Train service to the Manitowish
Chain vicinity

by Michael Dunn

Among the important and colorful outside influences that contributed to the development of the Manitowish Waters community and its quality of life were the two railroads that served the people around the chain. One served from a few miles away; that was the Chicago & North Western Railway. It skirted the neighborhood and had a principal station at Manitowish, about nine miles away, and had a flagstop at Powell, five miles from Little Star Lake and served for about seven years less than a century and transported people for all but eleven years of that span.

The other was the railroad known popularly as the "St. Paul" when it was active near the chain but which re-invented itself as the Milwaukee Road after it reached Puget Sound and added the word Pacific to make its corporate name Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific. Its rails actually touched the chain but its service was distinctly branchline in nature, hardly the railroad of choice for travelers who did not absolutely have to ride it, and its active period here was fifteen years, for it quietly lifted its tracks toward Island Lake with no formal sanction after laying its local tracks in 1905.

The Milwaukee, Lake Shore & Western was the name under which tracks first reached the North Woods before being absorbed by the North Western. Rails first reached Three Lakes over a span of eight years till 1882 and then in one giant leap were extended north toward future Watersmeet and then to the point on the Montreal River where Hurley and Ironwood would develop, 98 miles, finished by 1884. The final 35 miles to Ashland came in 1885. The idea of cutting off some of the long mileage to Hurley developed in 1882 with 15 miles from Monico on the old line to Rhinelander. Then the cutoff was completed via the reservation at Lac du Flambeau in 1889.

The completion of the shortcut to Hurley made the new route via Monico and Hurley the main line to Ashland and an artery for passengers, mail and freight from Chicago or Milwaukee all the way to Ashland, the lifeline to the Manitowish chain via Manitowish station.

The Milwaukee Road provided the same sort of services, overnight passenger trains from Chicago and Milwaukee with similar amenities, both overnight and day trains. These services, however, ran only as far as Sayner and Star Lake before the trains' turnaround point was cut back to Minocqua and Woodruff around 1940. When the highways were improved, it was not much more trouble to drive twenty five miles to catch a train or meet a train at Minocqua or at the log cabin station at Woodruff, and as the passengers finished detraining at Woodruff, the passenger train did a disappearing act. Locomotives always had to be turned around to face the proper direction, and if the passengers were not to ride backwards, so did the passenger cars. When the trains had run as far as Star Lake they could be turned on a wye track there during their layover. When the modern diesel powered Milwaukee train had to be turned by disappearing, it ran around a loop in the woods near the Woodruff station and emerged from the loop still in one piece and facing the right direction. There was a two stall enginehouse in Minocqua for the locomotives' layover. The line here was a secondary line up through the Wisconsin River Valley from a connection at New Lisbon with the real mainline between Chicago and the Twin Cities, and while sleeping cars ran through, coach passengers had to change trains in New Lisbon except during the summer vacation season and passenger service on this line was gradually pruned back to a little train of a diesel locomotive and coach or two, and coming north only as far as Wausau.

The promise of a large sawmill and booming logging and lumbering activity farther on lured the St. Paul to build north as far as Star Lake at first and then gradually in an arc to the new hamlet eventually known as Boulder Junction and from there in two directions, north into Gogebic County, Michigan (where no passenger train service was ever instituted and the traffic consisted principally in saw logs) and, in the other direction, west to the crossing of Rice Creek and Papoose Junction where the line split in two directions, north to the short-lived sawmill and village at Buswell, and west to serve only logging outfits toward Rest Lake.

This was the St. Paul segment that directly served the Manitowish chain for a few years between 1905 and roughly 1915. As the need for rail service dried up the railroad simply cut operations back without any sanction. For its remoteness, this little line had some interesting quirks.

For travelers heading farther north than Woodruff or Star Lake, the train that carried them onward was a freight train that towed a combination coach and baggage car or separate coach and baggage car. The train was slow and dirty from the cinders that blew from the steam locomotive through the open windows. The only amenity was a water "cooler" and the children oftentimes got sick by ride's end.

