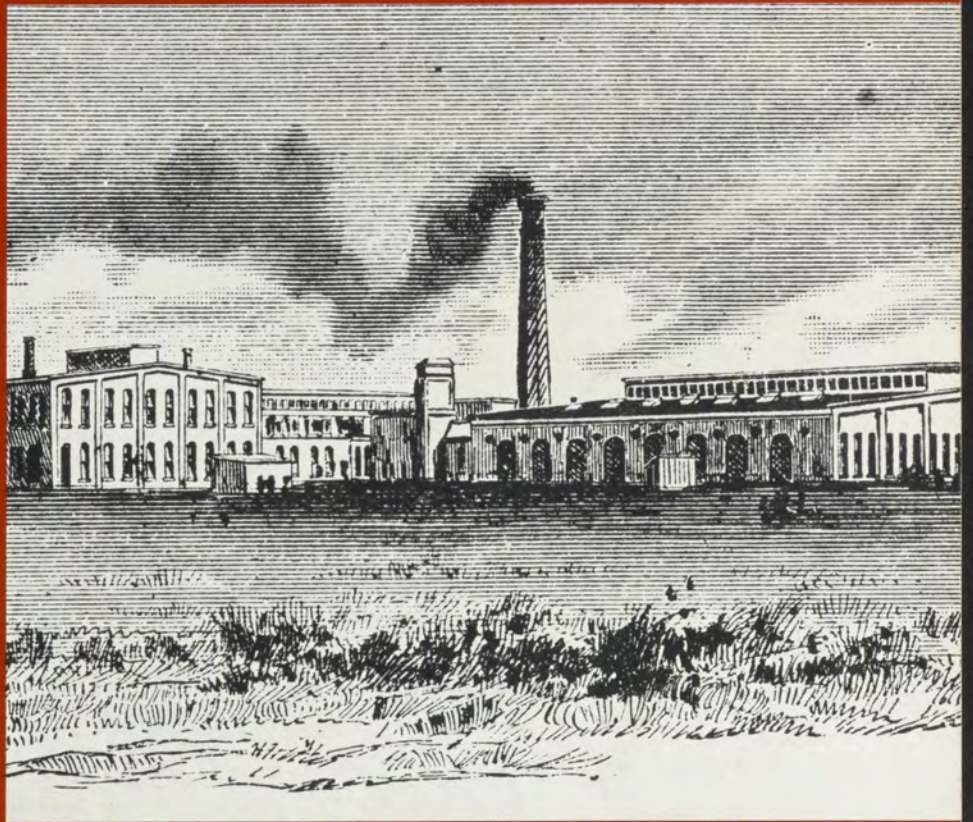




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Landmark Center, 75 W. 5th St.
St. Paul, MN 55102

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

**Special Issue:
The Como Shops —
Transformed Into
Bandana Square**



Volume 19
Number 1

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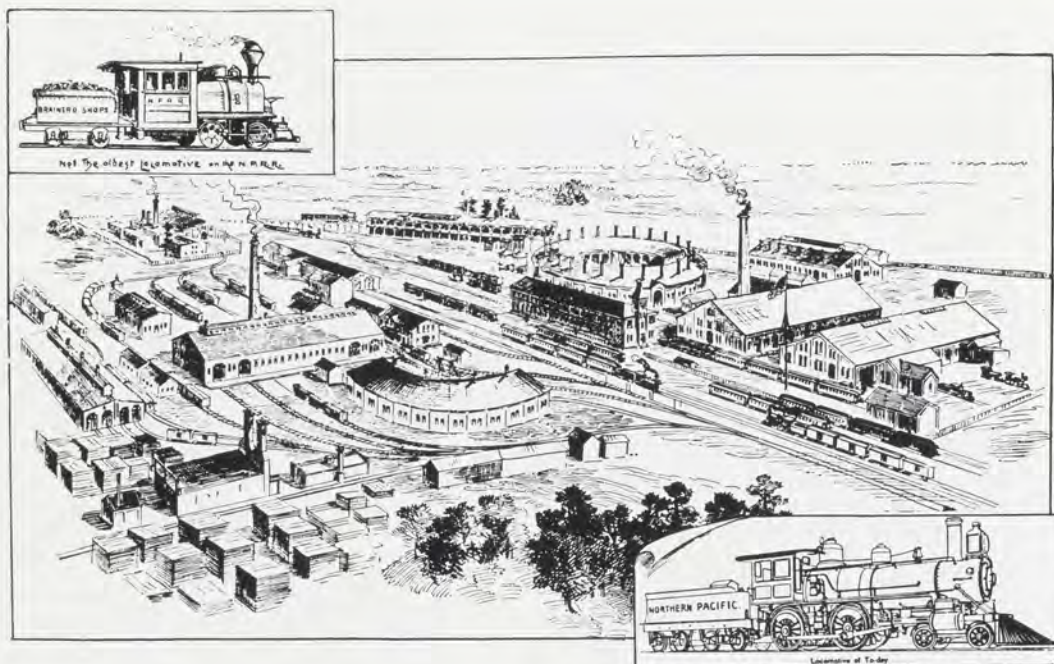
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ON THE COVER: This is the earliest known view of the Como Shops, an illustration that appeared in Northwest Magazine in 1886.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Photographs on page 6 (of the office-storehouse) and on page 7 are from the files of the Ramsey County Historical Society. Those on pages 11 and 12 are by Nancy Tracy. All other photographs and illustrations, including the original architectural drawings, are from the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.



