents and trainmasters, because they out drank their competition. People got promoted because they out

drank their completion. A couple of people bragged about it. I knew one station agent there in Waupaca. The Green Bay & Western used to run into Waupaca and there was a big potato business out on the Golden Sands area. The agent there's name was Stony Erickson. He openly told the story to anybody that would listen that the reason that the Green Bay & Western left town was because he drank the other agent under the table at a get together trying to get a customer which potato warehouse would ship which railroad. He drank the Green Bay & Western man under the table and so the Soo Line was prominent and the Green Bay & Western pulled up and left. He was proud of it. The Green Bay & Western pulled up and left.

John Decker: Speaking of having a few, when I started out on the Milwaukee Terminals Division, it was on the Milwaukee Road that served all the breweries in town and what I quickly found out is that when the switch crew went to lunch they would usually go into the employees' lunch room in the brewery where they had beer on tap. The brewery employees thought nothing of taking a five minute break and going and tapping themselves a beer and that sort of thing. So the guys would imbibe on those once in awhile. Nothing was ever said, If the engineer had a few too many, you'd prop him up in the fireman's seat and the fireman would run the engine, nothing was ever said. If the engineer had a few too many, you'd prop him up in the fireman's seat and the fireman would run the train.

The only time there was any issue about beer being consumed or taken from a brewery by a switch crew was when some guys were at the Miller Brewery and the brewery had some secret new beer that they were going to test market. One of the guys picked up a case of this special new beer and hid it in the cab of the switcher. Well, somebody in management noticed that the beer case was gone, the brewery management, and raised holy hell about it and of course the trainmasters are called to find out what happened to the special case of beer.

What I quickly learned on that division is that the managers were all scared to death of the men and it was a pretty tough group of guys. So, the word got passed that the assistant trainmaster was out checking cabs of switch engines. When he came up to the crew that had this special case of beer, he approached very slowly and ostentatiously so the guys could grab the case of beer and sneak it out the door of the other end of the cab of the engine and stash it in the weeds. Then he could go back and report, "Yes, I personally interviewed all the locomotives and all crews and it's not us." That's the only time a stink was raised about drinking or beer.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : We had a case one time when I was working at Phillips. The night operator worked from 2 in the afternoon until 11 at night. The passenger train came in late. It was the holiday season. A deer farmer west of Phillips and he had a contract to provide some live deer at Christmas time (they weren't reindeer but people evidently didn't know the difference) down to some department store in Chicago that had one of these big window displays.

He came and we measured up the doors of the baggage car. He went home and made crates for these live deer. And it's maybe the Friday before Christmas weekend. I don't know if Christmas was on Saturday or Sunday, I can't remember. I'm out there on the platform. Passenger train comes from Ashland and went way on by and down past the feed mill. I could just barely see the rear markers before they came to a halt, sat there a minute and whistled back up, started backing out. The engineer had passed out somewhere between Fifeld and Phillips. What happened was, there was a clerk. I knew him well, and he was a great fellow to be friends with, but he was an easy talker and he got everybody on the train drunk. The engineer was drunk. The baggage men were laying sleeping on top of the mail. The rear brakeman and the fireman were running the train and this clerk was working all the baggage cars and the mail cars, all alone.

So, here I had these two baggage carts. Remember those big wheeled carts that you've seen out-

side the depot? With big boxes that were this square and four feet high with live deer in them. We had to fit those. The guy made the box so big that you had to get it perfectly straight to get it in. I made the mistake of putting my hand in there to move it. One of those deer got me on the hand. Oh, man, did that smart.

We managed after awhile to get all those deer loaded, plus the mail, the express, the baggage and all the other stuff they had. The train left, I said the train arrived at such and such and left at so and so. It was like 22 minutes or something. The dispatcher asked, "Was there a problem?" "No, just a lot of freight, a lot of baggage to get loaded." I'm sure they wondered down at Stevens Point how come we had so much baggage.

