

The Railroad at Lake Sarah

By Alton Chermak, and Brad Spencer

Much of the advertising ephemera from Lake Sarah's resort heydays in the early 1900's makes note of the convenience of travel to the area's accommodations via the Soo Line Railway.



The railroad played an important role in the early development of this area, enough interest to warrant a station at Lake Sarah for a short time. On the Soo Line, Lake Sarah is located at mile post 24, measured from downtown Minneapolis, and this number can be seen on a small sign along the tracks just west of the intersection of Lake Sarah Heights Drive and Lake Sarah Lane near the property currently owned by Mark and Terry Holten, just east of Bob Beadle's farm.

The Minneapolis & Pacific Railway was constructed through the area in 1886, with the roadway skirting the north side of Lake Sarah between Loretto and Rockford. On June 11, 1888 the Minneapolis & Pacific Railway and three other affiliated lines were consolidated into one single corporation, the Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Ste. Marie Railway Company, better known as the Soo Line from the phonetic pronunciation of Sault.

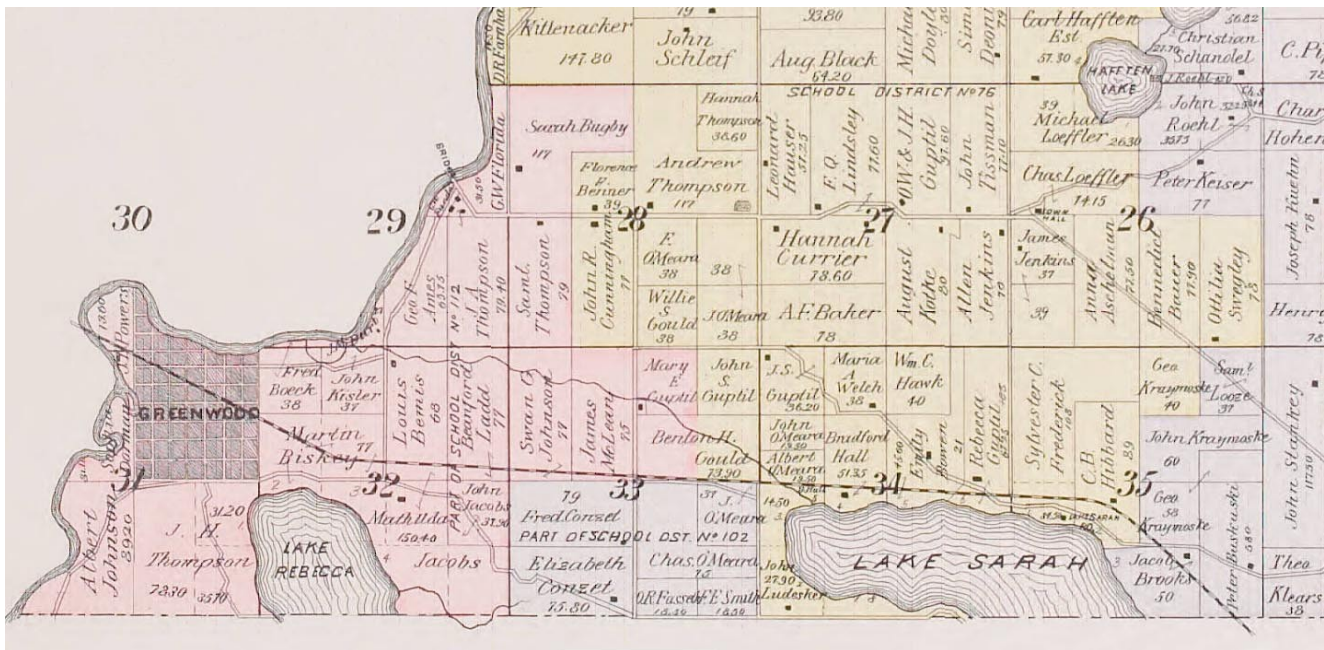


Minneapolis, Sault Ste. Marie & Atlantic engine No. 6 was built by Baldwin in 1886, photo by Joseph Lavelle

The above photo of the Minneapolis, Sault Ste. Marie & Atlantic engine No. 6 with passenger train is from 1886-1887. The coach cars are identical with the equipment that was purchased for the Minneapolis & Pacific. Sister road to the M&P, some of the MSSM&A locos were set up to burn wood, as evidenced by the style of the smoke stack and wood piled on the tender. Most of the M&P locomotives were similar in appearance to the No. 6, except they had a straight smoke stack and burned

coal. Photos of Soo locomotives taken during 1885-1890 are rare, and notes on the back of the photo claim this to be the first passenger train on the Soo Line.