Northern Pacific's Brainerd shops, from *Northwest Magazine*, spring of 1888.

The Como Shops — Transformed Into Bandana Square

By Nancy Tracy

Construction of the Como Shops began in July of 1885 but planning had been underway for several years. The shops were but one part of the extensive terminal development that the Northern Pacific was to undertake in the Twin Cities between 1882 and 1887. To understand why the Como Shops were needed and why they were located in St. Paul, one must look briefly into the early history of the Northern Pacific Railroad.¹

The original charter for the Northern Pacific, granted in 1864, called for a railroad to run from the eastern tip of Lake Superior to the Pacific Ocean. Construction of the line did not get underway until 1870 and this initial building effort came to a halt in 1873 with the financial panic that swept the United

States. By this time tracks had been laid from Lake Superior to Bismarck, North Dakota, on the Missouri River. Headquarters for the Northern Pacific had been established at Brainerd, Minnesota, and the major repair shops were located there also.

A gradual recovery from the Panic of 1873 took place during the second half of the 1870s. In 1877 the Northern Pacific moved its headquarters from Brainerd to St. Paul, which was convenient to river and rail traffic and increasing in size and population as it assumed its position as the gateway to the Northwest. The engineering and construction department of the Northern Pacific remained in Brainerd, however, as did the major shops.

The city of St. Paul was pleased with this move by the Northern Pacific. City officials further encouraged the Northern Pacific to remain there by offering the company land in 1879 for the purpose of building railroad yards and an office building.² In return, the Northern Pacific was to locate in St. Paul permanently or forfeit the land. The offer

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Nancy Tracy is a graduate of the University of Kansas where she also received an M.A. degree in the history of art. She has had a long-standing interest in local history. This article is the result of research into the history of the Como Shops for a class in industrial archeology which she took in 1981. Because of the great amount of material available in the Northern Pacific papers at the Minnesota Historical Society, her research is still in progress.

was accepted and work on yards downtown near the Mississippi River began immediately. By 1882 an office building was under construction. Meantime, by 1880, financing for the final push to complete the Northern Pacific line to the Pacific was assured and the company looked forward to celebrating its completion late in the summer of 1883.

