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H.Roger Grant
University of Akron

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LIVING IN THE DEPOT

THE TWO-STORY RAILROAD STATION ON THE NORTHERN PLAINS

H. ROGER GRANT

The environment of the northern Plains caused settlers to make special adaptations to meet their need for shelter. Buildings were practical and often temporary. Dugouts and sod houses proliferated during the frontier period, then gave way to more permanent structures as settlement matured. By the late nineteenth century the balloon-frame building had become ubiquitous. Instead of requiring experienced carpenters fashioning large timbers with mortise-and-tenon joints as they had often done in the East, balloon framing utilized two-by-fours or similar pieces of lumber that amateur woodworkers could nail together without difficulty. Fabricating a

balloon-frame structure became even easier with the accessibility of standard, sawmill-produced lumber available from independent and chain “line” lumber yards spawned by an expanding network of railroads. The Plains likewise became the heartland of the prefabricated, even portable building. These “ready-mades” or “knock-downs” solved the often urgent requirement for immediate but inexpensive structures on the empty prairies.¹

Railroads enthusiastically embraced types of balloon-frame structures for their thousands of new stations on the Plains. While they might select prefabricated shelters for minor stops, usually for the short-term, they commonly erected permanent balloon-frame “combination” passenger and freight depots constructed from standard architectural plans. It was usually later before companies spent heavily on custom-designed passenger stations, likely of brick, and nearly always for the busiest communities.²

As the process of settlement continued, the northern Plains sported sensible, mostly prosaic edifices, whether residential or commercial. Novelist Hamlin Garland, for one, thought these “flimsy little wooden towns”

H. Roger Grant is professor of History at the University of Akron. His latest book is Erie Lackawanna: Death of an American Railroad (1994).

[GPQ 14 (Spring 1994):117-28]

drab and depressing. Few probably disagreed; elevators, stores, and houses shared a dreary sameness.³

While hardly filled with architectural gems, the Dakotas and Nebraska by World War I led the country in the percentage of frame railroad depots with living quarters. Likely a thousand or so of these structures blanketed the region. Most were two-story affairs, with private rooms above the public space, serving smaller communities and seemingly functioning well.⁴

Railroad companies early on realized that providing depots with apartments for employees and their families paid extra dividends. The agent was essentially *always* on duty. "This would insure the practically continuous presence of someone to receive service and emergency messages," aptly noted a trade journal. An occupied station also meant that an agent or family member could respond quickly to any crisis, whether calling the local law-enforcement authority if someone attempted to break in and steal cash kept in depot offices or valuable freight and express stored on the premises or reporting a fire to the volunteer brigade. If the railroad carried fire-insurance coverage, it could expect a lower premium rate if the building were occupied.⁵

Additional advantages existed. Railroad officials speedily learned that married agents were steady and reliable and that company housing attracted and kept such employees. This meshed well with railway executives' corporate paternalism during the period. Also, if housing were expensive or locally unavailable, an apartment pleased workers, since it was usually free. Of course, agents would be at their place of work, making any commuting, either by foot, animal, or later, bicycle or automobile, unnecessary.⁶

Then there was the matter of image. A gestating prairie settlement lacked much in the way of imposing structures. Likely only a grain elevator or occasionally a windmill-water tank complex projected further skyward than a two-story depot. Since the station served as community gateway, something more substantial

than a trackside shack suggested a locality's permanence and promise. Even Chicago, the nation's foremost rail Mecca, initially had only a two-story frame depot, one built by the Galena & Chicago Union Railroad in 1849. (The upper floor provided office rather than apartment space.) So for any "New Chicago" of the Plains, a double-story structure promised to be a harbinger of better buildings to come. "I sometimes wish that the [Chicago &] North Western had put up a *three* story depot here in town," noted Wilbur S. Smith, the company agent at Pilger, Nebraska, early in the century.

