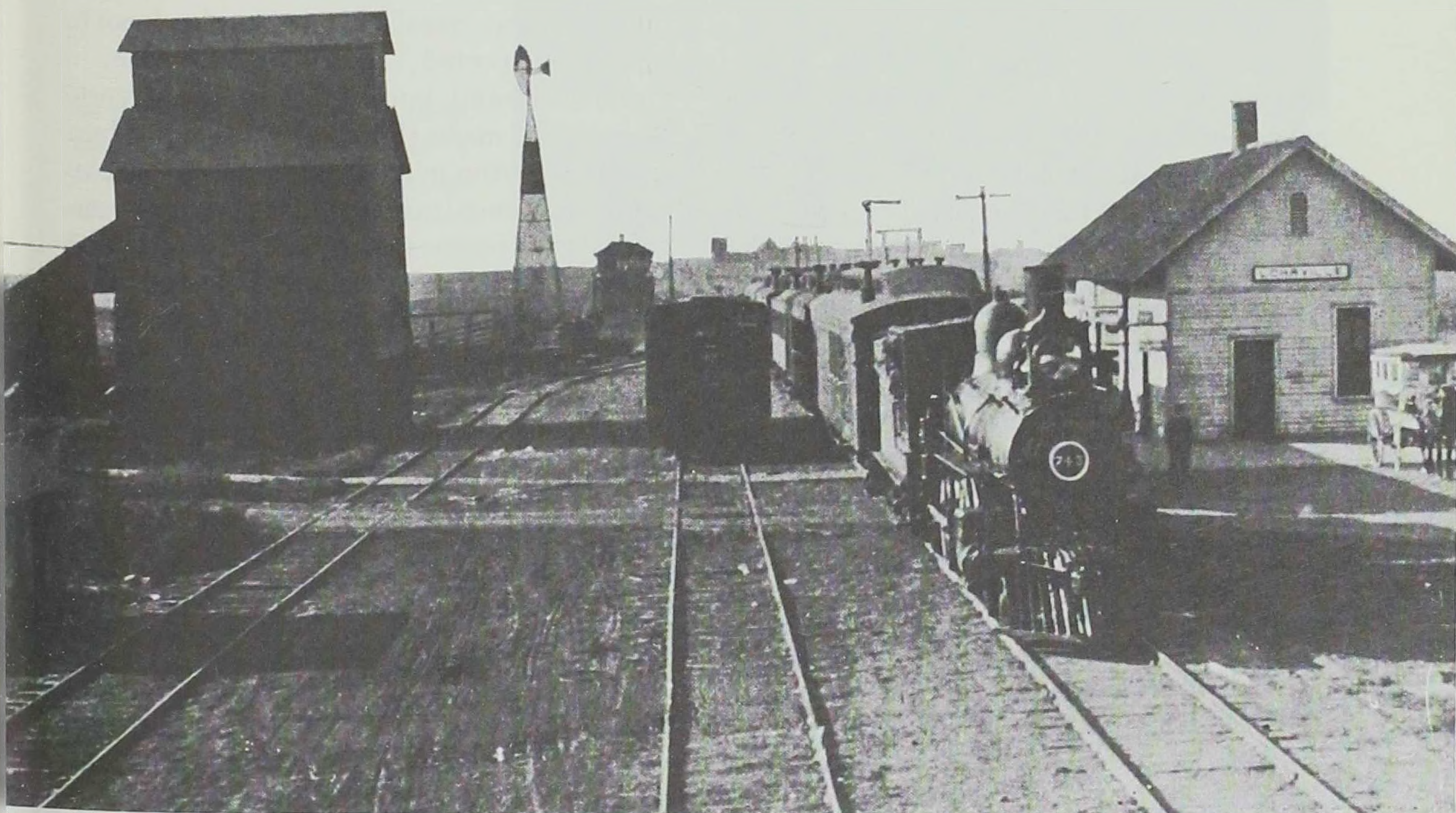


The Railroad Station Agent in Small-Town Iowa

by H. Roger Grant



The Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul depot in Lohrville, c. 1910. This was one of three depots located in this community. (courtesy the author)

Before the widespread presence of automobiles, trucks, and buses, trains bound the nation together. On the eve of World War I, Iowa alone among the states could claim that no point within its boundaries lay more than eight miles from the iron horse. Understandably, the railroad map of the Hawkeye State resembled a plate of wet spaghetti. Every community had at least one depot and many boasted two or more. For example, the Calhoun County village of Lohrville (1910 population of 674) sported three, those that belonged to the Great West-

ern, the Milwaukee, and the North Western. And each “deepo” had an agent, sometimes several, since the larger facilities often remained open continuously and had a sizable volume of business. The majority of depots, though, were staffed only by one person who understandably performed a multitude of services. The bigger ones might even have more than a “second” or “third trick” agent. They likely had a half-dozen or more employees who participated in a variety of specialized tasks that ranged from telegraphy to baggage handling.

The preeminent function of the small-town

agent in the daily routine of Iowans illustrates superbly the former importance of the railroad. As the line's official representative, he (occasionally she) was probably as well known as a town's pastor or physician. The reasons were many and varied. Primarily the agent met the public when he sold tickets, planned travel itineraries, and reported freight and express shipments. These activities affected virtually every adult, possibly several times a month, for virtually all merchandise entered and left by rail. In some places the agent's chances for exposure increased since the depot building itself contained living quarters for himself and his family. But even if the agent did not reside in the station, he got additional attention because of his sale of postal cards, stationery, stamps, and even spool thread and other notions. (These activities, however, sometimes

violated company rules, although the rules could be overlooked.) Occasionally, the agent served as the town's "reading man." Folks who could not read knew that the agent could. "If any reading matter came their way," explained C.C. Searls, a longtime Milwaukee agent at Postville, "they usually headed for the depot to have it interpreted." And there was more.