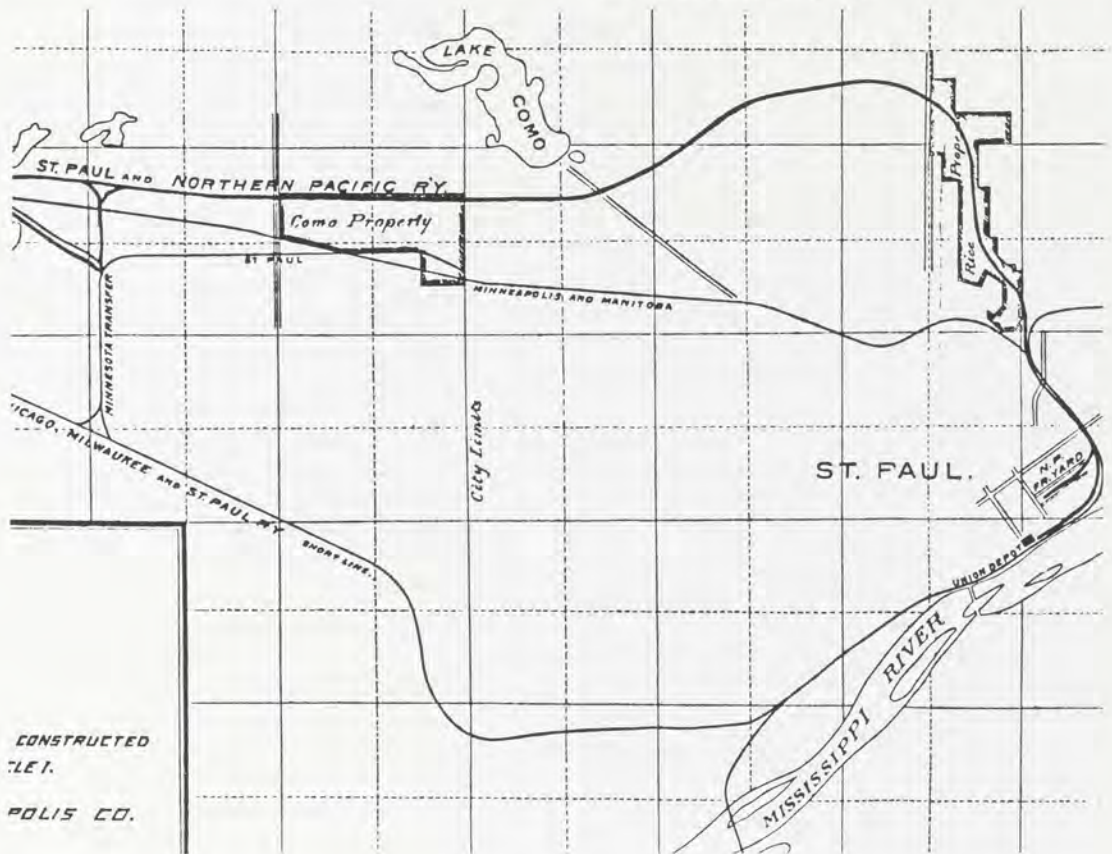
TO PREPARE FOR the increase in traffic this completed line would generate, the company began to acquire land in the Twin Cities. As a terminus city, St. Paul could soon expect to see large amounts of land undergoing new industrial uses to provide for stations, shops, stock yards, sidings, freight houses, elevators, transfer yards, etc. Among the many terminal needs, the Northern Pacific placed a high priority on shops. The company operated practically nothing in the Twin Cities for the repair of either engines or passenger cars. Repair work in St. Paul was frequently done in the shops of other roads, and Northern Pacific was then billed for the services. The major shops of the Northern Pacific were still located in Brainerd, and there was no intention of relocating them. In fact, in 1882 they were greatly enlarged with new brick structures built, for the most part, for the repair of locomotives. Passenger car

repair went on in the older, wooden buildings of the Brainerd shop complex built eleven years earlier.

It was because these older shops provided unsatisfactory working conditions that the need for new passenger car repair shops at the eastern terminus of the Northern Pacific became a high priority.³ In 1884, St. Paul was chosen for the location of these new passenger car shops. This designation was made not just because St. Paul was the headquarters for the company, but because, in this same year, Northern Pacific had made a traffic policy decision. St. Paul was to be the terminus for passenger traffic and Minneapolis the terminus for freight traffic.⁴

Among the pieces of property that the Northern Pacific had been acquiring, two large tracts in St. Paul are significant to the history of the Como Shops. In December, 1882, the Como tract, consisting of 220 acres, was purchased at a cost of \$108,941; in March of 1883, 160 acres in the Trout Brook valley, encompassing the country estate of Edmund Rice, was purchased at a cost of

St. Paul and Northern Pacific Railway map showing the Como property, the Trout Brook (Rice) property, the Manitoba tracks, and N.P.'s downtown yards.





South side of the cruciform building, from an 1885 architectural drawing. Building includes the car-erecting, woodworking, and machine shops, and the power plant.

\$225,000.⁵ Of these two parcels of land, the Trout Brook valley site was at first intended for the shops.

IN THE SPRING OF 1884, however, after soundings were made it was found that the land was too marshy to use for shop buildings without spending an excessive amount of money to sink pilings to stabilize the foundations.⁶ Furthermore, the Trout Brook site did not offer much room for expansion of the shops. The Como site, on the other hand, was high, dry and flat and provided a large area for the shops and their future expansion. The company observed that the location was convenient to both cities.

