NELLIE MACDONALD & THE HINSDALE DEPOT

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Early one cold Tuesday in December 1896, Nellie MacDonald trudged over the bridge to her new job as agent at the Hinsdale railroad station. A deep fresh snow was on the ground. It snowed all morning the day before, warming a bit in the afternoon. By dusk everything had frozen into place, firm against the night's mountain wind. Now, at 6:30 a.m., the sky was icy and clear. The early morning light on the crusty snow threw pale cobalt shadows through the clarified air. The serenity of the young day struck her, the glassy ice on the trees, and a silence so rare in a railroad town. *Whee-ump!* Suddenly a hard snowball grazed across against her left temple. For a moment she was dazed. Reeling, she heard shrieks from somewhere in front of her. "I'm sorry-I'm sorry-I'm sorry," squealed a boy. Another shouted, "You're a ninny, Billy Brague, you couldn't hit a barn door." So! It was Billy Brague from her boarding house. It made her feel better that she'd been caught in a crossfire, that it wasn't deliberate. Not so far from childhood herself, she knelt down in the snow to scoop up a ball—well-schooled Berkshire girl that she was. Nellie MacDonald, from a family of six siblings, shouted: "Y'should be more careful, Billy Brague!" And on the word *careful* she fired her hard-packed munition, nailing him right in the mouth, which up to that moment had been hanging open in disbelief. The two boys ran off to school, laughing at their rout, leaving Nellie to contemplate the span of her winters as she walked to the depot in the remaining morning's solitude.

Nellie, just 20, full of hope and health and her first full-time position as a Hinsdale station agent, realized she was entering a new phase into an adult life. For two years she had helped, part-time, to fill in for the aging Miss Taylor. In those two years she had traveled from Richmond, her family home, 17 miles west on the B&A main line. It was lonely boarding in Hinsdale with only Saturday nights traveling home to spend Sunday with her raucous family of Mom, Dad, and six other children. Her sister Kate, the oldest, was a nanny for the wealthy Colt family of Pittsfield—Mr. Colt was head of the Richmond Furnace. Elder brother John should have married his childhood sweetheart, but big sister Kate, signalling her ardent displeasure, chopped off John's best suit trousers at the knees. John remained a bachelor. None of the MacDonald children were destined to marry. Both brothers, John and Jim, were railroad men.

Their mother died first in 1888 of cancer. Jim died of Scarlet Fever at 28 in 1908. In 1890, working as a servant, little sister Mary succumbed to Pneumonia. The family was struck again in 1899 with (school teacher) sister Margaret's death at 22 of pulmonary consumption. That left just Kate, John, Nellie, and Sarah. Such early deaths, while not unusual, were still traumatic for the MacDonalds. Times were hard. Father died at 61 in 1909 from acute endocartitis.

Nellie's railroad career commenced July 3, 1894 when she began the spare work at Hinsdale. That she would succeed Miss Taylor we know from a handwritten note of October 26, 1896, from someone named Gray who—we suppose—supervised station agents:

BOSTON & ALBANY RAILROAD CO.

> Your note at hand this a.m. I would say I have not asked Miss Taylor when she will leave for reason that she might think I was crowding her off, but think it will be about 1st of next month by remarks I have heard. I will let you know when she informs me, so as to give you time with due regard.
>
> Am Yours, Gray.

Nellie duly became agent at Hinsdale December 2, 1896, when the handsome stone depot was just four years old. Her day began before sunrise; she was up at 5:30 a.m. to be at breakfast at 6:00 with Mrs. Brague and her five children (of whom Billy was the oldest) and the other boarders. The family had an ample garden and raised poultry for the meat and the eggs. Milk and cream came from a nearby farm. Coffee came on the railroad. It was just a few minutes walk to the depot, which Nellie MacDonald was expected to have open and running by 7:00 a.m. sharp.

In the cold months, from September into May, that meant a hot fire going in the stove. If left properly the night before, it would still be smoldering and easy to start. Starting afresh was enough of a chore that you avoided it when you could. The wood was brought from a local farm, ordered by Nellie for a month at a time, and stored in a woodshed next to the depot. Nellie supervised the snow-shoveling of the platform near the depot door, as well as on the street side, enough that two or three carriages could have access at once. High school boys like Billy Brague were eager then to do the work for a small stipend. If the appointed lad failed to arrive due to illness or, worse, clogged roads, Nellie might inveigle a section hand to do the shoveling. In blizzards, when there was a premium on labor, Nellie did it herself.

