

Numerous spur lines fed Antigo's major rail hub

By **JOE HERMOLIN**
Langlade County
Historical Society

The excitement about the purchase and restoration of an old steam engine at the museum reminds us that Antigo was a major rail hub in the days of rail travel. But the Chicago & Northwestern was not the only significant rail line in Langlade County. Settlers were drawn to area in the decades after the Civil War because of the area's forests. Initially logging occurred near the Wolf River where the cut timber could be floated downstream to mills.

In 1874 two woodsmen, passing through the Antigo flats reported that: "The country is full of pine and splendid tracts of hardwood, but it would take a whole year to get 1,000 feet of the product to the Wolf River." In less than seven years the railroad had eliminated the need to get timber to the Wolf and made logging practical in the Antigo flats. Small rail spur lines brought lumber and wood products from lumber camps and sawmills to towns and factories throughout the region, many in Antigo itself. These rail spurs were vital to the economic growth of Langlade County.

One mill, Heineman, was first owned by the Antigo Screen Door Co. in downtown Antigo in 1890. At its peak of operations it produced 150,000 doors and employed 110 men. The timber was cut at a sawmill at the fork of the Eau Claire (current site of the Riverview Golf Course) and brought into Antigo by train. Heineman took over the Antigo Screen Door Company in 1901 and expanded operations running the train line from East Ackley town-

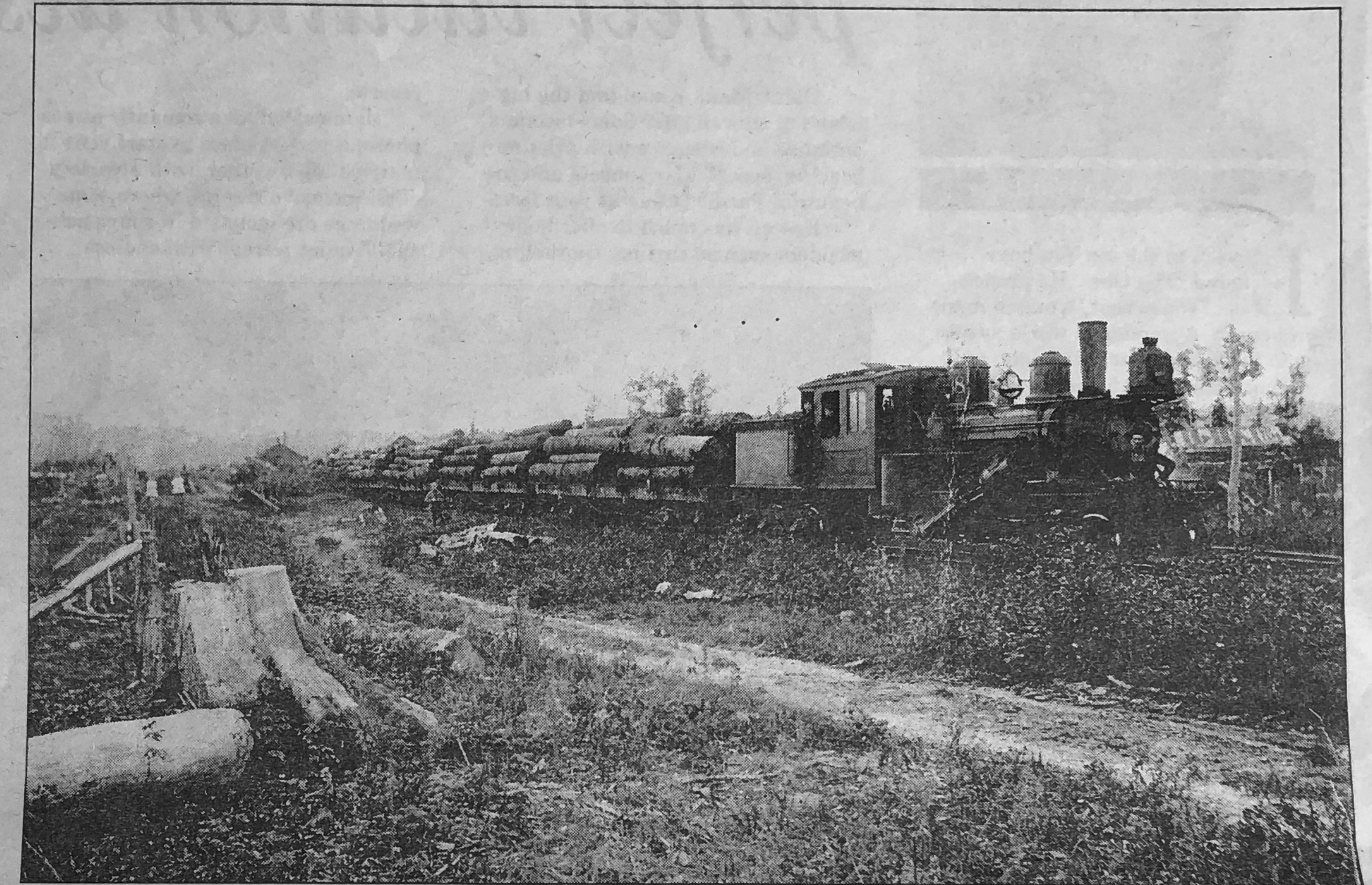


Photo taken in 1901-02 shows the Paine Lumber Company train loaded up with logs cut in the area.