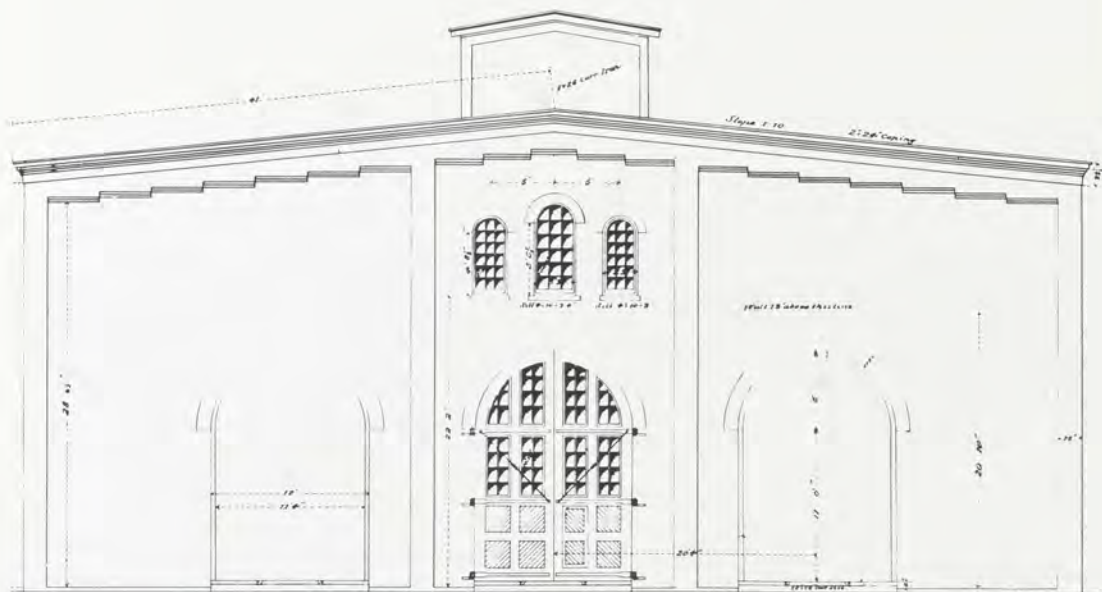
Before continuing, we need to consider another interesting fact: the Northern Pacific did not own any track into the Twin Cities. The original charter, as noted above, permitted a road to be built from Lake Superior to the Pacific. The growing prominence of St. Paul, however, brought a gradual shifting of company operations from Brainerd to the capital city. But because of charter restrictions and lost opportunities, the Northern Pacific had been unable to acquire and keep its own tracks into its headquarters in St. Paul. This lack of access was overcome in a manner common to the railroads of this time. A traffic contract was arranged in 1878 between the Northern Pacific and James J. Hill's St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway, whereby the Northern Pacific rented track from Sauk Rapids to St. Paul for \$40,000 annually.⁷

In view of this traffic arrangement, the properties that the Northern Pacific purchased for its terminal needs had to be located close to the Manitoba main line and, indeed, both the Como and Trout Brook sites were just off that line. Northern Pacific plans also included a single track line to connect the two properties on the north.

The Northern Pacific next formed a company to develop its Twin Cities terminal properties. Chartered in June of 1883, and called the St. Paul and Northern Pacific Railway Company, this new company immediately set about developing the newly acquired properties in the Twin Cities. During the first three years the construction schedule went as follows: in July, 1884, the new Northern Pacific line* from Sauk Rapids to Minneapolis was completed; that fall, work was well underway on the Minneapolis terminal yards; full-time work on the Como Shops took place in the summer of 1885; and, in 1886 the terminal yard in the Trout Brook Valley was under construction. At the same time as the latter two projects were in progress, the company completed building its own independent line between Minneapolis and St. Paul.

The men responsible for this hectic building pace were a chief engineer, E.W. Kendrick, working out of Minneapolis, and a comptroller, A.G. Postlethwaite, working out of St. Paul. Both of these men worked in close consultation with the Northern Pacific's general manager, Thomas F. Oakes. All three were likewise in constant communication with their respective boards of directors in New York City. By the time the major part of their job was completed in 1887, the landscape of the Twin Cities had been greatly altered.

PLANS FOR THE COMO SHOPS' design had been under consideration even before the exact location of the shops had been determined, and some of the machinery for the shops had already been ordered. The person **Hill had recently sold this right-of-way to the Northern Pacific for its growing traffic into Minneapolis.*



Facade of the car-erecting shop, above, from the architect's plan of 1885. At left, the office-storehouse, looking southwest, photographed in 1981.

The newspaper article also illustrates the high expectations the city felt by the decision to locate the shops there, calling it:

... the most important and most significant event ever written down in our local history. It forever fixes and secures St. Paul as the headquarters and eastern terminus of this grand transcontinental railway system. It guarantees the further expenditure of immense sums ...

Furthermore, it:

... involves the speedy and permanent increase to the population of St. Paul of from 30,000 to 50,000 who will be directly or indirectly connected with these mammoth enterprises.⁸

During the fall of 1884 the Como site was surveyed and graded. Three million bricks were ordered from Little Falls. Over the winter the foundation stones were hauled to the site by sled. By March, however, it was decided to extend the Northern Pacific's main line from Minneapolis to St. Paul before beginning work on the shops. This decision delayed construction on the shops until summer. In the meantime, Kendrick had hired John Boland as superintendent of construction for the shops and had promoted Charles Bihler to engineer of construction.

