

ALL ROADS LEAD TO CHICAGO

"MY JOB IS IN WISCONSIN, but my heart is in Chicago. In part, that's because I'm a big-city person. Put me in Los Angeles, or New York, or Sydney, or Rome — any place, really, with a flood of culture and dining and energy and people — and I'm in my element. And in part, it's because Chicago railroading is so dynamic ... a better show than any Hollywood blockbuster."

That's what I wrote in this space when this special issue first appeared in 2017, and all of that is still true. But I've found new places to enjoy Chicago's rail drama in the intervening six years, and that railroading has definitely remained dynamic.

So this revised look at the city had to be dynamic, as well. The majority of stories appeared in 2017, but most have been updated to reflect the changes brought by time and events in the rail industry. Most

notably, while no Chicago issue could be complete without a look at Metra, our story from 2017 has been replaced by an article in which we sat down with agency leadership to discuss the realities of post-pandemic commuter operations, as well as other changes for the ever-evolving system. We've also brought in a map and a feature that appeared in *Trains* subsequent to the original version of *Chicago*, but fit well with the focus of this magazine.

Chicago remains a place where railroading truly matters. I hope we'll once again help you understand why it truly is America's Railroad Capital.



David Lassen, editor



The Chicago skyline forms the backdrop for a westbound Union Pacific freight snaking through Kedzie on Sept. 10, 2021. David Lassen

CHICAGO CONTENTS

- 6** CITY OF RAILROADS
How Chicago became the vital hub of American railroading
- 18** MAPS: CHICAGO, THEN AND NOW
Rail network schematic; 1940 Chicago-Milwaukee routes; downtown, 1954
- 26** FIXING CHICAGO, OR NOT
With traffic down and the network functioning, railroads defer real solutions
- 36** FIVE DECADES, ONE STATION
Photographer John Gruber's look at 50 years of Chicago Union Station
- 48** THE ESSENTIAL L
Blair Kooistra explores the elevated lines that define the Loop and the city
- 58** ROOSEVELT ROAD
One street's route to becoming the place to see almost 1,000 trains a day
- 68** HALLOWED TURF
For railfans, the Chicago area is a must; these hot spots illustrate why
- 76** CREATING A NEW PATH
Metra pursues post-pandemic commuter success
- 88** FEEDING THE BEAST
Technology helps tame Belt Railway of Chicago's Clearing Yard
- 94** THE HIDDEN DOWNTOWN DEPOT
Like most gems, Van Buren Street station is found underground

ON THE COVER: Chicago is firmly in the grip of winter as Amtrak's *Empire Builder* rolls through the interlocking plant at Tower A-2 on its way to the Pacific Northwest. David Lassen



Trains SPECIAL

Trains Magazine special edition No. 03-2023

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Chicago: America's Railroad Capital (ISBN 978-1-62700-997-3) is published by Kalmbach Media Co., 21027 Crossroads Circle, P.O. Box 1612, Waukesha, WI 53187. Canada publication mail agreement 40010760.
 Single-copy prices: \$9.95 in U.S., \$10.99 in Canada and other foreign countries, payable in U.S. funds, drawn on a U.S. bank. Canadian cover price includes GST. BN 12271 3209 RT Printed in the U.S.A.

