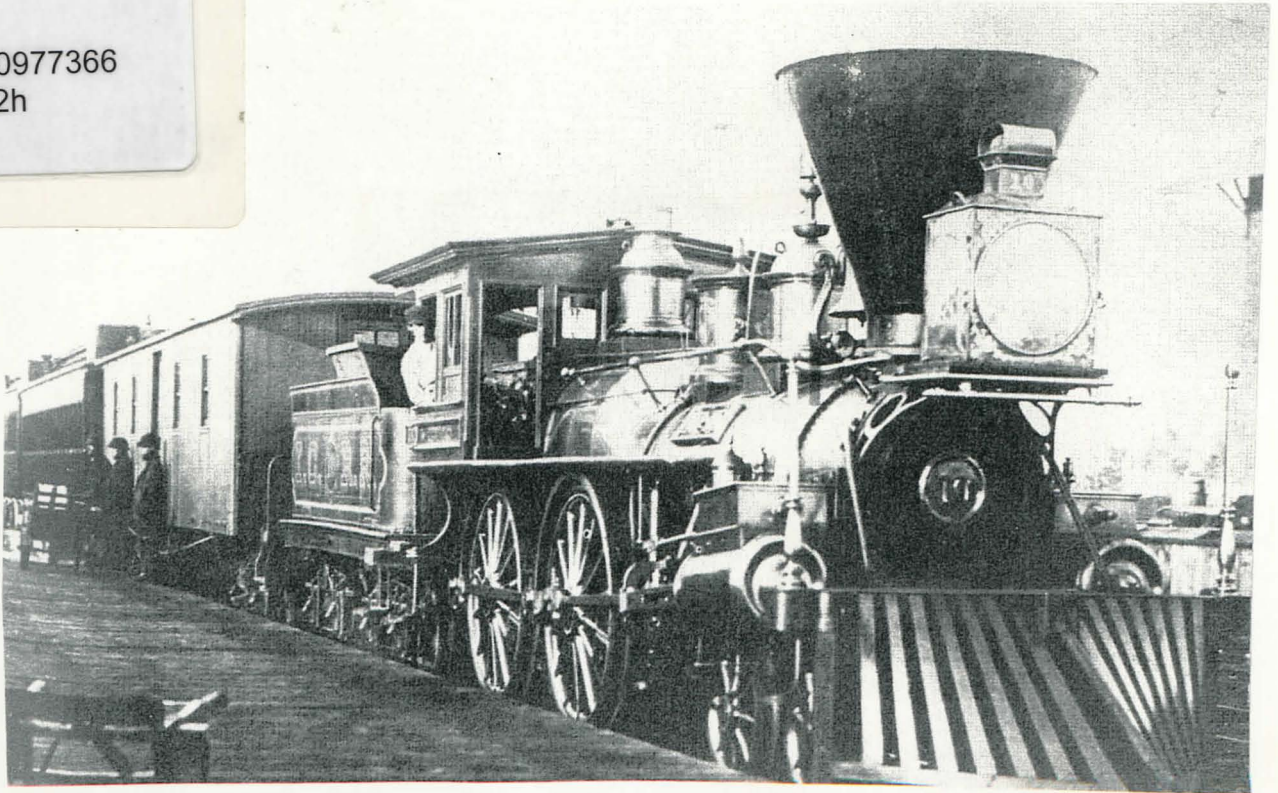


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THE HISTORY OF RAILROADS IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY



**THE HISTORY OF RAILROADS IN
CHAMPAIGN COUNTY**

*The Key to the Settlement and
Development of the County*

By
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Price = \$25

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2007

PREFACE

I have been deeply interested in railroads since I was a youngster. Trains have been an avocation and I have built numerous model train layouts since the 1930s. My interest in railroads also led to decades of taking photographs of trains and their facilities.

After I retired as Chief of the Illinois State Water Survey in 1986, I had more time to devote to railroading. This led to the preparation of several articles that were published in various railroad journals. Then in 1989-1990, I wrote a book about the busy railroading in central Illinois named "America's Rural Hub." Subsequent books were authored. One was about railroads in southern Illinois, and another about rail bridges in and around Illinois. A fourth book focused on Illinois communities with several rail lines and junctions busy with many train passages.

My knowledge of coal mining, based on being raised in the southern Illinois coal mine region, led to a book about railroads and coal. The summer of 2001 had an unusual train situation. Amtrak's Texas Eagle was diverted from its usual line to the Illinois Central line from Springfield to Gilman, and this became the topic of my sixth book. Then, my career as a weather scientist led me to prepare a book about how weather affects railroading in the U.S. This was published by the American Meteorological Society and subsequently won an award by an international librarian association.

This book about railroads in Champaign County is my eighth one. It is devoted to railroads in an area I have lived in since I began attending the University of Illinois in 1947. A reader will find that the railroads have had a major influence on the county over the past 150 years.

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FRONT COVER: The top photograph is of an Illinois Central passenger train, as seen in 1870 in Champaign. The lower photograph is of the northbound "City of New Orleans" entering Champaign in 2004 and passing the new terminal (left) and the older station (right) built in 1924-1925.

REAR COVER: Passengers are boarding an Illinois Terminal car ready for its westbound move from Urbana to Danville in June 1930.

CHAPTER ONE

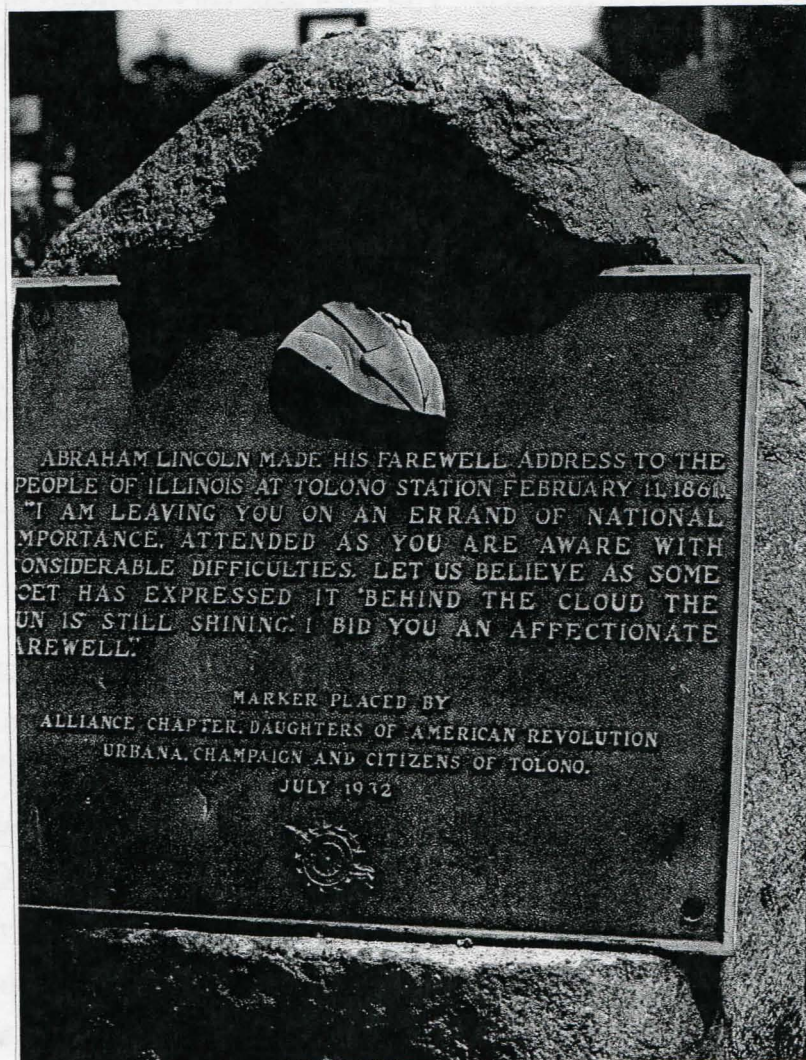
Introduction

Railroads have played a singular role in the history of the Midwest. In 1850 central Illinois was largely a swampy sea of prairie grasses without farms and most of the land was federally owned. The rich soils were very poorly drained, forming essentially a marsh most of the year. The area was very difficult to traverse on foot or horseback and nearly impossible to settle and farm. The few meandering moraines left by the Wisconsin Glacial period had slightly higher and drier elevations and were the only places where men on horseback or wagons could cross the sea of grass.

In 1850 Illinois politicians, including Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, pressured the federal government to agree to give Federal lands to the State of Illinois. These lands would be used as a financial incentive, through state-issued charters to companies, to build railroads. Financiers would put up the cash to build a railroad, and in turn, they got vast amounts of land to sell along their railroad's right-of-way. President Fillmore signed in 1850 legislation so that states could issue charters of federal lands, and the State of Illinois chartered the Illinois Central in 1851. It gave the proposed owners 4,060 square miles of land, nearly 10 percent of Illinois..

Since 1830, state leaders had sought a "central" railroad that would penetrate the unsettled central region of the state. The plan for the Illinois Central Railroad called for rails stretching from Cairo straight north to La Salle and then on to Galena with its rich lead mines. In 1851, Senator Douglas, who owned lands south of Chicago, got a change in the federal land charter for the "Illinois Central Railroad". The change was an agreement to also construct a "branch line" from Chicago south through east central Illinois and on to a junction with the main north-south line at a point in southern Illinois. This junction later became "Centralia," a town named after the railroad. The final federal land charter for the IC Railroad called for 702 miles of railroad to be built in five years, 1851-1856. If not done on time, the financiers lost their investment to the state. When completed, the IC would become the nation's longest railroad.

This set the stage for Champaign County's first railroad. IC track layers followed the survey crew that established a straight but slightly angular line from Kankakee southward, aiming for Centralia which was 280 miles away. Track laying reached Kankakee by 1853, and the surveyors, after scouting further south, reported to the owners that "the lands south of Kankakee are wild and unpopulated".



One of Illinois' great historic moments involved railroading in Champaign County. Shown is a plaque dedicated to Abraham Lincoln who gave his famous farewell speech to Illinois at Tolono when his train going east for his inauguration as President stopped there in February 1861. The stone-mounted plaque is in Tolono.

The construction of the Illinois Central and other railroads was a key factor in getting Champaign County settled and developed. Between 1854 and 1875 several rail lines were built through the county, and each led to the development of several small towns and one large (Champaign) community. Farming developed throughout the county during this era, creating a need for freight service for supplies and for shipping farm products. Trains also were the only means of reliable personal travel from 1852 to 1910, and passenger trains operated frequently. Some credit the state's selection of Champaign-Urbana as home for the University of Illinois due to the presence of the Illinois Central.

The importance of the railroads began to change after 1910 with the advent of autos and the construction of hard roads. The railroad scene in Champaign County grew in many ways from 1910 to 1950. Thereafter, railroad conditions began changing and declining. Train service shifted downwards over time, and some of the county's existing rail lines were removed. However, in the 1990s a rejuvenation of nation's railroads began, leading to rail developments and more trains through Champaign County.

This document describes the 150-year history of the railroads in Champaign County. There have been four eras: the development era, a growth era, an era of decline, and then an era of rail rejuvenation.

HOMES FOR THE INDUSTRIOUS

IN THE GARDEN STATE OF THE WEST.



THE ILLINOIS CENTRAL RAILROAD CO., HAVE FOR SALE
1,200,000 ACRES OF RICH FARMING LANDS,
 In Tracts of Forty Acres and upward on Long Credit and at Low Prices.

The attention of the enterprising and industrious portion of the community is directed to the following statements and liberal inducements offered them by the

ILLINOIS CENTRAL RAILROAD COMPANY, which, as they will perceive, will enable them, by proper energy, perseverance and industry, to provide comfortable homes for themselves and families, with, comparatively speaking, very little capital.

LANDS OF ILLINOIS.

No State in the Valley of the Mississippi offers so great an inducement to the settler as the State of Illinois. There is no portion of the world where all the conditions of climate and soil so admirably combine to produce these two great staples, **CORN and WHEAT,** as the Prairie of Illinois.

EASTERN AND SOUTHERN MARKETS.

These lands are contiguous to a railroad 700 miles in length, which connects with other roads and navigable lakes and rivers, thus affording an unbroken communication with the Eastern and Southern markets.

RAILROAD SYSTEM OF ILLINOIS.

Over \$100,000,000 of private capital have been expended on the railroad system of Illinois. Inasmuch as part of the income from several of these works, with a valuable public fund in lands, go to diminish the State expenses; the **TAXES ARE LIGHT,** and must consequently every day decrease.

THE STATE DEBT.

The State debt is only \$10,106,398 14, and within the last three years has been reduced \$2,969,746 80, and we may reasonably expect that in ten years it will become extinct.

PRESENT POPULATION.

The State is rapidly filling up with population; 868,026 persons having been added since 1850, making the present population 1,723,093, a ratio of 102 per cent. in ten years.

AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS.

The Agricultural Products of Illinois are greater than those of any other State. The products sent out during the past year exceeded 1,600,000 tons. The wheat crop of 1860 approaches

Pamphlets descriptive of the lands, soil, climate, productions, prices, and terms of payment, can be had on application to

J. W. FOSTER, Land Commissioner,
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS.

For the name of the Towns, Villages and Cities situated upon the Illinois Central Railroad, see pages 168, 169 and 190 Appleton's Railway Guide.

35,000,000 bushels, while the corn crop yields not less than 140,000,000 bushels.

FERTILITY OF THE SOIL.

Nowhere can the industrious farmer secure such immediate results for his labor as upon these prairie soils, they being composed of a deep rich loam, the fertility of which is unsurpassed by any on the globe.

TO ACTUAL CULTIVATORS.

Since 1854 the Company have sold 1,200,000 acres. They sell only to actual cultivators, and every contract contains an agreement to cultivate. The road has been constructed through these lands at an expense of \$30,000,000. In 1850 the population of forty-nine counties, through which it passes, was only 235,578 since which 479,293 have been added; making the whole population 814,871, a gain of 143 per cent.

EVIDENCES OF PROSPERITY.

As an evidence of the thrift of the people, it may be stated that 600,000 tons of freight, including 3,600,000 bushels of grain, and 250,000 barrels of flour were forwarded over the line last year.

PRICES AND TERMS OF PAYMENT.

The prices of these lands vary from \$6 to \$25 per acre, according to location, quality, &c. First class farming lands sell for about \$10 to \$12 per acre; and the relative expense of subdividing prairie land as compared with wood land is in the ratio of 1 to 10 in favor of the former. The terms of sale for the bulk of these lands will be

ONE YEAR'S INTEREST IN ADVANCE,

at six per cent per annum, and six interest notes at six per cent, payable respectively in one, two, three, four, five and six years from date of sale; and four notes for principal, payable in four, five, six and seven years from date of sale; the contract stipulating that one-fourth of the tract purchased shall be fenced and cultivated, each and every year, for five years from date of sale, so that at the end of five years one-half shall be fenced and under cultivation.