His firsthand knowledge of the cryptic Morse code made the station agent the best informed person in town. The chattering telegraph instruments carried more than just routine railroad business (train orders, equipment requests, and the like); they delivered commercial messages from Western Union, Postal Telegraph, and other firms. Even a community newspaper depended heavily on the agent's telegraphic abilities. As the daughter of a Poweshiek County newspaper editor recalled,



An impressive side view of Lohrville's Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul depot, c. 1910. Note the sign which also designated the depot a Wells Fargo & Company Express office. (courtesy the author)



"The [agent] was truly our link with national events, for in those days before radio and television the telegrapher got everything first, including the weather forecast. My father haunted the depot for these forecasts as well as important world events."

The excitement, even the glamour, of the agent's job made it attractive to many an Iowa lad. Usually he came from town, for farm boys always faced a multitude of daily chores. Commonly a youngster would "hang out" at the depot and, if he were lucky, strike up a friendship with the local agent. In exchange for instruction in telegraphy and station accounting, he would likely perform various odd jobs: carrying in buckets of coal during the heating season, helping to load and unload less-than-carload (l.c.l.) freight, sweeping floors, washing windows, and performing other janitorial tasks. Dan Knight, a former Hawkeye State agent for the Minneapolis & St. Louis (later North Western) recalled that "For many poor boys it was the break of a lifetime when they were able to learn a trade without cost and without having to live away from home while

doing so, then step into a job . . . in one of the most interesting industries in the world."

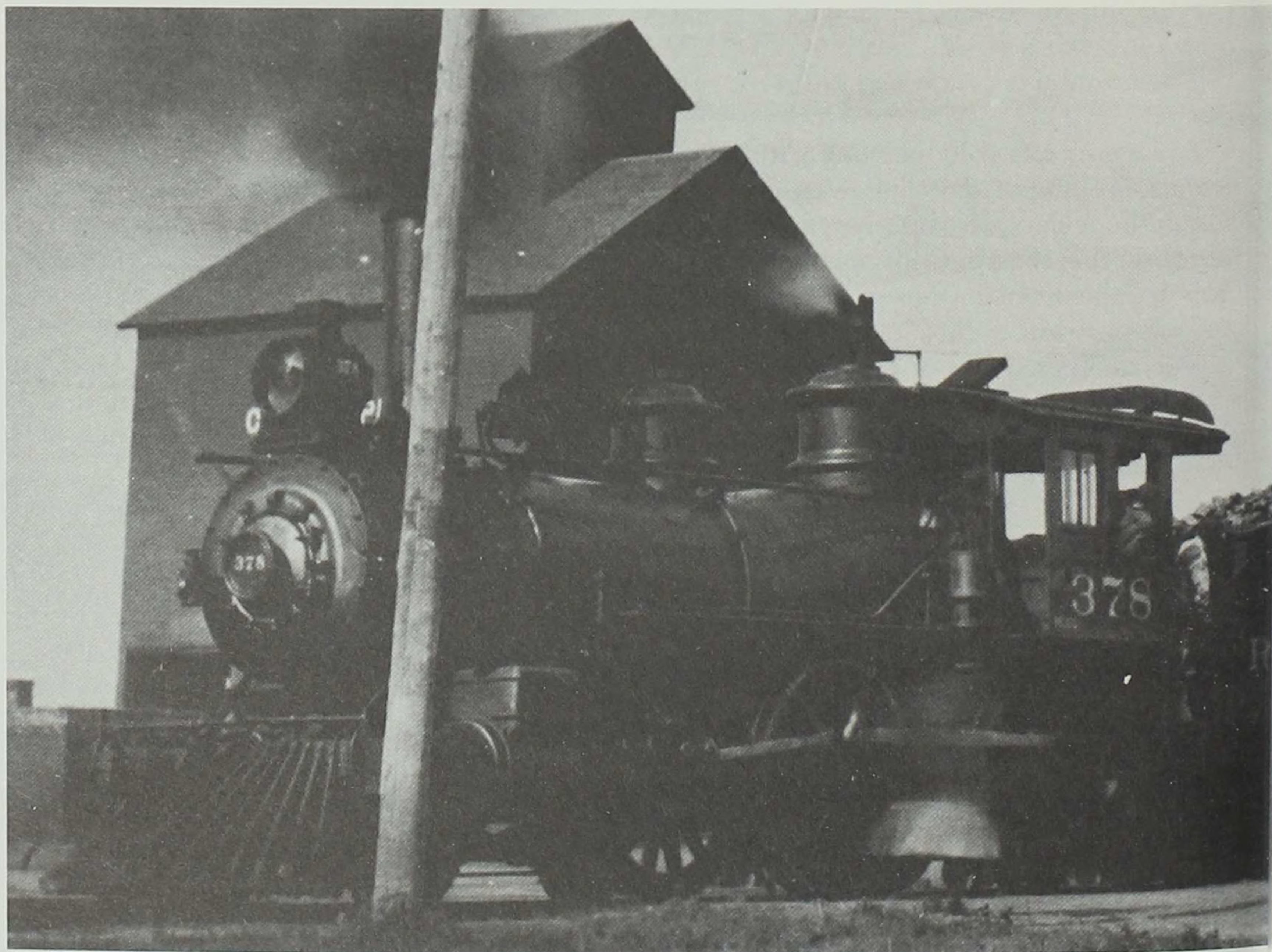
As in most types of work the station agent encountered his share of problems. The hustle-bustle of depot life made for many a hectic moment. A.B. Overby, agent for the Great Western in Tripoli, penned some thoughts about his job in 1926. Although located on a remote branchline, Overby's station was nevertheless a busy spot:

