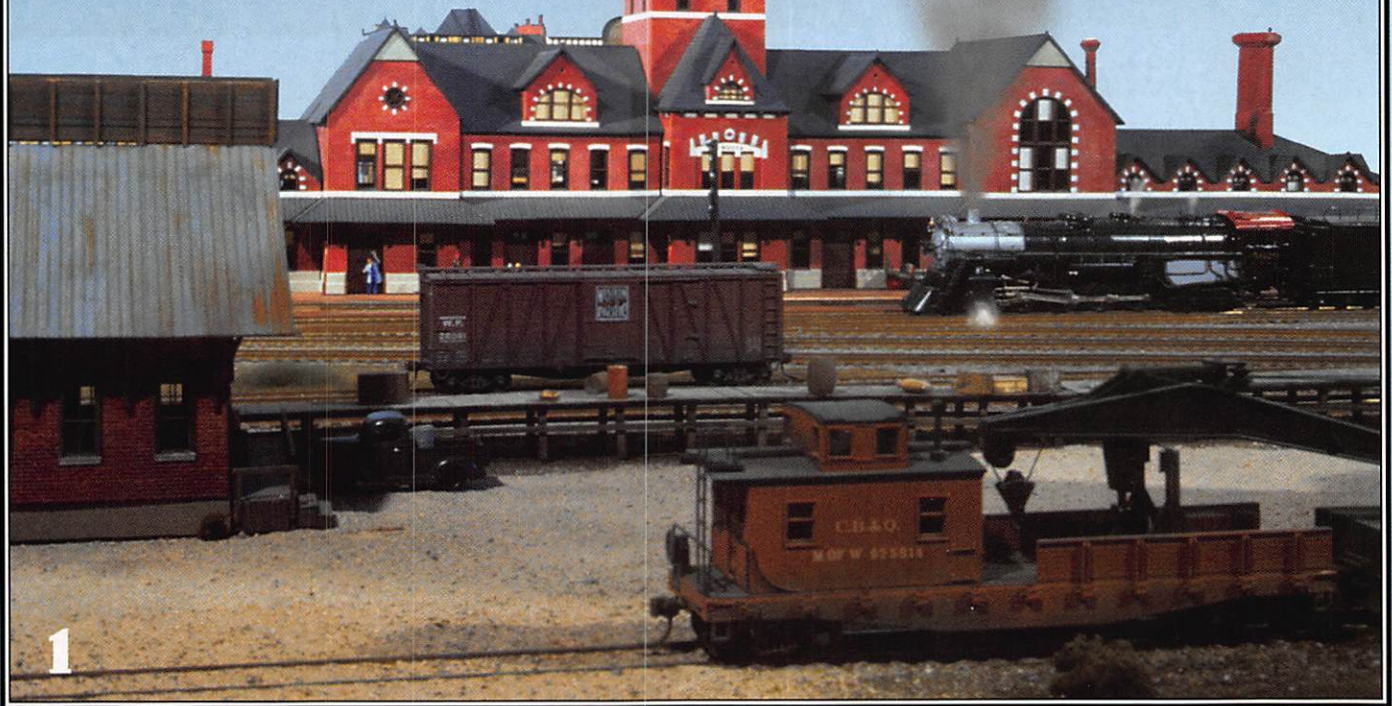


Mendota in Scale



Westbound CB&Q Northern #5629 awaits departure near depot while the CB&Q maintenance-of-way train in foreground eases down the spur track behind the Burlington Freight house.

The story behind the HO layout at the Union Depot Railroad Museum in Mendota, IL

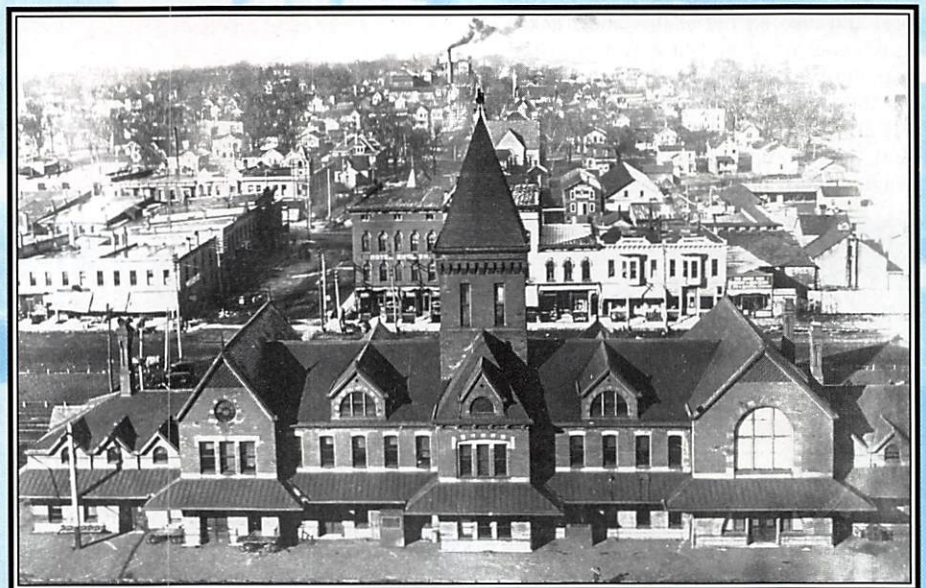
by Ray Tutaj, Jr.