TWENTY PER CENT. WILL BE DEDUCTED

from the valuation for cash, except the same should be at six dollars per acre, when the cash price will be five dollars.

The construction of the huge Illinois Central Railroad, planned as having 700 miles of track across Illinois, required a huge labor force that ultimately totaled 10,000 men. To get these laborers and potential buyers of the company lands, the railroad builders used this advertisement widely published in East Coast newspapers in the 1850s.

CHAPTER TWO

Railroad Development Era: 1854-1910

The Illinois Central built the first rail line into the county in early 1854, and the first train from Chicago arrived in December 1854. At that time, there were only two communities in the county, Urbana with 210 residents and Homer with 50 (Fig. 1). The entire county had only 480 families. The IC's chief engineer, famed Roswell B. Mason, designed the Chicago to Centralia line as a straight line with a south-southwest orientation running through Kankakee and Champaign County. This design had the line passing about three miles west of Urbana. This track location with a depot to access Urbana patrons, ultimately led to a development of a new town, named West Urbana. By 1855 West Urbana had 100 residents (Fig. 1); by 1857, the population had grown to 1,500, and in 1860 West Urbana was re-named Champaign.

In the years immediately after the line was constructed through the county in 1854, the IC sold the lands it owned alongside the right-of-way. The IC organizers and financiers had received the federal charter to build the Illinois Central Railroad. Their payback and profit-making for the construction and equipment costs of the railroad was the awarding of six miles of federal land alongside each mile of track built, plus a 200-foot wide right-of-way for the tracks. This was the method designed to pay the financiers back. Thus, the IC had received about 260 square miles of federal lands in Champaign County to sell, and the price they charged ranged from \$10 to \$12 per acre. Many of 10,000 workers who had been imported to Illinois to build the IC remained and purchased some of the lands. Many of them were from Europe, but hundreds had died during the 5-year construction period.

The IC chose to build a rail yard and engine servicing facilities in Champaign, in what is now the downtown area. In the early years, they had trouble with water and flooding since the line crossed a somewhat swampy area in the new Champaign town, and poor drainage existed into what is now known as Boneyard Creek. The IC used a wooden building named the Doane House as the local depot, and then in 1898, built a brick depot. A large brick freight station had been built in 1893.

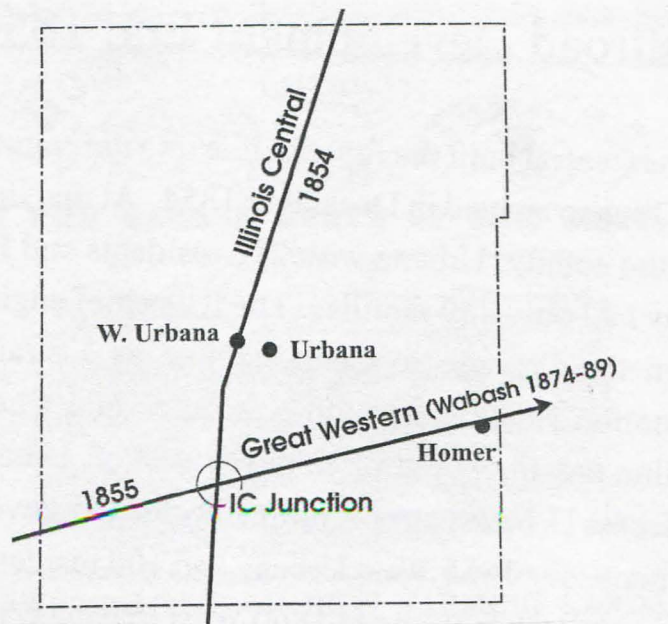
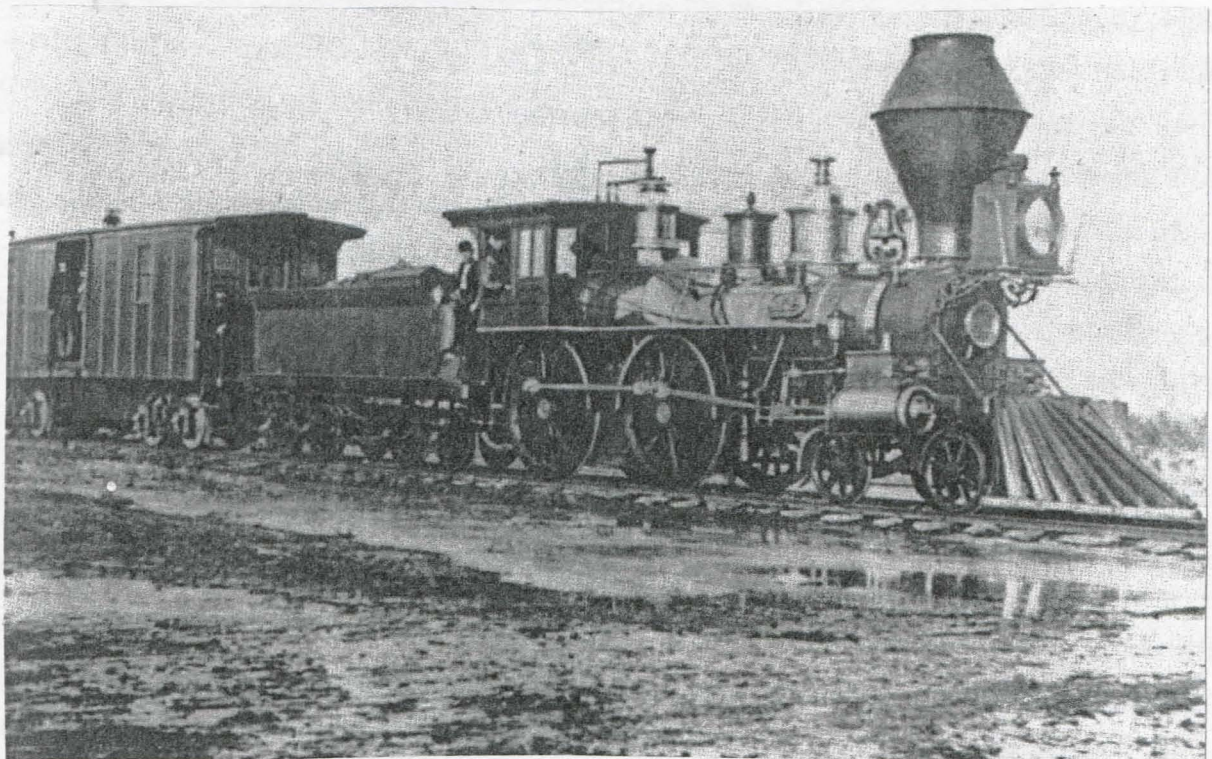


Figure 1. The first railroads were built into Champaign County during the 1850s.



One of the first engines to operate on the IC. It burned wood, and had been brought to Chicago from a New Jersey factory on a boat traveling on the Great Lakes. Its wheel arrangement is 4-4-0.

Elevators and towns sprung up every 5 or 6 miles along the IC line as well as along the other railroads subsequently built in the county. Some took on names of the railroad owners. Towns that developed along the IC line after 1854 included Ludlow, Rantoul (both named after two of the IC's nine founding fathers), Thomasboro, Savoy, Tolono, and Pesotum. The rapid growth in business after 1860, including the hauling of southern Illinois coal beginning in 1905, led the IC to double track its main line from Chicago south to New Orleans during 1901-1910.

Shortly after the IC line had been built across the county in 1854, another railroad built its line across the county. The Great Western Railway, which was building a railroad east from Springfield to join another railroad in Indiana, laid its west-east oriented rails across the county during 1855 (Fig.1). Their tracks crossed the IC line 10 miles south of West Urbana at "Illinois Junction." The community that developed there was named Tolono. President-elect Abraham Lincoln rode the Great Western on his way to Washington, D.C., in 1860, and he gave a famed farewell speech in Tolono. It was the last time he would speak in his beloved Illinois. Other county towns that developed along this line included Sidney, Philo, Sadorus, and Ivesdale. In 1874, the Great Western became a mainline of the Wabash Railroad, a major national rail system.

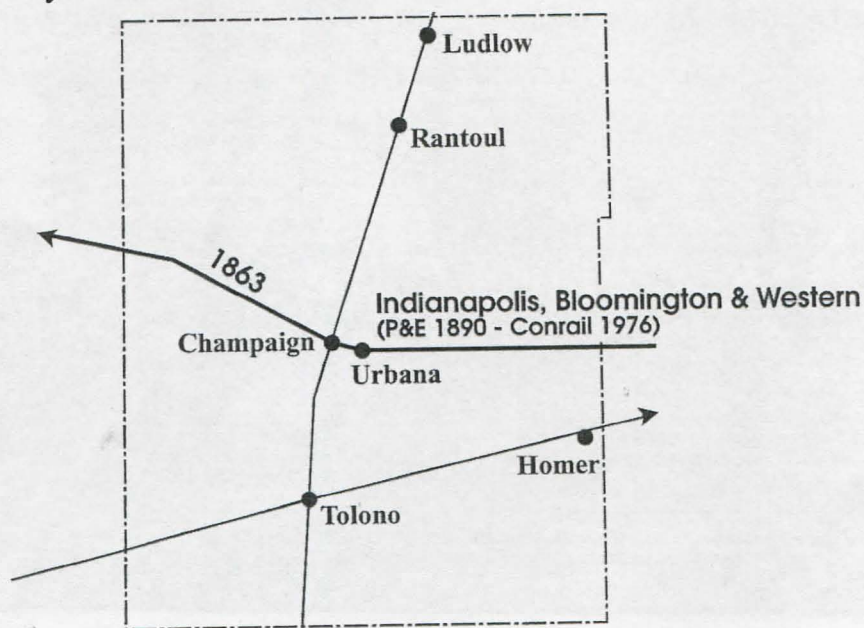
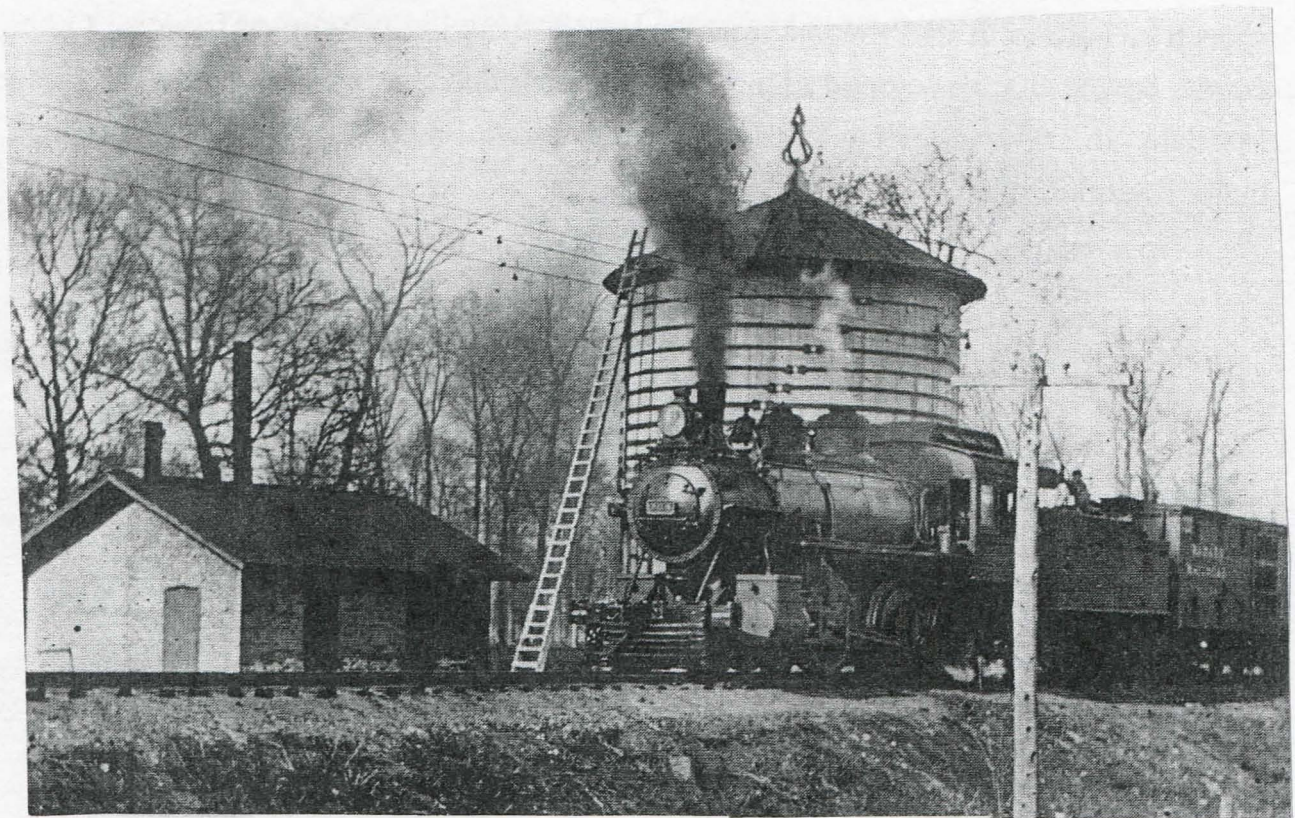


Figure 2. The railroads in Champaign County during the 1860s.

The Indianapolis, Bloomington, and Western became the third railroad built in the county. The IB&W was constructed west from Indianapolis in the early 1860s (Fig.2), a time during the Civil War. Its tracks were laid across Champaign County in 1863, and the line went through north Urbana and changed orientation to go west-northwest through the north side of Champaign and onto Bloomington. The IB&W built small wooden depots in Champaign and in Urbana. It helped make Urbana a railroad town by building major rail yards there. Small farm towns developed along the IB&W, including St. Joseph and Ogden to the east, and Mahomet to the west. In 1890, new owners named the IB&W the Ohio, Indiana & Western Railroad. In turn, it was quickly sold and re-organized in 1890 as the Peoria & Eastern, a railroad subsequently leased to the Big Four Railroad, then a large Midwestern rail system.

Railroads kept being built in the county at a rapid pace during the 1870s, seeking to reach into the remaining unsettled territories and reap the profits of new



A westbound train on the Wabash Railroad has stopped for water at Sadorus in 1913, at a place where the line crossed the Kaskaskia River. Note the decorative figurine mounted on the top of the water tank.