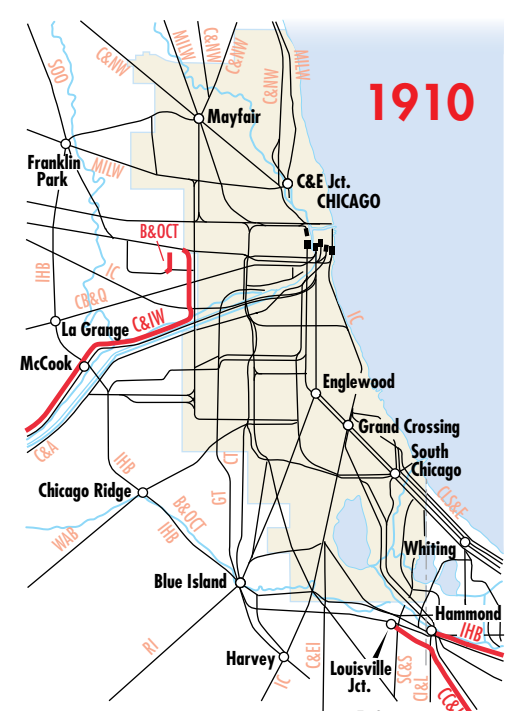
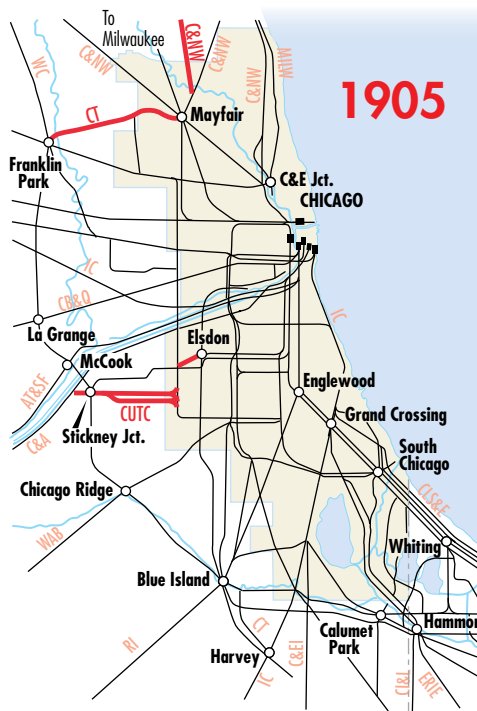
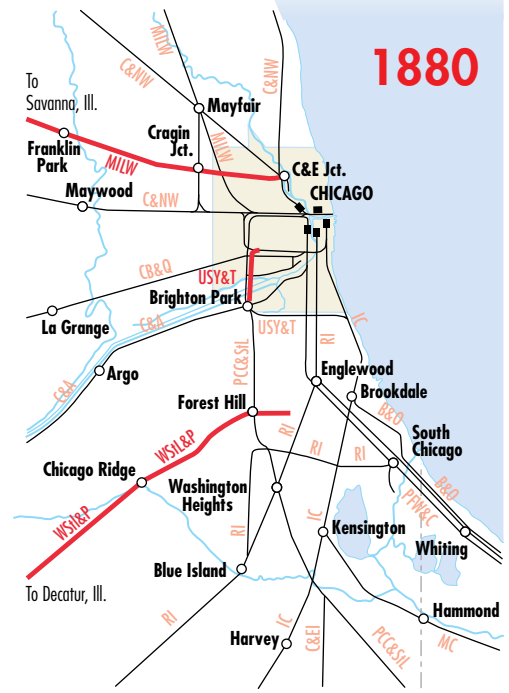
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- MS&NI Michigan Southern & Northern Indiana (LS&MS)
- NYC&StL New York, Chicago & St. Louis (Nickel Plate)
- PCC&StL Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Chicago & St. Louis (PRR)
- PFW&C Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne & Chicago (PRR)
- RI Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific
- SCAL St. Charles Air Line
- SC&S South Chicago & Southern (PRR)
- SOO Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Ste. Marie
- TR Terminal Railroad (IHB)
- USY&T Union Stock Yards & Transit (CJ)
- WAB Wabash
- WC Wisconsin Central
- WStL&P Wabash, St. Louis & Pacific (WAB)

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Chicago's central business district in 1962 shows passenger stations abutting the core on the south and west, and coach yards and freight houses occupying valuable land. Only six streets skirted or penetrated the tracks to the south. The warehouse-lined north and south branches of the Chicago River meet at lower right.

grain, meat, and lumber. All three funneled through Chicago in amounts unprecedented in human history. Grain elevators began appearing on the Chicago waterfront prior to the Civil War, lining the north and south branches of the Chicago River. As visitor James Parton noted of the grain trade in 1867, "it comes 'in bulk.'" Grain merchants established the Chicago Board of Trade in 1850 to create an orderly and enforceable market for grain. In turn, the grain created a market for food processing. Today, while grain movements through Chicago have greatly dwindled, Chicago retains a monstrous appetite for flour and sugars; it's the largest baking center in North America.

