

**A History of the
Chesterton Freight Depot:**

A Research Project Commissioned by

Richard Riley and *The Old Freight Depot Bed & Breakfast*

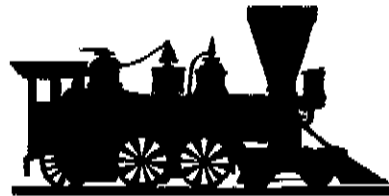
By

Lee Lyons

April 2009

TIMELINE

The Life of the Chesterton Freight Depot



- 1852** Depot built in Chesterton by the Lake Shore Railroad for use by passengers and freight. Depots like this encourage the development of the region and the growth of towns and commerce along the rail lines. Residents grow to depend upon rail service for travel to Chicago and within Indiana as well as the shipping and receiving of goods.
- 1913** Fire destroys the original wooden Depot one November night. The New York Central Railroad, seeking to expand its services through to Chicago, enters into an agreement with the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railroad to use its tracks to complete the line to Chicago.
- 1914** The New York Central uses two rail cars on the siding to ensure the continuation of passenger and freight services while it builds new Depots. Successful rail service at Chesterton prompts the railroad to build two new brick depots, one for passengers and one for freight. The Freight Depot opens without fanfare in the fall. The new Passenger Depot opens to a town-wide "depot-warming" celebration in December, attended by dignitaries from the town and the New York Central Railroad.
- 1921** A major train accident at the nearby Porter Tower interlock (1.2 miles west) complicates rail traffic and results in 37 deaths and over 100 injuries.

1938

A citizens' committee successfully appeals to the railroad for increased service so local men around Chesterton can use the trains to get to work in the mills at Gary, Buffington, Indiana Harbor, Mahoney, and Whiting.

1941

A freight train, switched by mistake onto the Depot's siding, slides into the rail stop at Calumet Avenue and derailed despite the engineer's braking efforts. Livestock run loose through the area, finally corralled with the ingenious use of snowfencing. The spectacular accident drew crowds throughout the downtown area but resulted in no loss of life.

1958

Reliance on rail lines for both passenger travel and freight shipping declines, causing railroads to close local freight stations in favor of large, centralized urban hubs, and reduce and discontinue passenger routes. The New York Central closes the Chesterton Freight Depot in May and offers it and some additional railroad property for sale.

1964

The last commuter train stops in Chesterton. Local passenger service along the New York Central Railroad is at an end. Commuters now rely on the South Shore interurban lines for local travel.



TIMELINE

The Life of the Chesterton Freight Depot



II. *A New Incarnation*

- 1960s** The heyday of railroading is over and the Chesterton Freight Depot stands empty for a time. While the community searches for a way to give the Depot a new life, the building is rented out to the Chesterton Furniture Company, which uses it for mattress storage and sales while its new building is under construction.
- 1963** Local banker John C. Read buys the Freight Depot planning to tear it down and build a complex of shops and restaurants.
- 1970** The Freight Depot survives to be sold to local residents Walter and Mimi Mitchell, who rent it out to Sam Dickson. Dickson opens "Calico Corners" in the building and the Depot's new life as a business emporium begins.
- 1975** The Mitchells become the proprietors of a refurbished Depot, opening "The Freight Station" in May 1975. "The Freight Station" contains 21 specialty shops, offering antiques, custom framing, handicrafts, and restaurants. Walter runs the framing business and Mimi runs the gift shop. Lessees operate a variety of ever-changing businesses through 1987.
- 1990-1994** Chicagoan Bob Redwanc and his uncle, Walter Bobkiewicz, buy the Freight Depot and turn it into a combination café and craft shop, called "The Freight Station." In 1993, local photographer Craig Berg opened an evening pizzeria in The Station, while Redwanc and Bobkiewicz continued to offer breakfast and lunch in the café.

1999

Dan Scheetz, a local businessman, opens "Estate Liquidators" in the Depot. The shop is a combination antique store and second-hand shop.

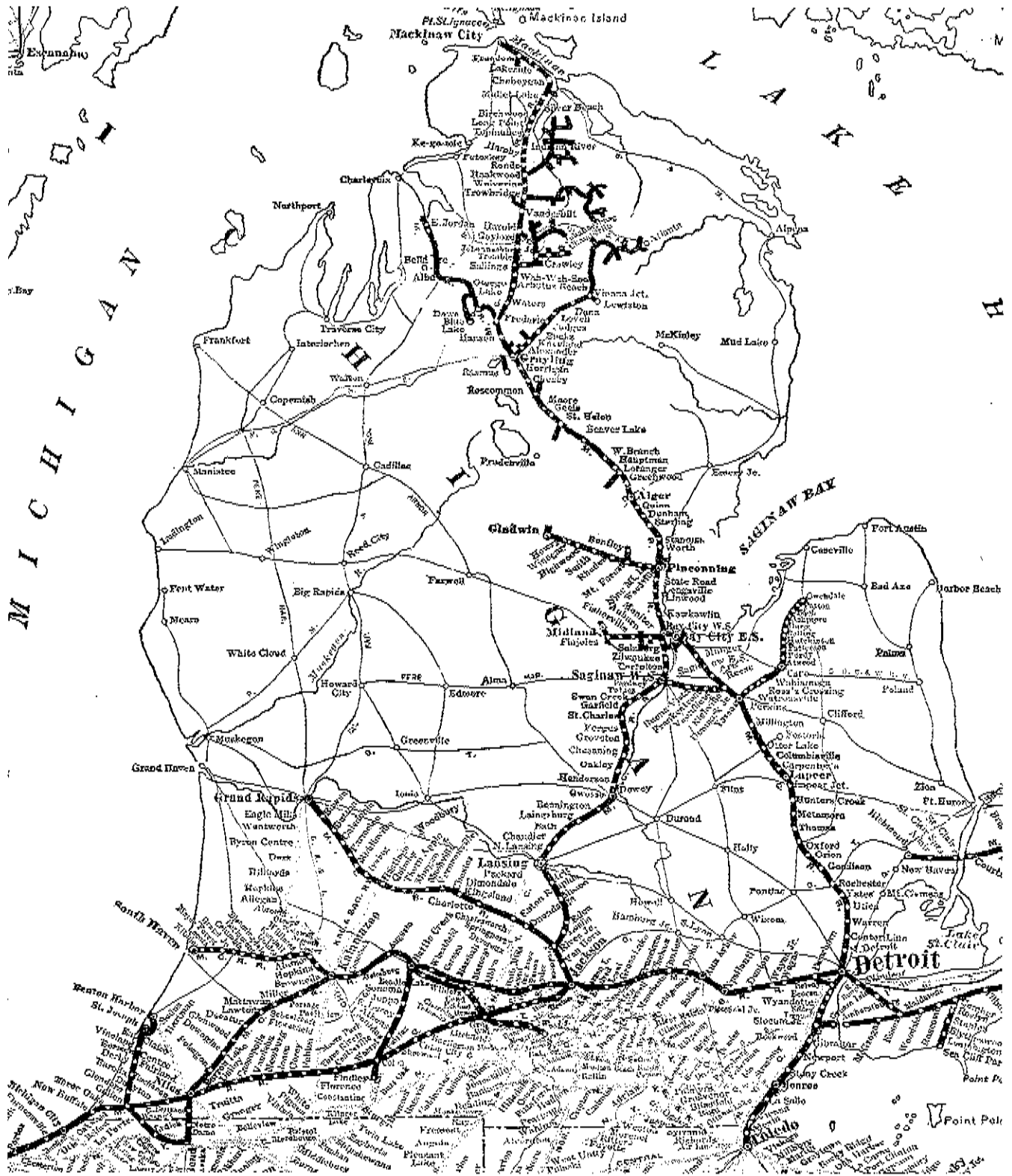
2005

Scheetz closes his shop and sells the building to Richard Riley of Orland Park, Illinois. Riley, a train enthusiast, plans a complete restoration and renovation, converting the Depot to a Bed & Breakfast for railfans and visitors.

