

# THE FORT PIERRE, SOUTH DAKOTA C&NW TRAIN DEPOT

## PART 1

BY GARY CRITTNER



***Author's Note:** Railroads have many components. Traditionally the bulk of the attention of railroad enthusiasts has been oriented toward rolling stock, particularly locomotives. Huge huffing, puffing work-horses draw the awe of railroaders and bystanders alike. And with an engineer in the cab waving and blowing the whistle, engines virtually came alive.*

*But there are many other parts of a railroad. These include fixed buildings such as storage sheds, water towers, workshops, tracks, bridges, and of course depots. Some railroaders feel that depots do not "get their due" in the grand scheme of railroad history, somewhat because so many have been demolished or otherwise lost. Fortunately, there has been at least some attempt to find, restore, and return these structures to their rightful place in railroad history.*

*This is the story of C&NW's Fort Pierre, S.D., train depot, its construction, use, abandonment, sale, removal, ranch use, return to Fort Pierre, and recent rehabilitation.*

The late 19th century was a time of great change in middle America. New states were being created, and the turmoil of the Civil War was largely in the rear view mirror. The nation's population was expanding rapidly and people were looking for land and opportunities outside the settled areas of the East Coast. The land west of the Mississippi River looked like a tremendous opportunity and the Homestead Act made it affordable.

The Federal Government's concessions to the railroads offered an additional incentive — expand the existing railroad system westward and bring settlers to the open land along the tracks. To make this opportunity a reality, the Chicago & North Western Railroad extended the rails from Tracy, Minn., to Pierre, S.D., in 1880. Towns sprung up along the line and homesteaders moved in and established communities. In 1889, South Dakota became the 40th state in the Union, and rail expansion continued. There were challenges, of course. At Pierre, bridging the Missouri River was a technological and financial challenge. This was particularly so since the area west of the Missouri was still part of the Great Sioux Reservation.

By 1906, several changes had been made, including the opening of much of the reservation lands to settlement. The C&NW seized on the opportunity and platted an extension of the railroad from Pierre to Rapid City. A bridge was built across the Missouri River between Pierre and Fort Pierre. The route west followed the Bad River drainage to near Wasta, S.D., where the Cheyenne River was crossed. From there the route continued westward to Rapid City and eventually along the northern Black Hills to the



**Above:** The Fort Pierre depot stands next to the C&NW line with the outhouse situated a few feet away. Today, this location is where the Yes Now convenience store resides. The exact date of this image is unknown but guessed to be after 1943. — *South Dakota State Archives*

Wyoming border. Along the route, many railroad structures were constructed to support the trains and the people, mail, and freight they transported. By 1907, the trains started rolling westward. It was now possible to travel by rail from the East Coast through Chicago all the way to Rapid City.

#### **Fort Pierre Depot Constructed in 1906**

In 1906, a new depot was built in Fort Pierre as part of the expansion. The C&NW depot in Fort Pierre was a Standard No. 1 station depot, 90 feet long and 20 feet wide with two passenger (men's, women and children's) waiting rooms. It was fashionably finished with horizontal varnished Douglas fir bead board upper walls and ceilings and painted bead board wainscoting in the "people" rooms of the building. The 34-foot 3-inch by 20-foot freight room was more ruggedly functional with open upper stud walls and rafter ceiling. Rough cut Douglas fir wainscot boards inside the freight room protected the walls from rough freight handling. Two 74-inch-wide sliding doors on each side of the room allowed

**Right:** This postcard, published by Fred A. Mix & Company, shows the first telegraph office in Fort Pierre. — *Virginia Windedahl Hart collection*

freight to be moved into and out of the depot. Two brick chimneys allowed for up to four stoves to heat the building. A slate roof topped the entire building, and a 14-foot-wide paver brick, plank and cinder platform provided access from the depot to the tracks. The building had no running water or toilet, but a sturdy outhouse was available.

In the middle of the depot was the agent's office, which handled the railroad business in the Fort Pierre area. Surprisingly, the agent's office built-in cabinetry was not elaborate, and could even be considered cheap.

As built, the depot had no electricity. City

power was added in 1913. Seventeen single-hung windows provided light during the day. Access to the people portion of the building was via three exterior doors that opened toward the platform and tracks. The doors were topped by transom windows, which opened to allow additional ventilation in the summer. The only interior door was between the small registration room and the agent's office. This design enhanced security, as most of the railroad transactions were paid in cash. The scheme apparently was successful, as a cursory review of history revealed no robberies of the depot.