Work can be frantic, especially when you are making switch list for local due in fifteen minutes; also fifteen or twenty waybills to make; several express shipments to prepare for passenger train, which is due to meet local at your station, and city telephone persistently ringing, the party on the line asking a question something like this: "Did Jim or Joe get off the train or did it not arrive yet?" In all probability you do not know either of them. Turning around to the ticket window another party asks: "Is there any freight for me?" without as much as telling you his name, taking it for granted

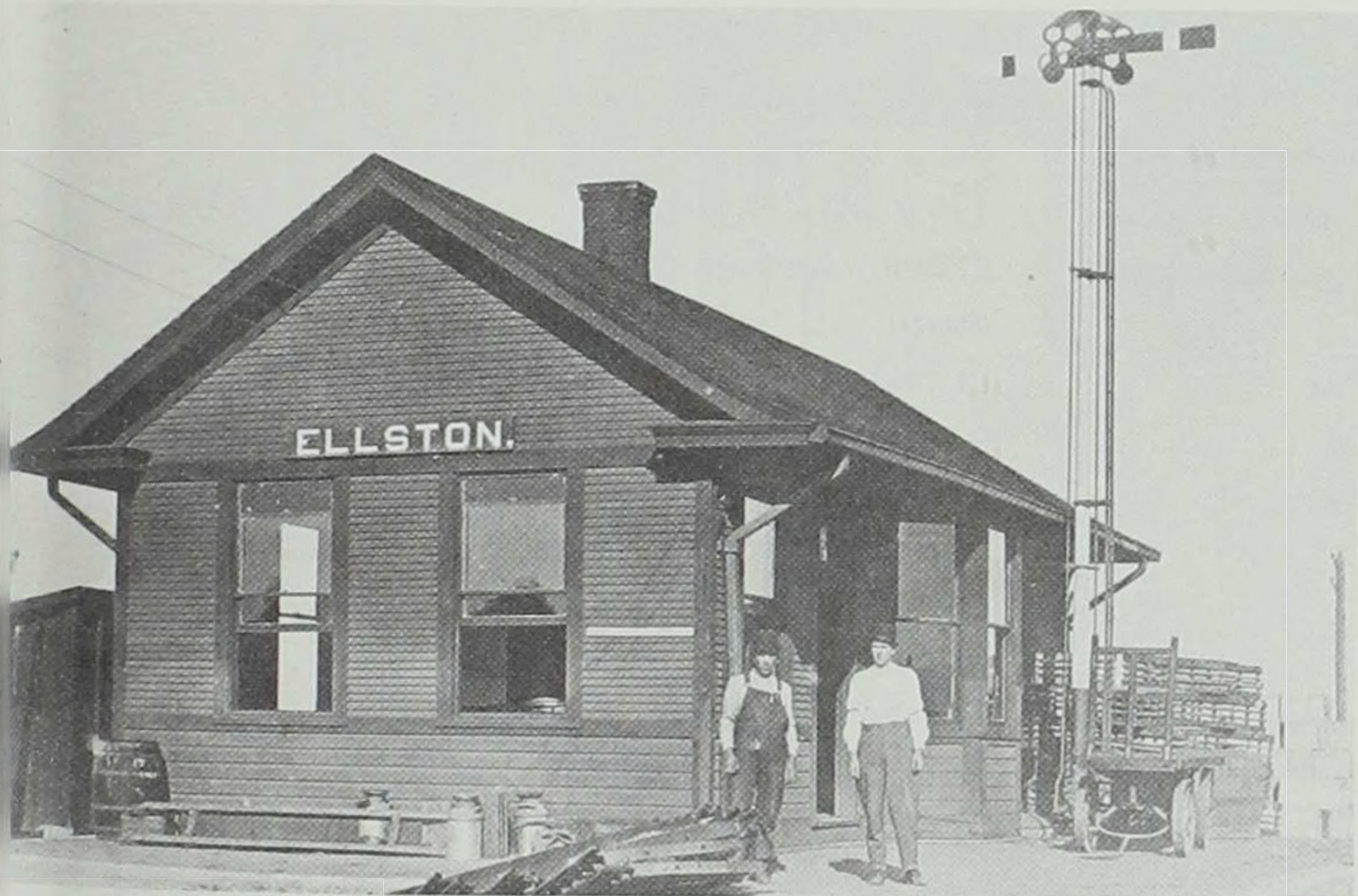
that you are the local railroad agent, you should know his name. . . . About one minute before passenger train is due, a traveling salesman rushes up with three trunks to check, three hundred pounds excess.