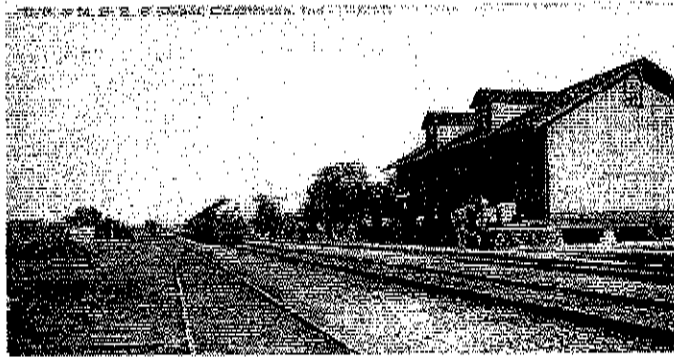
2005-2009

The Riley family engage in the difficult task of updating the Old Depot while preserving as much of the building's character and history as practical. The "Chesterton Freight Depot Bed & Breakfast" opens a new chapter in the Depot's life.





A History of the Chesterton Freight Depot



The Life of the Freight Depot

Railroads came to northern Indiana in the 1850s, linking the Great Lakes region with the East Coast and making both freight shipping and passenger travel easier, faster, and less rigorous than overland travel. Prior to the growth of railroads, the movement of goods and people, when not over land by wagon, depended on existing waterways and canals built to make them more accessible. During the 1830s, State governments pinned their hopes on canals that linked rivers with each other and with the Great Lakes. Several canal projects provided improved transportation options for commerce for a time, but water travel had its limitations and it soon became clear that railroads that connected to waterways provided the greatest benefits and revenues.

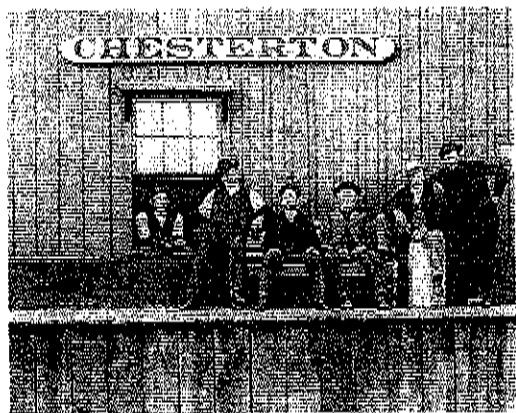
Small rail lines sprang up by the dozens in efforts to link the Great Lakes region with cities to the east and westward to Chicago. Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana all chartered a number of rail lines at approximately the same time in 1832. Building of track commenced at some locations and some demonstration railroads were built, linking towns over short distances. Financing for these ventures depended on state funds, however, which quickly ran out. Rail construction was both costly and difficult, and progress was slow. Not all of the many rail lines originally chartered by the states of Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana actually survived to operate a railroad line, but continued mergers and the emergence of new, private railroad companies eventually resulted in a network of rail lines across the state. By the late 1850s, the state capital at Indianapolis was linked by rail to the Ohio River and the interior towns of Ohio, and to several cities in Indiana.

Rail travel flourished during the 1850s and through to the turn of the century, with new railroads and new track appearing so frequently that it was almost impossible to keep current with the name changes. Competition between the private companies was fierce, each

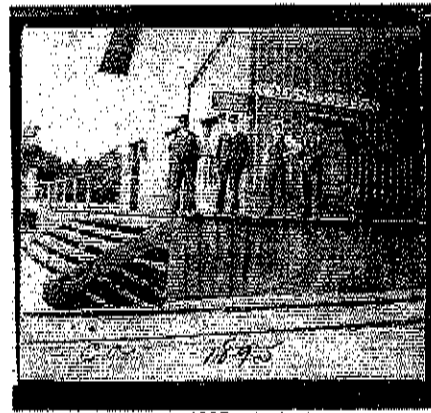
ving for the best routes and the opportunity to open up new areas of the state. The proliferation of rail lines allowed

Two railroads in Michigan—the Michigan Southern and the Michigan Central—competed to finish their routes and connect with Chicago. The Michigan Central built its rail line across northern Indiana, reaching Michigan City in 1850 and following the Lake Michigan shoreline. The Michigan Southern reached South Bend in October 1851 and continued several miles to the west, going through La Porte. Both routes were completed in 1852, only weeks apart, with the result being that the whole of northern Indiana was linked by rail to Chicago and points west as well as to Michigan, Ohio, and points east.

The Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railroad built a two-story wooden depot at Chesterton in 1852, combining passenger and freight operations in the large building. This was the standard style of railroad depots at the time, known as a “combined” depot. Passengers waited inside the depot in inclement weather or congregated outside. A railroad agent on duty at the depot sold passengers tickets, confirmed arrivals and departures, and took in freight. Railroad agents also were responsible for manning the telegraph and transmitting messages and passing mail to the trains.



depot 1852



depot 1852

The Chesterton Depot operated until November 22, 1913 when it was destroyed by fire.

The New York Central Railroad gained control over the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern in 1914, after the depot fire. Train service was too important to be disrupted by the loss of a local depot, so the company temporarily moved two rail cars onto the siding to be used for passenger ticket sales and freight loading and off-loading. The NYCRR began construction of two separate depots in the summer of 1914, an unusual decision and one that boded well for the railroad’s estimation of Chesterton’s importance and potential for growth since the privilege of having separate depots was usually accorded only large towns and county seats.



The new passenger station, an attractive one-story structure of brick and stucco, was separated from the new Freight Depot by 25 feet to better accommodate the different needs of the users. The Freight Depot, also built of brick, with space for both large and small freight, was completed first, opening with little or no fanfare in the fall of 1914. The opening of the Passenger Depot on

December 3, 1914 completed the project, signaling a return to the level of rail service Chesterton had become accustomed to and the town treated the opening accordingly.

Chesterton town officials organized a large public event referred to as a “housewarming” by the *Chesterton Tribune* and as a “depot-warming” by New York Central Railroad officials, who were pleased and impressed by the enthusiasm shown them by the town. The party was attended by more than 90 persons including Railroad and town dignitaries.

Rail service continued to thrive after the construction of the new depot buildings, with demand for freight service outstripping even the significant demand for passenger service. Farmers from throughout the area shipped their produce to other cities and towns, expanding their profit opportunities and their ability for growth, while local merchants brought in goods for retail sale and raw materials for production.

During the first half of the twentieth century—particularly, prior to World War II—hundreds of freight trains criss-crossed Indiana daily, carrying the production of mines, grain elevators, steel mills and other heavy and light industries, and farm produce. Local people relied on the passenger services for commuting to the steel mills to the west of Chesterton, and for travel to local destinations like Michigan City and South Bend. Trains boarded at the Chesterton depot also served as the first step in cross-country travel on the famous “named” routes to New York City, New Orleans, and the West Coast.

Rail service operated successfully through the 1940s, with abundant evidence that local residents relied on the trains for commuting to work. In 1938, for example, local steelworkers petitioned the railroad to alter its schedule to be more accommodating to their work schedules. Their efforts were noted in the local newspapers and the railroad responded to their lobbying by making the schedules easier for mill workers to use to get to work.

