



Iowa's Vanishing Depots

by Jamie Beranek

By the mid-1970s, it was abundantly clear that one of the icons of American life, the railroad depot, was rapidly approaching extinction. Rail passenger service had been in free fall for decades, and changing technology meant that the railroads no longer needed agents or operators in depots to deal with the public or help dispatch trains. One of the final blows to the survival of depots was, ironically, the advent of Amtrak in 1971. While the carrier did save a skeletal national rail passenger network, it also ended service to much of the nation and, hence, the need for hundreds of stations.

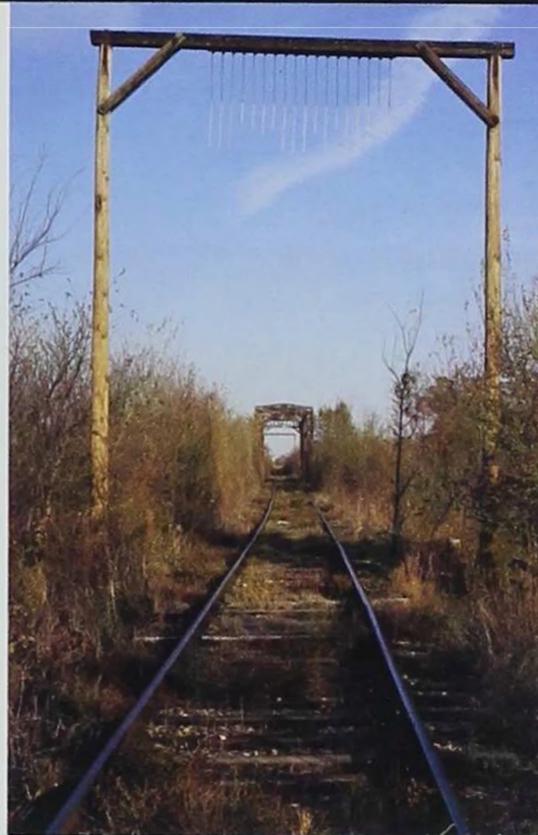
In 1976, I began to photograph as many of Iowa's surviving railroad buildings—depots, freight houses, engine facilities—as I could (later, I expanded my project to cover much of the Midwest). There were still enough depots and other railroad buildings—and, my particular interest, architectural details—surviving to make the project worthwhile. A small sample of my Iowa work begins here.

Opposite: The West Union depot was built by the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Minnesota Railway in 1872–1873. In the 1920s, parallel Highway 150, newly paved, killed off local business on the line, and its successor, the Rock Island Railroad, discontinued the last passenger train in 1932. It was replaced by a combination passenger and freight train that, despite spartan accommodations (passengers rode in the caboose) and a glacial schedule, was well patronized during World War II. Although the depot closed in 1973, these two ticket windows were still intact in 1976, seemingly ready to serve patrons who had vanished decades before.



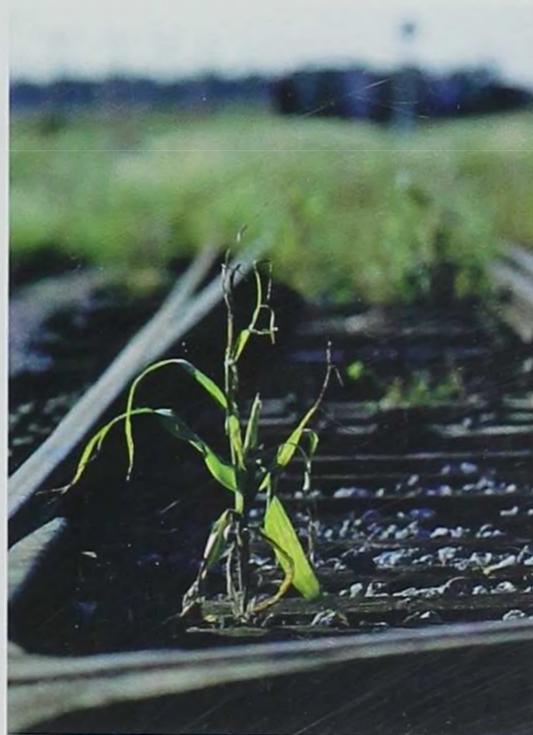
Above: Photographed in 1980, the Amana depot survived years of neglect, its brick platform stolen by souvenir hunters. Renovated by the Amana Preservation Foundation, it first served the Old Creamery Theatre and is now the trail head for the Amana Colonies Recreation Trail.