That would have gotten the attention of the travelers and would have been a good advertisement of the town's future. . . . The two story depot here [Pilger] is better than only the one story depots you find in those Union Pacific towns.⁷

Two-story depots are not as representative of the Great Plains as are dugouts and sod houses. Instead, railroads in the 1830s and 1840s accidentally discovered the value of buildings that included apartment space when they converted houses, hotels, and other multi-story structures into stations. Yet specially designed facilities had appeared elsewhere and even before the modern railway age. Throughout Europe two-story depots with apartments were common almost from the first appearance of the iron horse. Other transport forms in America also offered housing accommodations for employees. Canal companies, for example, erected cottages for lockkeepers and their families. While they were not technically public buildings, they served as integral parts of waterway operations and were widely recognized for their practicality.⁸

As the network of iron and then steel rails spread westward from the Atlantic seaboard, railroads embraced a variety of two-story depots with living quarters. But the process was highly individualistic; some carriers endorsed the concept while others rejected it. The Lackawanna liked stations with apartments but the Jersey Central, a neighboring road, did not.



FIG. 1. Either the Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Valley or the Chicago & North Western built this standard two-story depot at Plainview, Nebraska on the Norfolk, Nebraska–Winner, South Dakota branch. The design resembles other North Western structures constructed throughout the northern Great Plains and the upper Midwest. (Author's collection.)

Still one pattern of sorts emerged, and it was geographical. In the states of the Old Northwest, two-story depots seldom appeared in Indiana and Ohio, occasionally in Illinois (mostly associated with commuter operations in greater Chicago), and were frequent in Michigan and Wisconsin. Such structures appeared in the most isolated sections, for instance in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Where housing was scarce, companies responded appropriately.⁹

Further west, “Granger” railroads thought that living in the depot made sense. Nearly all carriers that served the Dakotas and Nebraska, both trunk lines and shortlines, provided agents with some on-site housing. Several of these roads, including the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul (Milwaukee) and the Chicago & North Western (North Western), already owned some standardized structures before they reached the Plains. For the most part,

they saw no reason to change their depot-building strategies.¹⁰

One illustration of this interregional continuity is the construction policy embraced by a North Western affiliate, Pierre, Rapid City and North Western. Popularly dubbed “Pretty Rough Country & No Water,” this company constructed a 168-mile line through the West River country of South Dakota between 1906 and 1907, linking the North Western’s western terminus at Pierre with an existing route to Rapid City, which the parent firm had acquired with purchase of the largely Nebraska carrier, Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Valley, in 1903.¹¹

Obviously, the Pierre, Rapid City & North Western required depots, some to serve immediately for train-control work, and then for its general freight and passenger business for communities that had already been established or would soon be platted. Since housing units,

