Iowa's Railroad Stations: A Pictorial Essay

by

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For decades the railroad station served as a focal point in Iowa town life. Whether through a sleepy hamlet or a bustling metropolitan center, the daily arrival and departure of passenger trains were important local events. "The depot," wrote an Iowa real-estate man in 1903, "is always a beehive of activity. 'Train-time' is an important event; passengers, freight, express and mail flow in great quantities. The hustle-bustle, which is America, can be found there. . . ."

Usually the station was located near the center of town. A. B. Stickney, the flamboyant and iconoclastic builder of the Chicago Great Western Railway, once told fellow railroad executives: "The depot should be built in as close to the business center of the city as possible. . . . That way the public will remember you." In those towns founded by the railroad companies themselves—and there were many in Iowa—the depot typically appeared at one end of main street. In older communities, where the town had been built before the coming of the rails, the station might be found near the outskirts of town. In virtually all cases, however, it was linked to the central business district by brick or macadamized streets, possibly the only improved thoroughfares in the town.

By the first decade of the twentieth century Iowans could boast of superb railroad service, although many citizens blasted high rates and demanded stiff state and national regulation of the carriers. Iowa had nearly a dozen large steam roads and numerous shortlines which laced the Hawkeye state with more than 10,000 miles of track. One source noted that no point in Iowa was more than twelve miles from a steam rail line and a number of communities enjoyed multiple company service. By then, the state had nearly 500 miles of electric interurban tracks, making this the greatest mileage in any state west of the Mississippi River except for Texas and California. Naturally, depots were plentiful in Iowa. According to the "Index of Railway Stations," published in the January 1911 issue of *The Official Guide of the Railways*, the state had 1882 individual depot structures.

Today, not only has the passenger train become virtually extinct in Iowa, but hundreds of miles of track have been retired, with plans for massive abandon-

Little has been written about the rural railroad station. Larger stations, however, are treated in John Droege, *Passenger Terminals and Trains* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1916) and Carroll L. V. Meeks, *The Railroad Station: An Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956). Two useful journal articles are: Harold D. Eberlein, "Recent Railway Stations in American Cities," *The Architectural Record* XXXVI (August 1914), 99-122 and J. H. Phillips "The Evolution of the Suburban Station," *ibid.*, 123-128. Readers might also want to examine Edwin P. Alexander's *Down at the Depot: American Railroad Stations from 1831 to 1920* (New York: Bramhall House, 1970).

ments during the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, hundreds of railroad stations have been closed in recent years, many razed, still more left idly standing and a few converted to other uses, ranging from museums to corncribs.

While Iowa's railroad stations may be viewed as symbols of a decaying industry and a by-gone era, many that remain have historical and architectural importance. The urban union stations, frequently massive brick structures with lofty towers, reflect the civic pride and boosterism that have been so much a part of America's past. Rural stations, usually of simple design, at times mirror this same spirit. History was made at Iowa depots, whether it was a politician's "whistle-stop" speech or the joyous return of veterans from the Great War.