LOWEST BIDDER for the job was Roland Patterson who had satisfactorily completed the work that the St. Paul and Northern Pacific had been doing on the Minneapolis terminal yard. He was finally able to start

most eager to have these shops and the one whose job made him responsible for the maintenance of all of the Northern Pacific's trains was G.W. Cushing, the railroad's superintendent of machinery, motive power and rolling stock. His ideas as to the particular needs for passenger car repair were noted down in general plans which were reworked several times until he felt he had what he needed. These were then turned into working plans by Charles Bihler, an engineer on Kendrick's staff at the St. Paul and Northern Pacific.

The citizenry of St. Paul were first informed of the plans for the shops through a newspaper article, actually a press release, from the company, which appeared in several newspapers on October 14, 1884. The information included a lengthy description of the shops, as well as an illustrated plan. Apparently there had been some rivalry between the two cities for the location of the shops because the *St. Paul Dispatch* delighted in announcing the project as a "victory" over Minneapolis.



The blacksmith's shop, photographed in 1981 before restoration began.

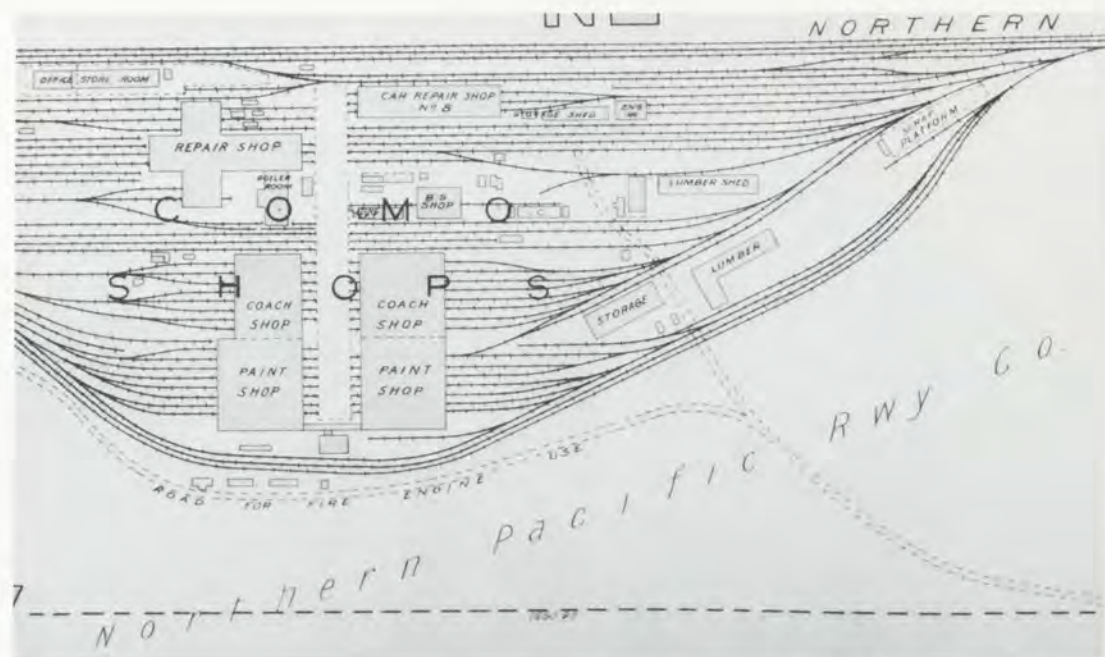
working on the shops in July. By late fall the buildings were up. During the winter months machinery, the heating plant, and tools were put in place, tested, and made ready for operations to begin.

There was still quite a bit of last minute work on the shops to complete, when a dramatic event occurred. The old shops at Brainerd were destroyed by fire on March 29, 1886. On April 1, the Northern Pacific took over operation of the Como Shops from the St. Paul and Northern Pacific. To quote Cushing, taking over the Como Shops was "... indeed the *only* recourse at this time, and we feel it is almost providential that these shops are available."⁹

Photographs of the shops were made late that spring, but if they still exist they have not been located. Still it is possible to visualize how the shops must have looked when they were ready to open for business. One sketch appeared in *Northwest Magazine* in April 8, 1886, and a fine collection of plans from 1885 has survived. These records suggest that the buildings which remain standing today look substantially as they did then. The first phase of construction called for five major buildings which were to be located in the northeast quadrant of the Como site.

