

Freight Cars and Wrigley Field

by Robin L. Øye

One of the incongruous sights from my Chicago memory is that of freight cars on the street outside Wrigley Field. They were on rails, of course, but—though I had ridden streetcars in various cities—the thought of those rails for freight traffic was, well—incongruous. Those tracks next to Wrigley Field ran north and eventually joined the “L” near Wilson Avenue. I seem to remember that the cars on this line would sometimes be hauled by the CTA’s steeple cab electric locomotives along the “L” to the old Lill Coal yard on the North Side. I would see these cars next to Wrigley Field when I’d pass on a bus or on foot. I would occasionally see cars on the line as I looked down from the “L” north of the great S-bends at the Sheridan Road Station where it ran behind the vast Graceland Cemetery.

For one part of a winter and spring in the mid seventies, I lived near another street on which this same rail line ran. This was several blocks south of Wrigley Field and a bit west. I lived in a house on the rear of a lot on Barry, which crossed Lakewood, the street on which this line ran. This neighbourhood had old houses and a few small factories: one processed poultry; another made candy. The line belonged to the Soo Line, or maybe the Milwaukee Road.

Trains came, as they do, with whistles blowing. Occasionally, someone would get off the short train and unlock and throw the switch in the middle of the street. These trains were never more than a few cars long. The trains left cars at various factories, or left them on the line, in incongruous places, such as next to Wrigley Field. I loved watching the little trains as they came up or down

Lakewood, but I have always loved watching trains, be they fast passenger trains, or freight cars next to docks, or even “L’s” or subways or streetcars.

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There are many fine views of Wrigley Field. Most are not well known, or at least, if known, they are not thought about much by those doing the viewing. The “L’s”—both the Ravenswood and the North-South (as it used to be known) offer wonderful views. From the North-South, at Addison St. Station (where A trains now stop, but where B trains once did), one can see into the stands. The crowd, away in the third-base-line grandstands is a large mass, which didn’t seem to be alive, but a rather strangely two-dimensional collage of bright colours on a sunny summer’s day. When I was younger, I used to see the trains from that same grandstand, and marvel at the fact that people actually had other things to do besides be at the ballgame. I pitied them, as a matter of fact.

It was the Ravenswood “L”, though, that gave the most wonderful view of the old ball park. It was a spring day when rain was threatening when I found myself riding a Ravenswood train, about mid morning. I was not a regular rider of the Ravenswood, and I don’t remember why I was riding it that day. What I *do* remember is being startled by glimpsing something that I’d never seen before: a series of graceful arches, filigree-like, running along some large building. The arches had been recently painted in a contrasting colour to the rest of the building. I went through my memory quickly to try and identify the structure when, as a street opened below, I

realised--this was Wrigley Field! I hadn't recognised it! Yes, this chain of lovely arches was the top of the third-base-line grandstands. From the other "L", no such elegant view was available. Mostly, it offered a practical, fan's view of the scoreboard or at least the pennant--white with a W for a win or blue with an L for a loss. But, here was a view, from the Ravenswood "L" west of Racine, that revealed Wrigley Field as a thing of architectural beauty. Wrigley Field was visible to me on that day as it must have been to its architect before it was built. He would have seen it as beautiful. As he placed his pencil to paper when he sketched, he would see, as he started, a commission taking shape. Then, as he warmed to his work, he would see his own love of line capturing his hand and pencil. Later, he'd find straightedge, compass, and protractor, and as he moved them around, pressing his pencil against them, he would see at last--and at first!--the beauty of the arches along the upper deck. The place of baseball games, base hits, beer, fans, players, cigar smoke, parasols--the ball park--all this would melt away, and he would view the arches--perfect, elegant on his paper--and hope that just once, after they went from lines on vellum to wood and steel, he would find himself sufficiently aloft--in a balloon, on the roof of a building, or--riding the "L"!--to see the *grace* of the arches, which transcended their mere functionality and that of the ball park that held them, baseball, and the magnates that owned them.

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One day, I decided to follow the tracks up Lakewood toward Wrigley Field. I wasn't going to a ball game, as I remember. It was an early summer Sunday afternoon. I followed the tracks where I could: that is, where there weren't fences and gates protecting loading docks. The rails curved as got close to the Ravenswood "L", and as they did, Wrigley Field came into view. The tracks go between buildings, and these

formed a frame in which the old edifice loomed. Again, below the game-day flags and pennants were its elegances, the grandstand arches. I enjoyed them in the privacy of a quiet, Sunday side street, quiet as a museum gallery, stopping once for a longer look, unencumbered by the need to watch footing or traffic.

I moved on, now into the traffic near Clark Street and then into the activity of the game-day carnival which finds Wrigley Field at its centre: the noise of cheering, the souvenirs, the traffic cops, hot dogs, and ushers. The flags on the old ball park got bigger, and the gates got wider. Busses joined the scene, and left, up and down Clark and Addison, en route to places and neighbourhoods where Sundays were quiet and ballgame-less. Years before, on cold, rainy school mornings, I would stand here with my cousin as we sheltered under an overhang waiting for the bus that would take us out Addison to Lane Tech. Then, traffic went by on its way to work, and Wrigley Field watched in silence, in the off-season wings, centre-stage no more until another inevitable spring. Now I, too was bound for wherever it was I was bound for that day. . . North, past the clubhouse away again from the festivities of game day, into the early summer quiet of side streets, hearing only the occasional sound of cheering or organ music, following me around the walls of the two-and-three storey flat buildings. I could hear my footsteps again in the quiet of the city.

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