

My Milwaukee

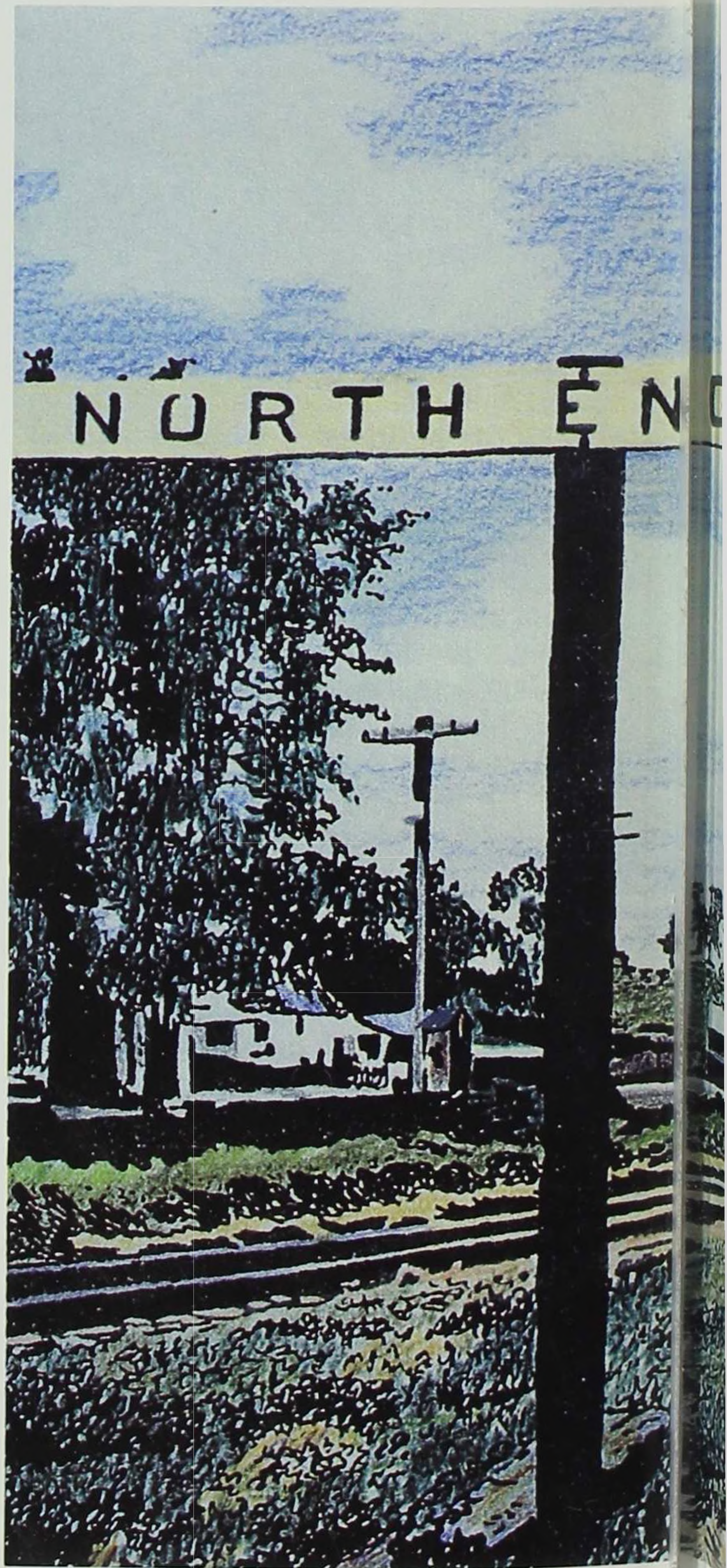
by Evan Garrett

THE OCCASION for these musings was the absorption, in January 1986, of the Milwaukee Road into the Soo Line Railroad. The tracks of the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad once criss-crossed eastern Iowa and much of the Midwest and even stretched a long tentacle, the "Pacific Extension," to the shores of Puget Sound. Changes in America's economy and particularly the advent of the automobile and paved roads, however, reduced the need for many of these rail routes. The Milwaukee Road, in common with many other companies, sought survival through abandonment of unprofitable lines and finally merger, which cost the railroad its corporate identity.