ship to the northwest edge of Antigo where it hooked up with the Chicago & Northwestern. Later extensions would bring timber from Vilas and Summit to sidings on the Heineman line and then into Antigo. At first water for the steam engines was siphoned out of passing streams. This would take about 45 minutes to an hour giving trainmen a chance to pick berries or do some fishing.

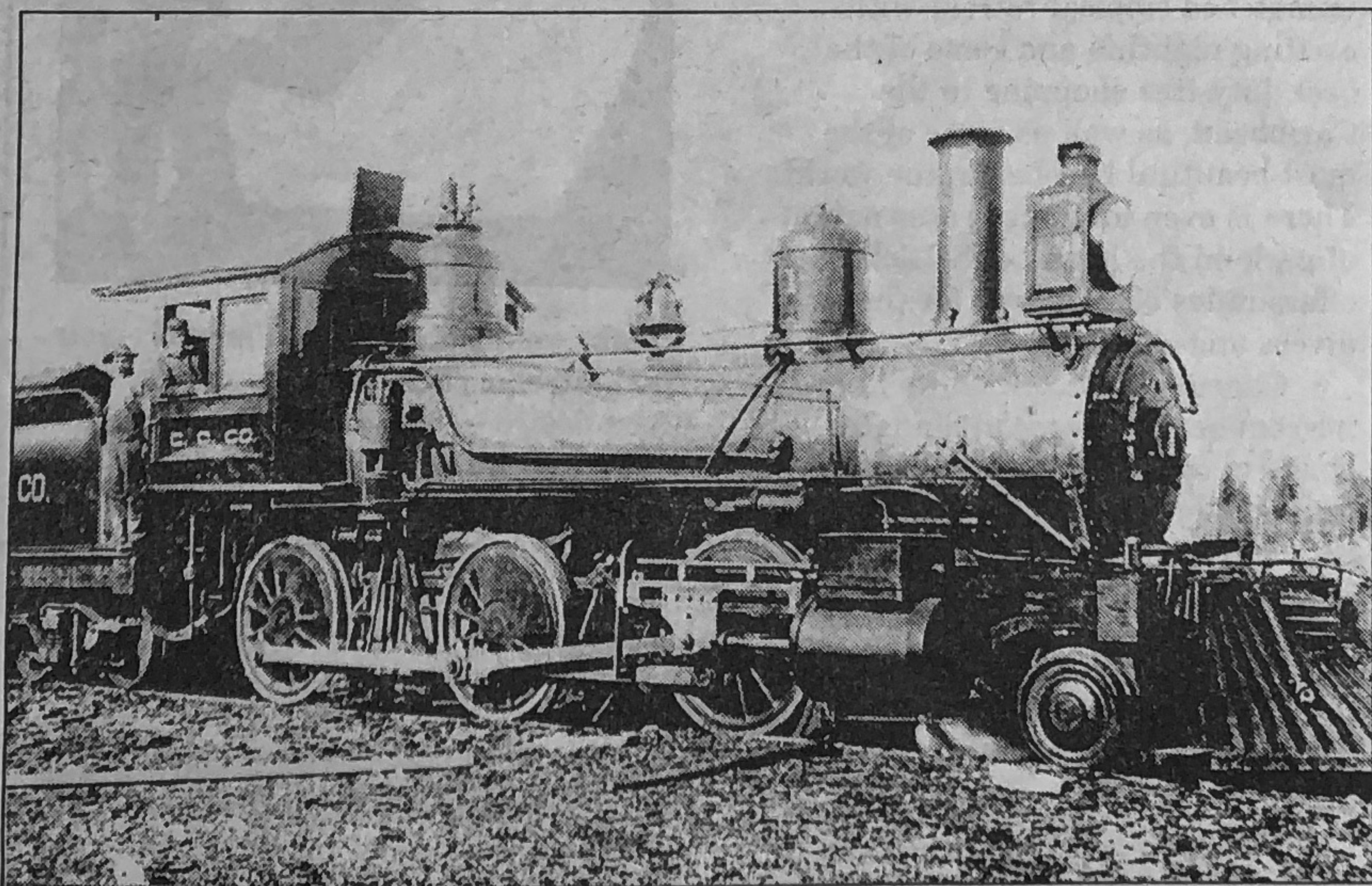
Another important line was

operated by the Paine Lumber Co. (later the Langlade Lumber Company). It operated many short lines in the towns of Upham, Elcho, Summit Lake, Ainsworth and Price from as early as 1899 to 1913. Timber from camps was hauled to the rail spurs and transported to an area near Bass Lake where it was transferred onto the Chicago & Northwestern lines and taken to mills in Antigo. The first locomotive was a Climax geared engine with two cylinders on one side of the boiler that drove the