STANDARDIZED RAILROAD STATIONS
IN KANSAS: THE CASE OF THE
ATCHISON, TOPEKA & SANTA FE

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In an age of jetports and interstate highways the crucial role that railroads once played is often forgotten. In past years Kansans depended heavily upon the rails. Since most residents in the preinternal-combustion era lacked access to either suitable water transportation or all-weather roads, they willingly made their state a center for rail construction. By 1890 Kansas claimed the second greatest railroad network in America with 8,797 miles of trackage.

Understandably, railroads opened up huge sections of land and similarly established scores of towns. These communities appeared at frequent intervals, largely to accommodate farmers, who, dependent on horse-drawn transport, found it burdensome to journey long distances over poor-quality roads to market their crops. While perhaps bearing imaginative and colorful names, a majority of Kansas towns, whether or not founded by railroads, shared similar layouts and even looked alike. The overall importance of depots became readily apparent: communities commonly boasted stations at the head of main street, with buildings designed to serve travelers, hotels and cafes, for example, clustered around them. Usually, too, the principal local businesses—grain elevators, coal, stock and lumber yards—were found nearby. In a very real sense railroads were the communities' link to the outside world and depots their gateway.

The ubiquitous stations were vital to their owners' economic well-being. They were foremost a place of business: passengers could buy

tickets and wait for trains; freight, baggage, express, and mail could be stored until shipped or delivered; and agents could take and send public messages. In fact, each depot functioned much like an outlet of a modern chain operation; a facility where a large commercial corporation served local patrons.

More than that, the depot played an integral role in railroad operations. An army of agents served literally as the eyes and ears of divisional dispatchers. By reporting train movements past their stations on the chattering telegraph, safe and efficient meeting and passing points could be planned. In a time of heavy rail volume and lacking such modern devices as centralized traffic control and two-way radios, agents were essential.

Midwestern carriers usually met their business and operating needs by erecting combination stations. Containing a waiting room, office, and freight-baggage house under one roof, these structures adequately served most communities. In Kansas, few towns grew large enough to warrant separate buildings for freight and passengers. Urban terminals in Kansas were virtually nonexistent, as late as 1910, Kansas City, the largest community, claimed fewer than 83,000 residents.

The design of these combination or country stations was a matter of great importance to the railroads. While they wanted to minimize costs, they also faced local demands for attractive structures. Community boosters were unwilling to accept an unadorned shack when they knew they deserved better. Railroads could not ignore these pressures. By the populist-progressive era bitter disputes over rates, services, and political activities made the industry extremely sensitive to consumer wrath. If attractive depots could help quiet the anti-railroad clamor, it would be money well spent. Observed one railroad official: “[It will] show that a railroad may be something other than a mere sordid, money-making machine it is often credited with being.”

Railroading, moreover, was frequently highly competitive. Communities were served often by more than one carrier. Kansas was no exception. If a company were to hold its own, erecting an unattractive depot when the road across town was constructing something more pleasing simply would not do.

Nevertheless, railroads in Kansas resisted civic demands and competitive pressures that might unduly raise construction costs. Railroading was expensive, and the industry seemed singularly vulnerable to economic downswings. Money was not available to erect overly ornate stations in hamlets and villages. During the town-building period especially, rail officials never knew for certain which communities would ultimately prosper and which would merely survive. Most carriers as a result relied extensively on standardized building designs. Such plans allowed structures to be constructed quickly and cheaply, while still permitting modification to meet local requirements. Furthermore, if properly conceived, carbon copy depots could become an architectural corporate logo. Specifically, the public would automatically associate certain stations with a particular road, hopefully in a positive way.

There exists no better example of a railroad that effectively employed carbon copy depots than the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway. This premier Kansas road with its massive network of trackage built uncomplicated yet usually attractive stations in more than 500 communities. From Abbyville to Ze- nth, the Santa Fe’s wooden buildings seemed ever present. The company, however, willingly replaced them with more substantial brick ones when heavier traffic justified the investment. The consistently pleasing form of most Santa Fe depots and the obvious attention paid their design make them an especially significant part of the state’s architectural history.

