

Iowa Chapter National Railway Historical Society

During the summer of 1952 a young lad in Spencer was busy writing his friends to stir up interest in forming an Iowa railroad club. Donald S. Hofsommer collected railroad material, took photos of rail scenes, and was never happier than when riding on a train or trolley. He thought there were others in the state with a similar interest. But how was he to know who they were? He broached the matter to Ralph L. Cooper, vice-president, Central Region, of the National Railway Historical Society. Although Cooper lived in Kansas City, he was aware of several railroad historians and "fans" in Iowa. With Cooper's help Don Hofsommer zealously set out to get six NRHS members in the state, the minimum number required to start a chapter.

On December 17, 1952, he proudly posted a mimeographed memorandum stating he had the required number. At the same time he asked for suggestions concerning the place and time of meeting so as to launch an Iowa Chapter. No two charter members came from the same community. Eastern Iowa was represented by James J. Kreuzberger of Dubuque, and J. P. Vander

Maas of Muscatine. Hofsommer, coming from Spencer, was considered "a northwestern member." The remainder of the sextet, namely Basil W. Koob, Guyon C. Whitley, and George Niles, Jr., were from Fort Dodge, Ames, and Des Moines. They spoke for central Iowa.

Of several nation-wide railroad historical organizations, Hofsommer and others believed the NRHS was the best suited to Iowa. For one thing, Iowa's members were scattered throughout the state. The NRHS was very active in promoting trips, and it was apparent these excursions would bring far-flung members together as nothing else could. Apart from this, the National Railway Historical Society, Inc., whose headquarters are in Baltimore, Maryland, was one of the largest organizations of its kind.

While plans were being made for the first meeting, the enterprising Hofsommer started a mimeographed sheet called *The Switch Lamp*. Published "at odd intervals exclusively for Iowa members," it did much to keep the historically-minded abreast of Iowa's railroad developments. At the same time, the paper focused attention on the need for an Iowa Chapter. The initial issue of January 15, 1953, pleaded for an early meeting but not before "mid-March or April," due to the condition of the highways in the event of snow or sleet. It was further suggested that the place of meeting be either Des Moines or Waterloo.

To appease the Capital advocates and those of Waterloo — Marshalltown, a half-way point between the two was selected. At any rate, "ten members and two visitors" met on March 28, 1953, in Hotel Tallcorn to launch the new chapter. According to the by-laws, they needed a president, vice-president, secretary-treasurer, and a director. The group elected George Niles, Jr., Edward H. Meyers of Boone, Thomas A. Gane of Des Moines, and Wilson B. Lemberger of Wever to these respective posts. Don Hofsommer was to continue editing *The Switch Lamp*, which was now enlarged and published monthly. Ralph Cooper presided over the meeting. After a dinner and a business session the historians and hobbyists toured the Minneapolis & St. Louis car and diesel shops in Marshalltown.

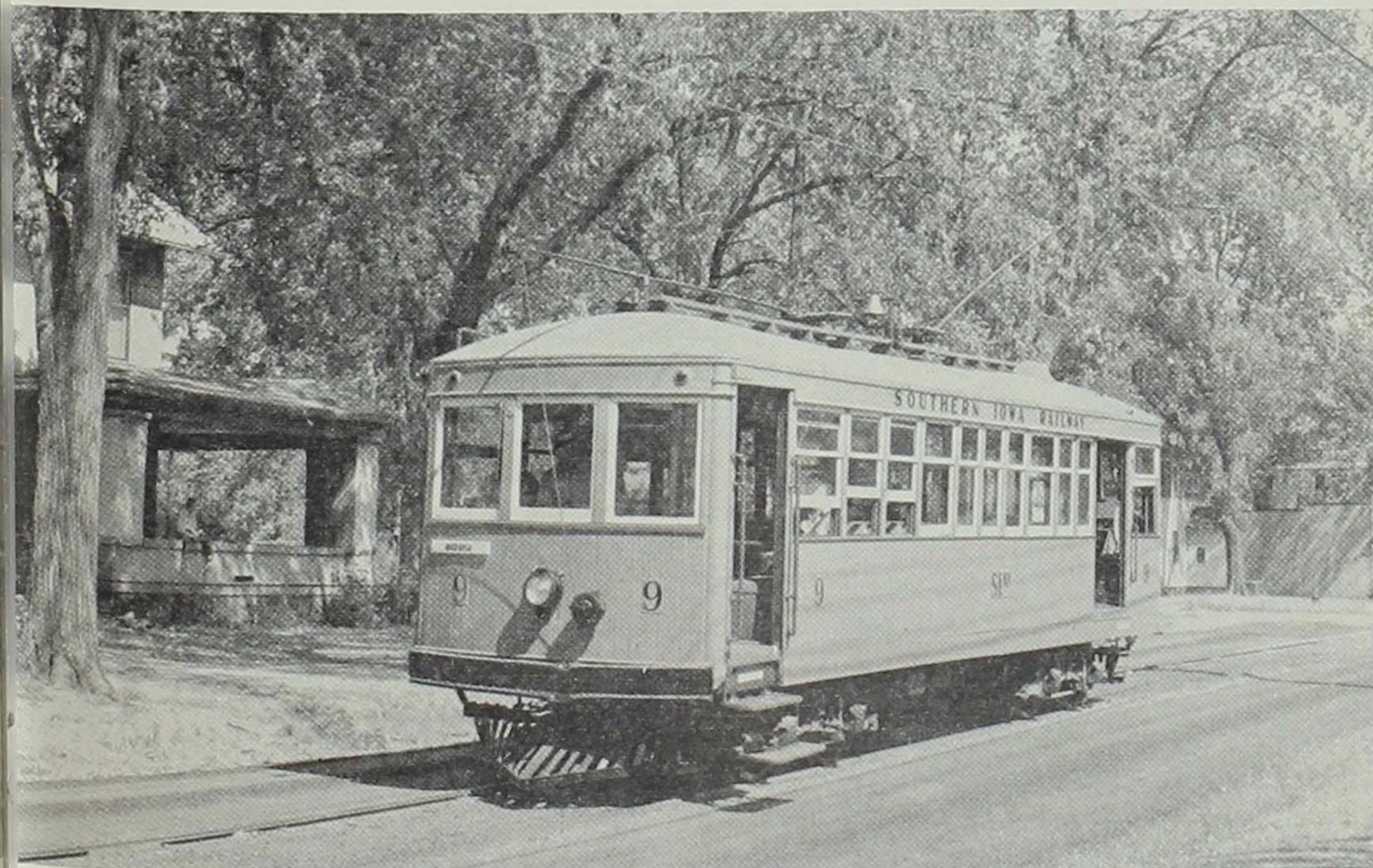
Once having been organized, the Iowa Chapter grew rapidly. By midsummer it had obtained twenty-three members, and by the end of 1953 had grown to forty-six. Late that year there was a change of officers. Meyers became president, James Kreuzberger, vice-president, and Dr. Robert B. May of Knoxville was elected secretary-treasurer. About the same time C. J. Lehnhardt of Dubuque took over the editorship of *The Switch Lamp*.

Dr. May chuckled in recalling how he was practically conscripted to hold office. He explained that it was not so much that they wanted



Wilson B. Lemberger

Iowa Railway Historical Museum's No. 100 on fan trip at Moravia, fall of 1958. Southern Iowa Railway car No. 9 in background.



