

# ZACHOW DEPOT AND TOWN MODEL OPENS AT SHAWANO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



BY KEITH KOHLMANN

Dean Proper and Leon Westerfield were childhood friends who grew up together during the 1940s in the small town of Zachow, Wisconsin, located on the Chicago & North Western line 24 miles west of Green Bay in Shawano County. Zachow was platted in 1906 after W.C. Zachow sold 14 acres to the C&NW Railway for right of way and station grounds where a depot was built. With a railroad connection, the town grew into a busy shipping center for lumber, cattle and cheese. Zachow existed to serve the surrounding farming community with a feed mill, creamery, bulk oil distributor, sawmill, farm implement dealer and a handful of small businesses.

Changing times have not been kind to Zachow and the other small communities located along the line. Improved roads, the lure of the big city, and the consolidation of businesses and services caused the populations of the small towns to move away. Most of the familiar businesses closed, and the railroad was abandoned in 1993.

But the small towns of the rural upper Midwest were not just a collection of buildings. Zachow was home to 100-plus people who lived, worked, and raised their families there. To Dean and Leon, Zachow was a vibrant, magical place to grow up. Their community was almost completely self-contained. As kids growing up there, the town and its environs were their playground.

The two men met again in 2005 and lamented the disappearance of their beloved community. They were feeling sad since each had recently been over to Zachow to have their annual look and to stir up old memories of when they lived there. All but a handful of

the businesses were gone. Most of the families they once knew had moved on, and many structures had been demolished or converted into apartments. Trees and shrubs had grown up considerably. The depot and tracks were long gone, and the Pensaukee Creek was now a lot lower. The old vibrancy they knew was no longer evident as the curtain of time slowly descended on the town.

Over beers, they talked about finding a way to preserve the history of the town. However, Dean was not content to just talk about the past. Plans were developed and carried out to build a top-notch historical re-creation and museum display of the town of Zachow.

The men formed the Zachow Historic Committee. They contacted former residents and sought volunteers to help research and write an expanded history of Zachow. They began researching each house and business structure to provide the best information possible to build their project. (The only existing history is two pages long. Eventually the detailed information will be compiled into a longer more comprehensive history of Zachow.)

The friends remembered that three large aerial photographs of Zachow, taken in 1949, once hung on the back wall of the Farmers State Bank. After the bank was closed, the photos ended up in the halls of the Bonduel Community Archives. It was agreed that a historically accurate scale model of Zachow could be built using this information. A quick calculation revealed that an N scale representation of the town would fit in an area of 7 feet x 16 feet. The year 1949 was chosen for the model because it would reflect the latter part of the town's peak years, and it was supported by the aerial photographs and living residents.



By 2006, the efforts to get accurate historical research on the town's structures were well underway, and the project became known as the "Zachow Project." However, the model of Zachow was still a problem. Inquiries made to the Bonduel Community Archives and the Shawano County Historical Society revealed that there was no space available for the model inside one of their buildings.

Historical research continued. A copy of the original 1906 plat of Zachow was acquired from Shawano County Register of Deeds Office. When the C&NW leased the land for the right-of-way from farmers, they gave each of them a Lands and Station blueprint of the area. Irene (Zernicke) Westphal provided a copy of the blueprint, which her father, Elmer, had in his files. This map showed the land owned by C&NW, the position of the railroad tracks, roads, lot lines, and many of the buildings. The combination of the original plat of the village, the C&NW blueprint of the railroad land, coupled with the 1949 aerial photographs,



provided the base of information to go forward with the project.

Initial contact was made with Joe Pierson, the head of the Chicago & North Western Historical Society Archives. The C&NW Lands and Station map noted that the Zachow depot was a C&NW Standard No. 3 depot built in 1906 when the town was created. Joe did further research and confirmed this using photographs. The plans for the No. 3 depot are on file at the C&NWH Archives. Joe provided a copy of the original 1903 plans for the No. 3 depot together with a photo of the depot. (The C&NWH Archives maintains a nearly complete collection of Lands and Station maps for most of the cities and towns located along C&NW Railroad lines in Wisconsin, circa 1920. These closely detailed maps are extremely useful to researchers and modelers.)

As the research information needed for an accurate model accumulated, the question of where the model of Zachow would reside became more pressing. While discussing the

project, one of the men blurted out, "If only we had the old depot, we could put it in the freight room!" A search was launched to find the old Zachow depot, and it was determined that the depot had been dismantled years ago.

After awhile it occurred to the men guiding the project that constructing a completely new replica of the Zachow depot and then placing the scale model of Zachow in the freight room was a perfectly elegant solution. A new structure would better protect the delicate model and be more comfortable for visitors than the original drafty wooden depot.

