RAILROADS

Any history of the Village of Dwight would not be complete if a tribute were not paid to and credit given the railroads for the part which they have played in the development of the community. Day after day, year after year and in this case, decade after decade, in the routine of their schedules, mail, merchandise and passengers have been brought into town and in the same routine, grain, merchandise, passengers and mail have been taken on their way.

The first railroad built through Dwight was called the Chicago and Mississippi. Later the name was changed to the Chicago and Alton. This road had a rugged existence, being in receivership for a number of years, sold under foreclosure, passing into the hands of the Baltimore and Ohio R R Company and finally in 1947 it was merged with the Gulf, Mobile and Ohio R R Company and now it is known by that name.

The land on which the railroad was built was owned by Richard Price Morgan, a civil engineer. He deeded the land to the railroad and the enterprise was begun in 1853. Henry Dwight, a capitalist from New York, furnished the money to construct the road from Joliet to Bloomington and, according to available records, lost a fortune in the venture. The village took its name from this man and grew up around the railroad which he financed. To guide the surveyors who were engaged in laying out the railroad, a telegraph pole with a pail nailed on the top was used.

The first train passed over the road on July 4, 1854 and in August of the same year, the road was opened from St Louis to Chicago.

The western branch, begun in 1869, was in service with trains running by 1870. The branch left the main line at Dwight and operated between here and Peoria. By this time Dwight was fast becoming a railroad center.

The first cabin or depot was built in 1853. It was a frame building, 16 ft by 24 ft, one and one-half stories in height and, according to what information we could gather, was located on what is now Main Street, somewhere between the Bank of Dwight and the Odd Fellow's Hall. It served both as an eating place and a dwelling for the railroad men. It was the only place where a person could get something to eat and a night's lodging.

During the winter of 1855-1856, an interesting story is told, when due to a snow blockade between Dwight and Odell, the road was closed. Trains could not get through. Temperatures ranged from 20 to 30 degrees below zero. Food supplies were low at the time and when some hundred and fifty passengers were brought to Dwight for food and shelter in the depot, provisions gave out. The good people of Morris were called upon for help and provisions were brought over in sleighs, thus averting what could have been famine.

The first round house or engine house was built in 1869 along the tracks near South Street. It was destroyed by fire and when rebuilt was located along the tracks on the southwest edge of town. This building has also been destroyed by fire. A water tower, now removed, was located just south of the present express office. It supplied water for the steam engines which have now been replaced by diesel power.

Gloom spread over the village on an April morning in 1907 when, by word of mouth, the news of the big wreck was circulated. In the early hours of the morning, due to an open switch, a lone engine and a heavily loaded freight train collided, headon, causing a terrific explosion and twenty eight cars loaded with coal were piled in a heap more than twenty feet high between the depot and the Chippewa Street crossing. Windows were shattered in the surrounding area. The bodies of the engineer, George Goodman, and a man called Mr. Brown, were known to be pinned beneath the debris. All day the wrecking crew worked while hope dimmed for the safety of the men and all day the little dog, belonging to Mr. Goodman, kept a sorrowful vigil near the scene. Late that night the bodies were recovered.

Probably the most famous train that has ever gone through Dwight was that on May 3, 1865 when the body of Abraham Lincoln was taken from Washington D.C. to Springfield for burial. On page 201 of John Carroll Power's book, "The Life of Lincoln," it is recorded as follows:-

> "Dwight, 2 AM, May 3, 1865. Minute guns and the tolling of bells announced the arrival of the cortege. The American flag was displayed and all buildings in view were draped in mourning. The entire population appeared to be out of doors, desirous to pay respects to the memory of Lincoln. Some of the escort recognized this as the place where the Prince of Wales and his royal family were entertained. Minute guns, tolling of bells, bonfires, funeral dirges and the insignia of mourning made up the demonstrations at Odell, Cayuga, Pontiac, Chenoa and Lexington."

It is of interest to know that a local townsman, Harry Haynes, now holds the record of being the oldest trainman, in point of service, now engaged on the Alton Road, having served the company continuously for 48 years.

The village is served by another railroad, a branch of the New York Central System, operating between South Bend and Zearing. Being on the outskirts of the village it is less conspicuous and less known than that of the Alton Road. Called now the New York Central it has not always been known by that name. Somewhere around 1854 when built, it was known as the Indiana, Illinois and Iowa road and there are those of the older generation who still refer to it as the 3-I. Later it was a part of the Chicago, Indiana and Southern Road but for many years now it has been the New York Central.

While now this road caters to freight service only it has not always been so. There was a time when it flourished both in passenger and freight traffic. Many a load of building material, machinery, etc, has been brought into the village upon it and much of the grain raised in this community was loaded from the elevators near their tracks. Residents in the north section of the village recall days when hay presses from the Spencer Factory were loaded from the platform there and it was largely due to this traffic that N. Franklin Street was one of the first streets to be paved.

For many years two passenger trains were operated daily between South Bend and Streator, making as it were, convenient shopping centers of Kankakee and Streator. The long walk to the center of town was taken care of by James Gregory who faithfully met each train with his horse drawn bus or hack, which opened from the rear to load and unload passengers. He operated in sort of a "Parmalee" fashion in that often his customers were making connections with Alton trains going north or south. Nor should the dray owned and operated by William Morris, which also met the N.Y.C. trains be lost sight of.

Along the line of memories for this little road are the Sunday excursions which were offered each summer when one could go to and from South Bend, Indiana or even St Joseph, Michigan for the total price of $1.50. And many there were who packed their lunch and made of these excursions an outing for the day. Attractive excursions were also operated during those years to Niagara Falls and return.

Some personal notes are thrown into our railroad history when we recall that when the body of Dr. Leslie E. Keeley was to be buried the road to Oaklawn was blocked with deep snow. The switch train on the branch was pressed into service and the body and funeral party were taken to the tile factory road where they were met by bob sleds to continue the trip to the cemetery. When Dr. Reynolds came to Dwight to practice, many of his calls were made with the help of the trains, both on the Alton branch and the 3-I. It wasn't at all unusual for a train to stop at a crossing in the country to let him off that he might call upon a patient.

In the light of modern railroading, stream lined passenger trains, electric automatic signals and diesel powered locomotives, we cannot lose sight of those who blazed the trails. We pay a tribute to those men who engineered the wood burning camel back engines, to those who fired the coal burning steam locomotives and to the signalmen who gave orders with hand operated levers. Our tribute to the trainmen whose hours were long and laborious and also to those workmen on the tracks who weathered snow, rain, hail and zero days to keep the rails safe. Our tribute to the railroads!