Wilson B. Lemberger

No. 9 as repainted by NRHS members for use on special trips. Trolley is pictured on Centerville's tree-lined West Madison Street.

CRITICISMS OF SERVICE ARE INVITED
ADDRESS C. M. CHENEY, G. F. & P. A., WATERLOO, IOWA



Buffet Parlor Car

YOU MAY KEEP THIS MENU AS A SOUVENIR
ASK PORTER FOR AN ENVELOPE

Menu

MENU

ORANGE (1) 10; SLICED ORANGE (1) 15
POST TOASTIES WITH CREAM, 25
GRAPE-NUTS WITH CREAM, 25
CHICKEN SOUP, 25
CLAM CHOWDER, 25
PICKLES, 15
CORNED BEEF HASH, 40
BAKED BEANS (HOT OR COLD) 25
BRAISED BEEF A LA JARDINIERE 50
BOILED EGGS (2) 25
SARDINES (IMPORTED) 35
COLD BOILED HAM, 40
SMOKED TONGUE, 40
HAM SANDWICH, 15
GREEN PEAS, 20
ASPARAGUS (HOT OR COLD) 35
BREAD WITH BUTTER, 10
BROWN BREAD (HOT OR COLD) WITH BUTTER, 15
NABISCO WAFERS, 15
PRESERVED FIGS WITH CREAM, 25
PEACHES OR CHERRIES, 25
CHEESE WITH CRACKERS OR BREAD
IMPERIAL, 25 ROQUEFORT, 25
COFFEE, 10
TEA, POT, 15
COCOA, 15
MILK, 10

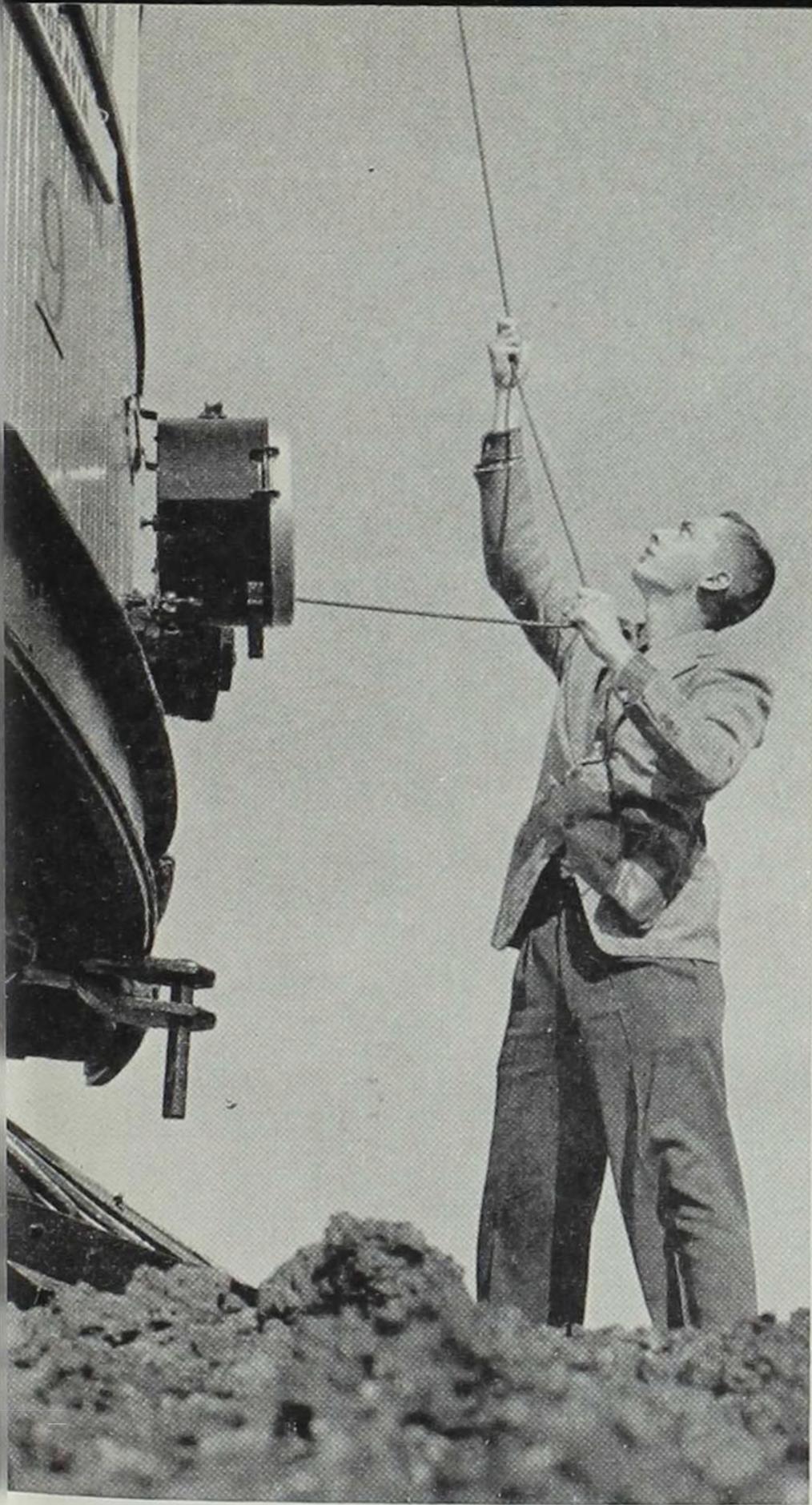
OLIVES, 20

TONGUE SANDWICH, 15

TO DRINK AND SMOKE

WHITE ROCK, SPLITS, 15
APOLLINARIS, SPLITS, 15
CLYSMIC, SPLITS, 15
IMPORTED GINGER ALE, 25
IMPORTED SARSAPARILLA, 25
LEMONADE, APOLLINARIS, SPLITS, 25
LEMONADE, PLAIN, 15
SPARKLING APENTA WATER, SPLITS, 15
RED RAVEN SPLITS, 15
CIGARS
10 - 15 - 25
PLAYING CARDS - 25

Menu used about 1915 on car No. 100 when it featured dining service. The vehicle provided de luxe accommodations on the Waterloo-Cedar Rapids line of the Waterloo, Cedar Falls & Northern Railway.