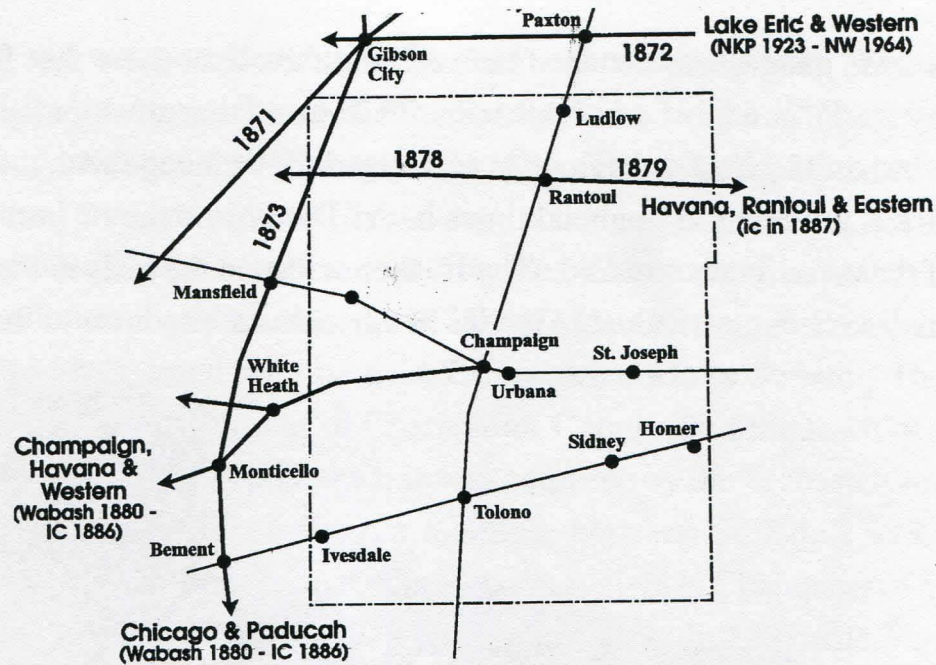
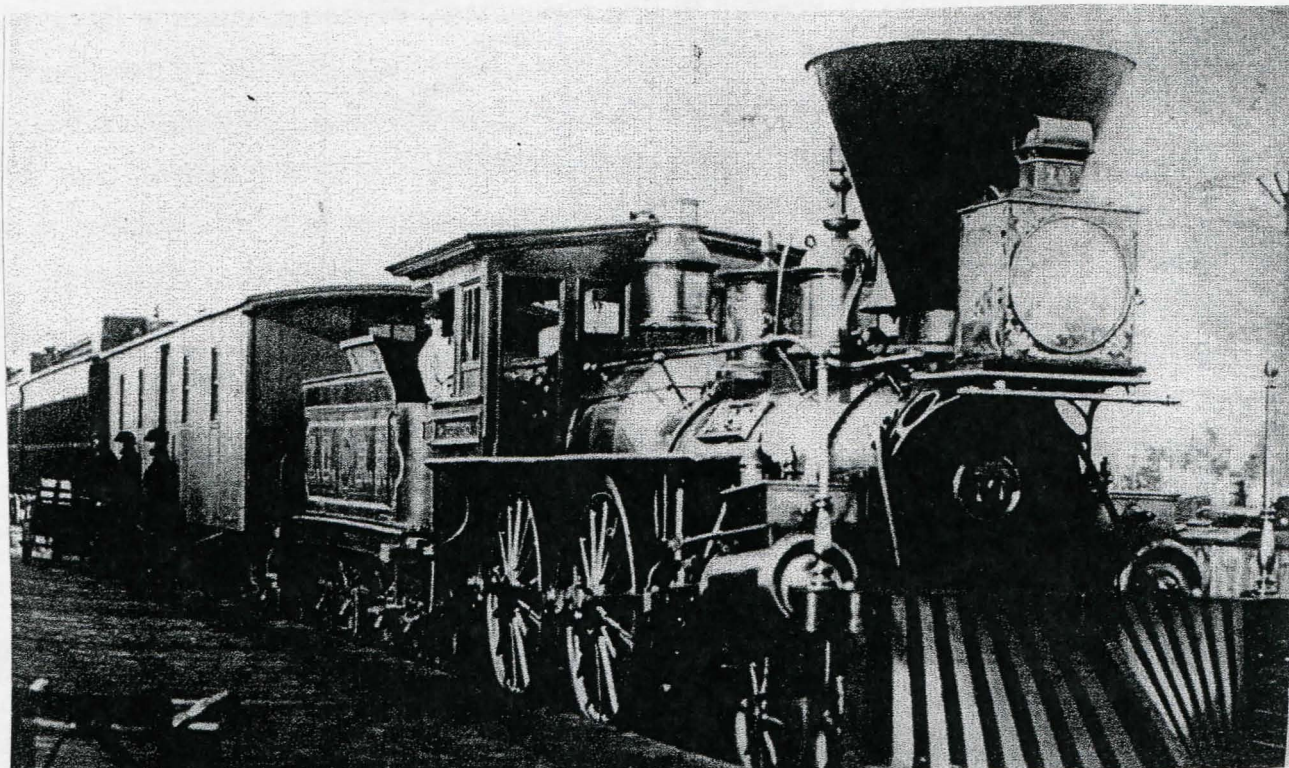


Figure 3. The railroads installed and built during the 1870s in Champaign County.

settlements and ensuing business. Grain elevators, which still remain as structural sentinels in the prairies of central Illinois, sprang up every 5 to 6 miles along the new rail lines. This distance resulted because travel over muddy roads in a horse-pulled wagon from a farm to the elevator and back home in one day typically could not cover more than 5 to 6 miles, necessitating the close spacing of elevators. Towns developed around most elevators, and the railroads built depots at each town to handle passengers and freight shipments. Another signature of the railroads is still found in many local communities that developed along the angular railroad lines. The street alignments close to the tracks are at the same angles as the tracks, as can be found in downtown Champaign, Tolono, and many other Illinois communities.

In 1872 John Gifford, a Rantoul banker, organized a group of Rantoul businessmen to plan and build an east-west railroad through Rantoul. They got a government charter in 1873 to help finance the line. The line was built west to Leroy in 1878 and east into Indiana in 1879 (Fig. 3). It was named the Havana, Rantoul & Eastern. Small towns developed along this new line and they were named after the Rantoul funding fathers, including Gifford, Fisher, Penfield, Dewey, and Armstrong. Since their resources were limited, the owners chose to build their line with a narrow

3-foot wide gauge, less distance between the rails than the 4 feet 8.5 inches width used by the IC and most other railroads. This meant that all shipments on the HR&E had to be hand loaded and unloaded at Rantoul for exchange with the IC. As a result, the HR&E fell on hard financial times in the 1880s, and the IC purchased it in 1887 at half the price it cost to build. The IC then widened the rails to the standard gauge and the line became a valuable feeder of agricultural products to the IC.



One of the Illinois Central's first coal-burning steam engines, seen pulling a passenger train into Champaign in 1872. The IC shifted from wood to coal because coal was cheaper and more efficient.

The 1870s saw the initiation of another locally funded railroad. This new railroad, organized by Champaign-Urbana businessmen, had received a federal charter in 1861. But the Civil War intervened and after the war local finances were short. The railroad was finally built west from Champaign during 1871-1872 (Fig. 3). The owners were ambitious and named the new railroad the Champaign, Havana & Western. The communities of Bondville and Seymour developed along this westward line in Champaign County. Bondville was named after one of the line's local financiers, Louis Bond. Ultimately, this new rail line went west to Clinton and

on to Havana and was completed in 1873. A branch was built from White Heath to Decatur, and it became nicknamed the "Peanut Line." The Wabash bought the CH&W in 1880, and then the IC bought it in 1886. This added further service to the rural agricultural areas of central Illinois.

The rapid expansion of railroads during the 1870s made Illinois the rail capital of the U.S., an honor it still retains. In 1873-1874 the Chicago & Paducah Railway built a north-south oriented rail line from Effingham north to Streator. The rail line went across the northwest corner of Champaign County, and the town of Foosland developed there (Fig. 3). In 1880, the line was acquired by the Wabash Railroad, and this line became part of the Wabash's mainline between St. Louis and Chicago. Then, to gain access to the business and potential travelers in Champaign-Urbana, the Wabash built a branch line from Sidney to the twin cities in 1881 (see Fig. 4).

In 1887 the Chicago & Eastern Illinois Railroad began building a main line southwest from Danville. It had two destinations: one was St. Louis and the other was deep southern Illinois. In 1888 the line was built through the southeastern corner of Champaign County, and the towns of Broadlands and Longview developed along

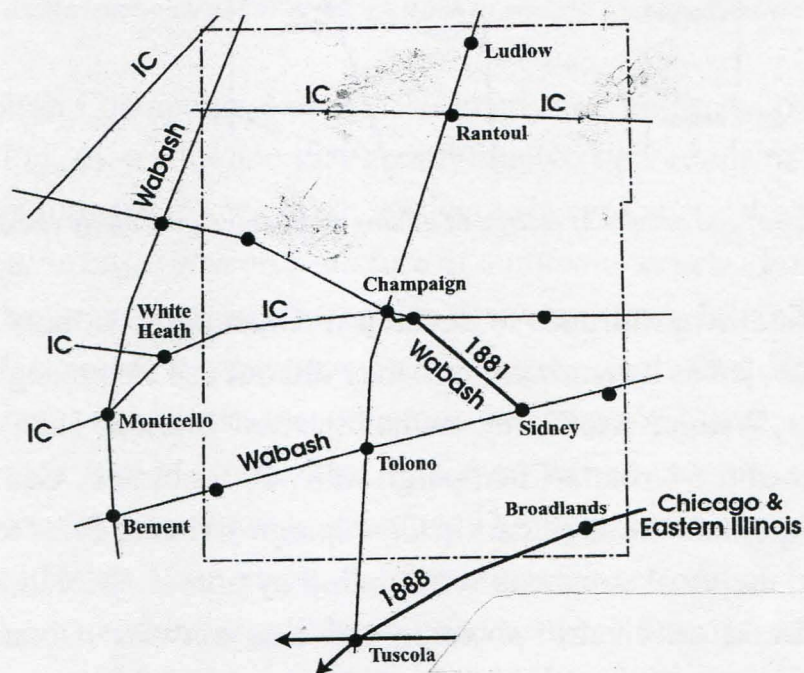


Figure 4. The railroads in Champaign County during the 1880s.

its route. As shown in figure 4, this line and the Sidney-Urbana branch of the Wabash (1881) ended rail construction in the county for 15 years.

In 1902 the Frisco Railroad gained control of the C&EI, and it sought a faster route from its home base in St. Louis to Chicago. It chose to build a 60-mile long rural bypass of Danville. This straight rail line was built from Woodland, located just south of Watseka, to Villa Grove during 1903-1904 (Fig. 5), and it was labeled as the "Woodland Cutoff". It crossed through the eastern part of Champaign County. The towns of Royal and Dailey developed along this new rail line.

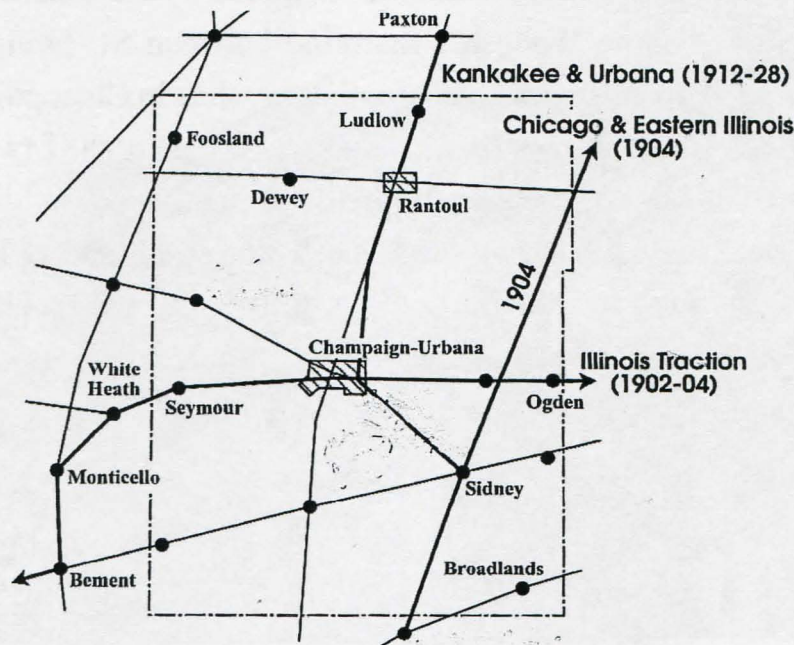
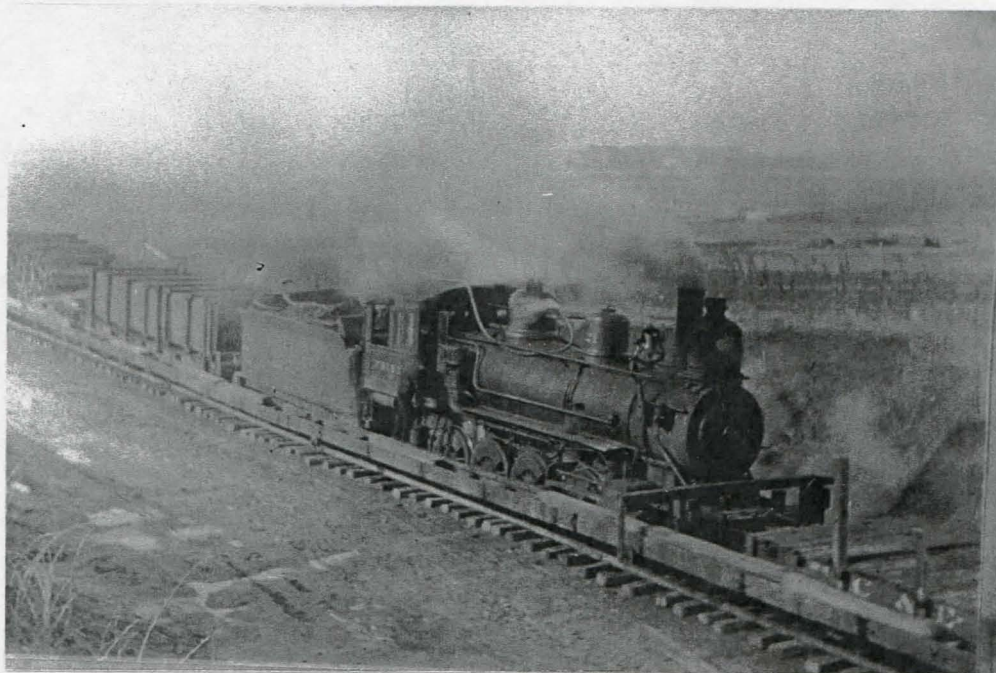


Figure 5. The final decade of railroad building in Champaign County came during the 1900s.

