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New 'On the Right Track' exhibit explores how railroads carved out Chicago area history

ELMHURST, Ill. – On October 25, 1848, the first Galena & Chicago Union train rolled west from Chicago and chugged its way to the end of the line in what is now Oak Park, and returned to the city with a load of wheat. The arrival of the railroad beyond city borders ushered in a new era in transportation, defying time and distance by moving passengers and freight quickly over long distances.

What role did the railways play in shaping regional settlement in Chicago, its suburbs and throughout the Midwest? The Elmhurst History Museum embarks on a journey exploring 170 years of railroading history to answer that question in the new exhibit, ***“On the Right Track: By Rail to Chicago & Beyond.”*** The exhibit, which opens on **November 14, 2019 through March 29, 2020**, takes a look at how railroads carved out the suburban landscape as we know it today and considers how people in the Chicago area experienced the railroad as passengers, business owners and employees.

Exhibit Themes and Highlights

The new exhibit, which was created by the Elmhurst History Museum staff, shares the story of the railroad’s enormous impact on the region to establish Chicago as the nation’s central transportation hub. “On the Right Track” explores early railroading history in Chicago and its expansion westward through DuPage County and beyond. The exhibit also chronicles the

various railroads that traversed the area including the Galena & Chicago Union; Milwaukee Road; Chicago & North Western; Illinois Central; Chicago, Aurora & Elgin and more. It also focuses on the people who used the railways for transportation and freight, and the many employees who made their living working on railroads.

“In planning the exhibit, we wanted to focus on the importance of railroads to the growth of this region, but also what they meant to the people who lived and worked here,” said Dan Bartlett, curator of exhibits at the Elmhurst History Museum. “The growth of Chicago’s suburbs emerged from this commuter culture that connected residents to their jobs downtown which was a key factor in development of towns on the city’s outskirts.”

In addition, Bartlett continued, the railroads employed workers in many different capacities. “From freight handlers and maintenance crews to the porters, station masters, conductors and engineers who kept everything moving and on schedule—the railroads linked this immense network of people and commerce that allowed Chicago to grow. I also wanted to know how the railroads manage to keep all those trains on time and on the right track, so there is a portion of the exhibit that gives visitors an understanding of what goes on behind the scenes.”

Artifacts, Images and Interactive Stations

The displays in the exhibit are filled with many intriguing photos, film clips of historic railroads and railroad operations, and a diverse array of artifacts. Many items are on loan from the Chicago & North Western Historical Society archives and the Illinois Railroad Museum, along with objects from the Elmhurst History Museum’s own collection. “On the Right Track” also features equipment used by rail workers, a diorama of a station operator’s office, and a section on Pullman porters.

“We’re fortunate to have found a number of collectors and institutions to share items with us, which adds colorful detail and texture to this story,” Bartlett added. Some of the featured artifacts include:

- Vintage telegraph equipment;
- A conductor’s uniform and lantern;
- 1930s era dining car china and menu from the Chicago & North Western Railway’s “400” line;
- Passenger tickets and freight bills;

- The original 1894 Elmhurst train station sign;
- A steam engine bell;
- Scale models of train stations, locomotives and railroad cars and toy trains.

In addition, children and adults alike will enjoy the hands-on learning stations in the gallery including a wooden train play area, a working telegraph where users can learn to send Morse code, and an interactive track switching game.

Exhibit-Related Learning Opportunities

The Elmhurst History Museum invites the public to learn more about railroading history through a number of upcoming programs:

Saturday, November 16: *Model Railroad Madness*, 11 a.m.-4 p.m., Education Center, FREE

Families can drop in at the museum's Education Center to meet local model train enthusiasts and collectors from Chicagoland T-Trak, see their innovative track layouts, and learn about the hobby and how model trains work. Kids can make a paper engineer's hat or Morse code bracelet while supplies last.

Saturday, January 11: *Train Songs of America*, 2 p.m., Education Center, FREE

Folk musician Dean Milano presents an engaging musical program of train-themed songs from America's past—both well-known favorites and a few obscure selections as well. Registration required at elmhursthistory.org or call 630-833-1457.

Sunday, January 26: *Chicagoland: City and Suburbs of the Railroad Age*, 2 p.m., Education Center, FREE to Members/\$5 Non-Members

Dr. Ann Durkin Keating, professor of history at North Central College, discusses the influence of the railroad in the 19th century in northeastern Illinois through a slide lecture. Dr. Keating is the author of "*Chicagoland: City and Suburbs of the Railroad Age*" (University of Chicago Press, 2005), and she is co-editor of the "Encyclopedia of Chicago." Registration required online at elmhursthistory.org (Adult Programs section) or call 630-833-1457.

Thursday, February 13: *Next Stop Elmhurst: An Exploration of Elmhurst Railroads Past and Present*, Education Center, 3 p.m., FREE

In this new Throwback Thursday lecture series, Elmhurst History Museum's curator Dan Bartlett

will talk about the earliest history of the Galena & Chicago Union Railroad, its operations, and how the coming of that first rail line from Chicago affected the communities along its path. Registration required at elmhursthistory.org (Adult Programs section).

Sunday, February 23: Gallery Talk, 2 p.m., FREE

Join curator of exhibits, Dan Bartlett, as he shares details about Chicagoland railroad history, the effect of the railroad on Elmhurst and other suburbs, and the creation of the “On the Right Track” exhibit. Drop in program in the first floor gallery, no registration required.

Climb aboard to explore Chicagoland railroad history with a stop at the Elmhurst History Museum to experience “On the Right Track: By Rail to Chicago & Beyond.” The exhibit is sponsored by Community Bank of Elmhurst and Prairie Forge Group, and runs through March 29, 2019 at the Elmhurst History Museum. The museum is located at 120 E. Park Ave. in downtown Elmhurst. Exhibition hours are Sunday and Tuesday through Friday from 1 to 5 p.m., and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. General admission is free, and limited free parking is available. For the latest exhibit and program information, please visit www.elmhursthistory.org or call (630) 833-1457.

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The Elmhurst History Museum is a department of the City of Elmhurst supported by the Elmhurst Heritage Foundation, a 501c3 non-profit organization. The Museum is located at 120 E. Park Ave. in downtown Elmhurst. General admission is free. For more information, call 630-833-1457 or visit our web site at www.elmhursthistory.org.

Caption: *Chicago & North Western Elmhurst Station, 1901, postcard from the Elmhurst History Museum collection.*