The Railroad Capital through the years

Giant on the lakefront

In three views of Chicago—taken, respectively, six, seven, and four decades ago—we see four of the six downtown passenger terminal areas and two outlying coach yards. The facilities served 13 of the city’s 20 Class 1 passenger railroads.

Illinois Central wasn’t the first railroad in Chicago, but was one of 10 Class 1s headquartered there and became arguably the most visible, thanks to it lakefront location. Its Romanesque Revival-style Central Station, built on fill in Lake Michigan for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, served IC plus New York Central’s Michigan Central and Big Four. We believe this 2:47 p.m. photo dates from fall 1940 after a refurbishment of the station. Note the diesels at lower left—an EMC SW1 (IC got its first seven in 1939-40) and the two box-cabs (which belong to NYC, not IC). Ironically, there isn’t a passenger train in sight, even on the suburban line. Today, Central Station and the IC offices are gone, and all rail activity here is passenger, operated by Metra Electric and the South Shore Line.

1 Central Station (demolished 1974)
2 11th Place taxi loading zone
3 Illinois Central General Office bldg. (razed 1974)
4 IC General Office building annex
5 Framework for new IC neon advertising sign
6 Weldon tower (center) and coach yard (to left)
7 Phillips 66 sign over suburban tracks (razed ’70’s)
8 18th St. electric M.U. shed and M.U. coach yard
9 18th Street pedestrian bridge
10 23rd Street viaduct (to McCormick Place today)
11 Soldier Field (built 1920)
12 Chicago Park District headquarters (razed 1990’s)
13 Northerly Island (site of Meigs air field until 2003)
14 Field Museum of Natural History (built 1919)
15 Lake Shore Drive (built 1920’s)
16 Streetcar station, turning loop (built 1933 for Fair)
17 Streetcar bridge over IC (demolished 1953)
18 Steam transfer freight from South Water St. yard
19 IC suburban tracks (electrified 1926)
20 IC suburban/South Shore 12th Street station
21 Suburban station pedestrian bridge
22 Pedestrian overpass to Grant Park

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Two south Loop terminals, plus a half

Centered above 12th Street about seven blocks west of Central Station, we are west of Dearborn Station but see La Salle Street, Grand Central, and Union stations as they appeared in late 1928 just as the 27-month project to straighten the Chicago River’s South Branch began. This work would, among other things, install a long, climbing curve for trains out of Grand Central to elevate the B&OCT tracks onto a new river drawbridge parallel to the IC-C&NW St. Charles Air Line and over the PRR C&A/CB&Q leads to Union Station, eliminating the city’s busiest grade-level rail crossing (36 diamonds) at 16th and Stewart streets. At top left, Union Station’s head house, which still stands, is barely visible; the concourse came down in 1969 for an office building. Grand Central is gone, and Metra’s current La Salle Street terminal is about where the south end of the trainshed was. Amtrak’s coach yard occupies all the former PRR land south of the PRR freight station site.

1. Chicago Union Station concourse (opened 1925)
2. U.S. Post Office, Van Buren St. terminal (built 1922)
3. Harrison Street interlocking tower (CSX)
4. Chicago & Alton freight houses
5. PRR 5-story Polk St. freight station (built 1918)
6. Pennsylvania Railroad commissary
7. Pullman Company commissary
8. PRR coach yard
9. PRR car depot
10. Former Baltimore & Ohio yard (river will be here)
11. New (left), old (right) 12th St. movable bridges
12. Baltimore & Ohio Chicago Terminal drawbridge
13. Taylor St. drawbridge, Chicago River, South Branch
14. Polk St. drawbridge
15. Harrison St. drawbridge
16. Grand Central Station (built 1899, razed 1971)
17. Grand Central Station trainshed
18. Pere Marquette freight house
19. Chicago Great Western freight house
20. Baltimore & Ohio freight house
21. American Forwarding Co. freight house (under street)
22. Wells St. ramp to 12th St. (a.k.a. Roosevelt Rd.)
23. La Salle St. Station (CSX built 1903, razed 1981)
24. La Salle Street Station trainshed (razed ca. 1933)
25. Rock Island Polk St. interlocking tower
26. New York Central (CSX) outbound freight house
27. Rock Island outbound freight house
28. Rock Island inbound freight house
29. RI team tracks and old passenger station leads
30. Ramp to newer Pere Marquette freight house
Support facilities to the west

North about three blocks from Union Station and Chicago & North Western Passenger Terminal, then west 2 miles, is the Western Avenue interlocking, controlled (to this day) by Tower A-2 (currently Metra’s). Here Milwaukee Road’s main line crosses C&NW’s West Line (Geneva Sub), and the old PRR “Panhandle” (owner of the line into CUS’s north side) diverges to the south (today it’s a Norfolk Southern spur). Tower A-2 is just out of the photo at lower right. Our focus is on the adjacent coach yards of C&NW and Milwaukee (in use today by UP and Metra). The latter has full engine support facilities, but C&NW units were cared for at the M-19A “diesel ramp” west another 2 miles at 40th Street. This 11 a.m. weekday photo is from late 1963 or so. C&NW has a full complement of bilevel commuter cars, but the 400 (note the observation car, stored, below “4”) has come off (in July 1963), and there are three dozen bilevels in Milwaukee’s yard (to the right of “21 right”); its first 40 bilevels arrived in 1961.

1. C&NW Geneva Sub main line (Chicago to Iowa)
2. C&NW California Ave. coach yard, “The Patch”
3. California Ave. coach yard, “Old yard” portion
4. California Ave. coach yard, “North Yard” (ex-freight)
5. C&NW “South Yard” (freight; later a scrapyard here)
6. Griffin Wheel Company
7. Sacramento Ave. (north-south)
8. California Ave. (north-south)
9. C&NW connection to Rockwell Sub
10. PRR connection to “Panhandle” line to 59th St. Yd.
11. Corner of Fulton St. (e.-w.), Campbell Ave. (n.-s.)
12. Corner of Fulton St. (e.-w.), Artesian Ave. (n.-s.)
13. Western Ave. (north-south)
14. MILW main line, Tower A-2 to Pacific Jct.
15. MILW Western Ave. commuter station
16. MILW Campbell Ave. team tracks
17. MILW Tower A-3 (upper), freight yard office (lower)
18. Grand Ave.; spur crosses to Nelson Bros. warehouse.
19. MILW “Spur Yard” for overflow car storage
20. MILW Western Ave. coach yard
21. MILW commissary (right), car department (left)
22. MILW Western Ave. diesel house
23. MILW roundhouse (upper), car washer (lower)
24. MILW and C&NW steam plants/power houses
25. MILW Western Ave. freight yard No. 1
26. MILW Western Ave. freight yard No. 2
27. MILW freight yard No. 3 (all 3 now city auto pound)
28. MILW Tower A-4 (right), switchtender shanty (left)
29. MILW Tower A-5 (Pacific Jct.)