HISTORIC SITES AND MONUMENTS BOARD OF CANADA

RAILWAY STATION REPORT

Title: **Former Canadian National Railways Station Transcona (Winnipeg), Manitoba**

Source: **PETERSON PROJECTS, Murray Peterson, Winnipeg**

RSR-113

INTRODUCTION

The former Canadian National Railways (CNR) station at Transcona was built in 1912 as part of the National Transcontinental Railway (NTR) system (Figure 1). Located approximately six miles east of Winnipeg (Figure 2), Transcona began to develop after the federal government chose the area for the new railway's huge maintenance shops. These shops offered employment to thousands, most of whom settled in the area. The station illustrates both the original rise in importance of the rail system in western Canada and how this system attempted to control settlement. It also reflects the subsequent decline of rail transport as other modes of transportation advanced. This decline hastened the alteration of the station, and resulted in its relocation and redevelopment by the railway company as a yard crew office.

HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

Thematic

The Transcona station was built as a component of the Transcona yards, a major repair complex of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway (GTPR)/NTR system. This system was completed as Canada's second transcontinental railway, thus providing an important connection for previously isolated communities across Canada.

Sir Wilfrid Laurier became Canada's seventh prime minister on 11 July 1896, and led the country during a tumultuous 15 year span that saw the arrival of two million new citizens, the creation of two new provinces and the move towards two additional government-assisted transcontinental railway systems.[1]

The prosperity of Canada and the growth of the western region during Laurier's first years of office, coupled with a convincing victory and a 51 seat majority in the 7 November 1900 election,[2] led to his optimistic policy of railway construction. Laurier, unlike Sir John A. Macdonald, was not interested in protecting the monopoly of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), and saw increased rail service as the only method of efficiently

fostering settlement in the West. As such, the Canadian government under Laurier would fund not one but two new transcontinental railway systems linking the emerging society of the West with the established settlements of eastern Canada.

In Laurier's search for a second transcontinental line, he was faced with a choice between an established, British-controlled railway, the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR), and a Canadian company, the Canadian Northern Railway (CNoR), which had extensive holdings in Manitoba and was looking to develop the northern prairies through railway expansion. Expansion across Canada was the next step.

The GTR had been incorporated in 1852 to build a line from Toronto to Montreal.[3] In the decades following incorporation, it expanded through amalgamation and construction and by 1867 the GTR's extensive network of lines in southern Ontario and Quebec made it the largest railway system in the world. By the late 1880s it stretched from Sarnia, Ontario to Portland, Maine[4] and, by the turn-of-the-century, it carried one sixth of all general eastbound traffic from the mid-western United States to the Atlantic seaboard.[5]

The race between the two companies for government assistance began in earnest after 1900, however, getting a deal proved to be difficult. One author described the process as a high stakes poker game in which the GTR attempted to bluff the owners of the CNoR by telling Laurier they were ready to build the line across Canada. The GTR hoped that increased western competition would scare the CNoR into joining with the GTR to create the transcontinental system.[6] What this scheme did, however, was strengthen the resolve of the CNoR to go it alone. As government attempts to get the two competing railways to join forces increased, the two sides moved farther apart. Both firms, at least publicly, intensely wanted to build the entire system, and finally they both did, though generous support from the government was required for both lines.

When the GTR's scheme to coerce the CNoR into an amalgamation failed, Laurier moved quickly to accept the GTR's original offer. He introduced a bill in the House of Commons in March of 1903 calling for the GTR, in partnership with the Canadian government, to build the country's second transcontinental railway. The GTR reluctantly forwarded an offer, which carried a cost of between $75 and $100 million for the government. It was met with a storm of protest from within Laurier's cabinet and from without. Laurier, with no way of reversing his policy, made a counter proposal which formed the basis for the National Transcontinental Railway Company Bill, passed 2 September 1903. The Bill called for the creation of a wholly owned subsidiary of the GTR, named the GTPR, which would endeavour to build, without support, the line from Winnipeg to the Pacific coast (1,743 miles). The line east from Winnipeg to Moncton, New Brunswick (2,019 miles) would be built by the GTR using public funds and under the scrutiny of

four government commissioners.[7] After a period of grace, this section would be leased to the GTR by the government of Canada, and the entire system would be operated as a single entity.[8]

These harsh new terms were finally agreed to by the board of directors of the GTR and with Laurier's subsequent election victory, the new transcontinental railway seemed a certainty. It was almost exactly a decade, however, before the route was completed, and it was significantly different than set out in the original legislation. The eastern half of the system, which became known as the NTR, wound through the inhospitable lands of northern Quebec and Ontario as it moved towards Winnipeg. Construction costs soared and controversy reigned. The GTPR was also experiencing difficulty, partially due to problems related to mountain construction, and partially due to the severe competition on the prairies.

The last spike on the GTPR/NTR system was driven late in 1913 and the first through train arrived in Prince Rupert on 8 April 1914, approximately ten months prior to the completion of the CNoR.[9] The First World War, the end of Canada's economic boom, and the duplication of lines and facilities ultimately spelt disaster for both systems. The NTR was never leased by the GTR due to the financial strain of western expansion. When the CNoR was nationalized in 1918, it was entrusted with control of the NTR.[10] The GTPR was nationalized in 1920 and when the GTR declared bankruptcy, the federal government added it to its holdings and formed the CNR in 1923 to oversee operations of all its railway holdings.