shaft and gears to the drive wheels. It was nicknamed "the coffee grinder" and although it was slow it was powerful and well suited for uneven grades. It would make five trips daily out of the camps, hauling only five cars of logs at a time. The Langlade Lumber Company in the 1920s also had major operations in Pearson and a network of rail lines leading there.

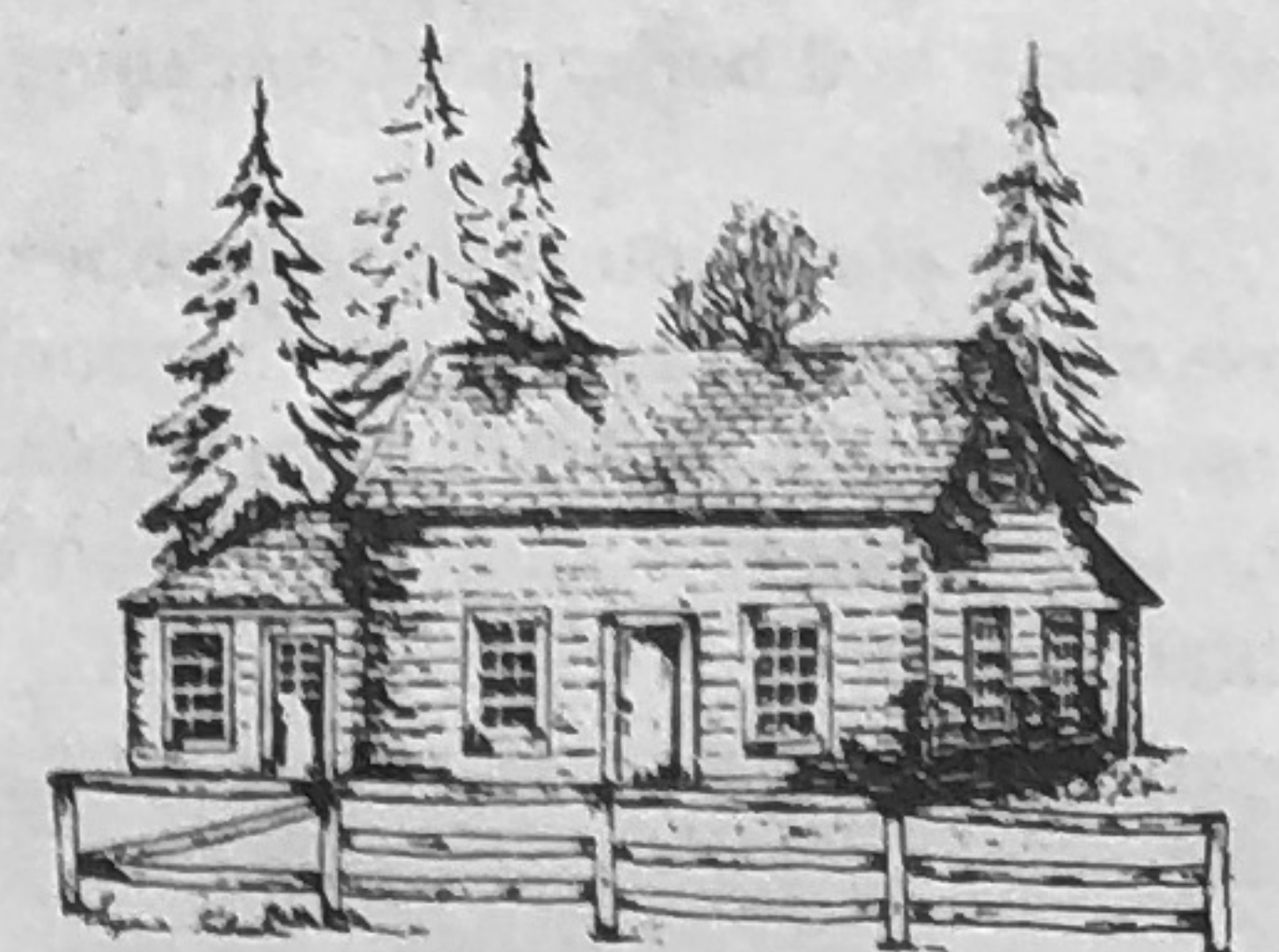
Other lumber operated rail spurs included one built by the Crocker Chair Company to bring logs from various lumber camps to its mill in Elton and to the chair factory in downtown Antigo. The Pratt line was one of the longer ones at 13 miles and carried logs from southwestern Oneida County to Post Lake where they were dumped into the Wolf River and

floated downstream. One of the shortest lines was the Ormsby line at about four miles, constructed in 1900 and serving the unincorporated village of Ormsby in the town of Peck.

