

# THE HISTORIC DEERFIELD TRAIN STATION

Deerfield, IL

www.deerfieldlibrary.org

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text: Dylan Zavagno

The first train station in Deerfield was built in 1871 by the Chicago Milwaukee St. Paul & Pacific Railroad, known as the Milwaukee Road, which, as the name suggests, connected Chicago to the West on its main line. The first station was a simple boxcar located near Central Ave. Before train travel came to Deerfield, you’d have to take a horse and buggy to Chicago—or walk to the Highland Park train station.



The station as it appears today

Deerfield had long been a resting place for travelers between Chicago and Milwaukee. John Kinzie “Indian” Clark, would stop in the area on his Chicago-Milwaukee mail route, which followed Waukegan Rd., an old Native American trail. An early Deerfield settler, Lyman Wilmot, was an abolitionist whose home was a stop on the Underground Railroad. Wilmot’s son reflected on the change to the town the railroad brought, writing in a diary entry on New Year’s Eve, 1874:

“Now as I write the shades of the last evening...are gathering fast, the sky is cloudy & as I look out of the east windows of the dining room & see the smoke from the engine of a long freight train rising as a cloud as the train rushes on up the grain, we are now in a living moving world & things look as if they were to last much longer than they will...”



But last they did. Train travel has been part of Deerfield for almost 150 years. Aside from allowing for people and trade to move more freely to Chicago, the railroad was one of the main employers in town in those early days of white settlement. With a train station, Deerfield was quite literally on the map. Studying this one spot can be illuminating: notable events at the station are representative of many eras of local and national history. Given its longevity and preservation, Deerfield’s train station is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the only building in town to achieve that distinction.

**Architecture** In 1903, the same year Deerfield was incorporated, the station that we see today was built. Designed by Jay W. Nettenstrom, an architect with the Milwaukee Road who designed many stations at the time. The Deerfield station is one of the few that lasted. It was also larger than many area stations, perhaps because of the many railroad personnel that lived in town or, likely, because Deerfield was the main stop between Chicago and Milwaukee on the line until the mid 1950s. The building burned down in 1918, but was quickly rebuilt nearly identically. In 1998, the station was restored and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The station is notable for its Craftsman style. American Craftsman, like the related Arts & Crafts and Prairie styles, emphasized natural inspirations and hand-crafted, simple elements as a reaction to the ornate styles and mass production of the Industrial Age. The station features several Craftsman characteristics: several low-pitched hipped roofs, broad eaves, and exposed structural elements, like the slightly stylized roof brackets. Many Craftsman homes have large porches supported by large round or rectangular beams—seen in the “pavilion” area to the south of the station, supported by simple Doric columns.

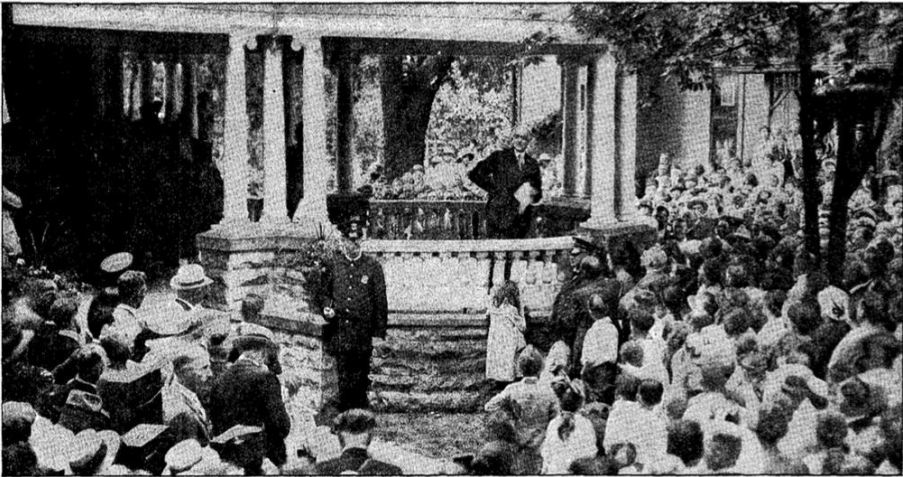
There used to be a milk tower at the south end of the station, which stored milk headed for Chicago from area cows. Being able to transport food and building materials (from the nearby Brickyards) was key to urban growth. The north end of the station held a baggage room and a smoking room, where the bathrooms and coffee shop are today.

