



Our Times

Volume 3 Issue 3

THE PEOPLE, HISTORY, AND CULTURE OF LOGAN COUNTY, ILLINOIS

Fall 1998

Riding the Rails

Interurbans, Streetcars, and Steam Trains

Standing by the tracks in an Easter snowstorm, holding her mother's hand, the little girl waits for the interurban to arrive. She has just had the "thrill of a lifetime"—a trip into Lincoln from the farm—and going home on the interurban is another special treat.

Eloise Park, the little girl in our story, is one of thousands of central Illinois people who rode the electric line. The interurban cars may have looked like oversized streetcars, but they were as much at home racing across the prairie as moseying through Lincoln or Elkhart or Union.

Passing through cornfields, taking strength and speed from the overhead wires, cars of the Illinois Traction System (the central Illinois version of the interurban) moved people and freight from Peoria to St. Louis, Springfield to Danville, and Decatur to Bloomington and Mackinaw.

Stopping at towns in between, the "People's Popular Railway" took athletes to the Corn Belt Meet in Springfield, shoppers to Bloomington and Decatur, fishermen to Mackinaw, and milk cans to the dairy.

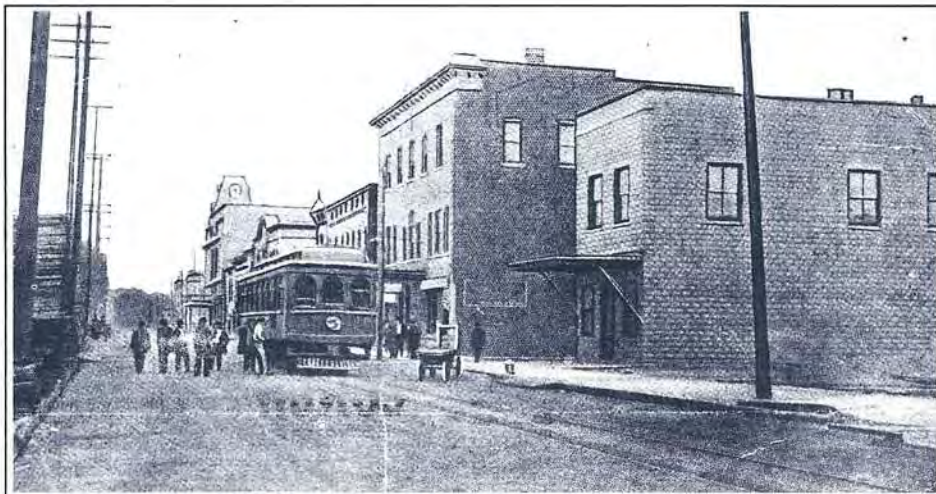
The first interurban in Central Illinois was built by William B. McKinley, a Champaign native and later U. S. Senator, who built an electric line from Danville to the coal-mining town of Westville in 1901. Other lines quickly followed, operated by separate corporations under the umbrella of the McKinley Syndicate.

Meanwhile, a group of men including W. H. Evans and D. H. Harts of Lincoln, J. W. Hoblit of Atlanta, and others from Bloomington, Peoria, Springfield, and towns in between, began to discuss building an interurban to connect their towns.

So on March 7, 1904, the Springfield, Lincoln, Bloomington, Pekin and Peoria Electric Railway Company was incorporated, with plans to build a line from Springfield, through Lincoln, to Bloomington. (In December the name was changed to the Springfield and Northeastern Railway Company.) Work started out briskly enough; but on September 10, 1905, the construction company shut down the project for lack of funds.

The McKinley Syndicate quickly stepped in and bought the property and franchises; and service from Springfield to the Illinois Central crossing just south of Lincoln began on December 15, 1906. It was a mixed success at first, with the *Courier* reporting one family's experience in January of 1907: wading through the mud to reach the platform, only to have the car (which was late) stop down the track and the conductor tell the 20 people standing in the rain that he lacked power and didn't know when he could leave.

With no way to telephone the taxis (which had left), the passengers gave up and walked home. The *Courier*



Illinois Traction System car in front of Commercial Hotel on February 3, 1913. ITS station at right. Courtesy of Bob Bismark.