Model photos by Randy Lee

Growing up in LaSalle and Mendota, IL, in the 1970s meant being surrounded by trains. The first train my dad took me to see was a Rock Island passenger train in LaSalle. In 1973, our family moved from LaSalle to Mendota. Our house along Seventh Avenue practically sat in the Illinois Central and Milwaukee Road railyards. The Burlington mainline was just a few blocks north. All three lines crossed in Mendota.

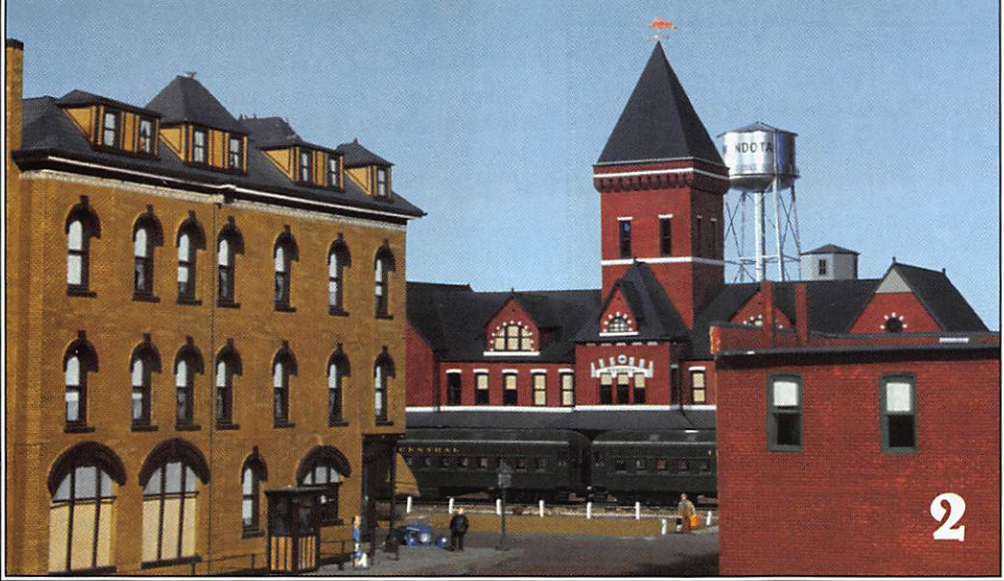
Mendota means *crossing of the trails*. It was a theater that staged many great railroading performances, and I had a front-row seat! Those railroads imbedded a mark in me that would never be erased.

When I was 12 or so, I had a train-set layout consisting of two 4' x 8' sheets of particle board forming an L-shape. I put together many ready-to-assemble buildings and had a nice downtown section and an original trackplan that functioned fairly well. While operating my train set, I often heard



This bird's eye view of the Mendota Union Depot was taken from the water tower to the east of the depot in about 1903 when the hotel across the street was the English Hotel. The hotel was later renamed the Faber.

Leo Muhlach collection



The Hotel Faber across the street from the depot provided many services, among which were bus station, dining room and barbershop.

IC and Milwaukee freight trains rumbling by. I would look out the basement window to check out the action. Milwaukee Road F7 units and Illinois Central Geeps were the norm at this time. I wouldn't have traded this for any other place in the world. The 1970s seemed to last forever; it was heaven and a big part of who I was.

When 1981 rolled around, our family decided to move west to Las Vegas, NV. I said farewell to the Milwaukee Road, Illinois Central and the Burlington, hoping I'd see them again someday. After all, they'll be there forever, right? To my disappointment, the next time I came to visit the area, I could no longer find the IC and Milwaukee Road. They were gone — history, and it hurt!