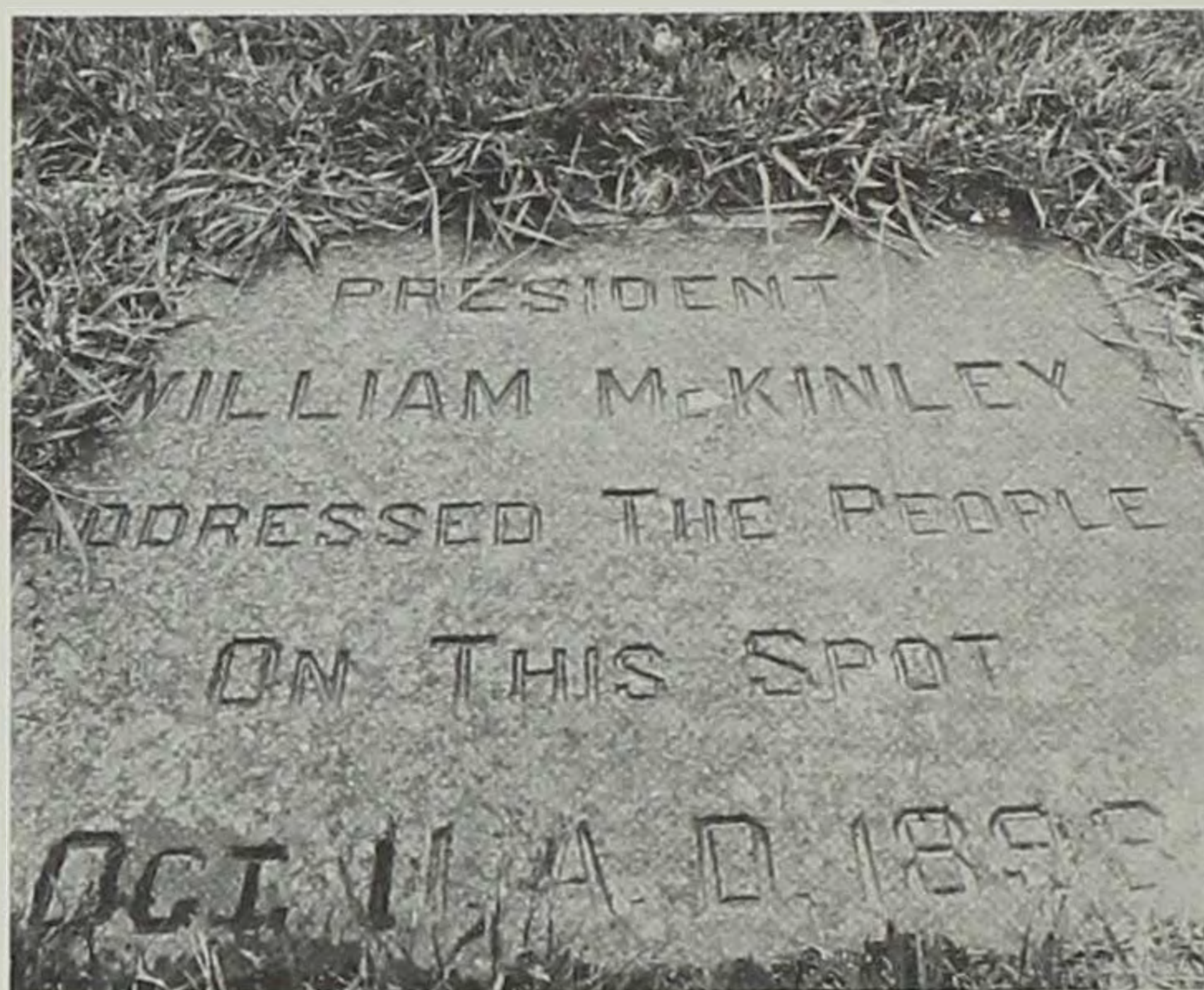
Iowa's railroad stations commonly reflect popular tastes in building styles and thus are significant architecturally. The large stations of the 1880s and 1890s, like those for example in Cedar Rapids, Dubuque, and Burlington, were huge monuments to the transportation boom. Even in smaller communities, stations constructed during the latter half of the nineteenth century frequently contained a

Sunset and shining rails at Nevada, Iowa. (John Schultz photo)

large amount of gingerbread, elaborate carriage canopies, and spacious freight and public waiting areas. More recent depots, of course, reflect modern tastes in architecture. For instance, stations in Ottumwa (Burlington Northern), Des Moines (former Chicago Great Western) and Perry (Milwaukee Road) complement other modern, local buildings.

Although Carroll L. V. Meeks, one of the nation's foremost students of railroad architecture, suggests that most pre-modern stations can be classified architecturally as "picturesque eletic," a more generally meaningful categorization of Iowa station styles can be developed. Virtually all stations that survive today are either "Late Victorian," 1880-1910; "Early Modern," 1910-1930; or "Modern," since 1930. The most dramatic change in Iowa station architecture occurred shortly after the turn of the century when "Late Victorian" styles gave way to the "Early Modern." At this time local architectural firms and the companies themselves accepted the point of view advocated by railroad official John A. Droege and others who stressed the need to build structures for efficiency and passenger comfort rather than constructing "those painfully elaborate affairs which run more to striking architectural beauty than to utility."