THE MOST UNUSUAL and the largest of the five original buildings was built in the shape of a cross. This cruciform shape was created by adding two-story wings on either side of the long narrow building. The four arms of the cross provided specialized, separate work areas efficiently combined under one roof. The west half of the cruciform building was used for assembling and taking apart cars. Large pulleys lifted the wooden upper car from the metal lower car, or truck. From here the car parts were sent to the several work areas in the building. If the car could be worked on in one piece, it would go into the north wing, designated for coach repair.

The east half of the central core contained the woodworking shop. A wide wood and iron truss system supported the roof and left a column-free, well-lighted, open work space. One of the features of this work area mentioned at the time was the shaving tower. Sawdust and wood shavings would be sucked up by fans from the work floor and carried over to a small tower just outside. There, by gravity, the sawdust would be separated from the shavings, and the collected shavings reused as fuel for the boilers. Perhaps this was an



Insurance map of 1928 shows plan of Como Shops after most of the buildings and their additions had been completed.

indication of foresight by these engineers for a building that some day would be located in Energy Park.

Some observations about passenger cars of this time might be appropriate here. Passenger cars in those days were made of wood and, therefore, the woodworking shop and paint shop were extremely important. Neither type of repair took up much space in shops specializing in locomotive repair, so paint and woodworking shops are associated mostly with the repair of passenger cars.

Also, as a rule, the Northern Pacific did not build its own passenger cars but ordered them from car-making companies such as the well-known Pullman company. The Como Shops serviced and maintained these cars. They also would do up-graded or down-graded cars. A second class car, for instance, might be turned into an immigrant car; a first class car might be remodeled into a business car or a luxury touring car. From the smallest repairs to major reconstruction, the Como Shops performed a variety of tasks.

THE FIRST FLOOR of the south wing housed the machine shop. Here a fair amount of the work centered around wheel repair, since wheels constantly needed smoothing or reshaping. Large expensive machines helped do this job. The bright airy room of today would have been filled at one time with pulleys, shafting suspended from the ceiling, and yards of leather belting, all necessary parts to get the machine tools running. Today we can still see the metal rods which supported

the shafting. Until quite recently, wheels were still stored on the wood block court just outside the machine shop.

The second stories of the wings, reached by stairs and elevators, housed a variety of functions, also. A cabinet shop and an upholstery shop were situated over the coach repair shop. Over the machine shop were several subdivided work areas. Car seats were cleaned here; there were large sinks, dye vats, and hair picking machines, and the plating shop was also located here.

The power plant for the shops was attached to the south wall of the wood-working shop. Here an immense 150-horsepower Corliss engine helped to power the tools needed throughout the building. The boilers supplied steam to power the machines as well as to heat this building and the paint shop. A smaller engine pumped water from the well, located in the courtyard between the power house and machine shop, for shop uses. Pumps also pulled water from the well to the shops' 50,000-gallon storage tanks set at some distance from the shop buildings where they provided water for protection from fire. By 1889, the shops were hooked up to the city's water mains. The shops had their own firemen.

ONE OF THE BIGGEST complaints about the old buildings in Brainerd was the lack of a good paint shop. Shoddy-looking passenger

cars were a poor advertisement for a well-run railroad. A large well-lighted paint shop was an essential part of passenger car repair shops. The paint shop at Como is a rectangular building with eight doors on the west side and seven on the east. Sixteen cars could be worked on or stored at one time, and fifteen of them had individual access to the building. This building also had the greatest amount of indoor track, 1,200 feet. In spite of a forest of interior columns which supported a wooden truss roof, light came in abundantly from the lantern along the ridge of the roof and from the many skylights. Glass-filled upper halves of the large swinging doors also provided a good direct source of light. Most of the shop buildings used lanterns or monitors on the roofs and these, in combination with the many tall, narrow small-paned windows along the lateral walls, served as important sources of light. The upper half of all of the interior walls were white-washed, further diffusing the natural light. In addition, the shops had electric lighting.

A small storeroom was attached to the paint shop at the point where the sixteenth door would have been located. Painting supplies were stored here. Window glass was washed here, too, since this building offered one of the few sources of hot water. Car seats were stored upstairs while the interiors of the cars were being painted or varnished.

THE BLACKSMITH shop is unique in appearance because of its twelve Queen Anne style chimneys which connected to the twelve forges inside. The blacksmith shop is also somewhat unusual in that it and the cruciform

building made use of a mansard roof along the side walls, although from the front the roof cannot be seen. The cruciform building's mansard was punctuated with dormer windows.

The facades of the cruciform building and the blacksmith shop are symmetrical, divided into three bays separated by flat pilasters. They each have a large swinging door in the center bay over which are three small round arched windows, the center one of which is slightly taller than the other two. Such details are significant for reminding us that these two buildings, so different in shape and function, still belong together in the same architectural group.