A TECHNICAL NOTE: Because I knew I would be out traveling for weeks at a time, I decided from the beginning to use 120 Panatomic-X and Ektachrome roll films instead of sheet film. My equipment was a Horseman medium-format view camera, outfitted with Schneider lenses, always attached to a sturdy Zone VI wood tripod. I printed all of my own black and white work, using a Beseler 4x5 enlarger fitted with a Zone VI cold-light head.



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As a concession to safety, railroads installed three-sided structures (like this one) called telltales to warn of approaching tunnels or bridges. Before air brakes, railroaders had to set the brakes on each freight car by hand while walking along running boards on top of each car, regardless of the weather. If a brakeman felt or saw the rope or strips hanging down from a telltale, he hit the roof immediately. The need for telltales ended in 1974 when freight cars were no longer allowed to have running boards on their roofs. Photographed in 1976 (on the Alden branch of the Chicago & North Western Railroad), this telltale and the bridge beyond were later replaced by an open-deck span over the Iowa River.



In July 1980 a young corn plant was the only sign of life at the crossing of the Rock Island's Chicago–Denver and Burlington–Minneapolis mainlines at West Liberty. Four months before this photo was taken, the Rock Island had gone out of business.



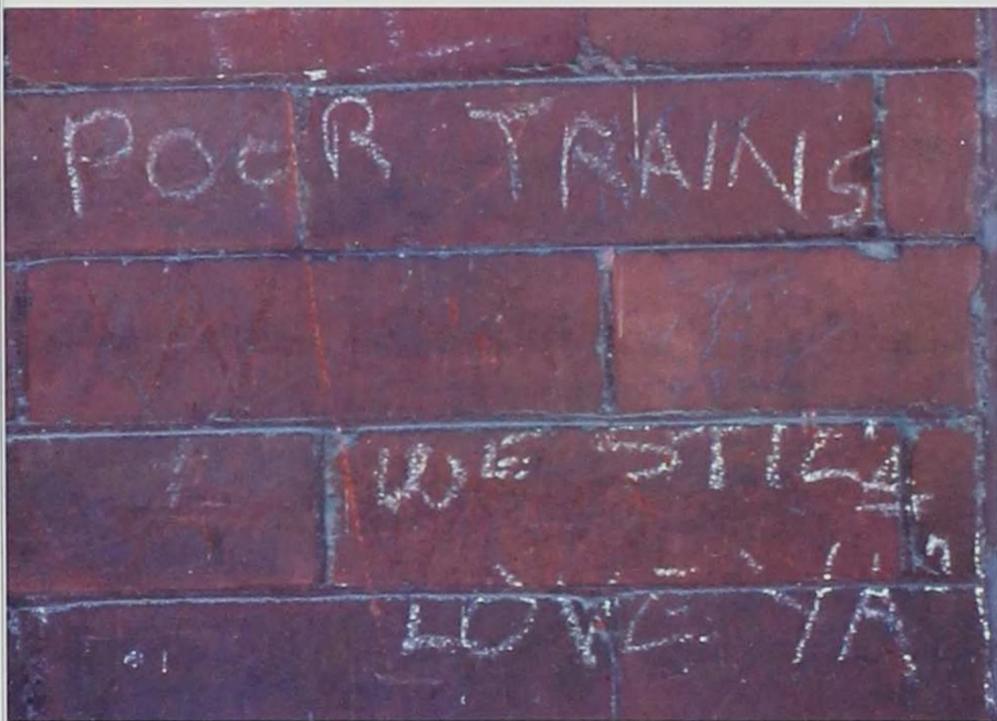
Above: The Independence depot was one of Iowa's finest, built by Illinois Central and opened in 1892 to handle the crowds arriving for the horse races at famed Rush Park. After passenger service between Chicago and Sioux City ended in 1971, the depot was closed and its waiting room locked, as it is in this 1976 photo. A local nonprofit group bought the deteriorating building and in 1996 moved it one block east to Highway 150. Now restored, along with the baggage building and canopy (not shown), the depot serves as a museum and as offices of the Buchanan County Tourism Department.