Station agents, too, never seemed too happy about certain duties. They disliked having to move about heavy amounts of freight, express, and mail. While they might get assistance from a friendly crewman, sectionman, helper or customer, a barrel of oil or a 100-pound sack of Sears, Roebuck catalogs could be a formidable obstacle and might even cause serious injury if mishandled. Pulling a loaded platform truck with its contrary iron wheels and stiff steering

mechanism was always a challenge, especially in snow and ice. And relaying train orders could be another troublesome assignment. Initially such communications were simply placed in the flat of the agent's hand. He then stood close enough to the passing train so that a crewman could slap his palm and remove the order. Fortunately, more effective equipment appeared toward the close of the nineteenth century. Yet problems continued. If an agent used the "P"-shaped train order hoop to hand up messages, he likely had to trudge along the track to retrieve it. (Without stopping a train, a crewman merely put his arm through the bamboo hoop, took off the paper order clipped to the handle, and cast the device to the ground.)



The arrival of a branch line passenger local in Swea City, c. 1911. A "Where We Got Off" caption along the bottom of the photograph (trimmed out of this reproduction) indicated that the view came from a postal



The Chicago, Burlington & Quincy agent at Ellston (right) posed with a patron, c. 1920. Note the less-than-carload freight that either had arrived or awaited shipment. (courtesy the author)