Back in the time of my youth, the booming years following the Second World War, the C.M.St.P.&P. played a profound role in nurturing my awareness and love of the world of railroading. My memories took shape in and about the small southeastern Iowa prairie town of North English, on the line from Cedar Rapids to Ottumwa. One hundred years ago this trackage provided the Milwaukee Road's initial link to Kansas City, but the indirect routing — in addition to frequent flooding, because of the many watercourses along which it was built — had long since relegated the line to a secondary status.

My thoughts reach back to summer afternoons at my grandmother's house, atop Cherokee Hill and overlooking the draw in which the railroad yard lay and, beyond that, the rest of the town. The wail of a southbound freight train's whistle would bring me racing break-neck to the foot of a giant elm, from whose vantage I drank in the sight of a venerable Mikado (a steam locomotive designed for freight service) drifting down into town with a mixed score of cars. More often than not, the crew would tie up on the long passing siding in front of the fading gray depot, then walk up the

Garrett drew these scenes from his 1977 photos.



ENGLISH



BOTH ILLUSTRATIONS COURTESY THE AUTHOR

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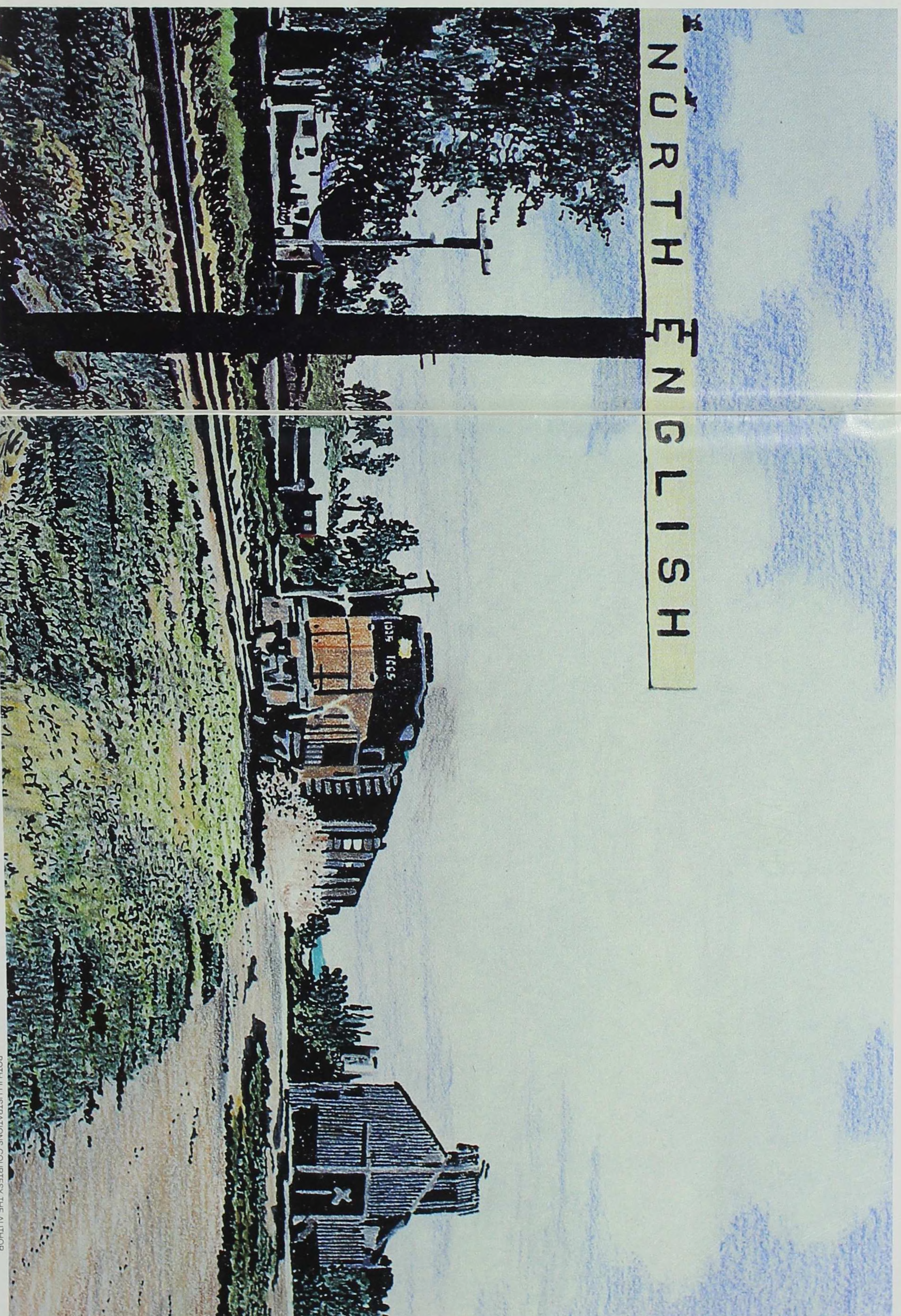
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hill on Main Street to Coffman's Cafe for "beans." There were on occasion as many as three trains in town at once, a circumstance for which many a lonely railfan today might gladly sacrifice his eye teeth.