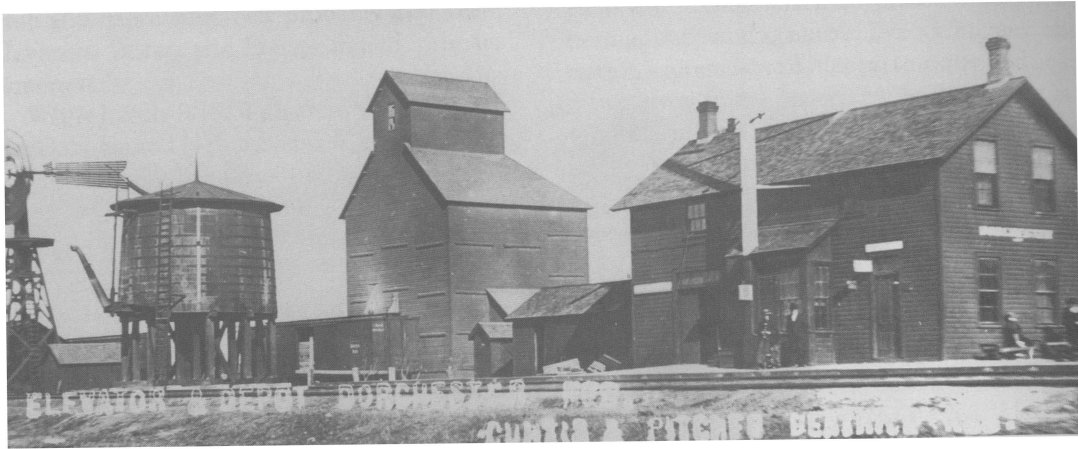


FIG. 2. The Chicago, Burlington & Quincy (CB&Q) and its affiliate, the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad in Nebraska, erected numerous depots to this particular plan in the trans-Missouri West. The Dorchester station, thirty miles west of Lincoln, served an "alphabet town" on the company's main line between Omaha and Denver. (Author's collection)

especially rental ones, were scarce, agents would have to book rooms in hotels or boarding houses, hardly ideal if they had families, or they would be forced to erect their own homes. The West River country, once described as "Hell with the fires out," was only beginning to attract settlers. The response of the company was predictable. "It became a simple task for us to use . . . the standard Chicago & North Western combination passenger and freight station with living room for [an] agent on the second floor," noted the road's structures engineer. These were the same or similar to ones built by the North Western in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Additionally, the PRC & NW erected about a half dozen standard frame houses for its "section bosses" along the line, and these dwellings were often placed near depots.¹²

While some railroads and their affiliates selected two-story designs for depots both on and off the Great Plains, others might use them only in the trans-Missouri West. The Chicago, Burlington & Quincy (Burlington) embraced this bifurcated policy. The company or its subsidiaries, with only a few exceptions,

erected single-story, combination depots without apartments in Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri, but as the system expanded during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it built scores of two-story depots with agents' quarters along its trackage, especially on branch lines, in Colorado, Nebraska, and Wyoming.¹³

Like the two-story depots with living quarters on other roads in the region—Milwaukee, North Western, Northern Pacific, and Soo—the Burlington's structures were utilitarian. A design produced by the Lincoln offices of the company (Lines West) in 1908 is typical. Personnel from the Bridge and Building Department produced a standard 20-by-40 foot depot with upper-level living quarters. The ground floor consisted of the ever-popular tripartite arrangement of waiting room, central office, and freight section. The second floor contained four modest rooms: kitchen, parlor, and two bedrooms. They provided approximately 750 square feet of useable living space and were much more commodious than a dugout, sod-die, or claim shack, but hardly spacious when compared to latter-day farm houses and town

dwellings. A centrally placed stairwell led downstairs to the office and a private door opened to trackside. The cost of these structures was minimal, likely less than \$1500 apiece, and company carpenters could build them in a few weeks. Lacking basements, these depots generally rested on piling foundations. The apartment section had neither closets nor bathroom. None had electricity until the communities they served received such service, often not until the Rural Electrification Administration debuted during the New Deal.¹⁴

While contemporary interior photographs or published descriptions of apartment space are rare, Dale Reeves, whose family lived in several Burlington depots in Nebraska during the 1930s and 1940s, recalled the one at Elyria,

located on the sixty-eight mile Palmer-Burwell branch in the state's Sandhill country.

At Elyria . . . we lived upstairs in a 2-story depot, typical of most depots with living quarters. We had no electricity, used kerosene or "aladdin" lamps. There was a hand pump in the kitchen sink. There was a wood and coal stove in the middle of the living/dining room (the only heat).