A major exception to the notion that the "Early Modern" stations were first built in Iowa about 1910 were standardized rural depots which appeared earlier. With the rapid rise of "standardization" in American life during the 1890s, several railroads built a majority of their smaller depots to a common, highly functional design. Leaders of the standardized station



A commemorative marker at Boone, near the location of a now destroyed C&NW station. (John Schultz photo)

in the Hawkeye state were the Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern (a Rock Island predecessor company), the Toledo and Northwestern (a Chicago and North Western forerunner), and the Minneapolis and St. Louis (now also a part of the North Western). In 1960, thirty-nine depots like the Rock Island station at Wellsburg could still be found in Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota, the states served by the BCR&N. The T&NW's stations were usually similar to the one at Sioux Rapids. Also in 1960, of the thirty-six stations still standing along the old T&NW (lines from Tama to Hawarden, Eagle Grove to Elmore and Eldora Junction to Alden, and Jewell to Wall Lake), twenty-two were virtually identical. Many M&StL small town stations were of a standard design, particularly those from Des Moines to Winthrop, Minnesota. As one railroad spokesman noted shortly before World War I, "Some roads, often when constructing new lines, have had their engineering departments design a cheap, wooden standard station. If business justifies, they

improve it." County-seat depots in Iowa, however, were less likely to be standardized than their rural counterparts.