She kept a small stove so that there would be coffee all day for conductors, trainmen, or a section boss who needed a kick. Sometimes on hot days she kept a pitcher of lemonade handy, though generally the station was cool. The thick granite walls repelled the heat, as did the big air space in the expansive attic. The station was one of the Richardson-inspired buildings designed by Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge. It was completed in 1892 at a cost of $9,054. Since it was virtually state-of-the-art for a country station when Nellie began in 1896, she must have found it comfortable. Her telegraph skills would have been excellent, of course, this being the *sine qua non* of any station

Writing such a defective ticket was a serious invitation for demotion. Not to mention what Aunt Rosamond might do. The railroad had a covenant with its traveling public and the agent was its ambassador. If your failures mounted up, you might be history. Compared to knowing the *Guide*, specific B&A train information was comparatively simple, and agents were expected to have these facts in their heads at all times. So much of their work revolved around the trains' schedules that it was easy to do so. Also nearly every station had a large rack of timetables of railroads from across America. They were in the business of transportation; the more convenient the connections, the more frequent the trains, the more money could be made. As fast as Nellie could get the foreign roads' schedules on the rack, she'd order more from the Passenger Traffic Department on the third floor of Boston's South Station.

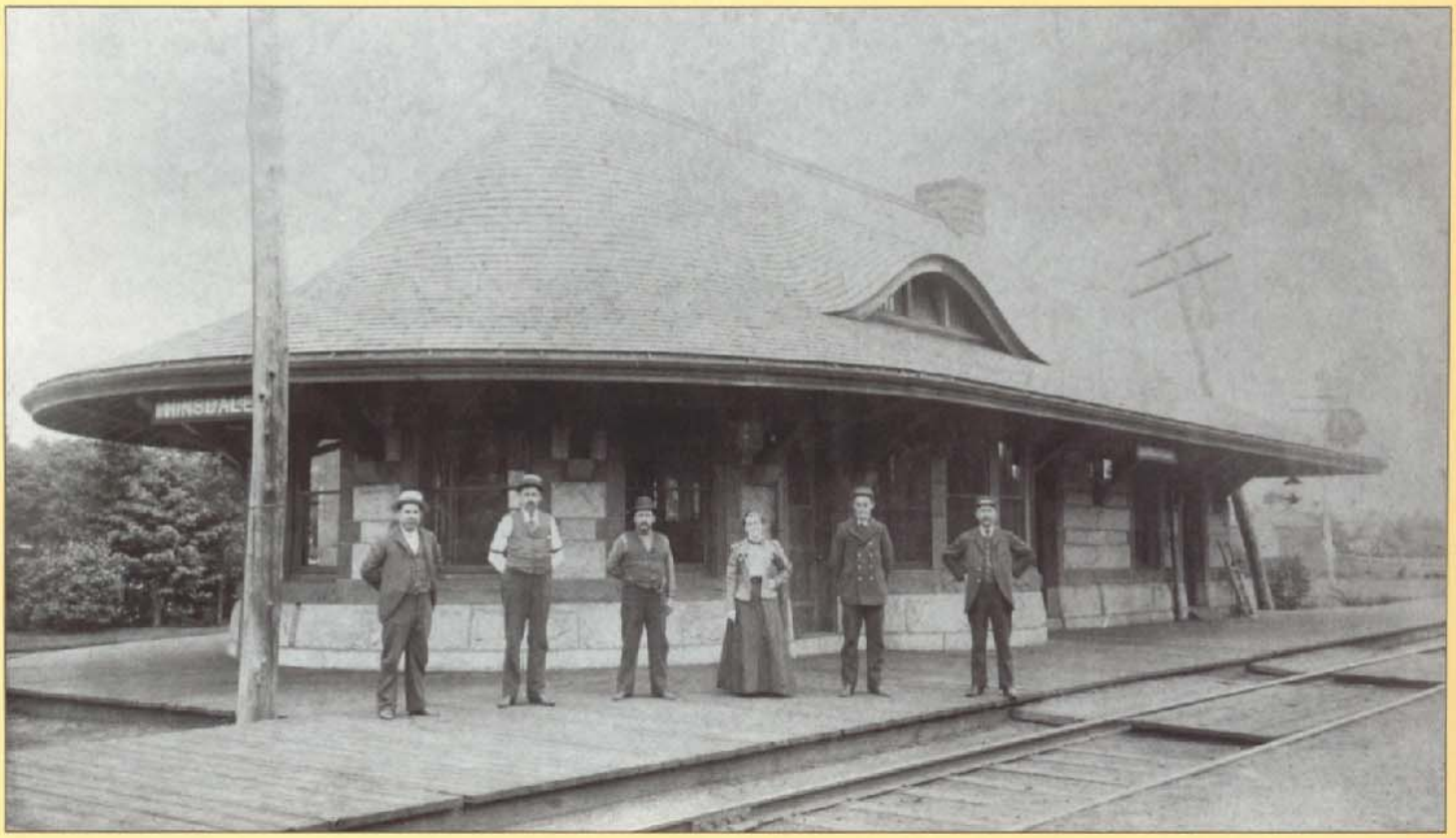
Through-travel tickets issued by the railroads were done on long forms having numerous sections, each to be punched and torn off by a conductor on the appropriate connecting railroad. Nellie kept a large stock of such stuff, chosen from those thought most likely to serve her customer's needs. Sleeping car space had to be requested by railroad mail—sometimes by telegraph—and it was typically a day or two before a rider knew if the requested space was available.

