

The History Of the Paper Valley Model RR Club of Appleton ,Wisconsin.

By Paul Hillmer

The PVMRC began in 1936 when Karel Richmond, a member of the YMCA junior board of directors, was put in charge of “hobbies’. Karel was fascinated with trains and decided to start a small model railroad club. Karel recalls “we started with a small layout in a room they gave us.” It was located between the secretary’s office and the billiard room at the old Appleton YMCA and was open at all times. Karel remembers the “Y” layout as “two loops of track, 20 foot square, with no yards or other facilities associated with it. The kids were all enthused until they found out they had to cut ties and lay rails. A lot of them lost interest when they found out they had to work at it.”

The club survived the “Y” for three years then disbanded due to lack of interest. Karel Richmond started searching for a new group and in 1940, advertised in local papers and hobby magazines for anyone in the area interested in trains. His effort attracted a number of interested Appleton area modelers.

The club reformed as an “armchair” club, meeting at various homes of the club members. Members would talk about the different aspects of the hobby and discussion often centered on trying to secure a permanent location. But with WWII going on, the members had trouble locating a place for a layout.

CHARTER MEMBERS 1942....

Karel Richmond-founder, Al Ayers, Sidney Cotton, Melvin Crowley, Al Dekuester, E. E. Fourness, Douglas Fronmuller, Bernard Laabs, Lester Manske, Freeman Nicols, Douglas Otto, and Carl Peotter.

On February 11, 1943, Mumme, Fronmuller, Laabs, and Nicols were appointed to investigate the possibility of locating a permanent location. In 1944, space to build a new layout, in the basement of the Conway Hotel, was leased. The

members began to build an “O” scale layout. The layout was about 30 feet long and Karel describes it as a double track figure 8 with two levels. Karel said that the pike was cramped and they had little room for visitors. The outside stairs leading to the layout were in poor condition, and the layout had its own natural waterfall. It seemed the upstairs tavern sink leaked into the basement. The members installed a “waterfall” to divert the water away from the tracks.

In 1945, the war ended and talks of a better location for the club began. The club was able to secure a lease of the old Chicago Northwestern Railroad depot located on South Oneida Street in the river flats of Appleton.

The old “Ashland Division” depot of the CNW RR was built in 1881 to serve the Milwaukee Lakeshore & Northern Railroad. This line was built from Milwaukee to Manitowoc and onto Appleton. (Kaukauna had a large yard and roundhouse). It then extended northward thru Antigo and onto Ashland and the UP of Michigan. It was the main depot for Appleton. The CNW RR acquired the ML&N in the early 1890s and shifted passenger traffic to Green Bay line depot on North Oneida Street. The depots importance dwindled and by 1945, the depot was in poor condition.

Even though Al Ayers stated that the buildings structure was in poor condition and it had heating problems, the club decided to lease it and began remodeling in 1947. Members rebuilt the interior of station, eliminating the old walls between the agent office, the waiting room, and the baggage room. This left one large room for a layout with an overlooking cage type balcony for visitors and the operating crew. It provided 2048 square feet of layout space for a new “O” scale layout.

On May 10, 1946 the Paper Valley Model Railroad Club was incorporated as a Not for profit organization with the state of Wisconsin. A large O scale layout was designed to be based loosely on the CNW RR Ashland Division operations. By 1948, construction began with ties to be cut, O scale rails being hand laid and

switches being built. By the time the track work was done PVMRC members used over 10,000 ties, 124,000 spikes, and laid over 5300 feet of track. In 1950, the Oshkosh Model Railroad Club came and helped the PVMRC and over 10,000 ties were laid in one night. On October 13, 1950 the “golden spike” of the mainline was driven and the railroad was humming with trains.

“A lot of track was welded in 15 to 20 foot sections,” recalled member Louis Phillips. “Most of the rolling stock and structures were scratch built using lots of cardboard and strip wood.”

To power the layout, the club installed a big bank of batteries which were given to the club by a local phone company. Later, Miller Electric donated transformers and rectifiers. The transformers were too small so the club obtained a huge transformer from the Fond Du Lac Phone Company. Karel recalled that “the thing way weighed a ton,” as he and Al Ayers hauled it from Fond Du Lac. The transformer worked and provided 18 volts to the common rail.

Seven control panels fed 25 miles of wire on the layout. The dispatcher would instruct cab “A” (Green) to operate the westbound routes, and cab “B” (red) to operate the eastbound routes.

The club became operational and the third Friday of every month was operating night. Club members recall that many area folk brought their kids down to the club and put them in the caged balcony while they shopped picking them up around 9pm when the stores closed.

Les Manske describes a typical operating train, number 126, a freight carrying livestock.

“Number 126 may start at 7.20pm in the yards of the Ashland Division and steam its way on a timetable through Maywood, Wyeville, Stockton, and Union Station.

At High Bridge, it switches some cars and transfer from the interior trackage of the Ashland Division to the outer trackage of the Lakeshore Division. At the end of the run, the orders may be that the freight should return to the Ashland Division yards. It returns, running in the opposite direction as number 125.”