Some people from north suburban Chicogo built elaborate summer places and even a children's camp around Big Lake and the train not only brought them there but was their lifeline for supplies. They would order groceries and other necessities from catalog houses or major grocery firms and when they arrived on the train, the crew would put them into little warehouses that the property owners had built right beside the track.

When the train reached Rice Creek, a little shelter awaited the passengers and their packages, and the engine would sometimes cut off from the rest of the train to switch a freight car onto a siding that ran

right down to the water. The freight cars might contain building supplies or beer that the resort owners on the chain would load into scows and tow away with their launches, or even a launch itself aboard a flatcar.

The Papoose Junction that appeared in the railroad's timetables was the wye where the freight train with its coach would either back up or pull forward to Buswell, where a company store depended on the train for its supplies and where cars loaded with finished lumber were awaiting their trip to market. After a fire ravaged Buswell and its workers moved away, any need for rides aboard a coach there vanished, and as logging waned all along the line from Boulder, trains simply stopped running beyond the outermost remaining customer. It was a gradual, informal abandonment.

Boulder Junction's status as a true junction was elevated in the early Teens when the Yawkey Bissell Lumber Company closed its sawmill at Arbor Vitae in 1912. To supply its logs the company had built a private logging railroad along the pretty eastern shore of Trout Lake, up to a little yard and engine facilities like a water tank and coal bin. This was only a couple miles from the older line into Boulder from Star Lake, and the St. Paul bought the track and filled in the short gap for a much more direct route to Boulder--heavy trains of logs would be traveling along the new route for a decade or more, to mills south as far as Wausau. This new bit of trackage also allowed the railroad company to tear up the lonely old track back as far as Star Lake. The track to Boulder itself remained in freight and passenger service till the late 1920s when a bus was installed as a summer innovation and all service ended around 1930.

Overnight passenger trains between Chicago and Ashland were a fixture on the North Western in our area from the opening of the line in 1888-89 into the 1960s, when the train was called the North Woods Fisherman. Daytime service was a necessity and the Manitowish station saw a variety of day passenger carrying trains. Till 1950 these day trains usually performed some of the duties that the Limited handled in the dark when stations were closed. Through the 1920s the signature day trains were combined freight/passenger trains. The passengers saw their progress slowed by interruptions when the train switched freight cars along the way. For the next two decades an entirely different type of train performed these duties: it was the Doodlebug. The technology of railroading had advanced to the point that gas-electric units could perform all services and do so in a single car propelled by a gas engine generating electric current that powered electric motors on the axles. The engineer was squeezed in between the big and noisy motor and the red and white nose of the car, and in tidy fashion two small mail and baggage compartments were squeezed in ahead of a passenger seating section. Mostly doodlebugs toiled alone as a train of one, but some pulled a passenger trailer. The doodlebug's red and white front was its visible notice from down the track that a train was approaching, for it lacked the thick plume of smoke that people could see down the track to advertise that a steam train was coming. And the gas engine, with large cylinders and slow revolutions per minute gave out a loud putt-putt-putt banging as a sort of trademark. This writer saw them at Manitowish and would still recognize its trademeak sound today.

The one job that the doodlebug was not built to do was to pull and switch freight cars as the mixed train had done. Wayfreights did that.

The end of the lowly mixed train's and doodlebug's career came in 1950 when the stylish new diesel powered green and yellow Flambeau made its

debut. In its streamlined new design and features it so closely resembled the characteristics of the North Western's famous 400 fleet that it too came to earn the title Flambeau 400. As long as daytime passenger service--or any passenger service, for that matter--survived, this was the daytime service and it was not burdened with carrying mail or express.

In reality the new 1950s' version had had some tentative predecessors in the late 1930s when in some years a summer-only day train was installed as a vacation service. It was suspended during the 1940s war but a steam powered day train was offered again before the new train in 1950.

Unlike the summer versions the new Flambeau was installed as a year-round train.