The depot lacked a bathroom, and Reeves noted that "There was a two-holer out back (across the side-track) with a Sears-Roebuck catalogue inside."¹⁵

While the vast majority of the inhabited depots on the Northern Plains were two-story

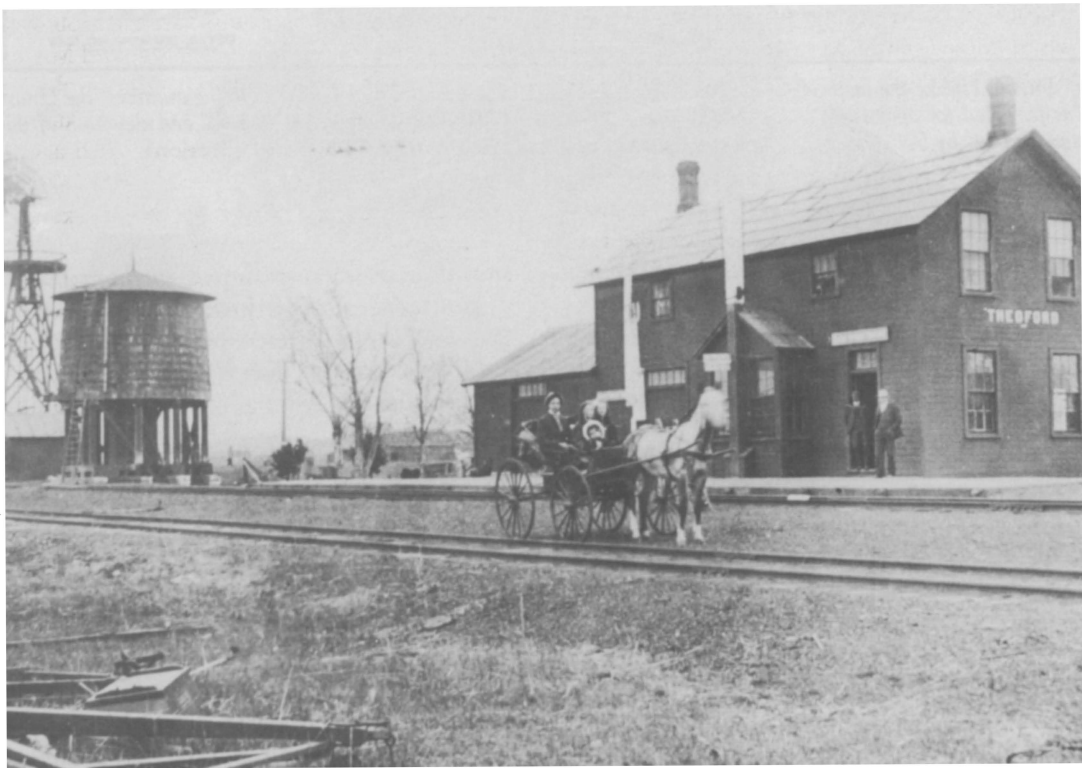


FIG. 3. The Thedford depot was on the Lincoln-Alliance-Billings (CB&Q) main line, 243 miles northwest of Lincoln. (Author's collection)