Besides the operating nights, the members meet from 8pm till 10pm on Thursday nights. Les Manske remembers that he would get so involved in his work on the layout that he would miss the last bus to Neenah and had to catch the 1.30am train back home to Neenah.

Across the street from the club house depot was a tavern. Members held quarterly meetings there and owner Jake Ashaer let them use a back room to show railroad slides and films. There was plenty of cheese, sausage, crackers and beer consumed during these meetings.

Wheat paste was often used for scenery work. The problem was that the local residents of the “river flats”, the rats, thought this was a tasty treat. Louie Phillips recalls one weekend when the rats consumed a good portion of the scenery on the layout.

The club began its annual tradition of open houses in 1950. This was done as a fund raiser and the public a chance to see the layout. This tradition continues today at our current club house! The club also had fund raisers for March of Dimes over the years.

In 1962, Stan Bye, a member of the PVMRC decided to start a club nearer to his home in Neenah. He started the Neenah Model Railroad Club and built an O scale layout, the Milwaukee & Northern, in an old CMST & P depot in Neenah.

This club, an offshoot of the PVMRC, remains active today.

By the late 1970s, the PVMRC was beginning to run into problems. Membership was dropping as the hobby of model trains was becoming less popular. And even

worst, the old depot was in great state of disrepair. The floor was so warped that the club had to jack up the layout several times to keep it level. The club managed to put a new roof on the building but it seemed to be an endless repair job just to keep the building from collapsing.

The main support posts were sagging.

A local non member, Frank McGinnis, tried to help the club obtain a National Historical Building register for the 1881 depot, but was unable to do so. The club even had money in the City of Appleton budget to repair the building, but the funds were used by the city elsewhere.

By the mid 80s, the club had dwindled to four members. In 1987, Amnet Real Estate Company purchased the building from the CNW RR and gave the club until the end of the year to vacate the premise. (it is interesting to note that the club could have bought the building several times over the years from the CNW for a \$1. But they couldn't afford to move it to a new location or purchase land for a new spot). They dismantled the 40 year old pike and sold most of the O scale items over the years to a former member, Peter Davis, now living in Missouri.

Peter had formed the Little Wabash Train Club in Columbia, Mo.

The club went back to being an "armchair" club, meeting at various members' homes. In 1988 member Francis Kozlovsky donated a HO module bench work set up for the club to work on... Each module measured 2 feet by 4 feet with larger corner modules. The club began working on this in Frank's basement. The members also began promoting the club for new members thru flyers at area hobby stores and began to find some (including this writer) new blood.

In late 1990 the club was able to lease a store front in the Valley Fair Mall. They set up the modules as a club layout and began to work on them. The club was open to the public on Thursday nights and Saturday afternoons. Membership grew rapidly. Members took bus trips to Train Fest In Milwaukee and the Illinois Railroad Museum. The club and its members became active in the National

Model Railroad Association. To date, the PVMRC has sponsored several NMRA events including Winnebago Division meets and Midwest Regional meets.

In 1995, Valley Fair decided that the store front could be used for more money making tenants (a mistake made by them in this writers opinion-the mall sank into financial ruin by the late 90s). The club packed up the modules and was able to lease a storefront space in the downtown Appleton Mall, The Avenue. Negotiations were taken place for use of the basement of the mall and possible tie into the Children's Museum.

Meanwhile, one of the members, Bill Moede, approached the club about leasing an old radio station on Block Road in Kaukauna (Darboy area) from Evangelist Ministries (WEMI). Bill was employed by the station at the time, and the station was using the building for a transmitter and towers. The rest was empty and falling in a state of disrepair. The club could use the building for a \$150 a month, heat included, as long as they take care of the building (mowing/snow removal, ect..). Even though it was located in Appleton, the price was right and the club packed up once again.

The club moved in to the building in late 1995 and began cleaning up the mess. Walls were knocked down, mice and rats were cleaned out, and as much as six months were spent on just cleaning up the items left by the last radio station to occupy the building.

The club began building a large HO layout and by November 1996, it held an open house (a tradition going back to 1950) with running trains. Since that time, the HO layout has expanded into 2 large rooms and is now features a fully operational pike loosely following a mainline from Milwaukee to Green Bay Wisconsin. It features award winning scratch built structures, many industrial switching areas, several large yards, a large harbor area, and a branch line that feeds into a mining area.

In 2001, the club began to work on a large "O Three rail" layout in the basement of the club house . Measuring 42 feet and 30 feet, this layout features a double track mainline and many scenic features including an airport!

The club also stores and it's 12 foot by 40 foot HO Module layout that it built in the Malls in the 1990s. The club currently takes this layout to several shows a year.

Sadly, the club lost its founding member Karel Richmond and long time member Louie Phillips in the past two years. If it wasn't for the determination of Richmond and Phillips, along with long time ember Les Manske, and others, the club probably would have folded years ago. Instead, the Paper Valley Model Railroad Club thrives today, with an average of 26 members, and has an awesome layout display at its current clubhouse. The future looks bright for the PVMRC.

Paul Hillmer

President

PVMRC

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