For roughly a half century, the stately and



# Last Depot Agent Makes Station Temporary Home

The C&NW railroad moved depot agents around from time to time. In 1943, a new agent was assigned to Fort Pierre. Ernest Windedahl arrived with his wife, Gladys, and children, Virginia and James. It was in the middle of World War II, and housing was scarce in Fort

Pierre. Ernest decided that the men's waiting room of the depot could be made into temporary living quarters for the family while they searched for a permanent home. (The women and children's waiting room was retained for passengers.) Ernest and Gladys made the

depot a home and the surrounding property very comfortable. They even creating a park area on the street side complete with many trees and flowers along with a garage for the family car. The added a separate outhouse for the family. (See sidebar on opposite page.)

sturdy depot remained part and parcel of the fabric of life in Fort Pierre.

## Early History of the Depot

The railroads have always been leaders in keeping records. For instance, when a section of rail fails, they can go to their records and determine which smelter lot the rail came from and where other rails from that smelter lot are located. If necessary, all those affected rails are removed and replaced and appropriate documentation recorded. The Chicago & North Western Historical Society has many of the records that were retained, but a thorough review of records pertaining to the Fort Pierre depot has not been done. However, there are a few historic tidbits that are interesting including:

- J.J. (Jack) Farrell was the first depot agent and served as agent for at least 30 years. He was the brother of Bernie Farrell, who later became general passenger agent for the C&NW Railroad.

- A young fellow by the name of Bert O'Reilly wrote his name on the freight room wall (graffiti style). He was the brother of George O'Reilly, one of the teenagers who in 1913 discovered the Verendrye Plate, a lead plate placed on a Fort Pierre hillside. The plate, dated 1743, claimed the area for the King of France. That claim, which included the entire Missouri River drainage, was eventually sold to the United States in a deal between President Thomas Jefferson and the French

Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte in 1803. We now call it the Louisiana Purchase.

- As a young girl, Jane Metzinger went with her mother to the depot in the spring to send mom's fur coat by train to Huron, S.D., for cold storage at Eilers Furs. Jane recalls that in the fall she excitedly returned with her mom to the depot to retrieve the coat.

- Longtime resident Carla Sahr remembers that when she was a child, her grandmother Louisa Fischer got ill with the consumption and was unable to be treated in Pierre. It was 1909 and two doctors in Rochester, Minn., had established a clinic there. The Mayo brothers thought they might be able to help Mrs. Fischer, but she could not withstand a buggy ride the 500-plus miles to Rochester. A railroad boxcar was rented and outfitted with a bed and other necessities. Accompanied by her husband, Mrs. Fischer was transported by the C&NW Railroad to Rochester and back in the boxcar. Unfortunately, she died later in 1909. (Note: Consumption is an outdated diagnostic term for a wasting disease, typically caused by tuberculosis.)

## Depot Surplused and Sold

The Fort Pierre depot served the C&NW and Fort Pierre for several decades — handling mail, cattle, farm products, bulk freight, and passengers traveling both eastbound and westbound. While historians may disagree about the exact time-

frame, by the end of World War II the transportation system in the United States was changing. A combination of improved roads (including the Interstate system), more advanced automobiles, and airplanes eroded the preeminence of the railroads. Local passenger service was largely discontinued by the early 1950s, reducing the value of passenger depots. Long haul mail service was captured by the airlines. The C&NW went through a series of consolidations, employee ownerships, and corporate adjustments.

But by 1958, the die was cast. The Fort Pierre depot was closed and boarded up. Ernest Windedahl and his family were transferred to Ainsworth, Neb. For the next five years the depot slowly deteriorated, much like the railroad that had built the building.

In 1963, the C&NW declared the building surplus and put it, along with several other depots along the Fort Pierre to the Wyoming border, up for auction sale. Mr. Shirley Miller, a rancher from Mud Butte, S.D., along with his brothers, Earl and Ronald, bid on seven of the depots. Their plans were to move the buildings to their ranches and either demolish them for their quality components, or use them as ranch storage buildings. The brothers were the successful bidders on five of the depots, for which they paid a total of \$1,566.96. The ranchers split the cost three ways and Shirley Miller's share was \$522.32. A copy of his check is shown on page 20.

