

HISTORIC SITES AND MONUMENTS BOARD OF CANADA

RAILWAY STATION REPORT

Title: Former Canadian National Railways Station
St. Boniface, Manitoba

Source: PETERSON PROJECTS, Murray Peterson, Winnipeg

RSR-201

INTRODUCTION

Construction of the former Canadian National Railways (CNR) station at St. Boniface, Manitoba (Figure 1) began late in 1913, and the building opened in 1914.¹ The new depot replaced an earlier frame station that had served the growing community since 1901.² St. Boniface, which became an incorporated city in 1908³ (Figure 2), is now part of the city of Winnipeg. The station is located at Mile 1.5 from Winnipeg on the Sprague subdivision of the CNR, originally the main line of the Canadian Northern Railway (CNoR).⁴

The station was built to meet the growing demands on the railway made by increased passenger and freight traffic. The station was a symbol of the growth of the city and the railway. The only other railway-related building on the site was a freight shed which was closed at the same time the station was vacated. After standing empty for several years, the station was converted into a restaurant, La Vieille Gare, which is nearing its 25th year of continuous operation. The land on which it stands is still owned by the railway company, although the station was sold in 1992 to the restaurant owners.⁵

HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

Thematic

The construction of this station is indicative of the period of growth and prosperity that occurred across Canada between 1900 and 1914. New provinces were created, and tremendous settlement and development in western Canada were facilitated by the railways, as two new transcontinental railway systems were constructed. The growth of the railway sector and its use by the public strained the capacity of railway facilities. All along the lines, new, larger stations were built to keep pace with traffic increases. Locally, St. Boniface was quickly developing into a major city boasting large industries. The construction of

the new, 1913-14 St. Boniface station recognized the growth of both local and national traffic.

In 1898 William Mackenzie and Donald Mann, the backers of the CNoR, gained control of a local charter in southeastern Manitoba, the Manitoba and South Eastern Railway (MSER). This line was chartered to run southeasterly from the town of St. Boniface, but the original charter was about to lapse as no construction had begun. Therefore the MSER negotiated a construction contract with Mackenzie and Mann, signed on 11 February 1898. Three months later the two men received the company's capital stock, amalgamating it a year later as part of the newly formed CNoR. The first 45 mile section of the MSER charter was completed in 1898 and was used by Mackenzie and Mann to bring cordwood into Winnipeg, which helped pay for its construction.⁶

By the end of the construction season in 1901, the CNoR - once a collection of unconnected lines and delinquent charters - had completed a line from western Manitoba to the lakehead at Port Arthur, Ontario (present-day Thunder Bay), of which the MSER was a major link (Figure 3). This rapid development was watched closely by a number of parties: the CNoR's rival, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR); the people of St. Boniface, through which the CNoR ran; and westerners in general.⁷ All were interested to see if another railway would challenge the CPR's long standing monopoly on transportation in western Canada. To improve the delivery of service within the community of St. Boniface, the CNoR built a new two-storey station in 1901 (Figures 4 and 5).⁸

Between 1901 and 1913, the CNoR's ambitions grew. From its role as a western Canadian carrier with ties to American lines, the CNoR planned to create a second transcontinental system to rival the CPR. This expansion period of the CNoR coincided with the expansion of western Canada's economy, population base and social network. Traffic along Canada's three major railways dramatically increased as goods and new citizens moved west, and grain and other crops moved east. For the railways, it was a time of unprecedented growth. New tracks were laid and existing facilities were improved. This so-called 'betterment phase' saw the railways improve their facilities all along the line. New round houses, water towers, bunkhouses, ice houses, freight sheds and stations were all built to handle more trains and more people and baggage.

The 1913-14 station continued to serve the on-going needs of the railway throughout much of the 20th century, facilitating the transportation of goods and people nation-wide. This station played an active role in transnational communications. While technological advances within the railway sector had little effect on the use of the station, advances outside the railway sector ultimately ended its usefulness within St. Boniface. The rise of car and truck travel reduced the need for railway links within the community, and by the 1960s the station was no longer an integral part of the daily life of St. Boniface.

Local Development

While settlement in the St. Boniface area began early in the 19th century, it was the creation and maintenance of railway links, as represented by this station, that established the character of the community. In 1817, Lord Selkirk, the Hudson's Bay Company shareholder, spearheaded a program of settlement at the forks of the Assiniboine and Red rivers (present-day Winnipeg). East of the Red River, he sought to create a settlement for "future French-speaking settlers, and for a Roman Catholic mission."⁹ In mid-July of 1818 two priests from Quebec arrived at the colony of 419 settlers, occupying the land east of the Red River granted them by Selkirk.¹⁰ This was the beginning of the Roman Catholic church in western Canada, as well as the commencement of permanent settlement by French-speakers in the west.

A steady stream of French-Canadian settlers arrived in the years following the merger between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company in 1821. As time passed, the French colony grew and stabilized. Named St. Boniface, the settlement was incorporated in 1880 as a municipality, and three years later it became a town with four wards. In the wake of the CPR land boom which sent land prices soaring in Winnipeg, local businessmen took advantage of St. Boniface's proximity to Winnipeg and its lower property values and taxes by building homes and industrial plants there.¹¹ By the 1890s, the area supported a number of businesses, including a flour mill, wool factory, brewery, soap factory, saw mills, abattoirs, and a brick manufacturer.¹²

St. Boniface, like the rest of western Canada, expanded rapidly after 1900 due to the waves of immigrants carried westward by the railways. Its population grew from 2,000 in 1901 to over 11,000 by 1916.¹³ This growth caused a need for modern institutions - police and fire services, streetcars, hotels, schools, a hospital and a proper civic administration.

The modern growth of St. Boniface, therefore, was spurred by the railways. By World War I, St. Boniface was intersected by all three transcontinental railway lines (Figure 5). Many industries chose to locate in St. Boniface rather than Winnipeg because of these permanent, all-season ties with eastern Canada.

St. Boniface, which had become a city during this period, outgrew the 1901 depot and required more space for passengers and for the freight handled by the CNoR. As a result, the company built a new, larger station in 1913, which was completed in early 1914. The new station was located nearer the extensive yards of its competitor, the CPR, and the industrial section that had developed in the eastern part of the city. Now the CNoR could properly serve both the business community and citizens. A large, separate freight shed, built in 1922, was an illustration of the railway's commitment and the growth in its traffic volumes.

Between 1913 and the Second World War, the station continued to serve the growing community, and this station continues to reflect the close ties between the development of St. Boniface and the railways. These ties furnished the city with an opportunity to develop a number of industries, thereby diversifying its economic base. Unlike many other small towns and cities across western Canada however, St. Boniface did not rely directly on any railway to be the major source of employment. Rather, industry developed partially because of the excellent railway connections throughout the city.

By the 1950s several factors combined to reduce the railway's impact on the daily life of St. Boniface residents. Improvements to bridges, roads, and highways caused an overall drop in passenger and freight traffic for both of Canada's major railways. Technological advances, principally the conversion to diesel power, caused a massive reduction in the size of the railway workforce. With fewer people riding trains and fewer people working for them, a nationwide restructuring occurred, and throughout the system stations were vacated, schedules were cutback, and repair facilities were closed.

A local factor at work in St. Boniface was its own residential expansion. Once on the outskirts of town, the CNR line was in the midst of a heavily populated area by the 1950s. In order to reduce the noise, hazard and inconvenience, the CNR decided in 1964 to re-route passenger trains further east. Combined with the general downsizing within the railway sector, the re-routing of passenger trains effectively ended the need for a manned station in St. Boniface and on 15 January 1965, city hall was advised that the station and freight shed would close.¹⁴

The construction of the 1913-14 CNOR station in St. Boniface was an acknowledgement by the railway company of its own growth over the previous decade. An expansion of trackage and traffic necessarily resulted in increased use of all facilities, many of which could not handle the strain. The new station was also an acknowledgement of the expansion of the city which it served. It is one of the physical reminders of an era when St. Boniface was a separate entity from the City of Winnipeg and harkens back to its early phase of modern growth. The shift away from railway-supported growth after the 1950s illustrates the basic reorganization of the transportation industry in Canada, as well as a gradual integration of the St. Boniface economy into the larger economy of Winnipeg.