The use of trains to haul lumber occurred in a period between the time of use of horses and trucks, beginning in the 1890s and lasting mostly until the 1940s. Some lines existed for only a year, others for decades with the average being around three years. Once an area had been logged the rails and ties were removed and used in another place. For many such lines there is no or little current evidence of their existence but careful searching of old plat maps reveals this former vast network.



Engine of the line operated by the Crocker Chair Company and used to haul logs from its mill in Elton to the chair factory in Antigo.



Our History

A monthly feature provided by the Langlade County Historical Society and the Antigo Daily Journal staff.

Rail history here dates to first train's arrival in 1882

By **JOE HERMOLIN**
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On Aug. 15, 1881, a locomotive bearing the name Milwaukee Lake Shore and Western (MLSW) pulled into the newly built Antigo depot. It was the beginning of rail service to the city of Antigo, which had its first settlers only three years earlier. The locomotive's arrival was greeted with great fanfare and a celebration that included sandwiches and lemonade. Francis Deleglise, who did much to establish Antigo and bring the railroad to the city, was a strong believer in the temperance movement and would not permit any stronger drink than lemonade.

Francis Deleglise had settled his family in what would become Antigo in 1878 in his cabin on the banks of Spring Brook. (That cabin has been relocated to the museum grounds.) During the next few years a handful of additional families settled in the region. At the time the major population centers were in Langlade and Lily. Most goods travelled along rivers and the Military Road which had been constructed as a path between Green Bay and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. With no major river systems or roads in the area Antigo's prospects for future development looked bleak.

Antigo's big break occurred in 1881 when the MLSW Railroad sought to expand from Aniwa, then the end of the line, northward



Provided by the
Langlade County Historical Society.
To donate, volunteer or become a
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Visit the museum complex at
Superior Street and Seventh Avenue
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Our History

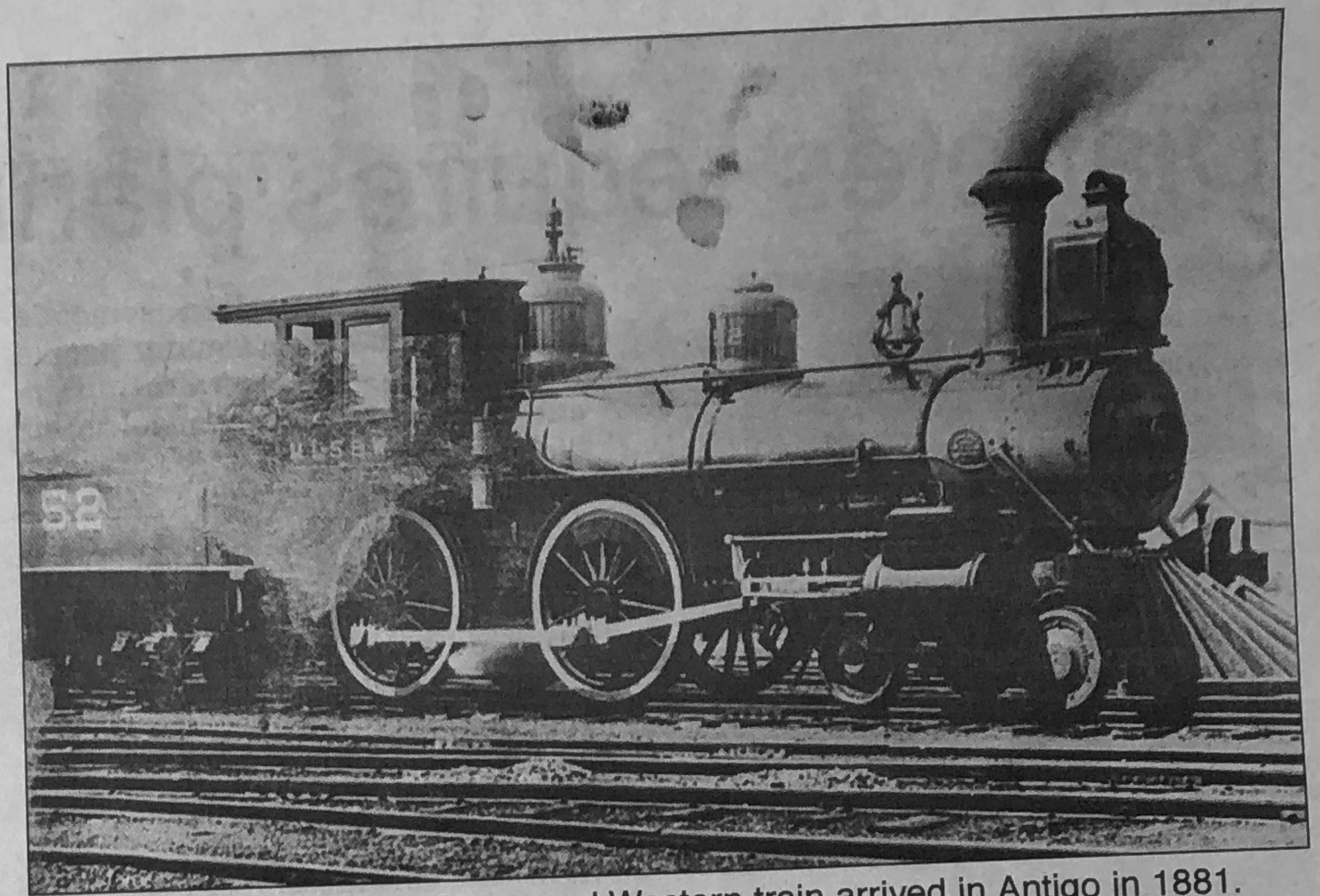
23 miles to Summit Lake. In those days choosing the path and laying track were not simple tasks. First a "locating engineer" went out on foot or horseback to assess the terrain through the dense woods and determined a feasible route. Then a survey crew staked the line. Changes were constantly being made when some grades were found to be excessive or the nature of the terrain disadvantageous for laying track. Additional problems would arise in obtaining right-of-way or easements for the line. Only then could a construction crew move in, clear a 100 foot right-of-way, and begin grading. Six horse teams would be used to rough grade, followed by finer levelling. Finally, they could begin placing ties and laying track.