The station as it appeared in the 1910s

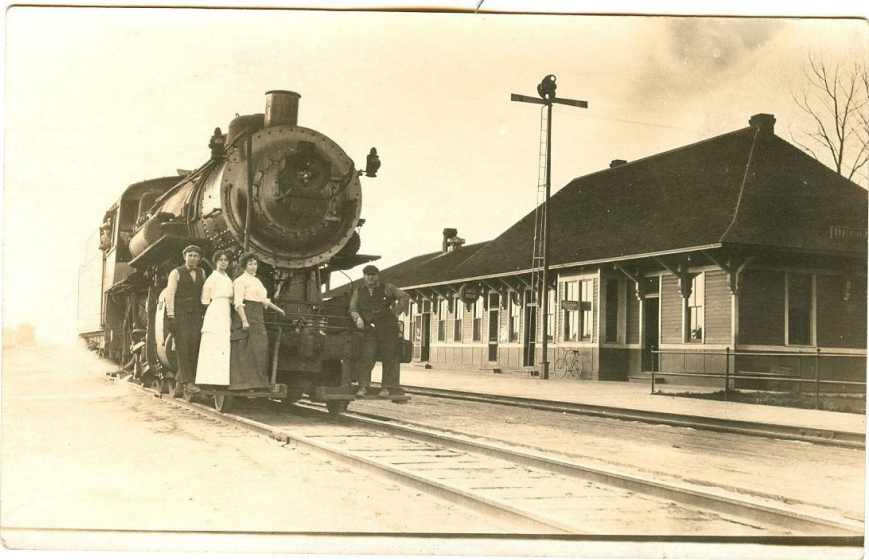


**Harding Comes to Town** September 7, 1920—Then presidential candidate Warren G. Harding was known for his “front porch campaign,” giving most of his campaign speeches from his actual porch, like President McKinley had done before him. However, Harding did travel during his campaign, including a trip to Chicago.

After visiting soldiers wounded in WWI, who were convalescing at Fort Sheridan, Harding drove to Deerfield and had a “heart-to-heart” with villagers. Harding was welcomed with flags and school children presented him with wild flowers. He gave a short speech on the importance of tolerance and law and order, and then boarded a special train waiting at the Deerfield station, on his way to St. Paul. Harding went on to win the presidency in a landslide victory.



Warren G. Harding, campaigning from his front porch in Marion, Ohio



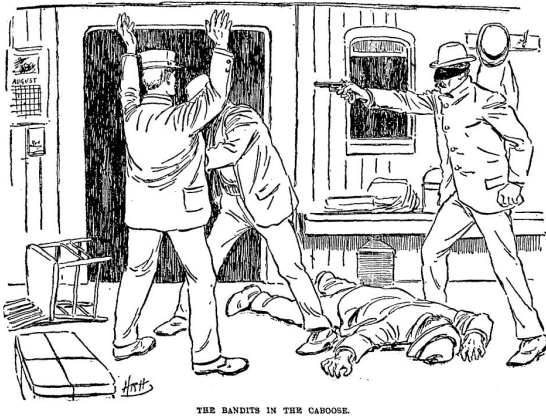
## About the author

**Dylan Zavagno** is the Adult Services Coordinator at the Deerfield Public Library where he hosts the *Deerfield Public Library Podcast*, featuring interviews authors, artists, and other notable people. He has an MAT from National Louis in Secondary English Education BA in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from DePaul University. In his spare time he loves reading and going to art museums.