New England manufacturing companies shipped most everything by Adams Express then, and Nellie had to be conversant with all the rules, and she had to collect the appropriate fees as designated in the charts. And for every piece of baggage handled, for every package accepted for delivery or taken from a train, for the boxes of baby chicks that inundated the station in the spring, along with seeds for the equivalent of several arboretums, and even for the inevitable casket of the dearly departed, for each of these there were the tedious forms to be completed in triplicate, signed by the customer, and sent to Springfield. Busier stations had a separate freight agent but at Hinsdale the single agent handled everything, literally from soup to nuts. It was a big, tiring job for any man or woman, yet it was one of great responsibility, one commanding respect, and one held with intense pride by its owner. The station agent was a pillar of the community.

Keeping the station clean was another duty. A simple sweeping of the floor might suffice in the summer and autumn, when there was lots of dust and soot, but in the snowy winters and muddy springs, it was a nasty daily ordeal to wash the floor. As were the windows. And that's why there were ample ammonia shipments in the express car perhaps twice a year. Nellie had a small budget to pay local boys for these chores.

Like all her colleagues in stations, Nellie kept an eye on the restroom doors, lest hoboes try to sneak into the building for a nap, sponge bath, or even to steal a purse. Hoboes along railroad rights-of-way were a virtual epidemic during the early years of this century, and they were everywhere. The railroad police helped, but Nellie's eagle eye was needed as well. Her customers considered that their safety was her utmost concern when hoboes were seen in the neighborhood.

At train time, the freight and express had to be wheeled to the platform spot where the appropriate car was expected to stop, and where the train crew would take over the labor.



Nellie took pride in her clothing. Here she stands with five colleagues at Hinsdale. The man to her right is perhaps her brother Jim who was also based in Hinsdale. His occupation was listed as "trainman" in the Richmond Town Clerk's office at the time of his death from Scarlet Fever. Brian Scace collection.

agent, and she would have been the local agent for Western Union as well. We know from her diary that she purchased a telegraph board in 1901, probably to practice on at the boarding house. And through the telegraph she was a conduit for news from the outside world. In the era before radio and television, the railroad station was a town's nerve center, especially for any news of national or international importance. The news brought by the early morning paper train from Boston was already half a day old when it got to Hinsdale, so when the citizens gathered at the depot for the papers, they looked to Nellie for any later, critical news she might share with them.