ARCHITECTURE

Aesthetic/Visual Qualities

The St. Boniface station is a one-storey, plainly yet handsomely designed structure, typical of many depots across western Canada

built by all three railways during this period (Figures 6 to 9). These stations were elongated in plan, simply massed and modestly ornamented. Typically, they were designed for efficiency rather than their aesthetic qualities, and were large enough to meet the future needs of the railway.

This station features a rusticated stone base below the buff brick superstructure. Smooth-cut stone for lug sills and as bases for the oversized wooden brackets supporting the overhanging eaves provides visual interest against the plain brick walls. The low-pitched, bellcast hip roof is interrupted on the west slope by a gable dormer, which features two small windows, ornamental half-timbering and decorative shingles. Below the windows a sign reads "St. Boniface." The track side façade was plain, a rectangular bay window being the only distinguishing feature. The windows and doors were designed similarly throughout the station and were kept uncomplicated.

The plans for the station, #100-54, were drawn by CNoR architect R.B. Pratt, whose first work for the company had been the 1901 stations at St. Boniface and at Fort Frances, Ontario (demolished). Ralph Benjamin Pratt (1872-1950) was a draughtsman who in 1895 was named architect for the CPR in Winnipeg. In 1901 Pratt moved to the fledgling CNoR. By 1906 he had started a private practice although he remained consulting architect to the CNoR and then the CNR into the 1920s.¹⁵ The 26' x 77'8" station cost \$15,000 and was built by a St. Boniface firm, Benoist and Company.¹⁶

Many of the features and the size and scope of detailing of the station were common to other railway stations throughout the west. Stations of similar ornamental treatment and scale in Manitoba can be found at Emerson (RSR 112; Figure 10), Rivers (RSR 114; Figure 11), and The Pas (RSR 83; Figure 12), although the St. Boniface station is much smaller in size than the last two stations.

Alterations to the exterior of the station have been numerous and have affected the visual qualities of the depot to some degree. In 1922, to coincide with interior changes, the double doors at the south end of the track and town side façades were bricked in. These two elements were replaced by a small window on the west side and a single door on the east elevation (Figure 13).

In 1969, the station was converted into a restaurant. The east façade was sealed and stuccoed and is now obscured from view by trees (Figure 14). The west façade has also been affected by the addition of a railway car at its south end (Figure 15). The remainder of this façade has been unaltered and the car, although intrusive, has not seriously affected the aesthetic qualities of this elevation. The end elevations have not been drastically changed (Figures 16 and 17). Overall, the changes to the original design have created a structure which today does not read as coherently as at the time of its construction.

Nevertheless, part of the town side elevation still provides a handsome and historically correct view to passing traffic.

Functional/Technological Qualities

This station's interior organization, like its exterior, followed general trends for the layout of a station of this size. The building was divided into three basic areas, reflecting the varied functions of the station (Figure 18). The baggage room at the south end measured 20' x 26' and interior access to this area was not possible. The central area contained a separate women's waiting room, washroom facilities against the west wall, and the ticket and station master's office which included the bay window. The east end of the station held the general waiting room, measuring 21' x 26'. The full basement was originally used for storage and for the boiler and coal rooms (Figure 19). Access to this area was gained by a staircase in the baggage room. Separate waiting rooms for men and women, a large basement storage area, and larger offices for personnel were some of the advantages of the new depot.

The first alteration to the interior occurred in 1922 when the baggage department was moved to the newly completed freight shed. At this time, the south end was converted into office space and a door was added to allow for interior access. As well, the ticket office was enlarged (Figure 20).

The major interior changes occurred during the station's conversion to a restaurant in 1969. The entire interior space was opened up and altered to suit better its new function (Figures 21 and 22). None of the original interior finish remains. The basement continues to be used for storage (Figure 23).

ENVIRONMENT

Setting

Since the construction of the CNoR station, the surrounding area has changed drastically. It was originally located near the Cusson Lumber Company's large sash and door manufacturing plant at the outskirts of the settled area of the city.¹⁷ In 1922 a freight shed was added to the station site (since demolished). This entire area has slowly evolved and the station now stands within a mixed area of retail shops, residential and educational structures and manufacturing interests (Figures 24 and 25).

Today, the station is part of a dramatically different urban landscape than that present after its completion in 1914. As it now stands, it is difficult to get a sense of how this structure fit into its historical surroundings.

Community Status

The restaurant, La Vieille Gare, has successfully occupied the former CNR station for nearly 25 years. The restaurant has incorporated elements of the station's history into its menu and decor. The station's value to the community has not been reduced because of its changing role. As one of Winnipeg's finer and most unique restaurants, the former CNoR station has once again taken on a highly public role, although a role very different from its original one.

Endnotes

- 1 Canadian Railway and Marine World (December 1913), p. 584, and (April 1914), p. 170.
- 2 CNR records, Manitoba Division, Winnipeg (below as "CNR records").
- 3 Alan F.J. Artibise, Winnipeg. A Social History of Urban Growth, 1874-1914 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), p. 169.
- 4 "CNR records."
- 5 Irene Kirouac, owner of the La Vieille Gare Restaurant, in conversation with the author, 16 September 1993.
- 6 T.D. Regehr, The Canadian Northern Railway (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976), pp. 72-75.
- 7 See Le Manitoba (St. Boniface), various editions, May 1898 to October 1901.
- 8 "CNR records"; and Le Manitoba (St. Boniface), 17 October 1901, p. 1. The builder was a local contractor, J.A. Senécal.
- 9 Manitoba. Historic Resources Branch, St. Boniface (Winnipeg: Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Recreation, 1988), p. 5. Below as St. Boniface.
- 10 Ibid., pp. 6-8.
- 11 A.F.J. Artibise, op. cit., p. 170.
- 12 Saint-Boniface, Manitoba, Canada: Centennial Year; Année du centenaire, 1967 (St. Boniface: St. Boniface Centennial Brochure Committee, 1967), pp. 12, 14.
- 13 A.F.J. Artibise, op. cit., p. 170.

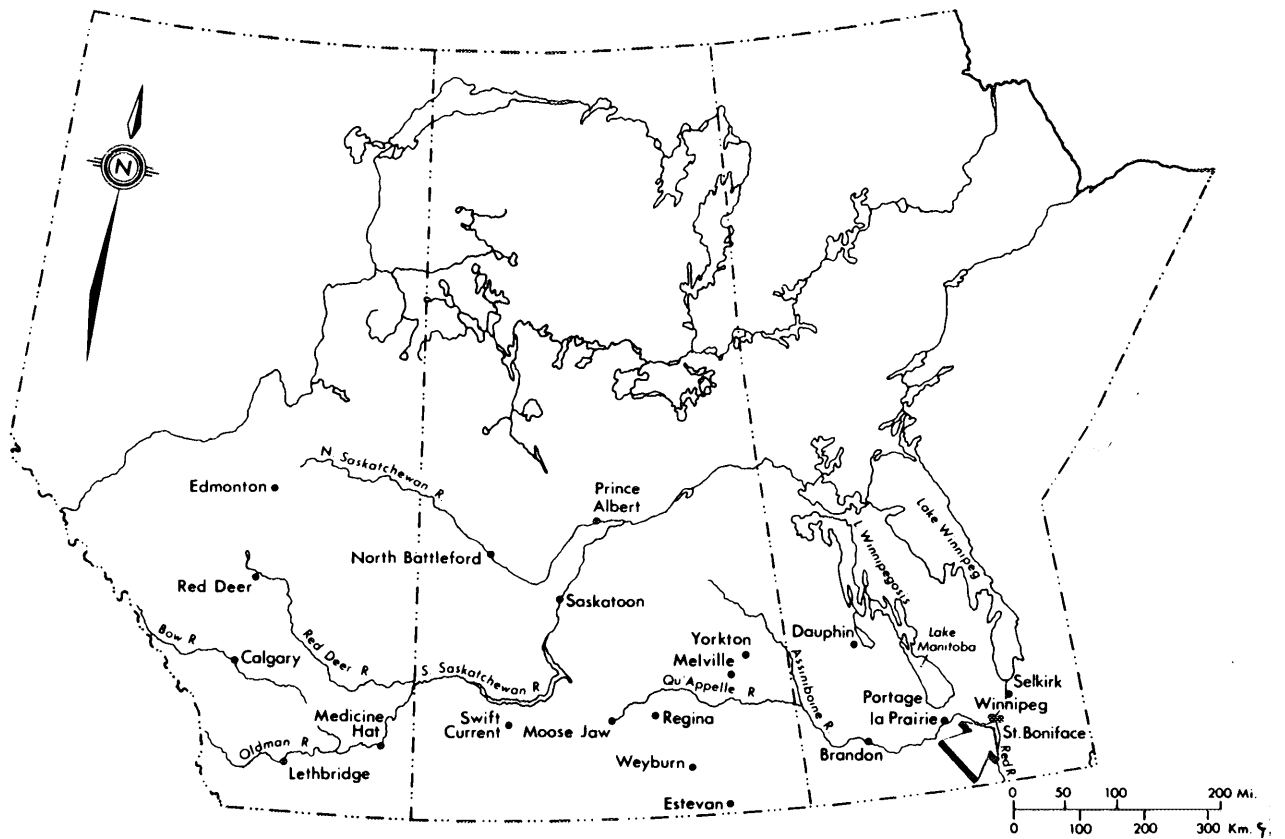
- 14 "St. Boniface - Vieille Gare," file of La Société Historique de Saint-Boniface, courtesy of Alfred Fortier, curator. Letter dated 25 February 1965 from CNR manager, Winnipeg Area to St. Boniface City Hall.
- 15 J. Edward Martin, The Railway Stations of Western Canada (British Columbia: Studio E, 1980), pp. 56, 112.
- 16 City of St. Boniface, Building Permit, #1340/1913, at City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.
- 17 City of Winnipeg Fire Atlas (1914), Volume III, p. 243.