The second commodity, meat, defined Chicago to the world. Meat was a natural fit. Just as the granger railroads gathered the grain crop, they gathered the animals raised on the farms and concentrated them in Chicago for forwarding on the trunk lines to the East Coast. Introduction of the refrigerated boxcar in 1869 enabled relocation of

slaughterhouses from the East to Chicago, for shipping chilled meat was cheaper and less troublesome than shipping live animals. Said one observer in the 1860s, "The corn crop is condensed and reduced in bulk by feeding it into an animal form, more portable. The hog eats the corn, and Europe eats the hog. Corn thus becomes incarnate; for what is a hog, but 15 or 20 bushels of corn on four legs?" In the 1860s, Chicago's meat-packing industry outgrew its initial locations near downtown and moved 4 miles southwest of the city to the Chicago River's South Branch, where it established the Union Stock Yards in 1865. The Union Stock Yard & Transit Co. was created as a belt line to serve Chicago railroads. But after World War II, trucks enabled the meat-packing business to move even closer to the farm, to new slaughterhouses adjacent to feedlots in towns such as Dodge City, Kans., and Greeley, Colo. Chicago's role as "meat-packer to the world" disappeared. But the economic power it gave to the city did not.

The third commodity, lumber, moved in the opposite direction to grain and cattle. Cut from forests surrounding the upper Great Lakes, it moved across the water to Chicago, then westward, where it built barns, farmhouses, chicken coops, villages, and every other structure needed to occupy and develop the treeless prairies. Boxcars that came into Chicago laden with grain returned to farm villages laden with lumber. In the late 1860s, Chicago became the largest lumber distribution center in the world. The Chicago River was walled by storage and sales yards, and planing mills. As the northern forests were exhausted, southern lumber appeared in the market, delivered by Illinois Central, Chicago & Eastern Illinois,