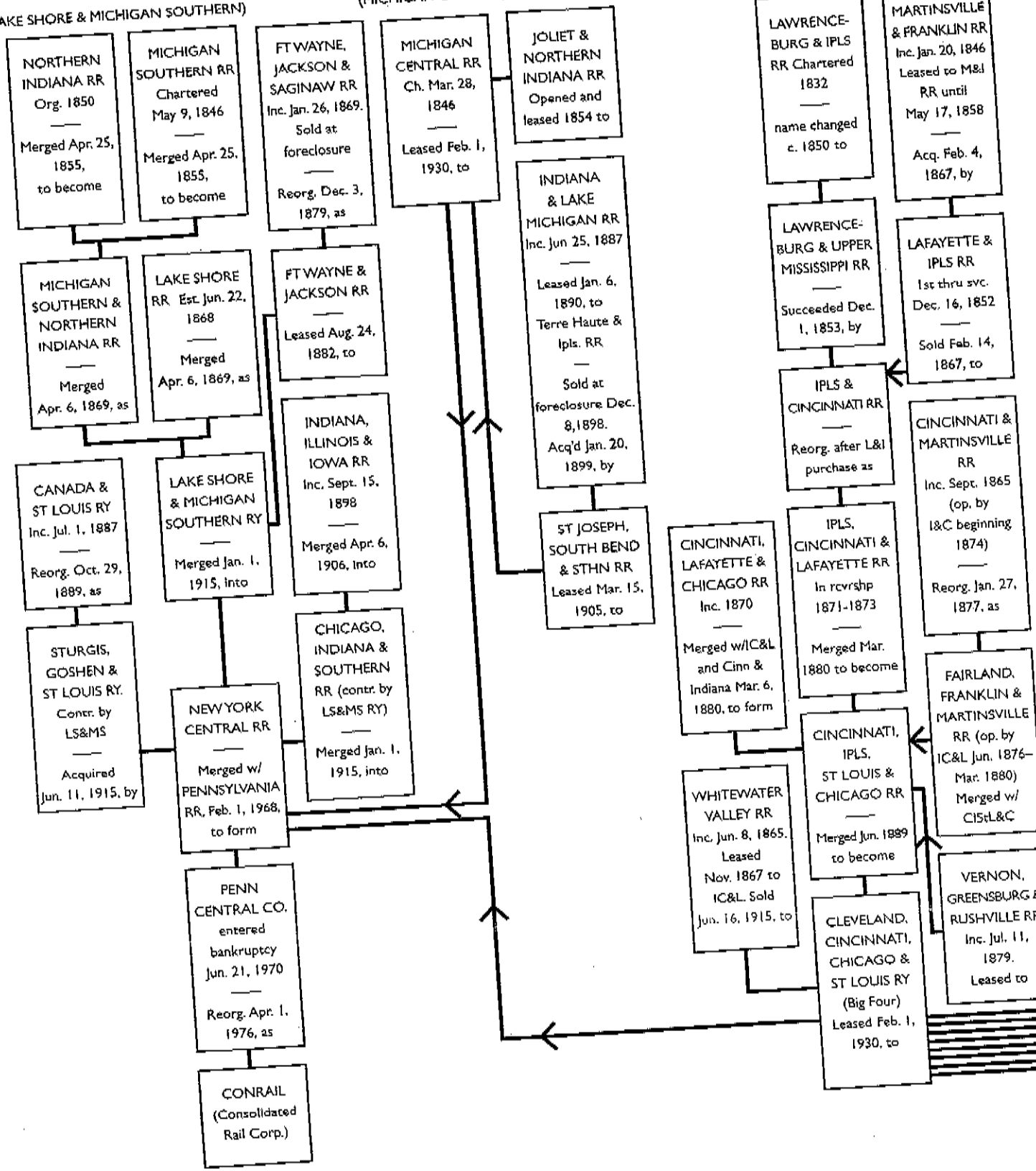
The postwar boom in auto ownership was years away, as was the growth of trucking as a freight-moving competitor. For a time, railroads ruled.

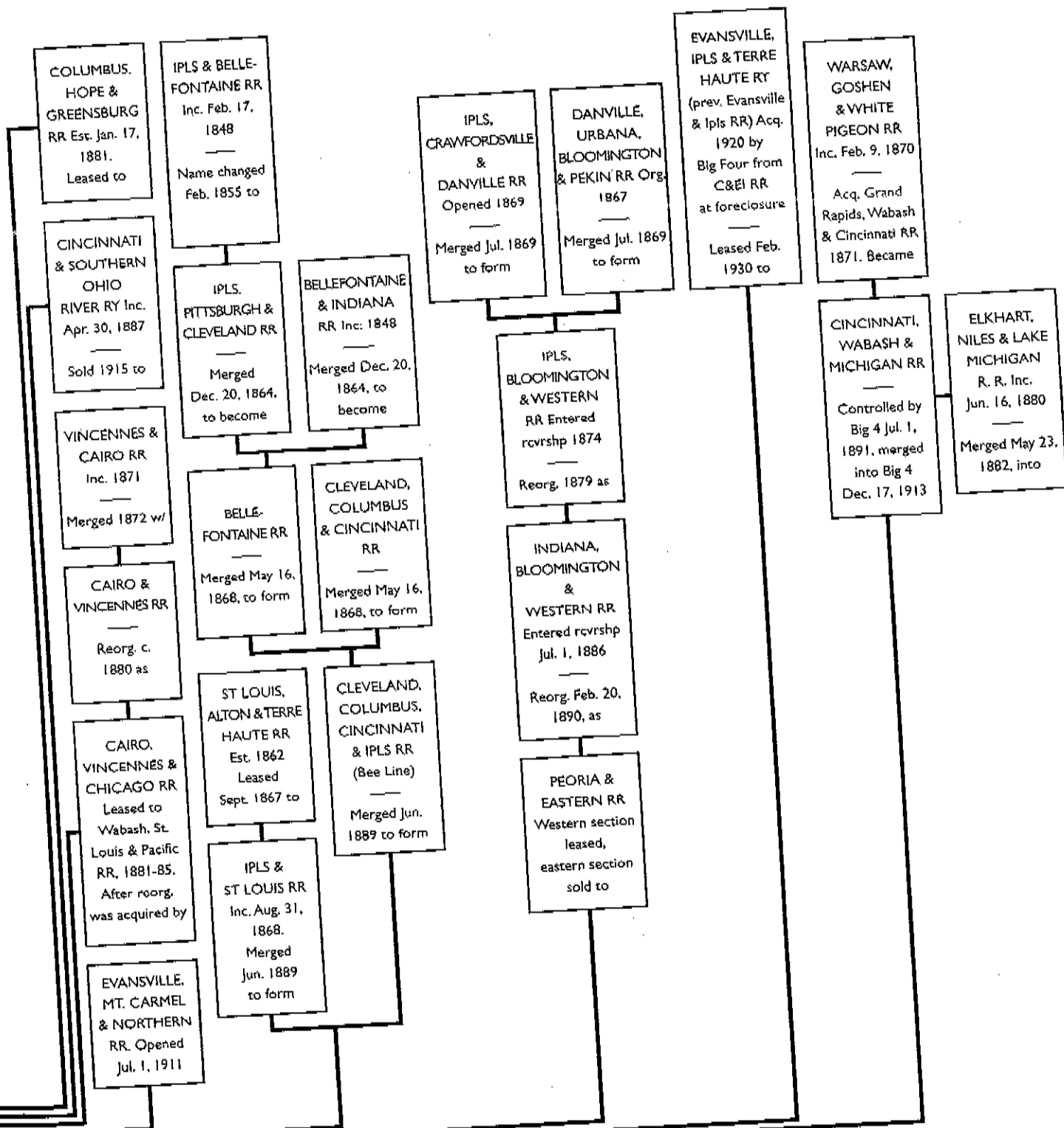
NEW YORK CENTRAL

(LAKE SHORE & MICHIGAN SOUTHERN)