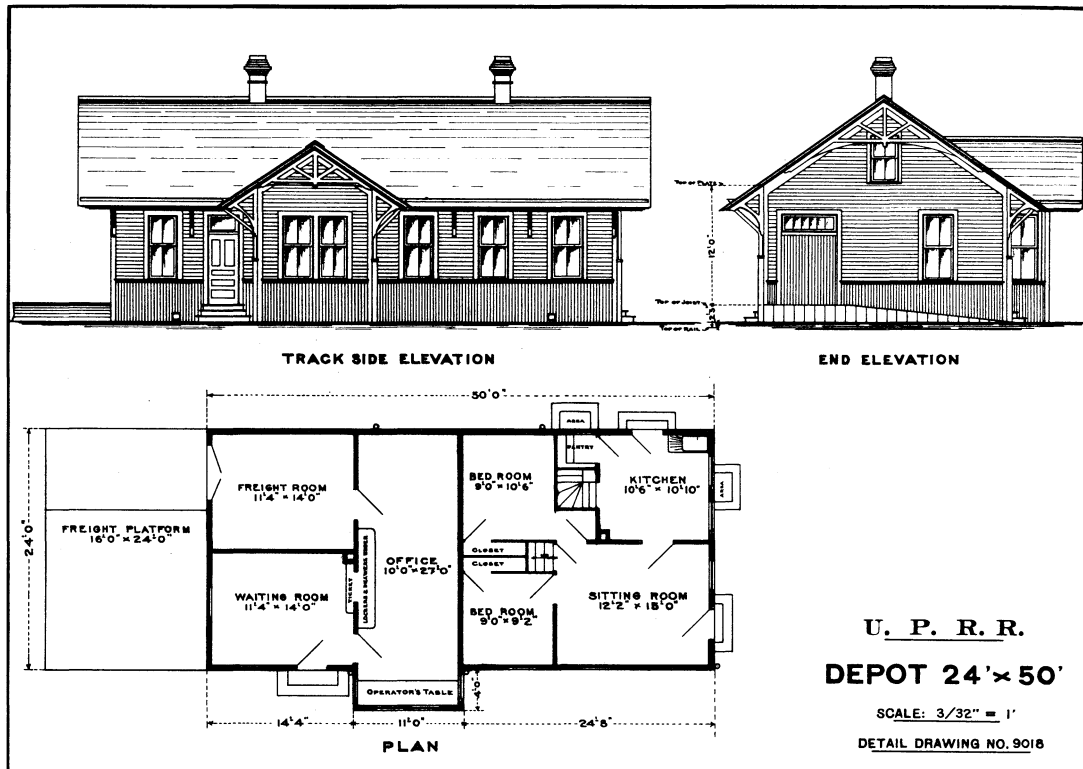


FIG. 4. Unlike the majority of northern Great Plains railroads that built depots with living quarters, the Union Pacific opted for apartment space on only the ground floor. The attic window, seen on the end elevation of this standard 24' by 50' drawing, lighted storage space above the freight room. (Author's collection)

affairs like the Burlington station in Elyria, some were single story. The Great Northern, Milwaukee, and particularly the Union Pacific (UP) usually erected one-story stations with first-floor apartment space along their prairie lines.¹⁶

The Union Pacific in Nebraska erected forty of these structures statewide; those in the eastern part appeared primarily on appendages while those in the west served communities along both main and branch lines. This surely reflected patterns of available housing. These UP depots were even less spacious than the cozy ones created by the Burlington in 1908. The UP often used a 24-by-64 foot combination plan, and this meant a four room, two bedroom, 475-square foot apartment. The company placed living quarters on the

waiting-room side and intentionally isolated private family space from public areas. Nevertheless, the plan offered more storage for personal possessions than did the Burlington, with closets, a pantry, and additional space in an attic and small cellar. "These were simple plans," remarked R. M. Brown, the company's chief engineer. "We gave those agents only very basic housing."¹⁷

The Union Pacific probably preferred the single-story design for several reasons. The door arrangement kept occupants, including lively children, from interfering with the hustle and bustle of the station at train time. Moreover, the configuration meant that the ground floor bedrooms allowed easy escape in case of fire, a not uncommon occurrence in wooden depots during a time of open illumi-

nation, heating stoves, and spark-throwing steam locomotives. And, too, families would appreciate not having to climb a stairway repeatedly, particularly on shopping, washing or moving days.¹⁸

Advantages of living in the depot are easily discernible. Not only did railroad management endorse the concept, but the patrons probably approved as well. An individual who wished to send a telegram, pick up a freight shipment, or plan a trip could usually find the agent even if he (or occasionally she) were officially off duty.¹⁹

Agents and family members likely shared more mixed feelings. On the positive side, a depot apartment meant free or inexpensive shelter in localities where housing might be costly or difficult to find. Station living surpassed the common alternatives: life in a cramped bunkcar, old passenger coach, hotel room, or more probably a rooming or boarding house.²⁰

Yet living in the depot on the Northern Plains or anywhere else had its negative dimensions. In both the Burlington and Union Pacific depots, rooms were small, storage was



FIG. 5. Bonesteel, South Dakota, located on the Norfolk-Winner branch, received a "Number Three" combination depot, a popular design used by the Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Valley for its more important communities in Nebraska and South Dakota. The structure offered a third bedroom on the second floor with a single end window. (Author's collection)

customarily limited, and occupants coped with the absence of modern plumbing. Most prairie depots *never* had flush toilets, although communities might install public water and sewage systems after the turn of the century.