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



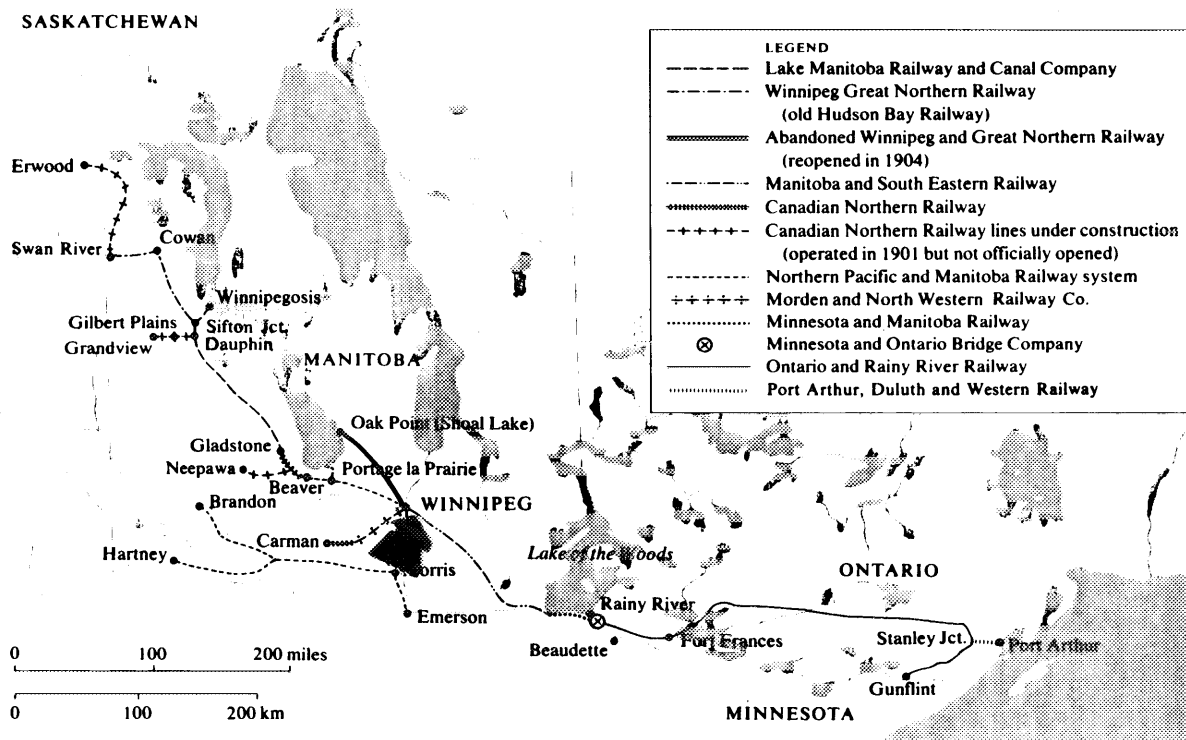
- 1 Former Canadian National Railways (CNR) station, St. Boniface, Manitoba; built 1913-14, designed by Canadian Northern Railway (CNoR) architect R.B. Pratt, Winnipeg, contractor Benoist and Company, St. Boniface; town side or west façade. (Murray Peterson, 1993.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



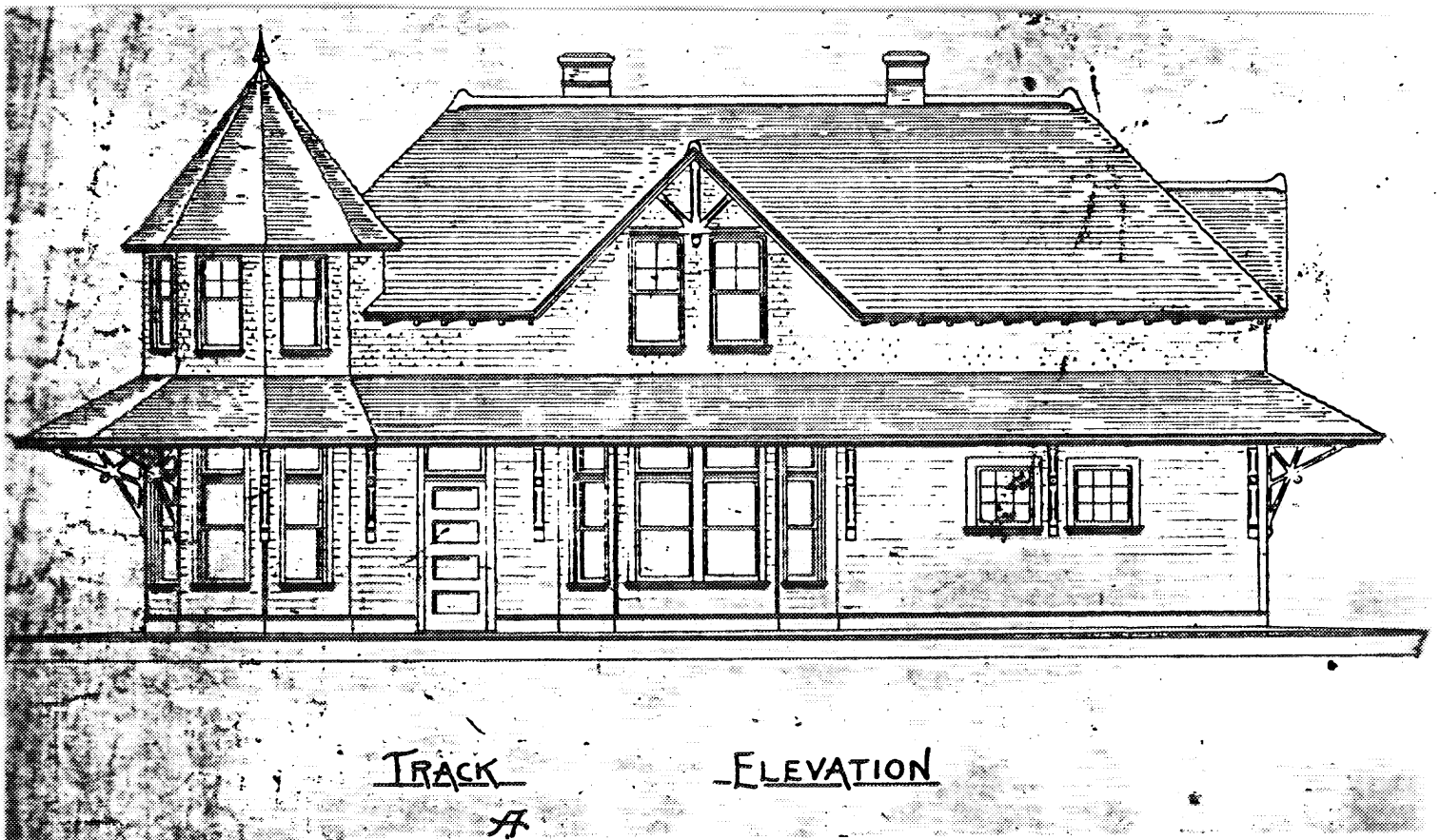
2 "The prairie urban network," arrow indicating St. Boniface. (Reproduced from G. Friesen, The Canadian Prairies. A History [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984], n.p.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



