

# Narrow Gauge in Wisconsin

When one thinks of narrow gauge railroads, if one knows anything about them at all, a persons mind tends to wander off to beautiful Rocky Mountain landscapes and the railroad network of Colorado. Indeed, the West lays claim to the most substantial and longest lasting narrow gauge lines, but there were other places that were dependent on the little trains that wound through hills and along river valleys. The state of Maine, for instance, had a monopoly on 2' narrow gauge railroads. European countries have made use of trains running on rails as narrow as 15" gauge. In Australia, 3'6" gauge was the standard track size for many years. Wisconsin, too, had narrow gauge trains.

What is meant by "narrow gauge"? In the early years of railroads, many track widths were used. The fact that the early railroads seldom operated more than 15 miles of track, generally linking one or two towns, the multitude of track gauges was not a problem. After profitable rail lines were built, it soon became obvious that a common track gauge and standardized equipment would make interchanging rolling stock possible, and thus increase profits considerably. Committees were formed in order to decide what this "Standard" track gauge should be. Great Britain was the birthplace of steam railroads, and thus the leading railways in that country met to decide this crucial standard. After much decision, 4'8-1/2" (56.5") was determined. This gauge exactly matches the gauge (or distance between wheels) of Roman chariots. Roman road standards were used to construct early railroad right-of-ways because of their strength and durability, and thus it seemed an obvious choice. Any track gauge less than 56.5" is considered "narrow gauge", and for apparent reasons, any track gauge wider than 56.5" is considered "broad gauge".

Wisconsin was fortunate enough to have five different common-carrier railroads which built in 3' gauge track size. There were several other proposed lines that never got off the ground, in addition to the plethora of private narrow gauge lines serving mines, sawmills, quarries, and other industries. Many of the railroads built as 3' narrow gauge were eventually converted to standard gauge after construction and the profitability improved. The two Wisconsin lines which remained narrow gauge until abandonment were the Chicago & North Western line from Fennimore to Woodman, and the Robbins Railroad / Thunder Lake Lumber Company line north of Rhinelander. The Fennimore to Woodman line was never converted to standard gauge because the landscape would not allow it, and the Rhinelander line was never converted because it was not necessary for its operation. The following is a summary of the primary narrow gauge lines built or proposed in Wisconsin:

Fond du Lac & Whitewater Railway  
- Incorporated in 1874

- Merged into the Fond du Lac, Amboy & Peoria Railroad in 1875
- Constructed and operated line from Fond du Lac south to Iron Ridge, WI
- Converted to standard gauge (Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul) May 24-26, 1884

#### Galena & Southern Wisconsin Railroad

- Incorporated March 2, 1857
- Could not raise funds to build in Standard gauge, so 3' narrow gauge was decided upon
- Built line from Galena to Platteville, with branch line extending from Ipswich to Montfort
- Bought by Chicago & North Western in 1880, merged with Chicago & Tomah Railroad to form the "Milwaukee & Madison"
- Converted to Standard gauge in 1882

#### Chicago & Tomah Railroad

- Woodman to Fennimore line built 1878
- Fennimore to Lancaster built 1878
- Lancaster Jct. to Montfort built 1879
- 1879 line graded from Wauzeka to Gays Mills, but track was never laid because funds were lacking for a bridge over the Wisconsin River. This line was later used by the Standard gauge Kickapoo Valley & Northern Railway, and much later became the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul LaFarge Branch.
- Purchased by Chicago & North Western in 1880 and merged into the "Milwaukee & Madison Railway"
- All trackage except Fennimore to Woodman converted to Standard gauge beginning in 1882

#### Pine River Valley & Stevens Point Railroad

- Incorporated August 5, 1872
- Track laid from Richland Center to Lone Rock 1875-76
- Originally built of 3.5 x 5" maple rails with strap iron facing on curves. Eventually rebuilt with steel rails.
- Purchased by Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul May 26, 1880
- Line entirely converted to Standard gauge August 1, 1880

#### Robbins Railroad

- Rhinelander to Robbins, WI
- Originally private line built to haul logs and lumber
- Organized to common-carrier in 1898
- name changed to Brown & Robbins Railroad
- 1901 name changed back to Robbins Railroad after Brown left business
- eventually became property of Thunder Lake Lumber Company, and operated as "Thunder Lake & Northern" though the official name remained Robbins Railroad
- Abandonment approved June 19, 1941, making this the last narrow gauge common-carrier to operate in the Midwest

#### Milwaukee & Southern Wisconsin Narrow Gauge Railroad

- Projected to build from Milwaukee to Beloit
- 1874 line was partially graded, but track was never laid

#### Wisconsin Peninsula Railroad

- Incorporated January 1, 1881
- Proposed route was Green Bay to Liberty Grove Township (at tip of Door County), via Sturgeon Bay
- 1883 second charter secured for line from Green Bay to Fond du Lac
- No track ever laid, unknown if grading was ever started, though a route was surveyed and chartered.

#### Private Railroads

- Unknown how many lines were built for mining, logging, quarrying, and other industrial operations

Oddly enough, the only narrow gauge lines built in Wisconsin were of the 3' gauge variety. Wisconsin has not seen a scheduled 3' narrow gauge train since 1941, and its high time this colorful history be brought to light and life. To my knowledge there are only seven pieces of 3' gauge equipment on display in Wisconsin. They are as follows:

Fennimore, WI - Godchaux Sugar Company 2-6-0 steam locomotive on static display (never used in service in Wisconsin), and Denver & Rio Grande boxcar (used on Colorado narrow gauge system).

North Freedom, WI - Chicago & North Western Boxcar #10 and Combine #1099 (used on "The Dinky" C&NW Fennimore-Woodman line).

Rhineland, WI - Steam locomotive, coach and caboose on static display at Rhineland Logging Museum (locomotive used on Thunder Lake Lumber Company line, unsure about coach and caboose).