

DECLINE OF THE

Once the small town's major link with the outside, branch line railroads face a struggle today.



The old branch line railroads are in trouble.

According to the Wisconsin Public Service Commission (PSC), since 1946 railroad abandonments on branch lines have amounted in 168 miles of track no longer used.

More recently, from June 30, 1957 to June 30, 1958 there were three branch line abandonments and one consolidation. With this came ten station abandonments, also.

BRANCH LINE

Train's comin!

Once an eagerly awaited call, the news of the arrival of the Chicago, St. Paul & Omaha railway in the small western Wisconsin town of River Falls goes largely unheeded today.

At 9:23 a.m. on a Wednesday morning, River Falls station agent Nels Dodge receives word over the telegraph that the train has left Hudson, 12 miles to the north.



Over hill and vale, feeling every curve and bump, the train moves on slowly toward River Falls. Because of its slow speed, it was long ago termed the "Peanut Pusher," and this nickname has stuck with it to the present day.

And from many a farm house, like the one shown here, children hear the whistle down the valley and say, "Peanut Pusher's comin."

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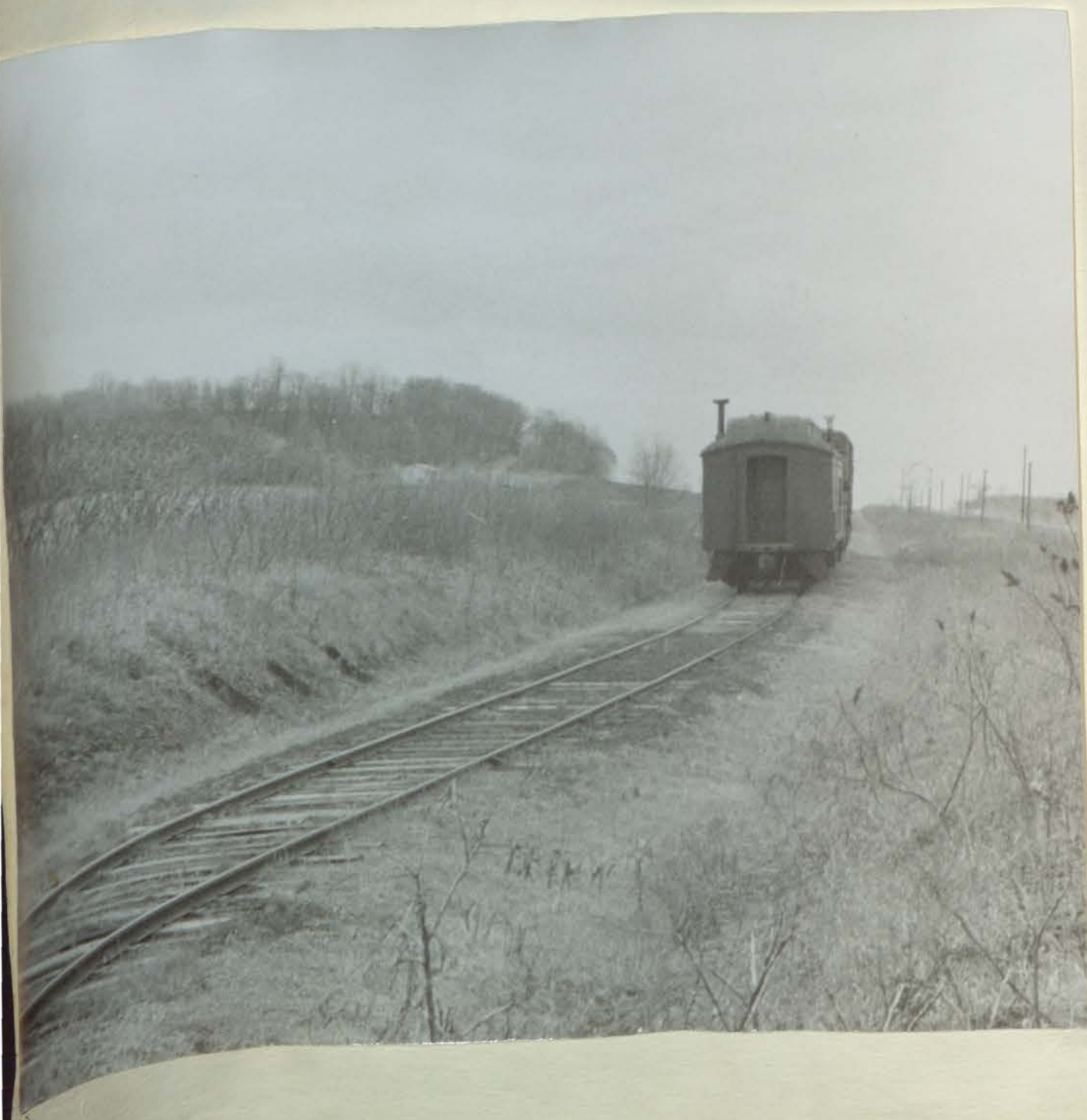
Mark Wyman

May 26, 1959

But in less than 20 minutes, it is time to leave and move on south to Ellsworth, another small town served by the branch line. There, it will pick up some creamery products and some unfinished lumber, and leave some finished lumber.

The old train leaves, trailing its empty "caboose," or passenger car, behind. But no passengers take the train today--a far cry from forty years ago, when two passenger cars had to be run daily. This branch line operates only three days a week now, and further cuts are in the immediate future.