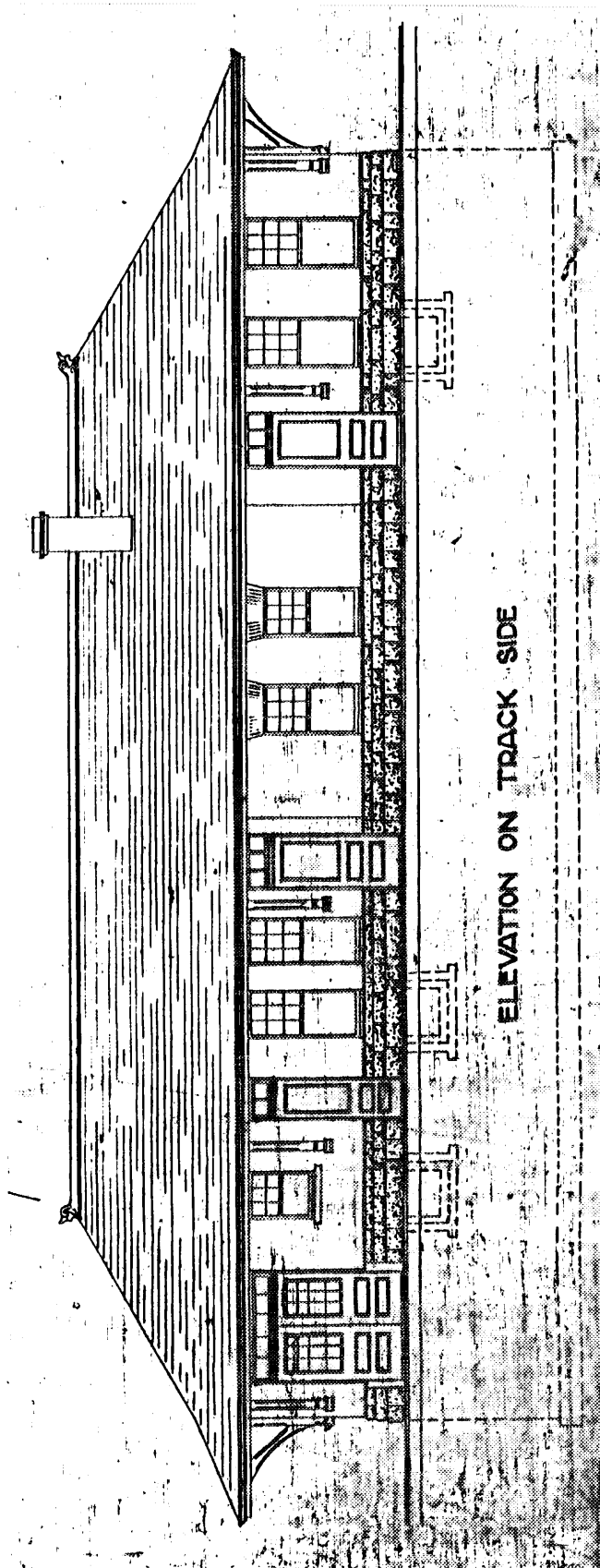
3 "The Canadian Northern Railway at the end of 1901." Arrow indicates the location of St. Boniface. (Reproduced from T.D. Regehr, The Canadian Northern Railway [Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976], p. 77.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



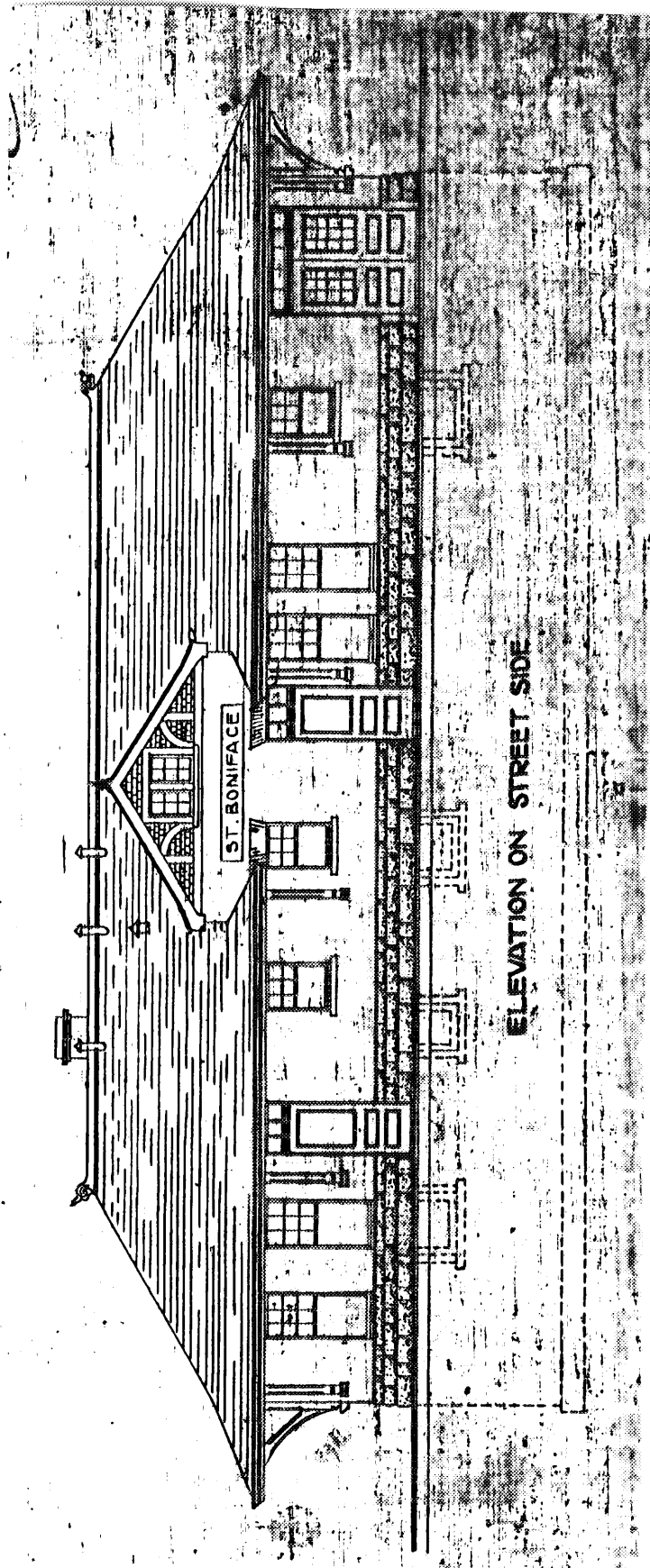
- 4 CNoR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba, 1901 (demolished); designed by CNoR architect R.B. Pratt, Winnipeg, contractor J.A. Senécal, St. Boniface, Plan #100-4, cost \$4,620; track or north elevation. The CNoR built the same station at Fort Frances, Ontario, also in 1901. (Plans courtesy of the Bob Paetsch, CNR, Manitoba Division, Winnipeg.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