The only non-shop building from this first period of construction is the office and storehouse. It was located right along the main track, convenient for the unloading of materials. A wooden platform surrounded the building. A lovely ornately carved wooden porch originally covered the entrance. The front part of the two story building contained offices on the second floor, and, on the first floor, a telegraph office, record storage office, store-keepers' office, and lavatories. The east two-thirds of the building was used for storage.

Finally, the simplest of the five original buildings did not even handle passenger cars. This long narrow frame building, the only one of the five made out of wood, was designated for work on freight cars. Much freight car work went on out-of-doors but it was good to have some enclosed facilities and

Paint shop, built in 1885, with transfer pit added in 1902.





View of the Como Shops about 1928.

also to have access to a blacksmith and woodworking shop. This building was the only one of the original five to have been recently demolished.

THESE FIVE DIFFERENTLY shaped buildings, shapes which reflect five different functions necessary to provide for a well tuned, attractive looking passenger car, present, in spite of their differences, an architecturally harmonious grouping. Two factors, the uniformly light colored brick, and the generally large scale of the buildings create a sense of architectural continuity. There is also a vaguely Romanesque style of architecture consistently in evidence in, for example, the symmetrical organization of the facades and lateral wall surfaces into bays, and the frequent use of the rounded arch for doors and windows.

Even the use of lanterns recalls a clerestory of a medieval church. Historically derived architectural details relate these buildings further: the pilasters used to mark the bays, the corbelling which follows the angle of the buildings under the roof line, and the dentils strung along the sides of the buildings under the roof. Other elements derive from a utilitarian basis: the low pitched roof lines, the lanterns along the roof ridges, the tall paired windows of the lateral walls, and the large rounded barn-like doors.

After the shop plans had been approved, several more buildings were added: a two-stall engine house, a large lumber storage shed, and a double dry kiln. These last two items again illustrate the primacy of wood in passenger car construction at this time. These buildings were all torn down many years ago.

The Como Shops remained relatively unaltered until the turn-of-the-century when a

significant change took place. A transfer table and pit was installed in 1901 just east of the paint shop and the main building. This allowed for easy transfer of cars from one specialized work area to another with a minimum of wasted space. For example, a car could leave the wood working shop on its center track; the transfer platform would be rolled on tracks in a pit, and it would align itself to the tracks on which the car rested; the car would then be moved onto the platform and be rolled along sideways to whatever shop door the car was to enter next. The tracks would then be aligned again and the car would roll off the platform onto the track and into the doors of the shop.

THE PLACEMENT of the transfer pit determined the future expansion of the shops to a great extent. At the time the transfer pit was installed, another large shop building, similar in size and design to the paint shop, was built opposite the paint shop. Tracks and doors were aligned so that a car could leave this new coach repair building, slide out the door and onto the platform, cross the platform, and go directly into the paint shop - or the car on the platform could be moved to another door or shop farther away.

In 1911 the transfer table was extended to the south. With this extension, both the old paint shop and the newer coach repair shop were also extended to the south, almost doubling their capacity. The paint storehouse was demolished at this time and rebuilt at the end of the extended transfer pit. A passage way connected the two buildings at the south end.

Two entirely new buildings were built after 1912. Since neither was connected to the

actual repair of cars, they were located away from the transfer pit. They were erected along side the main line track on the north, just to the west of the office-storehouse. The first was a laboratory building (1913 and 1927), which had become more and more important by this time; all kinds of equipment and materials were tested there. When the shops were first built, a separate laboratory building was not even considered, even though the superintendent of machinery, motive power and rolling stock was frequently testing things out; for many years the former blacksmith coal storage house was used for this purpose.

The second building, also built in 1913, was an unusual, almost windowless structure that was to house the company records. The interior construction reflected the modern use of cast concrete columns to support the second floor. Fortunately for later generations, vast amounts of information about the Northern Pacific — basically, all of its records — were stored in this building. This collection of documents is now available to the public at the Minnesota Historical Society.

Additions were made to the blacksmith shop in 1917 and to the office storehouse in 1920, but after the First World War, major building at the Como shops ceased.

In all of these later buildings and additions, there was an admirable attempt to blend the new construction with the old, architecturally. After World War II, however, there was little attempt to preserve the architectural purity of the buildings. For example, glass brick replaced the multi-paned windows, the mansard roof was removed and rebuilt with brick that did not match the cream brick of the buildings, and many of the rounded arches of the car doors were squared off or filled in.