## The Move From Fort Pierre to Mud Butte

The Miller brothers arrived in Fort Pierre in late 1963 and prepared the depot for the move to the ranch. Moving buildings in the 1960s was not quite as sophisticated as today. The Millers brought a single-axle dual-wheel truck to provide the move's pulling power. Instead of supporting the depot on beams under the building, Miller "hung" the depot on two beams inserted through holes cut in the room walls above the floor. This lowered the overall building height during the move. Determining that the depot was still "too tall," the Millers removed roof slate tiles from the high portion of the roof and cut the sheeting and rafters off — essentially giving the depot about a

**Left:** This postcard, also published by Fred A. Mix & Company, is an early image of the Fort Pierre depot. That station was built in 1906 and was a Standard No. 1 design. — *South Dakota State Archives*



## Windedahl Family Takes Up Residence in Fort Pierre Depot



**Above left and right:** Ernest and Gladys Windedahl lived in the Fort Pierre depot until they were able to find a home in town. At left, Ernest is shown at the telegraph key in the Ainsworth, Neb., depot. At right, Gladys pauses for the camera at her work desk. Ainsworth was the Windedahl's next assignment following the closure of the Fort Pierre depot in 1958. These photos were taken in 1962. —Virginia Windedahl Hart collection

*Author's Note: This material was written by Virginia Windedahl Hart, who lived in the Fort Pierre depot from age 8 until graduation from high school. Virginia currently lives in Texas and has been an enthusiastic supporter of the depot rehabilitation.*

In 1942, my parents, Ernest and Gladys Windedahl, and my brother, James Robert, and I were living in the Quinn, S.D., C&NW Railway depot. It was a two-story depot and our home was upstairs. My father was the depot agent.

My father thought about moving to Fort Pierre, so we all drove over one day and decided that was the place we wanted to live. Daddy had a special attachment to Fort Pierre, since his parents had homesteaded there when he was an infant.

Daddy, mother, and James left on January 10, 1943, for our new home. I had tests to take in school, so I stayed with my friend, Alberta, and her family on their farm. Alberta had lived with us while she attended the Quinn school. After I finished the semester, Alberta and I boarded the train to Fort Pierre. James and I started school on January 18. It was a perfectly designed school.

The elementary school was downstairs and the junior high and high school were upstairs. (The Fort Pierre school had burned down in 1940 and a new school was built in 1941.)

Our only hurdle was trying to find a place to live, since the depot did not have living quarters. It did have two waiting rooms: one for men and one for women and children. Daddy selected the largest one (the men's) for our home. He put partitions up so my parents had a bedroom, I had a bedroom, and James slept on the couch.

Trains came through all the time. My bedroom was right beside the tracks, but since I was born in the depot in Irwin, Neb., any noise the train made was music to my ears. I know James was smiling when I left for Minneapolis in November 1949 to work for Northwestern Fire and Marine and go to Patricia Stevens Modeling School at night. James now had a bedroom!

We had a pot belly stove in our home and Daddy would stoke the fire at night and make sure it was warm when we got up the next day.

We did not have running water. You can imagine how we navigated that one. I was sure I knew a lot about how the pioneers lived.

Daddy was always busy, and when he went to town, we answered his office phone. We did that by climbing up on the ticket window sill, (remember it was still a waiting room), and then climbing back. I don't know how my mother managed ... she was only 5 feet 4 inches!

Mother helped Daddy and he ended up turning the Railway Express business over to her. The freight room was always full of milk cans, little chicks, and at one time a huge piano.

The records will probably show that Daddy billed more cattle out of Fort Pierre than Pierre, which is just across the Missouri River. He was always available, day and night. He would get his flashlight and meet the cattle truck at the stockyards. Then, the trucker and cattlemen came back to the depot and Daddy started typing.

Eventually the railroad business declined, and the Fort Pierre depot and others were scheduled to close. There was an unsuccessful lawsuit and trial to stop the closures, but Daddy was heartbroken and devastated.

He would have been elated to see how the trains have come roaring back!