My grandfather had begun his career as a section foreman for the Milwaukee at Amana. By the time I made my appearance in his life, he had settled down to a coal dealership in North English (people still bought that commodity by the truckload for home-heating purposes) but he never forgot his connection with the railroad or his pride in the Milwaukee. Colorful calendars from the company graced his office walls, together with some from the Louisville & Nashville, which originated his consignments of Kentucky coal. Through his continued acquaintance with the railroaders on the division, I felt a certain affinity for the gentlemen in their white caps and striped overalls who indulged my hours of watching from the station platform as they shunted box cars and hoppers on the siding and team track.

My own bedroom window faced out over the rolling southern Iowa hills to where the track traversed the English River valley about one and a half miles distant. Many a night I lay with my ear pressed to the screen to hear a north-bound train call for the crossing at Cuba, then square its shoulders and gather its breath for the assault on the long grade up out of the valley and over the hill into North English. My father recounted that on the curve at the foot of that grade, back before the First World War, a tank car had exploded and sent half of the tank slicing off into the adjoining woods. Years later, squirrel hunters employed the unrecovered debris as a shelter against bitter winter winds.

From the time that the railroads emerged as this country's first self-conscious "great industry," they left their physical mark upon the land. Even now, as farmers' plows, highway realignments, and the inexorable march of nature strive to eradicate the right-of-way from which the last rails were removed in 1982, there are traces of the Milwaukee's presence. When the road stretched across the rolling loam hills of Iowa and Keokuk counties in the 1880s, the builders found good ballast in short supply. Consequently, the company inaugu-

Locomotive 1005 heads under the overpass bridge.

rated an operation to dig gumbo clay from the English River bottomland at Cuba and fire it into a brick-like consistency. A century later the kilns and cookhouse, station and water tank have all long since vanished, but Cuba may still be identified by three quarter-mile-long "pits." At one time, the property owner pridefully mowed the grassy banks and stocked the collected waters with bullheads and bluegills. Shady cottonwoods no longer overhang the pits, whose waters now are probably too silted and shallow to support fish anymore.

I think I first apprehended the significance of change when, about the time I was expected to forsake grammar school for the challenges of high school, suddenly the familiar, if somewhat mournful moan of Milwaukee steam whistles ceased to echo up out of the valley, displaced by the strident blat of what I knew to be diesels. For the next two weeks, before I caught the opportunity to look over the newcomers, my curiosity and imagination conjured images inspired by my grandfather's calendars, of chrome-accented streamliners leading the Olympian Hiawatha. What disappointment I felt the day I rode down Main Street to spy an orange-and-black hood unit, the first of what would be many of these more prosaic "road-switchers" in my train-watching future!