The stairway symbolized what was wrong with living in the depot. "One problem in those typical two-story depots was what to do with a piano," remembered Lloyd Reeves, Dale's younger brother. "My dad played the piano. But there was no way to get one up to the second floor. Maybe Dad found a spot in the waiting room or in the freight room." The stairway itself was not only a roadblock for some of the family's personal possessions, but also a general nuisance, necessitating repeated climbs and descents. Dale Reeves recalled that

there was a "coal house" . . . across the side-track behind the depot, where we went to get coal for the stove and coal oil for the lamps [items supplied at no cost by the railroad]. There was a wood-pile next to the coal house, where my dad and I chopped wood.

Running up and down the stairway for all these essential items was an inconvenience.²¹

Life at trackage was also dangerous. Freight and passenger trains, even on light-density branch lines, could be deadly for a toddler who strayed onto the track. Older children, too, might fail to heed rolling stock being switched or an on-coming locomotive. Dale Reeves recollected his mother's fear of the



FIG. 6. The depot at Abie, Nebraska, on the Fremont to Superior branch of the Chicago & North Western, was built in 1887 by the Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Valley, a company that the North Western purchased outright in 1903. Typical of structures erected by the road, it contained living quarters on both the first and second floors. (Author's collection)

railroad. "My mother hated the depot. She worried about me and my brother and sister. The platform and the tracks were our playground, and the trains on the main line provided a frequent, serious threat." His mother's concerns were real.

Youngsters were easily injured falling when running across the tracks. I once tripped with my toes on one rail and made a one-point landing on my jaw against the other rail. My jaw wasn't broken, but I was in pain and couldn't eat for awhile. Years later, when I wanted to reminisce, my mother would not discuss our days in the depot. She never overcame the dread of tracks and trains.²²

Admittedly, children of agents were not often fatally injured, but there was another drawback to life on the railroad corridor. A visitor to the Burlington depot at Berwyn, Nebraska, on the Lincoln–Billings, Montana line, recalled that it was "very strange to live that close to the tracks" and that it was "quite an experience when the trains went past—the noise and the place kind of shook." The raucous passing annoyed residents, too. "I never really got used to all of that noise," remembered the daughter of an agent for the North Western in Agar, South Dakota.

The piercing cry of the whistle, the clanging bell, the squeaking wheels and the monster locomotive itself would give you a good startle in the middle of the night and might keep you awake. . . . A stopping passenger train always seemed to be especially loud, with the mail, baggage and express being worked and the passengers coming and going. There weren't any "Please Be Quiet" [family sleeping] signs on the platform!²³

Station quarters were likely to be cold and drafty during winter months, a drawback more constant than the occasional excessive noise. These wooden depots usually lacked central heating and insulation. Upgrading, if it came

at all, occurred only during the final years of a station's existence. To keep structures warmer in these colder climes and also to reduce maintenance costs, the Soo Line covered its depots with a type of asphalt siding sold under the trademark of Insul-brick (Fig. 7). (The name came from the product's purported insulating properties and the brick outlines stamped on one side of each panel.) Other roads might fill hollow depot walls with granulated rock wool. Some agents, either in their desire to winterize or for convenience, threw old papers—tariffs, waybills, timetables, and the like—and other trash behind freight-room walls. Companies might add storm windows and doors and skirting around the foundations, and if they did not, agents might make these improvements at their own expense. But as buildings aged, the fight against the elements seemed more difficult, and it was never fully won.²⁴