But the whole train crew was out like a light. I don't know if they came to by the time they got to Spencer. I'm sure that didn't get reported because the next day they were still working. So they didn't get laid off or have any problems with it.

John Sornson: I had one good time. I was riding on the rails coming out of Evansville. We had dumped a ballast car and I had to ride the ballast car because the crane was on the other end. We were going to Janesville. All of a sudden we looked out and here comes a deer. He jumped up on the track. We were only doing 7 or 8 miles an hour. That deer ran at least three miles right down the track. He never went either way. He could have jumped off any time. We watched him. He'd look back. It must have been at least three miles he ran down the track. We're going down the track and I told the other guy who was looking out the crane, "There he is." It was unreal for him to run that far.

Daryll Disch: You see a lot of them doing that too. They aren't smart enough to jump off. You kind of feel sorry for him.

John Sornson: One time we were chasing one with a truck. He wouldn't get off the tracks.

John Decker: The same thing happened in Alaska with moose. You know, the railroad cuts a deep enough swath through the snow in the winter time that the moose all find that easy going. So they use the railroad as a highway. Even in the summer time they do the same thing. They get out on the tracks and they just stay on the tracks and don't veer off. People up in Alaska call trains "moose goosers."

John Sornson: They don't care.

Daryll Disch: I see a semi hit a moose up there. Boy that thing was slaughtered. You could see that for miles.

John Ehle: John, what is the prospect of getting this track opened up all the way to Madison for passengers?

John Decker: I think there are people in county and state government that are pretty interested in seeing that happen for economic development prospects. The Union Pacific owns the line to about a mile and a half to a mile and three quarters north of town. My understanding is that the State of Wisconsin owns the rest up to Madison.

It was slated for abandonment and there is a law that permits the state acquire railroad lines when they come up for abandonment with the hope that they can either be put back into service at a future date or take the rail out and make it a bicycle trail.

John Ehle: Is there a fund in the state budget for the purchase of that kind of property?

John Decker: There has been from time to time.

Mike Nelson: I wouldn't imagine that the Union Pacific would want that grade to move to Madison. Like on the Wisconsin & Southern to Prairie du Chien, they say, they want it to go on their rails to Janesville and south. They would fight that but on the other hand it's not to say that they could be turned around in their thinking. For them it's much more economical to run the trains on their rails.

John Decker: They might have some interest in development of some new industry that would ship west. There have been articles in the papers recently, indicating that there are active discussions between Fitchburg and Oregon about putting that line back in service and Wisconsin & Southern would be the operators. I haven't heard any discussion about opening anything south of Oregon.

Dave Fellows: Where do you guys live?

Mark Nelson: We live in Oregon.

Dave Fellows: Do you want to be our Oregon agents?

Mark Nelson: I have a question for Matt. Obviously, Lycon is proceeding to build their plant in Oregon. I keep looking to see when maybe the empty lumber flats there above Highway 14 as you go into Madison would be moved out. Do you have a base locater for when you people might start to renovate the line?

Matt Koser: I don't. Some of the flats are moving now. It's not really because of the Oregon plant being built. It's because the economy is coming back and we're moving lumber again. We just had, I think about 300 cars moved out that have been stored for several years. I do know that there have been talks about our men going out there and looking at it and seeing exactly what the line needs, cutting the trees and the brush and stuff that have grown between the rails there.

Mike Nelson: I don't think the people south of Oregon want the lumber flats pushed south of Oregon. It's good to see the industrial rebound.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: Kids with paint cans need new places to paint.

Matt Koser: As far as a time line when those would move, I have no idea.

John Decker: Janice Ringhand mentioned this morning about some interest that was expressed by Fitchburg and Oregon during the time that she was Mayor here. State Senator Judy Robson had a task force several years ago trying to look into the feasibility of rail commuter service. Studies have been done that show that there is probably a pretty good market between Madison and Rockford. So there was some investigation done of different routes that might be utilized, Evansville being one of them, if the lines north from Madison were put back into service.

