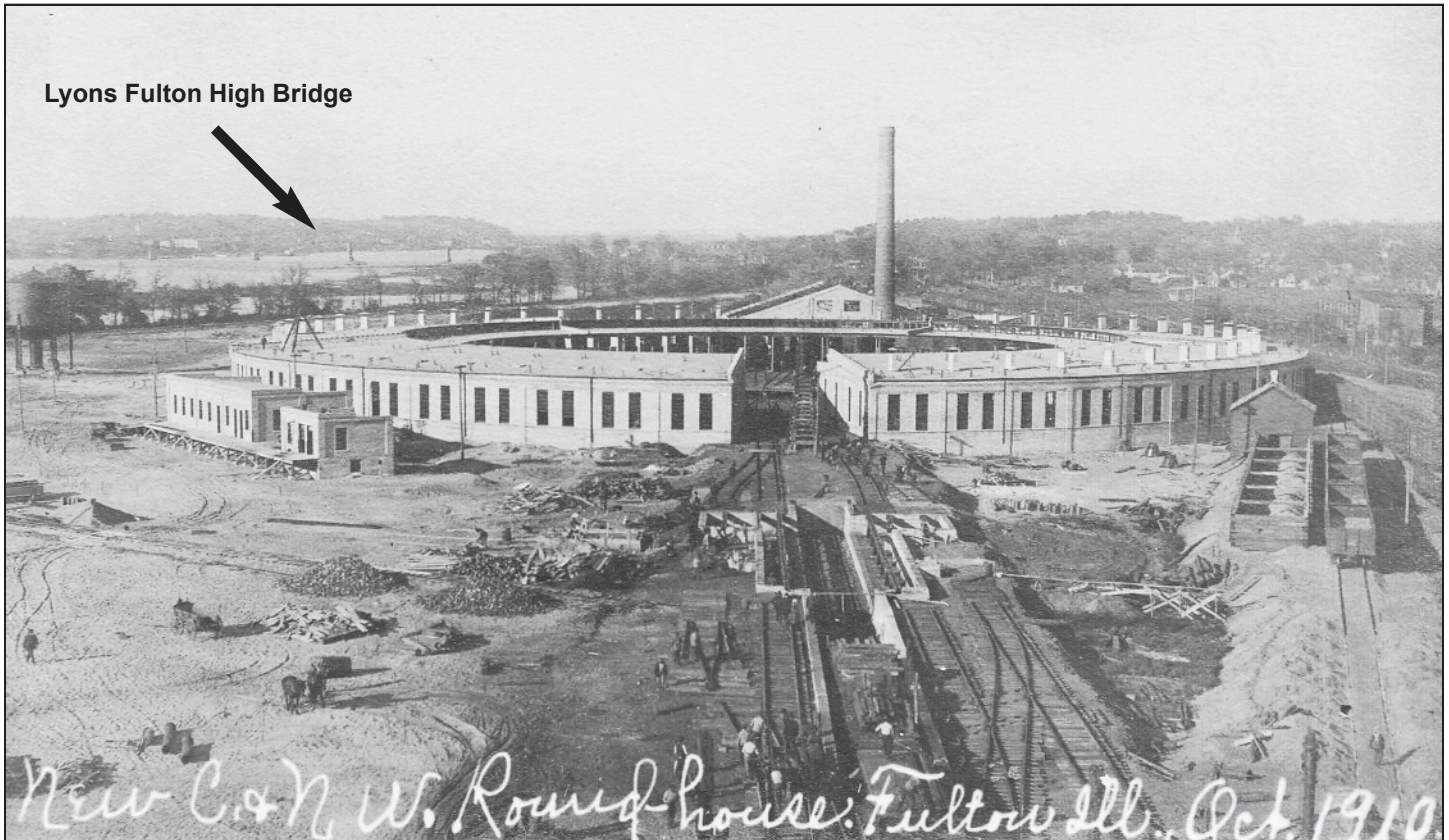


THE CHICAGO & NORTHWESTERN ROUNDHOUSE



Looking North: Note the bridge location, which provides a perspective on the roundhouse location.

By Barbara Mask

Often referred to as the Roundhouse in Fulton, Illinois, residents who live in East Clinton are quick to point out that it was called the East Clinton Roundhouse, too, and according to them, that was a more accurate location name. Regardless of the site name, the Roundhouse was a huge construction project, created jobs for over 500 men, and spurred an economic impact in Fulton like no other single event.