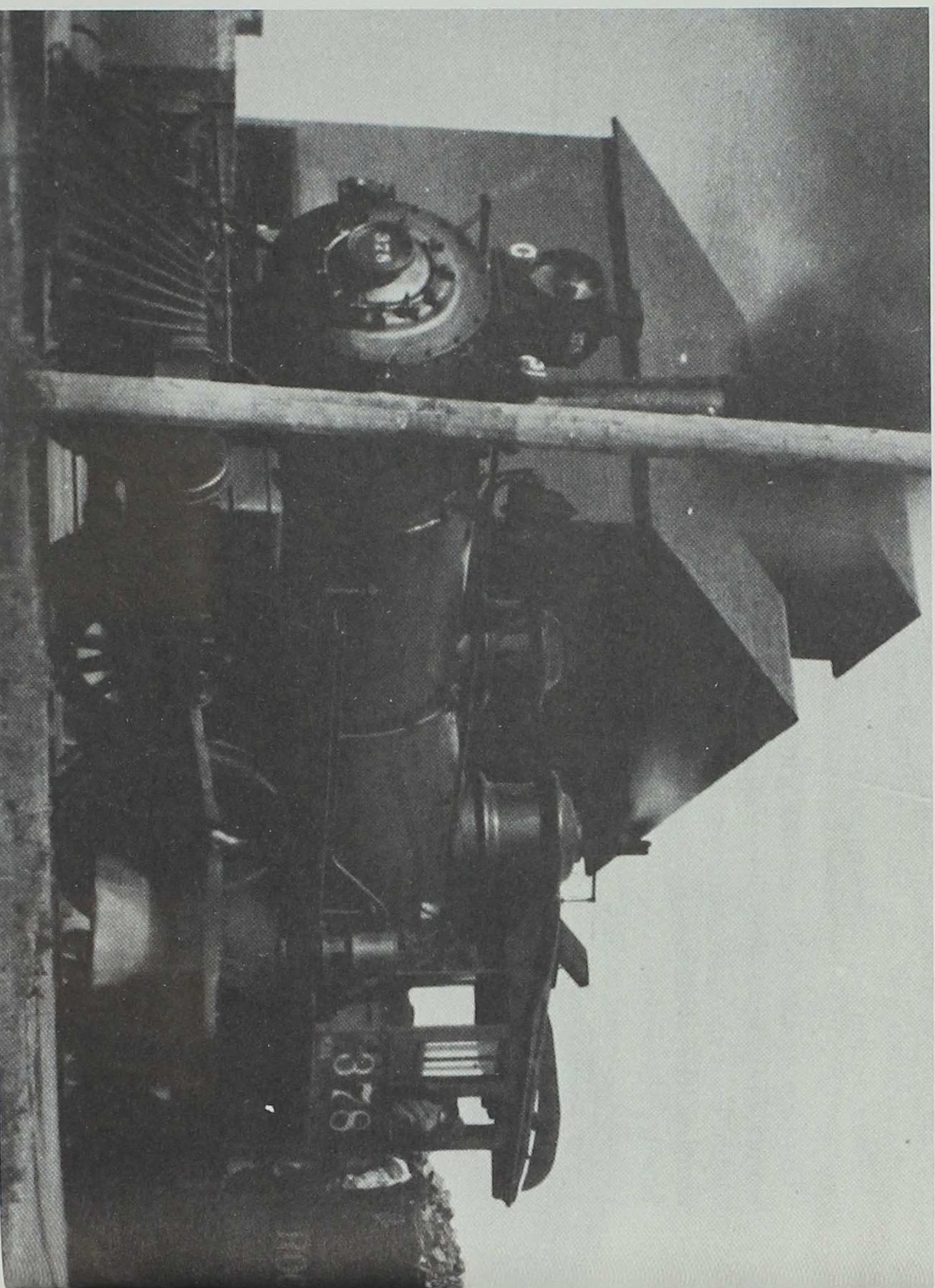


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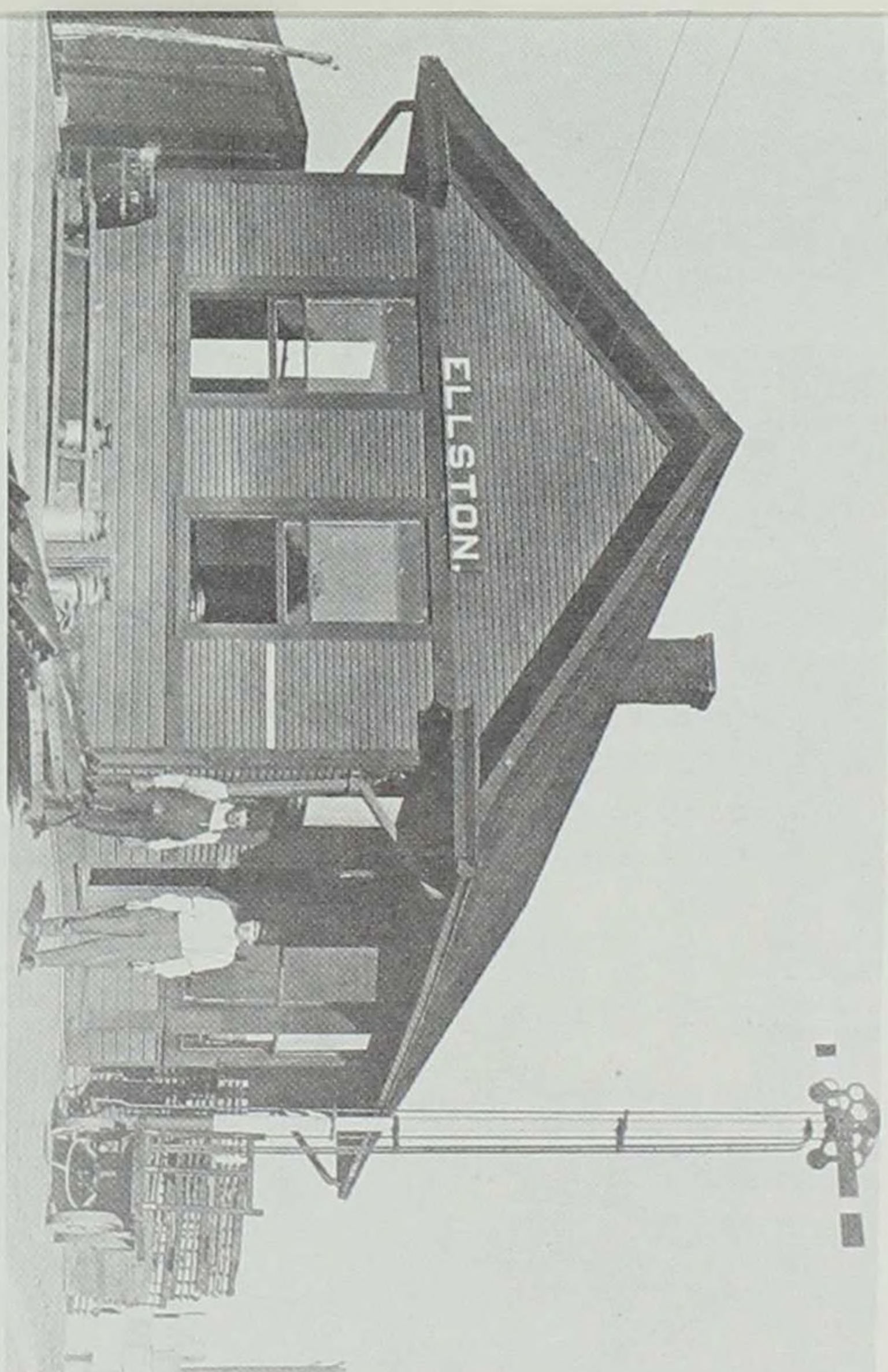
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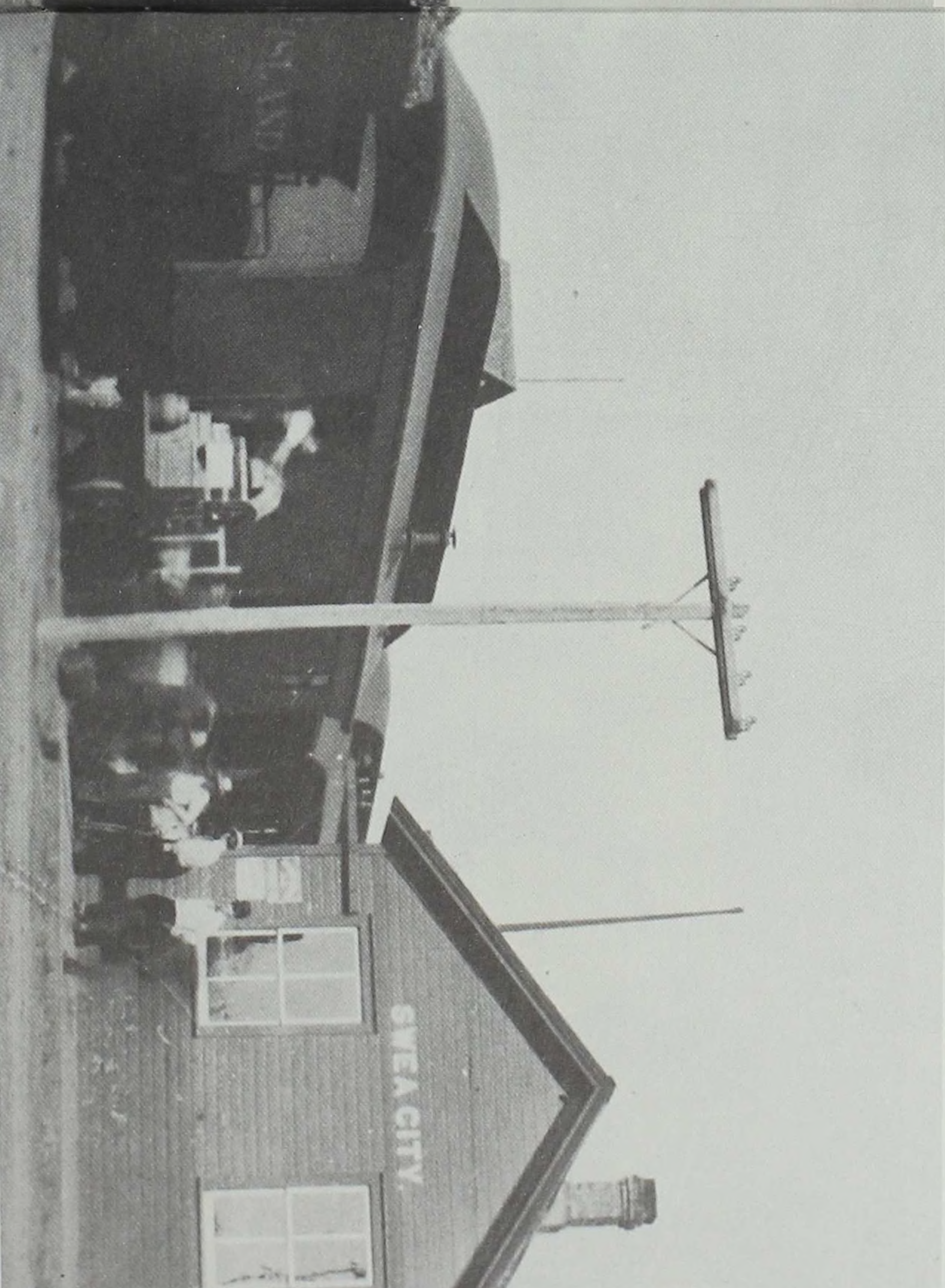
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Finding the hoop could be an adventure when it landed in high weeds or deep snow or when it was dark. (By the 1940s the widespread use of the "Y" strip hoop ended this problem.) Feeding hungry stoves in offices and waiting rooms during the wintry months was a matter of seemingly unending toil and caused extra aches and pains. Coal houses were frequently a considerable distance from the depot, making the necessary daily trips unpleasant. Of course when the weather turned nasty, any outdoor task became an additional burden.