The final two railroads to develop in Champaign County were both electric-powered, labeled as interurbans, and they did not use steam engines. A Champaign entrepreneur, William McKinley, owned the new (built in 1885) Champaign power plant as part of the Urbana-Champaign Railway Electric & Gas Company that also owned and operated the streetcars in Champaign-Urbana. Prior to the building of the power plant, the local streetcars were pulled by horses. McKinley raised the funds needed to build an electric-powered rail line between Champaign-Urbana and Danville, named the Danville, Urbana & Champaign. This new 34-mile railroad was

built in 1903, and provided frequent passenger cars (interurbans) between the two communities. The railroad also built a branch from Ogden south to Homer in 1905 to allow access the resort environment there.



A Frisco engine pulls a construction train used to lack track in eastern Champaign County during 1904.

To get through Champaign-Urbana, the interurban trains ran on the existing streetcar tracks (Fig. 6), a situation that greatly limited operations of freight trains because there were numerous very sharp 90-degree curves at street crossings. The route through the twin cities was on a mixture of numerous streets. For example, an eastbound interurban train entering Champaign first came down John Street, and then went north on Neil Street to the downtown area, and the line's first depot was at the corner of Walnut and Main. From there the train went east on University Avenue to Third Street where it turned south. The train then turned east on a right-of-way parallel and just south of Springfield Avenue. The train went straight east to the Urbana depot at 120 West Main Street and from there on east out of Urbana.

McKinley built another interurban railroad between Springfield and Decatur in 1904, and then in 1906 formed another, the St. Louis, Decatur & Champaign

Railway. Its line from Decatur to Champaign, 51 miles, was started in 1906 and completed in 1907, and interurban cars were operating across the entire county by June 1907. The various electric railroads owned by McKinley were combined to form the Illinois Traction Railway. The ITR also offered rail service to St. Louis as well as to Decatur, Danville, Bloomington, and Springfield.

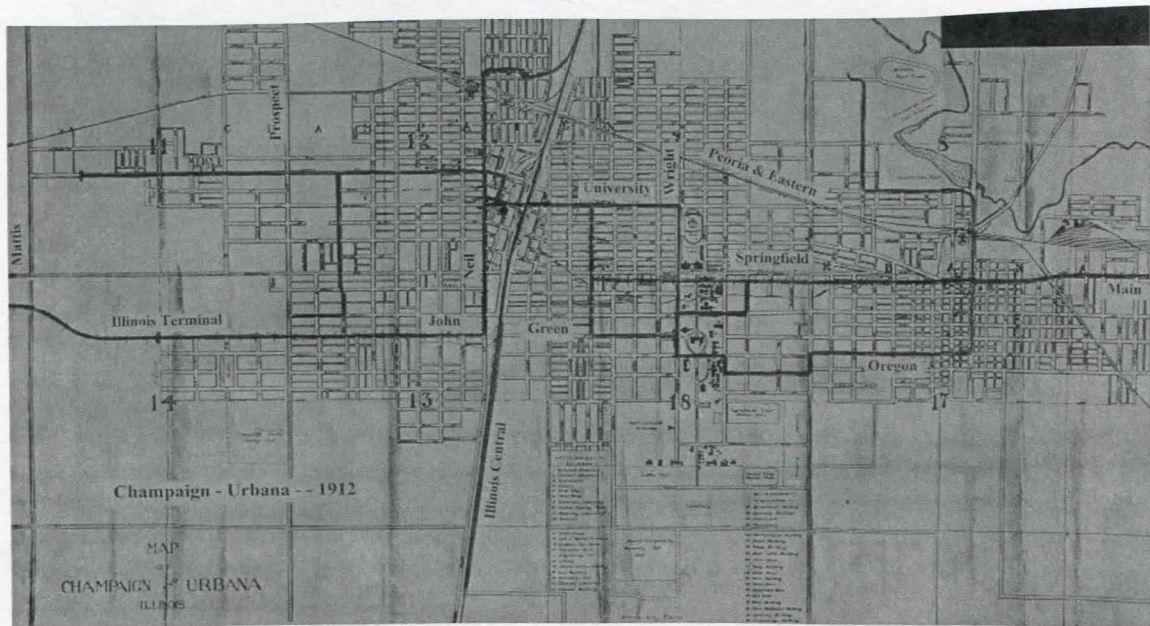
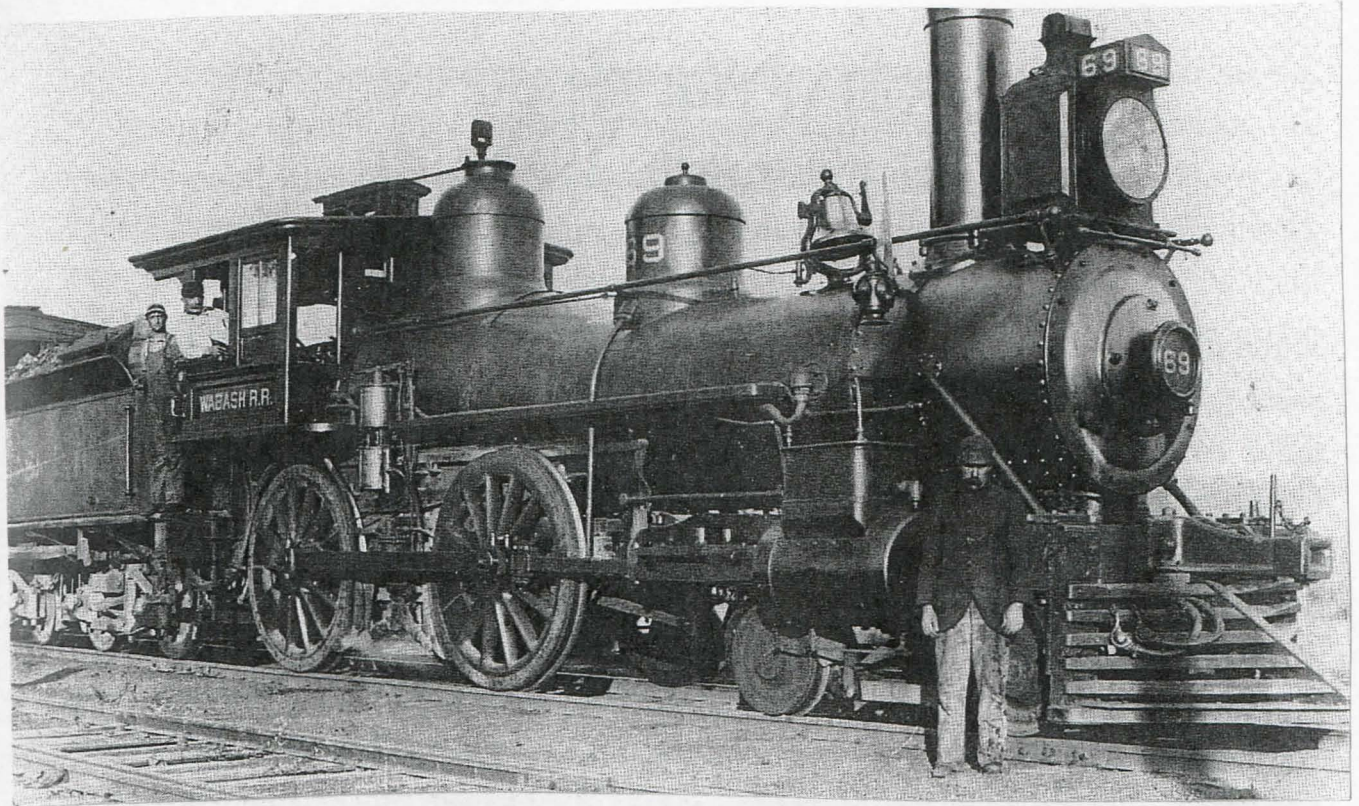
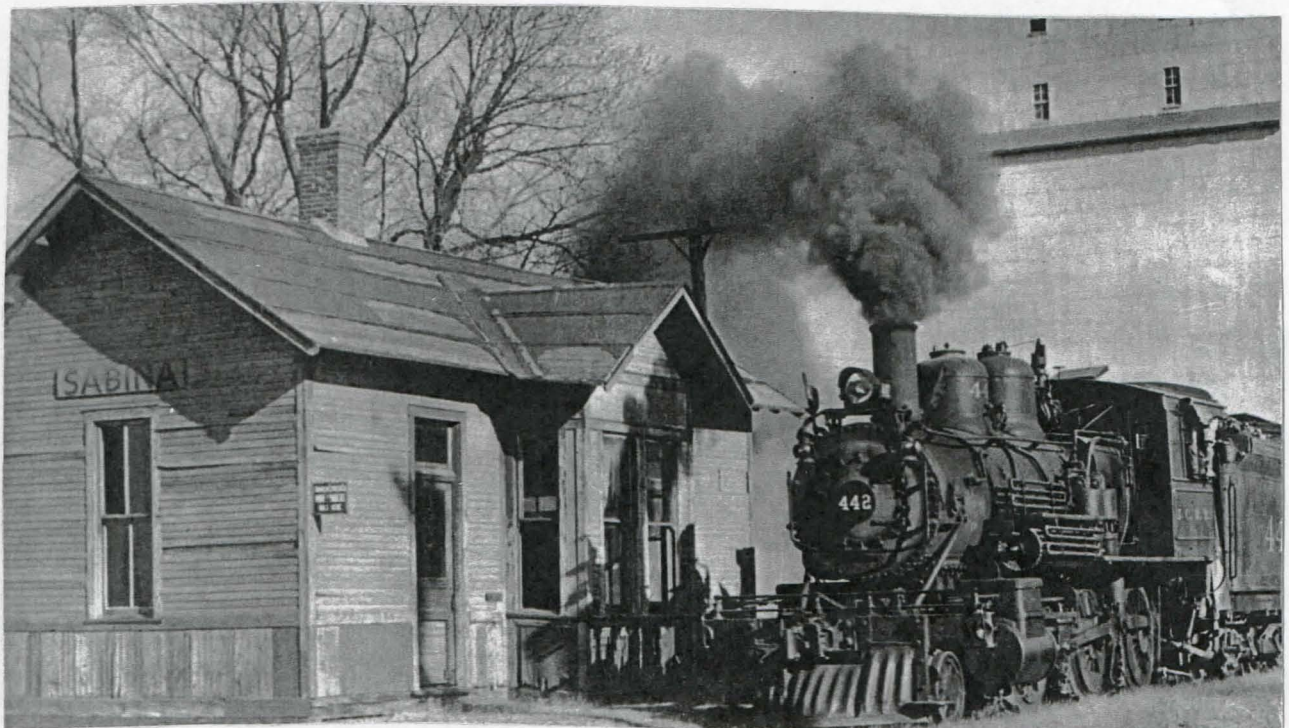


Figure 6. A map of Champaign-Urbana in 1912 showing the location of the streetcar tracks and those used by the Illinois Traction trains.

The other, and last railroad built in Champaign County, was named the Kankakee & Urbana Traction Company. It was built during 1911-1912 from downtown Urbana north through Thomasboro, Rantoul, Ludlow and on to Paxton. It never was built to Kankakee. Operations of its interurban cars began in 1913. The decline of business during the 1920s led to its demise, bankruptcy, and closure in 1928.



A Wabash engine with a 4-4-0 wheel arrangement is seen at Tolono in 1911.



A westbound local freight on the IC's branch line west of Rantoul is seen entering Sabina in 1912.

CHAPTER THREE

An Era of Growth: 1910-1950

The railroads of Champaign County offered opportunities to travel to all parts of the nation. In the hey days of railroad travel, there were endless options for passenger train travel from Champaign-Urbana. In 1930 the IC ran 16 passenger trains each day, 8 going north and 8 going south. These connected Champaign County to Chicago, Memphis, New Orleans, and Miami and all points in between. The Peoria and Eastern provided service on six passenger trains a day operating between Peoria and Indianapolis. The Illinois Terminal (re-named from Illinois Traction in 1928) in 1930 offered 16 cars a day to Decatur and Danville with 8 trains going on to Springfield and St. Louis. The Urbana branch of the Wabash had 8 passenger trains operating each day, allowing one to board in Champaign or Urbana, go to Sidney, and there catch trains for Kansas City, Detroit, St. Louis, or New York. Bigger steam engines and Midwestern industrial growth led to many more and longer freight trains operating through the county.



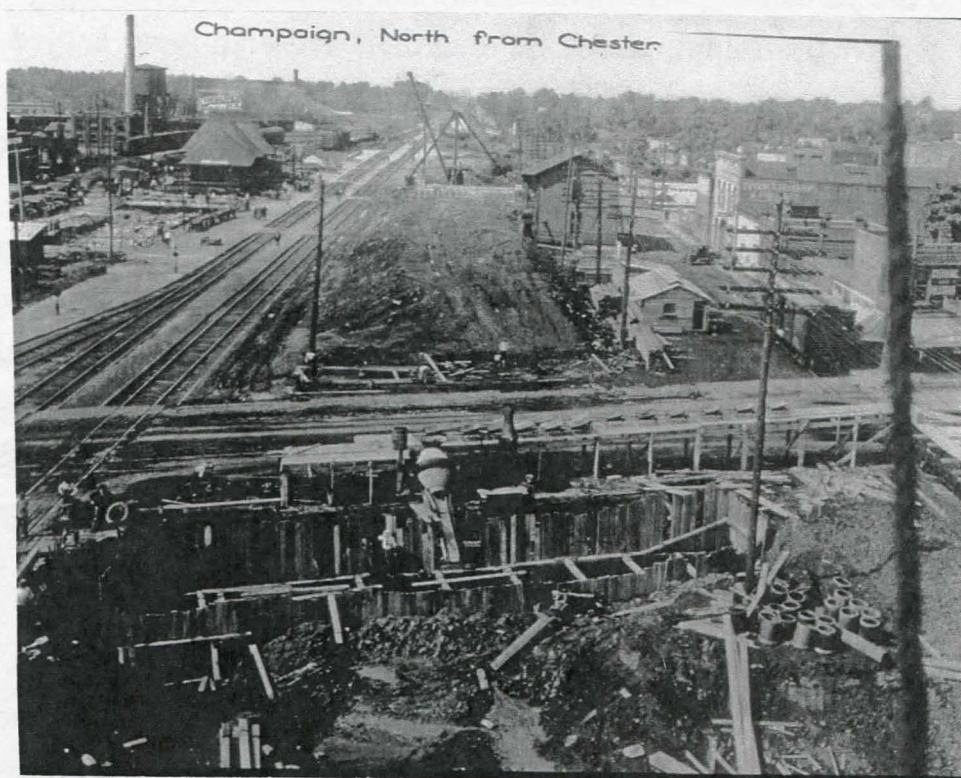
A view north of the IC station in Champaign as a crowd of travelers moves towards an in coming southbound train in 1913. Note the well decorated yard and garden on the south side of the station.