In 1920, according to the history, The Railroads of Wisconsin, 1827 - 1935, the 35 different railroad companies operating branch lines in Wisconsin traveled over 11,615 miles of track. Last year, according to the PSC, there were only 18 companies, and they operated over 9,664 track miles.



And with the train gone, the station is quiet.

It's especially quiet for the station agent, who wonders "When will this one fold up?" "When will I lose my job?" He looks through the dirty window set in the weather-beaten frame, out onto the rusted and worn tracks, and ponders the future of both the branch line and himself.

540 - Pic Story

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But there is still some work to be done. Some feed from the farmers' cooperative elevator, above left, is usually picked up.

The workmen find time to talk, above right, while an empty station wagon sits idle behind them. Once they would have been kept busy loading lumber, barrels, wheat, flour, and other goods onto cars during the River Falls stop. Now there is little but some feed and lumber.

The stop is usually used to examine the hook-ups between cars. Note the unpainted, worn-out condition of the car at right. Branch lines usually get the most worn equipment.



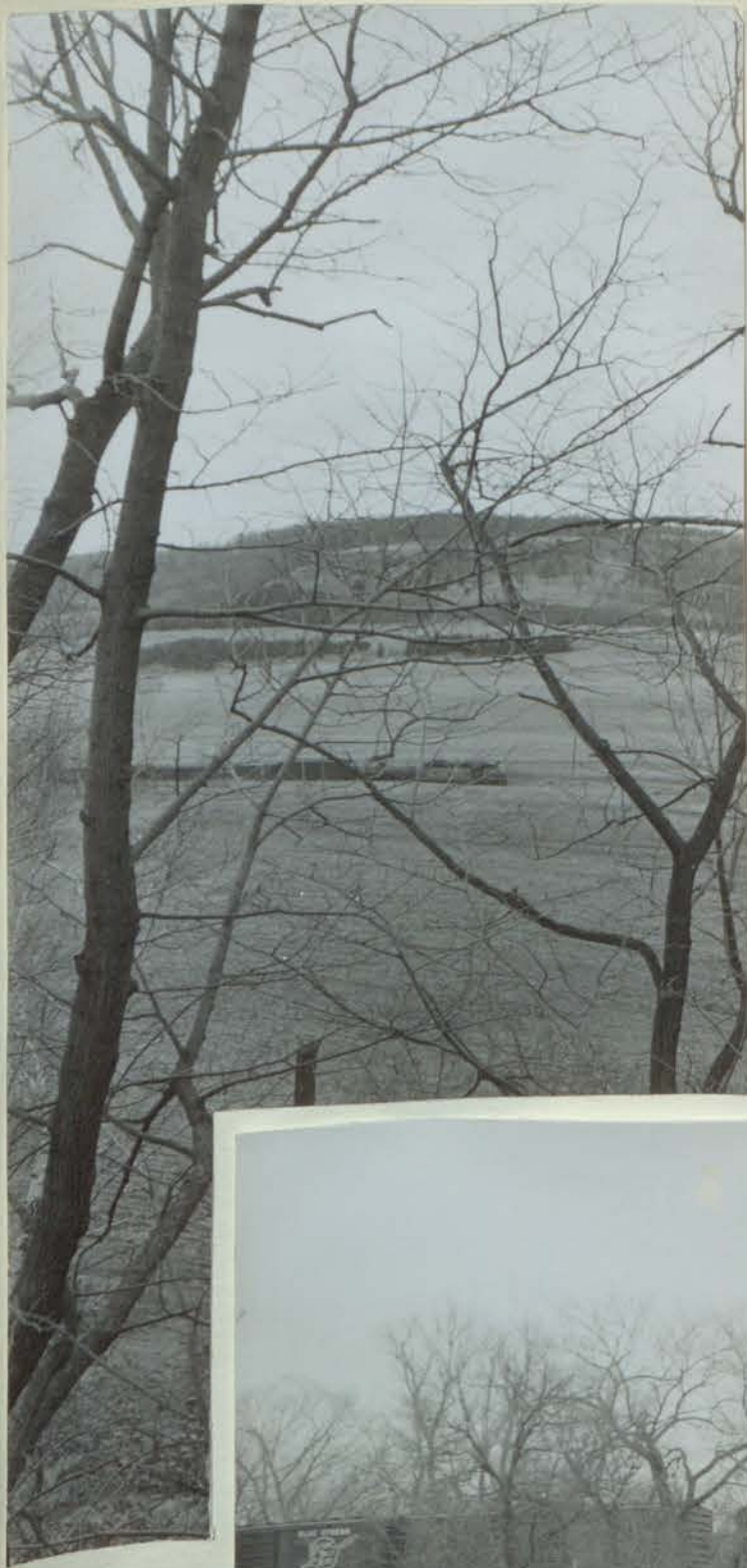
The switchmen and car couplers still must use their traditional arm-waving signals to the engineer, however. As long as there are railroads, this will never change.

The signals no longer spark admiration from bystanders, however. A city crew member (above) ignores the train and climbs in his truck.

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Moving through the broad valleys created thousands of years ago by the receding glaciers, the train appears from the distance to be a thin snake, inching forward to its prey.

As it approaches River Falls, it encounters the Kinnickinnic river, a trout fisherman's dream in the summer but now, in late winter, a cold, dismal sight on a dreary day that perhaps does little to cheer the train and its crew up.



Its major competitor awaits...

Already waiting at the station in River Falls, however, is a truck--both a representative and a symbol of the new means of transporting goods which has signalled the end of the branch line railroad.

And in the almost-deserted station, the trucker prepares a few packages for shipping. (Once hundreds gathered to get the latest news and greet travelers.)



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