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PUBLISHER
Sam Redding

WRITER/EDITOR
Nancy Lawrence Gehlbach

MANAGING EDITOR
Darla Hamilton

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Publisher's Notes

The Postville Putter had its season in the sun in the spring of 1990, but the little red and green trolley chugged to a financial halt within a few months. Good intentions, civic enthusiasm, and Janet Henrichsmeyer's cheerleading were not sufficient to keep the rubber-wheeled trolley on track (so to speak). The *Pantagraph* ran a front-page, color picture of Lincoln's trolley, chock full of school kids grinning through the windows as the driver narrated a tale of the historical sites they putted past. It was a happy, jolly little car (or rather, its bright colors and boxy frame and buoyant cargo made one happy to behold it). Each time I heard the trolley's clanging bell, a smile came to my face.

I'll bet the interurban brought smiles to people's faces when it whirred through the prairie, feeding on electricity from its overhead lines, stopping to load milk cans from trackside platforms, delivering college kids to Normal, giving the farmer's wife a lift to town, carrying the

businessman to a meeting in Peoria, and transporting the Brown kids to Aunt Grace's house in Decatur. The interurban was a "people's train" at a time when folks of every walk of life mixed freely in the depots and train cars that connected the towns and cities of central Illinois.

Streetcars in Lincoln? Cool! Can you imagine gathering with your neighbors, waiting for the next train, chatting about the weather, hearing the streetcar rumbling toward you, then boarding together, sitting next to Milton from Eighth Street and learning the good news about his new granddaughter, and finally hopping off at Alvey's Drug Store for a lime phosphate?

Mixing and mingling in public places is a much-lamented lost art. Now we step from our front door to our Chevy, confine ourselves to its 24-square-foot interior, zip to a parking spot in front of a store, hop out, dart inside, nod and chirp a hello to the clerk, grab the newest Beanie Baby, dash back to the car at the curb, jump in and see the world compressed into the view of our windshield, and return home to see the world compressed into the view of our television screen. Streetcars, on the other hand, got us places in groups and kept us waiting in clusters, and inserted downtime into our lives—time to wait and watch and talk. Without headphones. What a big, expansive world that was! SR

Material for this issue came from *History of Logan County, Illinois 1911, 1982; Atlases of Logan County, Illinois 1873, 1893, 1910*. Mr. Vernon, IN: Windmill Publications, Inc., 1990; Stringham, Paul H. *Illinois Terminal: The Electric Years*. Glendale, CA: Interurban Press, 1989; Hubbard, Freeman. *Encyclopedia of North American Railroadings*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981; "Interurban' Linked Luxury with Convenience." *State Journal Register* 4 Sept. 1995: 1+; "Small Electric Railways of Illinois." *Central Electric Railfans' Association Bulletin* 98; "News of the Electric Railways." *Electric Railway Journal*. 2 March 1918; Lincoln, IL city directories; the *Courier* under its various names; and the vivid memories of our friends.

Continued from page 1, *Riding . . .*)

decided that the "Ruben," as it was called, would only benefit those who lived in the country and small towns, for whom the regular trains wouldn't stop.

Things got better, of course. The

Illinois Central finally allowed the interurban to cross its tracks, the city of Lincoln granted a franchise, and the first car into downtown Lincoln pulled onto Chicago Street on October 21, 1907. By then, the carbarn at the south end of Chicago Street had been put into service.

Today the red brick power station at that location is owned by the Logan County Highway Department.

By December of 1907, the McKinley Syndicate had also built a line from near Mackinaw to Lincoln, closing the gap that separated Peoria from Springfield. Much of the right-of-way had been granted on private land, free of charge, spearheaded by landowner W. H. Evans, who later became Industrial Agent for the ITS.

Now a traveling salesman could climb aboard in Peoria and ride to St. Louis via Mackinaw, Lincoln, Springfield, and Staunton, stopping to sell his wares at numerous towns in between. Newspaper ads encouraged Lincoln people to visit friends in Springfield, climb aboard a sleeper car at 9:00 p.m., and wake up at 7:00 the next morning in St. Louis.

For a time, the Lincoln ticket office for the interurban was located in Alvey's Drug Store. In 1909, the ITS opened a two-story, concrete block building, with the station in front and a freight house at the rear, which still stands at 216 S. Chicago Street.