The IC Railroad made large sums of money during the 1910-1925 period. Profits were up and the company's leadership had funds to improve tracks, rail facilities, and stations. The IC's growth locally led to the need for much larger rail yards. Growth could not be accomplished around the existing yards in downtown Champaign since businesses had surrounded the existing yards. Hence, the IC built massive new rail yards and facilities north of Champaign in 1912-1913. The need for labor to build the yards and perform other railroad tasks, led the IC to import a large labor force from Mississippi, and they and their families were settled in north Champaign near the rail yards. The IC's greenhouse was retained in downtown Champaign so that the IC could continue to have flowers to decorate the tables in its dining cars.

The IC also decided to make Champaign, which was a major source of passenger traffic thanks to the university, a division center. A major new building designed in the Beaux Arts Classical style, was built to serve various operating needs of the railroad as well as to serve as a new and larger passenger station. Space was limited in the downtown area and to make room for the new station, the existing brick station was moved a few hundred feet north into the existing rail yard area during 1923. The beautiful new station was built during 1924 and 1925 and cost \$1.3 million.

The IC had two local-regional problems and found a solution to both. One was the fact that the east-west streets in Champaign were frequently blocked by their trains and there were many local complaints. Second, the mainline went up and over a large moraine ridge at Paxton, sufficiently high to require that many freight trains had to stop, cut their trains in half, and make two runs up the steep grade. The solution to these two problems was to raise the tracks through Champaign (from north of the new station) south through town to St. Marys Road, and to excavate a wide trench through the hill at Paxton and haul this enormous amount of earth to Champaign for the earthen fill needed to raise the tracks. The 35-foot deep rail cut at Paxton was dug during 1923-1924. Trains loaded with dirt were brought to Champaign, and there moved along the existing street-level tracks. They dumped their dirt loads along the east side of the rail line. The new tracks built on the fill

were done in early 1925, as were several underpasses for University, Springfield, and Green Streets. Then the old street-level rail lines were removed in 1925. Thus, the IC tracks were raised through Champaign by 1925, a major improvement for the community. The IC also built a new brick depot at Rantoul in 1925.



The excavation for building the underpass for University Avenue in preparation for elevating the IC mainline through Champaign. Dirt hauled from Paxton forms the base for future rail lines is seen to the north, and the re-located station is seen to the left alongside the street-level tracks, a scene from 1924.

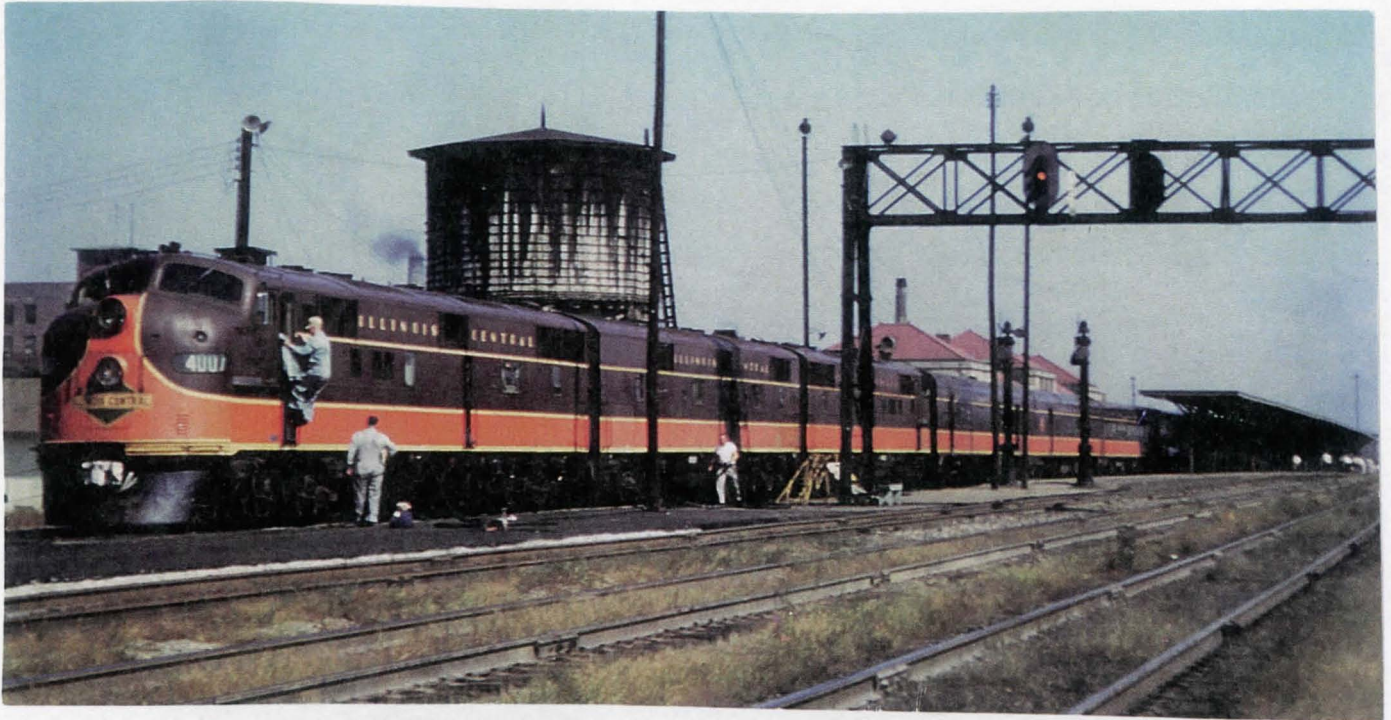
In the 1930s the IC was operating two local style passenger trains each day between Champaign and Decatur, but none were operated on the east-west line through Rantoul. However, by 1946 the operations of passenger trains going west out of Champaign had ended. A major train wreck occurred on the IC in downtown Champaign in 1936. A switching error led to a head-on collision of two freight trains, killing two persons.



The head-on collision of two IC freight engines occurred at 7 p.m. on December 3, 1936, in the area just north of the station in downtown Champaign, and spectators have gathered there the next day.

The use of steam engines on the IC had begun to end during the 1940s. Most IC passenger trains were powered by diesel engines by the early 1940s. By 1956 all use of steam engines for freight trains was ended and diesels replaced them. This led to the closure of the Champaign roundhouse and engine servicing facilities.

Several passenger trains were operated on the IC's mainline. For example, in 1945, 14 passenger trains went through the county each day, 7 southbound and 7 northbound. The named, more classy trains included the Panama Limited, City of New Orleans, City of Miami, Seminole, Louisiane, and Creole. The Illini was a train operated daily between Champaign and Chicago. The average fare was 2 cents per mile on most IC trains in 1940.



A view of the southbound "City of New Orleans" stopped for passengers at Champaign in 1946. The train is led by the new diesel engines the IC began acquiring in the early 1940s.



An IC steam engine wheels a freight south of Rantoul in 1938. The IC's use of steam engines ended in the 1950s.

Another special local feature provided by the railroads were "football specials". In the 1920s, and in keeping with the statewide growth of interest in University of Illinois football, the IC and ITR began operating special passenger trains from Chicago, Peoria, Decatur, and Springfield to Champaign. These trains carrying football fans would arrive before a game, park near the stadium, and depart after the game. As late as the 1950s, one could see 3 or 4 long passenger trains parked near the UI power plant on football Saturdays.

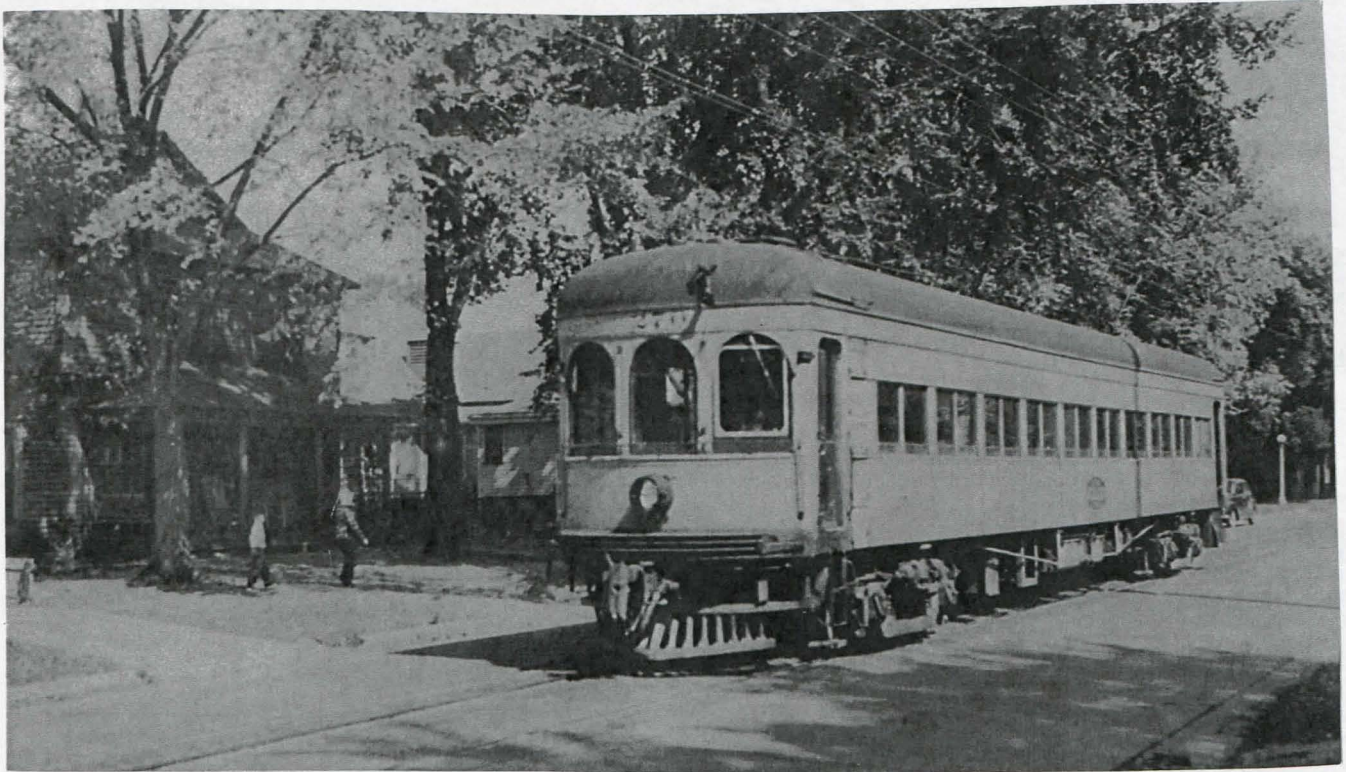


A series of football specials on the Illinois Terminal are parked in the campus area in 1936.

The IC also worked closely with the University of Illinois to help the state's agriculture grow. For example, in the 1920s when the UI agricultural experts wanted to promote interest in growing soybeans, the IC developed the famed "soybean train". It was a special series of cars containing all types of information about the crop with UI experts on board. The train traveled all over the state on the many IC lines showing Illinois farmers everything there was to know about soybeans.

The Danville, Urbana & Champaign Company became part of the Illinois Traction Company in 1923, McKinley's large network of electric interurban lines across central Illinois. The branch line from Ogden south to Homer was closed in

1928. The road was re-named as the Illinois Terminal Railway in 1928. McKinley's power and interurban companies during 1912 built a beautiful 3-story brick building in downtown Champaign, and from 1913 to 1927, the start of the belt line operations, it served as the Champaign depot and corporate headquarters. The ITR also built a freight house along the east side of Neil Street in Champaign in 1930.



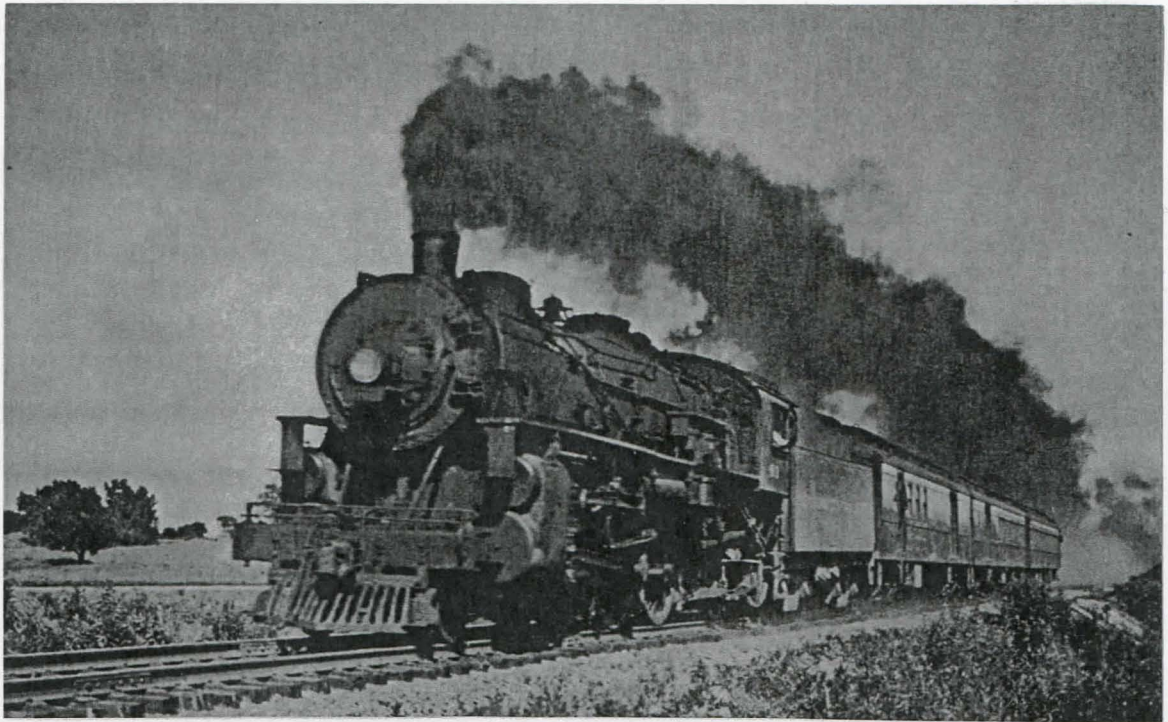
The Illinois Terminal's trains ran through Champaign-Urbana on city streets until the line was relocated in 1927. Here a westbound IT car heads down John Street.

The ITR had long been frustrated by the street-running of its trains through Champaign-Urbana. It slowed their trains and minimized the length of its freight trains. Hence, in 1927 the ITR developed a belt line around the north side of the two towns. It started just west of Champaign and consisted of a shift onto IC tracks and then running on IC tracks across the northern portions of Champaign. The ITR trains then used the Wabash tracks from downtown Champaign to Urbana, where the rails re-joined the ITR'S own rails on East Main. The ITR passenger cars used the small existing Wabash depots along this new bypass line.