In 1981 I graduated from Mendota High School, and then moved to Vegas. It was time for me to find a job in the City of Lost Wages. I lost interest in trains in any form from '81 to '91, but then I met a couple friends from work who were railfans. This helped rekindle the spark that had been out for so long. I became interested in photographing trains and bought a camera and started chasing trains. I also became interested in collecting old photographs of both the Mendota and LaSalle area and researching the railroad history of this historic area. I collected many photos over a four-year period with the kind help of noted Mendota photographer, Leo Muhlach and his wife, Norma. These photos of *old* Mendota gave me a clear image of what it was like in the early part of the 1900s.

Quite a few of the railroad structures were still standing when I lived in Mendota, especially the switch tower where I even had the opportunity to throw a switch! Photos I had of the tower showed every angle, so in late 1994 I decided to scratchbuild an HO scale replica, my first scratchbuilt structure. This was to be the beginning of my goal to restore Mendota's railroading past in HO scale. To fill the void in me that the IC and MILW left when they took up their lines I decided to start building a replica of the

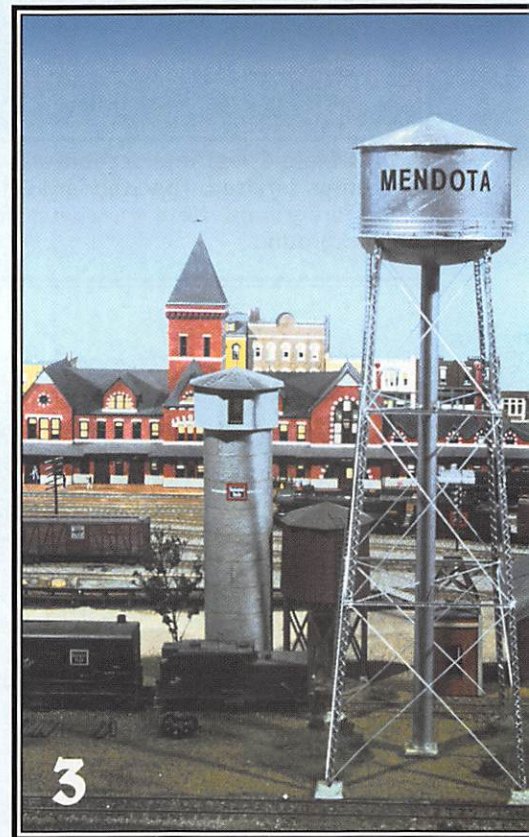
trackwork near the switch tower, IC freight house, and a gas station. I could only dream about building and completing the rest.

While living in Vegas, I would occasionally come back to Illinois to photograph any railroad action. Despite the pleas of the band I played with to not leave them hanging without a guitar player, I had a strong gut feeling and a dream that pointed toward some business in Mendota.

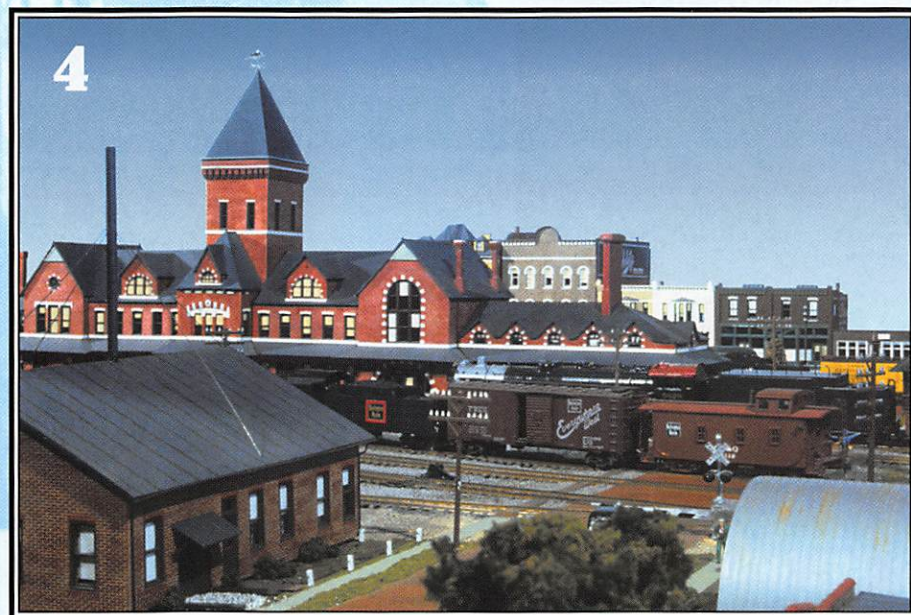
Yes! There I met with friend Bill Schlosser (from whom I also collected photographs) who had previously written to me about a possible railroad museum in Mendota. It was this important lead that led me back to this area to inquire further about the proposed museum. Also, on my trip I visited the Muhlachs to view and purchase more photographs for modeling purposes and to ask them about the possible railroad museum. I had brought some pictures of the modeling work completed, and they were

impressed enough with my work to suggest that I meet with the two gentlemen heading up plans for the new museum — Bill Greenwood, a former chief operating officer of the BN and noted inventor Horace Hume, who is now 100 years old. Mr. Greenwood had worked in the Mendota switch tower at the beginning of his railroad career.