While architectural styles changed over the decades, interior station floor plans remained similar. Urban stations and terminals had complex floor layouts, yet all had specially designed waiting rooms, express and baggage facilities, and ticket and office spaces. In larger communities freight facilities were often housed in a separate building. Smaller stations typically had three distinct sections: a waiting room, a center agent's office, and a freight-baggage-express area. But variations occurred. Although Iowa did not have "Jim Crow" waiting rooms to segregate the races, some stations, particularly in the southern Iowa coalfields, separated the sexes. For example, Albia's union depot, constructed by the Iowa Central Railroad in 1904, contained a commodious waiting area for women and children, but a Spartan-like room for men, most of whom traveled from Albia to work in the nearby Hocking mines. These facilities were separate but not equal.

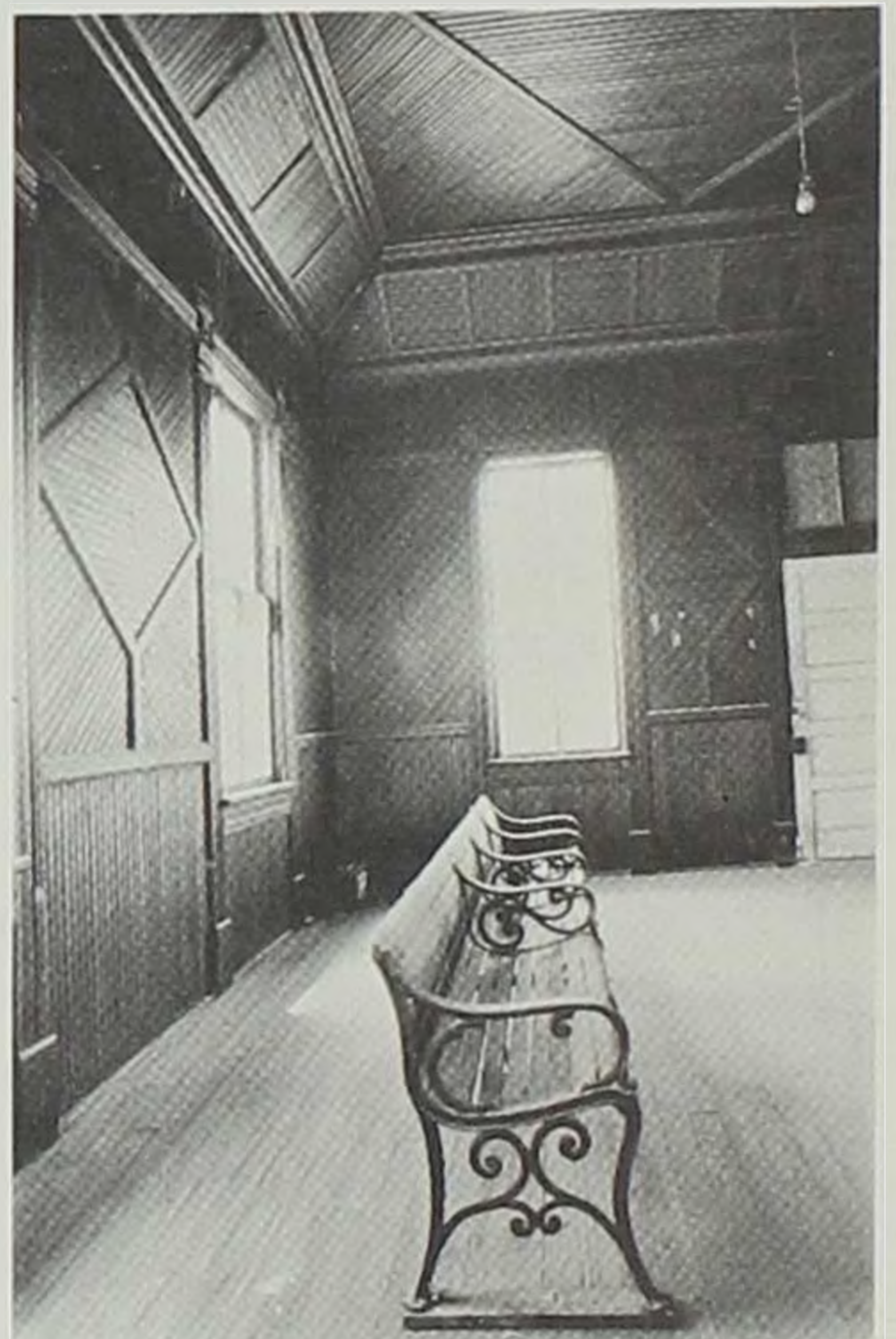
From the nineteenth century to the present, two-story depot structures have been fairly common throughout Iowa. Large urban stations have almost always been multiple-story affairs. Such buildings needed to provide adequate space for passengers, baggagemen, and express agents and for office workers. Frequently, these stations served as division points for operating personnel and therefore the divisional superintendent, dispatchers, and other white-collar workers needed additional room. Commonly, these stations contained restaurant facilities for the convenience of the traveling public and railroad employees.