Edward H. Meyers

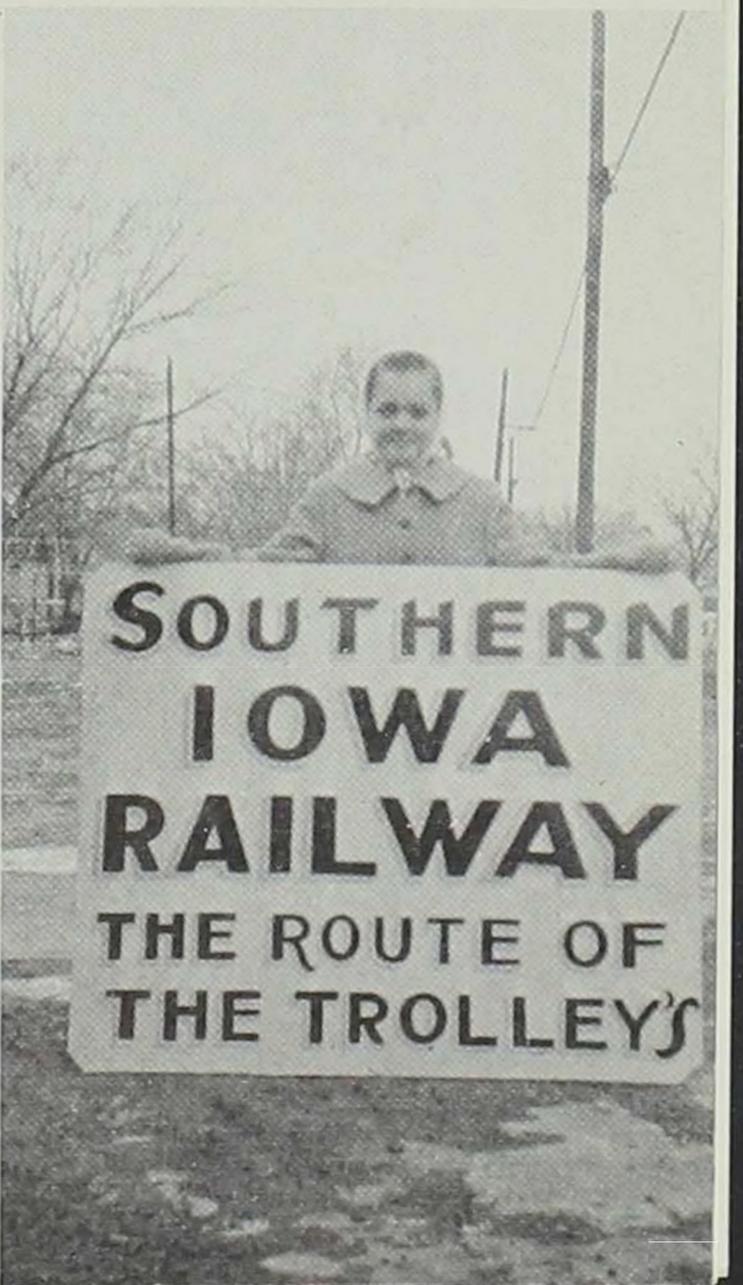
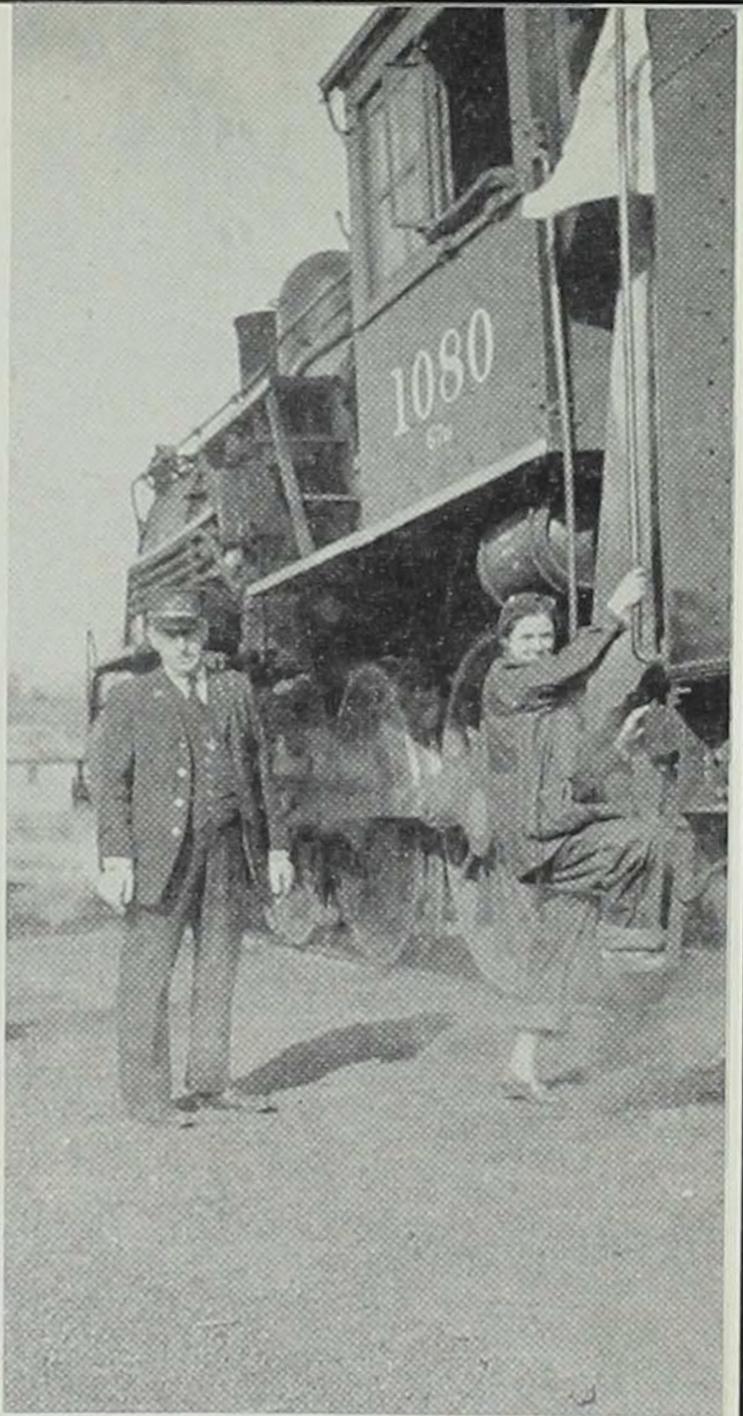
Putting the trolley back on the wire. Dick Billings performs this once-familiar operation, formerly seen on a thousand electric lines in the United States.