There were a couple of railroad consultants who worked with that committee. They pointed out that the Evansville to Janesville routing rather than a Milton Junction to Janesville routing would have two advantages, one being that there are fewer grade crossings on the Evansville line, than on the Milton line. Another thing is, that, and something I had forgotten about, was that the Evansville line was built to pretty high standards and the North Western used to haul their rock ballast

trains through here. There might be one of the photographs over there that shows one of those trains.

John Sornson: Yeah, they did.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: John, do you know how heavy that rail here is?

John Sornson: 135

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: 135, so that's a heavy rail.

John Decker: The disadvantage is that there has been quite a bit of investment and improvement of the Madison, Edgerton, Stoughton, Milton line. So it's in much better shape than the Evansville line is.

Matt Koser: We just put welded rail in Milton Junction line. We put 110 pound welded rail, a nice run of that.

Mark Nelson: The Hanson rail.

John Sornson: At one time when I was on City Council with Janis when she was Mayor and they were talking about, "Well, why can't we run trains from here to Madison." They said the signals are out and all that stuff. There is no reason that you couldn't take a bus and put high rail equipment on it. Run it one way in the morning. You run it. You wouldn't have to worry about anybody coming at you. You worry about the one behind you. One or two buses that takes a lot of people. You could run it and save money there. They had talked that way at one time.

Daryll Disch: Could they make money or was it just a tax money pit?

John Sornson: No, they could make money at that. You are taking cars off the road. It's not something that you can do right away. As soon as you get people to start to understand what's going on, there is a possibility that you could. Because, you are taking cars off the road, you are saving the road.

John Ehle: They said that 135 is the weight of three feet of that kind of rail. So, what is in fact the heaviest rail that you can lay down?

Daryll Disch: 136.

John Sornson: 136 that stuff is about this high. That's on the railroad that is really fast. You aren't ever going to see that around here. They have plates that are this big. I saw those before I retired.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : When I was working at the PSC [Public Service Commission] we had to do several studies that were proposed from Madison out to the west on the old Milwaukee Road, to Mazomanie or someplace bringing commuters, and one to the east and one down south through Evansville. In those days there was still rail traffic on there. So if you put the incremental cost of running a train on it, you had to have 1,000 and some people a mile, something like that, for the rates that were charged. If you put no other trains on it, if you were the only train that was going to use that line, and you had fully distributed costs. There was no way that a passenger train was ever going to pay off that rail, if you were going to have a big smooth rail and keep it up.

Then we also had to do a study on potential grade crossing accidents, especially the one from Mazomanie. I forgot what the number was, but we were going to kill somebody every week, with the train coming in from Mazo, based on the other accidents on that line with as few trains as they had, freight trains.

John Sornson: Because no one is ever looking for them.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: There is a lot of car traffic and if you put two or three trains running each way, or even one running each way, it would have been a really high statistic. For some reason the one on the east side wasn't as bad and the one down here through Evansville wasn't as bad once you got past Fitchburg. I don't know if the road crossings were different or what.

At that time we had to walk the tracks and take pictures and all that kind of stuff to do the study. It was a study that went on for a long time. The legislature asked for it from the PSC. It wasn't really feasible without a lot of money being put in, not counting the cost of the equipment.

Daryll Disch: John, that bus that you said sat on the high rail did they take it off and did it peddle people off from there?

John Sornson: Yeah, what they were talking about was taking highway equipment and you pick up and you line up the bus and drop it down. They were talking about having a bus terminal where they go and drop people off. They've got bus services in Madison where they just go from there. This is what they were talking at that time. This was ten years ago.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: They might not want to have a common bus-type vehicle hauling passengers that are interfacing with big trucks and trains. Insurance might get pretty costly on something like that. You know most buses aren't built to take on other big vehicles sideways.

