

The North Shore Line: From Depot Avenue to McKinley Road

By Norman Carlson

A letter from the Commandant of Naval Station Great Lakes to Lake Forest Mayor Keene H. Addington in July 1918 resulted in the Chicago North Shore & Milwaukee moving houses and constructing McKinley Road on a new alignment. The Commandant, Captain W. A. Moffett, was concerned with the lack of sufficient road capacity to move trucks and automobiles in support of the war effort between Chicago, Fort Sheridan and Great Lakes. Green Bay Road was the only route.

Depot Avenue was on the site of the present day bike path next to the Union Pacific North Line. North Shore Line trains operated on Depot Avenue between Illinois and Woodland Roads. A new roadway was desired between Woodland Road and the north limits of the city. What we now know as Sheridan Road between Westleigh and Old Elm Roads did not exist.

Then, as now, the question was, who would fund the building and maintaining of the desired roadways? The answer, the North Shore Line. Four years of City Council deliberations, negotiations, and a mountain of paperwork followed.

There was always a contentious relationship between the northern lakeshore suburbs and the North Shore Line and its predecessors. When the railroad first proposed coming through Lake Forest in 1898, Lake Forest extracted \$10,000 and used the money to build, among other things, City Hall.

The devices that provided suburban communities the ability to exercise leverage against the North Shore Line were the franchise agreements that stipulated the terms under which the railroad could operate within city boundaries. These agreements were constantly being renegotiated. The Commandant's request gave the City of Lake Forest yet another opportunity to bring the railroad to the bargaining table.

John Griffith was the real estate agent for the railroad in Lake Forest for years. Beginning in 1918, the city forced the railroad to purchase the homes on what was then the east side of Depot Avenue, the land to the east of the homes and then pay to move the homes east to the property behind them. At the same time the City vacated what was originally Depot Avenue, now renamed McKinley Road, allowing the railroad to remain on what then became a private right-of-way for the trains, now the bike path.

As agent for the railroad, Griffith appraised the vacant land and the homes, made offers to the owners based on advice from the railroad as to what they would pay, and handled the closings. During the forthcoming construction period many of the homes were leased, some to railroad employees and construction workers.

Griffith found the tenants, established the lease rates, collected the rents, was the collection agent when the rents were not paid, and remitted the proceeds, net of his fees to the railroad. The stream of correspondence was prolific and punctuated with a few tidbits of Griffith finding properties surrounding Lake Forest that he thought the corporate officers would have a personal interest in.

Finally roadway construction was undertaken. The railroad was required to pay all of the construction costs. Initially, the railroad was going to be required to maintain the new roadway in Lake Forest, while the city was going to be required to maintain Sheridan Road south from Westleigh to Fort Sheridan, a roadway that was not within the city limits. Ultimately, the city was required to maintain only the roadway within the city limits. Construction took place in 1923 and 1924.

Train service along the original route from Waukegan to Highland Park through downtown Lake Bluff and Lake Forest, later known as the Shore Line Route, began on June 23, 1898 and was completed to Evanston on August 13, 1899. Ravinia Park was built by the railroad to generate more passenger traffic.

The railroad was extended from Lake Bluff to Mundelein in 1905, from North Chicago to Milwaukee in 1908 and via the Chicago elevated from Evanston to the Loop in 1919. To provide faster service between Chicago and Milwaukee, the Skokie Valley Route opened on June 5, 1926. It was built west of the suburban communities in what later became the U. S. Highway 41 corridor.

Falling victim to the automobile, the Shore Line Route ceased operations on July 24, 1955 and the Skokie Valley Route ceased operations on January 20, 1963. Fifty years later, memories of and affection for the North Shore Line remain strong.