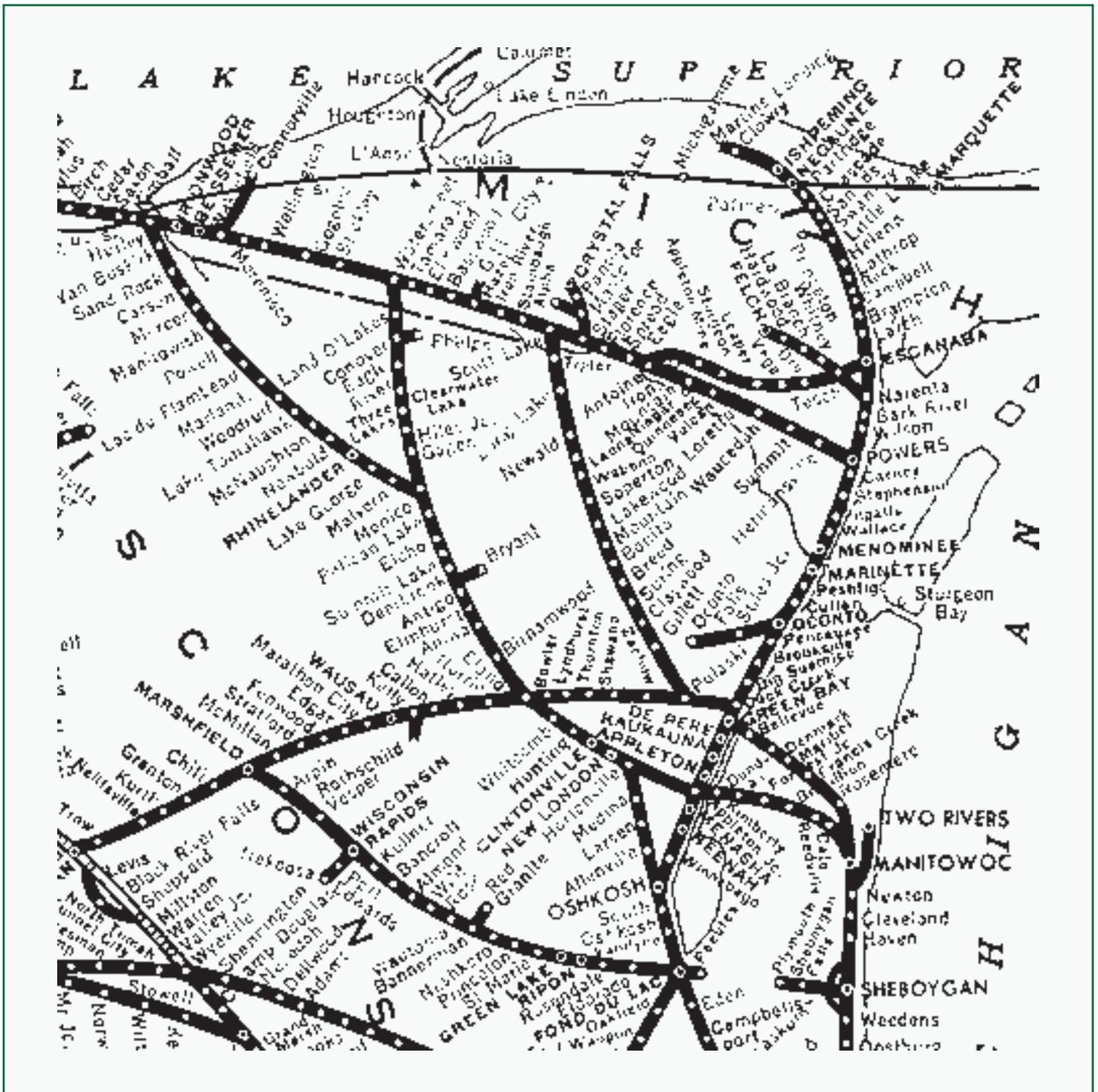
The Zachow Project had the plans for the depot and the town. Now the problem was: Where would they put a full-sized depot when they couldn't even find a place to put the model?

Dean Proper, the head of the Zachow Project, made an offer to build and donate a new C&NW Standard No. 3 Depot to be placed at Heritage Park in Shawano, Wisconsin, adjacent to other historic structures operated by the

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Shawano Historical Society. However, a major problem was then brought to light: the land at Heritage Park used by the Shawano County Historical Society was owned by Shawano County, and it was not considered park land, even though it was called "Heritage Park." After three years of negotiating, the land was officially made into parkland by the county board. The Shawano Historical Society gained a permanent home, and the Zachow Project found a place to build the depot.