Close your eyes and squint, and you can almost see the interurban car pulled up on the spur track between the station and the Commercial Hotel. With a bit more imagination, you can hear passengers chatting as they stroll over to the hotel for an elegant dinner. Meanwhile, their baggage is being brought over—an easy feat, since there's a second-floor runway between the two buildings.

The Lincoln station closed in 1929, when the ITS began sharing the Chicago and Alton Station which still stands at 101 S. Chicago. The C&A tracks ran on the west side of the depot; the interurban ran down Chicago Street on the east.

The *Courier* had predicted "a lively awakening" in Broadwell and

Elkhart, "when the interurban trains are flitting through every hour" (June 27, 1908). The Broadwell station was in a frame grocery store. The Elkhart and Union stations were built after Mr. Chubbuck, Mr. McKinley's right-hand man, had commissioned a uniform style for all ITS stations and substations: red brick bases, buff brick walls, tile roofs.

The station-substation at Elkhart has been torn down, but the ruins of the lovely station at Union remain. The little interlocking plant on the road to Lincoln Lakes is another nice example. Manned by the Lincoln Sand and Gravel crews, it was lined for the interurban except when a LS&G train was crossing. (Lincoln Sand and Gravel shipped partly over the ITS, which had an active freight division.) Looking north on South Kickapoo Street, it's easy to see where the interurban tracks were taken out just last summer.

Advertising "NO dust, NO dirt, NO smoke, NO cinders," as well as frequent service, Illinois Traction (Illinois Terminal after 1937) gave the steam railroads a run for their money. Before the advent of the automobile, during the hard days of the Depression and the shortages of the war years, the electric line made it possible for people to "get around." For many years, there were six daily round trips each between Peoria and St. Louis, Peoria and Decatur, and Springfield and Danville.

When automobiles became plentiful after World War II, passenger service began to decline; and the last passenger interurban came through Lincoln on June 11, 1955. In cars-draped in black crepe and decorated with a funeral wreath, the last IT passengers made the trip from Springfield to St. Louis on March 3, 1956, after which the electric power was turned off.

Illinois Terminal was still in the freight business, now using diesels; but because people objected to their noise and fumes on city streets, the company was forced to abandon the city lines for trackage rights. In Lincoln, the last IT freight train ran down Chicago Street on March 31, 1962. Illinois Terminal was sold to Norfolk and Western in 1981. ■

The Last Streetcar

Bob Steinfort was ten years old when he and his family rode on the last full trip made by a Lincoln streetcar.

Bob's dad, C.E. (Ed) Steinfort, was the manager of the Illinois Public Utility Company, which had been leasing the streetcar line from the city for \$1.00 a year, just to keep it running. By 1928, however, not only were automobiles making streetcars less necessary, but the streetcars and the line were pretty well worn out. According to the *Courier*, "riding grew so rough people preferred to walk, even for the longer distances" (May 9, 1928).

So at 7:00 p.m. on May 15, 1928, city officials were guests at a special streetcar party and final trip over all the lines. As Bob says, "It was the end of an era."

That era began on Christmas Day of 1891, when the first car of the Lincoln Electric Street Railway Co. ran to the new Woodlawn subdivision, the Illinois Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children, and the Illinois Central depot on North Kickapoo Street. The company had been incorporated by E. D. Blinn, Arthur Quisenberry, and John F. Mundy; and four and one-half miles had been laid.

The power house and car barn were located on Clinton Street, where the bank drive-up facility is located today; the station was at 211 S. Kickapoo.

In 1907, \$6,000 was privately raised to extend the asylum line over a

mile to reach to the Chautauqua grounds. The service was popular: the streetcar company rented as many as seven additional cars from the Springfield Street Railway during the Chautauqua season.

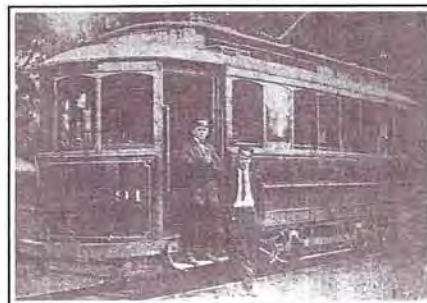
Commenting on new ownership in 1907, the *Courier* reported that "People who formerly got out of the cars and helped lift them on the rails at the curves or used to help push them up the hills were highly gratified at their ability to get into the cars and stay. The summer cars were the most popular and as high as 150 people were handled on each car during the rush hours" (August 28, 1907).