Lunch was usually taken at her desk, where she could keep an ear cocked to the telegraph as she read a favorite book. We know she enjoyed reading because she often bought chances on books (16 times in 1900 alone) whenever she went to a fair or a show. Some other chances she bought were for slippers, dresses, pictures, a Silliveau Watch, and a chain letter. When the weather was beautiful, Nellie could occasionally be seen outside, sitting on the sunny side of the depot, eating her lunch and reading, or even sneaking a few winks. A 12-hour day always went better with a little nap, and there was a quiet period midday where there were no trains. She always kept one ear alert to the telegraph. And like any good agent, Nellie always knew the status of her trains: "Fifteen's gonna be late today, Miss Libby, 'count of all that rain on Washington Hill and the washout danger. Prob'ly 'twon't be here till quarter to five, but I believe you'll still get your connection to Buffalo alright at Albany. You just sit there by the stove and rest yourself."

She handled the baggage and express, and the U. S. Mail, too. Of course she had to be completely familiar with the rules and regulations about U. S. Mail. She lugged those often-heavy postal sacks from sometimes far afield after they were thrown off the expresses, and she mounted them on the big frame to be picked off by the arm on the RPO car. If the RPO boys missed dropping a bag—sometimes they forgot where they were—Nellie telegraphed the dispatcher so that it could be brought back on a return train, at worst meaning a whole day's delay. This was a great disappointment to the locals, many who were waiting right there at the depot for important mail, stock dividends, maybe a package of Burpee seeds or, God-willing, a love letter.

Of course Nellie sold a lot of tickets. While many local folk found it more convenient to take the trolley to Pittsfield, the only comfortable and efficient way to go west to Chatham and Albany, or east to Springfield, Worcester, and Boston—or anywhere far away—was by train. Nellie's bible was the *Official Guide of the Railways* published monthly in updated editions of some 1,500 pages. These essential tomes listed every railroad train in North America (and Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, too) and steamship lines as well. The trick to the *Guide* was being sure you were reading all the symbols correctly. Otherwise you might strand Aunt Rosamond in a remote junction where no connecting train ran that Saturday night.

Opposite: *Nellie MacDonald as a young woman. Dorothy Boyle collection.*
Above: *Nellie poses on the Hinsdale platform with two men. The man with the cane is perhaps a passenger; the man closest to the camera appears to be in uniform, probably a conductor, and he may indeed be the same man at far right in the photo on page 263. Note the express wagon, the crate on the platform, and the lantern hanging from the roof. Brian R. Scace collection.*

There might be orders to be given to the conductor, in the event a change in conditions had arisen since the last orders or station stop. It was every agent's duty to send an "O-S" message ("On Station") to the dispatcher whenever a train left or passed through. And a really good agent was always looking out for the comfort of the passenger. Nellie would survey the platform as the conductor bellowed "Boooaaaard!," looking to account for whom was getting on. More than once she roused Father O'Malley from a deep nap next to the pot-bellied stove where he'd dozed when the train was late.

At 7:00 p.m. she tamped the fire for the night, made one last telegraph connection with Springfield, locked the doors and walked home in this little country town. Mrs. Brague had dinner on the table when she came in, and usually a lively conversation surrounded the meal. Every night they had a half-hour bible reading in the parlor. After that Nellie retired to her room to mend clothing, write a letter or two, or luxuriate in a new book.

Saturday afternoons Nellie left her job at 4:26 to catch the local train which would drop her at Richmond at 5:04. So she had the fun of Saturday night with family and friends in Richmond. Sunday always included church and a big dinner, and then tending to the needs of the Richmond house during the afternoon. Nellie was the breadwinner, and it was expected that part of her wages would provide for the upkeep of the house. Over the years there were hefty expenditures for coal, lumber, insurance, even a new stove for $25.

Sunday afternoon at 5:40 Nellie boarded the eastbound train for Hinsdale. Her rail transportation was not free; she paid $1.95 a month for an employee ticket. Were she to miss the 5:40 local, she could arrange for a livery to take her to Pittsfield, from where she might catch a trolley. Otherwise a livery from Richmond to Hinsdale was $1.50, a day's pay!