While uncertainty remained regarding negotiations over the location of the new depot, work on the model went forward. In 2006, Dean hired John Dornfeld of Depots by John, a professional model maker based in



**Above:** The little town of Zachow, Wisconsin, is west of Green Bay, just west of the junction at Pulaski. Additional lines and cities are shown in this 1959 timetable to illustrate the surrounding route structure. —WRP collection

Milwaukee. John then brought in Jim Rindt of Rindt's Relics from Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and together they began constructing museum-quality N scale models of every building that existed at Zachow in 1949. Fortunately, they had the three high quality aerial photos of the town and many local contacts to help with

research. Some of the structures were still standing. Field measurements were made, often gaining the attention of curious and concerned local residents.

Dean found the USGS map of Zachow, which included geodetic elevations and a scale. It also showed the position of the railroad tracks, streets, and many of the structures. He determined that N scale (1:160) provided the optimal size for the model town. The USGS map was reduced to a single 8 1/2 x 11-inch piece of copy paper. He took it to the local sign/print shop and had them make a full size template of Zachow in N scale that was 16

feet long. It took three passes to print the full map using 3-foot wide copy paper. This was taped together and adjusted to find the best orientation to the space available in the freight room. Dean determined that a zigzag peninsula projecting into the viewing area allowed the entire town to fit in the freight room with no selective compression.

As plans for each building were being drawn by the modelers, it became necessary to interview many past and present residents of Zachow about their homes and businesses in order to make the models as accurate as possible. Dale Dirks, an architect who grew up



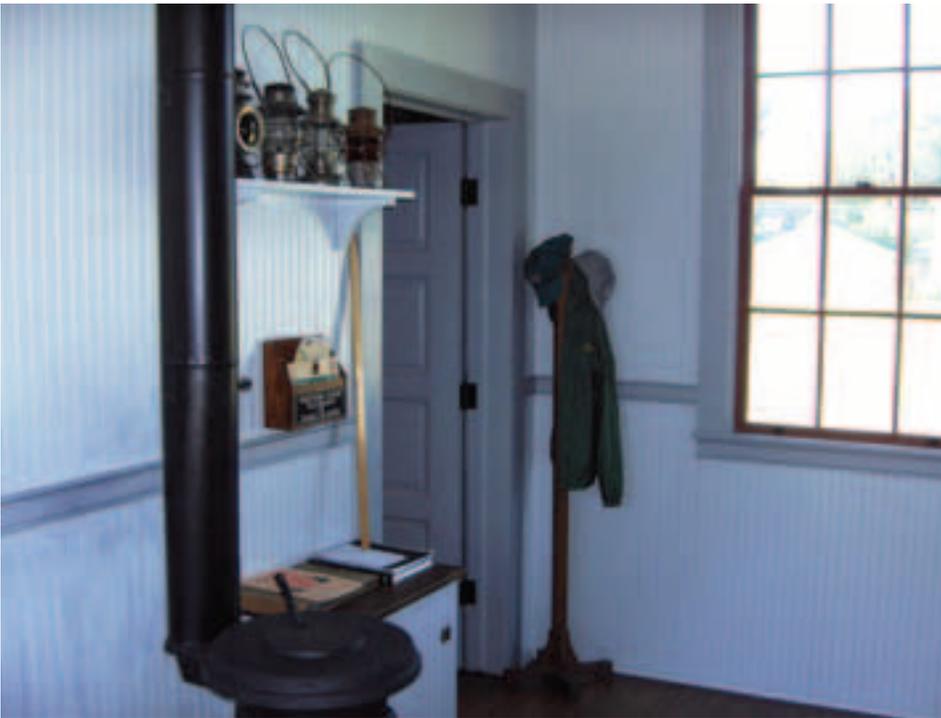
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in Zachow, remembered some of the buildings that had been removed, including the feed mill, which his father owned. Dale drafted a number of plans for the team. Dean and his wife, Mickey, spent the summer in the office of the Shawano County Register of Deeds learning the history of each property in town. All of this information was necessary in order to have the highest standard of accuracy and quality that Dean set for the project.

After a permanent site for the depot structure was created, an architect specializing in historic structures expressed an interest in the project. Matt Schachtner from Sommerville,

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Inc. of Green Bay and his team put together a set of modern construction plans with specs for a re-creation of a C&NW Standard No. 3 Depot specifically designed to house the museum model. The project was put out for bid.

Felts Construction, Inc. of Shawano, Wisconsin, was awarded the contract by the Shawano County Historical Society for the construction of the first new C&NW No. 3 depot in almost 100 years. Richard Felts was chosen as project manager because of his passion for historic accuracy and attention to detail. Ground was broken in July 2011, and most of the depot and modeling of Zachow was completed in 2012.

