



**Veterans' Association  
of the  
Chicago & North Western Railway**



*Organized December 9, 1924*

**Ernest Koehn, C&NW Traveling Mechanic**

*Mention the job of Traveling Mechanic and you may not have much of an idea of what that was all about, it being one of the lesser known railroad occupations; yet nonetheless, a very important one. Truman Koehn, whose father was a C&NW Traveling Mechanic tells us about it and fills us in on his father's career. Certainly, these men who were obviously jacks of all trades and, contrary to the familiar saying, were also masters of most of them. Our sincere thanks go to Truman Koehn for this excellent article.*

My Dad, Ernest Koehn, was a traveling mechanic for the Chicago & North Western Ry. He and one other man, Oscar Mellgren, were assigned all the territory in Iowa pretty much north of the C&NW east-west main lines and up into southern Minnesota. Mr. Mellgren's father, incidentally, was also a C&NW Traveling Mechanic dating that family's service back to the 1890's. Eagle Grove was sort of in the middle of this territory. They had a nice sized shop in one section of the Eagle Grove roundhouse, separate and secured off from the main part of the roundhouse. He also had a panel truck in addition to his Fairmont Motor Car. His territory is highlighted on the map further down the page. Truman's article on track motor cars can be found [here](#) along with a picture of Ernest Koehn..

Traveling mechanics kept coal chutes working, water tanks functioning and did all the plumbing, heating and air conditioning (if there was any air conditioning) in all the buildings owned by the C&NW including the depots. There were a great number of depots in those days.

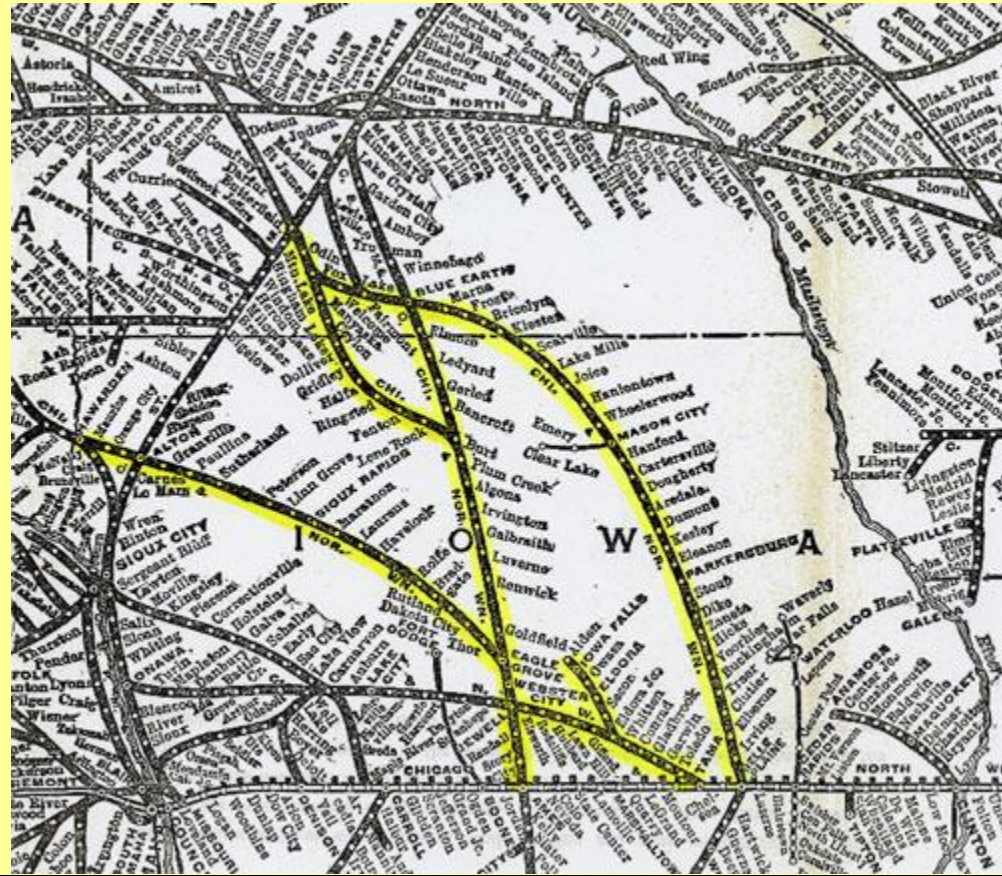
My Dad's territory out of Eagle Grove included the line west of Eagle Grove to Hawarden, IA on the South Dakota state line. This line went through Orange City, Iowa. (Holland Dutch settlements). He also covered the territory from Eagle Grove north to Fox Lake, MN, which included most of the southern Minnesota lines through Blue Earth, Fairmont and Butterfield as well as Bricelyn to Mason City, and continuing south down to Belle Plaine on the main line via Parkersburg. He had the rural east - west cross line from Wall Lake through Jewell and over to Tama, on the main line. The Iowa Falls-Alden Line and the Eagle Grove line south down to Ames, which is also on the main line. On the line north of Eagle Grove, at one time that line split at Burt so the line to the left that went through Ringsted and Dolliver (Danish settlements) was called the Burt line. The line that went straight north to Blue Earth went via Elmore and was called the Elmore Line. Almost all of these lines are gone today so you would need an old C&NW system map to follow up on most of my Dad's territory, (see below). He was on the road a great deal and was a monthly employee with an expense account. He knew most of the hotels in northern Iowa and southern Minnesota very well. My Dad even worked as far north in Minnesota as St. James and Butterfield.