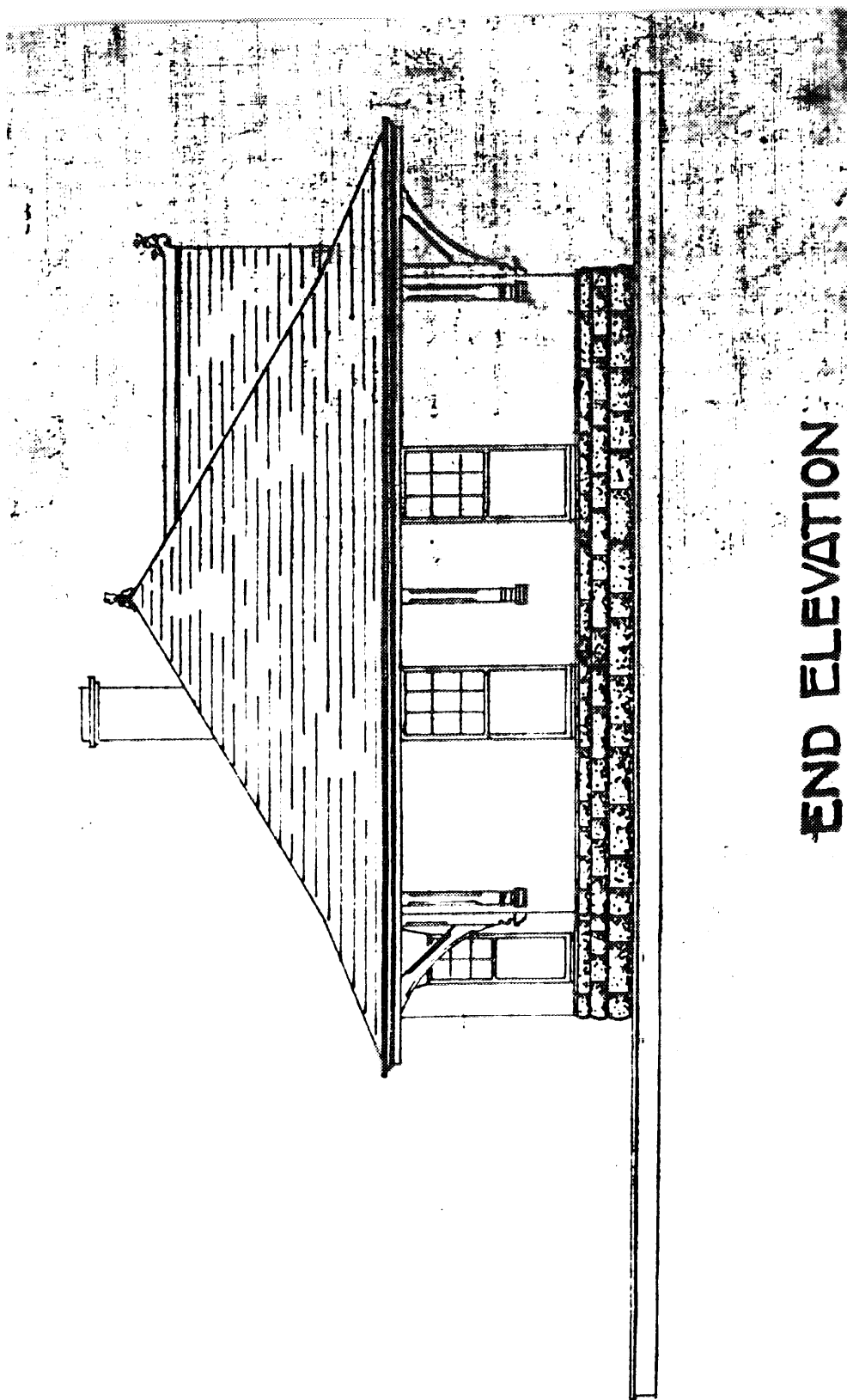
6 CNoR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba, 1913; "Elevation on Track Side." (Plans courtesy of CNR, Manitoba Division, Winnipeg.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



7 CNOR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba, 1913; "Elevation on Street Side." (Plans courtesy of CNR, Manitoba Division, Winnipeg.)

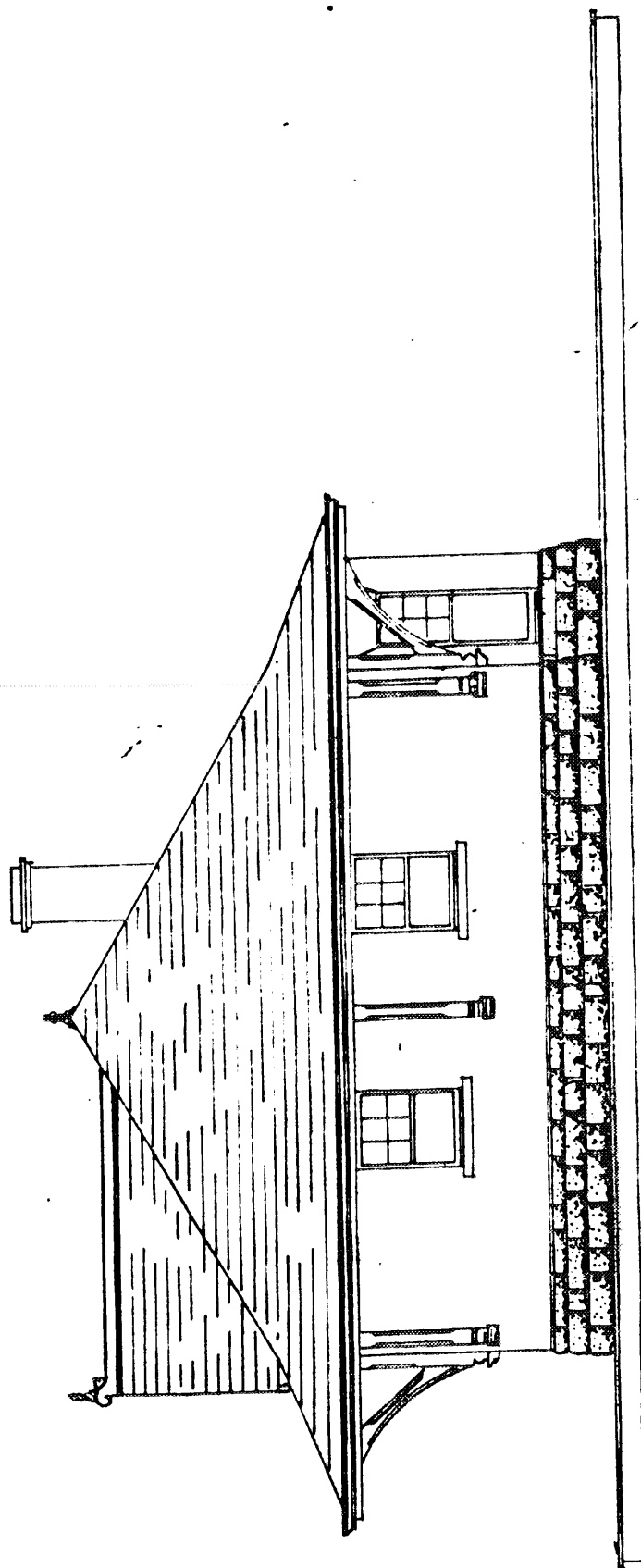
FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



END ELEVATION

8 CNoR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba, 1913; "[North] End Elevation." (Plans courtesy of CNR, Manitoba Division, Winnipeg.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA

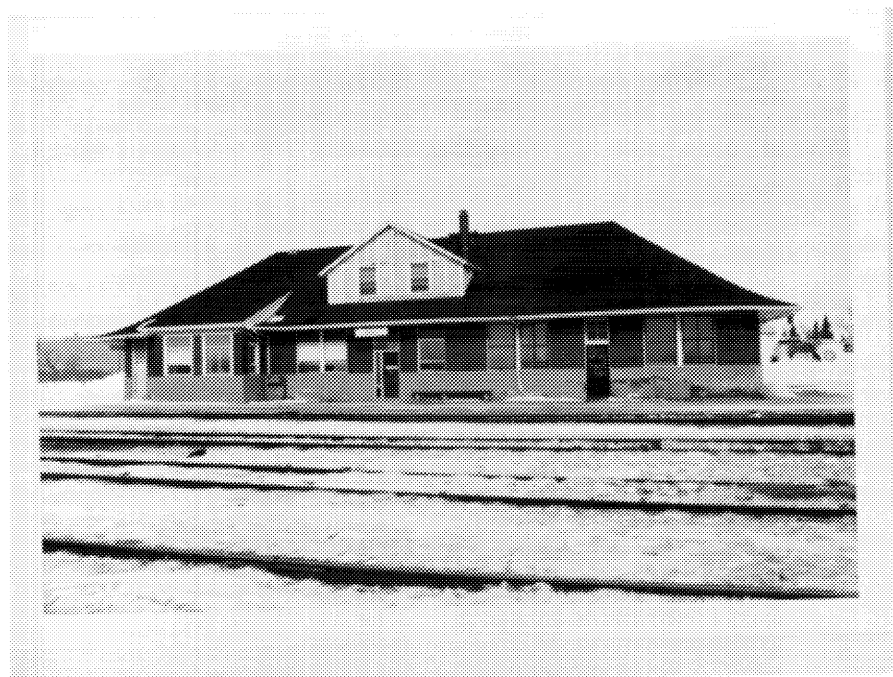


END ELEVATION

9 CNOR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba, 1913; "[South] End Elevation." (Plans courtesy of CNR, Manitoba Division, Winnipeg.)