John Decker: The study that Senator Robson did assumed that they would be using a diesel multiple unit, DMU, equipment with is sort of a modernized version of the old RDC cars. You can multiple them, they are each self-propelled, that kind of idea.

But Evansville does still have some land on the north side of the rail, down where Landmark is, that is earmarked for heavy industrial development, with the assumption that it would use rail. So that is a big advantage Evansville has, is we do have land that is immediately adjacent to the railroad that could be made into an industrial development. That wouldn't necessarily prompt reopening of the line to Madison. I don't think UP would object at all if it produced good car loadings.

I think one thing that people don't appreciate is just the tremendous expense of the materials involved. I found that out when I was the de-facto manager up at the Mid-Continent Museum for a year. Oh, my goodness, the cost of rail, and turnout and switch parts. You just can't imagine. So, it's a very expensive undertaking.

John Ehle: I would think that just preparing the railroad bed, with the ballast, ties and track would be hugely expensive.

John Sorenson: Twenty years ago they said out of the west end, from Verona going out that way, they said just for 5 miles an hour was 1 million dollars a mile, to make it just so that you could use it 5 to 10 miles per hour. That was 20 years or more ago. You can imagine what it would be now.

Daryll Disch: Look at all the cuts and everything they used to do with the horses. I don't know

how they did that where they built up and cut out.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: One of my grandfathers, when they built the cut-off on the Soo Line from Spencer to Owen, a local farmer, and lived a mile from where the track was going to be. They put out the word to all the farmers that they would pay them $2.50 a day, with a team, to come and pull slushers. A slusher is kind of like a big shovel, but it was wheeled. So they could tip up the handle and pick up; tip down the handle and take it someplace; and pick up the handle and dump it later. They paid $2.50 a day.

He worked quite a bit of the summer because he wanted to build a new house and he needed a little money. This was his job. They did the cuts and fills on that line between Spencer and Owen. It's that swampy and a couple of good sized hills. They hauled the hills down and filled in the swamp.

This might be something that Matt would be interested in. When I was working at Phillips one time, it was a nice spring morning and I was done at 8 o'clock. The section foreman came out. That line was one of the original Wisconsin lines; 1876, I think it was put in. When they built the line, they didn't have enough dirt around and they didn't want to spend the time. They were in a hurry to show the money. So they just sawed all the trees in the area and laid them down for corduroy and filled in the swamps. There are some magnificent swamps up there around Phillips. They laid this corduroy and then they covered it with dirt and then covered it with ties and rails.

The section foreman gave me a ride out one morning. It would have been in the mid '50s, a beautiful morning. You could see deer and the sun was nice, out in the country. We stopped at this one swamp and you could see all these things sticking up out of the swamp. I just thought they were trees that died.

He said, "Do you know what that is?" I said, "No." This was 200 feet from the track. He said, "That's the corduroy. Over the years we kept adding dirt and pushed the corduroy out to the side." They were sticking up 4 feet out of the swamp.

John Decker: There are stories like that on the original line between McFarland and Madison that was put in the 1850s. They had swamps like that. They did the corduroys. There is a story they got done laying the rail one day and went out the next day and all the rails were 4 feet below grade.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft : This isn't to do with the Class A railroads, but there used to be an ice railroad that ran north of Marshfield to a town that isn't there anymore, towards Stratford and out into the woods out there. In those days, it was all woods. It had a steam engine with sleigh runners on the front and big iron wheels on the back. It pulled sleds out to the woods and back and it was past Stratford a ways.

I have a picture at home. The engine had a name, like "Mary" or something. I just can't remember what it was. The engine fell through a bridge and exploded and killed the fireman and that was the end of the ice railroad. It ran a good 25 miles or so and connected with a town called Romeo which is north of Spencer. They hauled logs and whatever other freight they could get on sleds in the wintertime. In the summertime they didn't run.

