



Rusting rails, empty rooms await abandonment



Farewell to a railroad

By LARRY WILLS
Chronicle Staff Writer

The Bozeman freight office of the Milwaukee Railroad stood nearly empty last week, waiting for the final train that will wrap up 86 years of shipper and passenger service to the community.

John Robinson, the local agent, walked through the office pointing out a few mementos here and there that reflected the heyday of the railroads.

He said the office once employed seven people with daily freight and passenger service to Three Forks and the transcontinental mainline.

Robinson said he gave some of the more valuable items to the Museum of the Rockies, such as telegraph keys and sounders.

Most of what remained was in the form of maps, and train orders.

Robinson will be the last railroad representative in Bozeman when the line is officially abandoned next week. He said he expects to be transferred elsewhere on the Milwaukee system.

In the half hour that Robinson talked about the closing, the phone didn't ring once, and a single customer came in the office.

He said today's situation was a far cry from when the office had an agent, a cashier, two clerks, an operator, and three deliverymen for parcels.

The predecessor of the Milwaukee began in 1892 when the Gallatin Light, Power and Railroad Co constructed 2.5 miles of line on the streets of Bozeman. That streetcar line ran from where Montana State University is today through downtown to the Burlington Northern passenger station.

According to testimony given at the Interstate Commerce Commission hearing, a new company, the Gallatin Valley Electric, constructed a line from Bozeman to Three Forks in 1910.

About that time the Milwaukee, the last transcontinental railroad was moving west, absorbing smaller railroads to obtain right of way. One such line was the "Jawbone Railroad" at Ringling.

The Milwaukee bought the Gallatin Valley Railroad stock in 1912, and absorbed the local line into the system.

The line being abandoned this week consists of 40.3 miles from Three Forks to Bozeman, including a spur to Gallatin Gateway.

Robinson said when the Milwaukee first bought the local railroad, passenger trains ran to Bozeman connecting with the six daily mainline trains running through Three Forks.



One of the company presidents reportedly built a hotel at Salesville, the former name of Gallatin Gateway, which was used as a stopover point for passengers headed for Yellowstone Park.

A sticker on a cabinet door still proclaims "Gallatin Gateway — Gateway to Yellowstone."

Later, passengers heading for the park were bused from Three Forks to Gateway. Robinson said he remembers telegraph messages to Three Forks saying how many passengers would be getting off for the park.

After about 1920, the railroad abandoned passenger trains on the Bozeman line, but maintained caboose service for passengers. The caboose carried passengers until about 1960.

Robinson said many residents called the line the "Turkey Red," after a variety of wheat that was introduced into the mountain country around World War I.

The line north end to Menard was abandoned about four years ago.

After 1960, it was all down hill for the line. The flour mill closed which cut off about three to four cars a day business.

Business today consists of a few firms in Bozeman, and the Greenwood and Manhattan elevators. Robinson said no decision has been made on whether the BN will service these customers after the Milwaukee pulls out.

The line officially goes out of service Monday, but Robinson said there may be another train sometime early this week.

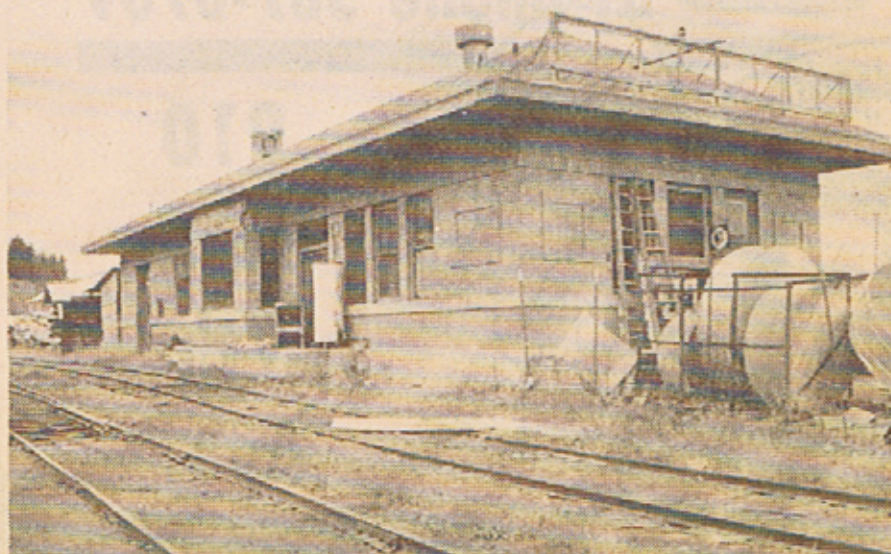
He said he doesn't know what is going to happen to the line's right of way, but that most of that route was bought outright when it was constructed.

The city planning staff has been studying the possibility of making the route a bike path.



Swan song

John Robinson, Milwaukee agent, talks of busier days as he awaits the demise of the Bozeman branch line. At left, the old telegrapher's office now collects dust. (Photos by Gary Bakken)



Forgotten depot