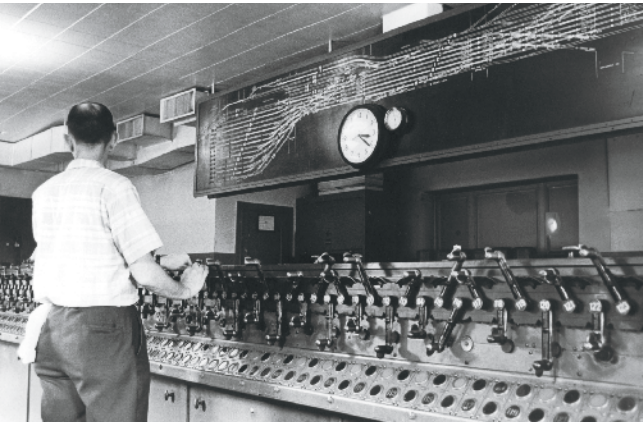
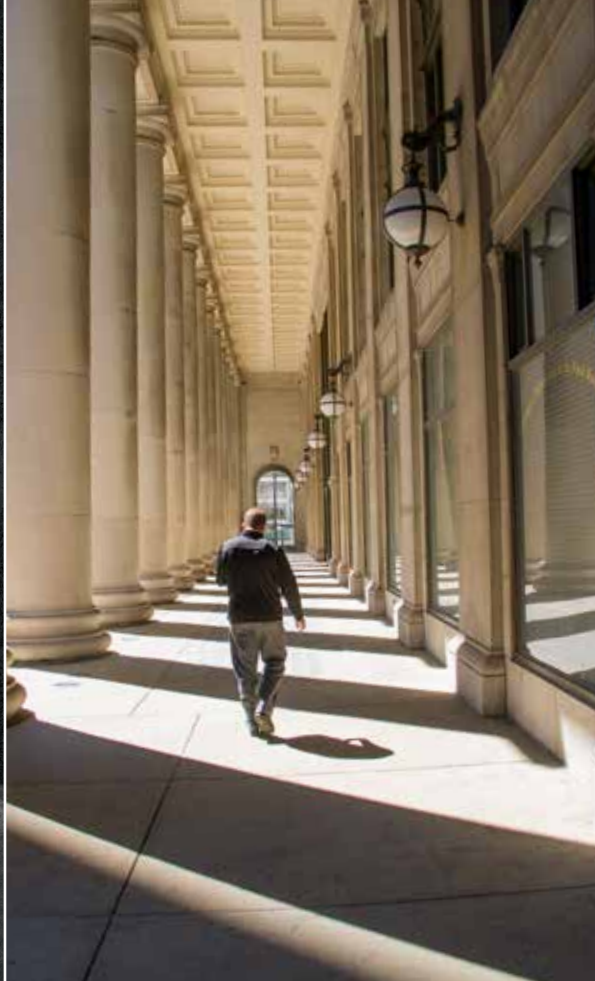
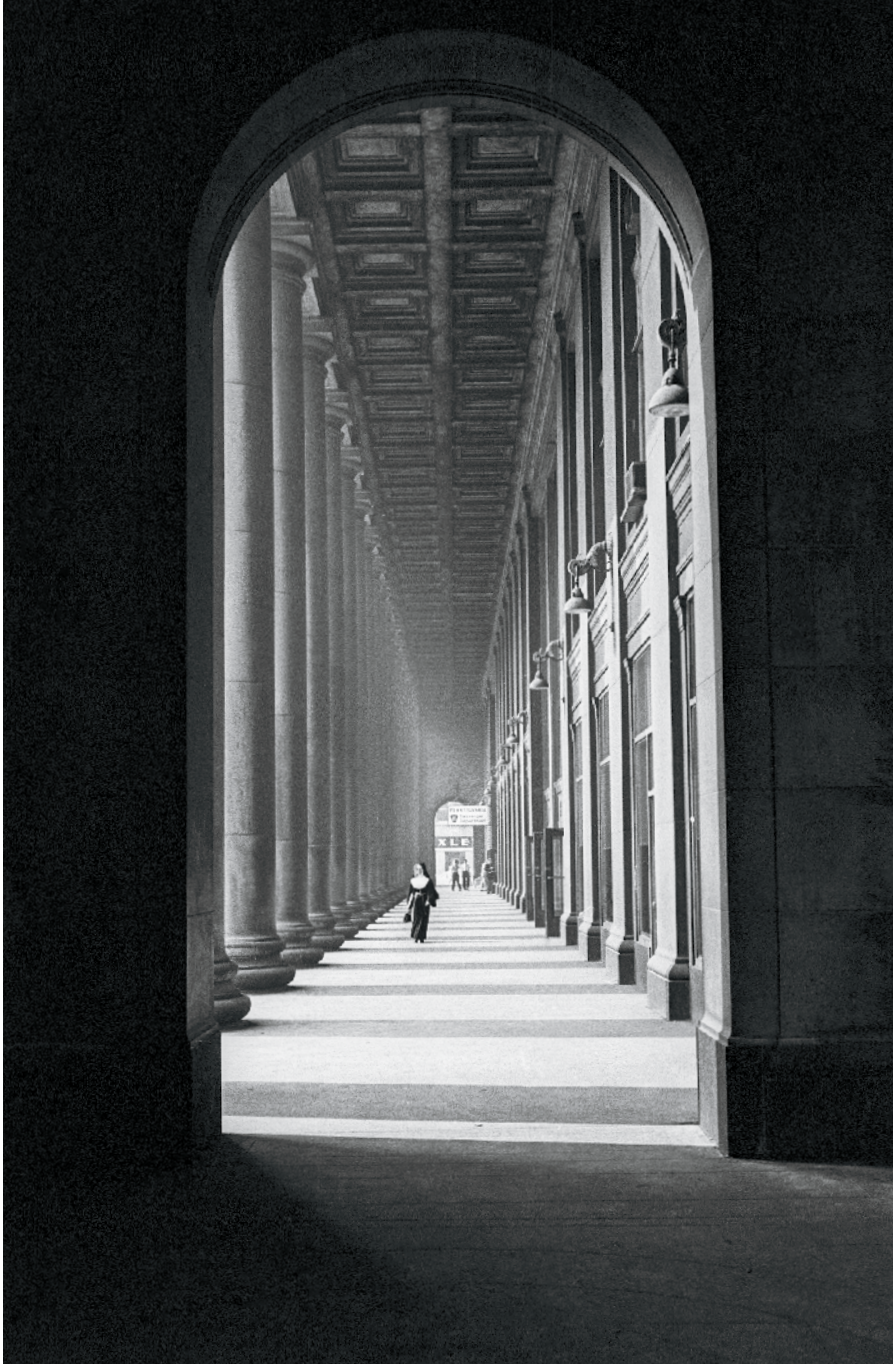
CHICAGO UNION STATION: THEN AND NOW



The concourse dominates the view from the Chicago River bridge. Today, the office building and the Willis Tower (commonly known by its former name, Sears Tower) soar above the station's headhouse.