It was a slow process but soon tracks had been built all the way to Summit Lake and on to Three Lakes with a branch to Rhinelander. Thus within a span of about three years Langlade County, only created in 1880, had a fairly extensive railroad system.

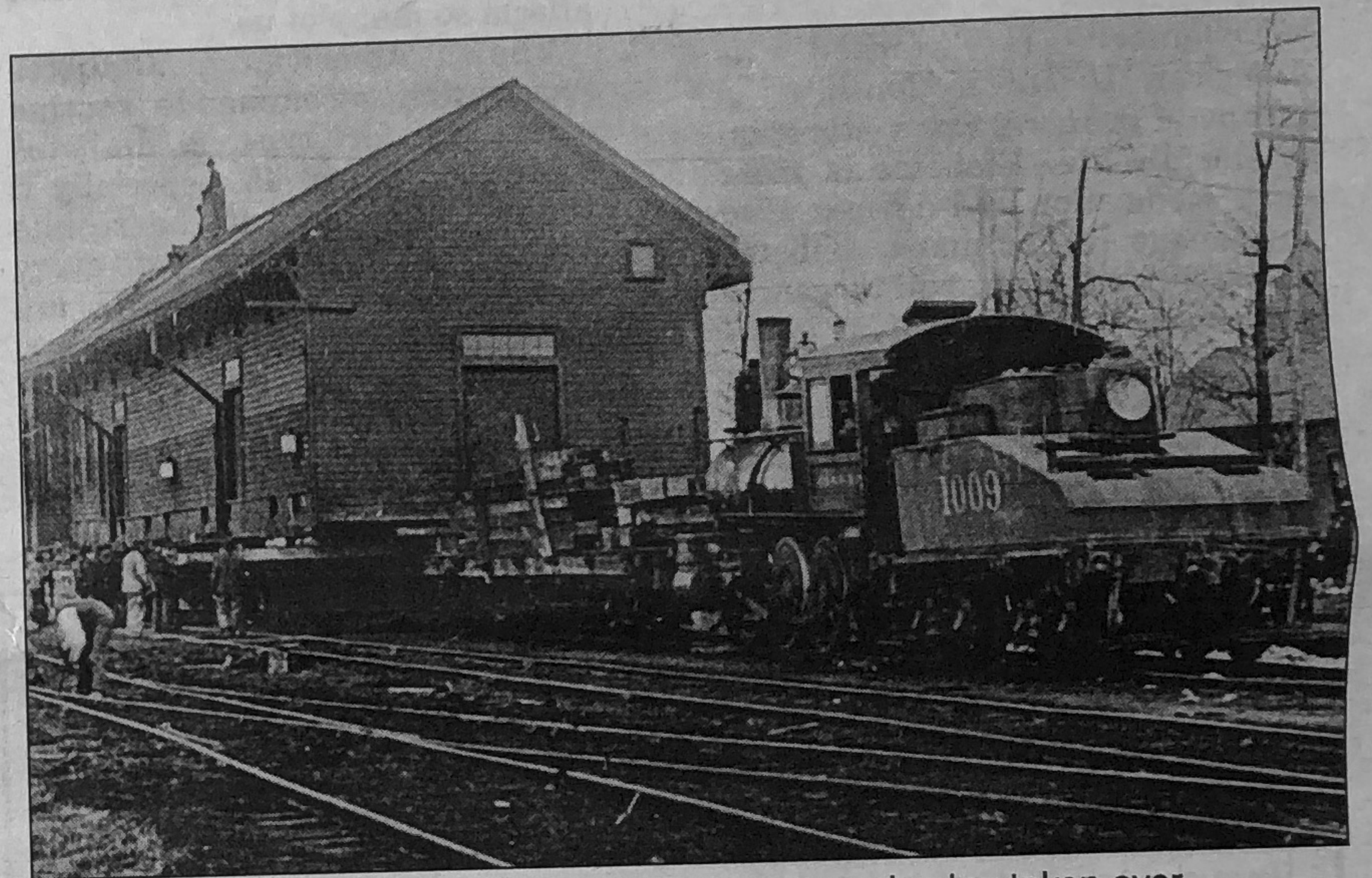
Why did the original line from Aniwa come through Antigo? It was not an obvious choice. The most practical choice for construction and the first choice ran two miles west of town. Once again, as with many early developments in Antigo, Francis Deleglise played a role. By now he was a successful real estate entrepreneur. He recognized that the presence of a railroad was vital to the growth of Antigo and would increase the value of his real estate holdings. He lobbied officials of the MLSW to reconsider their choice of a route. Clinching the deal was his offer to the railroad of 50 acres of land in Antigo for railroad facilities. And so it was that on August 15, 1881, the MLSW locomotive pulled into the newly built Antigo depot.