A meeting with Mr. Greenwood and Mr.



The Mendota water tower overlooks the busy railroad yard, Union Depot and Main St. business district.



Twelve tracks at the Eighth Street crossing present a challenge for motorists. Notice the CB&Q yard office at bottom left.



5 Sixth & Main Street intersection was the primary location where motorists had their autos serviced. The Standard Oil station (Star station in later years) is seen in the foreground. Note the switch tower, also called an interlocking tower, in the background.



5 This late 1930s view of 6th & Main shows the Conoco station with the interlocking tower to the rear. The sign is all that is visible of the Standard station.

Leo Muhlach collection



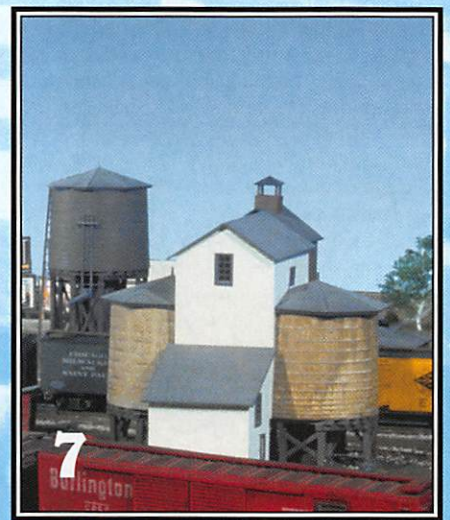
6 Bird's-eye view of Black Brothers Co. Factory, noted manufacturer of woodworking machinery. This company has been a Mendota industry since 1901.

Hume resulted in their desire to include an HO scale model of the downtown Mendota area in the new Mendota Union Depot Railroad Museum. They gave me the green light and the funds for the materials, and I volunteered my time to complete the project. Before returning to Vegas, I attended one of the first meetings of the Mendota Museum & Historical Society where I further discussed my plans and passed around photos of my little Mendota layout.

For the next 2½ years, work proceeded on the Mendota layout in Las Vegas. The layout was built in ten sections of various sizes. I could never have more than three sections together at one time because of space limitations, so I could only hope that it would fit together as planned. The most difficult section was the huge Union Depot brick platform with the many tracks on both sides. Buildings were generally built before completing the trackwork. The Union Depot model took four months to construct and the Hotel Faber approximately a month and a half. These were the most difficult parts of the layout. Actually each structure and section presented new problems to overcome.

The benchwork was to be built with the help of Leo Muhlach in Mendota upon my arrival. It was built from 2x6s that had been salvaged from the old depot when it was renovated into the new Mendota Union Depot Railroad Museum/Amtrak station.

As the grand opening and dedication of the museum on August 8, 1997, grew closer, I anxiously prepared the 29' x 6' layout for the big move across the country. In May 1997, I packed all of my worldly goods along with the precious museum cargo and left the desolate desert...it felt great to be homeward bound. It was a smooth move; everything went perfectly. My parents accompanied me on my move and helped me settle in my new place.



7 — Water for use in steam locomotives had to be free from any impurities which might lessen the efficiency of the operation of the engine, hence the Illinois Central water treatment plant.

The layout had to be stored at my place for two months before the designated room in the museum was ready for the big layout. It wasn't until three weeks before the grand opening that I was able to get into the room to set up the entire layout, including benchwork and wiring. Harry Schaller, president of the museum was concerned as the opening drew nearer, but I was confident that I could do whatever was necessary to get it up and running. Well, to make a long story short, I got it together with time to spare. The museum was dedicated, and the ceremony was a great success, except for the absence of CB&Q steam locomotive 4978, which finally arrived on site for permanent display about four months later, having been tied up in litigation.

