

# The Bangor Depot Building and Station

*A Proud Past, a Period of Neglect, and a Promising Future*



Thanks to a great amount of private investment from Ken Ratzlaff and his Beacon Specialized Living Services corporation, the Bangor Downtown Development Authority, and the State of Michigan CDBG and MDOT grants, the Bangor station has new life. This after a period of neglect that almost saw the building razed by its owner, CSX Transportation. Thanks to a seed grant, the City, State grants and private investment the building is no longer an eyesore but rather has become a centerpiece of the City's revitalization.

## A Proud Past

The development of Bangor, MI in the early 1870's, is directly related to the railroad being built through the middle of town. The railroad became a means of transportation for local businessmen to ship commodities to outlying markets, and for stores to have their needed merchandise replenished. The depot was built almost immediately after the tracks were laid, and a stationmaster was hired to handle the traffic of cars to and from town.

The Bangor Furnace Company was a blast furnace that produced pig iron from iron ore shipped from the Upper Peninsula. It came into existence in 1872 because of the availability of the railroad and the almost endless supply of hardwood forests. The hardwoods were needed to create charcoal to help fire the kilns at the furnace. Farm owners were offered the service to clear their land free of charge for the wood. As a result, Bangor slowly acquired hundreds of acres of rich farmland. By the late 1870's, the community was a thriving agricultural center. Apples, peaches, and wheat were the main crops grown and hogs were the primary livestock. Lumber was also an important commodity and was stacked along the tracks for hundreds of feet in both directions of town.

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Furnace Company had departed and the hardwood forests were replaced with thousands of acres of farmland. Hundreds of carloads of agricultural products and merchandise were shipped yearly to and from distant markets for local businessmen.

The old depot was beginning to show its age by the early 1920's. After several years of discussion, it was determined in the spring of 1925 that a new brick station be erected. Louis Janoskie, a local contractor, got the call in August of that year. The work began with the razing of the old building. The sidetrack, which ran between the main line and the depot, was removed so the new building would be closer to the main tracks. A brick cobblestone sidewalk was laid from Monroe St. north for about a block to the depot. The new brick structure was completed in June of 1926, for a cost of \$30,000.

The late 1920's and the 1930's still saw Bangor as a major shipping center for apples and other produce. The local demand for rail cars was so great in the fall season that an engine was stationed on the sidetrack to help move traffic. The upper room in the depot was used as a bedroom for tired rail workers to sleep after their long hours of work.

As the 1940's and 1950's rolled by, larger semi-trucks and better roads slowly took business away from the railroad. The tourist industry, however, was thriving. People flocked to Michigan

during the summer, looking for recreation and peace from commotion of the city. Bangor was stepping off point for tourists heading for South Haven, the lakeshore and local resorts. The parking lot at the depot was filled to capacity with cars and cabs taking people to and from the train for fun in the sun or the return rip home.

## **A Period of Decline**



Eventually, during the 1960's, as interstate roads were developed and cars traveled faster, the trains carried fewer and fewer tourists. The train station was closed down and fell into disrepair. It was leased in the early 1980's as a toy train factory, but after several years that enterprise also went out of business. Again, the station sat idle and began to deteriorate. CSX made plans to raze the building. The depot had been listed a one of the top ten most endangered train stations in America. Locals began efforts to save the building.

## **A Promising Future**

In 2001, the City of Bangor purchased the depot from the CSX Railroad with the hope of restoring it as a mixed public and private partnership reopening the Amtrak waiting area and reusing the remainder of the building for commercial/office use as a step in revitalizing the community.

The Great American Station Foundation awarded the City a \$10,000 seed grant for a historical, structural and re-use analyses. This was accomplished through the work of John Allegretti Architects of St. Joseph. The resulting study and re-use plan was marketed in hopes of attracting private investment. After a year, a private party was found and sale plans were begun.



This was accomplished as the building and land were sold to Beacon Specialized Living Services, Inc. who has invested over \$250,000 in the renovation of the depot for office space.

Today, the renovation has been completed. The depot building now houses offices for Beacon Specialized Living Services, The Coffee Depot, the Edwin Foster Trophy Collection and the Bangor Station for rail passengers.

The grand re-opening ceremony (May 6, 2005) and open house dedicated the Amtrak waiting area, the Depot Coffee Shop and the Corporate offices of Beacon Specialized Living Services, and the Edwin Foster Trophy Collection. Formal Opening - 8:30 a.m. Tours - 9:00-10:00 a.m. Open House - 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. Following more than 10 years of standing vacant and slated for demolition, the area can look forward to the rebirth of the building. The rebirth started with a seed grant (\$10,000) from the Great American Station and funds from the Bangor DDA (\$4,350) to conduct a structural and historical analysis of the building and prepare a re-use plan. That work led to the solicitation of investors. Ken Ratzlaff stepped forward and committed to investment and job growth at the site. The City/DDA then secured grants to renovate the former waiting (\$125,000 - MDOT) area and to make infrastructure improvements serving the building (\$120,563 - CDBG).