

= Winston Tunnel =

The Winston Tunnel is a railroad tunnel located 9 miles ( 14 @. @ 5 kilometers ) west of Elizabeth , Illinois .

The tunnel was completed in 1888 for the Minnesota and Northwestern Railroad , a predecessor to the Chicago Great Western Railway ( CGW ) . The tunnel was located on the CGW main line 152 miles ( 245 kilometers ) west of Chicago in the isolated and hilly Driftless Area of extreme north @-@ western Illinois .

In 1972 , four years after the Chicago Great Western was merged into the Chicago and North Western Railway ( C & NW ) , the CGW 's largely redundant trackage in the area , including the Winston Tunnel , was abandoned . It was the third longest railroad tunnel in Illinois at 2 @, @ 493 feet ( 760 m ) . Two longer ( still active ) tunnels are located on the Canadian National ( ex @-@ Illinois Central ) Edgewood Cutoff Line , the longest being Tunnel # 2 near Abbot , Illinois which is 6 @, @ 994 feet ( 2 @, @ 132 m ) long .

= = History = =

The newly constructed Minnesota and Northwestern Railroad across northern Illinois utilized trackage rights on the Illinois Central Railroad between Dubuque , Iowa and Stockton , Illinois in 1886 before construction on its own line through the isolated wilderness could commence . Engineers quickly realized that a tunnel would need to be constructed in order to traverse the rugged landscape . The Sheppard , Winston and Company ( for which the tunnel would be named ) and more than 350 laborers worked by hand , digging through the silty and unstable shale for nine months starting in the spring of 1887 . The work was backbreaking and dangerous , and at least one worker , a thirty @-@ two @-@ year @-@ old Finnish immigrant named John Hill , was killed . When complete , the total cost of the tunnel , \$ 600 @, @ 000 , had exceeded expectations .

The tunnel proved to be a constant nuisance to the Chicago Great Western and its predecessors . Almost immediately , railroad engineers realized that the unstable nature of shale through which the tunnel was bored , ground water seepage , and the isolated location of the tunnel meant repairs would be frequent and costly . The tunnel was originally braced by wooden beams when it opened to rail traffic in January 1888 , but these eventually proved inadequate , to be replaced in 1902 by brick and reinforced concrete . Constant deterioration of the supports meant large @-@ scale reconstruction of the tunnel would be needed again in 1912 , 1918 , 1944 and 1947 .

The bore was also improperly ventilated at first . A shaft sunk into the top of the tunnel failed to provide enough fresh air , and the crews of the steam engines would often complain of the intense heat and smoke due to the poor air circulation . Piecemeal solutions failed to work , and by 1912 the railroad was forced to install a huge fan , powered by a 310 horsepower ( 230 kW ) diesel motor and staffed by operators day and night , to ventilate the tunnel . The fanhouse , constructed by 1916 , was abandoned by the CGW with the acquisition of diesel locomotives by 1947 .

When the Chicago Great Western was federalized during World War I , a contingent of Illinois National Guardsmen were assigned to protect the tunnel .

The operating nightmares of the tunnel , not to mention the millions of dollars the CGW spent to keep it open , forced the railroad 's management to consider many schemes to rid themselves of the burden . In 1909 , 1951 and again in 1964 ( the same year the North Western and Great Western announced their intentions to merge ) the CGW sought engineering proposals to reroute their trackage around the bore , to daylight the tunnel , or to completely rebuild and improve it . To the often cash @-@ strapped Great Western , however , all these plans proved far too expensive .

In the end , the 1968 merger with the Chicago and North Western ( C & NW ) sealed the Winston Tunnel 's fate . The Great Western 's main line through northern Illinois closely paralleled the North Western 's own line , but through less densely populated and less commercially active areas . The steep grades of the line and the obvious financial burden of the Winston Tunnel also played a role in the decision to completely abandon the Great Western 's trackage in the area . The C & NW operated its last train through the tunnel in 1971 . Scrappers pulled up the tracks the following year .

Upon abandonment , the C & NW placed chain @-@ link fences over each bore of the tunnel to keep squatters and other trespassers out . A 1973 attempt to turn the right @-@ of @-@ way through Jo Daviess County , including the Winston Tunnel , into a rail trail , failed when ownership of the land reverted to nearby property owners .

= = Present day = =

The Winston Tunnel still exists , although in a very isolated area , and in a very deteriorated condition . Nature has reclaimed the right @-@ of @-@ way ; the fan house , unused since the 1940s and severely damaged by the elements , was demolished in early 2007 ; and the eastern bore , located on private property , has been almost completely sealed with earth .

The western half , however , was purchased by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources as a " satellite area " of Apple River Canyon State Park . The DNR installed a new steel gate to replace the chain @-@ link fence covering the western bore , and is developing the area with nature trails and other improvements . However , the tunnel is currently off @-@ limits to general public visitation , as it is a very dangerous place to visit , with the ever @-@ present danger of further collapse and rattlesnake bite .