

The midnight train is whining low,
I'm so lonesome I could cry.

—Hank Williams

The last depot

Falls City, Neb. — A rumbling noise echoes through the cold, dark morning. The sound gets louder. The ground shakes. Out of the darkness a train looms into sight and roars past the concrete platform. The whistle whines. The wooden ties creak. The wheels clatter against the hard, steel rails. Louder and louder and louder, until, gradually, the roar begins to fade.

Then... silence. Not even an echo.

The southbound Burlington Northern freight train doesn't stop in Falls City anymore. It used to. But, three months ago Burlington's depot was closed. The building stands empty now, the lights off, the door locked.

Falls City, a community shaped and developed by trackside activity is, in fact, almost trainless. The Missouri Pacific depot is the last working remnant of a long railroad history. And Falls City typifies what has happened all along the line.

In the last 40 years, 20 depots have been closed between Kansas City and Omaha. Increased technology — especially the extensive use of computers — has eliminated the need for stopping points between large cities. Towns like Nearman, Kan., Atchison, Kan., Stella, Neb., and Paul, Neb., have lost their link to the railroad. Today, only two small-town depots are still operating along the Missouri Pacific line. And Falls City's final tie to the railroad could be broken soon. The town's last depot might be the next to go.

Built in 1925, the Missouri Pacific station hasn't changed much since the days of telegraphs and steam locomotives, except... well, the bustle has disappeared. The long rows of oak benches are gone, as well as the many passengers who once filled the lobby. Dirt and cobwebs have accumulated on the windows. Five strips of tape hold the cracks together in the ticket window. The waiting room looks worn and tired. But the depot isn't dead... yet.

In the next room, the agent's office, a man in a tan sweatshirt and yellow-tinted glasses talks with his dispatcher in Kansas City. The headphone wraps across the agent's graying hair and the mouthpiece is mounted on a scissor-like bracket.

"Falls City midnight weather: 49 and cloudy," Robert Ferguson says over the radio. A relief agent for the Missouri Pacific Railroad, Ferguson is just starting his shift, the graveyard shift.

Between two desks in the middle of the room, a computer terminal, surrounded by antiques, symbolizes the increased technology that may lead to the old station's down-

fall. A list of numbers covers the computer screen. Tapping a couple of keys on the terminal, Ferguson pulls out a printed list referring to the boxcars lined up a few miles down the track.

The cars are supposed to be in a certain order so trainmen can drop them off at the right stations along the line. Ferguson says he likes to go out and look at the cars himself, though, just to make sure the crews put them in the right order.

Stepping outside shortly after 1 a.m., his breath becomes a dense fog in the cold night. A dim glow from the overhead lights accents the peeling paint on the wooden trim under the roof. The long cement platform, rising a couple feet above the tracks, stretches beyond the depot's red brick walls. Ferguson, bundled up in a large brown jacket and cotton gloves, climbs into a green Plymouth Satellite, and heads off to check the order of cars on the track.

The streets are dark and empty. Ferguson drives slowly along the road, past the closed Burlington station, around a few more curves, then pulls his big green car to stop in front of the yard office. The train crews are exchanged at the yard office instead of at the depot. Ferguson explains. He points to a large two-story office building across the tracks. Boards cover the windows and the gravel parking lot has been taken over by tall weeds. The building was used as the Missouri Pacific division office between 1935 and 1962, he

says. Now it's empty.

Ferguson puts the car in gear and heads west. Four sets of tracks line the valley past the yard office. Driving down a bumpy dirt road next to the tracks, Ferguson's headlights shine on the brown grass and weeds that outline the path in front of the car.

"This used to be a track too," he says, referring to the road. At one time, he explains, the yard had nine tracks to move railroad cars into proper groups for different destinations.

Ferguson seeks out the 10 boxcars he wants to check. They stand, nearly colorless in the night's darkness, on the outside track, linked together almost like circus elephants. Using his flashlight, the agent searches the cars for identification. The big, black numbers and letters are caught in the beam of his light. He checks the numbers off on his list: "UP 129, UP 113, MP 121..." Stopping at the last boxcar, he makes a note: the last three are out of place.

Driving back to the yard office, Ferguson becomes a history teacher.

"That was the underworld," he says, pointing at a track under the trees to his right. When the railroads owned their own mines, he explains, they kept the coal in cars on that track. Company coal, he says, was used to heat the offices, depots and steam engines.

Ferguson points to the foundation of the old roundhouse.

"And the back shop was right there," he

says, shining the flashlight on a pile of broker concrete and rubble 50 yards away. The buildings, he notes, used to house the big steam engines overnight and when they were being repaired.

When the railroads changed to diesel engines in the 1940s, several of the men either quit, retired or moved to Kansas City, Ferguson says. Many of the engineers and mechanics were old men. "They didn't know very much about the new diesel engines," he says. "It was hard to teach an old dog new tricks."

Ferguson shakes his head, then slips the car into gear. He must get back and complete the morning's train orders. Besides, he notes, something might have happened while he was gone. He says it doesn't look like there is too much to do at night, but it isn't always this slow.

"There's times here when it's quiet, and there's times when you can't even wipe your nose," he says.

Ferguson parks the car and goes inside the depot. He sits down behind the radio and tells the dispatcher that he's back in the office. The radio has simplified communications, he says. It's better than the old days, he explains, when the telegraph was the only means of communicating.

Ferguson was a part of those times. He started working for the railroad when he was 18. In 1949, he started as a call boy for the Missouri Pacific in Falls City. Back then, the railroad's telegraph and Bell System telephones ran into a tower, east of the depot. Ferguson used to run messages between the tower, the yard and the depot. When the tower was torn down in 1963, the communications equipment was moved into the depot. With a few modifications, Ferguson says, some of that equipment is still being used.

The agent pauses for a moment, perhaps remembering the old times, then taps out the final pages of his daily report on an old manual typewriter. He already has finished the train orders telling the train crews where they are going and what they should be pulling. In just a few hours, the conductors will stop in to pick up their orders. It's almost dawn.

Ferguson looks at the clock. It's 5 a.m. A train is scheduled to leave at 7 a.m., but Ferguson says he doubts if it will get out on time. Trains don't run on a precise schedule anymore, he says.

"Not like the trains before, when everything had to be right on time. Now, whenever it gets here, it's here. Whenever it leaves, it leaves.

"Time just isn't that important anymore."

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