To service smaller Kansas towns the Santa Fe developed combination station plans that


5. Perhaps the most successful example of a railroad using depots as three-dimensional trademarks was the Canadian Northern in western Canada. Now part of the Canadian National system, the Canadian Northern developed a distinctive red line that it employed on urban terminals, important division-point depots, and on nearly 300 small-town combination stations. See Charles W. Bohl, Canadian National’s Western Depots: The Country Stations in Western Canada (Toronto, 1978); and Charles W. Bohl and H. Rogers Grant, “The Standardized Railroad Station in Saskatchewan: The Case of the Canadian National System,” Saskatchewan History, Saskatoon, v. 29 (Autumn, 1976), pp. 81-102.
6. By the end of World War I the Santa Fe operated 1,241 miles of mainline in Kansas and another 1,373 miles of branches. The next largest carrier in the state was the Missouri Pacific which owned 651 fewer miles than the Santa Fe. —See Kansas State Public Utilities Commission, Sixth Biennial Report (Topeka: State Printer, 1920), p. 274.
are strikingly plain. The firm initially opted for several styles that omitted major structural and at times even minor decorative ornamentation. The depot at Conway, west of McPherson, represents this general architectural format. Of primitive boards and batten construction, this simple gabled-roof building lacks characteristics that could easily distinguish it from stations on a number of other Midwestern roads. (Indeed, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy, the Great Northern, and the Chicago Great Western commonly used a similar plan.) Only two minor structural features add distinction: a beveled bay that helps to soften the effect of the unbroken walls, and the roof overhangs that give the structure a somewhat larger look. Both the bay and the overhangs, however, have practical uses. The former makes it possible for the agent to enjoy a full view of the main track and yards, and the latter provides relief from the hot summer sun. Furthermore, the Conway depot lacks minor decoration; for example, gable bargeboards, ornate door and window moldings, and fancy chimney brickwork.

The station at Burlingame, near Topeka, is another example of an early Santa Fe depot design. This structure, in spite of its beveled bay, decorative brackets, and artistic window trim, is really quite plain. The Burlingame building, however, could easily be mistaken for one built by other granger roads. Simply put, it is just another combination structure with few interesting architectural characteristics. Clearly, when the Santa Fe constructed this station and others like it, the company opted for spartan simplicity.

While the Santa Fe remained wedded to inexpensive wooden depots, it developed by the 7. The Santa Fe devised a simple classification for its wooden depots. For example, a $24' \times 48'$ frame building was designated "Frame Depot No. 2 for Main Lines." If it had a smaller bay window, the Santa Fe intended it for branchline operations. It is difficult to know how firmly the company adhered to these plans because of the erection of additions to depots and local variations that were used. As the stations got larger so did their numerical designations. A "No. 4," for instance, was bigger than a "No. 2."—See System Standards: Volume Two (Dallas, 1978), pp. 133-172.

The depot played an integral role in railroad operations where agents served literally as the "eyes and ears" of divisional dispatchers. By reporting train movements past their stations on the chattering telegraph, agents made it possible for safe and efficient meeting and passing points to be planned. At Santa Fe stations the beveled bay was an architectural characteristic, and in addition to softening the effect of an unbroken wall, the bay provided the agent with a full view of the main track and yards. Operating his telegraph the depot agent was generally the first person in the community to know the news. Commercial messages, election returns, weather reports, sporting events, and other information came over the telegraph wires before long-distance telephones and radios were in use. Charles W. Bohi photograph.
late 19th century a more pleasing and hence more identifiable style. The frame station at Alden, northwest of Sterling, which is presently being restored as a museum, is a superb illustration. Resembling both the Conway and Burlingame structures, this particular depot retains the gable roof, beveled bay, and roof overhangs. After all, the latter two components have significant practical applications. While still spartan, it is the effective use of a major structural feature—in this case a gabled dormer over the office bay—that enhances the Alden depot’s appearance and makes it distinct. The dormer unquestionably breaks a monotonous roof line. This styling proved so satisfactory that the Santa Fe utilized it widely throughout the state. While exterior dimensions and interior floor plans vary (one hallmark of standardized plans is flexibility), the dormer bay marks these stations as Santa Fe, as surely as if the company herald were painted on the gable ends. Buildings containing this architectural feature were erected repeatedly from the 1880’s to the 1920’s, and dot the Central and Southern Plains. Just as the “golden arches” today denote McDonald’s Family restaurants, this distinctive dormer bay likewise labeled Santa Fe depots for travelers during the railroad age.

Railroad officials viewed wooden structures as expendable; they could be replaced if business developed. Traffic volume at county seats, in particular, frequently grew to such an extent that initial frame depots were woefully inadequate. Since these communities were many times the homes of prominent politicians and shippers, it also made sense to build substantial stations there. And on occasions local pressures forced replacement. For instance, A. Frank Kearns, mayor of Lecompton, marshalled forces to convince the Santa Fe that his town deserved a more substantial station. In an August 3, 1901, petition filed before the Board of Railroad Commissioners, Mayor Kearns successfully sought an order to replace Lecompton’s original frame depot. Later an undoubtedly elated mayor wrote commission members that the “Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway Company has put up a new [brick] depot, consisting of two waiting-rooms and one freight-room . . . . We appreciate what the company has done for us here.”