- 10 CPR station, Emerson, Manitoba; built in 1914, designed by the CPR engineering department; track side façade. (Murray Peterson, 1991.)
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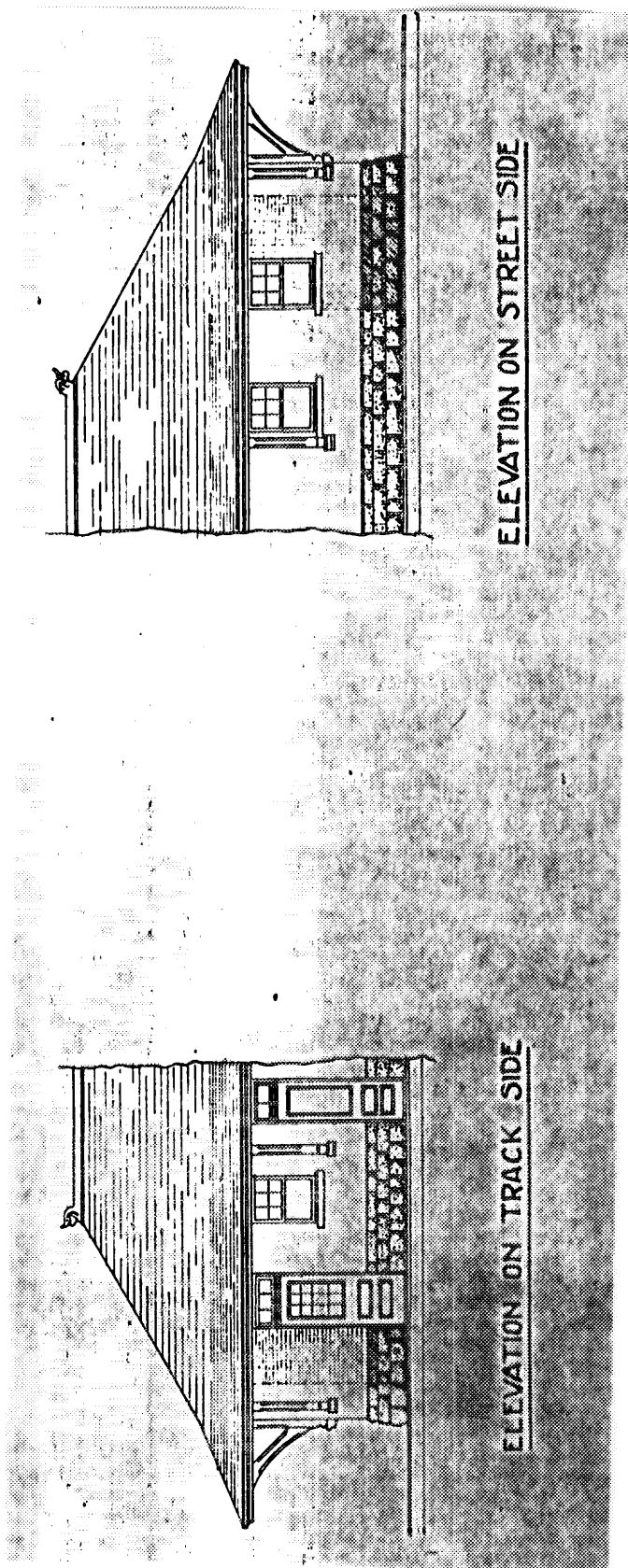
- 11 CNR station, Rivers, Manitoba; built in 1917, designed by the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway engineering department; track side façade. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



- 12 VIA Rail station, The Pas, Manitoba; built in 1928, architect unknown; track side façade. (Murray Peterson, 1991.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



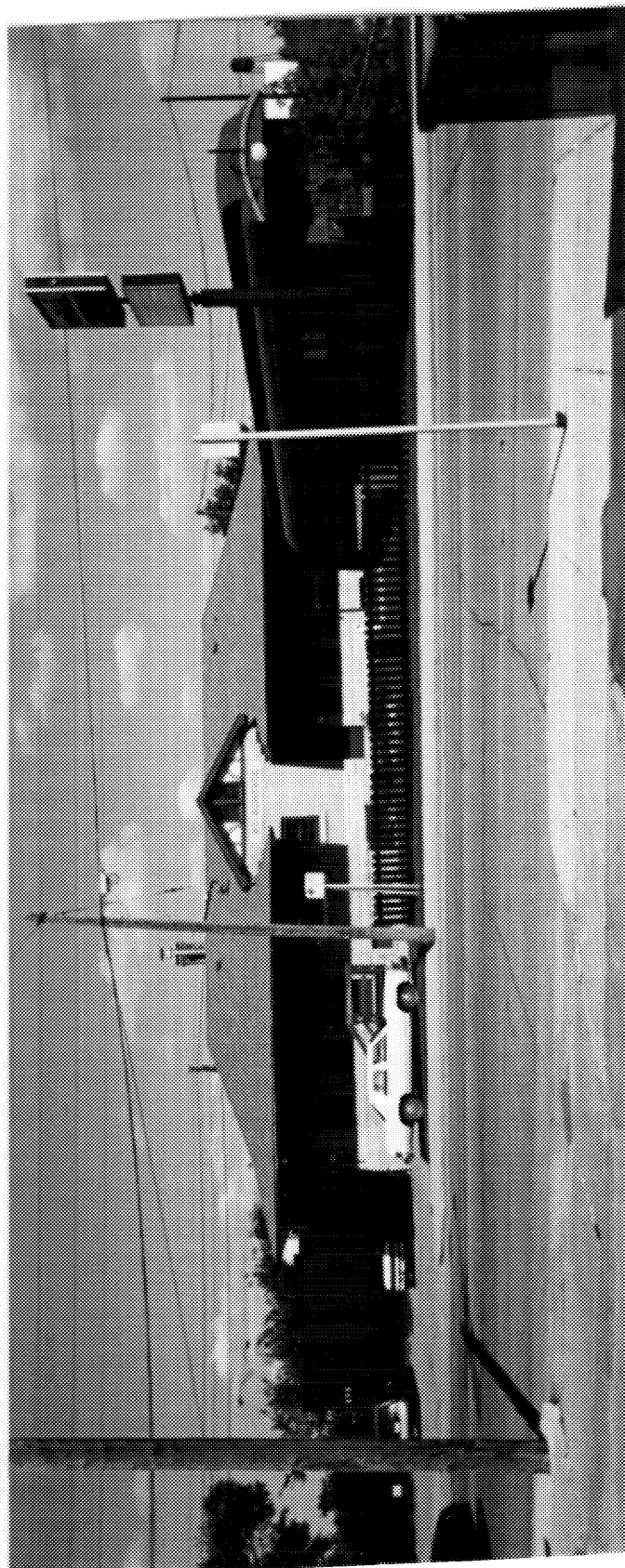
13 CNR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba, 1922; alterations to track and town side elevations. (Plans courtesy of CNR, Manitoba Division, Winnipeg.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



14 Former CNR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba; track or east façade. (Murray Peterson, 1993.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