Construction of the GTPR/NTR system led to the construction at Transcona, Manitoba of the largest maintenance complex of its kind in Canada, totalling over 17 acres of floor space.[11] It officially opened on 18 January 1913 after nearly five years of construction and was to serve as the western repair centre for both the NTR and the GTPR, the latter moving its original repair centre from Rivers, Manitoba upon completion of the Transcona shops.[12] While the introduction of diesel engines and other technologies have altered specific work at the shops, their basic function, now within the CNR system, has not changed to the present day.

In 1912, as these shops neared completion, the NTR built its western-most station, at Transcona. It was an important, although distant, part of the railway complex that became an integral part of life in the area, and completed what the railway saw as both an industrial and residential development.

Local Development

In 1906 real estate broker John Henry Kern sold two sections of his land, 800 acres in all, to the GTPR for $138,000.[13] This area, east of Winnipeg, was part of the Municipality of Springfield. It consisted of scattered agricultural holdings and

homes, and a few businesses north of the present-day shops. Development was rapid, however, after plans for the massive service and maintenance shops were finalized in 1908.

The site had many features which made it suitable for this development. The shops required a large parcel of flat land, something the area could easily supply. The complex would also require a reliable source of water and hydro-electric power, and the railway was able to tap in to both the power and water sources of Winnipeg.[14] The site was close enough to Winnipeg to benefit from its large population, its varied labour pool and its service industries. Because the areas to the west, north and south of the provincial capital had been developed and settled for many decades, it was necessary to purchase land in the Springfield Municipality, where the lack of significant settlement facilitated the purchase of such a large block of land. And as Winnipeg had done previously, the shop site was able to capitalize on its central location in Canada; it was the perfect place in which to service and maintain the entire GTPR/NTR system.

As hotels and boarding houses filled to capacity, a tent community quickly developed to house the workers from across Canada who poured into the area. On 10 February 1911, with work on the shops progressing well, local businessmen organized a Board of Trade, a process that had been repeated throughout the West as railways spurred development. Interestingly, the Board was in place for more than a year before the town was incorporated, on 6 April 1912.[15] The name chosen, by a public contest, was Transcona, "Trans" to commemorate the transcontinental railway that signalled the town's beginning, and "cona" after Lord Strathcona who drove the last spike in the CPR line.[16]

In total, $6,000,000 was spent to build the shop complex which included a forge shop, a locomotive carpenter shop, a 200' high, 11' in diameter chimney, and a 24 locomotive round house (see Figure 3).[17] In the midst of this flurry of activity was the unheralded construction of the NTR station at Transcona. It was built to the southeast of its present position, far removed from the shops (Figure 4). This location was chosen for a number of reasons.

Firstly, passenger train service in Transcona, unlike other locales, took on a more informal nature, much like bus service. Because the train was used daily to bring the different shifts into Transcona or to take local residents to and from Winnipeg, it was not uncommon for the train to stop at various points along the line, regardless of their location relative to the station. Because the workers were used to boarding and detraining in an open field during the construction phase of the shops, there would have been little pressure to construct a station near the shops as they neared completion.

Secondly, the original plan was to have some housing north of the

shops, but for most of Transcona's newer residential development to take place in the area south of the NTR main line (Figure 4). This was intended to keep the noise and dirt of the shops away from the large population that was locating nearby. The station would, therefore, be more logically placed on the main line, and east of the yards and maintenance shops.[18]

While the shops were of prime importance to the people of Transcona, the majority of whom worked there, the passenger rail connection between it and Winnipeg was also very important. It was 1931 before an asphalt road surface was completed,[19] but even after its completion, many people still depended on the trains to bring them to and from work or shopping. As such, when the station was built, it was intended to serve a large population and to become the focal point of the community, in much the same way as were stations in rural centres all across western Canada.

The development of South Transcona, as it is still referred to, however, did not proceed as planned. It was assumed that the newly arriving professionals and businessmen would settle in the southern district, nearer the station and away from the established, mainly labour-occupied neighbourhood to the north. The land to the south was too swampy, however, and businesses, especially hotels and boarding houses, and transportation lines to Winnipeg had already been firmly established immediately north of the shops. Ultimately, all the residential activity centred in North Transcona, quickly reducing the use of the new station. While it is likely that inclement weather would have chased some passengers into the safety of the station, there also was a small building at the north gates of the shops used for railway passenger service into Winnipeg.[20] It seems that almost from construction, the Transcona station was underutilized by the residents of the area, and when the CNR took over the holdings of the NTR, including this station, it is likely the building was virtually unused.

ARCHITECTURE

Aesthetic/Visual Qualities

The CNR station in Transcona is a small, utilitarian structure of frame construction (Figures 5 and 6). The one-storey section is covered by a low hip roof which, when constructed, extended out the west end to form a canopy (Figure 7). Large wooden brackets supported the overhanging eaves of the track side elevation. The roof over the centrally-placed second storey was low-pitched and hipped, interrupted at the front and back by indented hip dormers holding two windows each.

The original design also included the familiar bay window on the first floor. The station was built as a Standard NTR #1 Station,

Plan 100-179, which called for a 24' by 53' building. This plan was used only for the line between Thunder Bay, Ontario and Winnipeg (Redditt Subdivision), and besides Transcona, there were only two other such stations built: Elma, Manitoba (Figure 8) and Redditt, Ontario. Both were built in 1910, measured 24' by 53', and both have been demolished.[21]

Exterior alterations have been numerous and severe. The bay window is gone, the original double hung windows have been replaced and the roof extension on the west side has been removed. Wind shelters around the two doors on the north side and a new entrance and shelter on the west end have been added and the structure was stuccoed in 1943.[22] The roof has been altered and small eaves supported by wooden brackets have replaced the larger, original elements (Figure 9 and 10).