Commercial telegraphic work created its own special difficulties. While this business meant extra income, the bother nearly universally outweighed the compensation. Agent Knight explained:

Invariably, somebody would show up about 20 minutes or so before you'd go off duty with a handful of death messages. They expected you to accept them with graciousness and to get them out right away. All the operator made from a telegram was 10 percent of any money he handled. If somebody came in with 5 or 6 telegrams that were to be paid for at the other end . . . I wouldn't get a nickle from sending any of them. . . . When you accepted the telegrams, you didn't know how long it was going to take to get rid of them because you had to call a relay operator. . . . And you had to wait until he was not busy. You might sit there for 2 hours waiting for him past your time to go



Burlington Route Agent Martin J. Kenton at work in the Russell depot, c. 1925. The ubiquitous train order hoops can be seen to the right of the bay window area. (courtesy the author)



Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul depot at Akron in June 1907. (courtesy the author)

home. . . . On in-bound telegrams . . . if the telegram was paid for on the other end, you never got anything out of it. . . . If [the message] was for out in the country, and the people had no phone, and if it was an urgent message . . . you felt that you almost had to deliver it. If you drove out . . . and delivered it, you never got a nickel and you never got any thanks from the people. They expected it. There have been times when I got stuck in the snow and mud and I had to hire somebody to pull me out. . . . It was a fine thing for the Western Union but it was a mighty poor arrangement for the agent.

Relations with the public could also prove difficult. Questions and complaints were part of the daily routine. If shipments were late or damaged, patrons' tempers flared. Such occurrences were emotionally draining and extremely time consuming. Agents, for in-

stance, developed a hardy dislike for the cheap dish and drinking glass traffic. "Always two or three 5¢ each type glasses or a couple of 14¢ plates broken, requiring a trip to a store for inspection of packing, reason for damage, etc.," noted Agent Searls. "Most time consuming, when the time was so badly needed for all the other demanding work of the day. Naturally those handling such shipments felt their needs were equally as important as those of the livestock . . . shippers. We strived to keep them all happy. If we could get the 20¢ damage handled within 72 hours, it worked out rather well." Searls added, "Many times I paid them out of my own pocket to save time."