(MICHIGAN CENTRAL)

(CLEVELAND, CINCINNATI, CHICAGO & ST. LOUIS: BIG FOUR)





SOURCES: Meints, *Michigan Railroads and Railroad Companies*; Drury, *Historical Guide to North American Railroads*; Harlow, *The Road of the Century*; Poar, *Manual of the Railroads of the United States*; Edson, *Railroad Names*

The Depot's New Incarnation

A New Lease on Life

About 1960, after fifty years of service, the Freight Depot at Chesterton was abandoned by the railroad, a victim of changing patterns in industry, transportation, and auto usage. It was a chapter in the story of railroading that was being played out across the country as depots were decommissioned and freight and passenger services ended. The railroads themselves struggled to survive, resulting in a round of mergers that differed from the mergers of the late 1800s in that they combined large, interstate rail companies rather than small, local lines. But the results—the Penn Central, Conrail, and Amtrack, most prominently—couldn't save the era of local rail service that was ending.

The Chesterton Freight Depot's transition to a locally-owned building was not a fortuitous one: local banker John C. Read bought the Freight Depot in 1963 with the stated plan to tear it down and build a complex of shops and restaurants, utilizing old rail cars. The building sat empty for awhile, then was rented out to the Chesterton Furniture Company, which used it for sales and storage of mattresses and bedding while its own new store was under construction. Afterward, the Depot stood empty again.

The Freight Depot survived demolition plans, however, and was sold to local residents Walter and Mimi Mitchell in 1970. The Mitchells rented it out as business space. Its first occupant was Sam Dickson who called his shop, "Calico Corners." The Depot's new life as a business emporium had begun.

In May 1975, the Mitchells opened their own business venture in the Depot, calling it "The Freight Station." The new business contained 21 specialty shops, offering antiques, custom framing, handicrafts, and restaurants. Walter and Mimi ran two of the Station shops themselves: Walter had a framing business and Mimi ran a gift shop. Lessees operated a variety of ever-changing businesses for several years, including Russ and Barb Stephens, who operated an antique store in the Depot before opening their own shop on Third Street.



In 1990, Mitchell sold the Depot to two Chicagoans, Bob Redwanc and his uncle, Walter Bobkiewicz. The pair continued to call the business "The Freight Station" but put a

whole new face on things, spending almost a year remodeling and renovating, putting in a kitchen, refurbishing the wooden floors, and installing the exterior deck. "The Freight Station" the relatives opened was, possibly, the first "coffee shop" in Chesterton, offering cappuccino and lattes, along with hand-made sandwiches and salads.

Redwanc says they operated their café in half of the building and rented out the other half to crafters and artists. After three years, local photographer Craig Berg moved his pizza business into The Freight Station, offering pizza and live music in the evenings while Redwanc and Bobkiewicz continued to serve breakfast and lunch.

In 1994, the participants decided The Freight Station was just not doing enough business and the ventures closed, one after another.

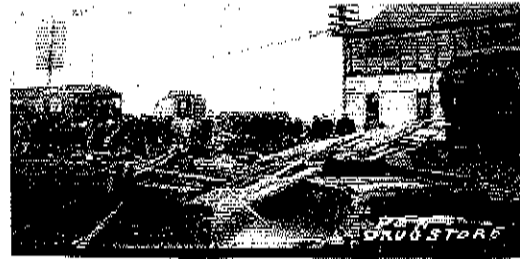
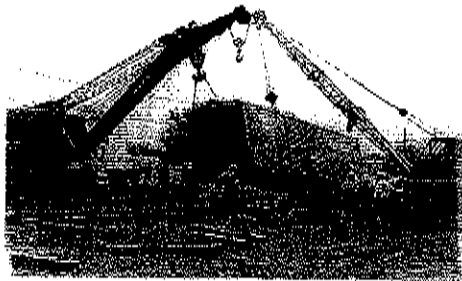
For a time, the Depot stood empty. A few short-term enterprises opened the Depot's doors to the public for awhile, including Wagner's Ribs of Porter. For the most part, though, the building remained largely unused until 1999 when local businessman Dan Scheetz opened "Estate Liquidators" in the Depot. Scheetz's "Estate Liquidators" venture was a combination antique store and second-hand shop which also included a "neon shop" where collectible neon signs of every electric color and size were bought and sold. Estate Liquidators survived until 2004 when it closed its doors.

In 2005, train enthusiast Richard Riley of Orland Park, Illinois, bought the Depot, planning a complete restoration and renovation in order to convert the building to a Bed & Breakfast for railfans and visitors.

Over the past few years, the Riley family has been engaged in the difficult task of updating the Old Depot while preserving as much of the building's character and history as practical. Making use of the loft spaces that were used for small packages back in the Depot's freight days, the B&B features upstairs bedrooms and baths at either end of the long building and a large central dining area and lounge in front of the newly-built fireplace. The "Chesterton Freight Depot Bed & Breakfast" is expected to open its doors in 2009, beginning a new chapter in the old Depot's life.



Rail Accidents

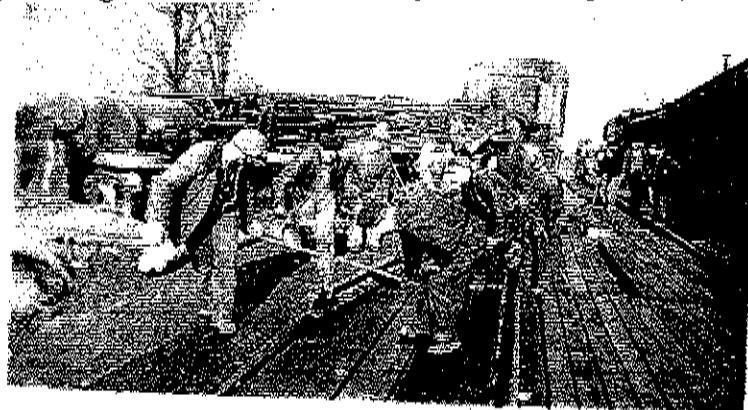


Like highway accidents involving motor vehicles, rail accidents are an inevitable part of the movement of people and machinery through complex, interconnected routes. Old wooden cars, reliance on signalmen, problems with switches, and human error have all contributed to the catalogue of notable train accidents in the history of railroading.

Two significant rail accidents are part of the history of the Chesterton Freight Depot.

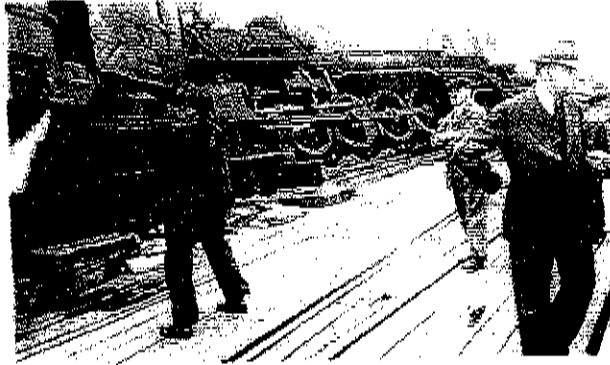
The first major accident in the vicinity of the Chesterton Depots occurred at the interlocked crossing near the Porter Tower (1.2 miles west of the Chesterton Freight Depot), on February 27, 1921. A westbound New York Central passenger train “plowed through the third coach” of an eastbound Michigan Central passenger train that had “run past a home interlocked signal” and derailed.