Rural stations might also be two stories. The upper floor, however, contained living space for the agent and his family rather than offices. Certain Iowa railroads, particularly the Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern and the Milwaukee Road, used the two-story country station extensively. These buildings provided needed housing for agents in communities where suitable living accommodations might be scarce or expensive. With an agent living over his place of work the company could expect him to be on call twenty-four hours a day. And having occupied stations, carriers could expect significantly lower fire-insurance rates.

From the beginning of their construction, Iowa's railroad stations have been richly varied in appearance. They have ranged from the small Kelly-green depots of the M&StL to the large, brick, county-seat stations of the Burlington line. Whatever their appearance, they were, for generations, an important part of Iowa's everyday life. □

The following illustrations show a variety of Iowa railroad stations, past and present. Special photography has been provided by John Schultz, Indianola, Iowa.

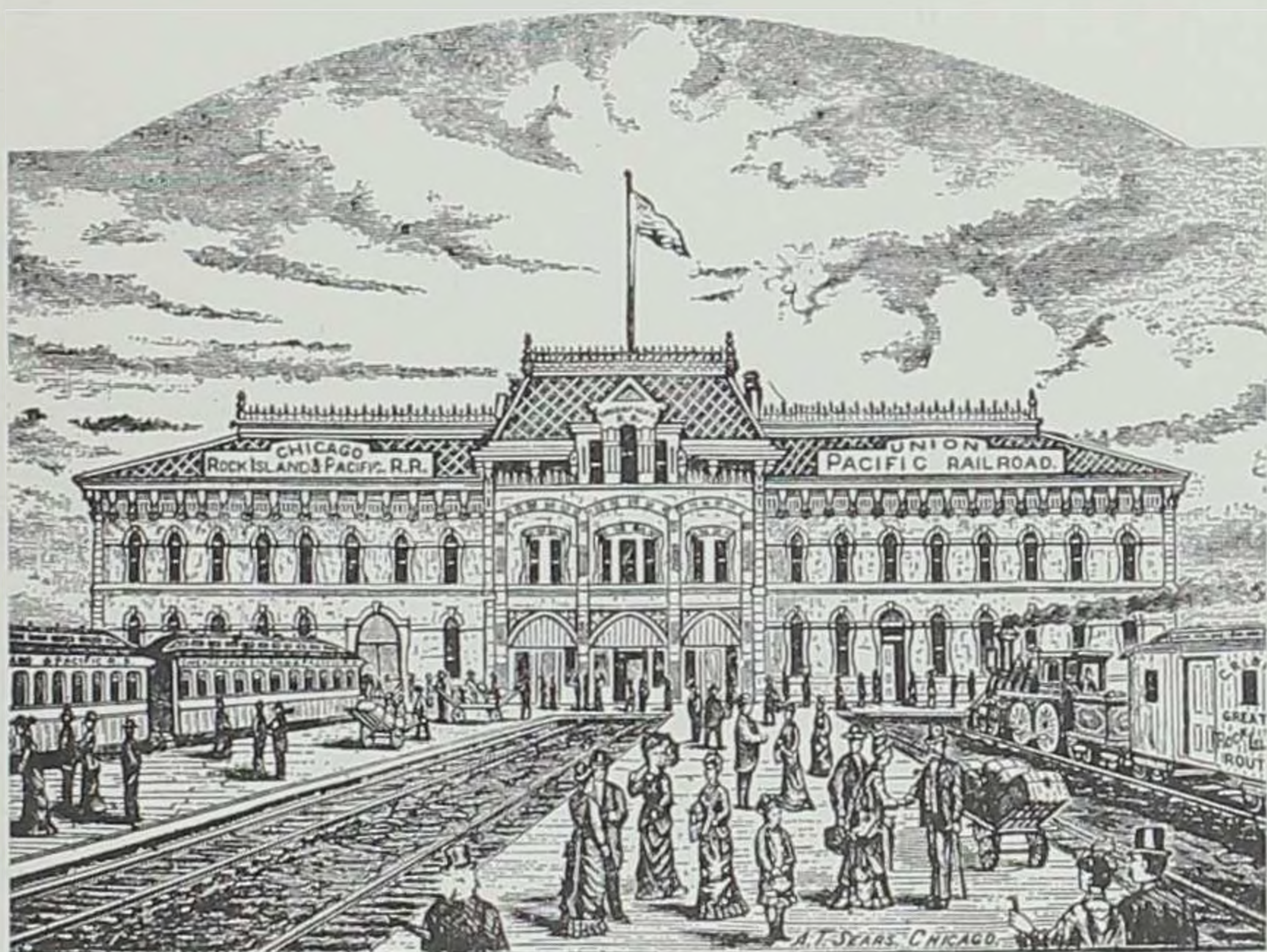
LATE VICTORIAN



The Moravia, Iowa station (above and right) is a fine example of rural late Victorian station architecture. It was built by the Wabash, St. Louis & Pacific (later Wabash, now Norfolk & Western) around 1882. The beautiful wooden interior is of oak. (John Schultz photo)

The ornate interior of the Creston depot (see caption p. 1). (John Schultz photo)

A 1910 postcard view of the Shenandoah, Iowa station built around 1879 by the Council Bluffs & St. Louis Railway. This was for years the busiest station, except for Omaha, on the line.