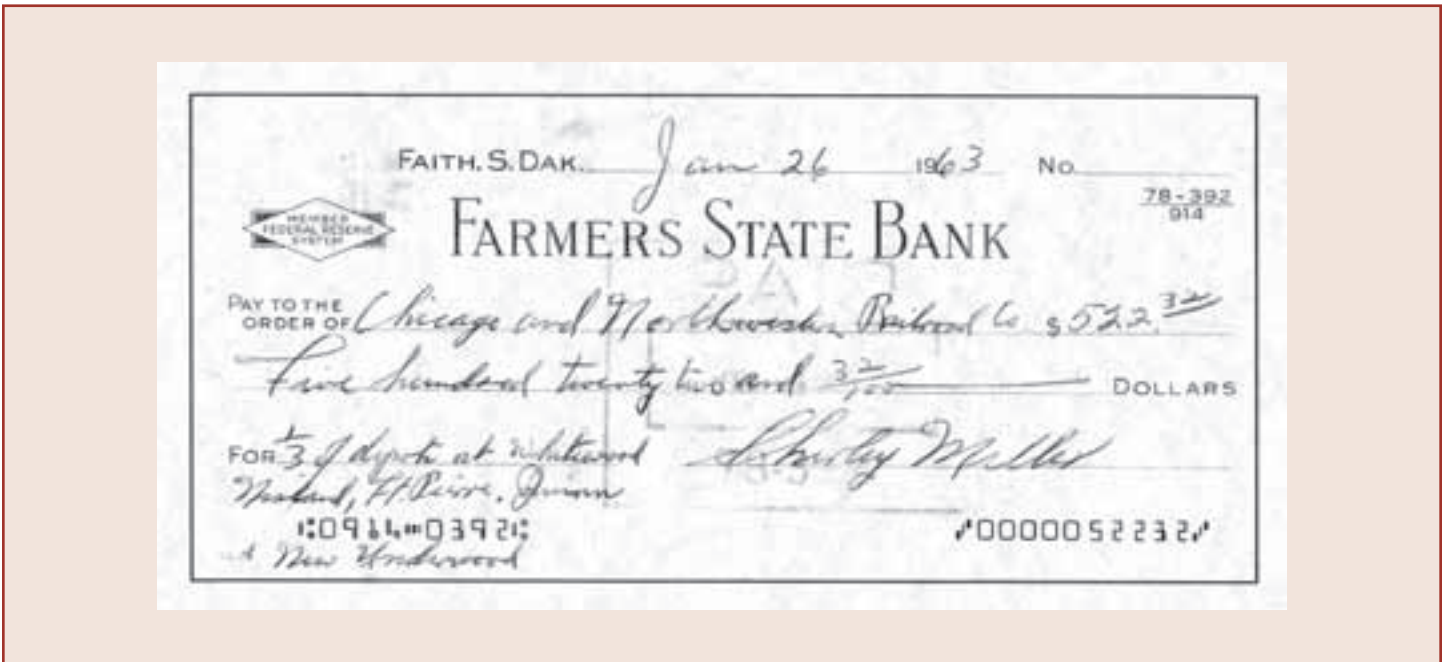
—Virginia Windedahl Hart



four-foot “haircut.” Add a set of dual dolly wheels under the back of the depot and the Millers were now ready to get underway.

But not so fast! Enter the railroad bureaucracy of the day. Since the Fort Pierre depot was on the east side of the railroad tracks and Mud

Butte is on the west, the tracks needed to be crossed. The depot was a heavy structure, and the Millers were told they needed a permit to



**Above:** Mud Butte rancher Shirley Miller and his brothers bid on seven depots, hoping to use them as storage buildings or demolish them and save the quality components. They were successful on five. They split the cost, and this check shows Shirley’s share at \$522.32. —Garry Grittner collection



**Above and right:** The Millers are on their way to Mud Butte with the Fort Pierre depot in tow. At right, Shirley and Earl Miller stop on the roadway for a picture. Above, two trucks are used to get the depot to its destination as a single truck wouldn't be enough. Note the dual-axle on the second truck. At first, this truck had a bad motor but it was quickly overhauled and put on the job. Also note the cut-down roof, lowering the overall height of the building for the move. —*Reta Fae Kelly collection*

make the crossing. They were told that the St. Paul office of C&NW could issue the required permit. After contacting St. Paul and waiting a few days, the response arrived that St. Paul could not issue the permit and that it must come from the Chicago corporate office. Chicago was contacted for the permit, but after another few days no response was forthcoming. The Millers were men of action, and the towing truck was warmed up at sundown, ready to roll. By sunrise the following morning, the depot was across the tracks, up the hill, and several miles along the route to Mud Butte. Shirley Miller commented in 2013, "I still do not have a permit to move the depot."

The move west to the ranch was not as simple as driving away. Indeed it took weeks to arrive in Mud Butte. The single-axle truck



proved to be underpowered for the moving job. The Millers acquired a dual-axle truck, but it had a bad motor. After a quick engine overhaul, the two trucks were hooked in tandem and progress resumed. According to Miller, the moving entourage was accompanied by a Farmall tractor with a front end loader bucket. When low-hanging power lines were encountered, the front end loader was raised with one of the crew aboard. A 2 x 6 was used as a push board to raise the lines high enough to allow passage of the depot.