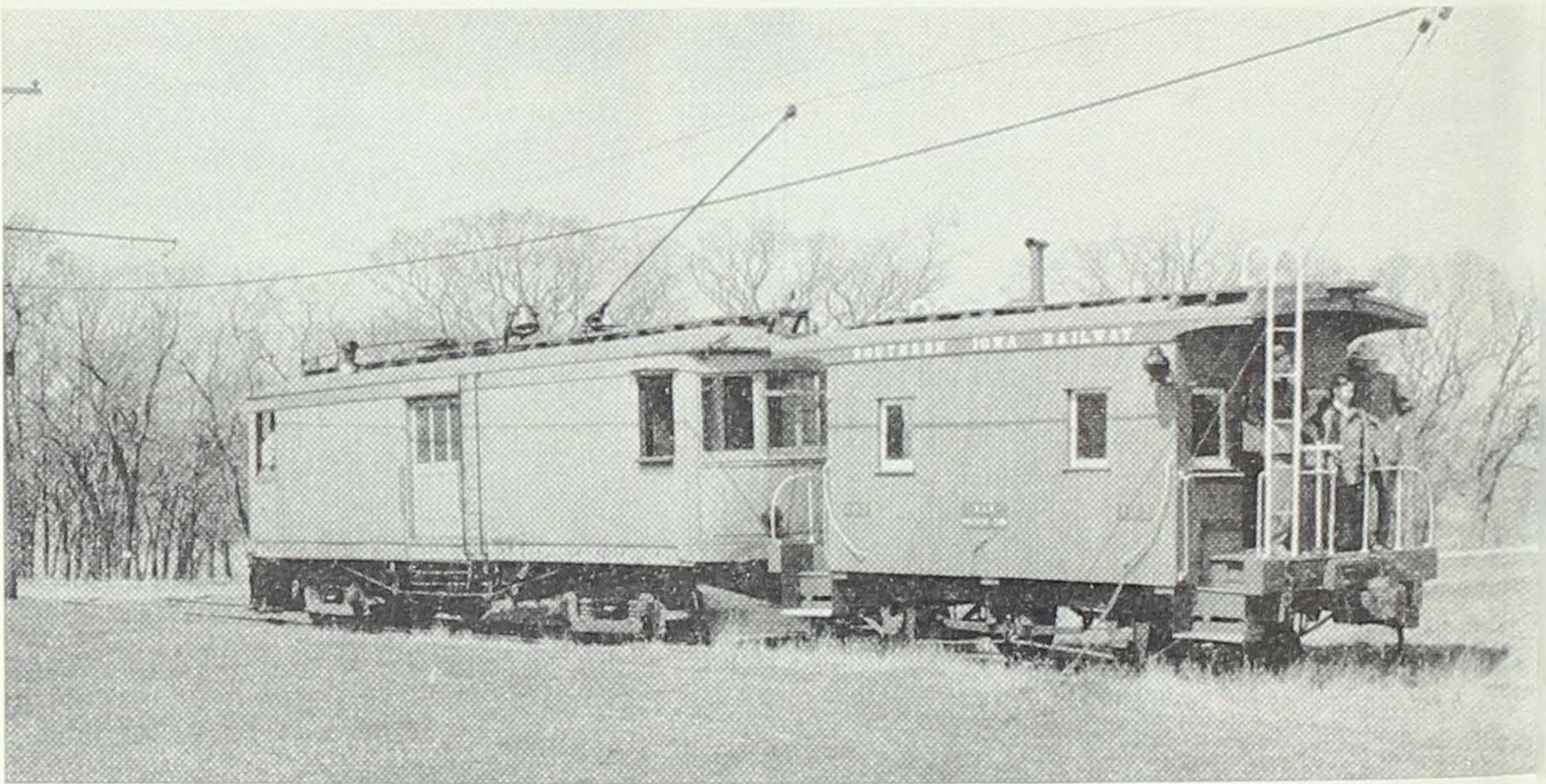
Upper right — NRHS member, Mrs. Floyd Parker, donned overalls to ride cab on Milwaukee Road trip at Strawberry Point, November, 1953.

James J. Kreuzberger

Lower right — Eleven-year-old "railfan" Cathline Reck poses behind new sign for Centerville. Photo taken in Ottumwa.