Whatever Nellie's various hostesses served at table, she would supplement her own food with items sometimes prepared in her room, such as meat, pressed ham, sausage, salmon, butter, cheese, Uneeda Biscuits, bananas, berries, grapes, lemons, oranges, peaches, cocoa, tea, doughnuts, sugar, candy, gum, peanuts, and ice cream. Often the sweets were bought at fairs and outings. Over the years Nellie occasionally recorded giving money to gentlemen friends, in amounts ranging from 50¢ to $15. She made no notations in her diary about being paid back, so we assume these were gifts, not loans. A pity she didn't tell us more about her gentlemen.

She bought a new watch in August 1901, which she took in for periodic repairs. Conscientious railroad employees took their time-keeping very seriously. In railroading, time was everything.

On July 21, 1902, Nellie recorded that she was receiving $1.50 a day. With a six-day week, 52 weeks a year, that meant $468 a year, and there were no taxes then. Nellie was a good Catholic and she paid $2.50 pew rental twice a year, plus funds for prayer books and her membership in the Altar Society. Her pay was increased to $1.75 a day in February 1907, $1.87 in April 1910, $2.00 in January 1912, and $2.14 in May 1913—increases averaging just shy of 4% a year.

Nellie seems to have been devoted to Sarah, her beautiful younger sister, who taught public school in Richmond for 50 years. Nellie's diaries are filled with entries such as: Sarah $1.50, Sarah Car Fare Pitts[field] to Rich[mond] 50¢, Stage Driver Sarah 25¢, Mr. Wentworth for Sarah 50¢, Ribbon Sarah 15¢, Loaned Sarah Convention $2, Took Sarah Peru 50¢, etc. Probably Nellie felt that Sarah's work as a schoolteacher was tremendously important, and that helping out was the right thing to do. A noble devotion to family and friends comes through her diary pages. She was very kind-hearted.

Good-quality clothing was important to Nellie. She bought small items regularly and there is the occasional large purchase: a "long blue coat" for $14.98; a hat for $5.98; a "skirt and making" for $5.75. Cash payment was the rule, but November 1912 finds Nellie buying a winter coat on credit for $18.80. There are dozens of entries for ribbons, lace, material, and thread. Like most women then, she often sewed things herself. And—given the long, wet winters—gloves, kerchiefs, and shoe rubbers were purchased regularly.

Of course Nellie's single largest expense was room and board in Hinsdale, where she changed locations from time to time. This may have had to do with changing circumstances of the host families (Billy Brague was quite the hellion with his burgeoning adolescence), or indeed it could have stemmed from personality conflicts with her hostesses.

Her boarding habits changed in March 1908, when she moved back to Richmond and paid her sister Kate $3 a week for board, and "Grace" $1 a week for room. Probably Grace, who is not otherwise identified, lived near the MacDonalds, and paying Kate for board at least kept the money in the family. Of course this meant a daily train commute. In March 1910 Nellie supplemented the board with another $2 toward running the household, a total of $5 weekly. The $120 she spent on room and board in 1900 had ballooned to $264 by 1912.

Most striking of all the diary entries are the escalating medical costs beginning in 1912; she developed a chronic respiratory ailment which was never cured. With no health insurance then, her stopping work would have meant the end of income. No doubt she worked at the station until it became unbearable. She was home sick for March and April, 1913, returning to work May 12. On July 6 she came home permanently, never to work again. She lost interest in keeping the heretofore accurate financial entries in the diary, her last noted expenditure a 24¢ steak on August 6, 1914. She died at age 39 on July 10, 1915 of Pulmonary Tuberculosis and Nephritis.

Was Nellie successful in her work? Probably she excelled at it. Did she enjoy it? I believe she was devoted to it. Did Nellie love? Between her work and caring for the family, it would not have been practical. But *did* she love? We will never know. Nellie was a fastidious station agent, a devoted family and church person, and generous to a fault.

The Hinsdale station only lasted until September 2, 1937, when the B&A closed it after 45 years of operation, and freight service was thereafter conducted at Dalton.

Today the local railroad station and its dutiful agent, the dominant force in American commerce for a hundred years, have passed from the land almost without a trace. Sometimes the buildings remain, but their role as a town's nerve center has ended forever. Nellie MacDonald worked out her 19-year railroad career at the absolute height of the railroad's power and success in America. Her story, of a hard-working and resourceful woman, is typical of station agents all across the country. Yet it is the Berkshires that can claim her as part of its rich, proud heritage.