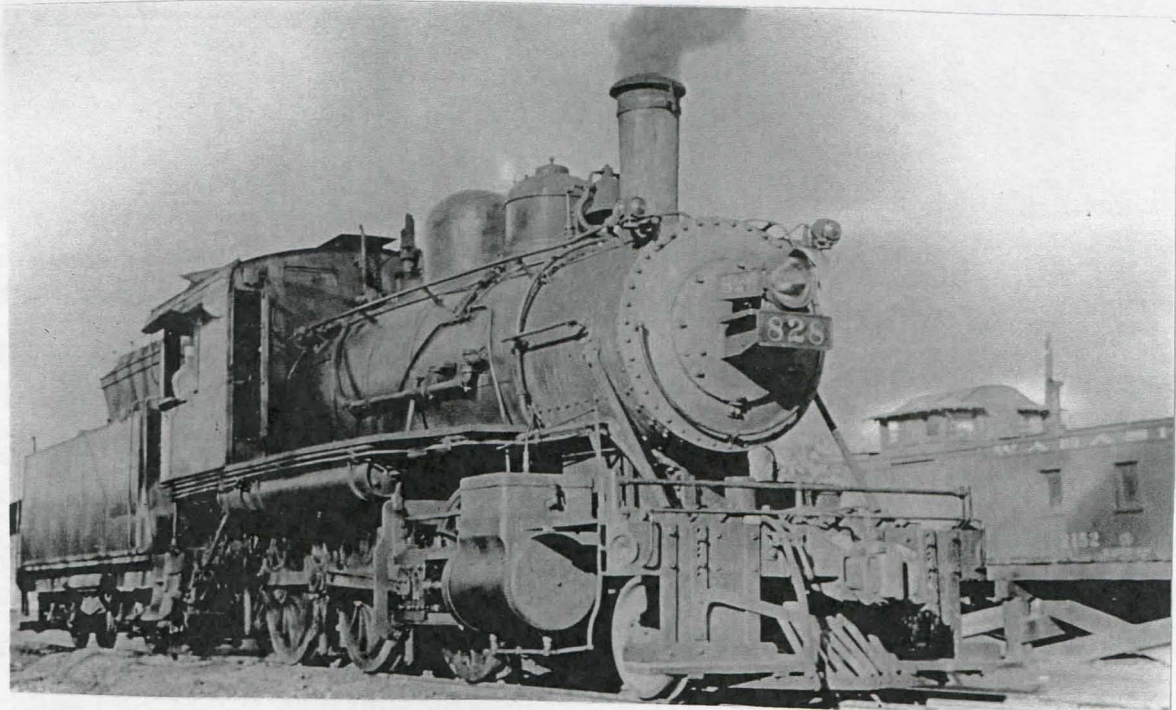


The station built by the Illinois Terminal in downtown Champaign in 1912. It also served as the ITR's main office building.

The Peoria & Eastern built a brick station in Urbana in 1928, and continued to operate its major rail yards in the north side of Urbana. Steam engines on their Peoria-Indianapolis trains were sometimes changed in Urbana. However, by 1953 use of steam engines on the P&E ended and they were replaced by diesel engines. The last passenger train operated on the P&E through the county occurred in 1957. The loss of steam engines and passenger trains led to a major reduction in the use of the Urbana rail yards. Many sidings were removed, as was the roundhouse.



The Peoria and Eastern's daily passenger train on its way from Peoria to Indianapolis is seen eastbound in the farmland west of Mahomet in 1932.



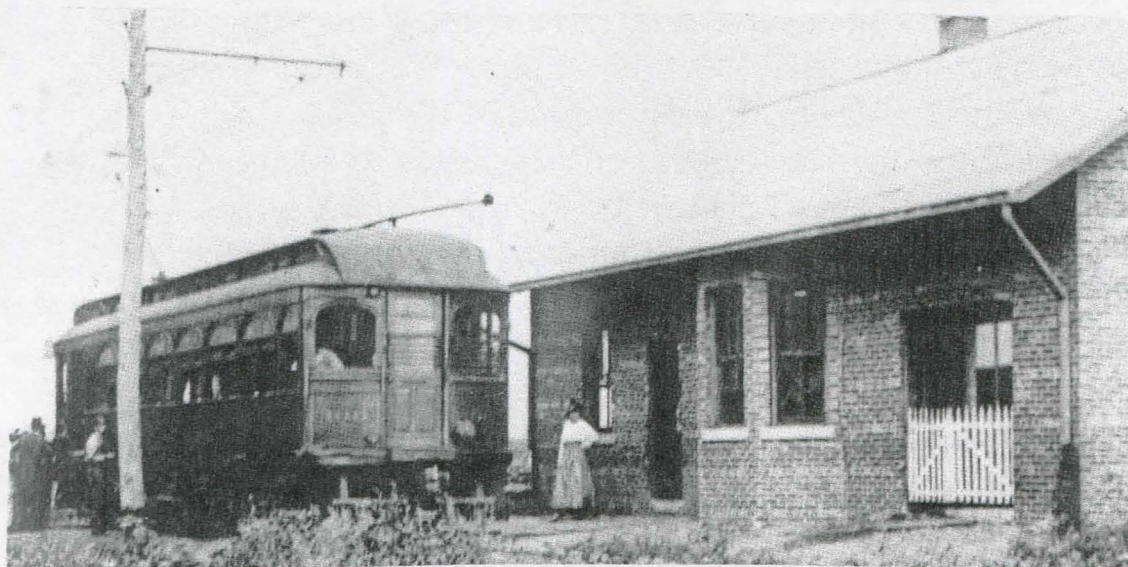
A Wabash steam engine with a 2-6-0 wheel arrangement, is switching cars in Tolono in 1918.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Era of Decline: 1951-1990

The continuing growth of use of autos and trucks and ever improving highways ate into the shipments by train and travel by train. After World War II, the decline in use of the railroads began in earnest. The advent of diesel engines also had a local impact by lessening the use of the IC and P&E rail yards for servicing of steam engines. Their roundhouses were both closed.

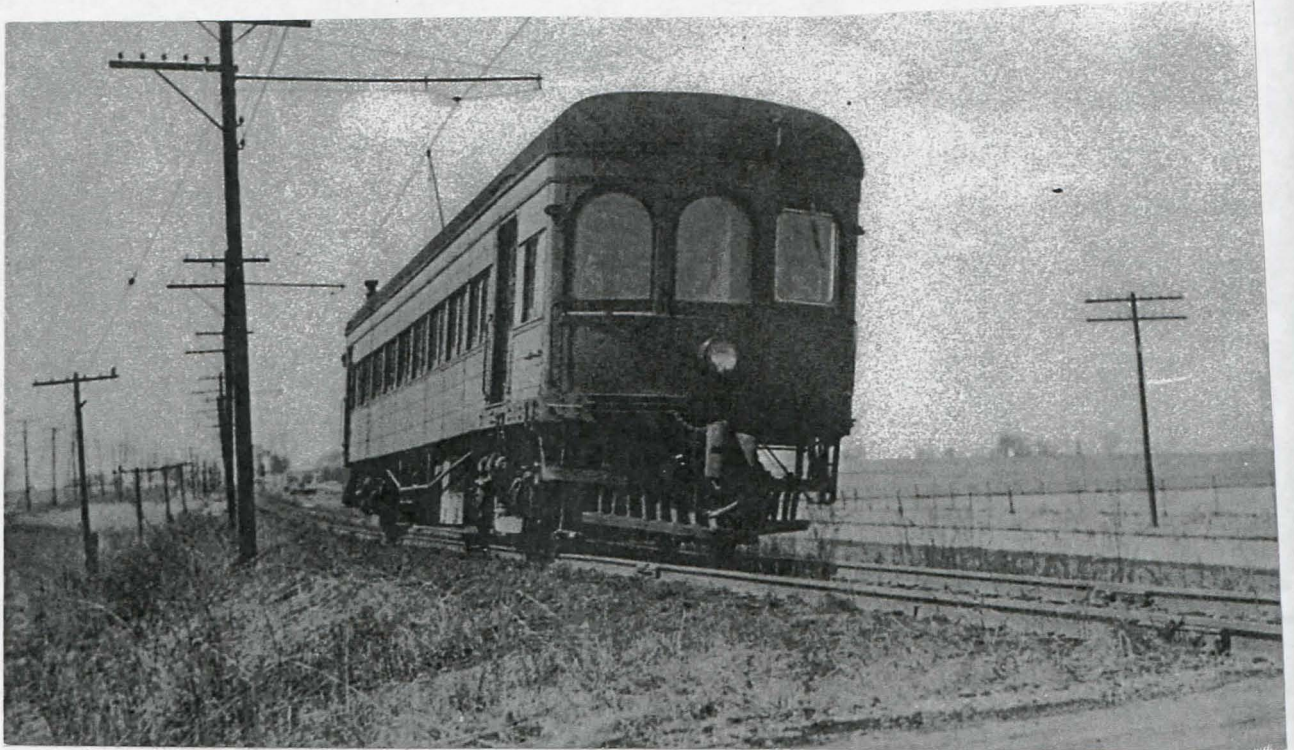
The last two railroads to be built in Champaign County, the ITR and K&U, which were both interurbans, were the first railroads to be closed. The K&U had closed in 1928.



A Kankakee & Urbana interurban car is stopped at its depot in Thomasboro in 1927, just a year before the line closed.

The Illinois Terminal began to experience major reductions in travelers after World War II. Hence, in 1952 the line from Urbana to Danville was cut back to DeLong, an elevator near Ogden, with no trains going to Danville. Only freight trains went east of Urbana after April 1952. In 1955 all ITR tracks east of Urbana were removed. In June 1955 the ITR stopped running passenger interurbans to

Champaign-Urbana with only ITR freight service between the twin cities and Decatur. In 1961 this line was finally closed, and the rails were removed from Champaign west to Decatur, ending all ITR service in the county.



One of the last ITR cars to operate into Champaign is seen moving east alongside Route 10 at the crossing of Duncan Road in 1955 in then rural area west of Champaign.

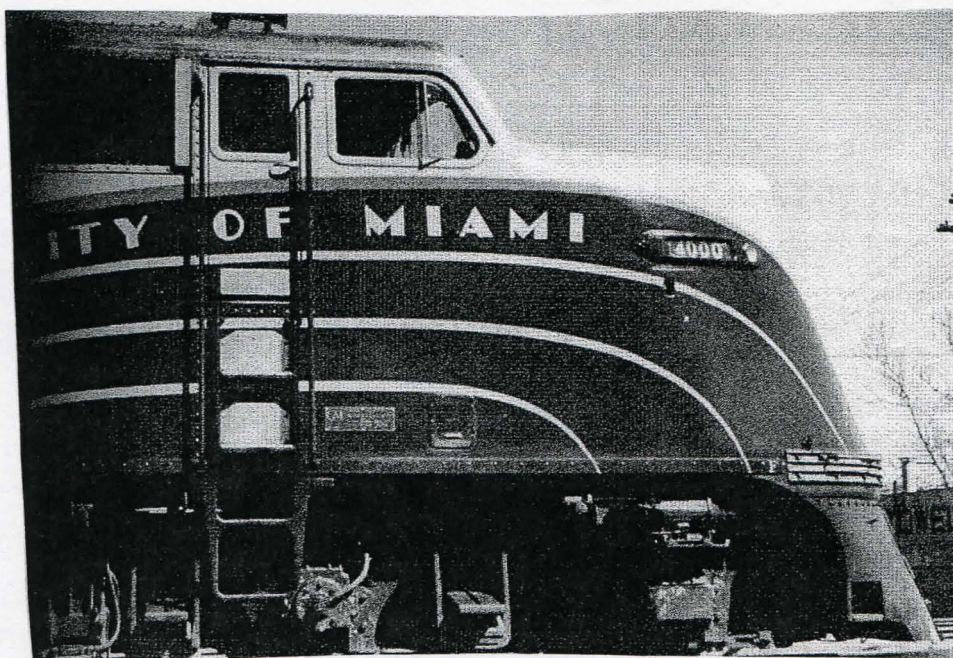
The down sizing of the railroads also led to line sales and mergers of many railroads. In 1967 the C&EI was purchased by the Missouri Pacific, which sought a St. Louis-Chicago connection. Then in 1982, the Union Pacific Railroad bought the MP. Passenger trains operating from Danville south to St. Louis and to southern Illinois were discontinued in the 1950s. The decline in freight shipments along the Villa Grove-Danville line led the MP to close the Danville-Sidell section of this line in 1971. The grain business at elevators between Villa Grove and Sidell was sufficient for the UP to continue local freight operations east from Villa Grove through Longview and Broadlands to Sidell. But, in 2006 the UP cut back on all operations on this branch line east out of Villa Grove, and the rails were removed.

The long-time Peoria and Eastern (P&E), which by 1910 had become a

subsidiary of the New York Central, became a part of the PennCentral in 1968, a financially forced amalgamation of the NYC and Pennsylvania Railroads. The PC struggled financially and finally Congress intervened and formed the Consolidated Rail Corporation (Conrail) during 1974-1976. The former P&E line became a Conrail branch line operating between Danville and Peoria in 1976, and CR closed most of the remaining Urbana rail yards.

The numerous railroad mergers after 1980 also affected the Wabash Railroad. First it had been leased by the Norfolk and Western in 1970 and then bought in 1976. In 1989 the N&W merged with the Southern Railway, forming the Norfolk Southern. Thus, the former Wabash lines in the county became NS lines. The short branch line from Sidney to Champaign-Urbana, built in 1881 to access both freight and passenger traffic, was closed by the NS in 1990, and the rails removed. From 1991 to 1996 the NS accessed Champaign-Urbana by using the IC line from Tolono to the Twin Cities, and thereafter by using the former Conrail line from Mansfield to Champaign.

The rapid decrease in passengers on all the nation's railroads led railroad companies to decrease the number of passenger trains operated. The small local trains once operated on the branch lines in the county had been terminated during the 1940s.



The diesel engine for the City of Miami had a unique decoration, as seen in Champaign in 1949.

The IC's president from 1945 to 1966 was Wayne Johnston, who had grown up in Champaign County. He had a special interest in passenger trains and kept more quality passenger trains operating on the IC than did most other railroads. The classy trains maintained were the City of New Orleans, Panama Limited, and City of Miami.

The potential termination of passenger trains on all lines by 1970 led Congress to establish the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, called Amtrak, in 1971. Amtrak took over the operations of all remaining intercity passenger trains in the nation. Amtrak established four trains a day (2 north, 2 south) on the IC main line, but none on the other lines in the county. For a short time during 1983, Amtrak tested potential ridership on a changed run of the "Illini" by having it run west from Tolono to Decatur, as part of its existing operations between Chicago-Champaign. The test failed to gain much ridership and it was ended. Then in 1984 Amtrak changed the Illini operations, and it then was operated between Chicago and Carbondale.