Right: Described in 1892 by the *Grinnell Herald* as "a model of architectural beauty," Grinnell's union depot was located at the crossing of the Rock Island and the Iowa Central railways. The distinctive corner tower was divided inside to allow each company's ticket agent "half the bay window." Both passenger service and the Rock Island had been abandoned when this photo was taken in 1981. It now serves as a fine-dining restaurant.

Below: The Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Minnesota Railway laid out the town of Walker on swampland. In 1873, the depot was the town's first structure, on a site so soggy it had to be built on piles. The depot is a typical BCR&M design; the agent lived on the upper floor. The one-story baggage/freight room was added in 1892. After almost 103 years of service, the Walker depot was closed in March 1976 and was photographed only months later. Since then, the Walker Historical Society restored the building and opened it as a museum.







These images are emblematic of midwestern railroading in the 1970s and early '80s. Clockwise from top: an anonymous sentiment chalked on the wall of the closed Illinois Central depot at Independence (1976); Rock Island depot sign, Iowa Falls (November 1979)—the railroad would shut down for good only four months later; abandoned Milwaukee Road station and office building, Sioux City (1983).



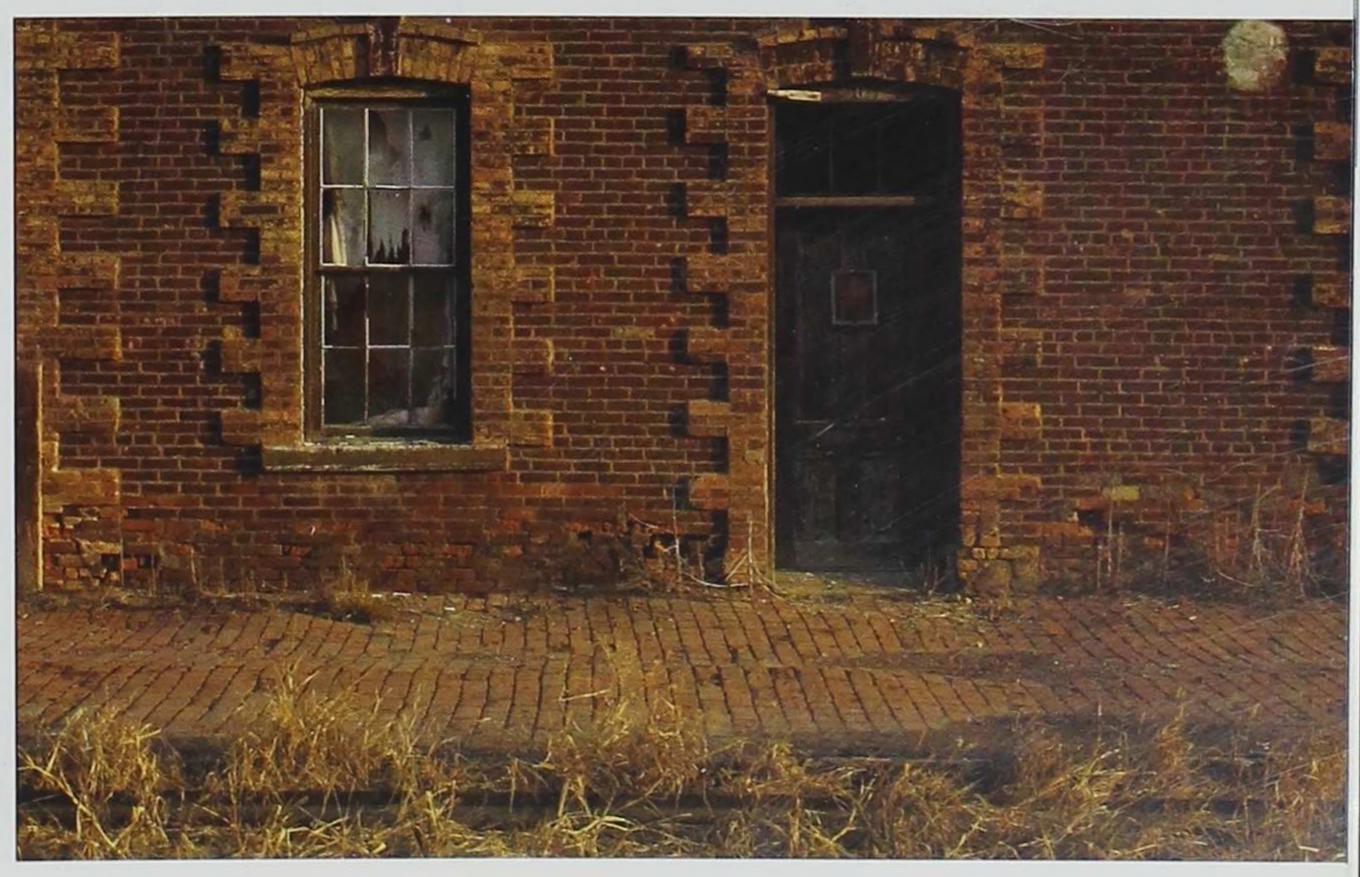
DEPOT BUILT 1873

ORIGINALLY B.C.R. & M. RR 1873
 CHANGED TO B.C. R.T. & N. 1875
 ROCK ISLAND BOUGHT B.C.R. & N. 1902

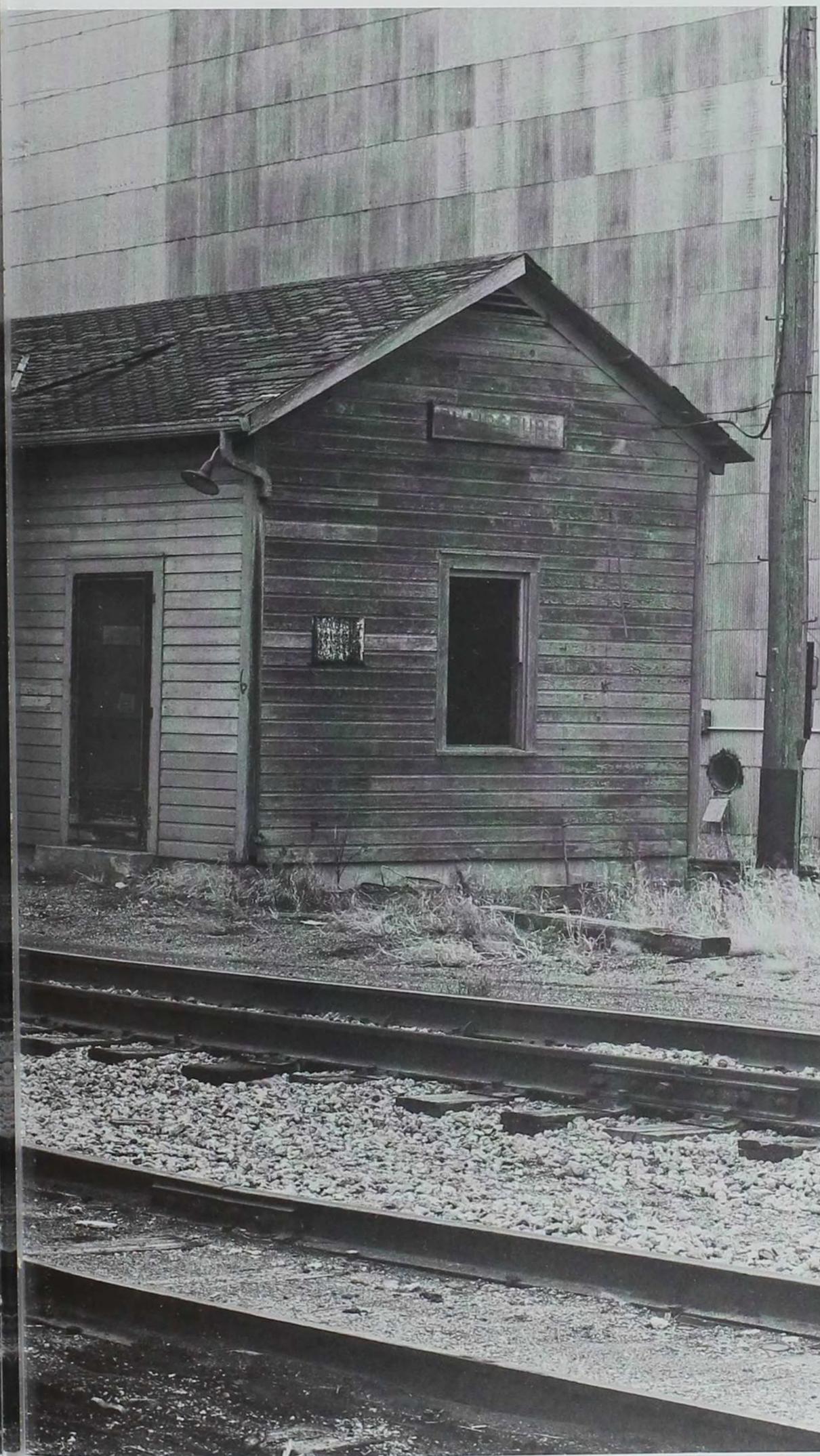
B.C. FAHR AGT 1873-1884	
ORRIS C. SWARTZ AGT 1884-1906	DIED 1913 BURIED WALKER CEMETARY
REWHITE 1906-1920	
BEN SMALLWOOD 1920-	
BUTZ 19 - 192	
R.C. RAINVILLE 192 - 1949	
B.D. NICHOLAS 1949-1964	1958 - ROWLEY ASSIGNED TO WALKER - 1964 ROWLEY DEPOT TORN DOWN
B.R. GOSNELL 1964-1965	1965 CENTER POINT DUALIZED WITH WALKER - 1972 CENTER POINT DEPOT TORN DOWN
C.E. HERMAN 1965-1968	RESIGNED 1968 TO GO FARMING
G.E. RISER 1968-1972	
C.C. GOEMAAT 1972-1974	BUMPED
N.L. POLZIEN 1974-1976 3/31/76	BUMPED