A Moment in Time Preserved

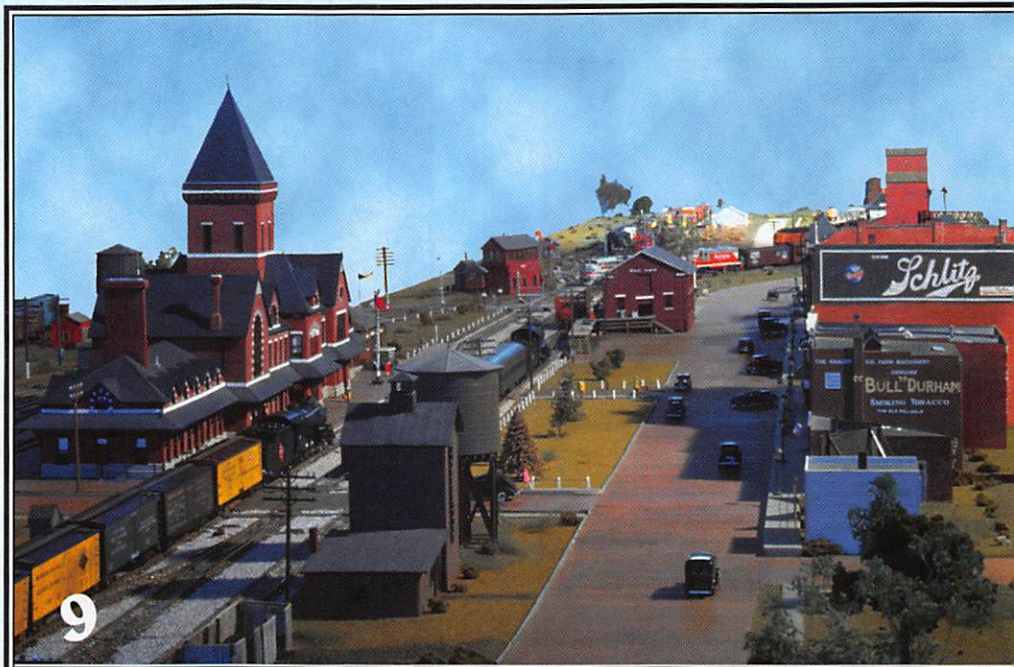
The HO scale layout is a replica of what Mendota looked like back in the 1930s and '40s, (although I couldn't resist adding some 1950 diesels and rolling stock.) All structures were scratchbuilt with the aid of hundreds of 8x10 photographs — meticulously studied for details. I wanted to duplicate exactly what I could see in the pictures. The trackplan coincides with the way the track was originally laid out in town, except for the loops which allow trains to come back around for continuous running.

An MRC Command 2000 system is used to operate the layout, and it has proven to be very durable and problem free.

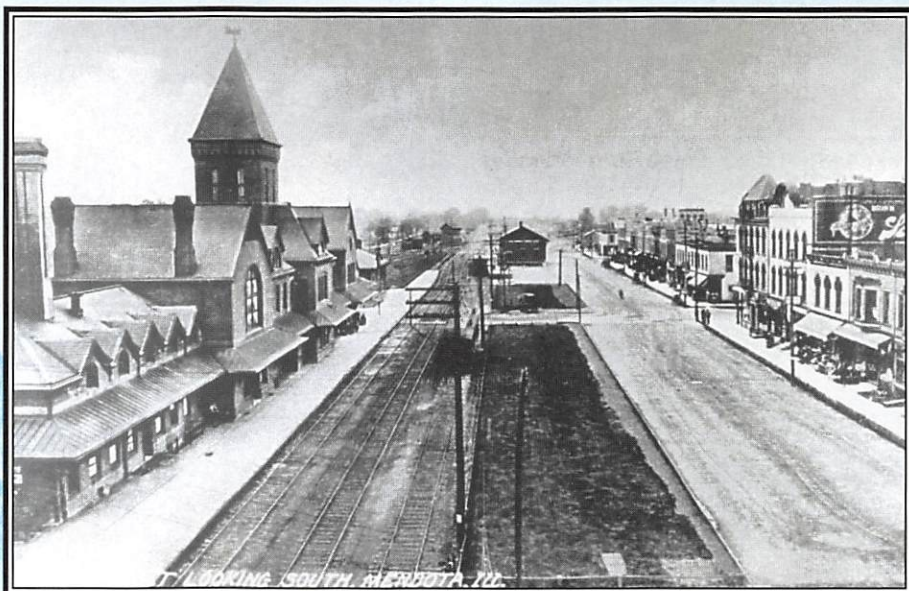
Future plans for the layout include the addition of more downtown buildings, five houses, more early 1900s rolling stock and a sound system. My deepest thanks goes to all the fellow modelers who helped with many locos and rolling stock items — some on loan and some donated. It's made the layout more authentic. Thank you so much.