The Roman-Doric columns, 39 feet high, along Canal Street are brighter and the cathedral-like appearance remains, but nuns wearing habits are seldom seen today.



The levers at Harrison Street Tower, an electropneumatic interlocking tower, have been replaced by work stations with computer monitors and digital screens at the Joseph C. Szabo Chicago Control Center, where Michael Roberts works.

CHICAGO UNION STATION: TODAY



At rush hour, commuters walk briskly to BNSF Line trains, while bright screens show the schedules.





Amtrak long-distance passengers gather in the main waiting room, then walk through the "To All Trains" portal to their departure gates. A symbol of the station's once important mail-handling role, a list of trains handling mail in the late 1960s remains on a pillar in the basement.



The Willis Tower, 110 stories tall, stands high above Chicago Union Station in this street-level view on Jackson Boulevard.

HALLOWED TURF



Videographer Ben Lake records a BNSF freight on the Racetrack at Highlands for the "Chicago: America's Railroad Capital" DVD. Two photos, David Lassen

Seven hot spots highlight the best that America's railroad capital offers dedicated train-watchers

CHICAGO IS STILL America's railroad capital, so it must also be the railfan capital. All six of North America's Class I railroads call on the city. It's arguably Amtrak's most important hub outside of the Northeast. Metra moves millions each year. And do not forget the famed "L" (and subway), too. Shortline, or more appropriately "terminal," railroads still punctuate the landscape for even more variety.

There are few places in North America where one can find more than 100 trains a

day — including freight moves — and Chicago is home to many of them. From gritty urban cityscapes to idyllic suburbs, the area offers a great deal for railfans. It has scenery. It has action. It has suspense. You just never know what you will see next.

Unfortunately, the region's expanse is much too great to include all of the spots here that we would like — especially when one looks as far afield as the Illinois Railway Museum in Union and Rochelle Railroad Park, both west of the Chicago sub-

urbs. Consider this the greatest-hits album for what is arguably the country's No. 1 act for railfans. We think, however, that these selections can bring much of what makes Chicago great to the forefront of your travel planning.

So if you find yourself in the upper Midwest, whether it's day or night, you're wearing sunglasses, with a full tank of gas (and a half pack of cigarettes), Chicago should be your destination of choice.

Hit it! — *Brian M. Schmidt*

BNSF's TRIPLE-TRACK TREAT



You may have heard Chicago winters can be a bit chilly, as illustrated by this westbound intermodal train at Western Springs, Ill., on Jan. 28, 2023.

LOCATION: One could spend months or years trying to photograph all of Chicago's rail lines. Most people don't have that much time, so here is a nominee for the most logical destination for a visitor wanting to see a high volume and variety of trains in a short period of time: BNSF Railway's famous triple-track Chicago Subdivision, commonly known as "The Racetrack."

The route begins at the Canal Street wye about a mile south of Union Station and runs west to Aurora. The best train-watching is on weekdays, especially during morning or evening rush periods when Metra runs commuter trains approaching streetcar frequencies; it's the busiest of Metra's commuter routes.

RADIO FREQUENCIES: BNSF road, 161.100; Canadian National ex-Elgin, Joliet & Eastern and ex-Illinois Central road, 160.920; Indiana Harbor Belt road, 160.980; Belt Railway road, 160.695.

TRAIN-WATCHING: To avoid Chicagoland's congested streets and highways, ride Metra to stations on the Racetrack. Metra runs 91 revenue trains on weekdays. However, the weekend schedule is significantly less with just 30 trains on Saturdays and 20 on Sundays and holidays, so visiting railfans should plan accordingly. The line is a stronghold for Metra's F40s.

On weekdays, traffic is often so heavy that a radio scanner is not necessary. Just follow the progression of signals as they

clear up for the next approaching train, which is often visible as a headlight on the horizon.

Many of the suburban stations along the route that survive from the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy era display esthetically pleasing architecture.

Amtrak operates four pairs of trains on the Racetrack. The westbound and eastbound *California Zephyr* and *Southwest Chief* all converge on the Chicago Subdivision (if they are on time) in mid-afternoon. The two pairs of regional trains, the *Carl Sandburg* and *Illinois Zephyr*, run between Chicago and Quincy, Ill. All eight Amtrak trains stop at Naperville, and the four Quincy trains call at La Grange Road as well.