Summers were little better than winters because depots heated up excessively. After electrification agents might acquire fans and later air-conditioning units, but earlier agents and their families were at the mercy of the sun. "The depots were smack in the middle of the rail yards and the towns," recalled a one-time railroader from the West River country. "There was really nothing to cast a shadow." With tracks on both sides of the building (main line on one side and sidings or "team" tracks on the other) and cinder, wood, or brick platforms likely on both ends, there was little space to plant shade trees. Even if someone planted saplings, and they survived, it would take years for them to cool the building. Although everyone in a prairie village suffered during a heat wave, depot dwellers surely took the full brunt of oppressive temperatures.²⁵

While life in the depot was hardly utopian, it was predictable. Still, agents might opt for their own homes or for rental ones locally or in a nearby community with better shopping, schools, and social life. As communities matured, housing became less precious, and automobiles and all-weather roads appeared. Yet each family probably considered that track-



FIG. 7. The Soo Line constructed hundreds of its second class depots throughout its system in the northern Great Plains and the upper Midwest, including this one at Rogers, North Dakota, on its Fairmount-Drake line. The company winterized the building with Insul-Brick, probably in the 1930s or 1940s. (Author's collection)

side accommodations were free and that coal for heating and cooking and oil for lamps were complimentary. Cost considerations were weighed carefully. For example, the Reeves family knew that, when assigned in the early 1940s to Wolbach, like Elyria on the Palmer-Burwell branch, they could live rent free in the old frame depot. "That was a big decision before we moved." But the parents preferred a

house away from the tracks: the father perhaps to be removed from patrons calling after hours and the mother for reasons of safety. "The folks ended up renting the Methodist Church parsonage. Rent was only \$7 per month and was apparently worth the cost."²⁶

If a station agent and his family wished to remain in a particular community, they might choose to leave their depot quarters and buy



FIG. 8. Although the Great Northern created its own plans for depots with living space, it also acquired in 1916 this unusual station from the 103-mile South Dakota Central at Wentworth, South Dakota. Decorative structural features—common in the East but occasionally found in the West as well—greatly improve the depot's appearance. (Author's collection)

or build a house locally if the agent had enough seniority to protect his job. That is what Gilbert Carter and his wife, Anna, decided in 1929. After living for fourteen years and raising three children in the Chicago & North Western (née Fremont, Elkhorn, & Missouri Valley) depot at Snyder, Nebraska, on the 116-mile Scribner–Oakdale branch, they “built the fine home on Cedar St. in the SW edge of Snyder.”²⁷

Living in the depot came to an end for most railroad families during the 1950s and 1960s. Agents’ options for better housing continued to improve with automobiles and highways. Railroads also contributed to the phenomenon. Some carriers, like the North Western, began to close most of their rural depots after that railroad won a bitter fight in the late 1950s

with the Order of Railroad Telegraphers, the union that represented depot agents. Similarly, carriers speeded up the process of abandoning branch lines, of course closing stations in the process. Railroads also substituted daily mobile agency routes and centralized agencies for depot-based agents along the remaining trackage.²⁸

About the only legacy of living in the depot occurred when individuals bought former railroad facilities, whether originally designed for apartments or not, and converted them into homes. Usually these stations were removed from their initial right-of-way sites and extensively remodeled. Carpenters, for instance, took off the second-story living quarters from several two-story Burlington depots and recast them as single-story homes.²⁹

Two-story depots sprang up to meet a special need in the lives of railroads and the plains towns they served. Once sufficient and affordable housing became available, these structures gradually disappeared. Raw, unsettled prairies saw an early demand for depots with apartment space, but they went the way of dugouts and sod houses, replaced either by more desirable buildings or nothing at all.