The Michigan Central engineman was found to have “run the derail” and “plowed over ties and track” that crossed the New York Central tracks. The speed of the Michigan Central was so great, reports claimed, that even after jumping the rails, the train continued on for some distance, running on the ties, and actually “re-railed” partially at one point. Only moments after the derail, the New York Central “Interstate Express” en route to Chicago from Buffalo, New York, came along and—unable to stop—struck the wooden day coach of the Michigan Central that rested across its tracks, resulting in the loss of 37 lives and 100 injuries. This



accident is considered to be among the worst of local train disasters.

The "Porter Interlock Accident" affected the operation of numerous tracks because of its location as well as causing significant disruption down the lines. Dozens of workmen, equipment were investigate the the damaged miracle, all the Tower itself since the near to it, in all directions. Central wooden passenger car, reduced to part.



inspectors, and heavy brought to the area to disaster and repair track. It was a reports agreed, that was undamaged, accident happened so sending debris flying The Michigan "day coach", or was by far the worst, splinters for the most

A second accident was less serious in its consequences but no less spectacular in the damage it caused across four blocks of downtown Chesterton. On April 26, 1941, "an eastbound [live] stock train was switched by mistake onto the depot siding", resulting in the train sliding down the track towards the Calumet Road closed switch. Four cars buckled in front of the Freight Depot and a freight car transporting hogs overturned, setting



loose the livestock. Eventually, all of the livestock was captured and herded into a makeshift corral made of snowfence that was set up by ingenious volunteers. The spectacular sight of the large locomotive engine on its side drew crowds throughout the downtown area for two days but resulted in no loss of life.

Although history is full of serious rail accidents, it wasn't accidents that spelled the end of railroading; it was the popularity of the car and the ease of interstate highway travel and trucking.

The fortunes of the Chesterton Freight Depot declined in the 1960s due to declining demand for rail service and the bankruptcies and mergers of railroads struggling to survive. The NYCRR closed the Freight Depot in 1958 and transferred its freight shipping functions to the passenger depot a few yards away. Passenger service continued at the Passenger Depot (the current Chamber of Commerce building) until 1963.

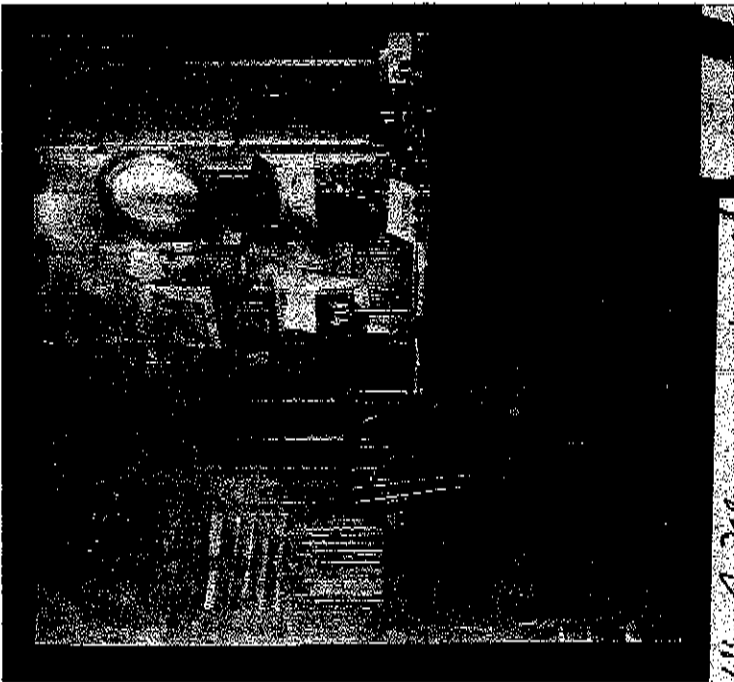


PHOTOGRAPHS

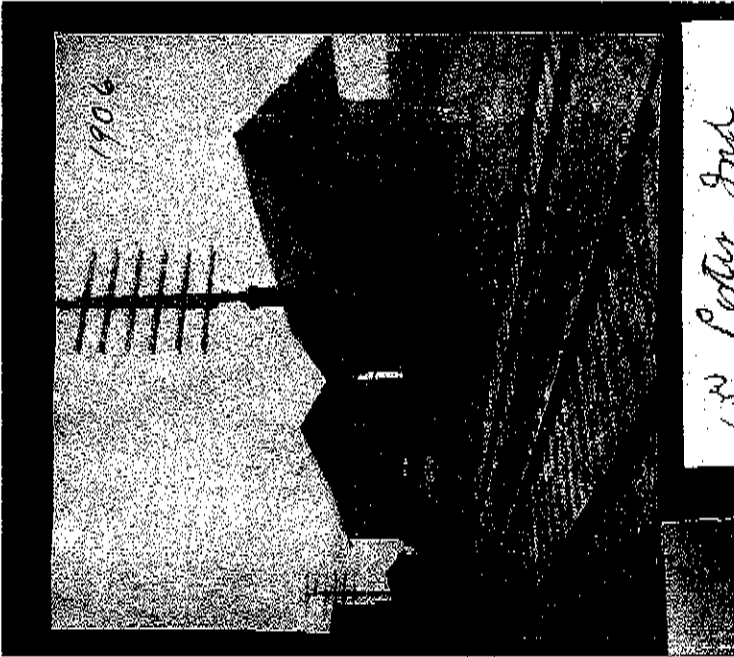
The photographs used in this Report can be printed to your specifications (including cropping) for framing or display at the Bed & Breakfast. Dan Bruhn, the only photographer the Museum allows to use its originals, will print whatever photos you want. You can indicate your choices on the contact sheet or photocopies.

I'd recommend uniform black matte frames throughout. These can be obtained from Michael's Craft Stores (among others), and are available in various photo sizes.

The maps and copies of surveys included in this Report are all, unfortunately, photocopies. (No holders of originals would allow them out for copying.) The maps could be manipulated to show color and age and, generally, approximate the look of originals, at a graphic design business. If you want me to try, I'd be happy to.