Every effort was made to give the depot

an original appearance. The depot was framed with custom-cut, full-sized dimensional lumber obtained from a local mill. Locally made vintage bricks of the correct color and texture were salvaged and reused for the chimney. The depot sits on the correct elevation, relative to the track, and it has a long wooden platform with a C&NW standard outhouse built from plans found in the C&NWHS Archives.

Dean searched the Internet for correct reproduction hardware, doors and windows. Yet hidden within the walls, in the attic and under the floor, there are modern electrical, ventilation and heating systems. The building is fully insulated, conforms to modern building codes, and is ADA accessible.

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When first approaching the depot and upon entering it, the overwhelming impression is that this is an original depot that has somehow managed to survive into the 21st century untouched. Dean has worked tirelessly to ensure that every detail is accurate to the period. The walls are made from custom millwork and cabinetry provided by local





companies. No expense was spared in providing the correct hardware, windows, and doors to faithfully reproduce the appearance of the original structure.

The inside of the depot was furnished using the Station Inventory from a C&NW Standard No. 3 depot at Lebanon, Wisconsin. Joe Piersen found it in the 1920 ICC Valuation

records on file at the C&NWS Archives. Vintage office equipment, chairs, stoves, clocks, lamps, C&NW business forms, paperwork, lanterns, train order hoops, and employees' personal effects are arranged around the depot to give the impression that the station agent has temporarily stepped away from the building. The attention to accuracy included chang-

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ing out Phillips head screws for slotted head screws in all visible locations. All exposed wiring inside the depot is cloth covered, just as it was in 1906.

Another highlight is the reproduction telegraph communication system. Tom French, of [www.artifaxbooks.com](http://www.artifaxbooks.com) was consulted for information on the correct equipment and installation of the telegraph. He is an authority on old telegraph systems and sold Dean a critical 100-year-old switch for the display. Dean proudly noted that Tom said it was "the best replica telegraph layout he has seen."

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The telegraph can be used for demonstrations. The lead acid battery tubs beneath the operator's desk, however, are for display purposes only. The accurate telegraph display extends outdoors to the pole line and wires coming into the building.

After the depot was freshly completed, Dean, Rich Felts, Matt Schactner, and Cross-Roads Cabinetry of Shawano worked to "weather" the interior to make it look "used." They applied washes of black paint, shoe polish, white paint, and intentionally scratched up the floor with heavy chains in the freight room. Other surfaces that would see heavy wear in the course of a regular business day were worn down with wire brushes and sandpaper.

The waiting room and office spaces are restored to look original, while the freight room is set up like a museum display space for the Zachow layout. The 7-foot x 16-foot N scale layout features a model of every building that existed in Zachow during the year 1949. There is no selective compression, except for moving one barn in a few hundred scale feet closer from the edge of town. The scale topography includes accurate roads, railroad tracks, farm fields, pastures, orchards, back-

yard gardens, trees, footpaths and alleys, lot lines, and fences. Each building was painstakingly scratchbuilt from styrene by John or Jim. No commercial kits were used. (However, the model of Radke's Service Station is now available from Depots by John as a resin kit.) Their high level of craftsmanship and attention to detail is astounding.

Chris Comport, a professional modelist from Merrill, Wisconsin, was hired to build the benchwork and scenery. He used the full-sized print out of the town to build the benchwork. Chris started building layouts professionally back in 1986 with Malcolm Furlow and with Raildreams starting in about 2000. (Some of his work can be seen at [www.chriscomport.com](http://www.chriscomport.com).) The layout is built from five interlocking modules. The framing is made from simple 1 x 4 ladder framing. The sub base is quarter-inch plywood laminated to 2-inch thick pink insulation foam.

Jim Rindt also worked on the scenery. The bench work is essentially a flat table. The creek bottom defines the lowest elevation point. The foam was just shaved away until the terrain matched the elevation drawings and looked like the aerial photos. Spackle and latex paint

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formed the base for Woodland Scenics ground foam grass and turf. Large cornfields were made with sheets of Astroturf. Tan paint was dry brushed across the tips of the Astroturf to create the look of corn tassels. Most of the other plowed fields and gardens were made using linoleum paste and a notched trowel. After a coat of dirt-colored base paint, various grades and colors of Woodland Scenics ground foam were glued down to look like crops. The surface joints between the table sections are hidden by scenery material. Pop up hatches allow for access to the back of the layout for maintenance.

