



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



*Organized December 9, 1924*

**Marc Deneen Remembers**



Marc Deneen (1925-2008) started with the telegraph key and ended on a computer keyboard during his 43-year career with the Chicago & North Western Railway. He sits at a computer at Monona Yard in Madison, Wisconsin on April 28, 1983, 3 years before his 1986 retirement. His railroad career was interrupted for two years by service in the U.S. Army during World War II. He nearly lost his life during a bazooka attack near Gifhorn, Germany in April 1945. He suffered 35 shrapnel wounds and was deafened in one ear. He returned to C&NW working in Madison or nearby, never moving from the house he grew up in at Riley, WI on the present Military Ridge State Trail west of Madison.

For Marc, working for the railroad for 43 years was a good experience. He came from a railroad family. His father, John, spent 30 years on the railroad, and Tim, his son, already has 30 years of service in as a locomotive engineer.

"Yes, it was quite a change from telegraph and telephone to computers, but I got familiar with them too. It wasn't a bad job. At the age of 61, I took my pension a year early, in 1986. All I lost was 10 percent for one year. I get a fairly good pension now," said Deneen, who lives in Riley where he grew up, a small community 17 miles west of Madison. His father, a butter maker, was agent at Riley from 1906 until the station closed. Today, a state trail and tavern next door dominate the town.

Deneen started with the Chicago & North Western on August 23, 1943 as a helper to telegraph operator-agent Fred Wagner at Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin. He worked his way up to telegrapher, agent, car distributor, and dispatcher for the Madison Division headquartered at Madison.

"I liked my job as long as the passenger trains were running. That was kind of exciting because you really had to be on the ball. It was a little bit strenuous. Some of the guys couldn't take it. There was pressure to keep the trains on time. Freight trains were put in the hole and they would be there until the passenger train went by. If you had some trouble, it was too bad."

In 1958, the C&NW moved the Madison Division dispatchers to Milwaukee. Marc would have stayed as a dispatcher if they had stayed in Madison. Instead, he spent the rest of his railroad days as chief yard clerk at Monona Yard in Madison.

Deneen, known for his story telling, tells about the day Wagner left him in charge of the Mt. Horeb station. "He told the train dispatcher to take it easy on me. That was all right. But those Western Union hot shots, man they could telegraph. Rosie, the secretary for the cheese buyer, called and told me to give their next car to bando. I jumped on that, to get the rate and all that. I figured bando was a destination. I couldn't find bando in the state where the car was going. When Wagner came back the next day, I asked him about it. He said: 'That's B. & O.,'" Deneen laughs.

How has work changed? "Wagner used to tell me, 'You have it good, because when I started working we worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week.' When I started in 1943, I worked 48 hours; then they passed the 40-hour week. In those times, if you had to work your day off, it was time and a half."

As have many others, the Deneen family has spent more than a century in the railroad industry at a time when employment climbed from 1,040,000 in 1900 to 2,236,000 in 1920, then declined to 883,000 in 1960 and 227,000 in 2001. For much of the period of industrialization in the United States, railroads were the single largest non-farm employer in the country. *(From the Center for Railroad Photography & Art, Madison, WI, written by John Gruber and used with permission.)*