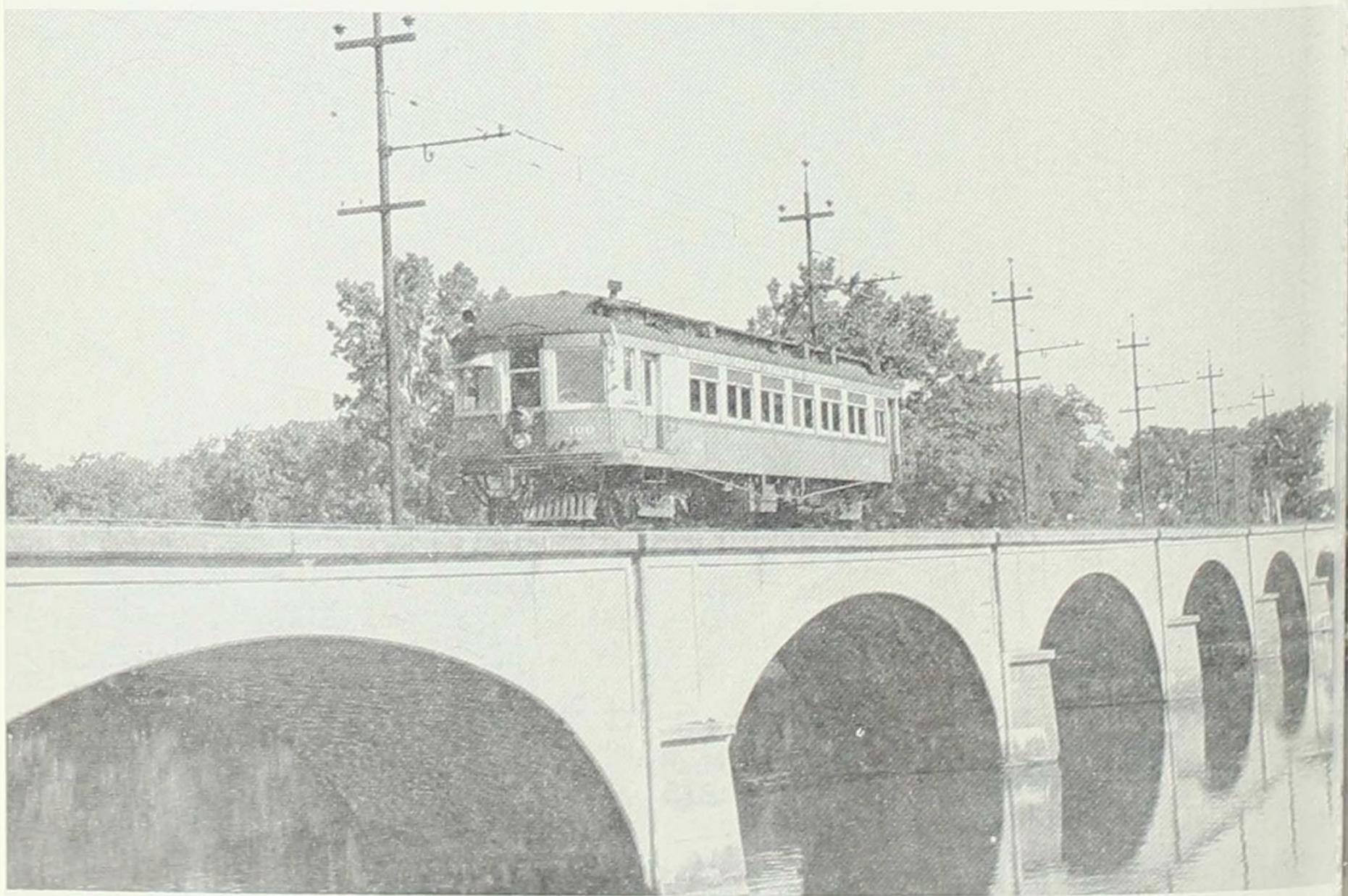
Elmer R. Carr





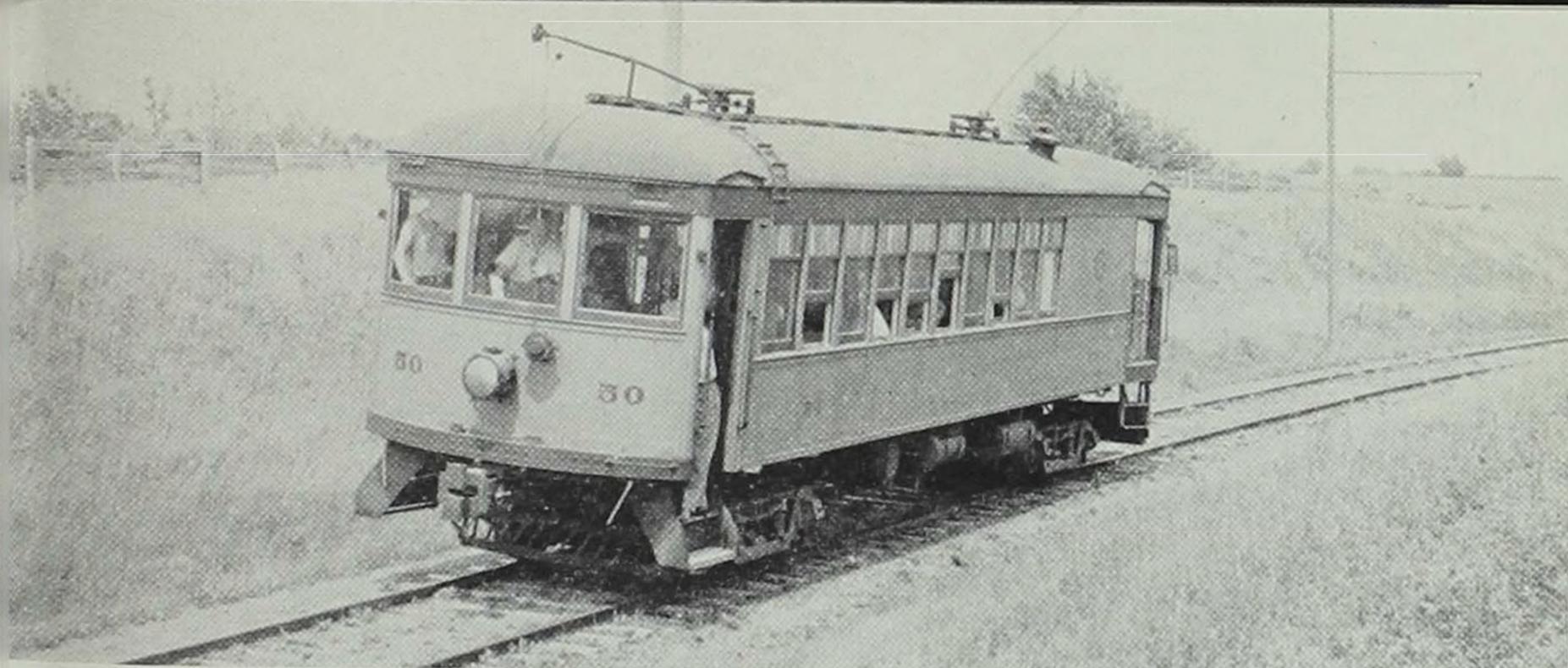
Wilson B. Lemberger

"Caboose hop" near Centerville featuring Southern Iowa Railway fan trip, April, 1958.



Richard M. Billings

No. 100 on Elk Run Bridge south of Waterloo in June, 1956, on the last "fan-trip" over the Waterloo, Cedar Falls & Northern. Car was donated to the Iowa Railway Historical Museum by the electric line.



Top—Lace-curtained interurban car on Charles City Western excursion, June, 1955.