Lots of cattle were shipped on the railroads in those days and many stations all along the branch lines in the rural areas had stock yards. I remember they had to keep the stock yards functioning for water and such. Cattle were either gathered up and shipped from these stock yards or in some cases, cattle had to be unloaded, fed and watered after so many hours in stock cars. Stockmen rode in the cabooses to insure the livestock were cared for while being shipped. There were also large 4 inch diameter "stand pipes," which operated at two levels along the tracks every so many miles in larger communities. These were used to spray water on hogs being shipped in stock cars, which had 2 levels. Hogs do not sweat and will die in the famous Iowa hot summer weather if not watered down every so many miles. (Bet you did not know that - and few remember this today.) The 4 inch pipes were flared or nearly flattened on the ends to provide a good solid spray across the stock cars. Behind these "stand pipes" a man would operate these big flared pipes up and down on pivots as the train moved past very slowly. They used a lot of water under high pressure soaking down the hogs.

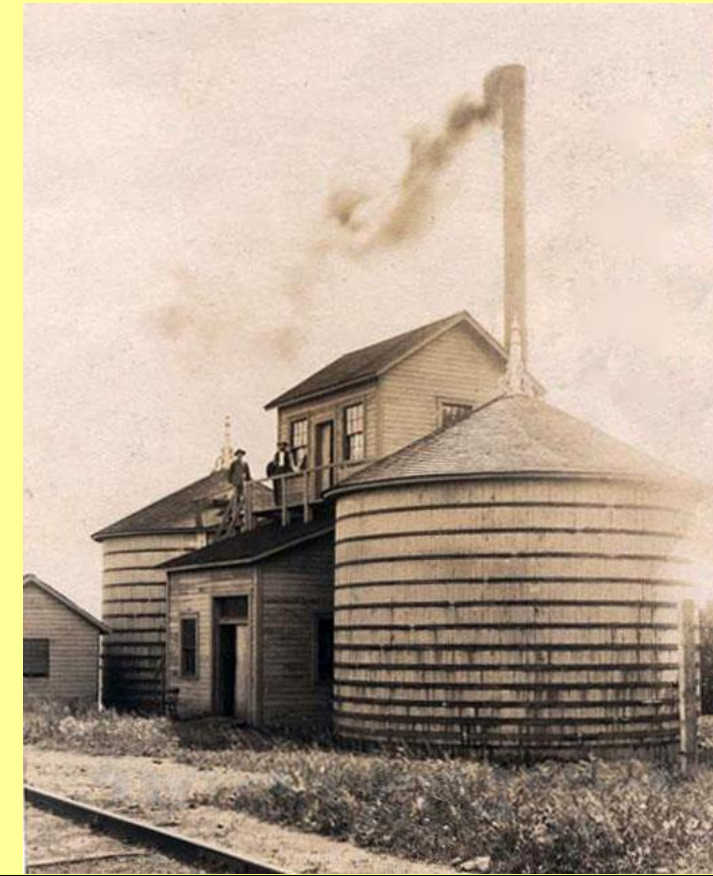
My Dad also did lots of welding and did steam pressure welding up to around 200 pounds that I know about. He was also a qualified pipe fitter and had done pipe fitting in roundhouses at one time. He also took care of wind mills that pumped water into tanks on branch lines out in the middle of "nowhere" for the needs of an occasional steam powered train. I recall he climbed smoke stacks as my Dad was sent out to Iowa to replace a man killed when the man slipped off near the top of a smokestack, the rivets in his safety belt ripping out as well. The C&NW put new rivets back in and my Dad had that same safety belt for decades.

