

Living in the Depot: The Two-Story Railroad Station, by H. Roger Grant. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993. xiv, 131 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JAMES BERANEK, CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA

Few buildings in American life have maintained as strong a hold on people's interest and affection as has the railroad depot. Long after its importance has vanished, the depot remains a place of almost spiritual retreat for the railroad enthusiast and an important symbol of a town's past for the historian or preservationist. In *Living in the Depot*, historian H. Roger Grant, who has written extensively on North American railroads and railroad structures, concentrates on one particular kind of depot—the two-story depot, where the railroad's business and the agent's living quarters were combined into one building. These buildings, which Grant estimates represent fully one-fifth of the approximately seventy-five thousand depots that were built in this country, were the railroads' creative solution to a number of problems, the most important of which was finding housing for employees in remote or newly settled areas.

The book is divided into three main sections. In the first, "The Railroad and the Depot," Grant traces the origins of the two-story station and tells where they were built and how their architectural styles varied by region and railroad. Used first in Europe, the buildings spread throughout the United States after the Civil War, except in the South and Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. They were most common west of the Mississippi River and in Canada. Generally, they were more elaborate on the East and West coasts and starker and more box-like in the Midwest. This section gives a good overview of the subject, although the author has recycled a fair amount of his own material, some almost verbatim, from two of his previous depot books.

In the book's second section, "The Agent and the Depot," Grant uses letters and manuscripts to convey some of the flavor of what it was like to live in the depot. Compared to the alternatives—a hotel, a furnished room, or a boarding house—living in the depot was a good choice, especially if the agent had a family. But it was a mixed blessing. The depots were usually cheaply built wooden firetraps lacking insulation, water, and electricity. The drafty apartments on the second floor were often small and cramped; the family bathroom was the depot's public outhouse. What is most striking, however, is how little privacy and quiet a family living in a depot must have had, with passengers waiting in the building at all hours, townspeople gawking

at the arriving trains, "depot loafers" and passing hobos and bums smoking and spitting, section men and other railroad employees always coming and going, and a stream of wagons and trucks making pickups and deliveries. Then there was the railroad itself: one can only imagine what it was like to have steam locomotives and heavy trains literally passing beneath one's bedroom window in the middle of the night, laying a carpet of whistle noise and coal smoke over a vibrating apartment. This might seem like heaven to a railroad enthusiast, but I suspect it was something less for those who worked and lived in the depot. So why live there? It was cheap, and it was readily available; and, ironically, the disadvantages of depot living were also its advantages. If the depot was the center of constant activity, it was because it—and its occupants—were at the center of a town's life. Virtually anyone or anything that arrived in or departed from a town passed through the depot. The railroad was an exciting and glamorous part of life in pre-World War I America, and those who lived in the depot lived in the middle of it.

After this evocative chapter, the photo section is an anticlimax. It displays 125 photographs of two-story depots, most of which are drawn from John Vander Maas's collection of thirty thousand depot photographs. Photo selection is good (though one wishes for more, given the size of the collection) and the coverage is adequate, averaging four photos per state, with emphasis on the Midwest and, happily, on New England and the East Coast states, sites of some of the more eccentric and ornate depots. Unfortunately, the paper on which the book is printed does not do the photographs justice. A more serious problem with the photographs, however, is that while they show what the depots looked like from the outside, they don't show what they were like on the inside. The title of the book is *Living in the Depot*; what these photographs show is "Looking at the Depot." There are no interior views, no closeups of architectural details, no family snapshots of everyday activities. Some photographs give hints, but only at a distance: closed curtains on second-story windows, laundry hanging on the line, a jungle-gym. A few distant clues are as close as one gets to seeing behind those closed curtains. Interior views of depots, let alone of living quarters, are hard to find, but there must be family snapshots available in private collections. H. Roger Grant has written a useful and informative book on a particularly interesting type of railroad depot. It would have been more useful, however, had he included the types of interior and personal photographs that would let the reader see more of the lives that were lived on the second story.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.