BNSF runs, on average, 50 freight trains in a 24-hour

period across the Chicago Subdivision, depending on the day of the week, with volume building toward the weekend. Traffic is varied and includes general freight, coal and other unit trains, and intermodal. Freight moves are concentrated overnight and midday to avoid commuter runs.

Cicero's one-time freight yard now is an intermodal facility; Eola, east of Aurora, is a general freight yard.

The Chicago Subdivision goes under Canadian National's former Elgin, Joliet & Eastern at Eola, over the Indiana Harbor Belt in La Grange, under the CN's former Illinois Central main line to Iowa at Berwyn, and under the Belt Railway of Chicago in Cicero.

— Howard Ande

Aurora-Chicago, Ill.





Metra CEO and Executive Director Jim Derwinski speaks at ceremonies marking completion of CREATE's Argo Connection project on June 17, 2022. Derwinski has told employees that Metra must reinvent itself because of changes the commuter operator faces in the wake of the pandemic.

For the moment, some of Metra's financial stress has been eased with an influx of new state and federal funding. But as it moves into the post-COVID era — a challenge redefining commuter rail, and indeed all U.S. public transit — it will, in the long term, need that ability to be creative and innovative more than ever.

"Metra is not going to ever be the same again as it was when COVID hit," says Jim Derwinski, CEO and executive director. "We have to reinvent ourselves."

That process has already begun on a number of fronts.

Foremost is a planned evolution into a "Regional Rail" operation. The goal is to expand the focus beyond moving commuters to and from downtown Chicago for a Monday-Friday, 9-to-5 work week, to being the seven-day-a-week choice for a broader variety of activities. Closely related is a desire to develop new services, such as a regular, dedicated operation to O'Hare Airport.

Evolution is also beginning for Metra's aging equipment fleet, where another example of that financial creativity — a coming fleet of rebuilt SD70MAC locomotives — will be joined by an honest-to-goodness infusion of new passenger cars.

Meanwhile, the Metra physical plant is getting a facelift, as well, particularly its stations. Its 2023 capital plans include the start of a five-year program that will see rebuilds or makeovers for about 20% of its stations. That includes 13 on the Metra Electric line, where the commuter operator has been participating in a fare-equity pilot project that has boosted rider-

For a time, Cary, Ill., on the UP Northwest Line, had a pair of stations., as seen on Oct. 10, 2020. The new building, at left, replaced the older structure, which was closed and awaiting demolition. Metra has begun a significant effort that will see rebuilds or upgrades to almost a quarter of its stations.

ship and could be a harbinger of similar efforts elsewhere.

Derwinski — who rose through Metra's mechanical ranks to become CEO in 2017 — believes that as Metra reinvents itself, there also needs to be a revision of how Metra's impact is viewed.

"We've got to stop thinking about commuter rail success in terms of ridership numbers," he said during a March presentation to Northwestern University's Sandhouse Rail Group. "It's got to be about how beneficial it is to the region, how beneficial it is to the communities."

No matter how Metra's success is measured, though, he says the operation a few years from now is likely to be significantly different from the one we see today.