My Dad grew up in Danville, IL, home to the famous Oakland Shops of the Chicago & Eastern Illinois Railroad. At one time, 1,500 men worked in the Oakland Shops. My Dad came out of a large railroad family, all of whom had at one time worked in the Danville roundhouse or shops. My Dad apprenticed as a sheet metal worker and carried his union card as a sheet metal worker and was the last card carrying union sheet metal worker employed on the C&NW north of Chicago. My Dad came up to Fond du Lac and hired on the C&NW around 1922 as the C&NW was the only railroad in the nation that settled the Great 1922 National Shop Craft Railroad Strike. (None of my Dad's immediate family ever went back to work on the C&EI at Danville as all of the shop craft unions lost that strike, except on the C&NW.) This was the last national railroad strike in American history. My Dad worked as a sheet metal worker, pipe fitter and welder at North Fond du Lac on the C&NW. I was born in Fond du Lac. Shortly before World War II began, my Dad was "temporarily" sent back to Eagle Grove, Iowa for 6 months to fill in after the man previously mentioned was killed falling off a smoke stack. The war broke out, men became scarce, so my Dad was "frozen" at Eagle Grove and the 6 months turned into 15 or 16 years. My parents eventually sold their home in Fond du Lac and bought another in Eagle Grove, Iowa, which at one time was a major division point on the C&NW and headquarters of the Northern Iowa Division. In the 1950's, the Iowa and Southern Minnesota lines began to disappear and my Dad was given the choice by the C&NW to return to Fond du Lac, go into Chicago, or come to Green Bay. He decided to go to Green Bay as he had never worked there. He had worked in the C&NW California Avenue coach yard in Chicago in the 1930's for a spell building coaches, I believe. His transfer back up to Wisconsin was around 1956-57. I came home from 7th Army in 1957 to find my family preparing to leave for Wisconsin. They moved to Green Bay in 1958 when my Dad was 60 years old. This move had to have been very difficult for them as by this time they had roots in Eagle Grove. But, we had no other relatives in the state of Iowa.

Shortly after I came back from Germany (1957), in 1958 my grandfather, John Koehn Sr., died in Danville, Illinois. He was almost 95 and had enjoyed near perfect health and a totally clear mind up until the very last days of his life. He was still on strike against the C&EI right up until the day he died. None of my Dad's brothers ever went back to work on the C&EI and my youngest uncle, who never had an opportunity to go to work on the C&EI due to the 1922 strike, began the 2nd truck line in the City of Chicago. My uncle, who had the truck line, had contracts with Sears as well as Armour & Swift transporting meat, etc. and trucked right up Illinois Highway #1 back in the 20's, 30's, 40's and 50's, right next to the C&EI main line south of Chicago. And his truck line trucked all over the Midwest. He helped put the C&EI out of business. Proving that what goes around comes around and that it is a long road indeed that does not have a turn in it.



Mr. Koehn maintained the facilities located on the lines highlighted in yellow – some 660 miles of single track railroad.



Typical of the facilities kept in good condition by Mr. Koehn was this water treatment plant at Alton, Iowa



Above is a "bird's eye" view of Parkersburg, Iowa, one of Mr. Koehn's frequent stops on the way to Mason City.



Here is Dike, Iowa, just south of Parkersburg on the way to Mason City and Blue Earth.



This is Garwin, Iowa, northwest of Tama, Iowa on the way to Eldora Junction.



A familiar sight to Mr. Koehn and other family members would have been the C&EI office building at Oakland Shops, Danville, Illinois.