



No amount of fine detailing—stained-glass windows, French tile floors, and even its own garden and fountain—could mask the depot's location in what was then a grit-

ty industrial district. The dark mass looming on the left in this early postcard was the huge illuminating gas plant on Broadway.

COURTESY SUSAN WINEBERG

## The Michigan Central depot

*When the railroad was the city's lifeline, it was Ann Arbor's grand entrance*

The elegant 1886 Michigan Central Railroad Station at 401 Depot Street, now the Gandy Dancer restaurant, testifies to the importance of train travel a hundred years ago. No expense was spared to make this massive two-towered stone building what the *Ann Arbor Register* called "the finest station on the line between Buffalo and Chicago."

Access to a railroad line could mean the difference between life and death for a struggling young town in the mid-nineteenth century. Before the Michigan Central reached Ann Arbor in 1839, a trip to Detroit was a difficult all-day affair on horseback. On the train, it could be done comfortably in two and a half hours. The movement of freight improved even more dramatically. The depot swiftly became the funnel through which virtually all traffic in and out of the city passed.

The Michigan Central was putting up new depots all along its route when the Ann Arbor station was built, but each had its own unique design. Ann Arbor's was designed by Detroit architect Frederick Spier (who also designed the Kelsey Museum and St. Thomas Catholic Church) in the then-popular Richardson Romanesque style. It was built by Gearing and

Sons of Detroit of glacial stones quarried from Four Mile Lake between Chelsea and Dexter and cut at Foster's Station on Huron River Drive near Maple Road.

The inside was elegant, with stained-glass windows, red oak ceilings and trim, and French tile floors, and even separate waiting areas for men and women. Ivy grew up the side of the building, petunias and carnations were planted around it, and a fountain spouted at the point of a triangular garden just east of the baggage shed, where the Gandy Dancer's valet parking lot is now. In the 1880's, gardens were considered an important element in railroad station design—after all, the station was the first impression visitors received of the town.

Freight operations were handled out of a smaller stone building to the west of the main station. In those days, before trucks, trains carried goods of every description, from food (for instance, bread from the Ann Arbor Home Bakery was delivered to the western part of the state) to kit houses. Whole train cars were devoted to mail, which was sorted as the train moved and then thrown out onto station platforms as the train whizzed by. Mail service was often faster than it is today: a letter

mailed at the Ann Arbor station in the morning could be delivered in Chicago that afternoon.

Even after the automobile came into general use, people took the train for most long trips. In 1915, there were thirteen Detroit to Chicago passenger trains a day, plus other, shorter runs. Many Ann Arborites commuted daily to jobs along the route. Others used the train for excursions. Kathryn Leidy recalls day outings with friends to Hudson's in downtown Detroit. And of course the beginnings and endings of university semesters found the train station crowded with students, the more adventurous of whom had slid down State Street on their trunks.

Celebrities and artists arrived by train and were met at the station by committees of dignitaries. Alva Sink, whose husband, Charles Sink, was head of the University Musical Society, greeted countless musicians, including Ignace Paderewski, who arrived in 1933 in his own sleeping car. Former U-M bands director William Revelli often provided the escort as they left; among those he saw off at the depot were Victor Borge, Meredith Willson, Gene Krupa, Benny Goodman, and Pablo Casals.

As late as World War II, when rationing of gas and tires made car travel difficult, the depot hummed. Betty Gillan Seward, who worked as the station's accountant during the war, remembers it as a very busy time. In addition to the regular

trains, there were extras for troop transport. Art Gallagher, retired editor of the *Ann Arbor News*, remembers traveling to Kalamazoo during the war to visit his father and often having to stand the whole way because the train was so crowded with soldiers and civilians.

The depot's last hurrah came in 1960, when both John Kennedy and Richard Nixon addressed rallies from their campaign trains. They were the last in a long line of politicians to make whistle-stops in Ann Arbor, running back to William Howard Taft, Teddy Roosevelt, Grover Cleveland, and William Jennings Bryan.

In 1970, the depot was sold to Chuck Muer, a restaurateur with an interest in historic restoration. By then the trickle of passenger traffic that remained was easily accommodated in the former freight building to the west. Amtrak built the present station a few years ago.

Muer, who later did similar remodeling of an historic fire station in Cincinnati and a railroad station in Pittsburgh, kept the building intact. The original stone walls, slate roof, stained-glass windows, red oak ceilings, fireplace, and baggage scale are still there. He added a kitchen in the open area between the baggage building and the waiting room, windowed in the platform area, and changed the color of the outside trim from green to dark mauve. Muer named his restaurant the Gandy Dancer, after the laborers who once maintained the tracks.

—Grace Shackman