



The restored Richland Center passenger depot and visitor center. Mark Adsit photo.

The Pine River Valley & Stevens Point Railroad.

By Lon Arbegust

“Give us a reasonable price, or we’ll make a hunting ground of your city.” The carrying out of this threat influenced Richland County history perhaps more than any other single factor since the creation of Richland Center. The statement was made to the citizens of Richland City by the surveyor of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul railroad, prompted by the attitude those people were taking toward building the main rail line from Lone Rock to Prairie du Chien. The community of Richland City believed the rail line would have to go through their town and were taking advantage by asking an unheard of price for their land. When work was started on a bridge to lay tracks along the south bank of the Wisconsin River, they realized their mistake.



First locomotive of the narrow gauge Pine River & Stevens Point railroad. Richland County History Room photo.

Richland City being on the north bank of the river was doomed even though, at that time, it was the most important city between Madison and Prairie du Chien. River traffic died out along with Richland City, Orion, Richmond and Port Andrew. The Wisconsin River eventually eroded away the land where Richland City was located and many of the buildings were moved to other towns including Gotham and Lone Rock.

In 1870, the state legislature had authorized the formation of a local corporation to construct the Pine



Richland Center passenger depot. Richland County History Room photo.

River Valley & Stevens Point Railroad which was originally planned to extend from Lone Rock to Stevens Point through Richland Center. Promoters decided on the Lone Rock to Richland Center leg in 1872 with financing derived from both individual and local municipal subscriptions. George Krouskop served as president of the corporation while N.L. James guided its construction as general manager of the stock company. James furnished the wooden rails upon which the road ran. Beginning in 1875, construction proceeded from Richland Center to Lone Rock ending in 1876.

It was meant to be quite the railroad but never quite worked out as planned. It remained a narrow gauge setup which ran on wooden rails and never did progress any further north toward Stevens Point than the sixteen miles from Lone Rock to Richland Center. It did however, create a link to the outside world and ushered in an era of prosperity in Richland County.



Travel on the branch line of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad. Richland County History Room photo.

The promoters believed that as a matter of respect to the city of Richland Center, which was to benefit greatly from this enterprise, its citizens should be privileged to be the point of origin for the first trip. Oxen, mules and horses were contributed by owners who wished to have the prestige of being among those who were involved in the task of having hauled the locomotive the treacherous sixteen miles to Richland Center.

The Pine River Valley & Stevens Point Railroad did not receive its power from coal and every six miles piled at the side of the track was a stack of wood. Every six miles the train

| WESTWARD — NINTH SUBDIVISION — EASTWARD | | | | | | | | | | 9 | |
|---|-------------------------|------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| SECOND CLASS | | Capacity in cars | | Telegraph code | Distance from Lewis Fork | TIME TABLE No. 13 March 30, 1907 | Distance from Richland Center | See Note 4-A | Office open week days | SECOND CLASS | |
| 395 | 333 | Stalls | Other tracks | | | | | | | 396 | 318 |
| Mixed Daily Except Sun. | Mixed Daily Except Sun. | | | | | | | | | Mixed Daily Except Sun. | Mixed Daily Except Sun. |
| 1 3:15PM | 1 11:30AM | 14 | 14 | LB | 0.6 | LONE ROCK 0.3 | 16.5 | CJRWXY | 8:00AM to 4:00PM 10:00AM to 6:00PM | At 9:50AM | At 2:45PM |
| 1 3:30 | 1 11:45 | 14 | 14 | | 2.8 | GOTHAM 2.5 | 9.7 | | No Office | 1 9:35 | 1 2:30 |
| 1 3:40 | 1 11:55 | 19 | 17 | | 9.7 | TWIN BLUFFS 9.0 | 8.8 | | No Office | 1 9:25 | 1 2:15 |
| At 3:55PM | At 12:15PM | 17 | 100 | RN | 16.5 | RICHLAND CENTER 16.0 | 0.0 | BJRWYX | 8:00AM to 6:00PM | 1 9:10AM | 1 2:00PM |

Passenger and mixed trains must not exceed maximum speed of 30 miles per hour; other trains 20 miles per hour.

EASTWARD TRAINS ARE SUPERIOR TO WESTWARD TRAINS OF THE SAME CLASS.

No. 318 on Mondays wait at Richland Center until 2:40 pm for stock.

There were four passenger depots located on the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul branch line. Richland County History Room.

stopped and the engine was "fired up." It made two round trips a day between Lone Rock and Richland Center except Sunday. Ten miles an hour was record speed with the original engine.

The approximate cost of the railroad was \$55,000 and operated ten weeks. The James brothers realized the company could never pay off the debt and sold it for \$50,000 to Alex Mitchell, S.S. Merrill and John Lawler. In 1880 these new owners realized it was a bad investment and sold the Pine River Valley & Stevens Point Railroad to the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad and it became a branch of the their Prairie du Chien Division. In one day the old narrow gauge wooden roadbed was wiped out and replaced with standard gauge steel rails.

Probably constructed between 1876 and 1878, the first depot was located at the northwest corner of Main and Hazeltine and built by the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul, the second depot was erected at the corner of Haseltine and Second in 1878. After an 1882 explosion, the third depot was placed on the west side of the tracks along Orange Street. By 1906, community businessmen lobbied for a new depot. D.G. James finally secured a promise from the railroad in 1909. The new depot was placed on the east side of the tracks at the southwest corner of West Seminary and South Jefferson in that year. The new depot became the passenger depot and the 1882 edifice served as the freight depot. By 1917, three to four trains served Richland Center. This service declined by the late 1920s as automobile and bus transportation began to replace the train. As was true for many Wisconsin communities, the railroad was once Richland Center's connection with the state and the nation. It was a vital link from its arrival in 1876 until passenger train service waned in the 1920s when the automobile rapidly gained popularity.

The Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad Passenger Depot was built in the city in 1909 and by 1996 the depot had been neglected and unused for 20 years. A crumbling stone foundation and failing roof threatened the building. In addition, original features had been altered or removed, rendering the building almost unrecognizable. A canopy, which once protected waiting passengers, had been demolished, as had a bay window and a brick chimney.

The depot was rescued from ruin by Richland Center city officials and a group of dedicated volunteers. They applied for and received federal money from a transportation enhancement program, "TEA-21," administered by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. It paid for 80 percent of the project cost, with the remaining amount covered by community donations.

Not only does the restored depot stand as a sign of community revitalization, but it also houses organizations that work toward that goal. The depot's interior has been adapted to serve the Visitor Information Center and the trailhead of the Pine River Bike Trail.