What was once an attractive though simple station has been altered to the extent that it now only slightly resembles its former self. CPR stations in Hanley (Figure 11) and Davidson, Saskatchewan, both built in 1905, display much the same exterior form as Transcona. Replacing the hipped dormers with gabled ones would make this standard plan very similar to stations built by the CNoR, CPR, GTPR and to other NTR designs.

Functional/Technological Qualities

Original plans for the structure are not available, but it can be assumed that like other rural stations it would have provided baggage, waiting room and office space on the ground floor, as well as space for telegraph services, a large ticket counter and a small room for paper work and railway employees. Living space for the station manager and his family was located on the second floor.

The interior of this station has, like the exterior, undergone severe alteration since the move to its present location and its conversion into yard crew space (Figure 12). The concrete basement was built in 1956 for the station to be moved onto and holds the washroom facilities as well as eating and storage space. The first floor, with 9'4" ceilings, contains a number of small offices, a lunch room, and lockers for the yard crew. Renovations have removed all traces of the original fabric from this level (Figures 13 and 14). The second floor measures approximately 23'3" by 25'7" and is used as office space (Figure 15). The poor state of repair of both the interior and the exterior reflects years of neglect.

ENVIRONMENT

Setting

The Transcona station was originally located on the main line of the NTR, near enough to the maintenance shops to be used if necessary by visitors or workers. More importantly, it was located to serve Transcona's northern settlement and the new residential district south of the main line. When this development failed to materialize, the station was left in relative seclusion, reducing its usefulness.

It was moved in 1956 to its present location, between two of the many switching tracks directly south of the round house and maintenance shops (Figure 4). There it was placed over a basement and converted into an office for the yard crews.[23]

This relocation placed the station close to the complex's core of original railway structures with which it is chronologically compatible. While the original station would have been incongruous in this new setting, the severe alterations have given the building the appearance of an industrial structure. It is part of the unusually complete CNR railway compound in Transcona, which also includes a number of small, worker houses interspersed in the newer housing north of the shops.

Community Status

The heritage community in Transcona is very involved in commemoration of the past and in honouring the area's pioneers. The maintenance shops, so large a part of the creation of the town, figure prominently in many of these commemoration plans. The Transcona shops, which are intact, are nearing the 80th anniversary of their official opening. The round house has recently been reviewed by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada. The Transcona station is one of the original components of these significant and complete rail yards.

Endnotes

1 The Canadian Encyclopedia, Second Edition, Volume 2 (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1988), p. 1183.

2 Ibid., Volume 2, p. 675.

3 A.W. Currie, The Grand Trunk Railway of Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), p. 12.

4 The Canadian Encyclopedia, op. cit., Volume 2, p. 925.

5 G.R. Stevens, History of the Canadian National Railways (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973), p. 192.

6 Ibid., pp. 194-96.

7 Ibid., p. 200.

8 C. Bohi, Canadian National's Western Depots (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside Limited, 1977), p. 55.

9 Ibid., p. 13.

10 The Canadian Encyclopedia, op. cit., Volume 3, p. 1433.

11 The Railway and Marine World, No. 150 (August 1910), p. 633.

12 Transcona - On the Horizon of a Great Future, 50 Years of Progress (Transcona: Golden Jubilee Historical Booklet Committee, 1961), p. 38.

13 Ibid., p. 20.

14 Prior to the hook-up with the Shoal Lake aqueduct in 1918, both the town of Transcona and the shops used the Red River as its source of water. Transcona, 1911 - 1986, Celebrating 75 years of community (Transcona: Transcona 75th Jubilee Incorporated, 1986), p. 19. Below as Transcona, 1911 - 1986.

15 Ibid., p. 20.

16 Ibid., p. 22.

17 Railway and Marine World, No. 138 (August 1909), pp. 561, 563.

18 Information obtained from interviews 12-14 January 1992 with Andrea and Doug Reid, long-time residents and members of the historical community; Bernie Wolfe, public servant for 45 years, born and raised in Transcona; and Jack Fondren, curator of the Transcona Historical Museum.

