

Peek Through Time: Grass Lake's historic train depot

Published: Saturday, March 05, 2011, 6:20 AM



By Leanne Smith | Jackson Citizen Patriot

It's been a showpiece for 20 years, so some people might be surprised to hear that downtown Grass Lake's historic train depot almost became a thing of the past itself.

It's also quite possible that the stone building residents worked so hard to save really wasn't supposed to be built there at all.



Citizen Patriot file photo

The historic train depot on Michigan Avenue in downtown Grass Lake has looked much like this for the past 20 years, but there was a time when it seemed certain it could be demolished and lost forever.

Grass Lake's first settlers arrived about 1829. Two years later, they built the second U.S. post office in Jackson County on Michigan Avenue, just east of where the village is today. They called their town Grass Lake Center.

Grass Lake Center's demise was quick, though, when the Michigan Central Railroad, which was rapidly putting down tracks from Detroit to Chicago, found out that land there for a passenger depot was going to cost \$2 an acre.

Railroad officials went two miles west where land was \$1.50 an acre and built a wooden depot, which opened around the time the line to Jackson opened in 1842.

The railroad was the area's lifeline, taking crops and livestock to market and bringing back people, merchandise and mail. As trade boomed, the village relocated around the depot.

Grass Lake quickly outgrew that depot, so in 1887 a new one was built. It took just six months to erect the 2,000-square-foot Richardsonian Romanesque Revival stone structure with a high-peaked roof and stained-glass windows.

It's never been confirmed, but according to legend, it might have been an accident that Grass Lake got such a fancy depot.

As the story goes, a group of railroad officials were traveling between Detroit and Jackson when one of them shouted to stop the train just past Grass Lake. After the engineer backed up to the depot, the man supposedly pulled out blueprints, studied them for a few moments and said, "My gosh! They built this depot in the wrong place."

The right place might have been Coldwater or Niles, where a large stone depot was built in 1891.

Right spot or wrong, passenger trains stopped at Grass Lake's pretty stone depot for 69 years. In 1911, seven of the 21 trains passing through stopped at the depot.

As buses and automobiles became more popular modes of travel, the number of trains stopping in Grass Lake declined to five in 1929, three in 1933, two in 1947 and one in 1953.

In 1956, the New York Central Railroad, which had bought the Michigan Central, announced that Grass Lake was one of 406 passenger stations it would either lease or sell to someone else. The asking price was \$5,000, with a down payment of \$500.

The depot sat idle until 1962 when Robert Mather and his wife Bobby moved in and made it the 14-year home of The News, a weekly newspaper serving Grass Lake and Michigan Center.

In 1976, the depot was purchased by James Leonard of Marshall, who operated Drake's Batter Mix Co. and wanted to turn it into a small restaurant.

That never happened because of a suspected arson fire on June 21, 1980 that gutted the depot right down to its stone walls, which were eventually condemned and destined by the Grass Lake Village Council for demolition.

A citizens effort to purchase the depot began in 1985 and muddled along for years with Grass Lake Township Supervisor Alan Mollenkopf even trying to get his board to buy the building.

Then, Phil Willis, a resident whose grandfather P.S. "Sherd" Willis had served as a ticket agent in the Grass Lake depot for several years at the turn of the 20th century, helped form the Whistlestop Park Association in 1988.

"I think it was my family connection that made me a believer the depot could be saved," Willis said. "And, the rails were so important. They are the reason Grass Lake is there."

The group, which quickly gained supporters and members, purchased the depot on Dec. 15, 1988. Restoration was pretty authentic, right down to replacing the wooden roof.

It took three-and-a-half years, \$250,000 in grants and donations and thousands of volunteer hours, but the depot was restored and dedicated with much fanfare in September 1992.

Many people believe the restoration of the depot, which features a historical display, is rented for parties and functions and serves as headquarters for the village's annual Heritage Day and Art Fair, was the cornerstone of the renovation of downtown Grass Lake.

"I think it definitely is the centerpiece of the village," Willis said. "Seeing it restored from the horrible state it was in gave people confidence in the community."



Citizen Patriot file photo

This postcard shows Grass Lake's depot before the turn of the 20th century.

About the gardens

When Grass Lake's stone train depot was built in 1887, the Michigan Central Railroad also bought the land extending eastward to Brown Street for a park.

Parks were common at several of the depots along the railroad's Detroit-to-Chicago line because they gave passengers pretty surroundings to wait in. The railroad also used cut flowers from these gardens to decorate the tables of its dining cars.

A portion of the park around the Grass Lake depot was restored along with the building by the Whistlestop Park Association. In the years following the building's demise as a depot, trees had been removed and a number of stores and businesses built on the land.

However, four crabapple trees, three of which remain, were planted in front of the building in 1971 as part of Grass Lake's centennial celebration.

Old photographs and postcards were used to create the Victorian garden there today. Perennials popular at the time the building was used as a depot — including daylilies, sedum, coneflowers, black-eyed susans, phlox, astilbe and lavender — were planted.

The garden is maintained by the Jackson County Master Gardeners Association.

Tidbits

- Grass Lake Township was created in 1832, and its current boundaries were established in 1836. The village was incorporated in 1871 and in 10 years it had about 1,000 residents, two hotels, 11 stores, four saloons and three churches.
- Grass Lake's stone train depot was designed by Spier & Rohns of Detroit, which also designed stone depots in Ann Arbor and Hudson. Stone was quarried at Foster's Station, just northwest of Ann Arbor and hauled by train to Grass Lake.
- The depot originally had a small baggage and mail area surrounded by a waist-high wall in the northwest corner. There were separate waiting rooms and rest rooms for men and women on separate sides of the building. Two cast iron stoves and a fireplace provided heat.
- The original fireplace frame and mantel, which escaped the 1980 fire because they were in storage, were returned to the depot and are featured there today along with other relics from the building's railroad heydays.
- Grass Lake was not without its railroad disasters. In fact, Thanksgiving Day 1902 was a bit more exciting than usual after two Michigan Central Railroad freight trains collided head-on at the Lake Street crossing the night before.
- The Whistlestop Park Association took its name from the book "Whistle Stop," by Maritta Wolff Stegman, who grew up in Grass Lake and graduated from the high school in 1935. She studied literature at the University of Michigan and earned the 1940 Avery Hopwood "Major Prize for Fiction" for the book, which was a fictional account of life in a small Michigan town that everyone in Grass Lake knew must be Grass Lake. The book was very risqué for its time, received much critical acclaim and was the basis for the movie "Whistle Stop," starring George Raft and Ava Gardner. The association is still active today and led by longtime president Marilyn Ouellette.
- The depot was placed on the State Register of Historical Sites in 1992. It is managed by the village's Chamber of Commerce and is available for rental. Tours are also available by appointment. Call 522-4332 or 522-4384.