

## **Railroaders' library once west side hub**

Many longtime Twin City residents will remember long-gone Withers Library, located at the corner of Washington and East streets in downtown Bloomington. Yet all but a handful of folks today—those in their late nineties and older—could recall the Chicago & Alton Railroad Library on the city's west side.

For more than four and a half decades (1879-1926), this library welcomed those who worked at the Chicago & Alton (C&A) Shops, which for many years was the community's largest and most important employer. It was at this sprawling west side complex where upwards of 1,500 or more skilled and semi-skilled "shopmen" repaired, maintained and constructed steam locomotives and rolling stock—everything from boxcars to Pullman sleeping car prototypes—for the mainline railroad running between Chicago and St. Louis. There were also locomotive engineers, firemen, brakemen, switchmen, conductors and others who rode the rails for the C&A.

It's not known when the west side library was first established, but during the Civil War a group calling itself the C&A Railroad Library Association was already accepting donations of books, maps and other items. The association's first and only standalone library building (see accompanying photograph) went up in late 1879. The utilitarian yet handsome wood frame structure was located at 806 N. Catherine St., between Chestnut and Walnut streets, on the eastern edge of the C&A Shops (this stretch of Catherine Street no longer exists, as it was later absorbed by the adjacent rail yard).

Formal incorporation of the C&A Railroad Library came one year later, in the fall of 1880. The founding organizers included Barbara Prince, wife of attorney Ezra Prince; Fleta Stahl, whose husband was a C&A clerk; John Flynn, a C&A dispatcher; Edwin Edmonds, yardmaster with the C&A; and Robert Bell, a C&A storekeeper.

For a modest membership fee, the library was open to C&A employees and their family members. It's not known, however, if other west side residents were welcomed into the reading room to browse the collections, or perhaps, in some instances, enjoy lending privileges.

"A circulation of over 7,000 books last year, with our limited resources, clearly demonstrates the need and importance of having more books, to meet the increasing demand," read the library association's report from September 1883. "To the library reading room has recently been added a good piano, two large reading tables, and several additional games of chess, dominoes, &c." There were also "several prominent daily papers, railroad magazines and pens, ink and writing paper free, for the use and amusement of railroad men, who are cordially invited to spend their leisure time in the rooms of the association."

For many years, Margaret “Maggie” Fenton served as librarian, becoming in the process one of the more beloved and respected figures on the west side. Fenton, who had lost a leg in a cook stove explosion when she was younger, also served as paymaster to the C&A rank and file. How she came to be the distributor of paychecks is not known, but on paydays the library would bustle with activity from morning until night. This role, not surprisingly, endeared her to C&A employees.

Fenton was equally at home with both grease-spattered railroaders and their most bookish children. She was an expert telegrapher, but also had a discerning eye when it came to classic literature and popular contemporary fiction and nonfiction. “Miss Fenton,” it was said, “knows as much about literary works as she does about train crews, railroad men in general and all that is to be known about a railroad.”

In 1919, The Pantagraph staged a popularity contest to select a young woman to travel to Philadelphia and christen a WW I-era freighter named after Bloomington (the ship was actually called “Evergreen City,” as there was already a “Bloomington” plying the high seas)

The lively voting featured more than a half dozen of the city’s most popular socialites in their late teens and twenties. Yet the contest also included “genial and efficient” fortysomething Maggie Fenton. C&A workers, observed The Pantagraph, “think that it is high time that she be given a recognition of some kind for her faithful service as librarian and paycheck distributor.”

In the end, thanks to the strong support of west side railroaders, Fenton topped her supposed social betters, receiving 1,198 of the nearly 3,000 votes cast, 140 more than the second-place finisher. Fenton traveled to Philadelphia and christened the freighter on March 20, 1920, accomplishing the ceremonial task with the requisite bottle of champagne.

The end of the C&A Library came in the summer of 1926 when it and a group of surrounding buildings were either razed or moved, all in order to make way for an expansion of the adjacent C&A rail yard. In early August, workers with the Simpkins House Moving Co. placed the library on wide wheel trucks and rolled it to a new location on Seminary Avenue, where it became a part of the C&A Shops complex (it was torn down at a later date.)

There was talk of reestablishing the library at a new location, but for reasons unknown no actions were taken on this front.

Fenton, who had been in poor health for much of 1926, passed away in early January 1927. “She was a patient sufferer and won the sympathy of all by her cheerfulness and sunny smile, even in the darkest hours of her affliction,” read her obituary. As a member of Holy Trinity Catholic

Church, she was laid to rest at St. Mary's Cemetery on Bloomington's far west side. The well-attended funeral included a large number of C&A employees.

A decade earlier, back in August 1917, the C&A Library's cherished piano, said to be one of the oldest in the Twin Cities, was carted off the premises. Although its years as a piano had come to an end, it would soon be back in the cozy library, after its conversion into a reading room table.

"Librarian Margaret Fenton shed a few tears as the piano was dumped into the auto truck by John Curley and his force," noted The Pantagraph at the time, "but when the piano returns, converted into a library table the amiable librarian will undoubtedly be all smiles, which will be nothing more than the usual for Miss Fenton."