The Williams Bay Branch
of the Chicago Northwestern RR
Photos included at the end.

Historical Facts:

Built in 1855
Dismantled in 1983
128 years of service to the area
50 miles long (Elgin to Lake Geneva)

This railroad was built in 1855 to bring people and commerce into Elgin and up the Fox River Valley.

For perspective; the very first railroad built in the Chicago area (1848) was the G&CU (the Galena and Chicago Union RR). It ran from downtown Chicago thru Oak Park, Elmhurst, West Chicago, reaching downtown Elgin (East of the river) in 1850. Its ultimate goal was to extend to Galena's lead mines.

Many thousands of people rode the train to Elgin that year (1850) and discovered the beauty of the Fox River and its bluffs and the town flourished. After reaching Elgin, building a depot and bringing a new found interest and prosperity to the town, the G&CU started working on a bridge to cross the Fox River and continue westward. Unfortunately, the G&CU decided to build the Fox River bridge one mile south of Elgin. This meant that future trains would not pass thru Elgin making the town and its new depot insignificant, unused and ignored.

After the G&CU decision to cross the river south of Elgin a group of investors resolved to build a railroad from the Elgin depot to the Wisconsin border to bring commerce into Elgin and up the Fox River Valley.

This new railroad, the Fox River Valley Railroad, was built in 1855. Soon after, in 1858 it went bankrupt and was reformed as the Elgin and State Line RR. In 1860 it was taken over by the G&CU. In 1864 the G&CU merged with the Chicago and Northwestern RR. The Elgin & State Line RR then became the Williams Bay Branch of the CNW after its merger with the G&CU.

At its peak, from 1890 to 1910, there were 4 passenger trains daily and several local and extra freight trains per day. Some of the passenger trains were so full they were standing room only. Lake Geneva became the number one vacation destination for thousands of Chicagoans, rich and poor! The freight business supported hundreds of businesses including 5 that were the largest of their industries in the world!

The original right of way is still being used from Crystal Lake to Ringwood. Metra trains still run on the original ROW to McHenry. The remaining old right of way is a walking/biking trail in Illinois. The right of way in Wisconsin reverted back to the neighboring landowners.

By the way, the Galena & Chicago Union Railroad never made it to Galena. It stopped building west in Freeport, Illinois, after the Illinois Central made it to Galena before them.

Details of this Model Railroad:

This model railroad is of the 1960 era (Give or take a few years).

24 total businesses are modelled on the railroad.
All of them (except one) existed on the railroad in 1960.
8 businesses were over 100 years old! (the oldest was Haeger at 164 years!)
5 businesses were the largest in their industry in the USA (3 worldwide).

In addition to the 24 businesses modeled there is also…
2 Engine service facilities, 1 Team track, 2 Interchange tracks,
2 Classification tracks in Elgin and 3 Yard tracks (each hold up to 12 cars) in Melrose Park representing Chicago.

The model has over 50 turnouts (switches)
There is about 200 feet of mainline track (19,200 scale feet or 3.6 scale miles)
From Chicago to Wisconsin, it is 5 scale miles in HO Scale.

There are over 70 freight cars and 12 locomotives including 2 steam locos for the passenger trains.
The layout has 3 bridges, over 400 trees and 6 tunnels.
(There were no tunnels on the actual railroad)

It took about 3 consecutive years of work to build the model over a 17-year period.
Cost is estimated at $30k over 30 years.

2020-2021

In the winter of 2020-2021 during the Covid pandemic I decided to finally make some changes and additions to my 15-year-old HO train layout. After a major reconstruction project including restructuring of several steel shelving units and moving electrical outlets, I added new shelving to two rooms in the back of my basement giving my Railroad much needed real estate to work with. It included a large three track yard and two large areas with spurs for several industries in each. On the other side of the basement, two rooms over, I added enough shelving and track for 2 Classification tracks and 6 industry tracks. This gave the RR the room it needed to be able to operate trains in a realistic manner. This winter the RR went from having only 7 industry spurs to 25. I also created a "Car Card" operating system and added 40 more freight cars.

These changes/additions transformed what I had from a train layout to what could become a "Model Railroad." All I had to do now was to find a real railroad to base the model on.

My original "Layout" was fictitious. Loosely based on the Galena Division of the (CNW) Chicago and Northwestern RR which included the town of Elgin. It wasn't very operational as trains just went from one end to the other and turned to go back again. There were only about 7 industry spurs to move cars to and from and some of the trackage was poorly designed and needed to be re-built.

I had a custom decaled water tank with Elgin on it and wanted to continue to use it if possible. I started to look for CNW railroads around Elgin.

I soon discovered the Elgin to Williams Bay Line of the CNW. As I started researching the railroad, I thought it was perfect for my basement empire. So, I started modelling the businesses and towns along the line. Then I found out that it went right through Pell Lake, Wisconsin where my family lives. At the end of their street, about three houses down, the train track once existed! It made it even more personal to me now. I hope that Liam and Ellie become interested in operating it with me someday.

