

THE RAILROAD COMES TO ALMA, WISCONSIN

Twelfth In A Series Of Articles On The 19th Century Photography Of Gerhard Gesell

Transportation during the 19th century was often difficult, but as the century progressed accessibility to the central western towns of Wisconsin, their people and their commercial products improved dramatically.

Many of our ancestors walked across this new country with oxen-pulled wagons bringing their families and belongings but many also traveled up the Mississippi River, the highway of their day. This was especially true for the village of Alma, Wisconsin with its high bluffs and small land mass between the river and the bluffs. These settlers were dependent on the Mississippi River for six months out of the year while river transportation was advantageous, but to survive the winter they had to accumulate great quantities of staple articles and plan ahead.

From canoes, a preferred mode of transportation by Native Americans and trappers, to the steamer which first ascended the Upper Mississippi River in 1823 to Mendota, Minnesota, great progress was made in river transportation in the 19th century. From that year forward at least one steamer made the trip passing by Alma, but they were small packet vessels drawing less than 6 feet of water and could only pass the many shifting sand islands during high water. By 1847 the Galena & Minnesota Packet Company established regular traffic on the Upper Mississippi River.

1856 brought the opening of the Galena & Chicago Union Railroad and in 1858 the La Crosse & Milwaukee Railroad was completed. While this brought additional people and freight across the states of Illinois and Wisconsin, the river was still relied upon to transport people and freight up and down the river by steamboat. Steamboats operating at that time remained on the Upper Mississippi because the rapids of Des Moines and Rock Island made transportation the length of the Mississippi River virtually impossible.

The railroads in Minnesota began to come into active competition with steamboats in the 1860s. In 1866 the Minnesota Valley Railroad reached West St Paul. A railroad bridge was built and the railroads crossed over the Mississippi in 1869. In 1872 the West Wisconsin railroad reached St Paul from the east side of the Mississippi and the trade of the steamboats passed to the railroads forever because it no longer paid to run the many small boats that were on the river and the steamboat traffic dwindled.

In Buffalo County people wanting to go up or down the river crossed to Winona or Wabasha and the question had become how to reach these stations conveniently. Small steamers from Alma to Wabasha and from Fountain City to Winona made daily trips during the season of open navigation.

Around 1887 the first railroad crossed a very small part of Buffalo County, the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad from the Trempealeau River to Bluff Siding. With one station in Buffalo County, it crossed the Mississippi River to Winona. The next railroad construction within Buffalo County was the Valley Division of the Milwaukee & Omaha Road, connecting Eau Claire with Wabasha and running through the western part of the Chippewa bottoms for over 12 miles in Buffalo County and raising the status of the village of Durand because of its central location and almost level roads. Farmers who formerly took their wheat to Alma for shipping on the Mississippi now took the easier path to Durand.

There were many schemes and projects to bring the railroad to Alma and speculation was rampant because there were great fortunes to be realized if a town became a new center of trade along the railroad, this had already been experienced in Durand, Independence and Arcadia. In 1882 the first contracts for right of way at Alma were made and the first definitive survey and platting of the railroad line was finished and contracts for grading soon followed. Track-laying began in November 1884 at the Chippewa and finished in La Crosse on January 1, 1885. This changed the river landscape of Alma forever because the track ran between the business district and the Mississippi River a few feet away. In fact the railroad track often ran on a trestle right in the river. In March of 1885 regular trains were put in service between La Crosse and Trevino (located north of Nelson just below the Chippewa, deep in the Nelson-Trevino Bottoms).



Gerhard Gesell captured these changing times in the history of Alma with his photography. The Gesell exhibit includes a picture of the first train crossing the railroad trestle over the Beef Slough with American flags flying, railroad men with their new pocket watches are memorialized in a photo of a new railroad trestle bridge and the new Alma train station is documented with the workers standing around the station and on top of the water tower. Alma was no longer exclusively dependent on the Mississippi River for transportation.

By Katherine Goodman, Alma Historical Society

505 South 2nd Street, Alma, Wisconsin 54610

Email: society@almahistory.org

Website: www.almahistory.org

Photo: Alma Train Station (WHS Image 25846)