The Illinois Central also felt the growing economic pressures and a need to merge. In 1972 the IC merged with the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio Railroad, forming the Illinois Central Gulf. The ICG lasted until 1986 when it was re-organized and again labeled the Illinois Central. In 1980-1981, under new leadership, the ICG underwent a massive system-wide closing of rail lines. In Champaign County, the branch line west of Seymour to Clinton was closed and rails removed in 1984. The Seymour depot was purchased by a local farmer who moved it to his farm.

The Rantoul-based branch lines west to Leroy and east to Alvin were abandoned in 1977 and removed in following years. However, the track west from Rantoul to Dewey was bought in 1979 by local interests, forming the Fisher Farmers Grain & Coal Company to maintain service to the elevator. Cargill bought the line from Rantoul east to the Dillsburg elevator in 1980, and then sold it in 1993 to the FFG&C, the Dewey line owners.



A northbound Amtrak train pulls into Champaign in 1976 as a southbound Amtrak train (right) departs. Note the passing freight train on the left. At this time four tracks went past the station.



Local ownership of the former IC branch west from Rantoul to Dewey is reflected in the labeling on the line's SW 900 diesel engine, labeled the FFG&C which is the Fisher Farmers Grain & Coal Company, parked alongside the Dewey grain elevator in 1999.



Two of IC's SD38 diesel engines painted in the new color scheme of the merged Illinois Central Gulf Railroad head south past the University of Illinois power plant in 1976.

The IC leadership, in an effort to cut back expenditures in the face of the reduced use of its trains, decided to remove one of its two double tracks on the mainline that went from Chicago to New Orleans. The double line through Champaign County was removed during 1990-1991. The IC also sold the big Champaign station to local business interests in 1990s.



The IC's removal of its double track line is seen here near Rantoul in April 1990. Here, a portion of the once northbound line is being used as a passing siding. The removal of the rails and ties occurred 3 to 4 months later.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Era of Railroad Rejuvenation: 1991-Present

New economic and political pressures, which developed during the 1970s and 1980s, helped rejuvenate the railroads in Illinois and elsewhere. In 1976, Congress, faced with massive line abandonments across the nation and thousands of agricultural complaints, passed an act that eliminated labor protection and provided assistance to save short lines from abandonment. This, plus the Staggers Rail Act passed by Congress in 1980, helped rejuvenate the nation's railroads. The Staggers Act lessened the Interstate Commerce Commission's regulations on rail rate making, marketing, railroad mergers, and on rail abandonments. This did much to launch the re-development of the railroad industry. The era of decline had ended.

Societal and economic factors also attributed to a new emphasis on the use of railroads for shipping and for travel. The growth of vehicular traffic had created major congestion in and around urban areas. As a result, there has been a major growth in travel by commuter trains. Ever rising costs for gasoline made shipments by truck much more expensive, and urban area traffic congestion slowed truck movements. Air travel had become by 2003 a growing problem for many travelers with delays for security and an inability of the airlines to keep flights on time. Hundreds of flight cancellations were occurring each month. Hence, the competitors for rail shipments and travel by rail were experiencing growing problems, and transportation by rail became an ever more attractive option.

One local indication of the rejuvenation in rail travel was the construction of a new large brick station in Champaign designed to serve Amtrak needs and bus service in the Twin Cities built in 1999. The former IC station was left for local business use. Ironically, there were now three brick buildings alongside the CN line in Champaign, and all had been or were passenger train stations from 1898 to present.

One result of these actions and pressures leading to railroad rejuvenation was more mergers of large railroads and the formation of a only a few mega railroads in the U.S. These actions had considerable affect on the railroads in Champaign County.



The northbound City of New Orleans enters Champaign and slows to a stop by the new terminal in June 1999.



The last train operated by Conrail in Champaign County is seen heading east across a country crossing near Ogden on August 20, 1996.

In 1996, Conrail decided to close the Danville to Peoria line due to a decline in business. The last train through Champaign County operated in August 1996, and the rails between Urbana and Danville were removed by December 1996. Other parts of the line were saved because Conrail had been purchased in 1996 by NS and CSX. The NS wanted to use the CR line in and west of Champaign to access Champaign-

Urbana. It built a connection of the ex-Conrail line with its main line at Mansfield. Thus, the line through Mahomet and into C-U became a NS line in 1996.



A Norfolk Southern train heads east out of the Sangamon River Valley near Mahomet in October 1996.



The Canadian National's purchase of the IC is reflected in these signs at the rail yard in Champaign.



A southbound CN train with many auto carriers heads into Tolono in 2006

Another major acquisition involved the Illinois Central. The IC Railroad was purchased for \$2.3 billion by the Canadian National Railroad in 1999, ending the IC label after 150 years. As late as 2007 one still saw a few former IC engines operating on the line and in their IC black and white colors and IC labeling. However, most engines carried CN labeling or Grand Trunk labels, a subsidiary line of CN.

Rejuvenation of the railroads locally was occurring during the 1990s and following years. One action was an improvement in train routing to speed shipments.



To handle the great increase in traffic on the NS line, the railroad built new passing sidings, and here one under construction near Sadorus is seen in June 1998.



New signals were installed by NS at Tolono, reflecting their enhancement of control of added train traffic through town, as a westbound Roadrailer train passes beneath one of the new signal bridges.

Business increased as railroads began to be a more economic means of shipping many products and resources than did trucks. The NS line, which joins Kansas City and eastern cities, became a heavily used "bridge line," and by 2004 the line through the county saw 40 to 50 trains a day. Kansas City had become the nation's second busiest rail hub, second behind Chicago, and one of the problems many railroads faced were the delays in moving train loads through the congested rail lines in the Chicago area. Hence, a way to bypass this congestion was by using the NS line through the county and this was a major economic gain for the NS. This increased train flow on the single-tracked line through the area led to costly improvements to keep trains moving without major delays. In Champaign County the NS built two long passing sidings, one near Homer and one near Sadorus, to ease train movements. They also installed a major signaling system at Tolono to facilitate movement across the CN-IC junction.

Another result of the increased rail business were agreements between the large mega railroads to share their lines with trains of other railroads, an action to speed the movement of goods. This shift was reflected in two places in Champaign County. To facilitate the exchange of trains between the CN and NS, a special long curved track was built at their junction in Tolono. In a similar fashion a long and expensive curved exchange track was built one mile east of Sidney in 1997 to allow trains on



A Norfolk Southern train led by two former Conrail engines comes around the long circular track east of Sidney that joins the east-west NS line to the north-south Union Pacific line.



Ties for the new curve line being built at Tolono to join the NS and IC lines, as seen on in 1998.

the NS to get onto the UP (ex-C&EI) line. Thus, NS trains originating in the East could go to Sidney and then south to Texas without having to stop somewhere and shift cars between railroads and other trains. These actions in Champaign County reflected the new allowance of “run-through” trains among the railroad giants.

The increased use of the railroads since 1990 included passenger traffic. After 2000, the number of Amtrak passengers increased nationally. The increase was 15% on the four Amtrak trains operating through Champaign. A new train named the “Salucki” began operation in October 2006 between Chicago and Carbondale.



A new Amtrak train, the Salucki, moves northward into Champaign on its inaugural run in October 2006.

CHAPTER SIX

Summary

Several events during the 1951-2007 period reflect the major changes in railroading that occurred in Champaign County and affected the history.

- Shift from steam engines to diesel engines.
- Number of passenger trains drastically reduced.
- Amtrak began operations.
- Major sales and mergers of all the railroads (IC to ICG to CN; C&EI to MP to UP; Wabash to N&W to NS; and P&E to Conrail to NS).
- Major line closures and track abandonments.
- Illinois Central mainline became single tracked.
- Depots closed, destroyed, or sold (Champaign, Urbana, Seymour, and Savoy)
- Rail facilities greatly reduced (including Urbana yards, roundhouses gone)
- Labor force working on the railroads was greatly reduced.
- New connecting lines to allow sharing of rails between the major railroads.



The county's two busiest railroads cross at Tolono. Here in 1999, a southbound IC train hits the crossing as a NS train waits in the background.

The rail lines in Champaign County in 2007 are shown on Figure 8. Today there are three of the nation's big five major railroads (UP, CN, and NS) operating in the county (the nation's other two major railroads are the CSX and BNSF). At one time Champaign County had eight railroads: the IC, Wabash, C&EI, P&E, IT, K&U, HR&E, and CH&W.

Today it is difficult, unless you are a railroad historian, to understand the contribution of the railroads to the settlement and development of the Champaign County and much of Illinois. The railroads have left a lasting impression on the settlement pattern of the region. Champaign and Urbana, once "rail towns" with large numbers of rail employees, no longer think of the railroads as major much less minor employers. But, as the future growth of population and vehicles continues with its attendant traffic congestion and higher fuel costs, the 21st Century will see a major resurgence of travel and shipping by trains.

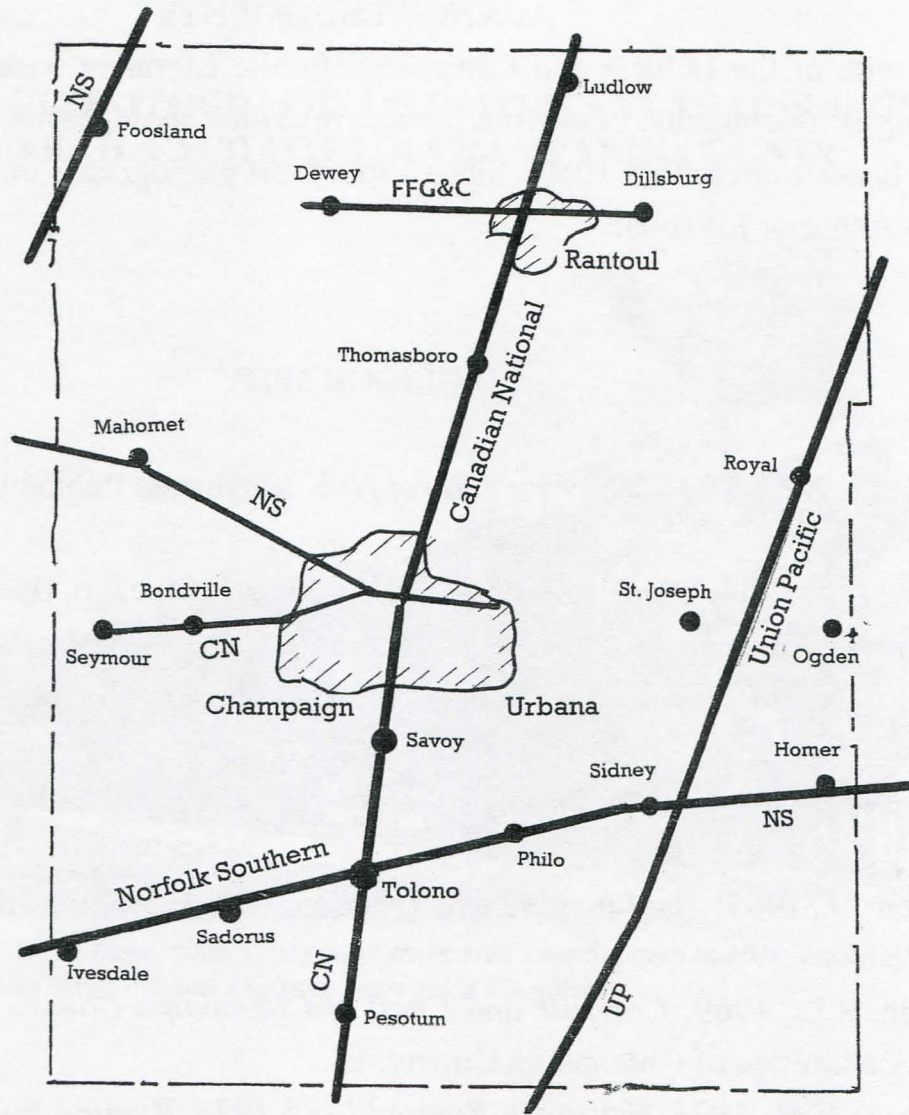


Figure 8. The rail lines existing in Champaign County in 2007. The mainlines have wider lines than do the branch lines.

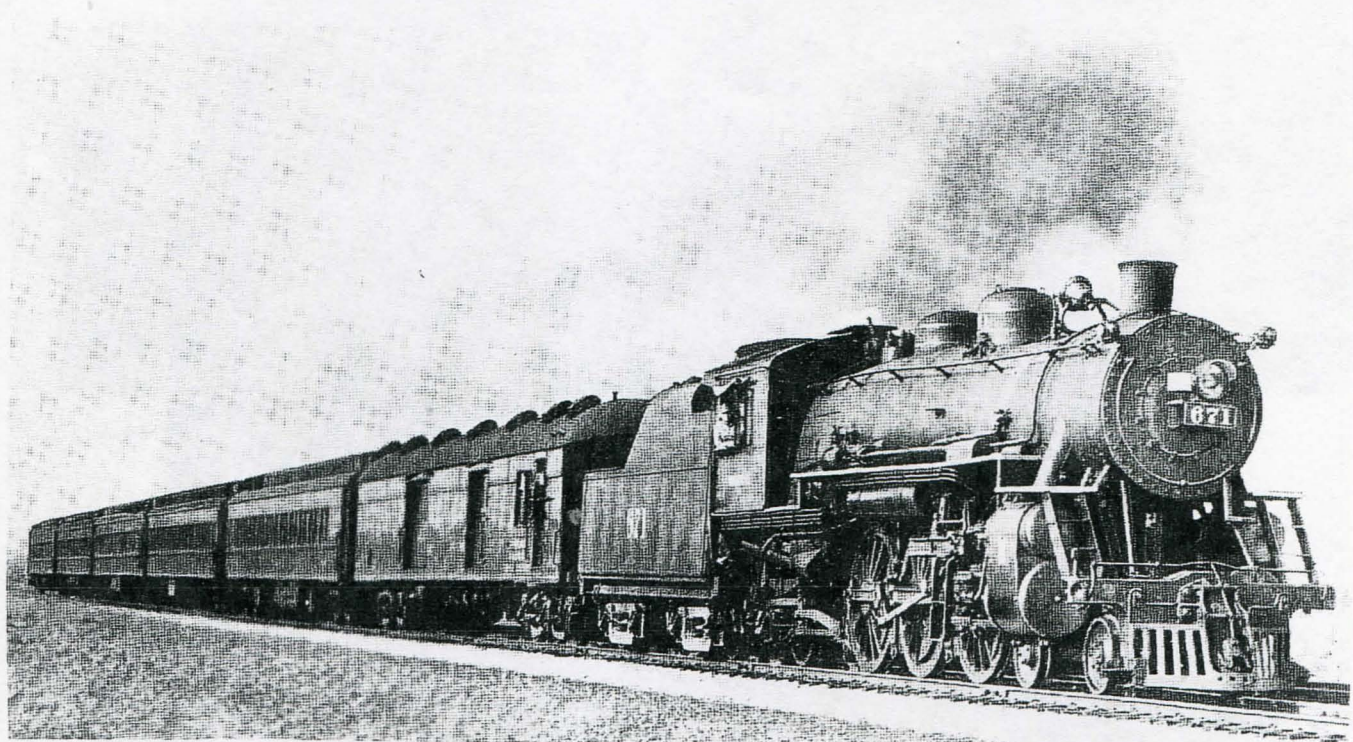
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Staffs of the Urbana and Champaign Public Libraries were quite helpful in locating old documents. Numerous persons provided photographs, particularly those of the historic era before 1960. Since 1960, most photographs included were taken by the author or his sons.