Because my basement has a walk out patio door, my railroad runs from one corner, thru a closet and then into the main layout where it runs thru twice (double track with a crossover). From there it continues as an upper level or lower-level shelf into the back two rooms of the basement. In the room farthest back, where the sink is, the lower shelf is the Proviso Yard in Melrose Park (Just West of Chicago). Proviso is a 3-track

yard each can accommodate a 12-car train waiting to go to Elgin with a new load of cars for the Williams Bay Line. That train from Chicago will go thru the layout to the other end of the basement and end up in Elgin. It will drop off its cars and pick up the 10 or so cars classified for Chicago and return to Proviso.

From Elgin there are two locals running up and down the line. Each train has pick-ups and set outs. From Elgin going North the stops are Dundee, Carpentersville, Algonquin, Crystal Lake, McHenry, Ringwood, Richmond, Genoa City, Pell Lake, Lake Geneva and finally Williams Bay. Then the train would do its work in the same towns, in reverse, going South.

Operation:

There are over 70 freight cars and over 25 destinations (Businesses and spurs) on the layout.

Each freight car has a 2x4 inch "car card" with a pocket. The pocket holds a double-sided waybill, with two or more destinations for that car. After a car reaches its destination, the waybill is flipped over and the car now has a new destination. Each destination has a minimum of 3 cars assigned to it. This causes every car to continually move and every business to receive and ship cars automatically.

Each train usually has around 8 cars and the operator of the train will carry the corresponding cards along with the train until the cars are delivered. When a car is delivered you put its card in the set-out box for that location. You then pick up any cars that have cards in the pick-up box and/or cars that were in the industries you just delivered new cars to. When you pick up a car, you take the corresponding card, turn the waybill to show its new destination and add the card to the train cards you are carrying. Move your train to the next town and repeat the process.

Using this system, the railroad operates in a somewhat realistic manner and most importantly it is a self-reliant and automatically managed system. All the cars on the layout move from one place to another and back. This system by design moves all the cars and is constantly and automatically refreshing itself.

Just as it did in real life train cars on this model move from industry to industry, place to place from Chicago to Elgin to Williams Bay, Wisconsin.

This is how the railroad operated in real life with some minor, yet notable, exceptions during the era. By 1960 the railroad was in decline and shipping and passenger traffic was very minimal. Our model operates as if it were still going relatively strong at that point. In 1960 trains on this line did not run from Elgin to Wisconsin. They ran over other CNW divisions. The few trains still servicing Elgin were coming from West Chicago and the trains servicing Algonquin were coming from the Wisconsin Division (The tracks along Northwest Hwy).

In addition, some of the industries were not using rail service at all at that time. One more notable fact is that the Elgin Sweeper Company was located across the Fox River from our line but I included it because it was one of Elgin's iconic businesses and I think the old Pelican Sweepers look great on the layout!

Nevertheless, let's not focus on the imprecisions of the model. Let's think of better days when the railroad was thriving and bringing people and commerce to the Fox Valley area. Let's take a step back into 1960.

By the way Elgin Sweeper is still in business and I have spoken to representatives of the company to obtain history and other information. I have also interviewed other business owners and employees at some of the industries I have modelled. I spoke with Mr. Alexander from Alexander Lumber, Jeff Sedlack one of the owners of Mathews Company, Alan and Jeff at Watlow (Formerly the Claud S. Gordon Co) and Bruce from Olsen Electrics. The research and history have been a large part of the reward of doing this. Many Librarians, Authors, museum employees and historical society members have been very helpful to me in my quest for information.

Some of the buildings are still in existence and I have been to many of them. Much of the Right of Way is now a walking biking trail and I have walked and biked some of it. I have posted short histories of the businesses on the layout. I am learning more as I continue to research. I am trying to make the model as accurate and factual as possible. It's kind of like a genealogy search and sometimes when I am on the land of the RR or an industry, I feel like I am visiting a ghost! I've been smitten by this railroad. I've imagined the enthusiasm and excitement this railroad brought to so many people in its beginning and thru the peak years. I've been saddened by the thought of its decline. Then I go run a train and it brings my thoughts back to better times.

Because of space restrictions (in my basement), the trackage and building designs are limited to what I have to work with. Please use your imagination, forgive the cut corners, paper building fronts, short sidings, small buildings, imperfect dates or other indiscretions.

Grab a throttle and let's run some trains!

PS: One more note about the physical operation of the trains. We do not touch the trains unless we have to re-rail them. We use bamboo skewers to uncouple the cars and they automatically re-couple when backed into each other.

CNW Elgin to Williams Bay Branch

PHOTOS

A view of all 3 rooms. Left: Elgin, Center: Main room (Dundee, Carpentersville, Algonquin, Crystal Lake), Right: McHenry – Ringwood – Richmond. (Right and out of photo: Wisconsin)

Main Layout Room

Elgin (Top: Left view, bottom: Right view)

Dundee (Back) and Algonquin (Front)

Carpentersville

Crystal Lake

Upper shelf: McHenry – Ringwood – Richmond

Lower shelf goes to Proviso.

Wisconsin: Genoa City & Pell Lake. Lower shelf is the Proviso yard.

End of the line. Lake Geneva & Williams Bay