John Decker: The main line of the Alaska Railroad was like that for a while up at Nenana, where it crosses the Tanana River, and they laid the rails over the ice in the wintertime and ran the trains over there. Then in the spring the breakup came along. They had a pool to guess the time of it until they put up a big bridge there.

John Ehle: Would they pick them up and take them somewhere and store them?

John Decker: Of course the trick was in guessing when the breakup was going to be. They still have a contest up there every year, a big pool based on when the ice breaks up. A lot of money won.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: If you look on the map from Bruce north, there is a railroad line that goes from Bruce north to a little town. I can't think of the name of it all of a sudden. I happened to inherit some land along that railroad track. The old guy who owned that land years ago, he could have put the robber-barons to shame, let me put it that way. He was somewhat of a character. He would tell that where the edge of the lake was, the railroad tracks ran along that. When it was frozen they'd run the trains. When it was thawed, they couldn't run the trains because it was either too wet or under water. They only ran that part of the line in the wintertime when they hauled logs to Bruce and Ludington. That's the other end of the track. They connected to the other railroads there and the logs went off to the bigger sawmills.

There was the line that ran from Phillips to the east towards Willow Lake. I used to like to walk the rail lines. In those days it was easier to find because they hadn't had time to grow up. I walked that line towards Willow Lake one day. I was maybe 5 miles from Highway 13. I would walk way out and then turn around and come back. Here was a switch stand with two ties and the stand and the arm and the Wisconsin Central shield with the holes in it.

Evidently that railroad leased their equipment from the Wisconsin Central, the rails and the cars because they didn't have their own, didn't want to buy their own. I just happened to mention that to some guy who was a rail fan. The next time I went out there, I bet there were ten cars parked along the road. They were all looking for that switch stand. I never heard who got it but it was gone after awhile. They must have carried that whole switch stand out. I don't know how they got it off those ties. Maybe a group of them went out and took the whole thing.

Mike Nelson: This isn't really a train story, more like a banjo story. We used to know Clyde Richelieu out of Oregon, who made banjoes and good ones but he grew up in Owen.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: I knew him real well. My grandmother and grandfather lived on the farm that he was brought up on.

Mike Nelson: He used to say that he gotten a new banjo ordered out of the Twin Cities. It came in on train Number 2 to Owen. So, he got it off the RPO car. That night he was going to play it on his radio show out of Marshfield. He was neat.

Mark Nelson: He was a gentleman. I remember there was a time we were eating at the family restaurant on the north side of Oregon. I won't use the name of the attorney, but he came in from the north side with his girl friend. He never took off his hat. Richelieu was sitting over there at our table. He liked to be called Rich. That was upsetting to him. He said, "A gentleman takes his hat off." But in this case Jack McManus didn't of course. He kept wearing his cowboy hat.

John Ehle: Different rules for Jack.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: When I lived in Madison, working for PSC. My grandmother from Owen came down to visit, I said, "You know, he's got this place and it was out of Madison a little ways, on Highway 14, I think. Let's go over there." Well, those two got together. They had been in school together and parties together. They had the greatest reunion you can imagine for an hour or

so and then we went back home. He was a real character and I wish I could play the banjo like he did.

Mike Nelson: Rich had a friend, who I think had moved from Stone Lake to Owen, Burleigh Grimes. I think he's going to be the last of the good spit ball artists. In fact he would go into the Baseball Hall of Fame. There was one time when he had his baseball chums and I think these two brothers played for the Pirates, Paul Waner and Lloyd. They were up there deer hunting around Owen and all three of them would eventually be in the Baseball Hall of Fame. They were good ones. Just stories.

Mark Nelson: We are getting off the subject. Again you are in the restaurant, George Scott manages the hardware store up in Oregon. So George of course said, "I was watching television last night." There was a special on their Country Western. Dolly Parton sang a number of times.

Rich, he didn't interrupt. He said, "Well, the last time that I performed with Dolly." So he's been around. He had been on the Jimmy Dean show. So he was just a very special person.