The home-built tow system had suspect braking capability. The team was prepared to "let 'er go" when the depot descended the steep Cheyenne River valley, but the brakes held. Rather than attempt a transit through the town of Faith, with its labyrinth of electric lines, Miller cut across the prairie a couple of miles south of town. Since the ground was frozen solid, the biggest concern was to repair the barbed wire fences that had to be cut to allow passage.

Once at the Miller ranch, the building was moved across a frozen stock dam and parked in the spot where it was to remain for nearly a half century.

#### **Use of the Depot as a Ranch Building**

Rancher Shirley Miller originally thought the depot he and his brothers purchased would be demolished and the materials used for other construction projects on the ranch. Because of this plan and in order to lower the height of the depot for transit, the 12/12 pitch section of the building was "clipped," leaving parts of the rafters sticking out of the building and the interior of the people rooms exposed.

But after closer examination, Miller was impressed with the quality of the depot and decided to rebuild the roof — albeit at a lower 6/12 pitch that matched the freight room roof line.

With the depot now enclosed and with a reasonably watertight roof, it was quickly put to use as a ranch building. The Millers raised sheep and the building provided shelter for the ewes and lambs during lambing. Feed was stored for consumption by the plethora of farm animals on the property. Equipment was stored in the freight room, and overhauls were accomplished when necessary. Seeds and chemicals were stored for application to cropland during the planting season. It was truly a versatile building.

According to Miller, no modifications were



made to the depot except for repairing the roof. However, eventually time started to take a toll on the building. Rain penetrated the poorly covered doors and windows. The sun burned and damaged the siding. Vermin took up residence and left their markings. Birds, particularly pigeons and swallows, built nests and left droppings everywhere. Swallows built nests that stuck to the walls and corners like glue with poo running below the nests. The roof started to leak. The building slowly deteriorated but continued to be used.

#### Discovery of the Depot in Mud Butte

In about 2009, an interesting intersection of events occurred. Television mogul Ted Turner owned the Bad River Ranch west of Fort Pierre. When he purchased the property, several buildings were included in the sale. One of these was the Chicago & North Western depot built for the town of Capa. Mr. Turner was willing to donate this and other structures for historic preservation. Tom La Faive, the Turner ranch manager, informed the Verendrye Museum in Fort Pierre of the Capa's depot availability.

A team from the museum toured the Capa depot (which had been moved from its original location). While the depot was in poor physical condition, the consensus of the team was that Fort Pierre needed a depot to accentuate its western heritage.

During excited discussion on the trip back to Fort Pierre, museum member Brian Scott quietly stated, "If you want a depot, why not get the actual Fort Pierre depot?"

When the chuckles subsided, multiple voices claimed, "The Fort Pierre depot has been demolished. We read it in the history book."

"Not so," Scott declared. "It's out in Mud Butte."

Be careful of what you read. It may not always be accurate. Indeed Dr. Harold Schuler, in his 1975 history book "A Bridge Apart," stated that the Fort Pierre depot had been demolished. The community of Fort Pierre did not know this was not the case until about 2005, when the depot was "discovered" on the Miller ranch. The fact that the roof portion of the building had been cut down from a 12/12 pitch to a 6/12 pitch made it difficult to identify, even though the depot was in

**Above:** At first, the Millers considered demolishing the depot and holding onto parts for additional construction on the ranch. But upon further inspection, the structure was in reasonable shape to provide storage and shelter. A new roof was put on, allowing a place of refuge for lambs and ewes. Note the substantial blocking of the building, allowing for air flow and minimizing rot. —*Reta Fae Kelly collection*

full view of travelers along U.S. Highway 212.

After the tour of the Capa depot and the revelation that the Fort Pierre depot existed, the Verendrye Museum's President Darby Nutter and board members excitedly proclaimed that the Fort Pierre depot should be returned to Fort Pierre.

Like a lot of great ideas, this was easier said than done. The building was owned by Mr. Miller, was being used as a ranch storage building, was not in great shape, had a modified roof line, and was 160 miles away from Fort Pierre in Mud Butte. And the museum clearly did not have the financial resources to pay for the return



**Above:** This view of the depot sitting at Mud Butte faces east. Barely visible on the exterior of the freight room (right side of the freight room door) is the Western Union lettering. —Gary Grittner collection

and rehabilitation. But the museum board wanted to proceed with the project.