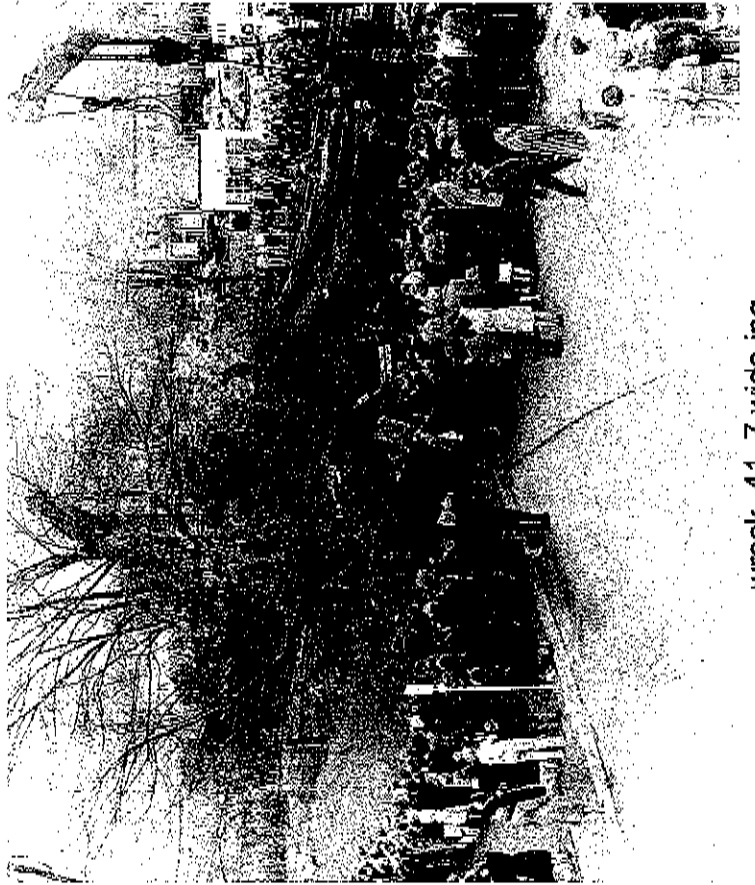


porter 1905 int b.jpg

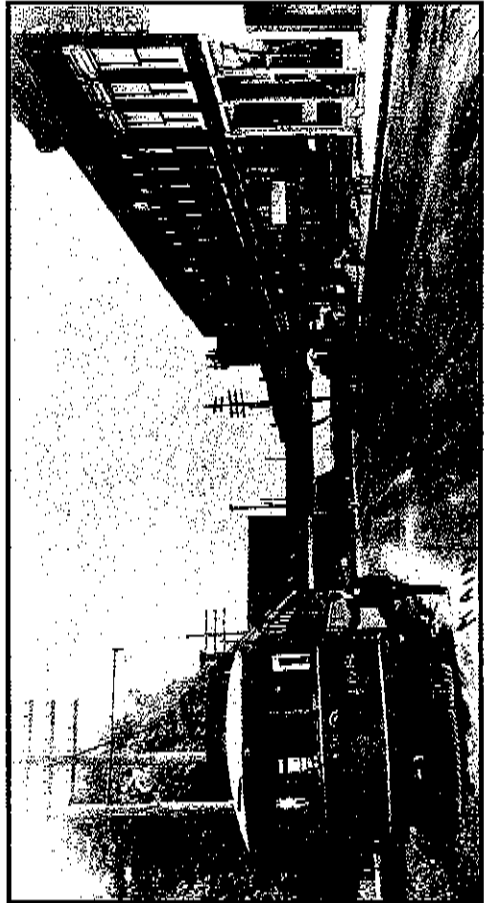


1906

porter depot 1904 ext a.jpg

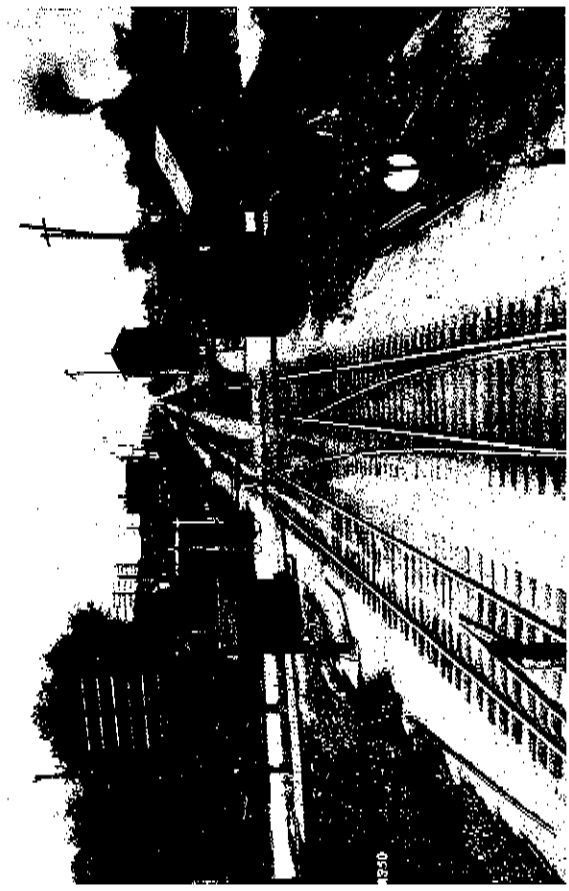


wreck 41 7 wide.jpg



trolley 1920s .jpg

Before: This scene looks west in Chesterton in July of 1906 and shows the freight house and station which later burned, during November 1913, and was replaced by a brick structure. The road crossing later became State Road 49 north and south through Chesterton. JOSEPH LANDGRAF.



freight 1906-17b.jpg



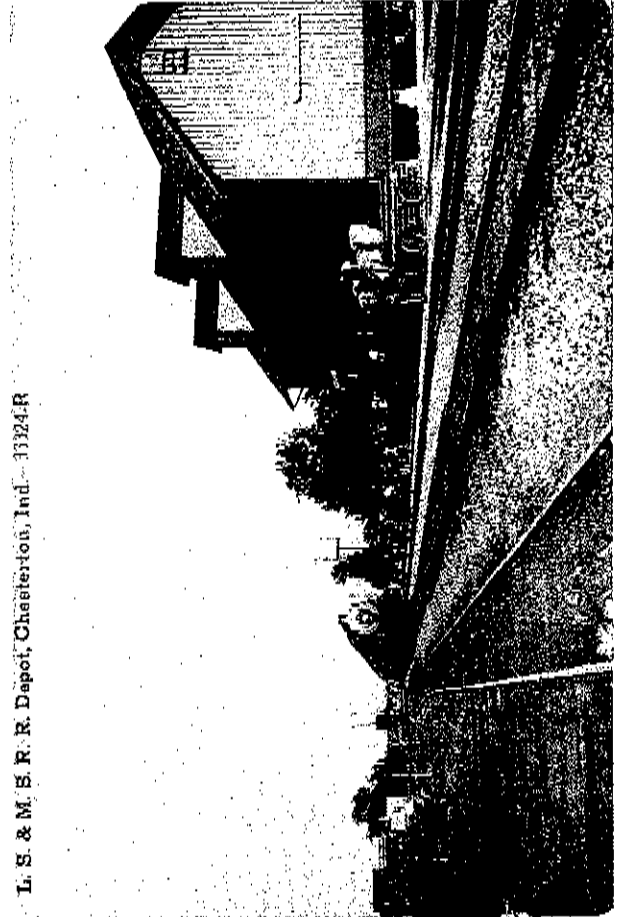
Porter and station force 1904
Mabel - Mary Norton
Roy, Edward, S. A. Ashwood, Jr.

