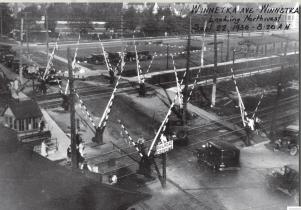
A HISTORY OF THE RAIL LINE IN WINNETKA

Why Are the Train Tracks Lower in Winnetka?

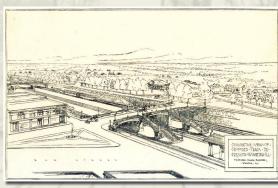
Grade crossings were a perennial danger in downtown Winnetka. In 1854, only two tracks existed with two trains a day. The addition of the North Shore Electric Line increased the tracks to four sets. By 1909, there were 177 daily steam engine trains and frequent commuter trains passing by and stopping in Winnetka. As rail traffic increased and the population grew, so did the number of automobiles, cyclists and pedestrians. Accidents resulted in 31 deaths and numerous injuries, but proposed solutions foundered for lack of funding.



View of rail crossing at Winnetka Avenue, 1930

In 1906, Village Engineer Frank Windes designed a plan for depressing the tracks (remarkably similar to what was implemented decades later) but nothing was done. When the Plan of Winnetka was issued in 1921 by architect Edward Bennett, track depression was the first topic listed, and grade crossings were described as "Winnetka's most serious and urgent problem." Village leaders embraced the plan, but no action was taken.

The tragedy that galvanized community opinion occurred on Halloween evening of 1937. Two women leaving the Community House were killed instantly when they drove across the tracks at Pine Street and were struck by a six-car train that was operating in reverse with no lights.



With the community demanding action, a funding solution was finally achieved. Of critical importance was a commitment from the Public Works Administration, headed by Secretary of the Interior and Winnetkan Harold L. Ickes, to fund 45% of the project. The Village contributed 29%, and the balance was funded by the Chicago & North Western and North Shore railroad companies. The Chicago & North Western railroad was in favor of the plan, as their trains had been getting stuck on the incline between Evanston and Winnetka for decades. An additional engine was frequently sent from Evanston to push the train up the bluff into Winnetka.



Profile of the grade elevations between Chicago and Winnetka



the first earth" of the Grade Separation Project, December 1938



The "Big Ditch" construction project began in 1938 and ran from Indian Hill to Hubbard Woods. It included seven bridges (two for pedestrians) and three train stations along with retaining walls. Much of the excavated soil was used as landfill in Crow Island Woods. After five years of construction, the project was completed in 1943.



View from Oak Street looking south, after completion of Cut #1, 1939