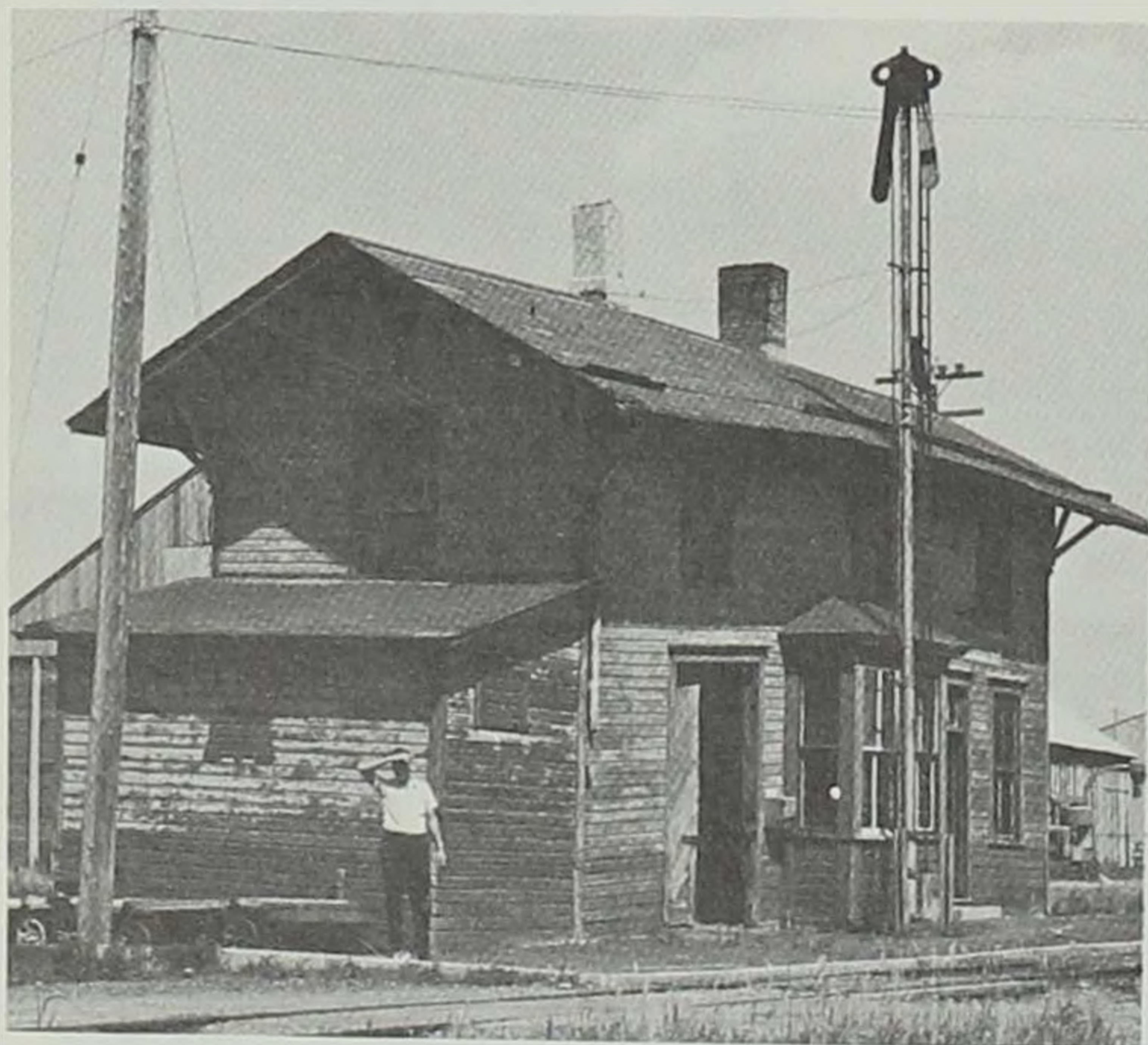


The union station in Council Bluffs, Iowa, built around 1870 and shown here in an 1886 engraving. The style is unusual for Iowa urban stations and resembles many Eastern stations of the period.