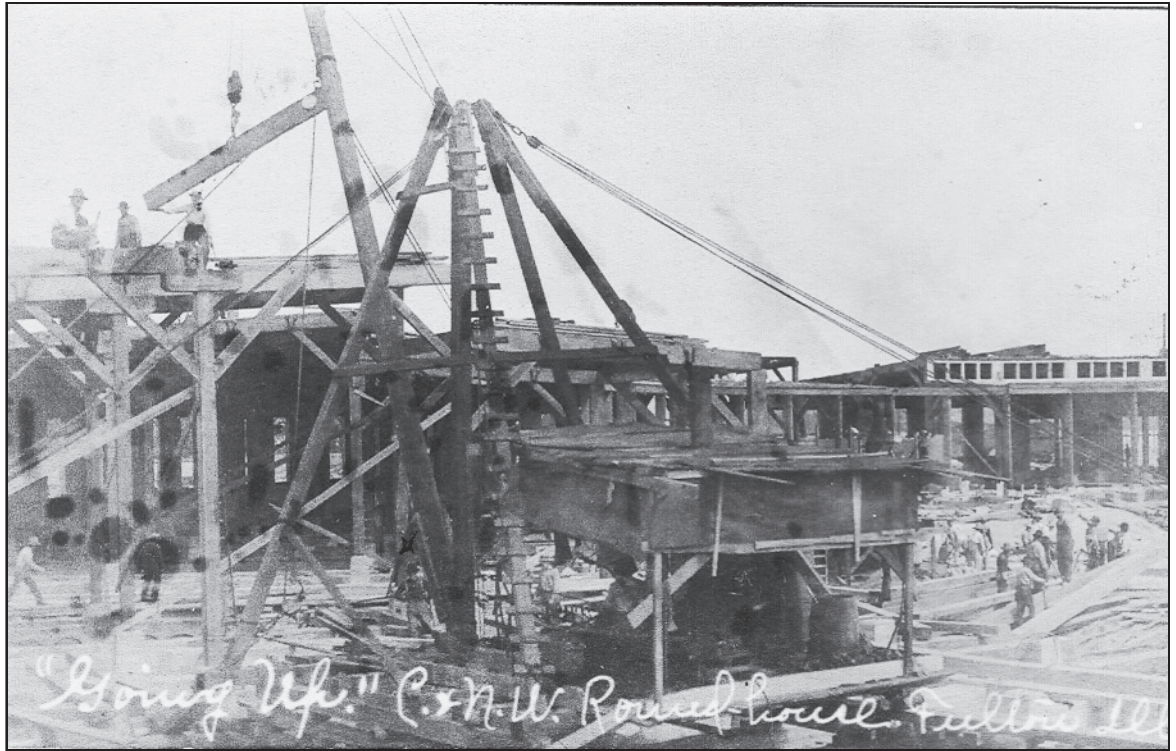
The C&NW Railroad Company had been purchasing land south of Fulton for many years: 42 acres from Claus Buis, 46 acres from G. C. Bugbee, 41 acres from T. J. Burch and Stony Point Park at the cost of \$772 per acre for 7 ½ acres. Then, a 25-acre farm owned by W. Z. Flower, was purchased which gave the Company contiguous holdings to about 775 acres—475 in Fulton Township and 300 in Garden Plain Township. Entrepreneurs in Fulton, such as Mr. and Mrs. Lemke, acquired many properties and built even more new ones, when the roundhouse construction began.

In the April 22, 1910 issue of the Fulton Journal, an article detailed the plans for building the roundhouse. The first train of 22 cars loaded with materials and tools arrived. The first step was preparing the land. Two huge sand pumps were installed in the bay just north of Stony Point and near a big sand-bar. They pumped day and night. The next step involved hauling in train-loads of fill. A temporary double-track was laid from Fulton to East Clinton.

In this initial phase of construction there were three camps of workers: Italians, Bulgarians and Austrians. The men planted gardens and lived in box cars and shanty-types of housing. They did their laundry on Sundays. Many interesting stories are told of the interactions of the foreigners with the local townsfolk.

The roundhouse was located west of 4th Street opposite today's 25th Avenue. Claims that 'it was the largest in the world' or 'the largest west of Chicago' have not been validated, but the size was gargantuan. The diameter was 436 feet and covered 3.46 acres. The turn-table in the center was 80 feet in diameter. There were stalls for 58 engines. The pits underneath were lined with concrete and the spaces between were paved with bricks (some of which are on display at the Fulton Museum). Heat was blown around the building by fans. It was ninety feet from the outer to the inner wall of the engine-house and 88 feet from the inner wall to the edge of the turn-table. The walls were massive. The foundation was 42 inches wide. On its top was poured a concrete wall 18 inches thick and nine feet high. A brick wall, 15 feet high, was laid on top of the concrete one. The roof was made from southern pine, three inches thick and was covered with tar and gravel.

A power-house was built close to the roundhouse. It was a brick building, 100 feet by 110 feet in size with a 125-foot smokestack (visible in photo). It was 14 feet in diameter tapering to 10 feet. The base was 21 inches thick. There was also a store-house nearby. The three buildings combined required the laying of about 1,300,000 bricks. The coal-chutes were south of the engine house. They carried 800 tons of coal in elevation and could service four engines simultaneously. An extensive photo collection of these railroad properties and activity in Fulton is on display at the Fulton (Martin House) Museum.



1910 Construction Photo: Roundhouse was completed in seven months.

While the construction was progressing on the roundhouse, the power house and the store house, the C&NW officials announced a plan to have a deluxe residential-hotel for railroad employees. It was called the Fulton Clubhouse and nicknamed 'Big Red' and the 'Red Onion.' It had 24 sleeping rooms and was used exclusively by railroad employees who worked on the trains in use; not for those who worked in the terminal yards surrounding the roundhouse complex. It was razed in 1935.

What forces came into play that altered the rapid success of the railroad industry in Fulton? One major factor appears to be the invention of the diesel engine. No longer were the roundhouses with their turntables needed as now the engines could move backward as well as forward. The C&NW Railroad Company had two major terminals going at one time and for economic reasons, Clinton appeared to have the better location with potential growth available on the west side of the river. By 1931, the roundhouse was deserted. John Adney, a Clinton Herald reporter, wrote of a melancholy walk through the crumbling building years after it was no longer in use. He stated it was as if the men had just gone home at the end of the day. Many of their tools and gloves were still there.

Here I Am!

One day, a young 12-year old boy, named Nikolai Rajiccoic, who could not speak English, arrived at the Fulton Post Office. He was wearing a tag that read, "Post Office Box 161, Fulton, Illinois." His father was one of the Austrian employees at the roundhouse who had sent for his son to come here to live with him. The boy had arrived on the Northwestern train and was directed to the post office. Another one of the Austrian workers from the camp noticed the boy sitting there and escorted him to his father. Such was the life of many workers who were away from families while they toiled in the roundhouse.