Richard M. Billings

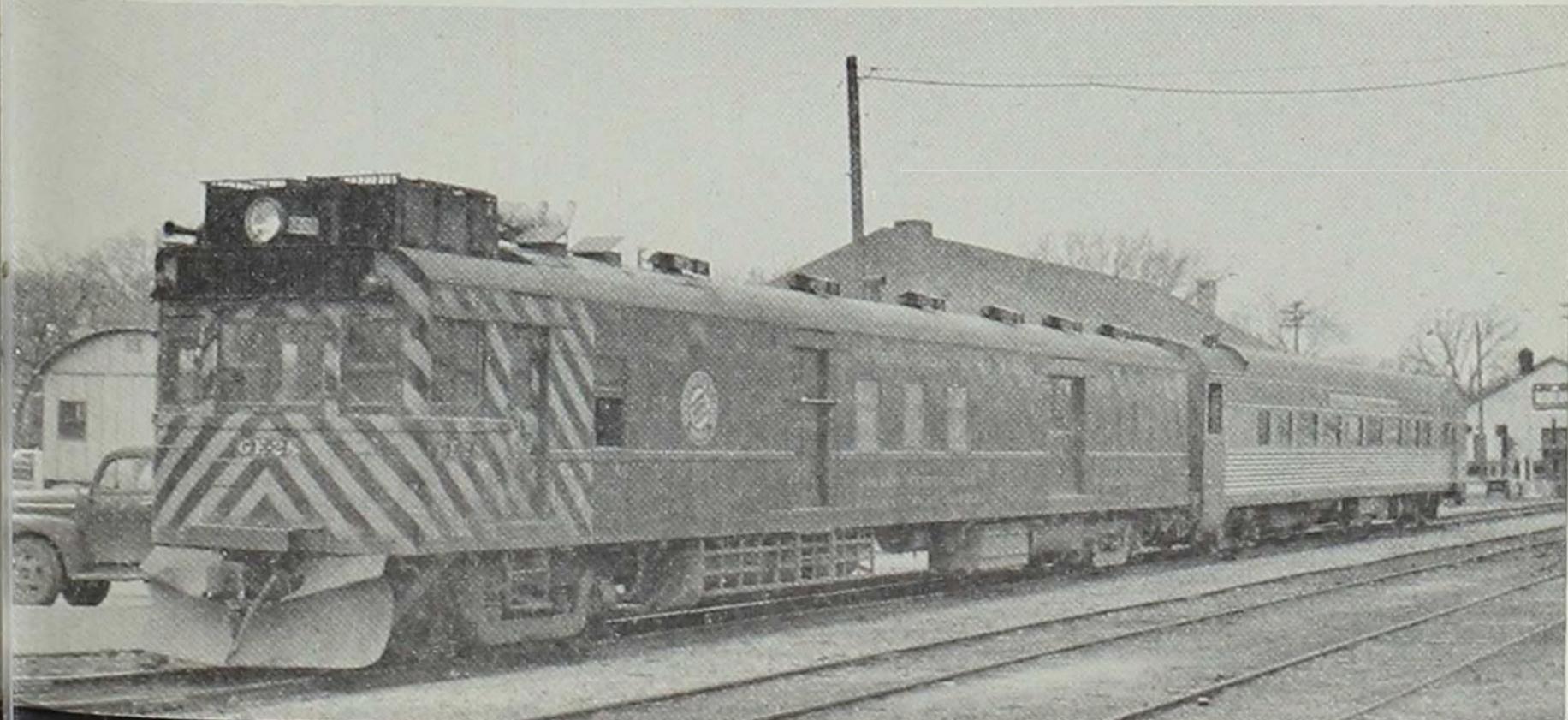


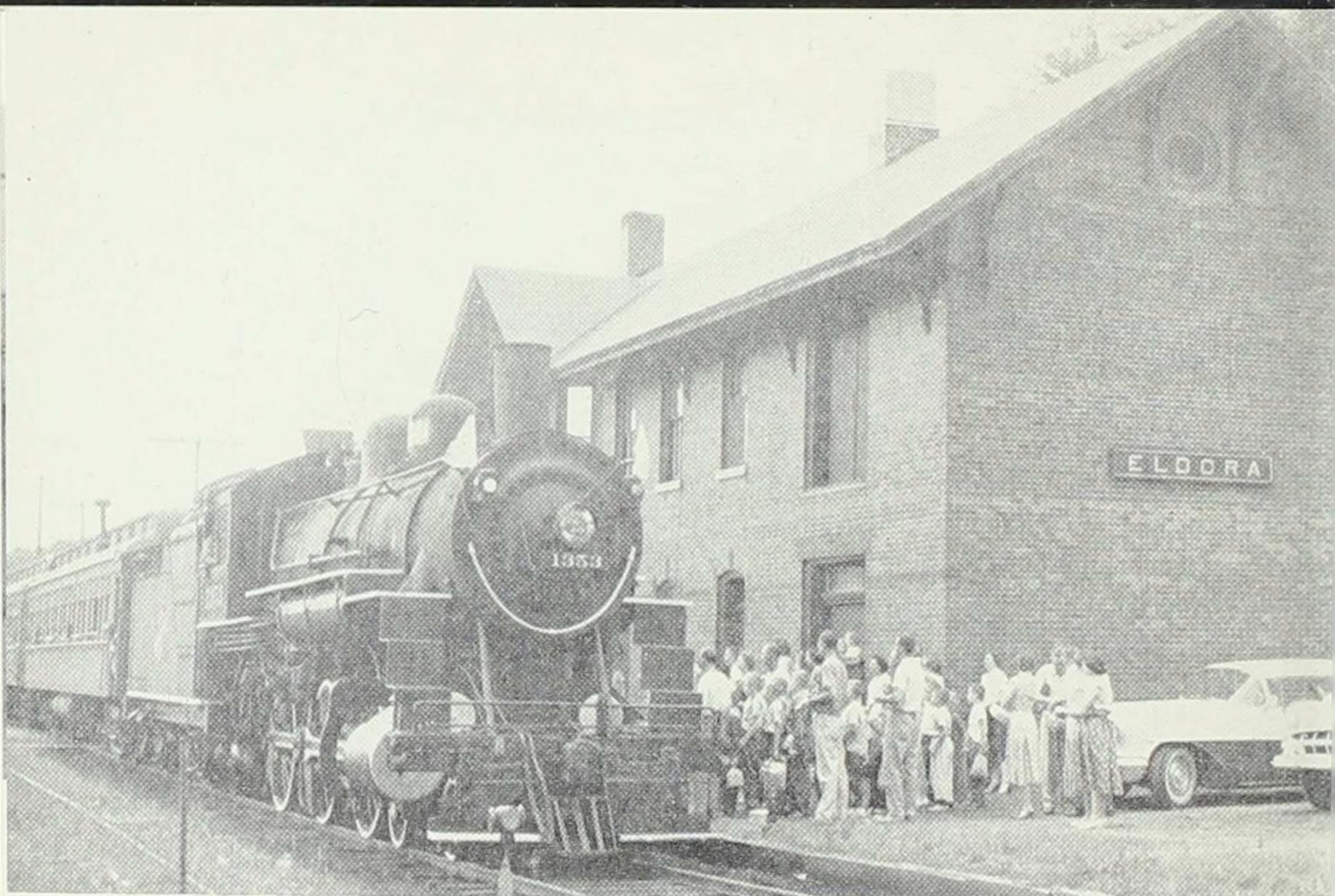
Middle—NRHS special at Hope Junction on the Fort Dodge, Des Moines & Southern Railway, July, 1953.

Wilson B. Lemberger

Bottom—M&StL rail-motor-car at Mason City used on "Iowa Circle Tour" over that line and the Illinois Central, March, 1954.

Wilson B. Lemberger





Wilson B. Lemberger

Crowd greeting special at Eldora in June, 1955. This Tama-Alden trip sponsored by the NRHS with the State Historical Society of Iowa cooperating, was over the Chicago & North Western. It was under the direction of Basil W. Koob.

"Railfan" special on Waterloo, Cedar Falls & Northern at milepost 25.8 in July, 1954. Many Iowa Chapter, NRHS officials are shown.

