

TRAIN CAR SHOPS OPEN!

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A stroll down the 600 block of West Washington Avenue in Madison, Wisconsin eventually brings one to the entrance of an antiquated, yet not abandoned, train station. The concrete sidewalk gives way to a brick platform, which hosts a short train under the protection of the depot's sheltering eaves. A group of middle-aged men, decked out in Wisconsin Badgers apparel, stagger out of the main doors of the building and head towards the colossal Kohl Center, which looms in the background of this afternoon scene. A couple on a weekend outing walk arm in arm, each clutching shopping bags, and board one of the train's five cars. One is surprised to learn, then, that the station hasn't sold a ticket in ages and the locomotive probably hasn't budged since then. The continuing commerce surrounding this strange depot recalls the days in which it was the center of a booming railroad industry and an integral part in shaping the mold that the city of Madison would eventually fill.

A closer inspection of the station reveals the true nature of the building. The interior has been gutted out to make room for valuable office space. The sign outside that once proclaimed the various destinations and boarding areas now bear the names of such businesses as Babe's Grill and Sports Bar, Park Tailoring, and Woodland Marketing. Even the cars of the train have been disemboweled to make way for an even more eclectic group of shops including an international import dealer and an adult bakery. Like those that have gone before them, these entrepreneurs were quick to capitalize on the novelty of the railroads as a means to advance their business.

Perhaps the first to take advantage of this opportunity was J. C. Farwell, whose efforts as a Wisconsin governor and Madison enthusiast resulted in the arrival of the first railroad in the city in 1854, bringing "countless public conveniences, creat[ing] hundreds of jobs, and greatly stimulat[ing] settlement" (Mollenhoff, 49). Before long, Madison was shipping wheat to Milwaukee via train, bringing more money into the local economy. After a brief depression following the Civil War, the city's railroad industry

took off again and soon found itself at the center of six major lines, “establish[ing] a fresh confidence in Madison’s future” (Mollenhoff, 122). Recognizing the strategic location of the city, the Milwaukee Road originally constructed the depot in question in the late 1800s, and is still represented there as the company’s logo is emblazoned on the bright yellow locomotive cab.

Peering through the window of one of the train’s cars, one might expect to see passengers reading the morning paper or taking a short nap. Instead, one finds a row of trinkets delicately placed on display for possible sale. The sign on the cab reads “Global Express - Handcrafts from Around the World.” While this train, even at the peak of its service, wasn’t able to travel to all corners of the Earth, it did cover considerable ground at one time. The acronym billed on the front of the station, “C.M.St.P&P.,” tells of one such line (Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Pacific Railroad), that lead trains from this destination outward. The success of Madison’s wheat trade resulted in “a very rapid expansion in the number of acres of wheat in the late 1850s and early 1860s” (Mollenhoff, 105). This explosion brought on the “mushroom like emergence” (Mollenhoff, 291) of the manufacturing of agricultural implements. A huge business was born, satisfying Madison’s need to industrialize. As Mollenhoff points out, “Madison leaders, like their counterparts around the state and country, were no longer content with just buying and selling somebody else’s wares; they wanted to *make* things” (122). Soon the city joined the national economy through its desire and ability to participate through their connection to the rest of the country by railroad. As local products shipped out, new products arrived, and Madison became a part of a much larger economic community. Thus, the notion of the train as a medium bringing exotic goods from far away places to the people of Madison is still alive, and in a strange way, the presence of the “Global Express” on board somehow seems natural.

A glance at the buildings surrounding the old depot attest to the importance the station once held in the economy of this area. With the initial success of the early

railroads in town, “an entire ‘village’ including warehouses, taverns, and other businesses, grew up around the depot grounds where just a few months before had been a dense thicket of poplar, crab, and plum trees” (Mollenhoff, 50). Old factories and warehouses remain scattered around the block, some still bearing the silhouettes of signs long removed. Across the street, what is now a storage building, shows a ghostly Sunkist insignia on the side, while the giant storehouse two doors down still sports the Wiedenbeck Dobelin Company logo. Down the tracks, the Southern Wisconsin Produce banner is still visible as the tracks wind their way through the city, connecting the old factories (as well as the new ones that have taken their place) both within Madison and with outside markets.

Even the new buildings that have sprung up around the train depot give homage to their predecessor. Since the heyday of the railroad, a new community has grown outward from the hub of the station, whose wooden structure was later replaced with brick, establishing a sense of permanence on the block. Apartments, banks, and health centers now surround the stripped-down depot, yet many bear a mark of distinction. The blocky base and trapezoidal roof that is characteristic of the train station is mirrored in the architectural style of the buildings that came after it. Indeed, great care was taken in its design, for “the railroad depot was a terribly important statement about a community because it told arriving passengers how big, how rich, and how important a city was” (Mollenhoff, 292). The strip mall next door bears the title “City Station” on its fake marquee, as a long, narrow row of stores extend from the center, mimicking the low roof that once sheltered passengers and freight a few yards away. The appearance of this area seems to have been well thought out, giving the feeling of wealth and respectability. One wonders if the convenience store which is to be built on the other side of the depot will also take on these characteristics, keeping with the spirit of this area.

Although it has evolved considerably, more than the look of the area has

remained consistent. The ownership of the buildings and businesses have changed hands many times over the years, yet many deal in the same types of goods and services as in the past. Many of the aforementioned warehouses which kept the surpluses of local factories have been bought out by commercial storage companies, who still using the buildings, if not to house mass quantities of wholesale heavy hardware to ship on the next train tomorrow, at least to hold on to some furniture for students returning from summer vacation.

The evolution of mass transportation on this block is also apparent. Even if the train station is no longer functioning, the Badger and Greyhound Bus Depot across the street is more than willing to escort passengers to a variety of destinations across the Midwest. Individual travelers as well as small businesses can take advantage of the U-Haul station on the corner (which also seems to be located within an old train depot) to move themselves in and out of town. Increased mobility as a result of a national highway system and improved roads provided simpler and less expensive options for Madisonians looking to make connections with outside markets. Thus, the automobile has taken its place with the train as an effective solution, and not surprisingly, has located its business in the transportation center created by the depot over a century ago.

Along the north wall of the station, crawling vines claim the side of the building as if nature means to take back what is rightfully hers. The people of Madison, however, got to it first and have made a point to preserve what proved to them in the past to be an invaluable asset. Although the five car train lies impotent in the station, doomed to a stationary existence, it is given life once again by the city it served in the past. The tracks that this locomotive rode decades ago are still active and run parallel to the stop, yet a fence divides the switch between the two lines, assuring that no more trains will join their fallen comrade at this particular junction. The debt of gratitude that the people of Madison owe the railroad system, however, has been paid in full, for as more and

more renovations and construction projects hit the 600 block of West Washington Avenue, the train shops remain open.

BIBLIOGRAPHY/WORKS CITED

Mollenhoff, David. Madison: A History of the Formative Years. Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1982.