NOTES

1. See John C. Hudson, "Frontier Housing in North Dakota," *North Dakota History* 42 (Fall 1972): 4-15; Roger L. Welsch, "Sod Construction on the Plains," *Pioneer America* 1 (1969): 13-17; Fred W. Peterson, *Homes in the Heartland: Balloon Frame Farmhouses of the Upper Midwest, 1850-1920* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992), pp. 40-60; John N. Vogel, *Great Lakes Lumber on the Great Plains: The Laird, Norton Lumber Company in South Dakota* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), pp. 93-108; Gilbert Herbert, "Prefabs on the Prairies," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 11 (March 1952): 28-30.
2. See H. Roger Grant and Charles W. Bohi, *The Country Railroad Station in America* (Sioux Falls, South Dakota: Center for Western Studies, 1988), pp. 17-24.
3. Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border* (1914; rpt. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), p. 312.
4. For a detailed account of the phenomenon of occupied railroad structures on the Great Plains and elsewhere in the United States and Canada, see H. Roger Grant, *Living in the Depot: The Two-Story Railroad Station* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993).
5. "Apartments in Railway Service Buildings," *Electric Railway Journal* 42 (30 August 1913): 3; see H. Roger Grant, *Kansas Depots* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1990), p. 19.
6. Ron Brown, *The Train Doesn't Stop Here Any More: An Illustrated History of Railway Stations in Canada* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1991), p. 127; John A. Droege, *Passenger Terminals and Trains* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1916), p. 268.
7. Wilbur S. Smith to Edmund D. Brigham, 7 May 1907, Chicago & North Western Transportation Company papers, in possession of C&NW, Chicago, Illinois.
8. Herbert H. Harwood, Jr., "History Where You Don't Expect It: Some Surprising Survivors," *Railroad History* 166 (Spring 1992): 106-14.
9. Grant and Bohi, *Country Railroad Station* (note 2 above), pp. 25-61; Larry E. Easton, "Wisconsin Central's 1898 Combination Depot," *The Soo* 11 (January 1989): 26-49.
10. Grant and Bohi, *Country Railroad Station* (note 2 above), pp. 70-110.
11. Quoted in letter from William Armstrong to author, 14 December 1976.
12. Ibid.; interview with Charles Shannon, Arlington Heights, Illinois, 1 October 1988.
13. Robert C. Brown to author, 12 December 1991.
14. James J. Reisdorff and Michael M. Bartels, *Railroad Stations in Nebraska: An Era of Use and Reuse* (David City, Nebraska: South Platte Press, 1982), p. 17; Grant, *Kansas Depots* (note 5 above), p. 17.
15. Dale Reeves to author, 6 May 1992.
16. Grant and Bohi, *Country Railroad Station* (note 2 above), pp. 74-91, 123-25, 137-38.
17. R. M. Brown to author, 28 February 1977.
18. Ibid.
19. Quinten L. Farnen to author, 4 February 1978.
20. Ibid. Companies apparently made no differentiation in wages paid to agents who lived on site. The Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway in 1903, for example, paid its "Agent and Telegrapher" employees in Iowa, western Minnesota, and eastern South Dakota between \$40 and \$55 monthly and made no adjustment for additional income if agents were assigned to depots that lacked living quarters.
21. Lloyd Reeves to author, 26 February 1992; Dale Reeves letter (note 15 above).
22. Dan Knight to author, 5 October 1982; Dale Reeves letter (note 15 above).
23. Michael M. Bartels to author, 31 January 1992; *Daily Huronite* (Huron, South Dakota), 8 January 1950.
24. Brown, *Train Doesn't Stop Here* (note 6 above), p. 129; Frank E. Vyzralek, H. Roger Grant, and Charles Bohi, "North Dakota's Railroad Depots: Standardization on the Soo Line," *North Dakota History* 42 (Winter 1975): 15.
25. Shannon interview (note 12 above).
26. Dale Reeves letter (note 15 above).
27. *Dodge (Nebraska) Criterion*, 29 April 1993.
28. Grant and Bohi, *Country Railroad Station* (note 2 above), pp. 169-75; Reisdorff and Bartels, *Railroad Stations in Nebraska* (note 14 above), pp. 47-59.
29. Reisdorff and Bartels, *Railroad Stations in Nebraska* (note 14 above), pp. 91-102.