To keep construction costs at a minimum and for other reasons, a low level crossing of the Crow River was made about a half-mile south of the present high bridge at Rockford, whose citizens were disappointed when the M. & P. did not locate through their community and placed the train depot and other facilities at or near the old townsite of Greenwood. There was a fairly quick succession of names for this station progressing from Marmion to Goodwin, before finally renaming the station Rockford in 1889. This old alignment began near the northwest corner of Lake Sarah and continued on a fairly straight heading west for a short distance before curving down the hill towards Greenwood and the low-level crossing of the Crow River. The woodlands were a source for cordwood and in 1887 a loading spur was put in on land that was owned by Charles O'Meara (land later acquired by Benton Gould). This location was known as Spur 2, or O'Meara's Spur, and was a little over a mile west of Lake Sarah.



1896 Atlas which shows the Soo Line track between Lake Sarah and Greenwood – courtesy MN Historical Society

The location of the station on the old Greenwood town site continued to be a challenge to Rockford residents, as they had to surmount a fairly steep hill and endure poor roads on the east side of the Crow River in order to gain access to the depot. There was some clamor to have the railroad put in a depot at the O'Meara Spur but this never materialized.

The Rockford reporter for the *Delano Eagle* in April, 1887 indicated that the railroad had decided to establish a station at Lake Sarah and that it would be named Farnham, speculating that this would become a popular lake resort stop. It was reported late in the year that a side track was being put in at this location and there is some indication that it had become a passenger stop, although the passenger train schedules that were published for the summer of 1888 do not show Lake Sarah (or Farnham) as a station and there was no agent assigned. The M & P Ry construction records do not show any expenditure for Lake Sarah. The newspaper reported that tickets could be purchased at Minneapolis for Farnham, but those boarding at this location likely had to purchase the tickets on the train. This may have changed shortly thereafter as the newspaper reported that Mr. Levi Bowen was the station agent at Lake Sarah and that he was prepared to sell tickets to the Minneapolis Exposition and the State Fair in

late summer. It was further reported at the end of 1888 that milk was being shipped from both O'Meara's Spur and Lake Sarah, so some manner of accommodation was being made for railroad patrons. In September, 1889 agent Bowen reported that he had sold \$600 worth of railroad tickets in the preceding year, and he continued to promote the Lake Sarah location over the old Greenwood (Goodwin) station, suggesting that Lake Sarah should get a regular station depot and be named East Rockford. Perhaps the renaming of Goodwin to Rockford in late 1889 toned down the advocacy of using the Lake Sarah location on the part of Rockford residents.



Levi Bowen home ca. 1900, photo courtesy MN Historical Society

In early 1892, the Delano *Eagle* reported that Levi Bowen was still engaged in the wood business, shipping carloads of cordwood. It may be that the side track mentioned in the previous paragraph was built for this purpose. There was a small spur east of the side track that was later put in closer to the west end of Lake Sarah, but no additional information has become available. In January, the Delano paper reported that a new station was being built at Lake Sarah but its existence has not been confirmed. If this building existed, perhaps it was used for other purposes. Lake Sarah was not shown as a station in the December, 1892 timetable published in the 1893 *Official Guide*.

Nonetheless, Lake Sarah had gained importance and by 1899 a local passenger train was making a westbound stop at 7:41 p.m., and an eastbound train scheduled to make a stop at 6:58 a.m. for an early

morning arrival in Minneapolis. The local way freight was also stopping when there was cargo to handle.

The Soo Line continued to improve its right-of-way and in 1907 completed the high bridge over the Crow River near Rockford and began running trains over the new grade, which tied into the original line near the northwest corner of Lake Sarah (on the property currently owned by Perry and Kimberly Buffie). The old line through Greenwood was abandoned but is still clearly visible and the old grade remains as part of Lake Sarah's outlet structure (locally referred to as the weir).



Lake Sarah Train Station (Soo Line) 1909-1930 - photo used with permission Minnesota Historical Society.