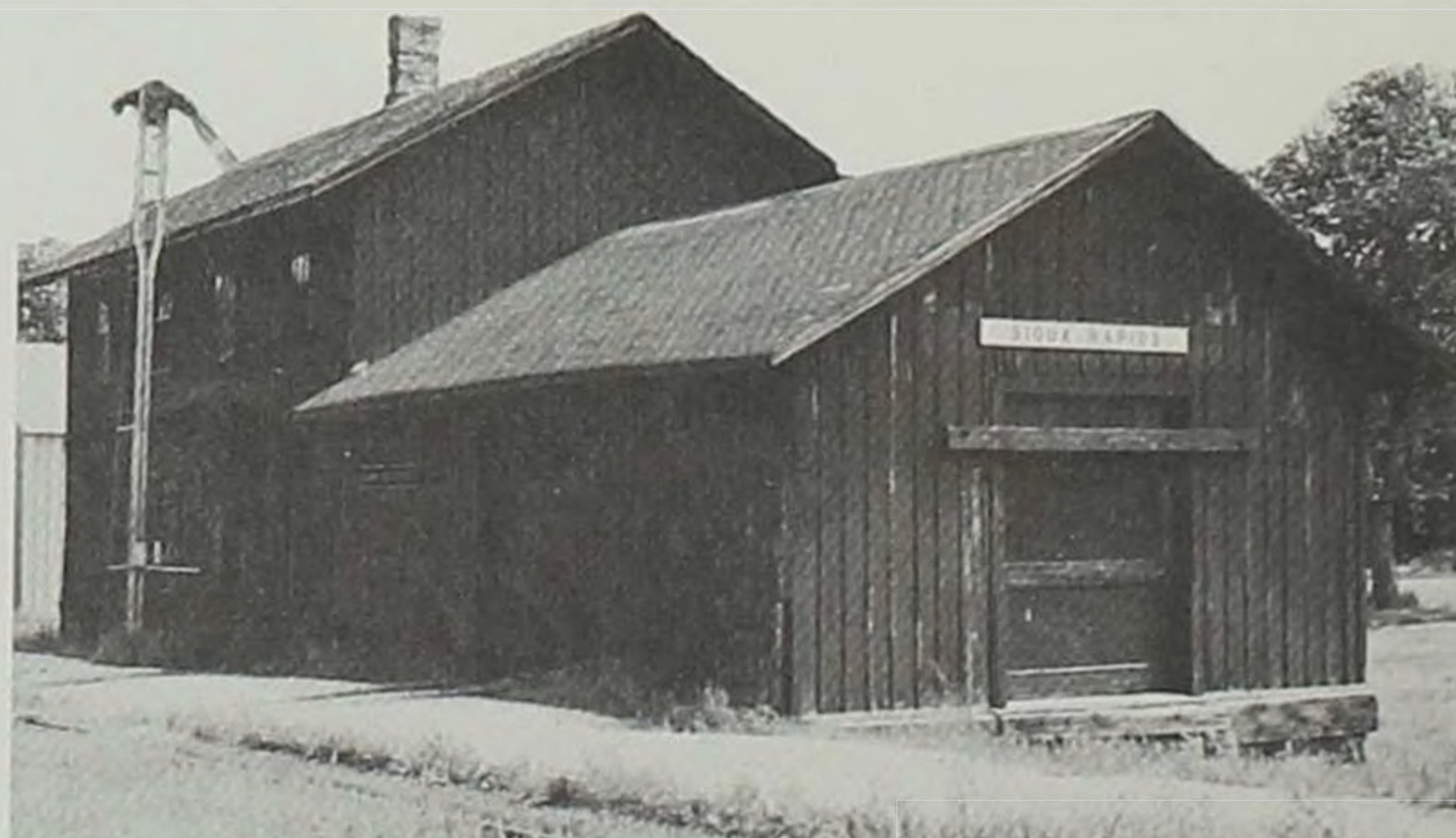
The Illinois Central built this large brick station in Dubuque in 1887. The building mesaured 290 feet long by 50 feet wide and was modernized by the railroad during World War II. The decorative tower reflects Eastern styles.

EARLY MODERN

The Dike, Iowa station, built in 1900 by the Iowa, Minnesota & Northwestern Railway (a C&NW affiliated company), is of a standard design found on various Northwestern lines in Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota. This early twentieth-century post-card view shows local produce ready for loading on a passenger train.



This classic Rock Island station, located in Wellsburg, Iowa on the Vinton-Estherville branch, was built around 1890 and is similar in design to many other Milwaukee and Soo stations in the upper Middle-west. (Charles Bohi photo)



The Sioux Rapids station on the Toledo & Northwestern (now C&NW) dates from the mid-1880s. Virtually all T&NW stations were of this style and usually painted red. (Charles Bohi photo)

A corner of the remaining portion of the Des Moines union station shows the 1898 cornerstone. This large, urban station was owned jointly by the Wabash and Milwaukee. In addition, the Burlington and Great Western railroads also used the depot. In 1905, more than fifty trains a day used the station. Since World War II, about two-thirds of the building has been razed. The remaining section is now occupied by the Norfolk and Western (ex-Wabash) and Milwaukee roads and is also the headquarters of the Des Moines Union Railway. (John Schultz photo)

Dating from 1905, the Monticello, Iowa station is of a design often used for county-seat communities. Situated at the junction of two Milwaukee Road branches, the structure has a typical carriage canopy.

Dating from 1903, the Ft. Dodge station of the Chicago Great Western is a very rare design, perhaps unique. The photo dates from the same year, just after the building was completed as part of the last major railroad building project in the Hawkeye state.

The Osceola, Iowa station, built by the CB&Q in 1907 (above and right), is one of the few remaining stations with passenger service, now operated by Amtrak. (John Schultz photo)

MODERN

The Ottumwa, Iowa station was built by the CB&Q around 1950. The second floor houses the division offices of the "Ottumwa Division." (John Schultz photo)

The Perry, Iowa station, built in the mid-1960s replaced a much larger two-story depot which had been destroyed by fire. Perry, on the Milwaukee Road, is also a division headquarters. This station was abandoned for passenger service when the Milwaukee ended all but freight transport in early 1970.

The modern, 1960's Creston station in the shadow of the nineteenth century depot. (John Schultz photo)