

Wisconsin Central Railroad

Wednesday, Nov. 15, 1871 was a great day for Stevens Points. This day was the occasion of the arrival of the first train of cars on the Wisconsin Central Railroad. The coming of a railroad to the community was serious business and when the day finally arrived, it was a time of ceremony and jubilation.

All through the fifties and sixties rumors of railway extension were heard and community and business deals were common. As one writer comments "railroad projects were sprung upon people and some of them were caught and seriously handled before they could extricate themselves. (History of N. Wisconsin, 1881)

The Wisconsin Pineries, especially in 1857 and 1858, (when "General" Albert Gallatin Ellis was most active) looked to plans for extension of the Milwaukee and Horicon Railroad. Planning and dealing was prevalent. "The iron is secured to lay the tracks to the village of Jefferson. That road, it is said, pointed to Stevens Point" (June 18, 1857). "Continuation of road west from Berlin is pointed to Stevens Point' May 14, 1858).

Other modes of transportation were having problems with the railways. Lumbermen complained of the "rascality" of the M & M RR which built its bridges so low over the Wisconsin boats and logging rafts found difficulty in passage.

But it was not until 1871 that marked the great coming, from another direction, the WCRR via Neenah and Waupaca. The WCRR opened its first stretch of track from Menasha to Waupaca in 1871 under the direction of Judge George Reed, Manitowoc lawyer and promoter of "numerous embryonic railroads" in this period, and Gardner Colby, a Boston financier. The original land grant offered by the federal and state governments was approximately 2,000,000 acres, offered as inducement to build north to unpopulated areas. Within a turbulent decade the line did extend to Ashland from Stevens Point and south to Portage. Charles Colby, president of the line and son of Gardner Colby, in his report of 1878 noted "Eight years ago, there was not a house within fifteen miles from where now stand the thriving villages of Junction City, Auburndale, Milladore, Marshfield, Spencer, Unity, Colby, Medford, Ogema, Phillips, Fifield... There were practically no inhabitants in that part of the state, but it is estimated that there are now over 20,000 people within carrying distance... 35 manufacturing establishments have been built.

Conflict was rampant. By 1880 the great inducement of land had dwindled. President Colby continues "it is now apparent that no attempt was made by the government to protect any of the lands given for this road. Pine hunters and speculators for three years and a half after the grant, were allowed to enter and select large bodies of pine...

it was found that for a distance of 20 miles on each side of the road many of the best lands had been selected and timbered.” The original grant was cut to 40%.

The company operated under the WCRR name for only 38 years. In 1909 it came under lease to the Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Ste. Marie RR; the line became better known as the “Old Soo”. The Soo Line operates on the same right-of-way as did the Wisconsin Central, the only major portions abandoned being the Stevens Point to Portage stretch.

The fortunes of the WCRR fluctuated with the economy. One of the bleakest periods was at the turn of the century when capital expenditures for equipment and physical improvements were almost non-existent.

Lumber, iron ore and a thriving passenger business had provided the greatest share of the revenues. Now, iron ore mines closed and lumber moved in moderate proportion. Commodities changed.

Wisconsin Central heritage is still very much a part of the Soo Line, at Manitowoc, Schiller Park, Fond du Lac, Chippewa Falls, Neenah-Menasha, Stevens Point. Stevens Point, once a focal point of early WCRR dispatch, is now Eastern Division headquarters for the Soo Line.

Much of the above information was gained from the Stevens Point Daily Journal and from Roy L. Martin’s History of the Wisconsin Central. (1941).

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