Since the depot served as the community gateway, "loafers" commonly became a nuisance and source of irritation. Some might be drunk, vile or generally undesirable. Agents usually coaxed these people to leave, but at times they had to get tough. The *Carroll*



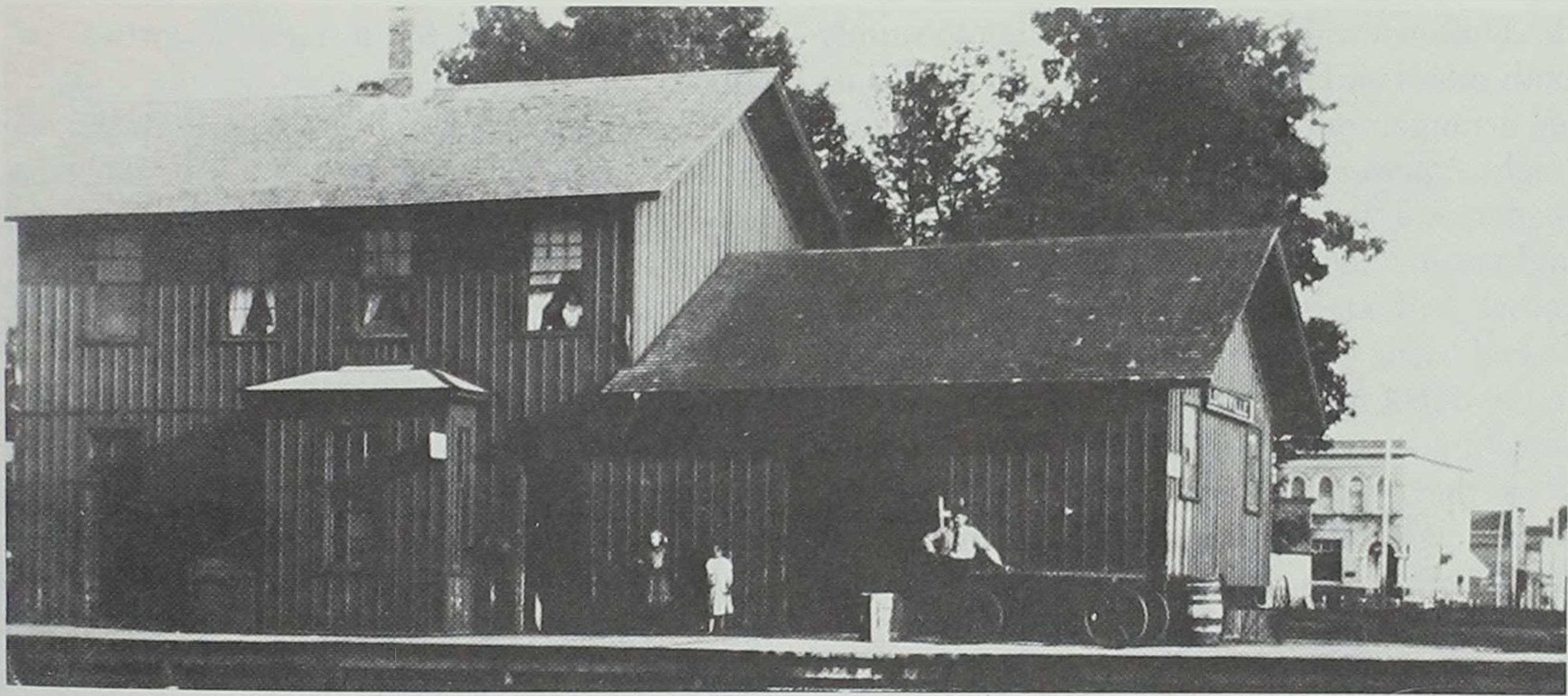
In August 1916 the Minneapolis & St. Louis agent and two assistants gave a photographer a few moments in the office of the Estherville station. Freight tariffs are stored on the right. (courtesy the author)

Herald reported in 1905 that the North Western agent “has made the announcement that hereafter loafers will be compelled to keep away from the depot and that unless his orders are heeded some arrests will be made in the very near future.” The threat worked, at least temporarily.