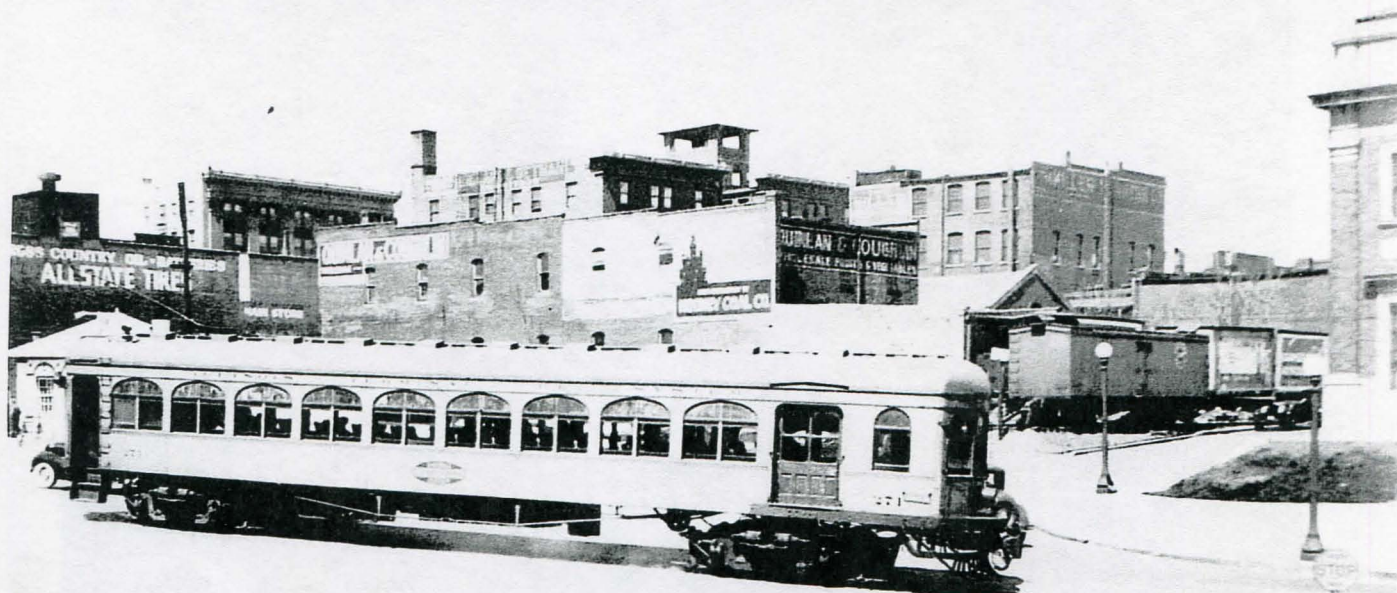
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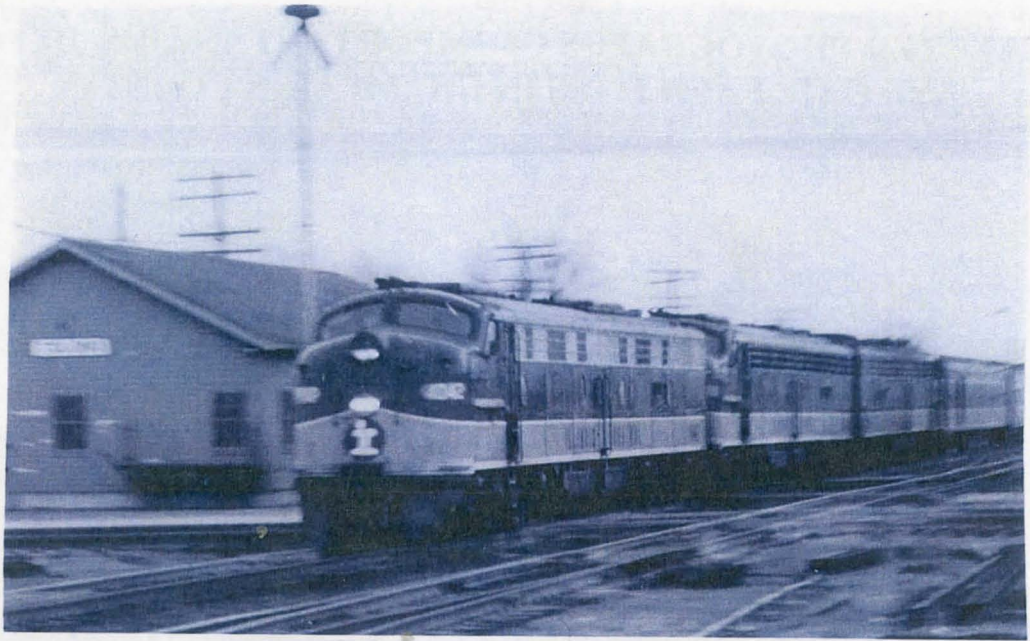
APPENDIX
SELECTED PHOTOGRAPHS OF IMPORTANT TRAINS, DEPOTS,
AND RAIL FACILITIES IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY



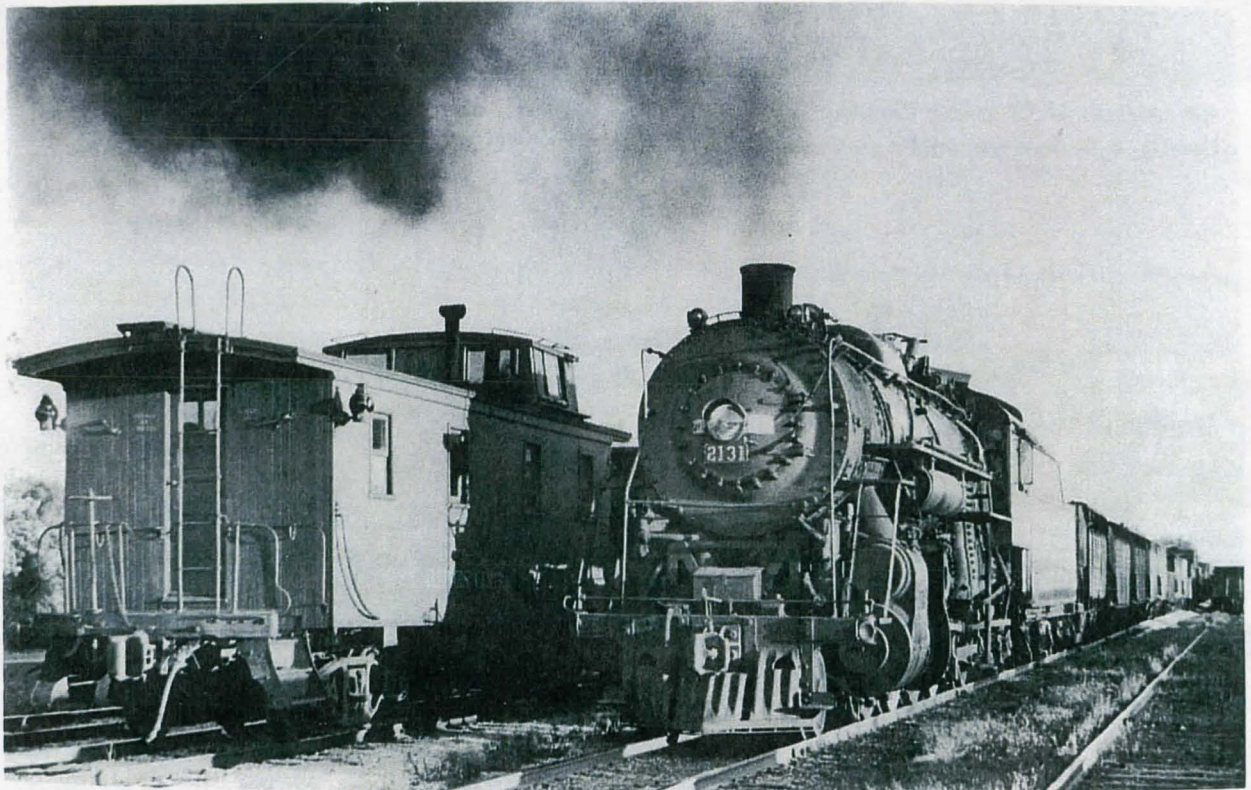
An eastbound "Wabash Cannonball" passenger train seen near Sadorus in 1930, led by a high-stepping 4-6-2 engine and a curious engineer peers from his window.



An eastbound orange ITR car #271 is going downgrade on University Avenue to pass under the IC tracks in Champaign in 1937. The corner of the IC station is to the right. Note boxcar by station.



The northbound "City of New Orleans" rushes past the depot at Tolono in March 1970.



A southbound IC freight steams past a caboose on a siding in Tolono in 1936.



Amtrak's "City of New Orleans" appears out of a dense fog south of Tolono on June 28, 1997.



A southbound IC freight passes a special IC passenger train parked in south Champaign and here for an Illini football game in 1998. The special was used by the leadership of the IC to entertain customers.



A SD40-2 heads a fast-moving Roadrailer train on the NS main eastbound through Philo in 1996.



A C30-7 of the Union Pacific along with two other engines leads a string of auto carriers north past the Dailey elevator on May 6, 1994.



A view to the west of the former Illinois Terminal depot that still stands in Bondville. Power generators were in the depot's tower, and brick construction was used to minimize fire danger.



The former IC depot at Rantoul, now used by Amtrak, is being passed by a northbound IC freight.



A view to the west of the former Illinois Terminal depot that still stands in Bondville. Power generators were in the depot's tower, and brick construction was used to minimize fire danger.



The former IC depot at Rantoul, now used by Amtrak, is being passed by a northbound IC freight.



A westbound Conrail train passes the Urbana depot, built originally by the P&E, in 1995.



When the IC decided to tear down its many wooden depots in small Illinois towns, some persons and town leaders stepped forward and bought the stations. Here, the wooden depot at Pesotum, which has been restored and locally maintained, is passed by a southbound freight on a snowy December 1992.



The brick control tower at the junction of the IC main line with the Conrail (former P&E) line in Champaign. The view is to the southeast. At one time, the Wabash line passed on the other side of the tower. The extended windows gave the operator a good view of the IC lines.



A view north of the Illinois Central rail yards on a snow-covered day in January 1994. The mainline tracks are to the left.



VISITORS

The Norfolk & Western, owner of the former Wabash mainlines through the county, used one of famous steam engines from train specials, and here the streamlined engine #611 moves a special fan train through Tolono in July 1980.

A southbound AT&SF freight crosses over the Windsor Road overpass, a train diverted to the IC line from Chicago to Memphis because of the massive 1993 floods that closed the AT&SF mainline in Missouri, requiring major train re-routings, as seen in July 1993.



In July 1993 a railfan special operating from St. Louis to Chicago is led by the famed UP challenger and storms upgrade past the Block elevator in the county.

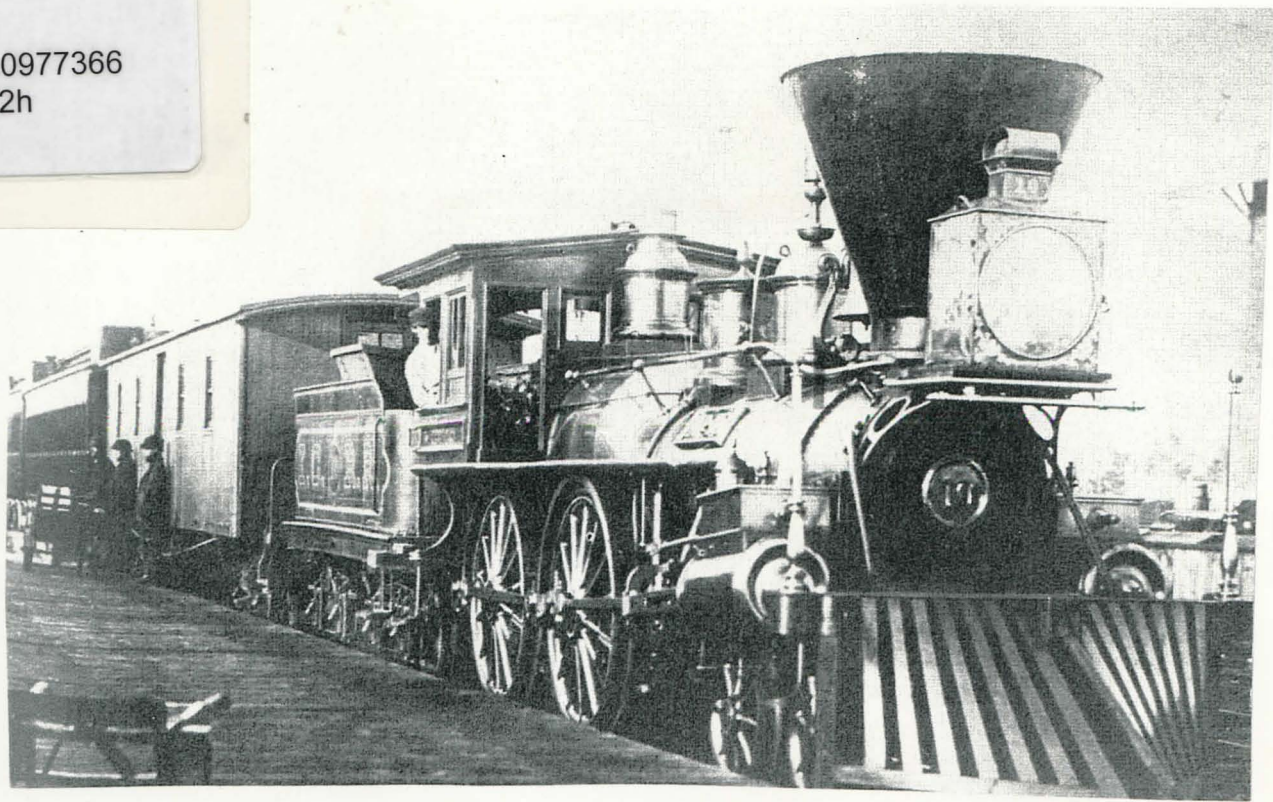
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THE HISTORY OF RAILROADS IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

