

GR & I Railroad Brought Travelers North in 1855

A Look at History

BY FRANK STRAUS

Golden Age of Railroading



By the "golden age" of American railroading in the 1800s, railroads were often named after the cities and states they served, or hoped to serve.

The Grand Rapids & Indiana, which grew into one of the largest railroads in Michigan, was begun as a short line intended to connect the fast-growing frontier city of Grand Rapids with railroad trunk lines in northern Indiana. It was chartered in January 1854.

During the years after the Civil War, the federal government joined hands with a gaggle of railroads to hasten development of America's frontier territories and unoccupied federal lands. Uncle Sam set aside one large swathe of one million acres of real estate, stretching from Grand Rapids north to Petoskey, for the GR & I.

The lucrative gift grabbed the attention, in 1869, of financiers in Philadelphia who controlled what was then one of the nation's largest railroads, the "Pennsylvania." Starting in the 1870s, the GR & I was a branch line of the main Pennsylvania line, which stretched from Philadelphia to Chicago. The two railroads joined together at Fort Wayne, Indiana. For decades after this, although the GR & I nominally retained its independence and corporate name, it was in reality a vassal and almost a subsidiary of the larger railroad.

With Pennsylvania money behind it, the northward-pushing railroad reached Cadillac in 1871 and Petoskey in 1873. During a period of hard times in the late 1870s, the GR & I could not raise capital to further lengthen and complete its railroad. For a brief period of time, Mackinac Island-bound travelers could take the "cars" to Petoskey and then board a small steamboat at Crooked Lake for a ride down the "Inland Waterway" to Cheboygan. A larger boat steamed past Cross Village and Waugoshance Point to Mackinac Island, too.

An enthusiastic traveler on the GR & I route to Mackinac Island published his impressions in the *Detroit Post* in August 1874: "The accessibility of the lake region, with freedom from malarious diseases during the hot season, and the fishing and hunting, the beauty of scenery furnished by forest lakes and streams, as well as other attractions which might be named, combine to

draw the health and pleasure-seeker there, and make all who come to Mackinac feel that their journeyings have not been in vain."

One hopes that the gushing writer got a free ticket from the railroad for his labors.

One of the most unusual cargoes ever carried by an American railroad was shipped on the GR & I in 1878. That was the summer of the last major nesting of passenger pigeons ever seen in North America. Market hunters, armed with shotguns, nets, and birdlime, swarmed to Petoskey to hunt the succulent birds. Contemporary accounts indicate that, throughout the summer, the hapless doves were dispatched at a rate of 50,000 birds per day. Plucked and gutted, the wild poultry was stacked in GR & I boxcars cooled with blocks of ice and rushed southward to American gourmets. Millions of nesting birds were killed. Petoskey citizens hoped that the pigeons would return in 1879 and following years, but they never did. A former Petoskey railroad station, now the home of the Little Traverse Historical Society, today displays one of its prize possessions - a stuffed passenger pigeon. The bird became extinct in 1914.

"These lands are timbered with Pine," the GR & I boasted in an 1875 advertisement aimed at lumbermen and real estate buyers, "and with Beech and Maple, Elm and other hard wood." One key freight carried by the GR & I was hardwood axed by the Grand Rapids lumberman, D.A. Blodgett, and shipped south to feed Grand Rapids' growing furniture factories. The GR & I was to become the 'silent partner' in making western Michigan the furniture capital of the United States; and Blodgett, with part of his hardwood fortune, would build the West Bluff showpiece, "Casa Verano," on Mackinac Island.

Spurred by competition with an eastern Michigan railroad, the Michigan Central, the GR & I resumed building across Emmet County in the early 1880s. The Petoskey-Mackinaw City segment was completed on July 3, 1882. The GR & I and Michigan Central were competitors in southern Michigan, but at Mackinaw City they decided to cooperate. The GR & I's trains



Vintage photo of Railroad Dock in St. Ignace. (Postcard courtesy of Tom Pfeiffelmann)

served the Michigan Central's depot near the waterfront, and the GR & I agreed to pay half the costs of operating and maintaining the station.

The GR & I and Michigan Central also joined hands to form a shared car-ferry company to shuttle railroad cars across the Straits of Mackinac to St. Ignace. This joint venture, the Mackinac Transportation Company, eventually built and put into service that pillar of the 20th century, the *Chief Wawatam*.

New car ferries across the Straits of Mackinac helped supply the Upper Peninsula's yawning demand for freight. In the pre-

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