**The Scene of the Crime** August 24th, 1894—On a warm Friday evening, around 9:30 pm, a northbound freight train headed from Chicago to Milwaukee stops in Deerfield to take on water. The station at the time was little else but a water filling station. Just as the train began heading north from Deerfield, two masked bandits, Henry Gordon and William Lake, emerge from the shadows and jump onto the caboose where one Conductor Largeant kept his office. One of the bandits demands the conductors valuables. Detective Patrick Owen, a retired police officer employed by the Milwaukee Road, steps on the platform of the caboose. He’s told to put his hands up. But Owen already is reaching for his gun and is shot in the heart. One railroad worker jumps off the train and runs back to the Deerfield station and telegraphs for help. A massive manhunt ensues. Gordon and Lake will commandeer a vegetable wagon, shoot another officer, and eventually be caught running through a cornfield in Irving Park. Deerfield residents recall seeing the two around town days before the murder’ presumably casing the station. Their not-so-perfect-crime was noted in the papers for several days. The Chicago Daily Tribune wrote:

“For cool alacrity in both robbery and murder and for desperate determination to escape, coast what it might, either to themselves or their pursuers, the crime and the criminals alike are remarkable.”

Illustration from the Chicago Daily Tribune



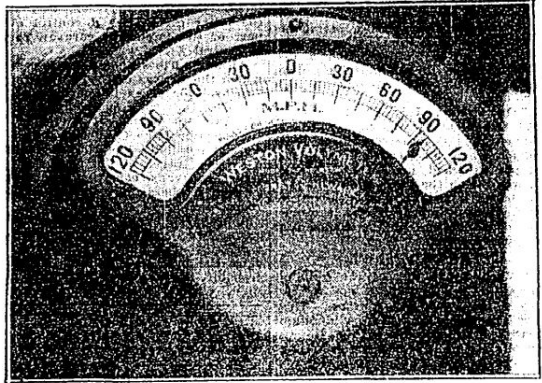
This was during the economic depression following the Panic of 1893. Gordon and Lake had no prior record and claimed they acted out of desperation for food after losing their jobs.

**Speed Racer** In 1934, a Milwaukee Road steam locomotive set a world speed record, reaching 103 miles per hour on a trip between Chicago and Milwaukee. This was a regularly scheduled passenger train, and passengers boarding at Chicago’s Union Station *were not told* they were to be part of this experiment, but they soon realized when the train departed the Mayfair stop express to Milwaukee. By the time the train passed Deerfield, it was at 93 miles per hour and still gaining speed.

Just a year later, in 1935, the Milwaukee Road set another record. In a trip from Milwaukee to Chicago they reached 108 miles per hour. This time, however, the passengers were members of a train club and were aware of the test. The Milwaukee Road would go on to advertise itself as one of the fastest railroad companies.

Photo from the Tribune of the Hiawatha reaching 96 miles an hour

“Nothing Faster on Rails” slogan



The speedometer in the observation car of the record breaking Milwaukee train photographed yesterday when the train had attained a speed of 96 miles an hour. [Associated Press Photo.]





The Super Dome cars appeared in 1953



Super Dome Hiawatha interior 1950s, a 1939 promotional poster, and the "Midwest Hiawatha," 1940s.



### "No Kissing!"

In 1979 a village engineer mentioned to Assistant Village Manager Marjorie Emory that kissing couples were holding up traffic a the station’s drop off point. “One thing lead to another,” Marjorie said, and the “No Kissing” sign was born. Designed by Marjorie’s son, the sign depicts a man in a hat kissing a woman in curlers, nestled into the universal circle and line “no sign.” A Kissing Zone sign was added to the south end of the parking lot, for people who wanted to linger when dropping off their commuting spouses. Of course, the signs weren’t enforceable. “Life is too short and we thought we’d add a little levity,” Marjorie said.

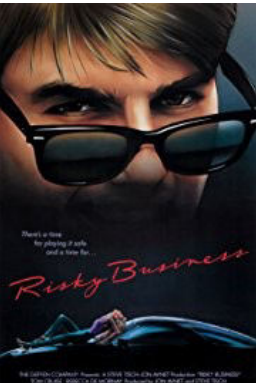
The fun signs made international news and brought attention to Deerfield. There were stories in *Time* magazine, *AM America*, and a Deerfield family showed off the signs on *Family Feud*.

