

Washburn Community Affairs — The Coal Dock

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The history of Washburn began with the construction, in the summer of 1883, of a large dock as a shipping terminal for the Omaha Railroad. The dock was U-shaped, with the northern arm a merchandise dock on which a large warehouse was erected, the western arm a grain dock with a huge grain elevator, and the center section, a coal dock surmounted by a large wooden structure with traveling buckets for transferring coal from ships to the dock. The length of the coal dock between the two arms was 525 feet, sufficient to accommodate two or three of the small vessels of the time. Coal shipments arrived regularly but began to decline after World War I as Ashland became the main receiving port for coal. In late 1931, the Northwestern Fuel Company ceased operations and the coal unloading structure was torn down. In February 1937, Mayor Hans J. Thompson announced that the coal dock would be reopened by the Michela Coal and Dock Company, predicting "that the reopening of the coal dock may be the beginning of more marine activity here."

In May 1938, the T.W. Robinson arrived with 10,000 tons of coal. At 575 feet, it was too long for the coal dock and had to moor with its bow in the corner formed by the coal dock and merchandise dock, and its stern projecting into the bay because the timbers and stone of the foundation of the old grain dock were in the way. During the summer of 1938 these obstacles to mooring at the coal dock were removed.

Operations at the Michela dock declined during 1939 but resumed again in 1940. Two lake carriers, the W.G. Pollock and the Hazen Butler, both 420 feet long, made repeated trips to Washburn with cargoes of coal. The coal was unloaded by two large caterpillar bucket cranes, controlled by operators in elevated cabs from which



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they could see inside a ship's hold. The coal was piled on the dock, then loaded into hoppers from which it was dumped into large trucks. These trucks drove the length of Bayfield Street, imposing a heavy load on the pavement. Coal was supplied to the DuPont plant and distributed throughout northern Wisconsin and Michigan.

In 1944 controversy arose over the terms of the leases negotiated with the Michela Company for the coal and merchandise docks, on which the city had expended a considerable amount of money for reconstruction and improvement under a federal Works Project Administration program. The city council threatened not to approve the leases, but after a meeting with the president of the company, during which he noted the investment the company had made in the dock and facilities as well as the economic benefits of the industry to Washburn, while threatening to take legal action if no agreement could be reached, the council renewed the leases. The WPA notified the city that the leases were illegal, claiming that the city had agreed not to lease the docks as a condition of the WPA restoration and improve-

ment project. How the WPA expected Washburn to benefit from the restored docks without leasing them was never explained; certainly the city could not operate the docks. The council ignored the WPA objection and its threat of legal action, which does not seem to have been carried out. Meanwhile a faint odor of corruption wafted through the controversy. During his meeting with the city council, the president of the Michela Company acknowledged that he had given giving a stoker and coal to Mayor Hans J. Thompson, saying "that such affairs were his own personal business and that he could give away his merchandise if he wished." Despite this admission, Mayor Thompson insisted that he had paid for the stoker and had not received any free coal. A city official accepting gifts, while considered improper, was apparently not illegal, and the issue of Mayor Thompson allegedly having received a free stoker and coal from the Michela Company seems to have simply faded away.

The Omaha (Chicago and Northwestern) Railroad, whose business had languished during the 1930s, benefited from the recovery that began in 1939, reporting that the volume of business that year was the largest since 1927. That year 248 carloads were shipped, mostly of coal but also a few cars of pulpwood, while 135 carloads of freight were received. Business from the Barksdale Works, handled at the Washburn freight office, included 708 carloads received and 704 shipped. There was a further substantial increase in freight business in 1940 and the company continued to operate its freight service to Washburn and the Du Pont plant through the 1960s. In July 1981 the Interstate Commerce Commission approved the abandonment of the railroad, almost 100 years after it was constructed.