PASSENGER CARS HAD changed vastly by World War II. The small wooden coaches of the 19th century were gradually replaced by steel and aluminum. The work in the shops changed, too. New specialized work areas replaced the old work areas as times and techniques changed. Once Amtrak took over the passenger traffic and repair shops outside of Chicago, not even passenger cars were worked on at Como. The Burlington Northern's continuing work on damaged cabooses at the Como Shops marked, as it were, the tail end of a long tradition in local railroad history.

With the city of St. Paul, the St. Paul Port Authority and private businesses joining together to purchase and develop the Como tract as an Energy Park, a common orientation toward energy conservation united the efforts to rebuild this part of the city. Residential, commercial, and retail structures all will occupy the site, and the Como Shops, once destined for the wrecking ball, are now playing a pivotal role. As enlightened heads prevailed, planners and developers began to look on the shops as a candidate for preservation. Now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Como Shops complex forms St. Paul's third National Historic District.

Not everything connected with the shops was saved. The freight repair shed was dismantled and its wooden boards salvaged. The power house, lavatory coal storage building and smoke stack were razed. Care was taken to save and collect the brick from these buildings for reuse in the remaining structures. The transfer pit was also filled in at this time.

The shop buildings which so far have

South end of the paint shop undergoing restoration in 1983.





Atrium condominiums under construction in 1983. Lanterns along the roof ridges repeat lanterns used to light interiors of shops.

undergone the most transformation have been the original paint shop, built in 1885, and the coach repair shop (1902) and its extension (1911). The original paint shop is now occupied by the Share medical offices; the coach repair shop building is being developed into an indoor retail mall, Bandana Square. Both structures have benefitted from a coordinated preservation effort. The restoration work is being done by the St. Paul firm of Winsor/Faricy Architects. They and all of the other buildings were first washed down with a chemical cleaner to remove the decades of grime and return the brick to its original cream color. This, along with the dismantling of accumulated odd wires and fixtures, gave the shops a fresh new vigor.

THE DISTINCTIVE OUTLINES of these buildings were greatly enhanced by the rebuilding of the lanterns along the peaks of the roofs. Even the reflector boards suspended in a V-form from the interior of the lanterns were rebuilt. This V shape helped to reflect light from the lantern windows down to the work area below, and today these forms enclose the mechanical systems of the renovated shops.

The interiors were sandblasted, exposing the warm color of the pine support columns and woodwork. On the cement floors, the remains of the original tracks are still in place.

The glass block windows have been replaced by triple glazed, small paned windows, much like the originals. The distinctive large rounded car doors have been replaced by similarly shaped panels, except on the east side of the building where three of the original doors, carefully restored, stand permanently open to welcome visitors and customers to the retail shops of Bandana Square. Both the window

frames and the large wooden doors are painted a fresh brick red, similar to a color once used on the shop walls.

Although the transfer pit was dug up when the demolition was going on, a part of it has been recreated at the south end of the original pit. Resting in the modified pit is the platform itself and the operator's shed.

Plans for the remaining buildings are being developed. A theater-restaurant is scheduled for the blacksmith shop. Work will soon begin on a health-sports complex to be located in the cruciform building. Offices will occupy the former office-storehouse building.

One striking feature in the redevelopment of these buildings and their surroundings is the reuse of the lantern; first it was restored to its original position on these buildings and then it was copied for use on the new atrium condominiums nearby. The repetitious grouping of this architectural motif on the new construction makes for a dramatic, visually exciting blend of the old and the new.

FOOTNOTES

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THE GIBBS HOUSE

at 2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Falcon Heights, is owned and maintained by the Ramsey County Historical Society as a restored farm house of the mid-nineteenth century period.

The Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. Its chief function is to collect and preserve the history of the city and the county and share that history with the people who live here. The Society is the county's historian. It preserves those things from the past that are the community's treasures — its written records through the Society's library; its historic sites through establishment of the Irvine Park Historic District and its successful efforts to help prevent destruction of the Old Federal Courts Building, now Landmark Center. It shares these records through the publishing of its magazine, brochures, pamphlets, and prints; through conducting historic sites tours of the city, teaching classes, producing exhibits on the history of the city, and maintaining its museum on rural county history. The Gibbs Farm Museum, the oldest remaining farm home in Ramsey County, was acquired by the Society in 1949 and opened to the public in 1954 as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler. In 1966 the Society moved onto the property a one-room rural country schoolhouse dating from the 1870s. Now restored to the period of the late 1890s, the school is used for classes, meetings, and as the center for a summer schoolhouse program for children.

Society headquarters are located in Landmark Center, an historic Richardsonian Romanesque structure in downtown St. Paul, where it maintains the center's only permanent exhibit, a history of the building during the seventy-five years it was the federal government's headquarters in St. Paul.

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