The image proved quite popular. Unusually, the Village actually owns the copyright. In 1998, Warrington, England began using the sign—with permission after the DBR Chamber of Commerce visited for a conference. In 2013, Kate Spade inquired about licensing it. “It was a different time,” Mayor Harriet Rosenthal has said of the signs, “I’m sure a lot of people would look at the picture of a woman in curlers and go, ‘Huh?’ ”



The official “Kissing Zone” counterpart

### Risky Business



Movie poster, 1983

The Deerfield station can be seen in a montage as call girl Lana (Rebecca De Mornay) leaves the suburbs after spending her first night with Joel.



Still from Risky Business at the Deerfield station

Despite the ban on kissing, the Deerfield train station was briefly featured in the 1983 film *Risky Business*. In a career-making role, Tom Cruise (21 years old at the time) plays Joel Goodsen, a high school student who starts a brothel in his parents home while they are vacationing.

Written and directed by Paul Brickman, a native of Highland Park, and apparently somewhat autobiographical, the film features many locations in Highland Park and the surrounding suburbs. The original title was *White Boys Off the Lake*.

Risky Business was made for 6 million dollars and released to a huge box office, eventually earning 63 million dollars. Critics praised its critique of the materialistic 1980s. Bob Seger’s 1979 song, “Old Time Rock and Roll,” was back on the charts.

### The Milwaukee Road’s Hiawatha Fleet

John Kress Willman was known as the unofficial historian of Deerfield. He remembered that, growing up in the 1930s, the thing to do for entertainment in town was go to the train station at night and watch the Hiawatha train go by. The Milwaukee Road’s Hiawathas were certainly appealing to look at. Many train enthusiasts consider the Hiawatha to be one of the best looking passenger trains of the era. It was *streamlined*: the rounded nose of the train was wrapped in fluted stainless steel giving it a very modern look. The colors were very distinctive too, featuring orange, maroon, and gray metals.

The name Hiawatha come from the Longfellow poem about the mythical Native figure:

Swift of foot was Hiawatha  
He could shoot an arrow from him,  
And run forward with such fleetness,  
That the arrow fell behind him!



Hiawatha logo

In addition to its speed, the Hiawathas were also known for their luxury and their famous observation cars, like the Super Dome or the Beaver Tail caboose. As highway systems and car ownership grew, the Milwaukee Road began promoting the Hiawatha lines as vacation experiences themselves. Travelers going west from Chicago on these trains would have passed through or stopped at the Deerfield station.

The Milwaukee Road ended intercity passenger service in 1971. In the 1980s, when Metra took over this section of the old Milwaukee Road, they paid homage to the famous train, designating the color of the Milwaukee District North Line “Hiawatha orange” for maps and signage.



Super Dome Hiawatha at night



Metra map from 1986



The “No Kissing” sign, with its Village of Deerfield copyright

### Restoration and Recognition

Starting in the 1970s, members of the Deerfield Area Historical Society pushed back against Metra’s plans to raze the old station. Noting it’s historical and architectural importance, the group lobbied to restore the station and get it listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Restoration work was completed in 1998—the same year it achieved National Register status—and featured brand new wood floors, a new cedar shake roof, and brass features. Metra and Village funds were used for the project.

It was a difficult and sometimes contentious restoration project, balancing historical accuracy with the needs of thousands of daily riders. One Metra board member said, “It was like ‘This Old House.’ We got into it and found that everything had gone to pot.”

There were disputes over the original paint color of the station. Restorers, going through layers of paint on the original wood, found the first color was a dark brown, when for years the station had been a buff color. Old black and white photographs were argued over.

NPS Form 10-900 (Oct. 1990) CMB No. 10024-0018

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions on the back of this form. For more information on the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A), complete each section of the form and check the appropriate box or boxes. For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway Passenger Depot

other names/site number Deerfield Train Station

2. Location

street & number 860 Deerfield Road ☐ not for publication

city or town Deerfield ☐ vicinity

state Illinois code IL county Lake code 097 zip code 60015

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places

First page of the registration form for the National Register of Historic Places

Don Wroblewski, an architect himself and member of the Historical Society said of the color, "I don't like (it), but I am not an architect from 1919. And you are not going to get a sense of history about something by trying to change it. Sometimes honesty is more important than taste."

The station today is prized by locals and train enthusiasts alike for its historical significance and perseverance.