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Charing Cross Station

Off of Charing Cross Road in Bloomfield Township lies the remains of what was once a symbol of pride for the residents. It was not a grand structure, or an iconic structure by any means, but a site where people went to work and came back from shopping or a night on the town. The Charing Cross station on the Detroit to Pontiac commuter rail line of the Grand Trunk Western Railroad, though no longer in use, remains in remembrance of a future that could have been.

In the 1920s, the population of the northern Woodward communities like Bloomfield Township experienced rapid population growth. The usage of Woodward Avenue had tripled by the 1920s, and it was decided to widen the right-of-way. At the time, the old alignment of the Detroit and Pontiac Railroad, under control of the Grand Trunk Western Railroad (GTW) since 1882, ran directly alongside the avenue. The railroad was vehemently opposed to this idea, but Governor Alexander Groesbeck made a resolution in 1925 that the railroad either be forced to vacate or cooperate and build a new right of way. Under the pressure, the railroad relented with \$200,000 (\$3.5 million today) of annual compensation. On January 29th, 1929, the Grand Trunk announced that it would be building a 3 track mainline, with 2 tracks for steam freight operation and 1 for electric commuter operation. Stations would be added at each mile road along with a toll way for cars elevated above the entire line, running 25 passenger trains a day in each direction. However, with the crash of the stock market these plans would never be totally realized and were scaled back immensely.

August 1st, 1931 the Grand Trunk began operating commuter rail service between Detroit and Pontiac. This event was met with considerable optimism by members of the community. The *Birmingham Eccentric* covered the preparations for the historic event in its August 1st, 1931 Special Commuter Service Souvenir-Program Edition. In it, C.G. Bowker, General Manager of the Grand Trunk, spoke with enthusiasm, saying that eventually the plan was to electrify the line if demand was seen for it. The celebration attended by over 50,000 people included a 60-float parade called the 'Pageant of Progress', band concerts, street fairs, and a dedication by governor Wilber M. Brucker at the new Birmingham station.

The new \$8 million dollar line (roughly \$152.4 million today) saw business that far exceeded expectations placed by Grand Trunk management, an extra car being added on one occasion. On August 24th, 6 additional daily trains were added to the schedule for convenience due to the popularity of the service. Passengers proclaimed "we're sold" after only a short period of operation. One man said he'd never go back to driving again. Bloomfield Township gained Charing Cross station, an intermediate stop off of Charing Cross Road, with a parking lot and passenger tunnel to the parking lot from the north side.

It was believed that as a result of the new service land value would skyrocket. A.R. Glaney, former president of the Oakland Motor Car Company, predicted rapid growth, citing that "If it were not for the railroads we might still be 13 colonies along the Atlantic. It might be said that the railroads bully this country." The future of commuter rail in the area was looking bright, but just 30 years later the commuter rail would be in a bleak situation.

The line was never electrified as the priorities of the public changed. The automobile was, after all, king in Michigan, and popularity declined over the years. Though passenger rail travel received a boost during the Second World War due to gas rationing, postwar it experienced

a sharp decline. Rail service across the country received a drastic decrease in quality, and the services through Charing Cross were no exception. The service saw a slight boost due to railfan-related tourism for the Grand Trunk steam locomotives during the 1950s, but not enough to sustain the line. The Grand Trunk was hemorrhaging money running the commuter service and wanted to get rid of it by any means necessary. They were back down to running 3 round trips daily and losing \$241,626 a day (\$1.85 million today) in 1971. Average daily ridership had decreased to 2,812. The hope was to cut their losses and hand over the service to Amtrak, but commuter services were deemed a separate entity and the Grand Trunk was stuck with the service. Luckily, state intervention was on the way.

After the Michigan State Legislature passed the Metropolitan Transit Authorities Act of 1967, the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority, or SEMTA, was created. SEMTA began subsidizing one third of the losses of the commuter rail service in 1974 but this was still not enough for the Grand Trunk. It increased to two thirds subsidy the next year but the Grand Trunk still did not want to continue operation. Finally, in 1978, SEMTA acquired the rolling stock and operations for the commuter rail service. Under SEMTA, ridership rose to 3,000 daily riders and a plan for expansion was made, but ridership would soon take a sharp decline.

The state of the commuter rail service had gotten so bad that it was estimated that the line was operating at a \$16 million (\$49.8 million today) deficit and losing \$1 million (\$3.1 million today) per year. The service also lost a considerable amount of government funding. It was the decision of the SEMTA staffers to completely cut the commuter rail service in favor of buses, ending 52 years of commuter rail service through Bloomfield Township on October 17th, 1983.

Today, Charing Cross station can still be found partly intact. The stairs, ramp, and platform are still there. The Amtrak Wolverine still runs by on the old Grand Trunk line, but it's been 41 years since the last commuter ever stepped foot onto the platform.

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