19 Transcona, 1911 - 1986, p. 19.

20 Ibid.

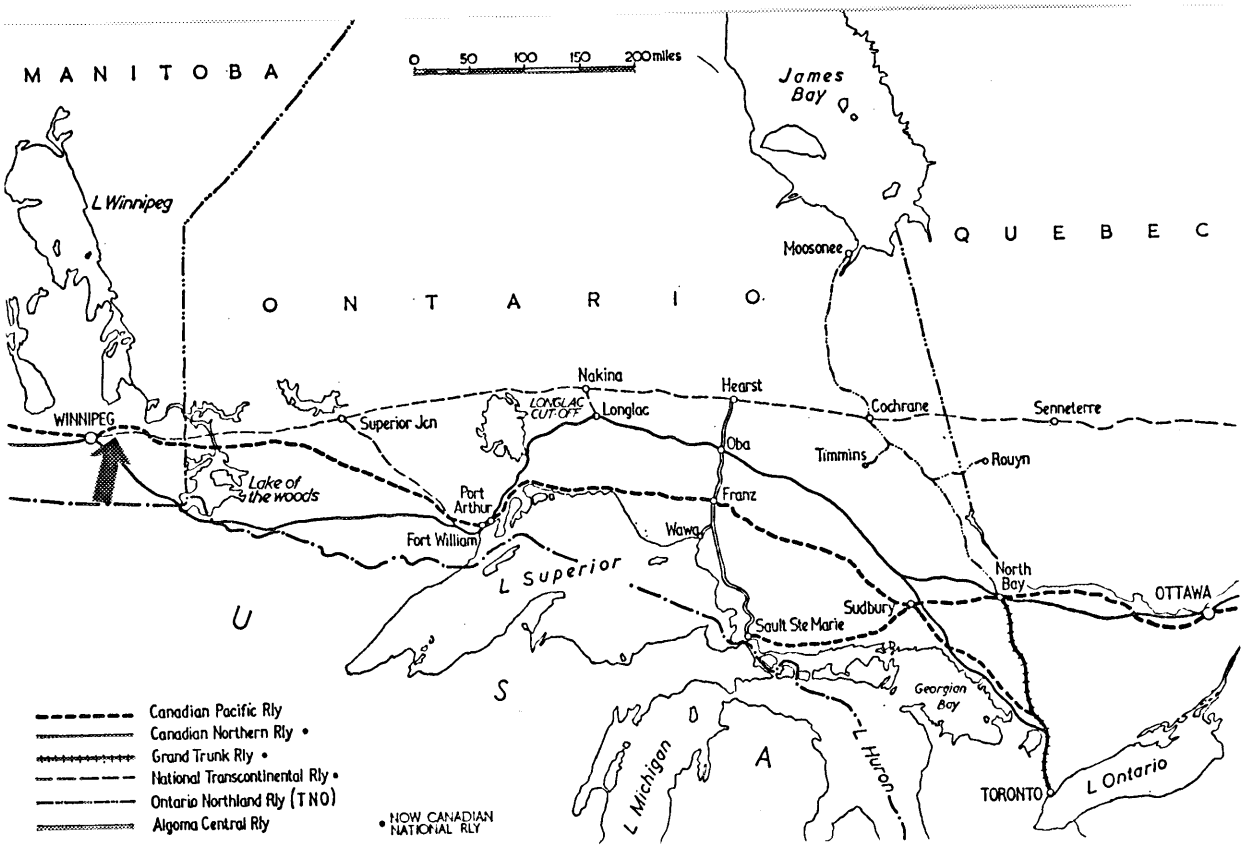
21 "Drawing Index Cards," CNR, Manitoba Division, Winnipeg.

22 Ibid.

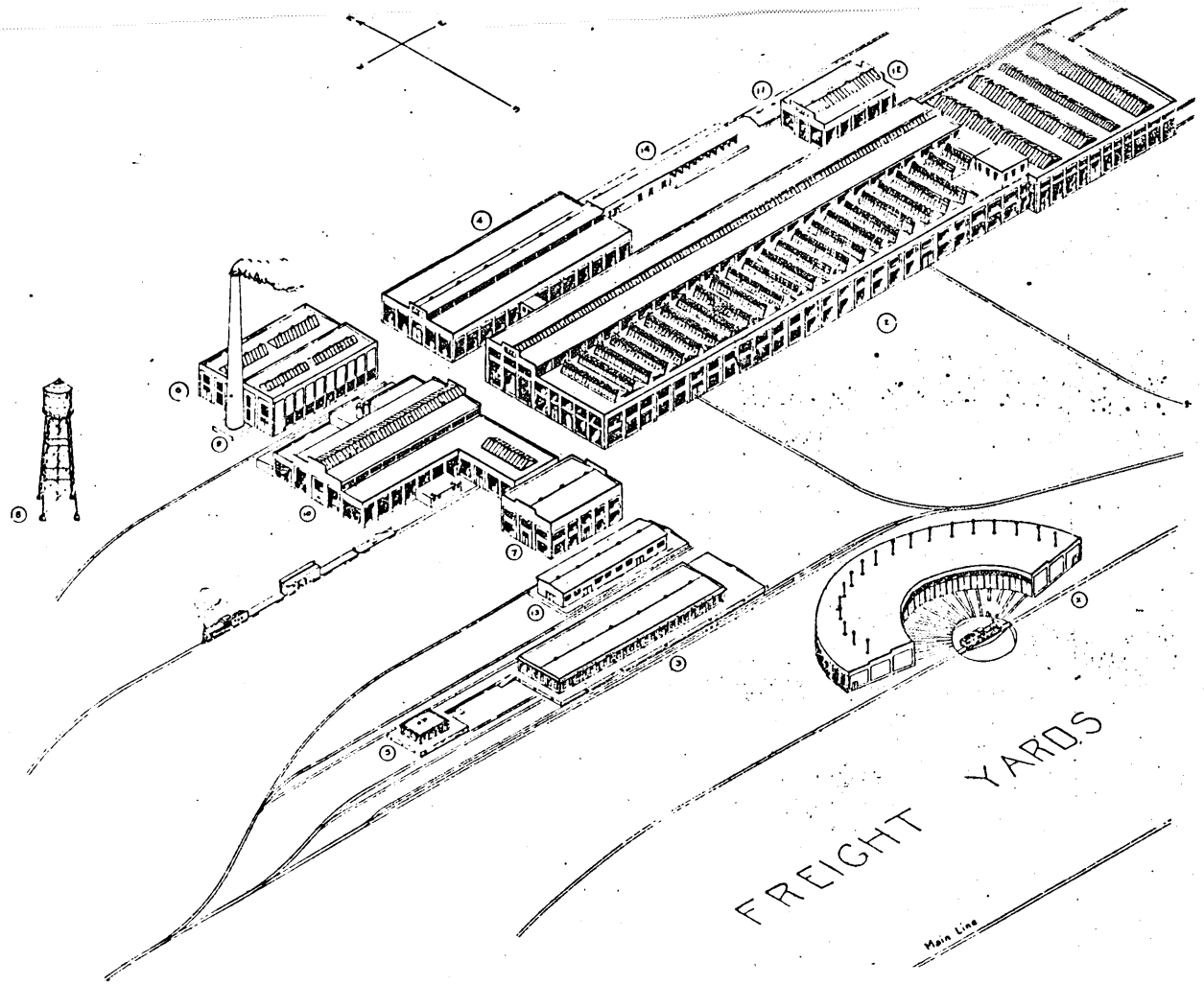
23 Ibid.

