

Minneapolis Eastern Railway 1902, 1914, 1976, 1999

At the turn of the twentieth century, the greatest concentration of grain and flour mills in Minneapolis was along West River Parkway at Portland Avenue. Rail access to the mills was a necessity, and the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway held the monopoly on access to the mills for delivery and pick-up. Tracks put in place by the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway effectively blocked other railroads from gaining access to the mills. The mill owners were not pleased, and they were able to put an end to the monopoly when they established the Minneapolis Eastern Railway Company.

The Minneapolis Eastern Railway was incorporated in 1878. The original cost to build the new rail line was \$275,135.99. John Sargent Pillsbury, founder of the Pillsbury Company, was one of the company officers. The principal business of the Minneapolis Eastern Railway was to provide switching between the flour mills and connecting railroads. Because the new railroad's intent was to serve only the mills, it was a small operation. By 1882, the railroad operated 2.9 miles of track, owned one locomotive, one hand car, a bridge and a trestle, and employed ten people.

The railway served as a switching line that moved grain and flour between the mills to the tracks of other railroads. The tracks were on an elevated, 1000-foot-long trestle that ran over the top of the present Mill Ruins Park. Building a bridge and trestle was the only way to get the tracks to the mills on the west side of the river. This innovative solution meant that any railroad could access the mills by interchanging their rail cars onto either of the two controlling railroads – the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway or the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railway. By the third year of operation, the small railroad was carrying 258,000 tons of freight.



The 200-foot long by 30-foot-wide Minneapolis Eastern Railway Engine House was built in 1902 and expanded in 1914, providing indoor space for the maintenance of the railroad's steam-operated switching locomotives – two by 1914.

On October 30, 1908, the Minneapolis Eastern Railway proudly reported in *The Minneapolis Tribune* that it was

the first Minnesota railway to file an annual report with The Minnesota Railway and Warehouse Commission. The year's gross revenue from the small railroad was \$50,222.50, with expenses of

\$24,379.40. Furthermore, the small railway reported that no accidents had taken place on the railroad during 1908, and not a one of the 21 employees suffered an injury.

MANGLED BY LOCOMOTIVE

Walter Aird, a Switchman of the Minneapolis Eastern Ry., Probably Fatally Injured.

Walter Aird, a switchman employed by the Minneapolis Eastern railway and living at the Sixth Avenue hotel, was hit by a St. Louis passenger train in the tunnel under High street this morning and received injuries from which he will die. He was taken to St. Barnabas hospital in the central police station patrol wagon.

Aird was at work in the tunnel with a switch engine. The smoke from the engine so filled the tunnel that he could scarcely see. He stepped out of the way of one train and in doing so stepped immediately in front of the Minneapolis & St. Louis passenger which was pulling in at a good rate of speed. The engine knocked him down and the wheels passed over his legs, cutting his left leg off just below the knee, crushing his right foot and breaking the leg in two places. His back was also injured and he sustained internal injuries which the physicians think fatal.

Aird has a brother at Centralia, Ill., and another at Carroll, Ill. He is 24 years old and unmarried.

The Minneapolis Journal, January 24, 1903

But work on the railroad was dirty and dangerous. Safety glasses, hard hats and other safety equipment were not yet known. Unfortunately, five years earlier, Walter Aird, a switchman with the Minneapolis Eastern Railway, accidentally stepped in front of an engine in a smoke-filled tunnel and was “probably fatally injured.” Aird would have earned about \$4.00 a day for his skills.

The Minneapolis Eastern Railway ceased operations in 1972, and the trestle was torn down. The trestle legs were cut off at ground level and later rediscovered when Mill Ruins Park was developed. The Engine House stood vacant until 1975.



Minnesota Historical Society

Jim Howe was a young entrepreneur who grew up in the restaurant business. He saw the Engine House when dining across the street at Fuji-Ya. The next day he contacted the owner – at that time, the Milwaukee Road railroad – and convinced the railroad to sell him the Engine House. Howe took possession of the building in early 1975, hired architect John Cuningham to remodel the building, and the First Street Station Restaurant opened in the summer of 1976.

Restaurant parking was located on the back side of the building, away from the river. The motif was “Early Railroad Machine Shop”, as Don Morrison coined it in his column in *The Minneapolis Star* on June 10th, 1976.



Hennepin County Library

The newspaper reported:

“The wine list is stenciled on the sides of old-fashioned flex-nozzled oil measures. The bill of fare is on stamped-metal coal-scuttled shovels. Kerosene railroad lanterns sit on the tables, the tops of which are reproductions of blueprints for engine-yard roundhouses and the like.”

The limited menu consisted of steaks, kabobs and crab legs - \$4.95 to \$7.50 – and desserts included an item called the Cream Puff Puff Puff. The First Street Station Restaurant closed in the mid-1980s.

The building stood empty until 1999 when it was purchased by Mill Place Inc. The new landlord renovated the building for Riley Hayes Advertising, with The Leonard Parker Associates doing the interior renovation.

Offices for executives and creative staff were situated on the river side of the building, where the engine shop repairmen worked.

The entrance, once intended for the steam engines, was turned into a large window, with a conference room on a second level.



Star Tribune, July 16, 2000