15 Former CNR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba; town or west façade. (Murray Peterson, 1993.)

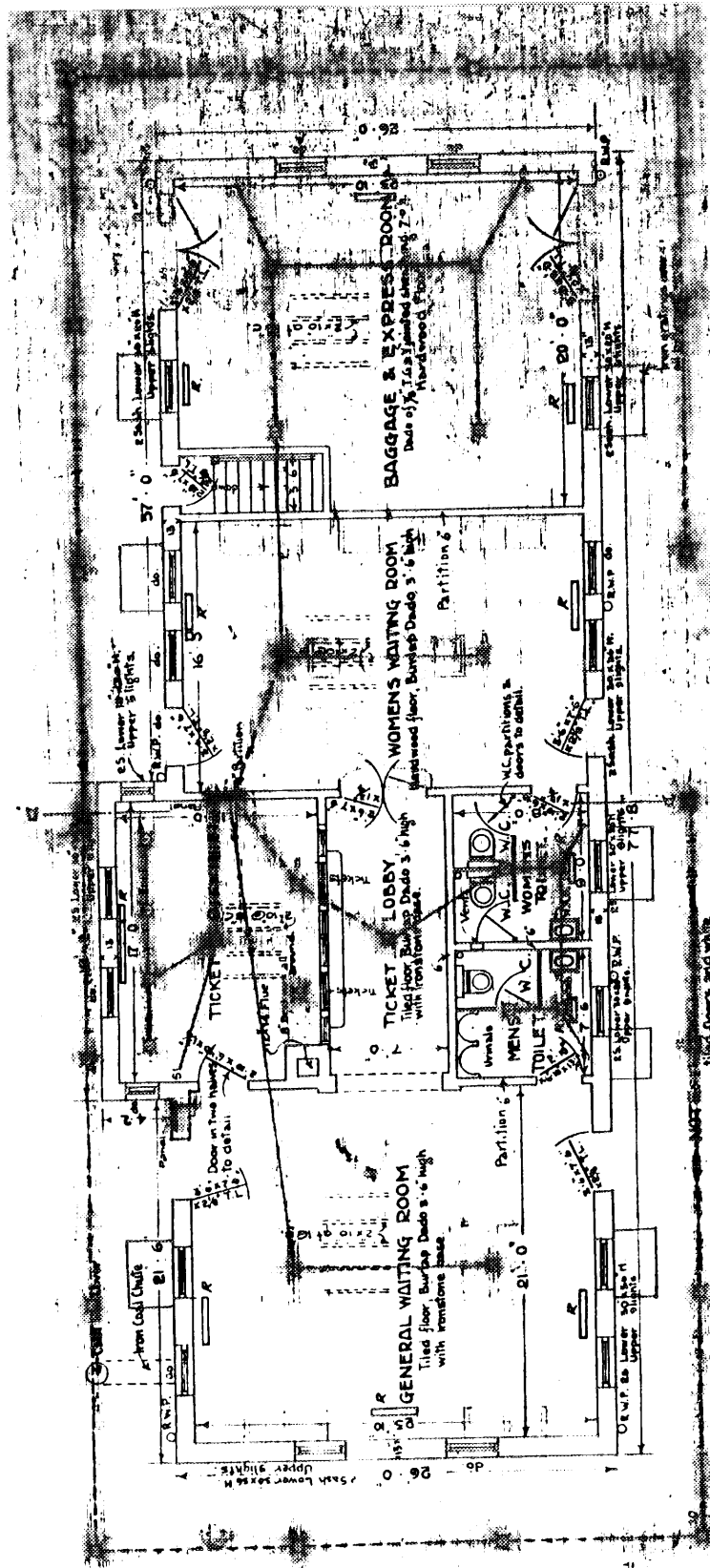
FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



16 Former CNR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba; north elevation.
(Murray Peterson, 1993.)



17 Former CNR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba; south elevation.
(Murray Peterson, 1993.)

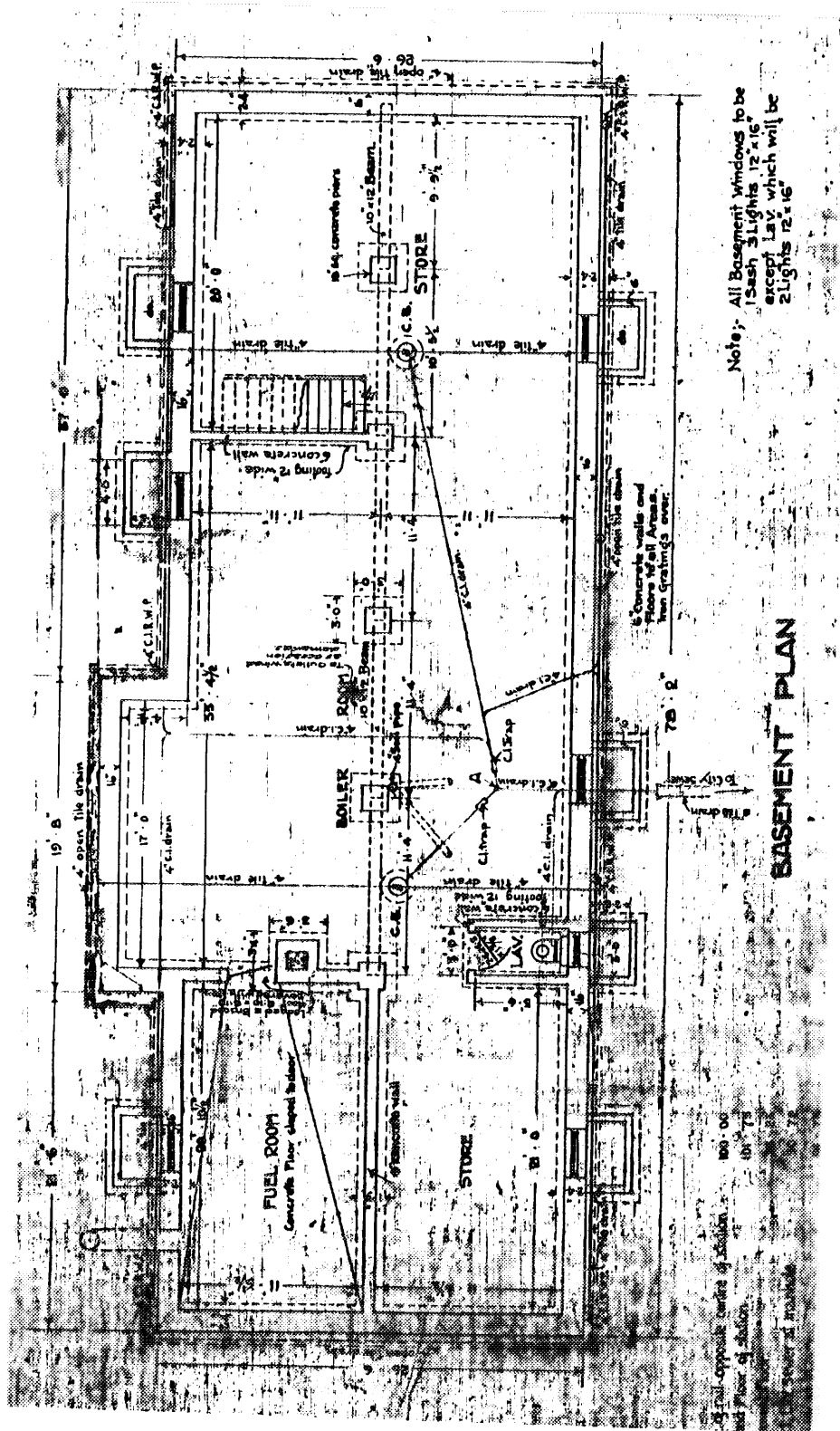


GROUND FLOOR PLAN

Revised only as to change of location. of doors and windows in Waiting Rooms and windows in Basement. Revised 14th Oct. 1913.

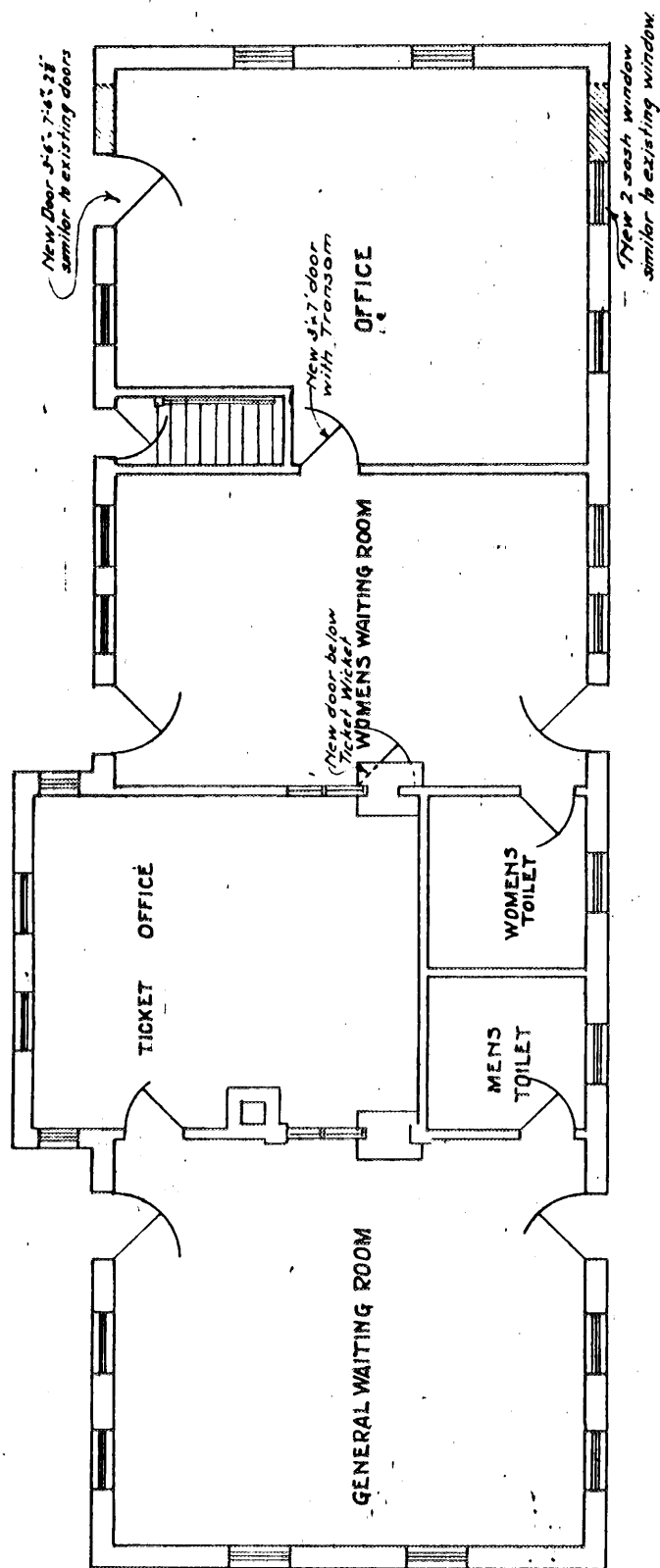
18 CNoR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba, 1913; "Ground Floor Plan." (Plans courtesy of CNR, Manitoba Division, Winnipeg.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