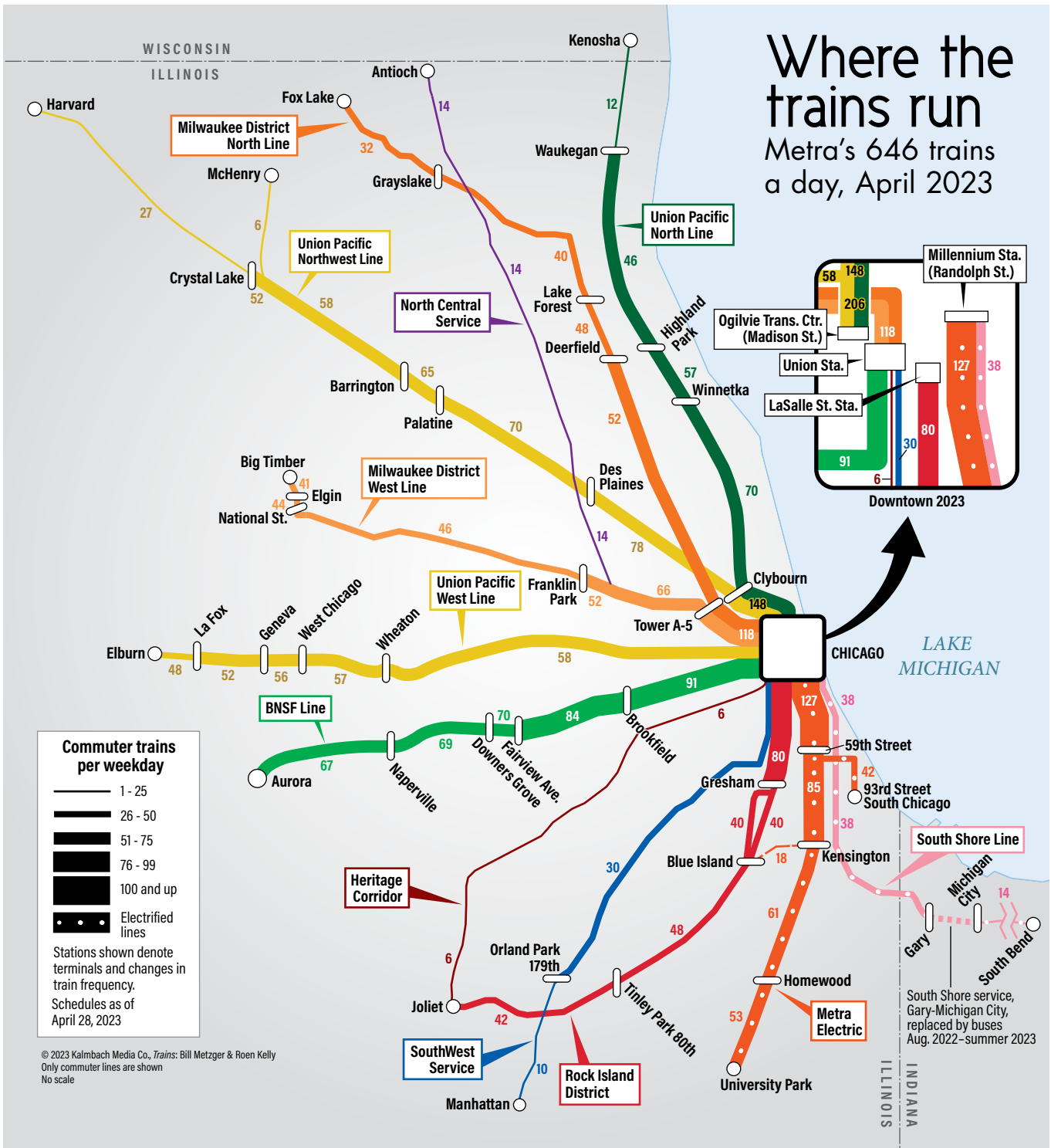
"If I say today, 'Is the Metra that you see in 2023 the Metra you're going to see in 2027?' I'm going to tell you absolutely not," he says. "We are going to continue to evolve."

Before considering what Metra may become, however, it may be helpful to review how it developed and what it is today.

AN ABRIDGED HISTORY

The 11-line, 487.5-mile system developed gradually and somewhat haphazardly into a mix of lines Metra owns and oper-

Metra's recent history has been one of creativity and strong performance in the face of financial constraint. Moves like addressing locomotive needs with secondhand power and a robust in-house passenger car rebuild program have helped the Chicago commuter operator maintain its sprawling operation on a relative shoestring. It has maintained an admirable on-time record — 95.4% in 2022 — while improving customer satisfaction, according to both its own surveys and those of its parent, the Regional Transportation Authority.



ates, lines it owns but doesn't control, and lines where it is a tenant.

Its roots are in the 1974 formation of the Regional Transportation Authority, created to fund existing commuter services in a six-county area. This was done through purchase-of-service agreements. Essentially, these were subsidies for railroads to provide operating personnel, shops, and maintenance workers to maintain their commuter equipment. Only the BNSF Line and three Union Pacific lines, inherited

from Chicago & North Western, still operate under such agreements.

This began to change when the RTA was forced to become an operator as a result of the bankruptcies of the Rock Island and Milwaukee Road. It created the Northeast Illinois Regional Commuter Railroad Corp. for that purpose in 1981. The RTA was reorganized into separate commuter rail, rail rapid transit, and bus service boards in 1983; the commuter rail division held its first meeting in June 1984 and took



This side of this car offers a rare reminder that Metra is short for Metropolitan Rail.