Twelve years later the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad (C&NW) acquired the MLSW. The next 15 years saw a rapid growth of the railyards: a large roundhouse, a new depot, new ice house, coal yard (coal had by then replaced wood as a fuel), an expanded freight warehouse, a

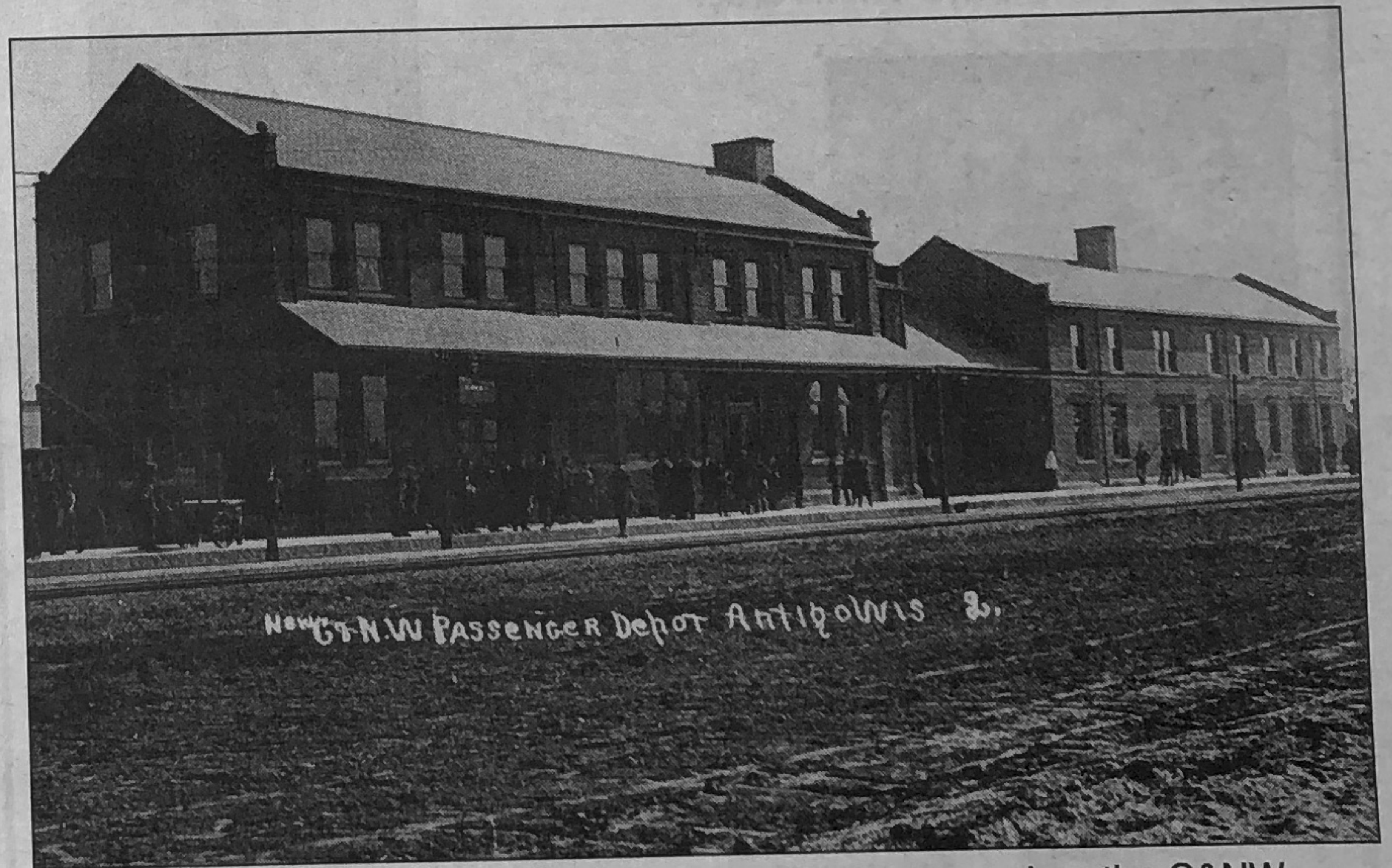
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A Milwaukee Lake Shore and Western train arrived in Antigo in 1881. It was the first train to pull into Antigo and was the start of a long history of the railroad in Antigo.