But by 1916, the little railway was looking pretty antiquated, at least to some Chicago newspapermen who came to Lincoln during an inspection tour of the State School. In writing up the "cockroach line" in the *Chicago Daily News*, one reporter described the "Toonerville Trolley" as it left the State School and was "soon lost in what seems to the unsophisticated city folks to be an impenetrable woods" (August 3, 1916).

Well, it was going out to the old Union Cemetery, where Alma Bouillon Sullivan Baptist remembers riding with her mother. The little station at the cemetery is still there; it has been bricked in and is used as a maintenance shed.

As ridership decreased and the last of a series of owners declared bankruptcy, J. R. Patton of Atlanta bought the company. He soon decided to discontinue the line; so in 1917, the people of Lincoln voted to buy it.

By 1925, the streetcar was a losing proposition; so the city rented the line to Lincoln Water and Light Co. for \$1.00 a year. After Lincoln Water and its successor, the Illinois Public Utility Co., were also unable to increase ridership, the service was abandoned in 1928. ■



Streetcar at Brainerd Park about 1912.
Courier photo.

“The Road of Good Service”

Whenever Dean Bruce thinks of the interurban, he thinks of a toothache.

Dean grew up in the country west of Broadwell, but he says he “spent a lot of time at the dentist” in Lincoln when he was a small child. Before Dean’s dad bought his Model T Ford in 1920, a trip to Lincoln meant a long ride in a horse-drawn buggy.

So the interurban was a blessing for families like the Bruces. Bright and early in the morning, Dean’s father would drive the horse and buggy to Broadwell, tie up at the hitching rack, buy a ticket at Earl Eisinger’s grocery store, and take the interurban into Lincoln.

Dean remembers that the fare was 21 cents and that the 6:30 a.m. car arrived in Lincoln at 7:30, leaving them with a half hour to kill before his dental appointment. After Dean’s teeth were repaired, his dad would buy a ticket at the busy station on Chicago Street next to the Commercial Hotel; and they would wait for the interurban to take them home.

(Of course, the waiting was worse for the horse, who “half the time had rubbed its bridle off and was stomping on it when we got back,” still secured by its halter but “not very comfortable” after three to four hours of standing.)

But the trip took some time, what with the stop at Fogarty Elevator and all the stops for produce: “cream cans, a couple of chickens, a crate of eggs,” and the like, remembers Dean. Perhaps a farmer and his wife would be standing alongside the tracks, and the motorman would toot his horn to let them know he saw them and was stopping. Maybe they were taking their cream and eggs to the grocery store to “trade them out”; they would buy their tickets from the conductor.

The interurban cars had long seats “like church pews” in one half of the car, where workmen sat to smoke. In the other half of the car, people who



Illinois Terminal System depot at Union, Illinois. Courtesy of Mary Kurilko-Skaggs.

were not smokers (and who also might be a little better-dressed), sat in seats on each side of the aisle.

In later years, the interurban sometimes pulled a trailer as well, remembers Dean; and the old brown cars gave way to orange cars, which seemed to be able to go much faster—up to 60 miles per hour.

In the winter, ice on the electrical wires could be a problem. Most of the time, the cars ran fast enough to break it loose; but occasionally the ice would bridge over where the wires crossed. Then the motorman would have to stop so the conductor could knock the ice off with a long bar.

When Dean was older and lived at Hallsville, he took the Illinois Central train to high school in Beason. The Beason basketball team took the IC to Lincoln, where the players would catch the interurban to neighboring towns for their games. There were about 14 kids on the team; so when they came into the interurban station, “it wasn’t quiet,” remembers Dean.

Dean remembers that the interurban picked many people up off the side roads and took them into towns like Lincoln to catch their trains.

One of Dean’s most memorable encounters with the interurban, however, took place in an automobile. One Sunday when he was

thirteen years old and just learning to drive his dad’s Model T, he was passing through Elkhart in high gear on his way home from church. Because of the curve of the track, he couldn’t see that the interurban was coming as he neared the crossing. Just as he got the front wheels onto the track, he heard the whistle blow.