Visiting the Museum

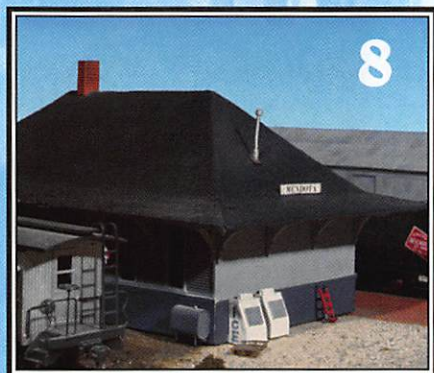
Come visit the Union Depot Railroad Museum located at 783 Main St., Mendota, IL. It is located in a restored portion of the 1886 depot. Features include the HO scale layout depicting late '30s, early '40s Mendota (operates Saturdays and Sundays), the static display of CB&Q Mikado #4978



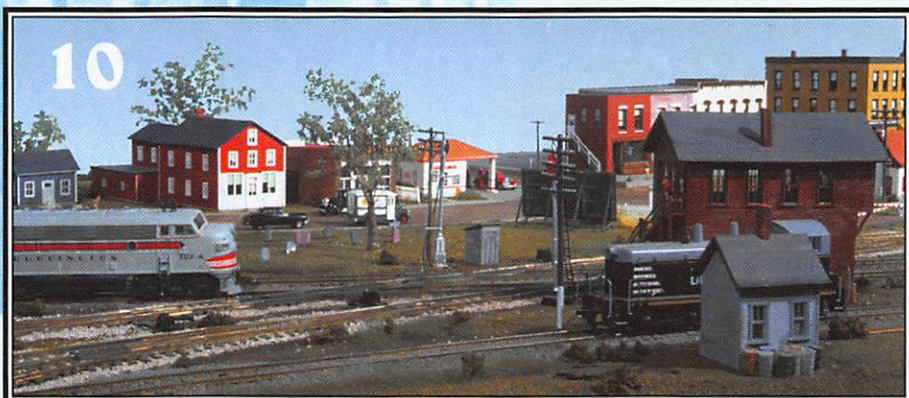
This view of Main Street looking south shows a southbound Milwaukee Road freight passing by the Union Depot.



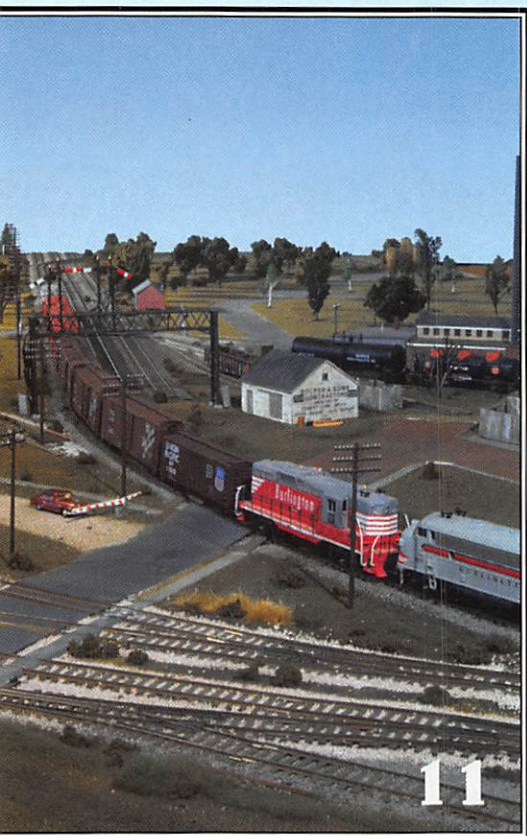
This early view of Main Street and the Mendota Union Depot shows the arrangement of the mainline tracks between the depot and Main Street. All of the yard tracks were behind the depot. The interlocking tower is just barely visible in the distance.
Leo Muhlach collection



The Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul depot with caboose in rear of depot and tender showing in front.