Mike Nelson: He was a very special person.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: Working in depots, you met an interesting cast of characters. We are missing our policeman here. For instance, in Owen there was a policeman who had been a wrestler. He had wrestled bears at carnivals. Everybody knew him. He would come in the depot and tell stories, because it was cold in the winter and he got tired of walking around out there. It was warm in the depot at two in the morning. And he'd be sitting there in the depot and when the steamer, Number 5 came in and they parked the engine behind the depot. It was across the platform about 20 feet maybe. So you'd hear this big engine big engine and then you'd hear the steam roll and you'd hear the brake air building up. So it was really sort of a romantic sound when they came in the depot and shut the diesel off and they just sat there.

This guy would come in and tell stories. I knew him and my family had known him for years. He was an older guy in the Atwood area. I thought, you know, he's getting old. I wondered if he could still do that. We had to do calling because there was a crew that over-nighted in Owen, from Number 5.

It was early in the morning and I didn't see it but I heard about it. His wife ran the restaurant. Somebody came in the restaurant and started swearing and was drunk. He came in and the guy was going to take him on and he pitched him right out of the restaurant, through the screen door, out into the street, about a 10 foot throw. Everyone said, "He still remembers how to wrestle."

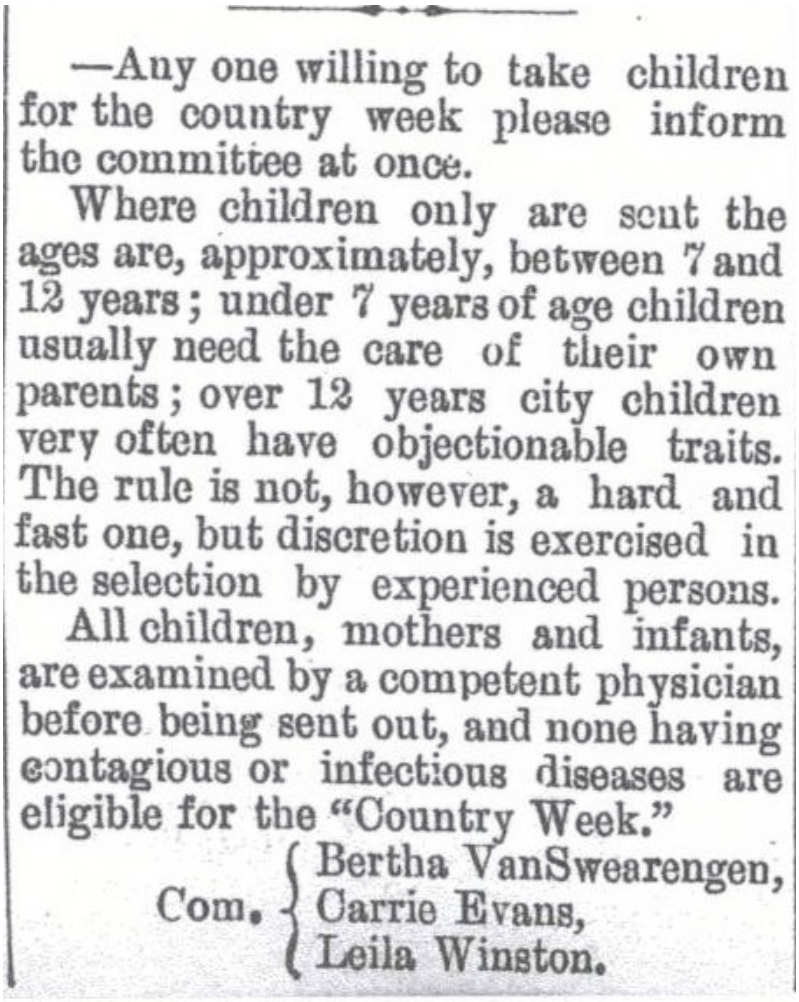
Every depot, the depot at Dale when I was there, I had to come out at night because we'd had a problem with the train. They needed train orders when there normally weren't any. All of a sudden the county sheriff was there to see if everything was ok. He was a nice enough guy. He came in and sat around and watched a little while, just to see how it worked. You had a lot of interesting people coming in the depots, old deer hunters, fishermen, and people that were just looking for a place to get out of the weather for a little while.