Above: Written by an anonymous rail-roader on the office-side of the Walker depot's ticket window was this hidden gem, a complete listing of the agents assigned to the station from 1873 to 1976. The depot was closed that year. Several months later, both the ticket window and the agents' chronology had disappeared—presumably stolen by a souvenir hunter.

Right: West Union had the finest of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Minnesota's depots on its Cedar Rapids-Postville Milwaukee Division. Built in 1872-1873, the building was 80 feet long, with brick and limestone ornamentation over each window and door, and a spacious second-floor apartment for the agent. This photo was made in 1977. The depot was demolished the next year.







Dwarfed by modern-day grain elevators, the Illinois Central depot at Blairsburg stands abandoned in 1976. Built in 1942, it was an example of the ambitious program begun that year by the railroad to replace "old, over-size, worn-out and outmoded stations" system-wide. Under this program, the Illinois Central would demolish most or all of an existing depot and then use the resulting lumber to build a smaller replacement based on one of four standard plans drawn up by the road's engineering department. The Blairsburg depot was a so-called Type A, measuring 16x36 feet, with an agent's office, a freight room, and a waiting room. Passenger service to Blairsburg ended only eight years later, when the daytime Chicago-Fort Dodge *lowan* was cut back to Dubuque. The depot was closed by 1970 and removed by 1985.



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Chicago & North Western tracks
(former Chicago Great Western
Minneapolis–Omaha mainline)
in Clarion, 1982.

If the future of railroading as reflected in these photos looked uncertain in the 1970s and '80s, today it has experienced a renaissance with record tonnage and rebuilt track. Even the former Rock Island's east-west mainline has long since come back to life and is now operated by the Iowa Interstate Railroad. The depots and some of the other passenger facilities from the past pictured here didn't have a place in this rebirth and have either been reused or demolished. But the economic logic of steel wheels hauling freight on steel rails has ultimately prevailed. ❖



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