

The Little Town That Could

Key to Winnetka's success as a town was its prime position along the commuter railroad tracks. It also posed a great challenge to our little village to do great things.

Love 'em and Hate 'em

The first train arrived in Winnetka in 1854 where the entire town of 100 people had gathered to mark this historic event. Railroad service quickly expanded. Adding a North Shore line in 1902 doubled the number of tracks and gates – and the danger.

Accidents grew more common as the number of people, trains and vehicles increased. For years, cries had gone up to *raise* the tracks as they had done in Evanston. Later William A. Otis put great effort into advocating on behalf of *lowering* the tracks. Solutions were all costly and involved an impossible array of jurisdictions. Nothing got done.

In a horrific scene in 1919, a young couple was making its way to the Hubbard Woods station to head to a movie in Wilmette. Seeing no train, they crossed the tracks where the heel of the woman's laced shoe got stuck in the train tracks. Before her husband could free her, a train came barreling down the track. Realizing that there was no time left, the husband held his wife tightly as the train brutally took their lives.

It Took Twenty More Years

Cries of outrage rang out! The 1921 Plan of Winnetka called for lowering the tracks below grade. Then a construction engineer was hired to draw plans spanning from Wilmette to Highland Park; but the cost was shocking and the project was shelved.

Another tragedy in 1938 pushed the issue to front stage once again. But this time Village President William B. Moulton was determined to make things happen.

The Public Works Administration was accepting applications for a new grant program. Secretary of the Interior and head over the PWA, Harold Ickes, was a former Winnetka resident and supporter of this project. Moulton had already served as Village President for an unprecedented nine years and so was able to effectively provide leadership and rally Winnetka's support for the project. The deal struck with the PWA involved Winnetka contributing \$1 million and the PWA providing another \$1.55 million. But Moulton would have to convince the two rail companies to split the remaining \$900,000 cost. Without the companies' participation, there was no deal.

A Big Deal . . . and a Big Dig

While Moulton is credited with striking a deal by locking two rail executives in a room at Village Hall, his success was likely due to a more pragmatic reason. The rail companies had problems with their trains getting stuck on an incline of the tracks just north of Indian Hill. It seems that the elevation of land rises 80 feet from Evanston to Glencoe, with the steepest slope in Winnetka. A few times a week, trains would get stuck and have to be rescued. Lowering the tracks would fix this problem as well as Winnetka's. So the railway companies kicked in their share and the Big Dig got underway in 1938.

Much like repaving a road one lane at a time, tracks were laid and trenches dug in succession. To eliminate ten treacherous rail crossings and lower the tracks required: excavating a trench 143 feet wide and 3.5 miles long, building seven new bridges, hauling 915,000 cubic yards of earth and replacing a quaint brick and stone rail station. The project was completed in 1942.

Extended leadership

We were fortunate to have the leadership and dedication of William Moulton to make this bold step. He stayed on as Village President to see this monumental project thru to completion and soothe the frazzled nerves of our community. His continuity of leadership over thirteen years provided Winnetka the confidence in its leadership to do great things.

Two key figures in making track depression a reality in Winnetka: Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, and William Moulton, Winnetka Village President.



Outline – photo of Moulton and Ickes

Big solution – too big, too expensive, haven't had a death in a while,
Political will – small solutions don't fix the danger

Determination and Resources – Moulton (served 1929 to 1942) and Ickes. Time to get this done.