Afraid he would kill the engine if he pulled the throttle down while in high gear, Dean quickly put the car in low gear, jerked the throttle wide open, and crossed the tracks, ending up just six feet beyond the track as the interurban hurtled by. “That could have ended my career right there,” says Dean.

Other Interurban Stories

Living in the country before the advent of autos could be isolating—unless you lived near the interurban, like Leona Apel’s family did when she was young. With the tracks just 1/4 mile from their house, Leona’s mother could take the interurban to town whenever she wanted. Leona remembers a small shelter at Fogarty elevator, where people could wait on rainy days.

Herb Alexander and his sister, Margaret Alexander Schildein, frequently rode the interurban to Peoria for the day, where they were

under the care of a dentist. Herb liked to sit with the motorman and watch the tracks for rabbits and other wildlife.

Herb's family didn't have a car until he and his mother put their money together and bought a Chevrolet for the family for Christmas in 1929; so Herb remembers going as a family to the Illinois State Fair on the interurban. It took them almost to the entrance.

Herb says that the freight engineers used to stop at the end of Chicago Street and walk to Molloy's for their meals.

Bob Quisenberry grew up one mile west of Union, where the Illinois Traction Service had a station; and during the war, "that's how I courted Mother," he says. Ruth Wrage was going to school at Bradley; so Bob would leave for Peoria at about noon on Sunday and return on the 11:45 p.m. interurban, getting into Union at 12:30 a.m.

The motorman sat in a little cubicle in the front of the car; and usually when they left Peoria, a soldier who was stationed at the Springfield fairgrounds would be on board. He would lie down on a bunch of mail sacks and be asleep, "before we crossed the river," says Bob. "He must have had quite a weekend."

Sometimes Bob would have the conductor drop him at Route 136 instead of at the station. He got to be such a regular, that if he didn't say anything, the old man (who had retired once but came back during the war) would ask, "Do you want off at the hard road tonight?"

Bob remembers that the cars got to running fast in the country during the night. He confirms Dean Bruce's estimate of their speed, once figuring that since the crossroads were a mile apart and it took one minute to go between them, the car must have been going 60 mph.

Bob's dad had grown up west of Union and remembered the building of the interurban. The company used mules and a slip scraper; if a mule died, they just buried it right in the grade.

Many years later, Madeline Hines came to Lincoln to work at the State School. Her folks drove her from her home in Mt. Auburn to Illiopolis, where she caught the interurban to Springfield and from there to Lincoln. Although the ride was "pretty rough," connections were good for her trip to Lincoln.

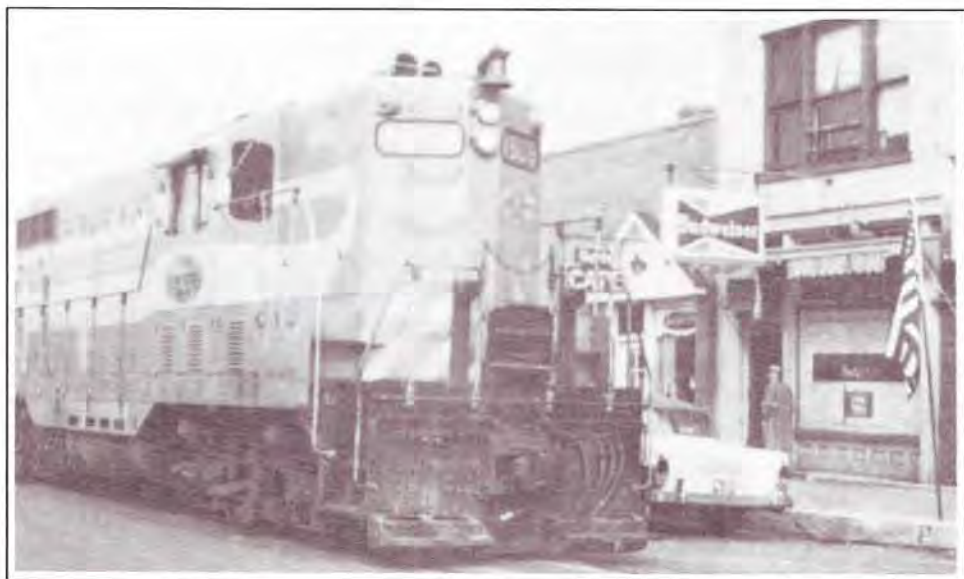
Sometimes, though, a trip could be just a bit more complicated. One Lincoln fellow who was courting a girl from Monticello years ago took the interurban from Lincoln to Springfield, where he changed lines and rode to Decatur—and from there to Monticello. That he traveled 100 miles to go 60 miles must have made quite an impression on his sweetheart, because she married him.