porter 1904 group a.jpg

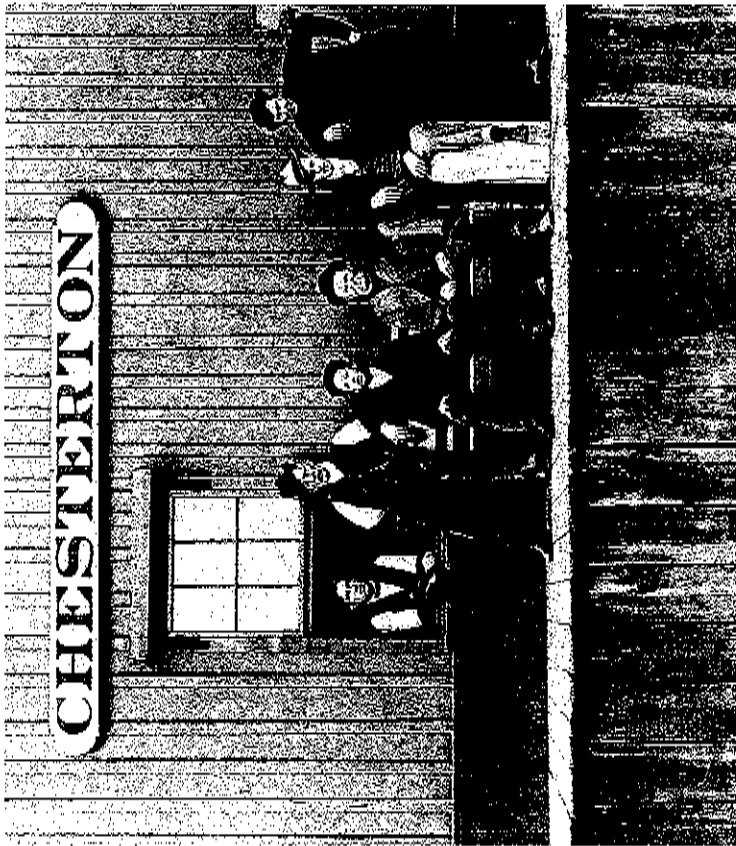


depot train station.jpg

L. S. & M. S. R. R. Depot, Chesterton, Ind. 3324R



freight 1913-10b.jpg



cton 1895 c1.jpg

Wm. W. Morrison



cton 1895 ext a.jpg

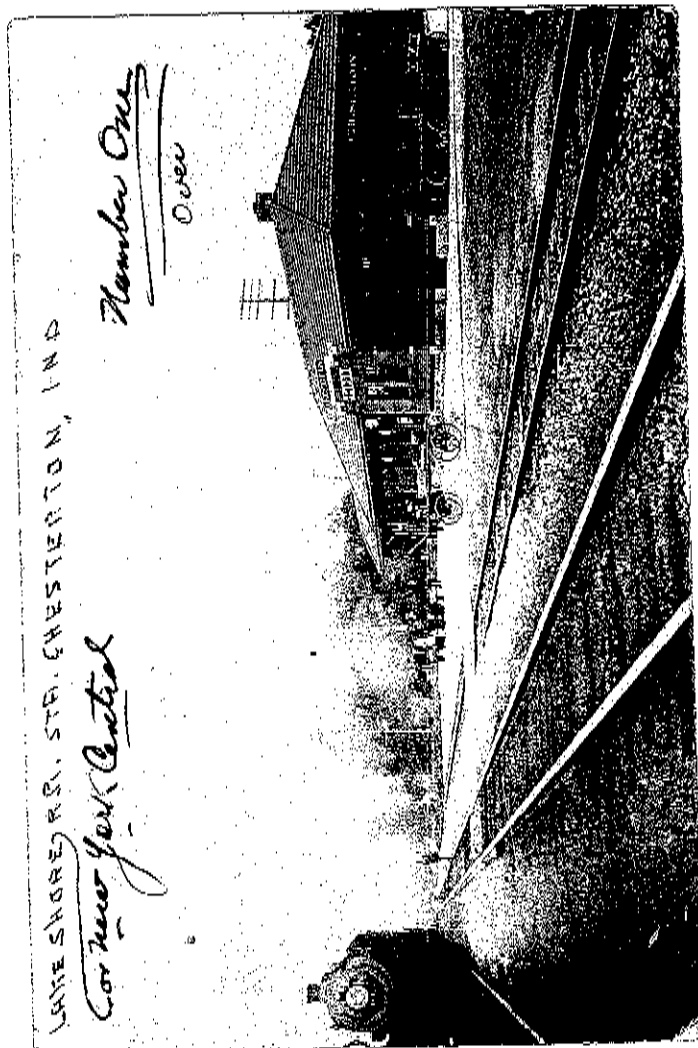
Wm. W. Morrison 1895