In 1907 the Chicago and Northwestern, having taken over the Milwaukee Lakeshore & Western, moved the original depot north, along the tracks, where it became the carpenters' shop.



The new depot, built in 1907, became necessary when the C&NW made Antigo headquarters to its Ashland division.

Continued

Railroad

machine shop, a blacksmith shop, and other buildings. In 1907 the C&NW realigned its divisions and designated Antigo its headquarters for the Ashland Division.

Antigo suddenly became an important railroad hub and thriving commercial center. Lumber companies began harvesting hardwoods and many linked their lines to the C&NW to bring lumber into Antigo. Industries such as Vulcan located in Antigo because of the rail connections. Freight and agricultural goods were directed through Antigo and on to other destinations. A C&NW ice house stored ice carved out of Kellogg's Pond (Antigo Lake) in winter and used that ice to air condition passenger cars and refrigerate agricultural freight throughout northern Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Antigo also became an important passenger terminal. The major passenger trains were the "noon" trains. Locomotive 116 arrived from Ashland at 11:59 a.m. and locomotive 117 from Milwaukee at 12:01 p.m. Time was allotted for a crew change, a check of the cars, filling the water tanks, and lunch for the passengers. The trains all had a mail car, baggage car, passenger coaches and a smoker car, and often a dining car. Overnight trains also had Pullman sleepers. Because Antigo was a crew change point many trainmen and engine crews lived here. Three line crews of three to five men were based in Antigo but travelled the line repairing the rails, keeping switches and crossings in good

Learn more about railroad history at Society meeting Thursday, Nov. 14

On Thursday Nov. 14 the Langlade County Historical Society will hold its annual meeting at the Antigo CoVantage Credit Union, beginning at 5 p.m.