Whatever the rationale, the Santa Fe erected some extremely handsome combination brick stations. They shared enough characteristics to be called standardized, even if usually built to custom drawings. Like the dormer-bay frame ones, travelers knew the ownership of these county-seat depots.

The station at Girard typifies one group of Santa Fe county-seat buildings found in Kansas after the turn of the century. Of brick rather than wood, it reflects a contemporary fascination with mission architecture. Topped by a gable roof with slate shingles, this depot sports massive brackets that brace the roof overhangs, thus retaining that highly utilitarian feature of the earlier generation wooden stations. A smart bracket-supported awning covers the end elevations. Decorative stonework, including stylized concrete company heralds, is also used. The building features the traditional office, baggage room, and freight house, and like the replacement depot at Lecompton, it boasts two waiting rooms, one for men and the other for women and children. (When financially feasible, railroad officials, reflecting current attitudes, believed that the “fairer sex” and children required protection from “coarse and vile” males.) A half-dozen Girard structures were built in Kansas. Four other states on the system claimed similar ones.

The Santa Fe employed a larger version of the Girard station at several Kansas locations. The building at Stafford is an example. Basically the same as Girard, this one once sported a carriage pavilion at one end. The company constructed at least four of these beautiful structures in Kansas, and they also appeared in Oklahoma and Texas.

The depot at Garden City is representative of a second major Kansas county-seat design of the 20th century. Covered by a hip roof that is broken by hexagonal bay dormers on the end and tracks side elevations, it exudes that substantial look. Undoubtedly its presence must have endeared the Santa Fe to the local populace. Wide overhangs and decorative glass add further adornment. The interior contains the office, baggage-freight house, and two sexually segregated waiting rooms.

While other Kansas railroads used carbon-copy building designs and devised interesting replacement stations, none
utilized standardized drawings as effectively as did the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe. Perhaps a combination of the road's generally strong earning power, good management, lack of a plethora of predecessor companies, and luck enabled this mighty transcontinental carrier to develop and execute such well-conceived plans. Over the decades the care given these buildings, especially the county-seat ones, has meant that many still remain at a time when other small-town depots are rapidly being abandoned as communities decline, railroads consolidate, lines disappear, and agents are placed in radio-equipped vehicles. However, the fact that most of the Kansas Santa Fe depots are more than 50 years old, and that the company's operations are not immune to national transportation trends, means that the number of stations is likely to decline, perhaps dramatically. It is appropriate that a few Kansas communities are seeking to preserve their depots as monuments to both a fading era and a meaningful type of country station architecture.

9. While the passenger train in Kansas is today virtually extinct, its demise was a relatively recent phenomenon. In fact, many of the Santa Fe's branch lines saw passenger service for several years after World War II. An exhaustive study of such travel is given in John B. McCall, *The Doodletugs* (Dallas, 1977). An extensive account of the mechanical development of gas-electric cars, and how they were used, as well as a fine selection of photographs make this a valuable work for anyone interested in rural Kansas railroading.

This drawing of the Santa Fe's standard 1890 "country station" shows a cross section of the waiting room looking toward the end. In this plan the waiting room is entered through an end door. The drawing also shows the distinctive roof overhang seen in the frame depots built by the Santa Fe in the late 19th century. Drawing courtesy of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway Company.
Above.—This station at Madison is but one of many railroad depots that stood at the head of Kansas main streets. Often Midwestern towns made special efforts to pave the roadway that led to the depot. The railway station was literally the gateway to a rural community, so quite naturally it was often located on the town’s most important street. Charles W. Bohi photograph.

Below.—Business matters often attract nonresidents to county seats, and in the railroad era this was especially true. Thus larger railroad depots were often needed in these population centers. The depots saw local politicians and businessmen leaving for the capital and campaigning state-wide candidates making whistle-stops at the county seats. If a large and striking depot would make a favorable impression on these influential people, the railroad’s investment was well worth it. Kingman, seat of Kingman county, could be reached from almost every village in the county by rail, so it is no wonder the Santa Fe built this attractive station. In fact, the county courthouse is only a few feet to the left of the photographer, and this must have pleased the company. Passengers from the competing Missouri Pacific, which also owned an attractive station in Kingman, had to go several blocks to reach the courthouse. Charles W. Bohi photograph.
The Santa Fe depot at Conway is of simple boards and batten (a construction method that saved significantly on wood and nails and thus cut costs) and resembles many stations found along other Midwestern lines. H. Roger Grant collection.