The first Verendrye Museum decision was to admit that the board members did not have the time or skills necessary to complete the project. And the money necessary to contract for a complete job was nowhere close to available. It was determined that the best way to proceed was to establish a separate museum committee with a project manager — a volunteer if possible. After some prodding, the author, Gary Grittner, and his wife, Connie, both of whom are museum board members, agreed to take on the job with the understanding that the task would be the rehabilitation of the depot building and that an appropriate committee would be selected by the Grittners to complete the task. This committee would have control over all aspects of the task, but any following effort to provide the building with artifacts and make it into a museum would revert to the museum board after the building rehabilitation was complete.



**Above:** This photo shows the interior of the agent's office inside the depot. The view looks toward the registration room. Behind the left ticket window is the registration room, and behind the right ticket window (not visible) is the women and children's waiting room. —Gary Grittner collection

# Ownership of Tracks Beside the Fort Pierre Depot

While this article is about the changing ownership of the Fort Pierre depot, there is a “parallel” story about the ownership of the tracks adjacent to the building.

The story begins with the Chicago & North Western Railroad, which was chartered in 1859 when the company purchased the assets of the bankrupt Chicago, St. Paul & Fond du Lac Railroad. The C&NW continued to expand out of the Chicago hub over the next decades.

The Chicago & North Western extended its tracks to Pierre in 1880 and crossed the Missouri River in 1907. The railroad owned both the depot in Fort Pierre and the tracks adjacent to it, along with the railroad buildings and tracks all the way to Rapid City.

In 1958 the railroad closed the Fort

Pierre depot and sold it as surplus in 1963. The depot was moved west 160 miles to Mud Butte, S.D. However, the tracks remained and continued to be used by the C&NW.

In 1986, the C&NW sold several hundred miles of track in South Dakota and Minnesota to the newly formed Dakota, Minnesota & Eastern (DM&E) Railroad, including the track adjacent to the space (now occupied by a convenience store) where the Fort Pierre depot was located prior to its sale and removal.

While not affecting the Fort Pierre tracks, the C&NW was absorbed into the Union Pacific Railroad in 1995, and the Chicago & North Western Transportation Company ceased to exist.

In 2008, the DM&E railroad was

acquired by the Canadian Pacific (CP), transferring the track ownership to that railroad.

In 2013 the Fort Pierre depot was returned and placed along the tracks a few yards south of its original location. CP still owned the tracks adjacent to the building.

Ownership of the tracks changed once again in 2014 when CP sold its South Dakota tracks to the holding company Genesee & Wyoming, which is operating the railroad as the Rapid City, Pierre & Eastern Railroad (RCP&E).

While track ownership has changed for more than a century, the rail bed through Fort Pierre remains in essentially the same location as when it was laid down in 1906.

## The “Bring it Home” Committee

The Grittner quickly moved to assemble the committee. Any major building project requires the expertise of a number of different team members. As committee members, Grittner selected: Britt Williams, a construction company owner and experienced building mover; Larry Cronin, a city councilman, plumbing company owner and utilities expert; Chuck Poches, a previous city attorney and furniture refinishing expert; Mark “Sharkey” Drees, a historic restoration company owner; Dawn Nagel, a hotel manager and public relations expert; and Brad Lawrence, the Fort Pierre city public works director and liaison with the city. Connie Grittner, who had accounting and contract expertise, took over the duties of treasurer and interior construction assistant. Project management duties were assumed by Gary Grittner, who had expertise in project management, construction, finance, and community relations. All committee members agreed to serve without compensation.

One of the early decisions made by the committee was to develop a moniker. After a short discussion it was determined to be “Bring It Home.”

*In our next part, the author takes us through the development of the depot’s return and the rehabilitation plan.* 🇺🇸

**Right:** Another picture shows the Fort Pierre depot sitting in Mud Butte. This view faces west. The sun highlights a few of the structure details. Note the rebuilt roof line. The depot was visible from Highway 212 but was somewhat unrecognizable. Having the actual Fort Pierre depot back in Fort Pierre would be a difficult task given the shape of the building and the 160 miles between the two points. But around 2009, initial plans to “bring it home” began to take root. —Gary Grittner collection

**Opposite page above:** The Missouri River frequently flooded in Fort Pierre prior to the completion of the Oahe Dam in 1964. This aerial view shows some of the flooding from 1952, a particularly bad flood that year. Water can be seen behind the station surrounding trees and houses. This image provides a good view around the depot area with the silos in the center and the stockyards seen on the left side. —South Dakota State Archives





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