Glenn Fairchild: I heard a story, now I've never seen one. I've never seen anything in a railroad books on it. I heard people, back in the vaudeville days, they had one railroad car. Half of it would be living quarters for the crew that did the show for the town and the other half they used for to haul the props. They would come to this town for a couple of days to the Opera House. Then they would go on to another town maybe two or three days later. The local passenger train would take them on.

Somehow or other, the way the car was built, the people would live in it when they were at the opera house. To get their props back and forth they had a wagon that somehow had wheels that folded underneath and slid under the center of the car between two or three trucks. I've read about it back during the show business days. Ever run across anything like that?

John Ehle: One of the things that Ruth Ann and I talked about a few weeks back was something called the Fresh Air trains. The orphan trains that would come from big cities out East. The orphan trains had kids, I believe, that were anywhere from 18 months to 19 years. And they would go through Wisconsin and I don't think any of them stopped here. They would go out to the Dakotas and people would come down to the depot and takes these kids. They would adopt them. Of course there were great success stories and then there were sad stories too about these kids being virtually indentured on these farms out west. Evansville had a program called the Fresh Air kids and they would come from Chicago and people would sign up. They had somebody who coordinated the program.

Ruth Ann Montgomery: Late 1800s, early 1900s.



—Any one willing to take children for the country week please inform the committee at once.

Where children only are sent the ages are, approximately, between 7 and 12 years; under 7 years of age children usually need the care of their own parents; over 12 years city children very often have objectionable traits. The rule is not, however, a hard and fast one, but discretion is exercised in the selection by experienced persons.

All children, mothers and infants, are examined by a competent physician before being sent out, and none having contagious or infectious diseases are eligible for the "Country Week."

Com. { Bertha VanSwearengen, Carrie Evans, Leila Winston.

August 4, 1888, Tribune, p. 1, col. 2, Evansville, Wisconsin

John Ehle: People would have these kids for two weeks and of course they would have a marvelous time. Some of them were orphans or lived at alone with single mothers. They'd stay with families in town for two weeks and get the fresh air and get the opportunities, I suppose. Was the lake in existence then? That's kind of an interesting legacy too. Without railroads the kids wouldn't have made it this far and they certainly would not have made it out west.

Gilbert Wiedenhoeft: I'm trying to think of the name of the town in Western Wisconsin, past Sparta, someplace out in there. I knew a fellow from that town. He had been an orphan. It was pretty close to the Mississippi River. It was north of La Crosse. It wasn't along the river. It was in the hills there someplace. I can't think of the name of the town. He was an orphan and he knew other ones.

Also, there is an interesting book, Harlan Miller has it about the town where he was from and how the railroad came through there. They started much earlier, how they went by horse and buggy or wagon, or even pack horse, before they had roads. Once the town got big enough that the railroad how, how suspicious the people in that town were of the railroad workers. I mean they hung out in the bar all night and it was an interesting book, you can ask Harlan. I can't think of the name of it. It's a good history on that little town.

John Ehle: Well, in summing up, I want to thank John Decker. I think John was the brains behind the spawning of this idea. The July program is going to be great fun. That's in the able hands of John Decker and Jim [Brooks]. This has been fun. I want to thank everyone for their participation and their great stories. It's very unselfish to come here for five or six hours to talk about some things that otherwise don't get discussed.

Thanks again to Gina Duwe of the Gazette and of course, Ruth Ann who keeps the spirit of story-telling and Evansville history alive. Thanks to everybody for showing up and sharing.

The transcript and recording of the railroad interviews is available on the website www.evansvillehistory.net

Train coming into Evansville, Wisconsin 1898