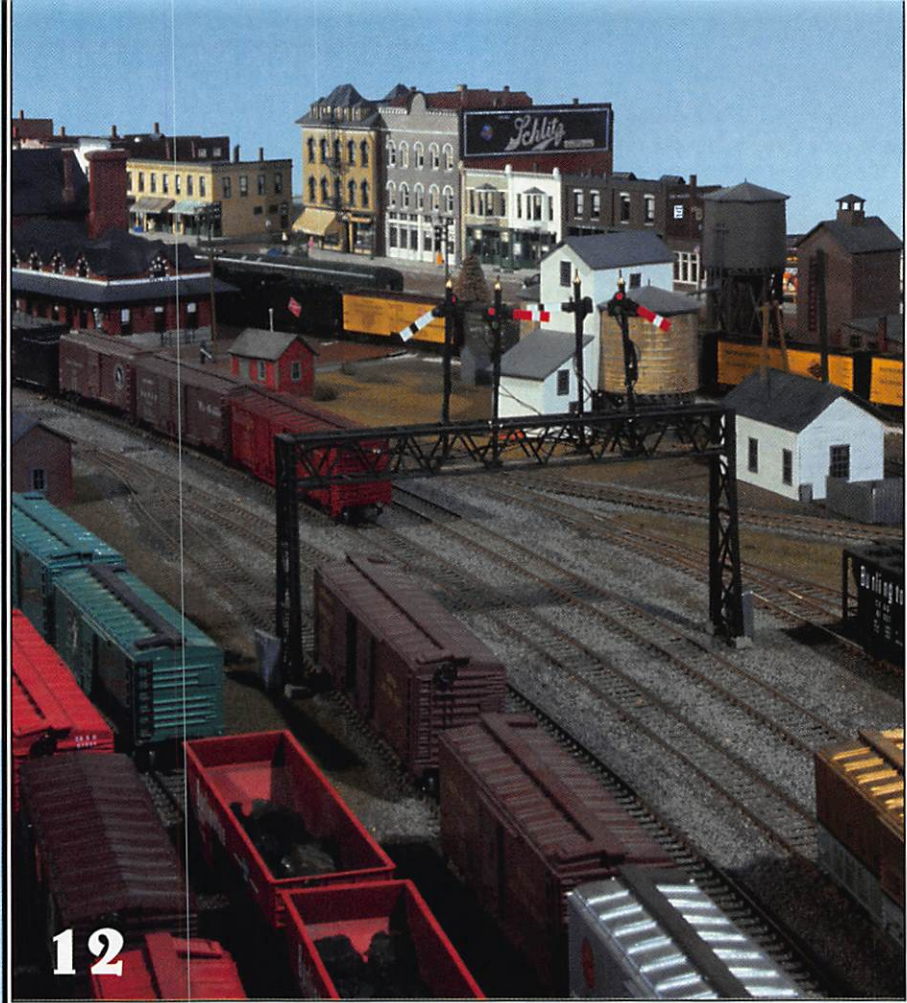


Eastbound CB&Q freight approaches IC interlocking tower as the SW1 switcher assigned to Mendota idles behind the tower.



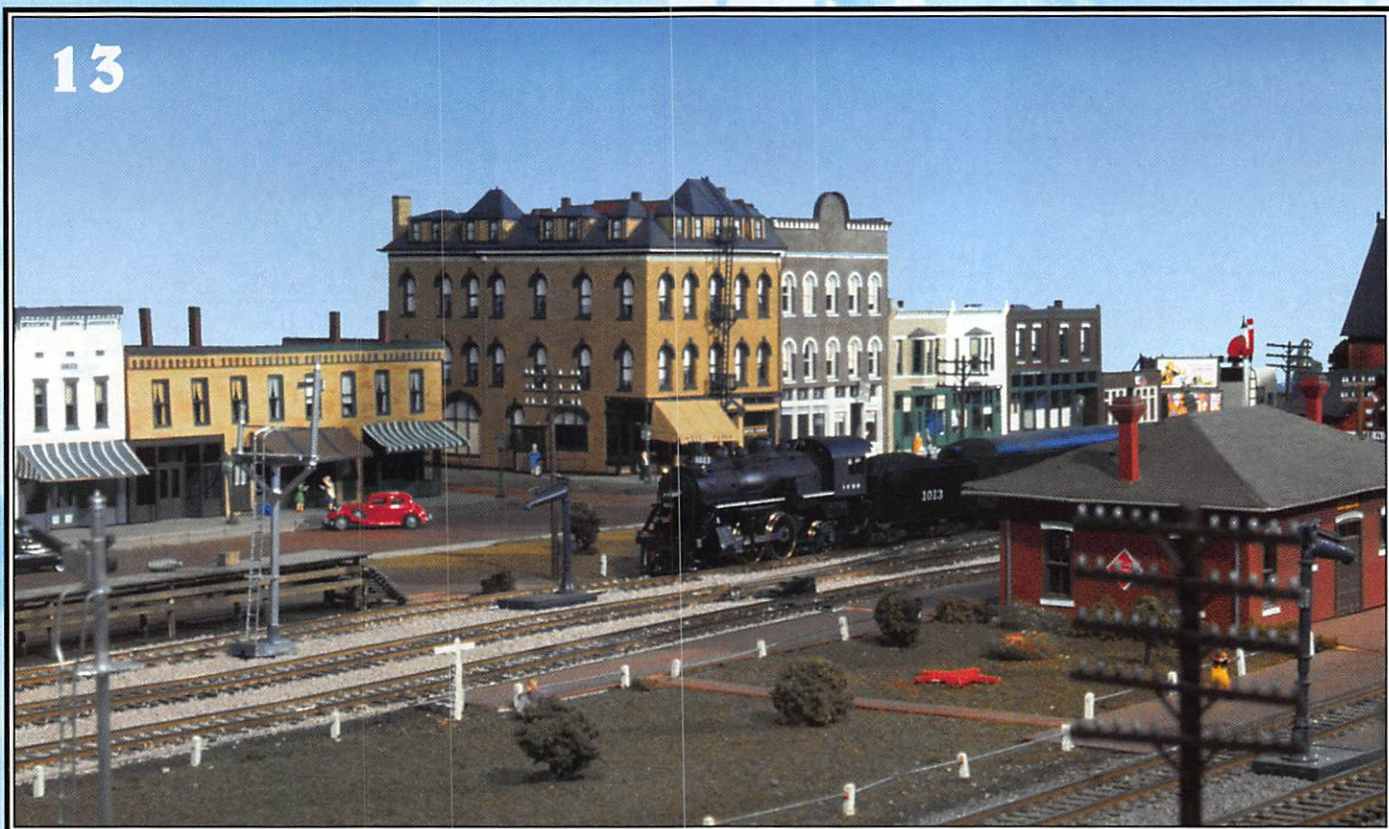
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Eastbound CB&Q freight train coming in from the west. Loops have been added to permit continuous running of the trains during regular operating hours.