Dave Armbrust remembers that as a kid, he would climb on the ladder at the back of the interurban car at Decatur Street and climb off on Broadway, getting a free ride that

way. The very last time he tried that trick, he stepped off in front of the Myers Industry station wagon, driven by his father, who just happened to be running errands when he saw what his son was doing.

Eunice Leach Campbell grew up in Atlanta. After she finished high school, she took the interurban to business college in Lincoln. After the big flood of 1928 or 1929, she was the only passenger on the first car from Lincoln to Union; when it crossed over one of the bridges, the water was clear up to the tracks. She says she must have been homesick to have come home under those conditions.

Alma Sullivan Baptist met her husband Floyd when she was teaching at Williamsville and working summers in Springfield; she bought her interurban ticket from him at the "new" C&A depot in Lincoln. Floyd's picture was on the front page of the *Courier* on June 11, 1955, as he said goodbye to the engineer on the last passenger interurban to come through Lincoln. ■



Last Illinois Terminal freight train on Chicago Street, March 31, 1962. History of Logan County, Illinois 1982.

A Day in the Life of a Railroad Depot

It's still dark, but Pat Sullivan [Bay] and her father, Marion (Sully), are already seated at the counter of the Maid-Rite restaurant down the street from the GM&O depot, eating homemade pie for breakfast.

It's the 1950's, and Pat is one excited little girl. She doesn't have school today, so she's gotten up in the middle of the night to come downtown with her dad, who is dispatcher for the Railway Express and works out of the north end of the depot on Chicago Street.

Pat can't wait to see the railroad men. Dressed in bib overalls with tall striped hats and red bandannas, they look just like the pictures in children's story books. A couple of them will have little packages of candy as a surprise for her; they fascinate her because they have come from faraway places like Baltimore.

But first Pat's dad has to get the flatbed wagons ready, pulling two or three of them down the brick pavement to wait for the train. Pretty soon the telegraph will start clicking, and Pat and her dad will know the train can't be far away.

When it arrives, Pat's dad will sign for the brown paper packages in various shapes and sizes. He'll pull the wagons into the depot, check the invoices, and get the boxes on the trucks so he and the other drivers can deliver them to the stores.

Floyd Sullivan mans the ticket office at the depot. Pat doesn't get over there very much: it's in the south end of the building, between the two identical waiting rooms (one each for men and women when the station was built) with the pedestal drinking fountain between them.

This depot was built by the Chicago and Alton in 1911, replacing the old depot at the corner of Broadway and Sangamon Streets. Years ago, Floyd's employer was the C&A; because of all the mergers, it has since been the Alton; the Baltimore

and Ohio; and now the Gulf, Mobile, and Ohio.

By the time the GM&O becomes part of the Illinois Central in 1972 and he leaves to work at the freight depot at 510 South Kickapoo, Floyd will have worn a place in the floor of the telegraph room where he has stood to sell tickets to the Ann Rutledge and the Abraham Lincoln.

Floyd also sends and receives telegraphs, essential to locating trains and doing other railroad business. His son, Bob, can't get over how quickly he can send and read messages.



Floyd Sullivan at the IC freight office. Courtesy of Alma Sullivan Baptist.

One of the sadder parts of Floyd's experience has been watching the young men of Logan County waiting to leave this depot for World War II and Korea, drinking coffee and eating doughnuts brought to them by volunteers.

This hasn't been the only station in Lincoln, of course. When Floyd's wife Alma was a little girl, she and her mother used to ride the streetcar up North Kickapoo Street to the Illinois Central depot, where they took the train to Delavan to visit her mother's family and friends.