cton 1895 int c.jpg



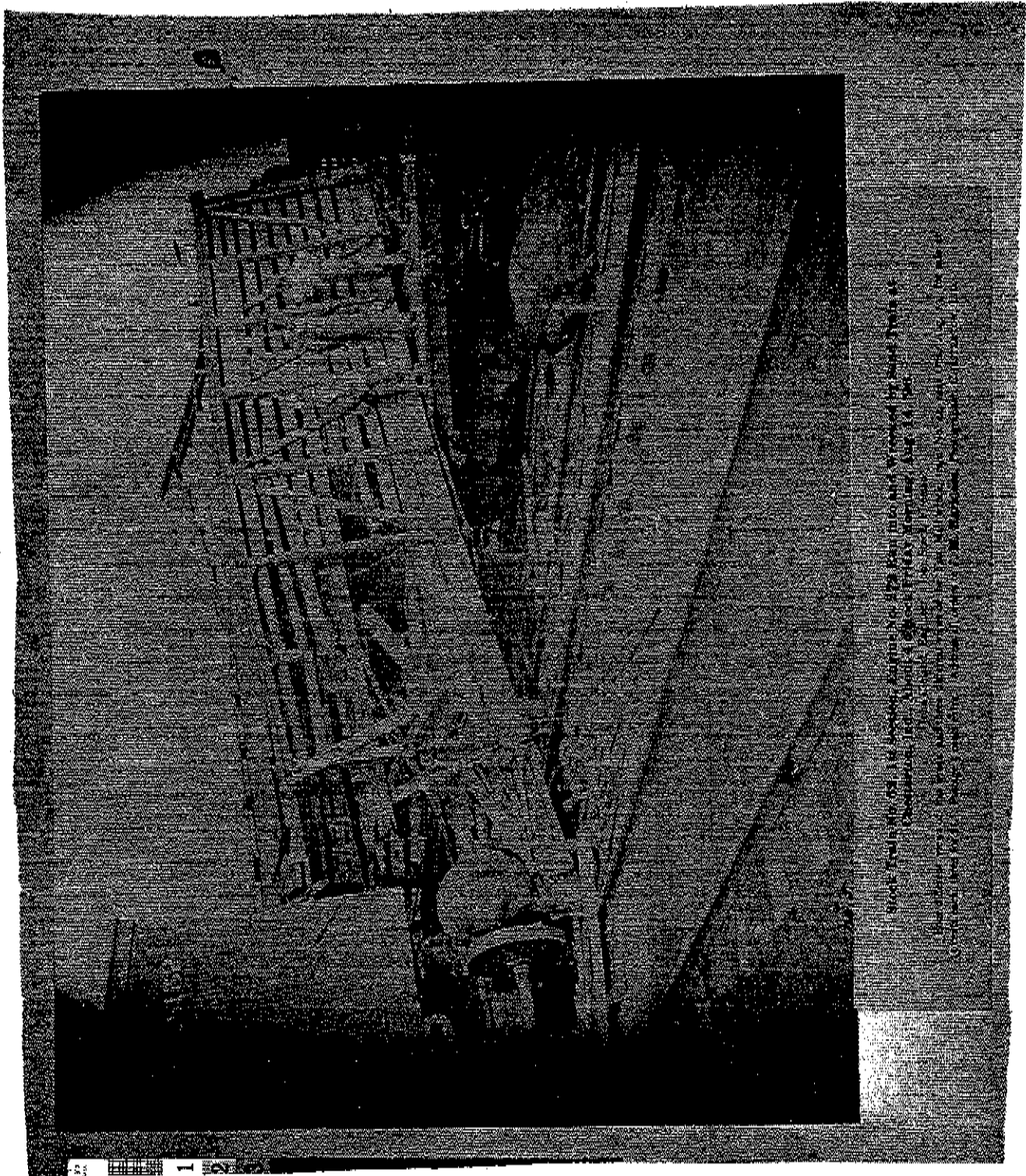
depot -11.jpg



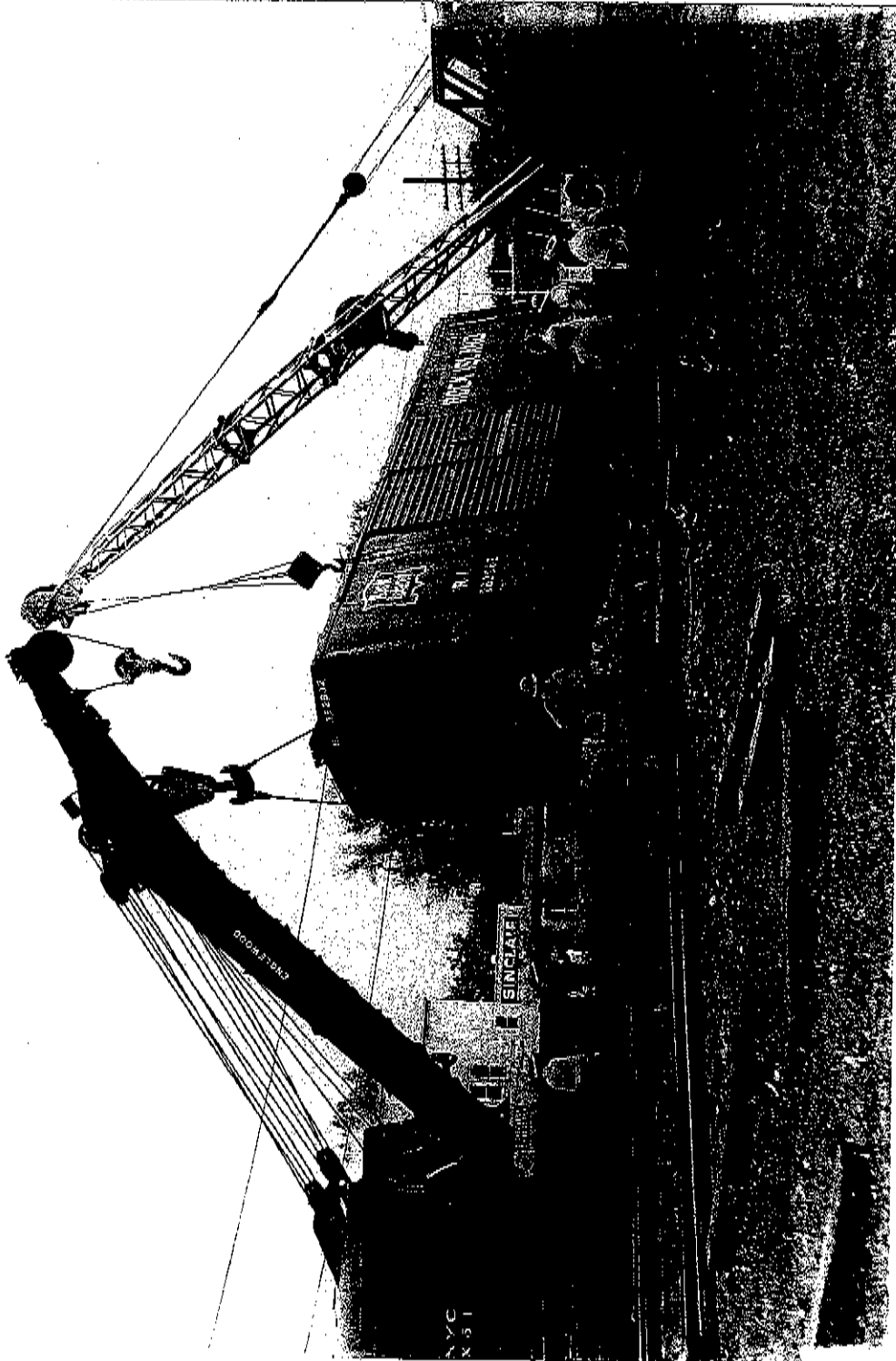
LAKE SHORES R.R. STA. CHESTERTON, IND

Cor New York Central

Number One
Over

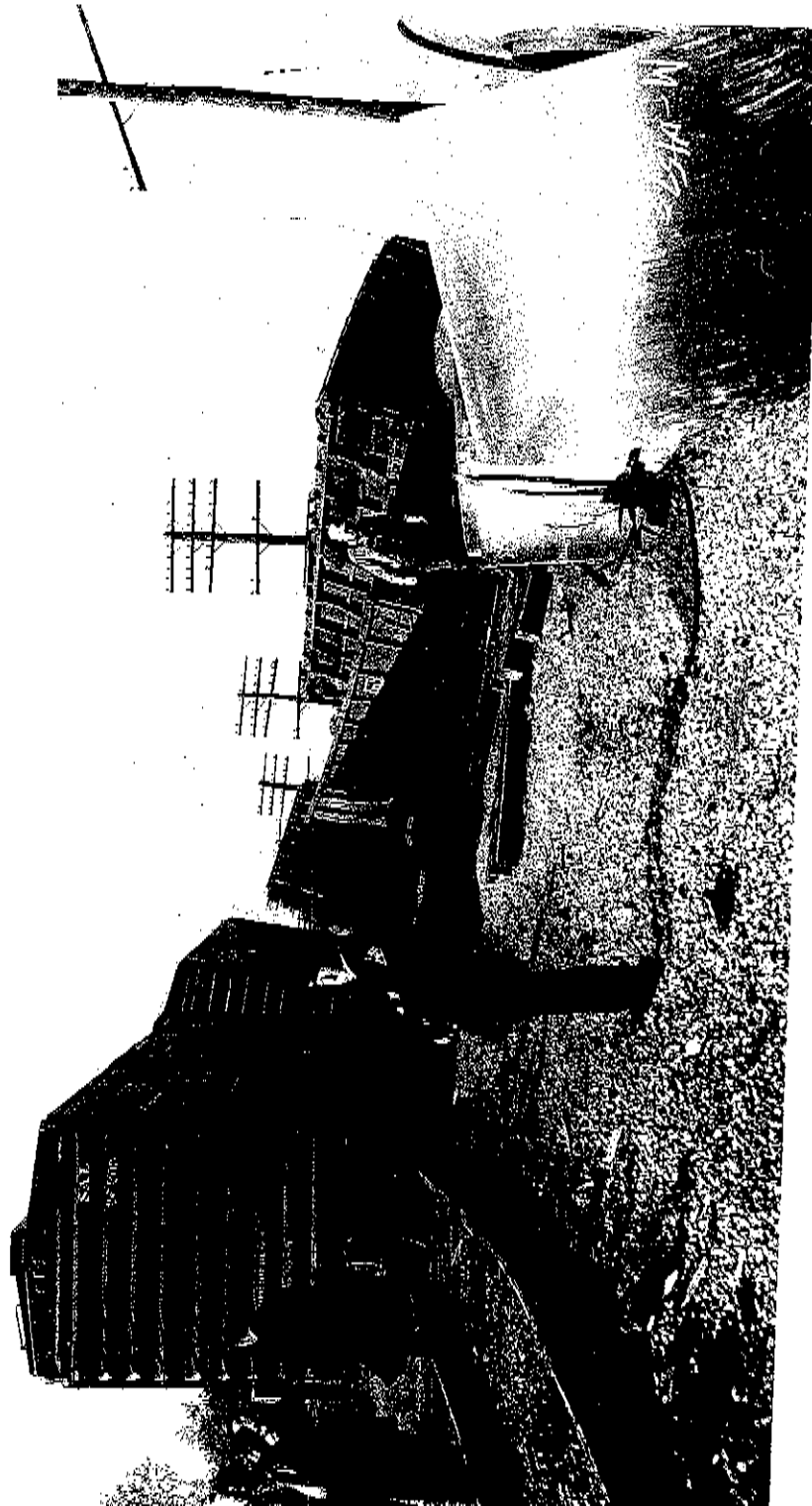


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