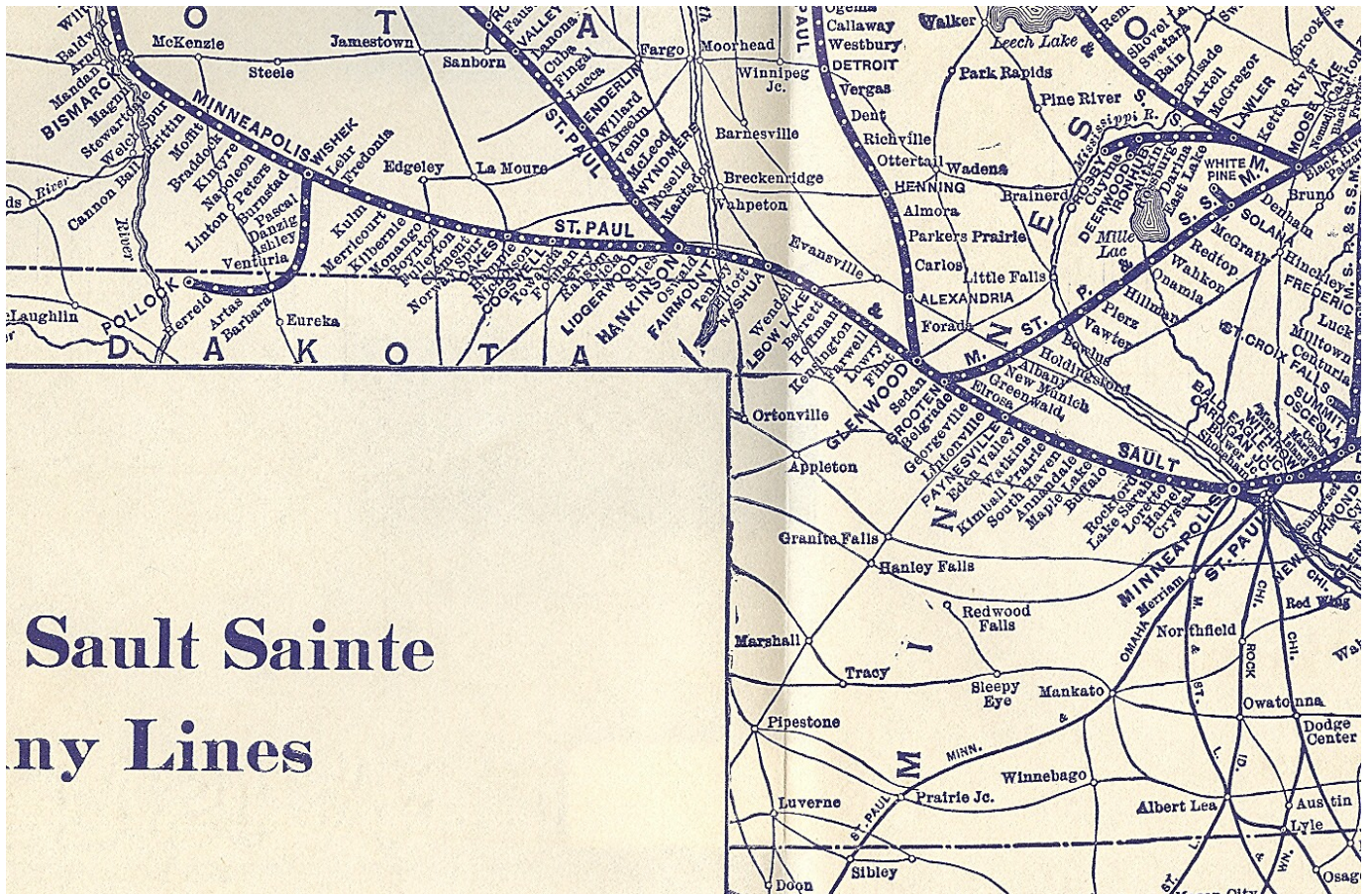
In 1905 the Soo Line put in a new 400 foot spur track at Lake Sarah and in 1909 constructed the 12 foot by 24 foot long hipped roof depot (pictured above). This small structure had an 8 foot wide by 208 foot long wood platform facing the tracks for the convenience of passengers. The depot, not including the long platform, had an estimated cost of \$345 when it was built in 1909.

A page from the February 15, 1914 Soo Line employees timetable #102 (below) gives the times of regularly scheduled eastbound trains and indicates that two local passenger trains in each direction were authorized to make what is called a 'flag stop,' that is they would stop only if it was known there were passengers to pick up or let off. Although the schedules changed over the years, these two trains were

still providing this service to Lake Sarah in 1921 as follows: Westbound trains No. 111 at 10:20 a.m. and No. 105 at 8:58 p.m.; eastbound trains No. 106 at 5:26 a.m. and No. 112 at 4:16 p.m. made flag stops. The other passenger trains were long distance limited runs that sailed through Lake Sarah at various times throughout the day and night.