19 CNOR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba, 1913; "Basement Plan." (Plans courtesy of CNR, Manitoba Division, Winnipeg.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



20 CNR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba, 1922; "Ground Floor Plan." (Plans courtesy of CNR, Manitoba Division, Winnipeg.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA

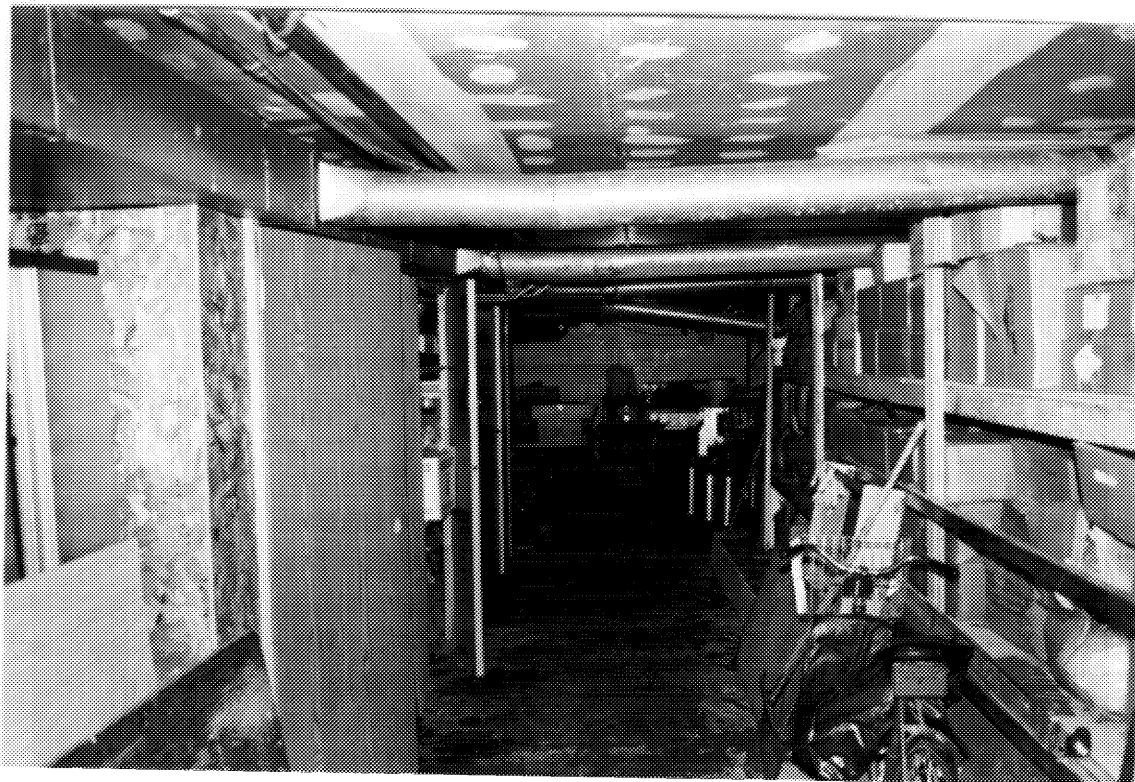


21 Former CNR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba; restaurant space, looking north. (Murray Peterson, 1993.)



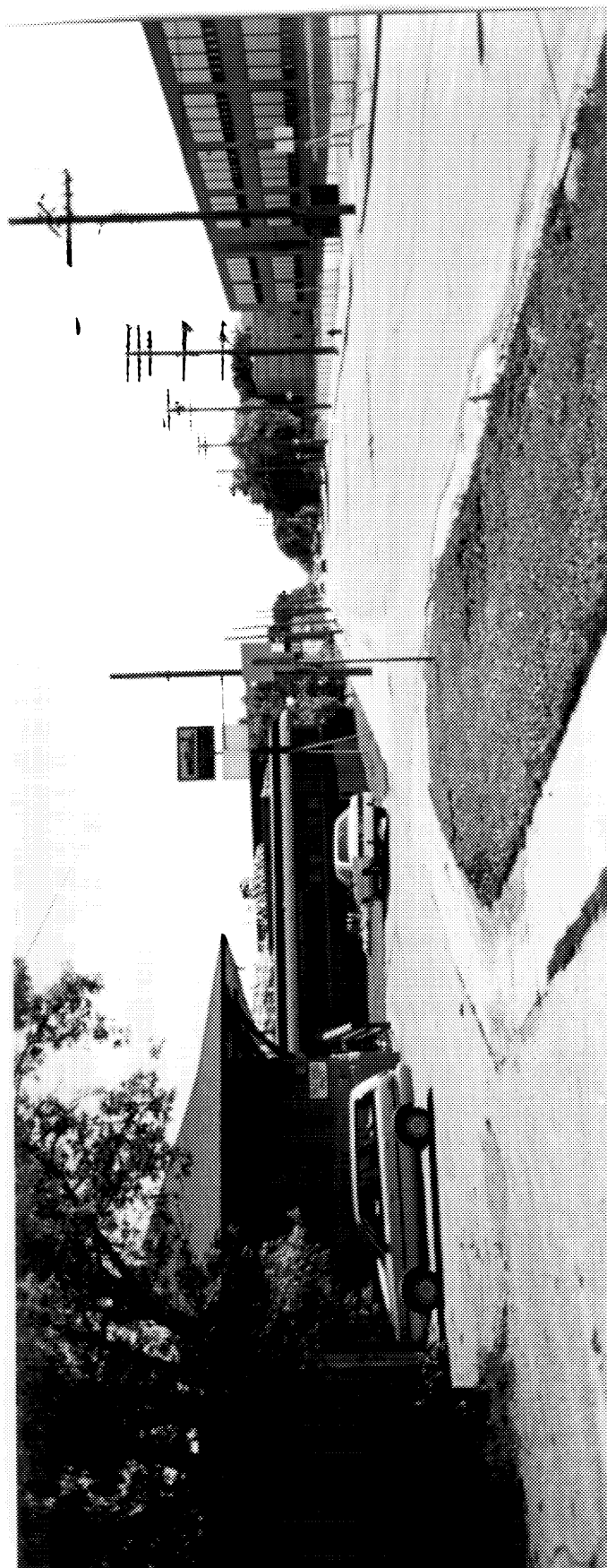
22 Former CNR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba; restaurant space looking south. (Murray Peterson, 1993.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



23 Former CNR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba; basement.
(Murray Peterson, 1993.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



24 Former CNR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba; looking south.
(Murray Peterson, 1993.)

FORMER CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, ST. BONIFACE, MANITOBA



25 Former CNR station, St. Boniface, Manitoba; looking north.
(Murray Peterson, 1993.)