In addition to the passenger and Railway Express business, U.S. mail leaves from this depot, including parcel post: for example, little corrugated boxes punched with

holes, filled with chicks from Sieb's hatchery.

The freight business is across the tracks at the corner of Sangamon and Pekin, at the old freight depot built by the C&A before 1873.

There's been lots of freight over the years: carloads of gravel from Lincoln Sand and Gravel, china from Stetson's, and scrap material collected by Floyd McGee and sent out during World War II. In fact, according to Alma Sullivan [Baptist], the freight business amounted to \$1 million in one month during the war.

Passenger service, Railway Express, freight: that's one busy place, thinks Pat, as she finishes her pie. On this early morning in the fifties, Pat probably thinks the two depots will be this busy forever.

More Train Talk

Years ago, train schedules were listed in the *Courier*: the Chicago and Alton to Chicago and St. Louis; the Illinois Central to Peoria or Evansville, Indiana; and the IC line to Champaign or Havana. The interurban schedules were printed as well.

In those days, says Eunice Campbell, "if we wanted to go out of town, that's the way we had to go." Both the C&A and the Vandalia line stopped at Atlanta, near Eunice's home in Eminence Township.

Eunice remembers that Mountjoy Station, northwest of Atlanta on the Vandalia line, had a grain elevator, coal dock, and water tank. It was called the Mountjoy "switch" because of the switch tracks.

Eunice remembers taking the train with her family to visit relatives. Being served meals in the dining car by white-jacketed waiters made the biggest impression. It was "something we didn't see all the time."

Because of vandalism, Amtrak closed the Chicago Street depot in 1974. The old freight depot at Pekin and Sangamon has been long abandoned and is scheduled for demolition. ■

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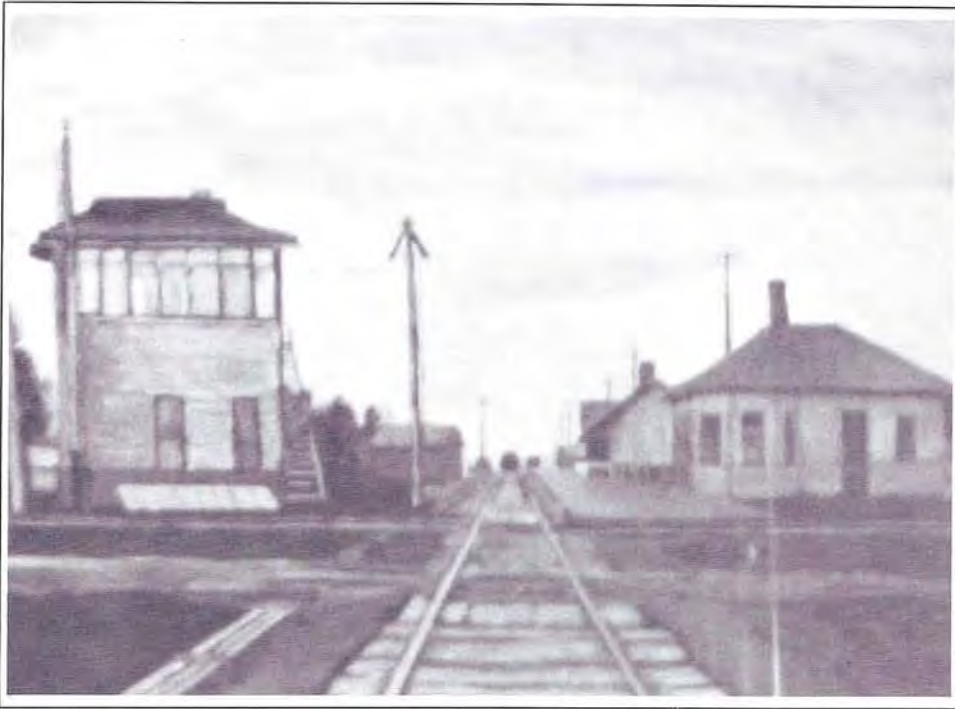
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Athol Tower on Illinois Central's Peoria, Decatur, and Evansville line. Crossing track is the Chicago and Alton, connecting Chicago and St. Louis. Workers in tower switched tracks by pulling big steel levers connected to pipes (seen running alongside track). Passenger station is on right. Painting by Mary Kurilko-Skaggs.

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