FORMER CNR STATION, TRANSCONA (WINNIPEG), MANITOBA

1 Former CNR station, Transcona (Winnipeg), Manitoba; constructed 1912, designed by the NTR; north elevation. (Murray Peterson, 1991.)



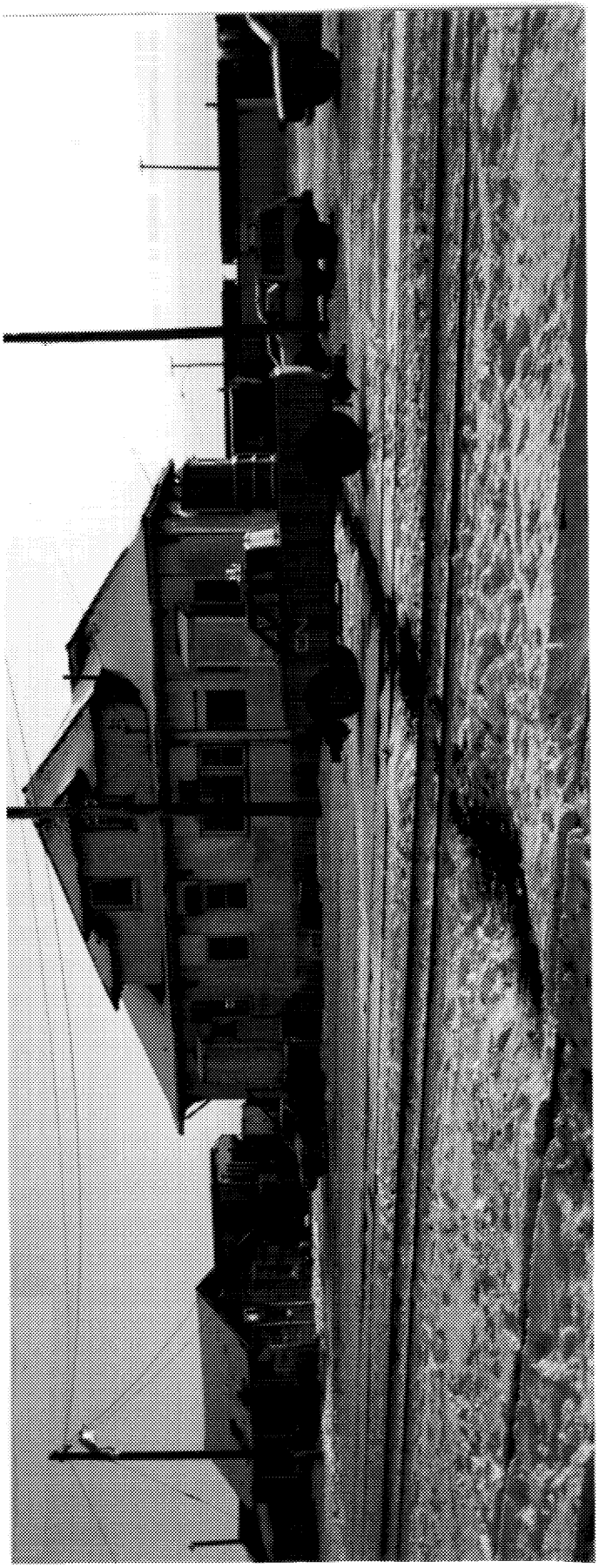
2 Canadian railways around the Great Lakes, arrow marking the approximate location of Transcona, Manitoba. (Reproduced from R.F. Legget, Railroads of Canada, Vancouver, 1973, p. 116.)



3 NTR shops, Transcona, Manitoba, as planned in 1909. (Reproduced from Railway and Marine World, No. 138 (August 1909), p. 563.)