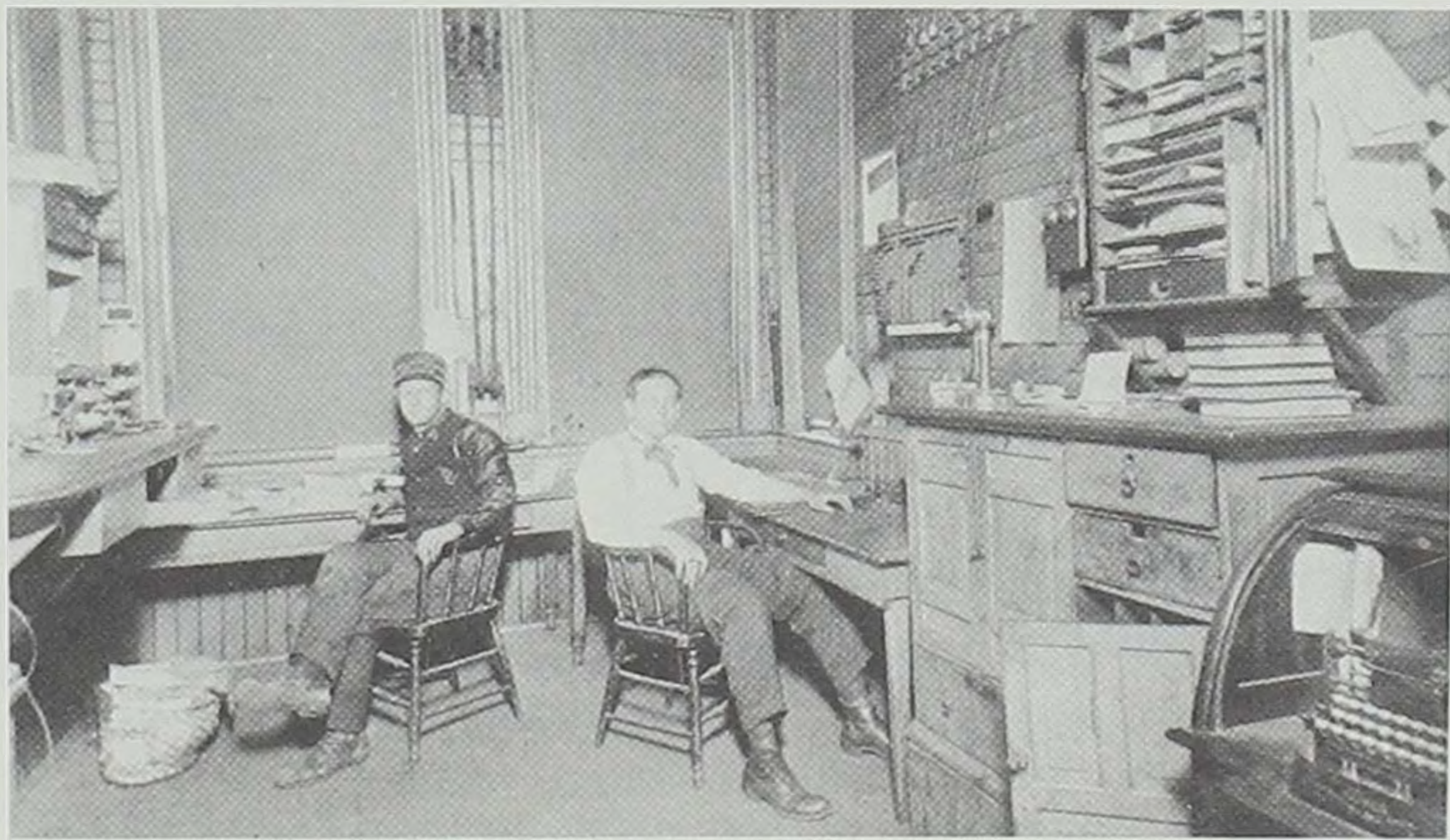
There existed, of course, those annoying and usually silly questions. For example, some travelers could not understand a railroad timetable or tell the difference between A.M. and P.M. In response to repeated inquiries about time, one frustrated Iowa agent in 1894 placed the following sign under the popular station clock: “This is a clock; it is running; it is Chicago time; it is right; it is set every day at 10 o’clock.

Now keep your mouths shut.”

The workaday life for the railroad station agent could have additional discomforting features. In particular, an “extra man,” one who lacked a regular depot assignment, might be forced to move frequently throughout a division or occasionally an entire system without much prior notice. He could well face a lengthy, bone jarring ride on a “way-freight” or a poky passenger train in order to reach his destination at the prescribed time. Upon assuming his new post, the agent needed to make his own eating and sleeping arrangements. Either could prove difficult and some smaller communities lacked both a restaurant and a hotel. The usual solution lay with a local resi-



The Chicago & North Western depot in Lohrville, c. 1910. The agent, William H. Marple, and his family lived on the depot's second floor. (courtesy the author)



This view of the office of the Chicago Great Western depot in Lamont, c. 1910, shows Agent Bert Snodgrass on the left near the telegraph key. (courtesy the author)



A McKeen gas-electric motor train at Hampton in 1949, a year before the Chicago Great Western discontinued passenger service on the line between Oelwein and Clarion. (courtesy the author)

dent (often a widow) who was willing to supply both meals and a sleeping room. Even if such an arrangement could be made, the agent might experience a general lack of cleanliness, inadequate heat during the coldest months, and a cantankerous hostess. There existed a last resort. Although the majority of Iowa stations lacked living quarters, an agent could "batch" in the depot itself. He could acquire food from the ubiquitous grocery or general store and use a cot that was placed in the office or freight house. With the advent of all-weather roads and automobiles, the agent enjoyed greater options. Larger, nearby towns generally offered suitable facilities.

Once settled the railroad agent faced long hours of toil with only modest financial compensation. "When my dad hired out in 1900 . . . he worked one of the better paying jobs for \$45.00 for a 12 hour day six days a week [approximately 14 cents an hour] and no overtime," remembered Dan Knight. "Any union activity meant automatic dismissal." Agents throughout the state and nation eventually unionized and won substantial improvements in wages and working conditions. Prior to passage of the Railroad Retirement Act by a New Deal Congress in 1935, all railroad employees had to work until they could no longer do so; men stayed on the "extra board" for years until somebody died, quit or was fired. Vacations

did not become common until the forties "so nobody laid off until he was sick."

While once there were several thousand agents, the railroad industry in Iowa today employs only several score. This enormous contraction has occurred because of several factors: the virtual extinction of the passenger train; the increased use since the 1950s of mobile freight representatives and centralized agencies; the widespread employment of radios for train-control work; and, the major track abandonments caused by mergers, declining business and, in the case of the Milwaukee and Rock Island, bankruptcy and liquidation. Fewer and fewer Iowans recall the time when the station agent played a vital role in the town's life. Those few agents still working and those who have retired have their memories. And they are probably fond ones: "It's been a good life," reflected Knight. "I don't think I would have wanted anything else . . . there never was a day when I hated to go to work because every day was different." □

Note on Sources

Surprisingly, virtually no secondary literature has appeared on the subject of the railroad station agent in Iowa or the nation. The various company histories virtually ignore this type of employee and the few railroad labor studies focus on either strikes or the operating brotherhoods. Some attention, however, is paid to the role of the depot and the agent in H. Roger Grant and Charles W. Bohi, *The Country Railroad Station Agent in America* (Boulder, 1978).