TRAINS BETWEEN MINNEAPOLIS AND ST. PAUL WILL BE GOVERNED BY C., M. & ST. P. RY. TIME TABLE														
MPLS, (FRT. YARD)														
SHOREHAM CWOT	DN	119.3								A 4.30 PM	11.30 PM	A 2.00 AM		
NORTHTOWN JCT		118.0												
Trains between Northtown Jct. and Shoreham and 14th Avenue North and 6th Avenue South will be governed by N. P. and M. & St. L. Time Table														
CAMDEN PLACE	DN	117.1	6.20	6.50	1.25	5.10		s 4.10	11.10	1.40	89	548.1		
HUMBOLDT AVE. YD.		115.8	6.17	6.48	1.23	5.07		4.02	11.00	1.37		545.0		
ICE SPUR		114.4										543.6		
CRYSTAL		113.8	6.12	6.45	1.20	f 5.03		f 3.55	10.54	1.30		543.0		
G. N. CROSSING X		113.4										542.6		
SPUR NO. 7		113.1										542.3		
HAMEL	DN	104.7	s 5.52	6.34	1.06	s 4.43		s 3.20	10.23	73	1.00	533.9		
LORETTO W	DN	98.9	s 5.38	6.26	12.57	s 4.32		s 2.55	10.06	13.32		528.1		
LAKE SARAH		96.1	f 5.32			f 4.25		f				525.3		
ROCKFORD	D	93.7	s 5.27	71	6.18	12.43	107	s 4.20				522.6		
DICKINSON		89.1						f				518.3		
BUFFALO W	DN	83.7	s 5.04	6.05	71	12.34	s 3.59	s 1.52	9.13	105	11.30	73	512.9	
MAPLE LAKE	D	75.8	s 4.46	5.52	12.22	s 3.42		s 1.17	107	8.47	11.08		505.0	
ANNANDALE	D	69.5	s 4.32	89	5.42	12.13	s 3.28	s 12.38	3.23	10.43			498.7	
SOUTH HAVEN CW	DN	64.6	s 4.22	5.34	12.05	PM 1	s 3.18	12.10	PM 1	8.05	10.28		493.8	
KIMBALL PRAIRIE	D	59.4	s 4.10	5.25	89	11.56	s 3.07	11.55	108	7.42	10.03	105	488.6	
WATKINS	DN	54.0	s 3.57	5.17	11.47	s 2.57		s 10.40	7.23	109	9.38		483.2	
EDEN VALLEY W	D	47.1	s 3.42	5.06	11.37	111	s 2.42	1	s 10.03	6.52	9.10		476.3	
PAYNESVILLE	DN	37.8	s 3.20	4.51	f 11.20	s 2.20	107	s 9.10	71	6.10	8.30		467.0	
G. N. CROSSING X		36.1											465.3	
LINTONVILLE W	D	30.9	f 3.07	73	4.40	11.09	s 1.58	s 7.55	5.47	3.00	109		460.1	
GEORGEVILLE		26.9	f 2.59	4.33	11.02	f 1.45		f 7.40	5.32	7.41			456.1	
BELGRADE	D	22.7	s 2.50	4.26	10.55	s 1.33		s 7.25	89	5.18	7.29		451.9	
BROOTEN WYE		17.8											447.0	
BROOTEN W	DN	15.9	s 2.35	4.15	73	10.45	71	s 1.12	111	s 6.55	4.52	1	7.05	445.1
SEDAN W	D	8.1	f 2.17	4.02	10.33	s 12.53		s 6.25	4.28	6.40			437.3	
GLENWOOD CWOT	DN	0.0	L 2.00 AM	L 3.50 AM	L 10.20 AM	L 12.40 PM		L 6.00 AM	L 4.00 PM	L 6.15	PM 1		429.2	

The segment of map (top of next page) shows the rail line and stops in 1913 as included in the 25th annual report of the Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Ste. Marie Railway Co. for the fiscal year ended June 30, 1913. The lake Sarah station is in between Loretto & Rockford stations in the right center just under "SAULT".



Map from the 25th annual report of the MSP&SSM Ry. Co. for the fiscal year ended June 30, 1913

The gaining popularity of the auto and improved roads led to a diminishing of travel by rail and with the stock market crash in 1929 and the onset of the depression, businesses were forced to cut expenses. The Soo Line retired and sold the Lake Sarah depot to J. H. Eschman, for \$100 in 1930 and removed the spur track, ending the brief era that Lake Sarah enjoyed as a station on the Soo Line.

Today, the trains of successor Canadian Pacific Railway continue their passage, skirting the north side of Lake Sarah. Perhaps they are thought of as being out of place, interrupting the bucolic setting of the lake, but are a reminder when the railroad was integral to the daily lives of everyone living nearby.

Alton Chermak, September 21, 2008

Notes and photos added by Brad Spencer

About the author: Alton Chermak, has been researching and documenting the history of the Minneapolis & Pacific Railway, which in 1888 was consolidated into what became known as the Soo Line, and hopes to publish his work in about five years. In doing so, some of the historical aspects of about 50 communities and non-incorporated geographical places are being woven into his research and writings. He welcomes any corrections, comments and additional information. His assistance and wealth of knowledge have been of incalculable value in reconstructing this little piece of our lakes vibrant history.