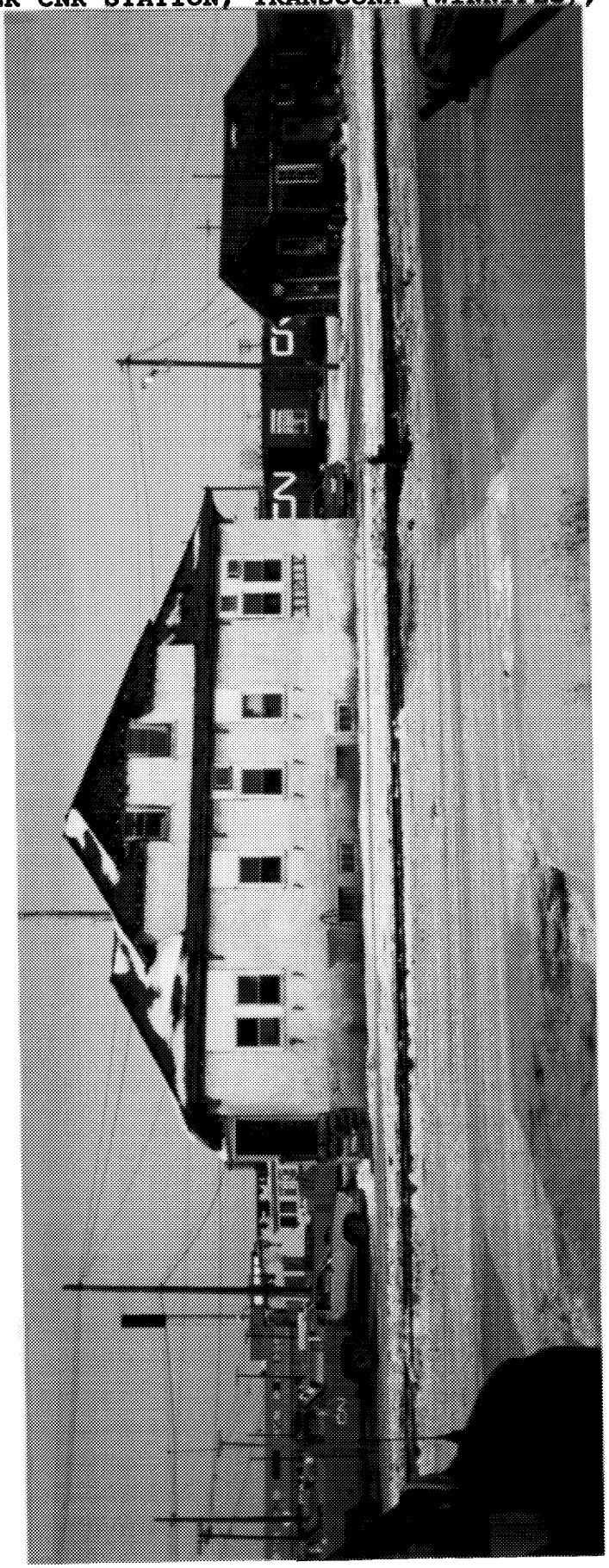
4 Aerial view of Transcona, ca. 1928, right arrow showing the station, left arrow indicating the present location of station. Note the lack of residential development below (south) of the station, although the land was subdivided into residential lots soon after the station was completed. (Photo courtesy of the Jack Fondren, Transcona Historical Museum.)

FORMER CNR STATION, TRANSCONA (WINNIPEG), MANITOBA



5 Former CNR station, Transcona (Winnipeg), Manitoba, north elevation. (Murray Peterson, 1991.)

FORMER CNR STATION, TRANSCONA (WINNIPEG), MANITOBA



6 Former CNR station, Transcona (Winnipeg), Manitoba, south elevation. (Murray Peterson, 1991.)

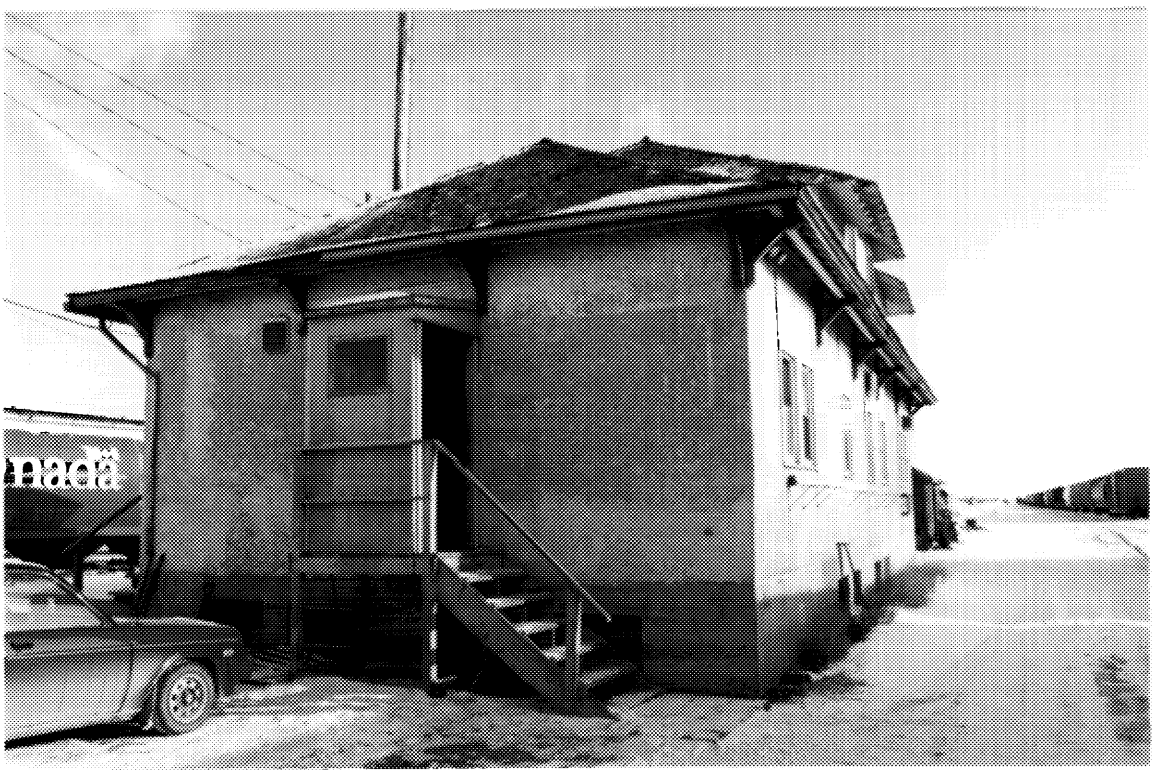
FORMER CNR STATION, TRANSCONA (WINNIPEG), MANITOBA

7 CNR station, Transcona (Winnipeg), Manitoba, ca. 1930. (Photo reproduced from Transcona, 1911 - 1986, Celebrating 75 years of community, Transcona, 1986, p. 85.)

FORMER CNR STATION, TRANSCONA (WINNIPEG), MANITOBA

8 CNR station, Elma, Manitoba (demolished); built 1910, architect unknown; track side elevation. (Photo reproduced from C. Bohi, Canadian National's Western Depots, Toronto, 1977, p. 54.)