James J. Kreuzberger



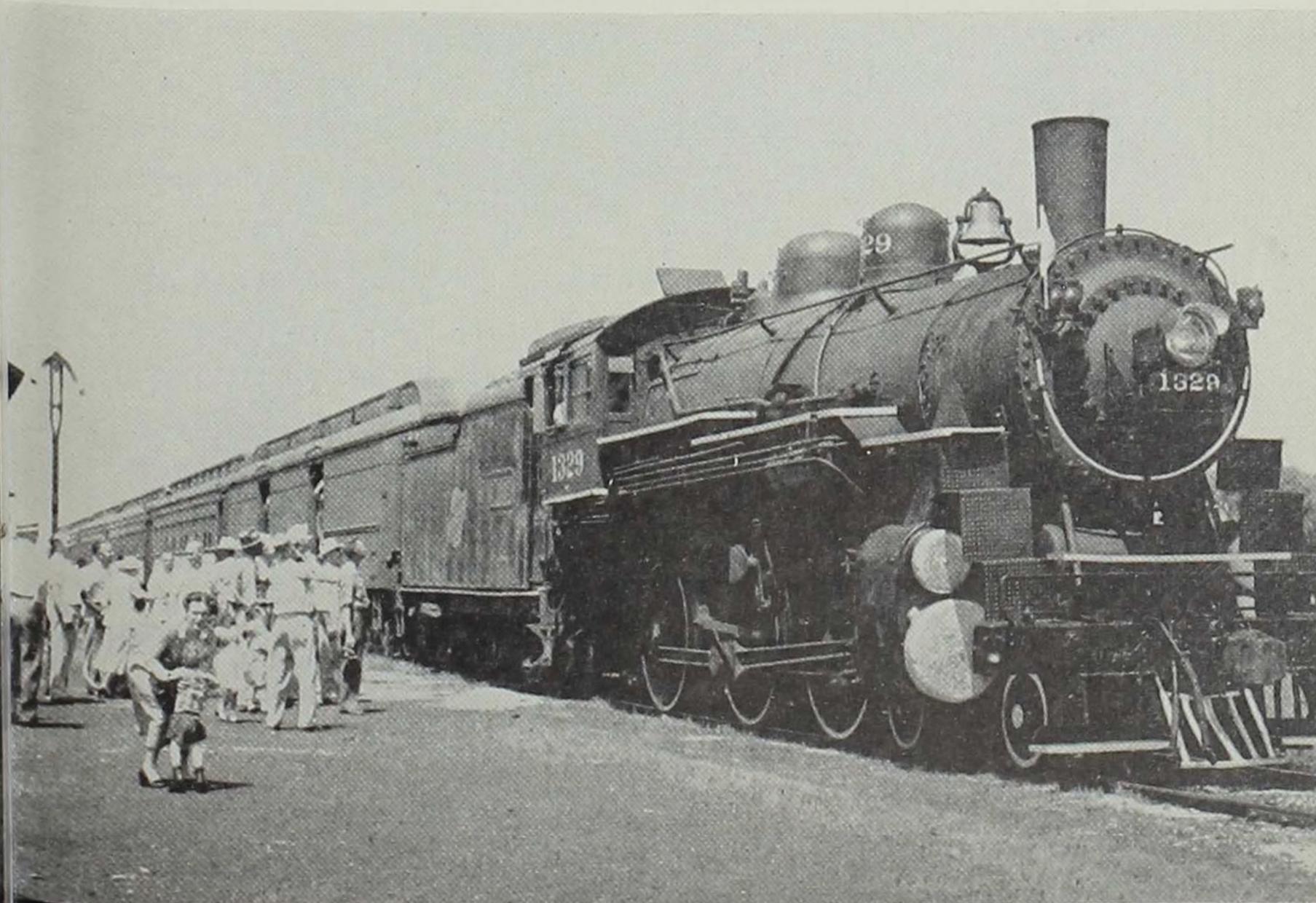


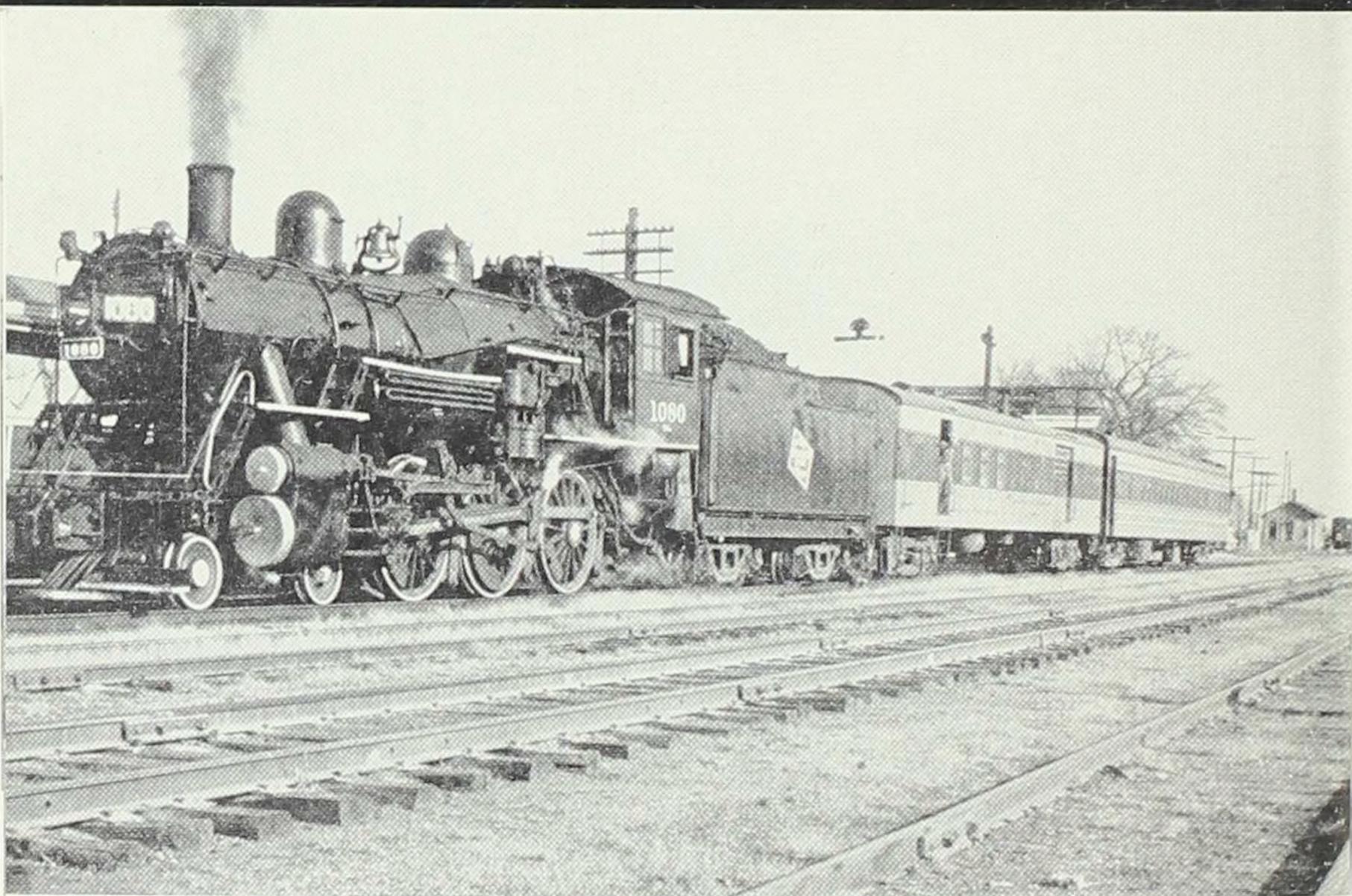
Wilson B. Lemberger

The Fort Dodge Line's NRHS special crossing High Bridge north of Boone, July, 1953.

NRHS excursion of June 27, 1954, at Hubbard. About 200 people were on this C&NW train ride, from Webster City to Alden, in charge of Dr. Robert B. May.

Basil W. Koob



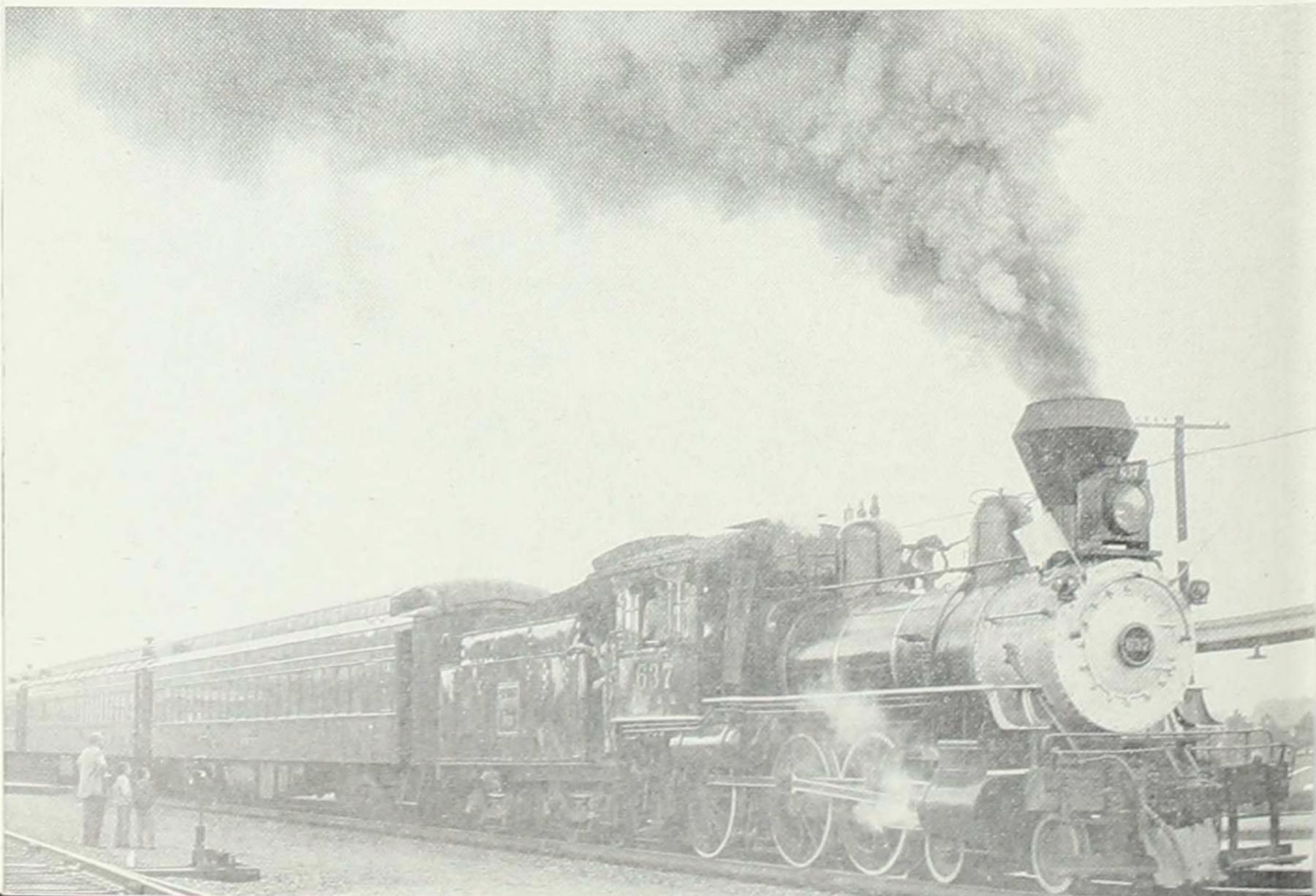


Richard M. Billings

Shown at Calmar is the Milwaukee Road train on NRHS trip November 7, 1953. The white trim on wheels and cylinders was painted by "fans" to accentuate the lines of the engine for photographers.