More elaborate than the Conway depot, the Santa Fe station at Burlingame is still of plain design. Yet on this early structure, the company included attractive roof-support brackets that in this photograph are highlighted by a contrasting paint scheme. Charles W. Bohl photograph.
The floor plan of the Santa Fe's "Frame Depot No. 2 for Branch Lines" is typical of those used for thousands of combination stations in North America. The lobby area of the office was likely planned so that trainmen could talk to the agent without going through either the waiting room or freight room. In addition, the layout allowed the agent quick access from his office to trackside. This was an important feature because dispatchers sometimes sent train orders to the agent just in the "nick of time" for him to relay to an oncoming train. Also note that even the outdoor privy was built to a standard plan. Drawing courtesy of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway Company.

At mainline points where the Santa Fe needed extra signaling devices, the bay window was greatly enlarged. Notice, however, that the bracket on the bay and the overall design remain the same as on branchline depots. The floor plan inside is also identical to the branchline stations. The "Name Here" written on the end elevation drawings is probably the best evidence that these buildings were designed for reproduction wherever needed. While the authors know of no stations like this in Kansas, the plan is a good example of the flexibility of standard designs and the length to which the Santa Fe would go to include its unique dormer-bay on its frame depots. Drawing courtesy of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway Company.
Located on the Wichita and Western branch, Cheney was founded in August, 1883, when the Santa Fe reached western Sedgwick county. Typical of the region, this depot has a grain elevator as a close neighbor, for most Kansas stations were built to serve the needs of rural communities. When rails first came to the state it was believed that villages needed to be no farther than 10 miles apart. In many cases a person can look down the track and see the grain elevators of the next town. Charles W. Bohi photograph.

The Coldwater depot, with its boards and batten siding, is likely an early version of the highly popular dormer-bay style. The office is in the corner of the building, and the waiting room is entered through the end door. A baggage section that is separate from the freight room is included. Even though the interior floor plan and the exterior appearance are different, the dormer-bay clearly marks this as a Santa Fe building. Charles W. Bohi photograph.
The Sawyer depot is probably a later edition of the Coldwater building. An obvious difference is that the Santa Fe selected lap siding rather than boards and batten for the Sawyer station. Both stations have the decorative wooden strip below the window sills.

Charles W. Bohl photograph.

The ubiquitous dormer-bay design is evident in this photograph of the Copeland station, taken early one summer morning. The platform shown is typical of the freight-house end of Santa Fe combination depots. Charles W. Bohl photograph.
This photograph of the Satanta station shows the standardized dormer bay and illustrates shading provided by the roof overhang. The depot has a longer freight house than the Copeland station, however. Charles W. Bohi photograph.

The Johnson depot is another carbon-copy station, but this photograph shows a freight platform different from the depots at Copeland and Satanta. Carriers made their standard plans sufficiently flexible to allow for some local variations. Charles W. Bohi photograph.
Railroad officials viewed wooden structures as expendable; they could be replaced if business developed. Traffic volume at county seats, particularly, often grew to such an extent that initial frame depots were inadequate. In this photograph there is much activity evident at the wooden station at Girard, county seat of Crawford county.

This brick “second generation” station at Girard reflects a contemporary fascination with “mission” architecture. Topped by a gable roof with slate shingles, the new depot has massive brackets that brace the roof overhangs, and a smart bracket-supported awning covers the end elevations. Decorative stonework, including stylized company heralds, is also used.
The Stafford station is more spacious than the Girard building (note the three-window waiting room), and also has an open porch on the waiting-room end that has been converted to a garage for equipment. The brick railway depots share much the same appearance otherwise. Charles W. Bohl photograph.

The graceful arches of the porch are clearly shown here, and other differences between the Great Bend and Stafford stations are evident—a different color brick, slightly different concrete work on the ends and on the dormer and differences in the stylized heralds. But the overall effect of the two structures is much the same. Although often designed specifically for one location, the Santa Fe incorporated enough of the same features in its brick depots that their ownership was easily recognizable. Charles W. Bohl photograph.
This interesting standardized station at Garden City replaced an earlier wooden one. Covered by a hip roof that is broken by hexagonal bay dormers on the end and trackside elevations, it exudes a substantial look. Wide overhangs and decorative glass add further adornment. Charles W. Bohi photograph.

This brick "second generation" station at Larned has a rectangular rather than the usual beveled bay. When passenger service ended in the post World War II years, the Santa Fe and many other roads occasionally built "third generation" depots, that, while standardized and even modular, lacked baggage and waiting-room facilities. Charles W. Bohi photograph.