The backdrop is just a plain blue summer sky. Earlier in the project, painted farmlands were planned for the backdrop, but the perspective in flat terrain would have been too complicated for the viewers.

Jim super-detailed the display, adding cows, automobiles, figures, poles, and flower



beds around the houses. His son, Peter, made trees from a local weed dipped in Woodland Scenics turf.

One of the highlights in Zachow was

watching the passing of the *Flambeau "400"* and the *Ashland Limited*. Both trains had scheduled stops in Shawano. On the display, the "400" is represented by a Life-Like E7

locomotive with a set of InterMountain passenger cars. The train is positioned approaching Zachow heading south, while a freight train waits in the clear on the passing siding heading north. This bit of railroad operation was a common occurrence each day at Zachow. Local passenger service for Zachow was discontinued in the late 1940s. It consisted of the gas/electric "doodlebug" which carried mail, express, and people traveling to the other communities on the Eland/Green Bay line.

The steam-powered freight train was built by Keith Kohlmann of Racine, Wisconsin. The train is headed by a modified Kato 2-8-2 Mikado locomotive, which matches the C&NW's Class J-A locomotives that once provided service to the town. The freight train is made up of 15 freight cars from all major manufacturers. All of them were (lowered or lettered?) and weathered. Many have custom paint and decals to reflect the types of cars and the road names that were common in the area in 1949. The caboose is a modified Micro-Trains model with Microscale decals.

Every miniature scene on the layout tells a story. Each home and business has memories attached. Dean did not want the model town to sit silently. He wanted these stories to be told. Two push button control panels are situated in the viewing area where the viewers can interact with the models. By pushing a numbered button, a light will appear in a building and a recorded voice will tell the history of that location. This system was designed and installed by Steve Pater of Hartwig Exhibit and Display, New Berlin, Wisconsin.

Museum quality non-glare glass panels separate the viewer from the model town. These can be removed for cleaning. The freight room is well lit and the shape of the display draws the viewer into the landscape. The railroad cuts diagonally through the scene. However, it is the sheer size of the landscape and sky, coupled with the lighting, which makes the model town seem so realistic. Details emerge everywhere, once the eye slows down to take in every inch of the panoramic scene. By crouching down to ground level, the terrain and the structures of the town come to life. It is a delight to the eye to follow roads and paths between buildings, exploring the connections in the town.

By listening to the pre-recorded stories, it is possible to learn how the people of Zachow were bonded together with ties of family, ethnicity, religion, and economic interdependence. By looking at the town, one can imagine the how people went through the everyday tasks of work, trade, friendship, and play. The community was woven together at that moment in time through these interactions like stitches in fabric holding the community together, until it unraveled with the coming of "progress."

The model captures the vibrancy and

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lifestyle of a self-contained community that has now disappeared. However, the depot and model of a landscape and community succeed in passing on the story of Zachow, a place where work and life dissolved into an all-encompassing experience for a child growing up there in the 1940s.

Dean Proper believes in the beauty of the small town way of life. He and the many dedicated people who worked on the Zachow Project generously shared that passion with others. Dean summed it up best while showing visitors around the depot during the dedication and grand opening of the Zachow depot on July 13, 2013.

“The town was our playground. We lived, camped, played, climbed on rail cars and lumber piles, searched barns, explored the businesses, begged cheese slices, we knew where all the good fruit trees were ...

“I loved the life of a child in that town. My heart and feelings still live in that town. I can’t let that slip away.”

For more information about the Zachow depot and model, please contact:

Shawano County Historical Society  
524 N. Franklin Street  
Shawano, WI 54166

The new depot, the model, historic photos of Zachow, and much more can be found at: [www.zachowhistory.com](http://www.zachowhistory.com).

The SCHS is open to the public year round on Mondays and Thursdays. Heritage Park Structure Tours (including the depot) are scheduled in June, July, and August on Thursdays 1:30-4PM, and on Saturdays 9AM-12 noon.

For special tours of the Zachow depot outside of regularly scheduled hours, call SCHS at (715) 526-3323. Ginnie is in charge of special tours.



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While in the city of Shawano, be sure to check out the old C&NW and SOO Line depots located nearby.

#### **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to give special thanks to Chris Comport, John Dornfeld, Joe Piersen, Dean Proper, and Jim Rindt for assistance in the preparation of this article.

#### **From the author**

I encourage everyone to visit the depot if you are ever in the area. It is an amazing experience to walk into what appears to be a fully active C&NW depot from 1949. It is then a real thrill to enter the freight room to find a museum-quality N scale model of the town of Zachow as it looked in 1949. For fans of the C&NW, fine scale modeling, or local history, this experience is not to be missed! — Keith Kohlmann