While I matured and went on to a larger world, the horizons of the railroad began to shrink. The only passenger service I remember, a daily gas-electric "doodle-bug," had been withdrawn before the advent of the diesels. The depot itself disappeared in a 1963 fire from an explosion at a nearby bulk oil plant. Considering the decline in business already evident by that time, the railroad chose not to rebuild but to let the last agent, Carl Zimmerman, conduct his business from the seat of a pickup truck. Service frequency diminished and eventually, with no remaining traffic source to detain a train from passing straight through town, all tracks but the main line were removed. Ranks of cornpickers and fertilizer wagons began to encroach upon the weedy verge, spilling over from trackside agribusiness firms.

In May 1977, I returned to Iowa for a family visit. The "Muscatine-Montezuma" line of the Rock Island (which had performed the rest of

my initiation into trainwatching) had dissolved during my absence, and I wanted to make certain that I saw "my" Milwaukee before it, too, abandoned me. I was fortunate to choose a sunny, warm Thursday morning, the kind of spring day when you can smell the freshness of the grass and the rich aroma of recently plowed soil.

I first caught sight of the train as it leaned into the wide bend at Webster around 10:30 A.M. On the point ran diesel locomotive 1005, a model GP30, long hood forward, with four box cars bound from Ottumwa to Amana and the requisite orange Milwaukee-built caboose. After a curt toot on the airhorns for the sole grade crossing in the small town, this shadow of what I had once known rolled past the Warder & Lee elevators. Iowa's farmlands sometimes produce corn in such quantity that these grain bins will not hold it all; I have seen corn piled in the center of the street, fifteen feet high and a block long. But now the corn leaves Webster in trucks, not Milwaukee box cars or covered hoppers, and 1005 had no reason to slacken her pace.

This might be my last opportunity to follow a train on this line (as it proved to be), so I jumped into my station wagon and the chase was on. State Highway 149 took a tack away from the rail line, rejoining only about a mile from North English, but the train's leisurely progress allowed me to get ahead. Near South English, in line with my bedroom window, I slowed to hear the whistle for Cuba — a moment from my childhood, never to be repeated. Then, I sped on to the "overhead bridge."

There was nothing particularly outstanding about this structure: it was just a two-lane highway bridge of cast concrete that was a bit too narrow and had to be approached on an abominably tight S-curve. But in a land devoted to the monotonous regularity of a road describing each and every section line on the map, such an aberration becomes a local institution. The bridge provided for me a splendid vantage point from which to observe 1005 surmounting the grade up from the river valley. Her black-and-orange livery displayed a liberal dusting of limestone from the occasional application of fresh ballast along the line (no gumbo or cin-

ders in 1977). As a blue haze shot up from the turbo exhaust on the far side of the bridge, my mind sprang back momentarily to a day thirty years ago when my mother drove across the bridge just as a very hard-working and somewhat ill-fired Mikado passed below, engulfing our car in a cloud of black smoke and soot.

The overhead bridge marked the summit of the grade up from the English River; from there, it was downhill for a mile into North English. As the train would not be slowing for the town — let alone stopping — I dared not waste any time getting down to the former station site, now indicated only by a diminutive signboard. The engineer was already blasting for the crossing as I knelt to frame the train beside that post in my camera's viewfinder. The flashing of a shutter can do so much to capture a fragment of history or even to evoke memories of a whole way of life. I stood again and turned to watch as 1005 and her train receded to the east, past the sumac that reclaimed the acre my grandfather has used as a coal yard, and out of sight up the draw.

I was aware at the time of the historical potential of the image I had just recorded. That is the reason I had gone to chase the Milwaukee that morning. But I do not think I will ever be comfortable with the rate at which the changes occur. By 1982 every aspect of the railroad had vanished: the train, the track, the signboard, the crossbucks, even Home Lumber Company's decrepit trackside elevator. A restructuring Milwaukee Road abandoned the trackage south of Amana to Ottumwa in 1980, retired its GP30 diesels, and in 1985, the company itself merged into the Soo Line. In 1987 the Highway Department eliminated the overhead bridge and its S-curve. Like this particular railroad line, there is no reason for them any longer.

On the other hand, our experiences are a part of our reality. My memories of the Milwaukee during my childhood — and of the last brief but fond acquaintance — will be with me forever. I come from a people who find it perfectly natural to give such directions as: "Go down to the corner and turn right where the seed house used to be." The "seed house" was demolished thirty years ago, but we still know where to turn. □