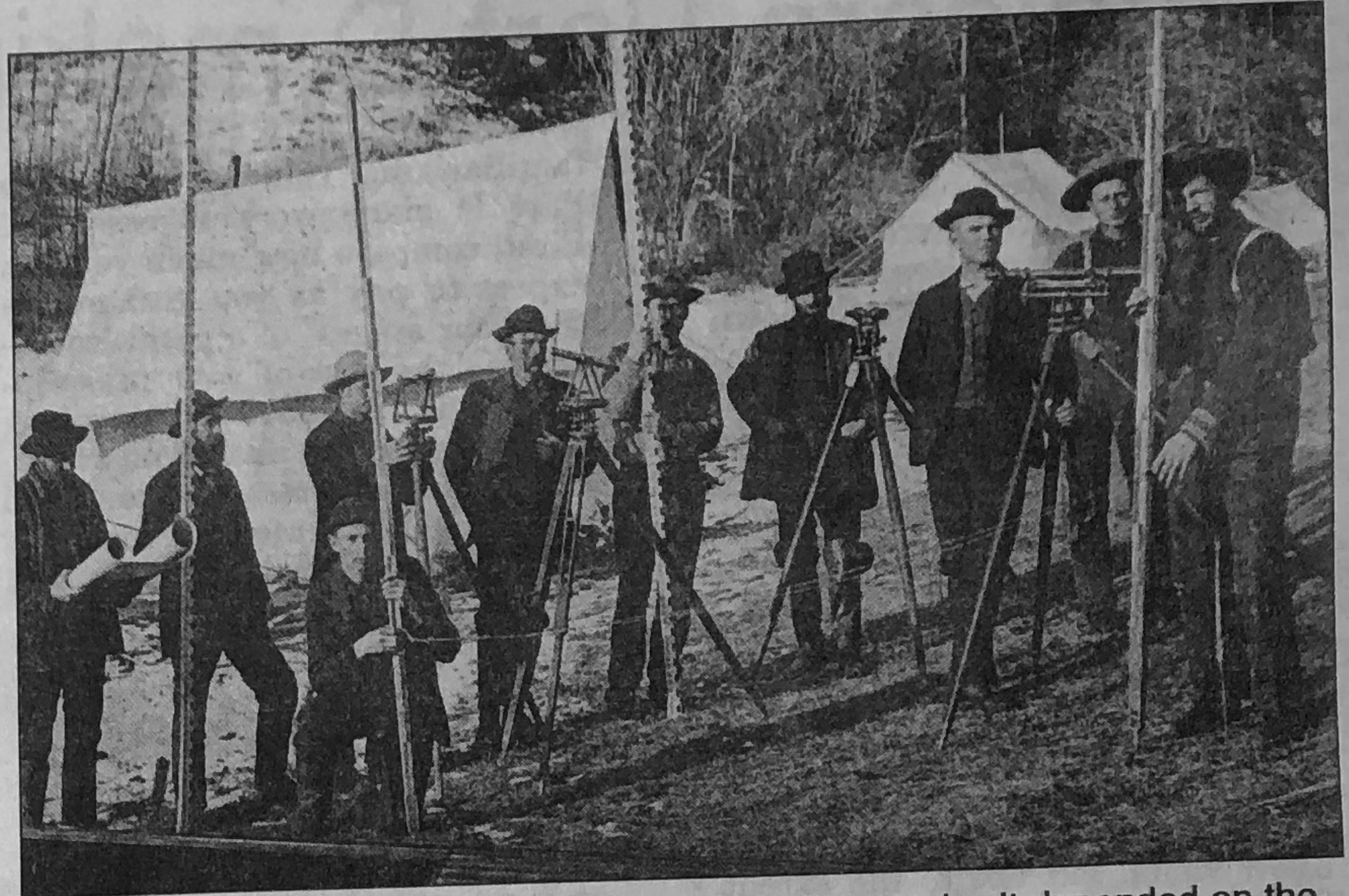
After a short business meeting there will be a slide show presentation describing the history of the railroad in Antigo. The presentation will feature photographs from the museum archives.

The event is open to the public with a nominal fee of \$5 for non-museum members but free to museum members. People who wish to attend are asked to notify the museum at 715 627-4464 so allow for proper planning.

working order, and clearing the tracks of ice and snow. In the 1940s C&NW was the major employer in the city.

The timber industry, long an important part of Antigo's economy, was also linked to the railroad. Many lumber companies built spur lines to lumber camps throughout the county. Some lasted only a few years, some for decades. After the timber had been harvested the company would tear up the tracks and reinstall them in a different region. The logs were transported by rail to the main line and brought to lumber mills in Antigo. One major company, Crocker, had its own engines and trains that carried logs from the Crocker Hills into its Antigo mill.

The railroad also had a major impact on the opening up northern Wisconsin to tourists. In days before roads and automobiles were reliable, people depended on trains. One interesting C&NW feature was the "fishermen specials" from Chicago. From 1917 to 1950 special trains ran through Antigo to Lake Gogebic where the C&NW operated a resort, and to Cisco Lake and Woodruff. From May 1 until Memorial Day and again from Labor Day until Oct. 1 these trains ran only on weekends. From Memorial Day to Labor Day they operated daily except Mondays. The trains left Chicago in early evening and arrived at the lakes by early morning. They brought fishermen north and took them home with a special refrigerated section in baggage for trophy



A typical survey crew decided where best to lay tracks. It depended on the grade of the land, nature of the terrain, and negotiated right of way.

fish.

In the fall, similar special excursions brought hunters to the Northwoods with special refrigerated cars available to transport the deer harvest back home with the hunters to their urban homes in southern Wisconsin and Illinois. Most of the hunting took place close to the rail lines.

In the 1950s and 1960s the importance of the railroad waned. Several factors led to its decline. Improved roads meant that more freight was shipped by truck and automobiles became the preferred method for people to travel. The impact of the decline of importance of rail on Antigo was further exacerbated when the C&NW began

realigning its divisions in the 1950s, decreasing the use of Antigo as a hub. Furthermore, diesel began replacing steam engines and the repair shops at the Antigo railyards saw less action. In 1957 engine repair operations were transferred to Iowa. Antigo's prominence declined. The last steam engine to go through Antigo was in 1957. In 1981, the C&NW announced plans to abandon the rail line through Antigo. This was almost 100 years after Antigo's first train, the Milwaukee Lake Shore and Western, arrived and was greeted with a celebration that included sandwiches and lemonade courtesy of Francis Deleglise.



The roundhouse north of the courthouse was a landmark long after Antigo lost its prominence as headquarters to the Ashland division.