12

Curve north of depot showing south yard in foreground. Mendota's business district is seen in the background.



13

Illinois Central passenger train #2 awaits departure for LaSalle and points south. Building behind locomotive is the Faber Hotel, a long-time Mendota landmark.



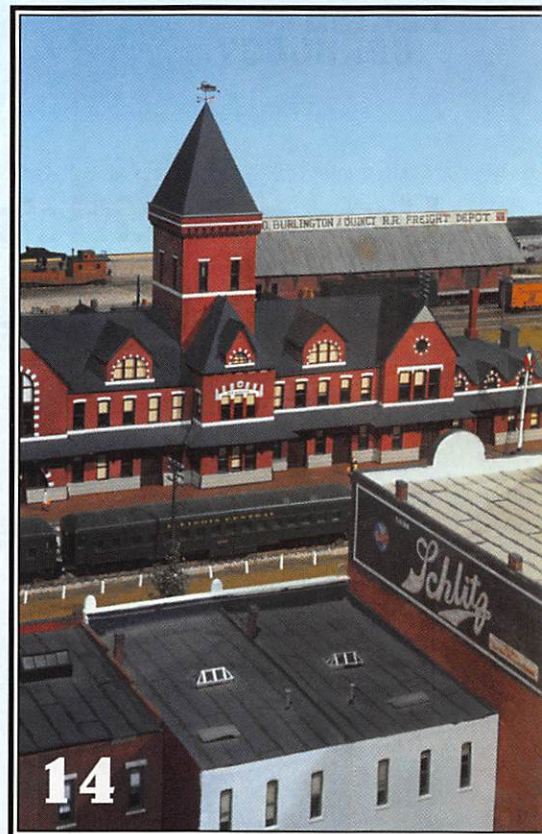
Mendota Union Depot as viewed from the Main Street side. Today only the small section (only partially visible) at the far left remains, and it houses the Union Depot Railroad Museum and Amtrak station. *Leo Muhlach collection*

with caboose, memorabilia from the Burlington, Illinois Central and Milwaukee railroads, plus a 1940s telegraph office. The museum is open from noon to 5 PM on weekends from Labor Day through Memorial Day; from Memorial Day through Labor Day it is open Wednesdays through Sundays. Appointments can also be arranged by calling (815) 538-3800 or (815) 539-3373.

Amtrak also serves Mendota with east and westbound stops by the *Illinois Zephyr* and the *Southwest Chief*. Mendota is also a

great location for photographing trains on the BNSF double-track mainline. Future museum plans include a kitchen car and a dining car. Guests will enjoy repast in these beautifully restored dining cars from the golden era of the passenger train.

The Mendota Museum & Historical Society also supports the Hume-Carnegie Museum, 901 Washington St., which portrays the history of the Mendota area. It is open weekends from 1-4 PM; its displays include Wild Bill Hickok, Helen Hokinson and extensive photo collections. **I**



Bird's-eye view of Union depot with IC passenger train in front of depot. Note locomotive weather vane which towered several feet from the pinnacle.