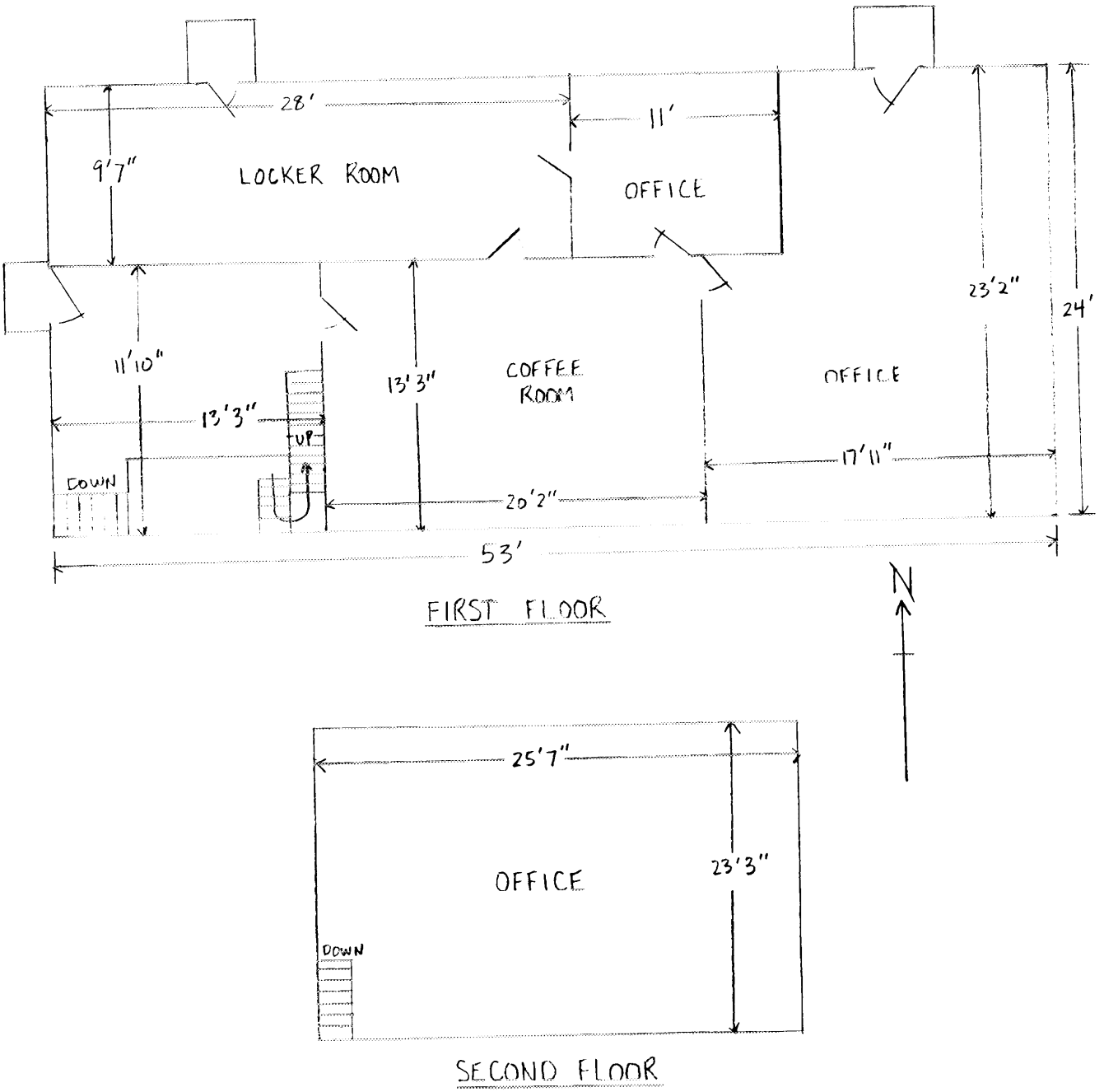
9 Former CNR station, Transcona (Winnipeg), Manitoba, north elevation and northeast corner. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)