The high style Flambeau 400 lost most of those trappings within a few years. The dining car and the tap lounge from Chicago were switched out of the train at Green Bay to lay over till being switched back into its southound return trip.

From Green Bay north the train came to look more like a Chicago communter train, promoted by the North Western as a "BiLevel" train with gallery style cars with seats both on a lower level and in narrow rows on upper aisles that looked down in gallery fashion to the level below. The seats were reclining seats, The cars could carry more riders using fewer cars in the process. As ridership really slumped the single diesel and its single car might be the whole train occasionally.

Another indignity came when the railroad was allowed to change to a seasonal bus and train arrangement by which a bus followed the train's route and the train was cranked up to run only in summer and for two weeks at the Christmas-New Year's holidays.

At the end of its Christmastime stint a day or two into January, 1971 those who spied the train whooshing the snow cover along the tracks

hardly
would have realized that they were likely to be seeing the train's last run through the North Woods. Before the train's summer resumption took place the government's new Amtrak rail system was inaugurated, and the train through Manitowish was one of many that Amtrak allowed to die.

The distinguishing mark of a small board-and-batten station like the one at Manitowish was the bay window overlooking the track, marched inside with a huge desk. The station had four means of communication, two phone lines and two telegraph lines. The employee in charge was called an agent operator rather than merely an agent, for he wore many hats and the wires contributed to different roles that he had.

One phone was the local land line phone which he used to answer questions about whether the train was on time (usually it did not seem to be) or to call someone to let them know that a shipment had arrived. The other phone was the company phone, a simple link to other stations on the company's own wires.

As agent, he sold tickets, kept records and wrote out the waybills for new outgoing carloads being shipped from the station; mostly these were cars of pulpwood for both Powell and Manitowish had pulpwood loading ramps.

A high green wooden cart with tall red metal wheels indicated that the station was a Railway Express Agency and the agent for the railroad was also a REA express agent, receiving and turning over to customers their shipments, usually small ones. He would place the outgoing express items on the cart and pull it opposite the express car door and he and the expressman on the train would exchange their shipments--that is why the cart was built to the same level as the train cars. One cart gave its life in the line of duty. It somehow rolled onto the track and a

train smashed it. Usually a chain around the spokes kept it away from the tracks.

One of the things in an early impression of the station was the clatter of the telegraph machines, which used clicking signals rather than tweety dots and dashes, One wire was the Western Union wire and the agent was able to decipher the clicks and call the customer and read it and then put a familiar yellow copy in the mail or he might deliver it. His quick fingers had to send messages just as quickly as he decoded incoming ones. And he had to know which wire was clicking, for the one that related to his being agent operator was very important. That line had sent vital messages from the dispatcher to a station dictating orders that were to be given to train crews if they stopped. These were especially crucial if they instructed a train crew where to pull into a siding to meet another train. If a message, written on very thin green or yellow paper, were to be given to the crew of a train that would be passing without stopping, the operator had a long hoop or forked stick which he would hold up toward the train and the engineer would reach out an arm and grab hold of it. And the same for the conductor in the caboose. Stations usually had a tall mast just outside the baywindow with two arms high above it in red and green and that, called an order board, would give the approaching train a signal about its status.

A decade after the last official passenger train passed through Manitowish, a family that owned its very own passenger car arranged for the freight train to bring it up to Mercer behind the caboose and spot it on the house track for a few days, from July 9 to 14, 1981. When a freight reclaimed it, that would be the last passenger car movement ever through the area, and during the few days it was in Mercer the formal announcement was published that the Interstate Commerce Commission had just ap-

proved a sweeping abandonment authorization that permitted the North Western to abandon its tracks from Washburn and Ashland all the way to Rhinelander. Lifting the tracks took months into 1982, by steps, and one step was to bring the rails from the segment between Mercer and Hurley down to Mercer for loading into gondola cars. As the last pickup train passed the station in Mercer, a message had been scrawled on a boarded up station window, "The End Is Near."

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