Historic diamond-stacked, Ten-Wheeler at Ottumwa ready to leave for Indianola. The trip was jointly sponsored by the State Historical Society of Iowa and the National Railway Historical Society over the Burlington in October, 1956.

Elmer R. Carr



him, but they knew he had a secretary, Kathryn Nichols, and her services would be very valuable to the Chapter. Mrs. Nichols did fine work, too, although she almost quit when she had to learn how to spell Kreuzberger, Lehnhardt, Lemberger, and Vander Maas, all in one day. As for Dr. May, he gave the Chapter direction, stability, and unity — to say nothing of long hours of arduous work.

To offset organizational problems posed by scattered membership, small groups met informally. They went on short train trips, trolley rides, or just to visit yards or terminals. But the lodestone of Iowa members was the well-planned excursion, generally open to the public. Frequently a Chapter meeting would coincide with a trip, and both would be held on the same weekend.

One such meeting will be long remembered. It was the get-together of the Iowa, Kansas City, and Topeka chapters of the NRHS in Boone, July 25, 1953. Arthur P. Wheelock, president of the Fort Dodge, Des Moines & Southern, invited the group to meet in his business car. The car was spotted in back of the Boone interurban station especially for the "convention." Under normal circumstances this would have made an admirable place for a meeting. But with three chapters convening, the plan had to be given up, for the car was much too small. Mr. Wheelock had his guests move into the railroad's general offices

nearby. Here the room was ample — and the heat intolerable.

Once again Wheelock came to the rescue. He instructed the shopmen to round up all the chairs they could find and put them on one side of the main-line tracks. They put a screen on the opposite side of the tracks for showing slides and motion pictures. The group then continued its program out in the open under the stars. Near midnight President Wheelock reluctantly brought the meeting to a close. He told the members they were virtually tying up his railroad!

With a wave of his hand he pointed to the bright rays of a headlight, not 200 feet away. It was the night freight from Des Moines groaning to a halt. How the motorman of the evening "hot-shot" had "sneaked up" without anyone's hearing the traction motors or observing the beam of light was a mystery to all.

In 1954 differences in policy led to a new slate of officers. Dr. May, nevertheless, continued in his post, whereas the presidency was turned over to Edward P. Wilkommen of Davenport, and the role of vice-president to H. E. Reisner of Webster City. Basil W. Koob, one of the charter members, took on the job of editing *The Switch Lamp*.

The policy of vigorous solicitation for members was continued, along with emphasis on numerous excursions. The chapter kept growing, and in December, 1955, it had seventy-eight members.

About one-third of the members came from outside Iowa. They were recruited largely from passengers on widely-publicized fan trips.

In almost every instance the officers of the Chapter worked diligently to keep the organization running smoothly and to promote weekend trips. Yet the very nature of the Iowa Chapter presaged frequent turnover in management. The majority of members came from the smaller cities and represented their communities singly. During the earlier years there were, curiously enough, no members from Council Bluffs or Sioux City and only two from Des Moines. As a result of this diffusion, officers had to drive sometimes up to 300 miles in order to attend a meeting or ride a chartered train. This meant long and uncertain hours, many of which were on the road. It is little wonder new names were frequently seen on the Chapter letterheads.

It is literally true that officers were "railroaded" in or out of their positions. To get a quorum, business meetings were often held on a train or trolley or in stations wherever a trip was scheduled. This was about the only time a majority was present, and it called for a meeting on the spot. During the next two years the procession of officers continued. Nineteen fifty-five saw the veteran trip-planner Wilson B. Lemberger, president, with Wilfred E. Tlusty of Cedar Rapids, vice-president, and Edward P. Wilkommen

changing over to the post of secretary-treasurer. The following year Fritz Britt of Renwick filled the top office, Basil Koob served as vice-president, and Elmer R. Carr of Ottumwa held the busy post of secretary-treasurer.

James S. Levis of Waterloo, was elected president in 1957. Koob and Carr held their same positions. Koob later resigned from the vice-presidency, and his place was filled by Richard M. Billings of Cedar Rapids. As of midsummer, 1959, the above men held office.

Under the editorship of Basil Koob, *The Switch Lamp* very adequately covered the Iowa railroad scene. Indeed, the periodical gives a graphic picture of the changes in Hawkeye transportation. The disappearance of the steam locomotive and of the trolley, the virtual elimination of the branch line passenger local along with the closing of many small depots, is recorded. Being a retired telegrapher and having worked at many country stations in Iowa for the Milwaukee Road, Chicago & North Western, and Minneapolis & St. Louis, Koob writes as an experienced railroader. At the same time he has the zeal of a "fan" and the painstaking research methods of a historian.

When Koob retired from his two-year service as editor early in 1956, the editorship was briefly filled by Richard Billings. Due to the latter's being called into the armed forces, Edward Meyers then very creditably filled the position.

In June, 1958, James C. McMeekin of Wheatland took over the work as editor. He printed the organ in offset in an illustrated magazine-style format. The enlarged publication was titled *Midland Railfans News — The Switch Lamp*. This arrangement proved too costly, and the periodical returned to its former style in May, 1959. Koob again became editor.

At this point one may ask: What makes a railroad historian or a "railfan?" The answer, of course, is a love of railroads. Apart from that, further generalizations seem futile. Take the matter of vocation. Fritz Britt is a banker; Elmer Carris, captain of a fire department; Donald Hof-sommer is a college student; James Kreuzberger is an auto supply buyer; Wilson Lemberger operates his own lumber yard; James Levis is a tractor-plant employee; Dr. Robert May is a psychiatrist; Edward Meyers is a postman; George Niles is owner-manager of a toy store; Wilfred Tlusty is a metalworker; Elmer Reisner manages a municipal power plant; and Edward Wilkommen is a mining engineer, who is now in Venezuela. Aside from their interest in railroading, the only thing they have in common is that they are all of widely *different* callings.

Like all historical societies the Iowa Chapter has had differences of opinion. One of the most controversial issues is the relationship between the parent organization and the Chapter. Some mem-

bers believe a separate local society should be formed; others are of the opinion that affiliation with the parent society adds prestige and stability.

The wonder is that such a scattered chapter can hold together at all. Most chapters of railroad historical organizations are centered in population centers such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, or in smaller cities like Minneapolis or Kansas City. But in Iowa the situation is just the reverse. The major Hawkeye cities scarcely account for any members, whereas the smaller widely-scattered communities provide the backbone of the Chapter. Finally, those who know the Iowa group are unanimous in their appraisal: they are among the friendliest, most wholesome and dedicated railroad historians and "fans" to be found anywhere. Perhaps that is the answer.

FRANK P. DONOVAN, JR.