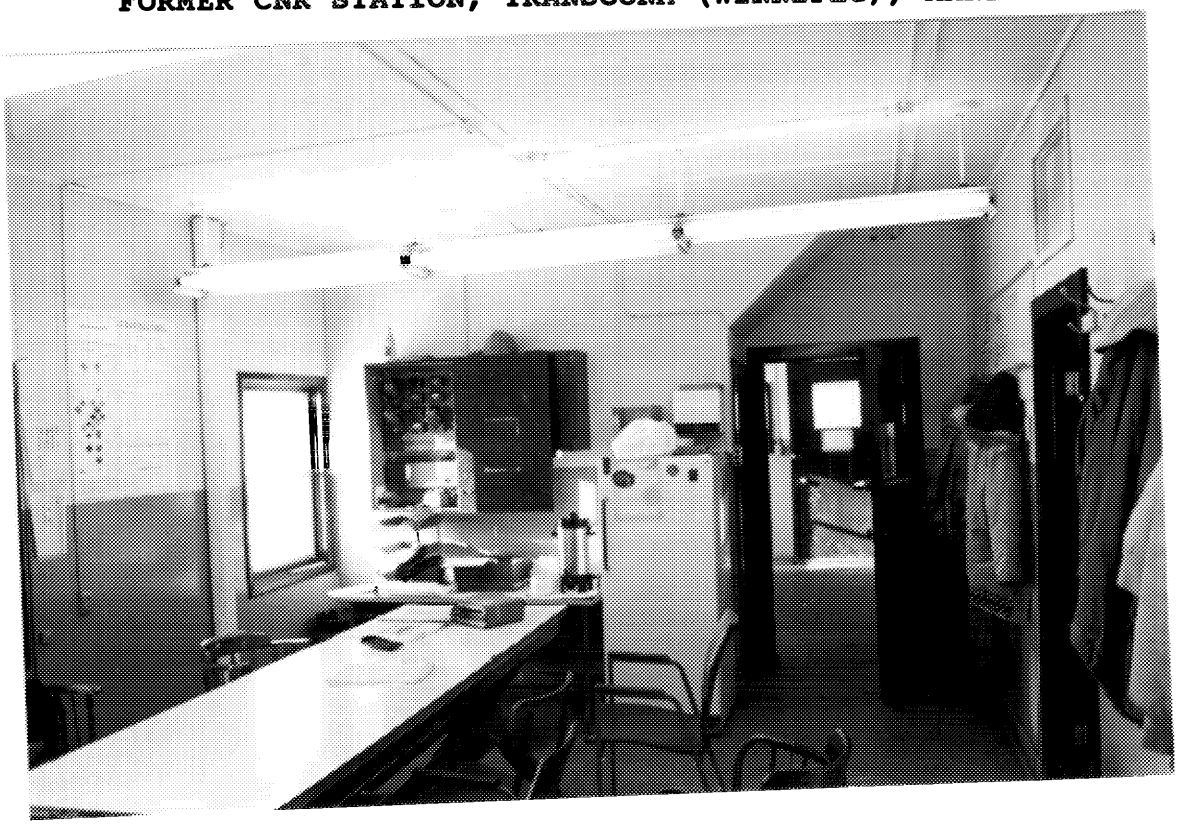
10 Former CNR station, Transcona (Winnipeg), Manitoba, south elevation and southwest corner. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)

FORMER CNR STATION, TRANSCONA (WINNIPEG), MANITOBA

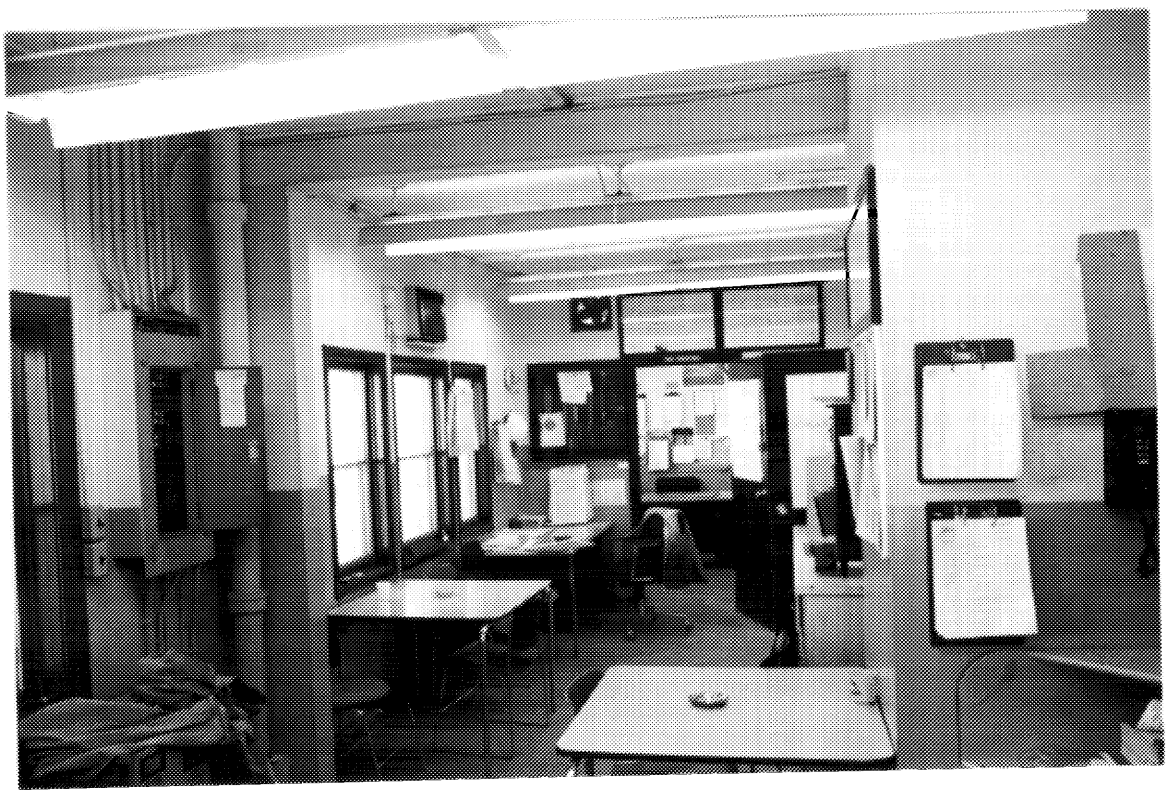
11 CPR station, Hanley, Saskatchewan; built 1905, architect unknown; track side elevation. (Photo reproduced from C. Bohi, Canadian National's Western Depots, Toronto, 1977, p. 22.)



12 Former CNR station, Transcona (Winnipeg), Manitoba, interior plans. Interior measurements are approximate, scale 1" = 8.4'. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)



13 Former CNR station, Transcona (Winnipeg), Manitoba, interior, first floor looking west. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)



14 Former CNR station, Transcona (Winnipeg), Manitoba, interior, first floor looking east. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)

15 Former CNR station, Transcona (Winnipeg), Manitoba, interior, second floor. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)