



## On the Bi-Level

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# Chicago & North Western left mark on Chicago history

*Most information in this history is from "The North Western: A History of the Chicago & North Western Railway System" by H. Roger Grant.*

The three Chicago area commuter lines that are now owned by Union Pacific spent much of their existence as part of the Chicago & North Western. Each began independently before becoming part of the C&NW:

- The Northwest Line, which started as the Illinois & Wisconsin in 1854, became part of the C&NW when that system was formed in 1859.
- The West Line, which began as the Galena & Chicago Union in 1848, became part of the C&NW system in 1864.
- The North Line, which started as the Chicago & Milwaukee in 1854, was leased by the C&NW starting in 1866 and was bought by the C&NW in 1883.

Commuter service on all three lines developed gradually, particularly in the years following the Civil War and the Chicago fire of 1871. The fire especially made living in the suburbs, away from the congestion and noise of the city, more appealing, and the railroad promoted and benefitted from the trend.

By the end of the century, the railroad's passenger terminal at Kinzie and Wells had become too small for the number of commuters and intercity passengers using it. The railroad spared no expense on a new \$23 million facility, which opened on June 4, 1911, on a site bounded by Madison, Lake, Clinton and Canal.

It featured a three-story, 202-by-117-foot main waiting room, a dining room, women's rooms with writing desks and hairdressing services, smoking rooms for men, a barber shop,

hospital rooms and a variety of other features.

In 1915, a committee sponsored by the Chicago Association of Commerce recommended that the C&NW electrify its tracks between Chicago and Waukegan, Des Plaines and Elmhurst. The company considered it in the 1920s, particularly after the Illinois Central electrified its commuter service (today's Metra's Electric Line) in 1926. But the cost – at least \$60 million – and fact that the commuter trains were money-losers deterred implementation.

Also in the 1920s, the railroad improved several suburban depots and introduced some new aluminum-alloy commuter cars. It also leased a private car, the Deerpath, to wealthy businessmen on its North line in 1929. (The descendant of that car is still in service.) But during that same decade, the company was noticing a severe drop in local train passengers due to the growing popularity of the automobile.

Like the rest of the country, the railroad was battered by the Depression in the 1930s, leading to a nine-year bankruptcy starting in 1935. The C&NW's introduction of its famed "400" intercity trains that decade was one of the few bright spots.

In the 1940s and 1950s, passenger trains continued to lose riders to the automobile and airplane. Commuter trains fared better than intercity trains but still were generally losing money.

The C&NW sought to reverse that trend under new leader Ben Heineman, who came aboard in 1956. The Heineman era included catching up on deferred maintenance, modernizing ticketing and collection methods, revising schedules and adjusting fares.

The railroad also replaced the commuter fleet with new bi-level coaches and shuttered about 20 close-in stations so it could concentrate on suburban service. And it rehabbed several locomotives and instituted a push-pull operation into and out of Chicago.

Like other railroads in the 1960s and 1970s, the C&NW sought to deal with losses by diversifying, and by 1970 the railroad was a money-losing component of a much larger corporation. In 1972, Heineman sold the C&NW to an employee-led investment group.

Two years later, the RTA was formed and it began to subsidize the region's commuter trains. The C&NW entered a purchase-of-service agreement with the RTA, an arrangement that continues for the three lines, although the agreement is now between Metra, formed in 1984, and UP, which bought the C&NW in 1995.

In 1984, the grand old head house of the North Western Station was razed to make way for the 42-story Citigroup Center, which was completed in 1987 and now serves as the main station entrance. The passenger platforms and adjoining facilities were renovated starting in 1992, after Metra bought them from C&NW. Upon completion of the \$141 million project, the station was renamed the Richard B. Ogilvie Transportation Center, after the former governor who championed mass transit.

The C&NW's long history came to an end when Union Pacific bought it in April 1995. The two railroads had long collaborated on connections to the West Coast and buying the C&NW gave Union Pacific a connection to Chicago to help it compete with other railroads.