

APPENDIX V: RAILROAD GLOSSARY

Word or Term	Definition
Ballast	A medium spread out beneath the tracks to hold them in place and assists in drainage to help prevent washouts. It could initially be composed of compressed dirt during construction then upgraded to rock at a later time, once the route was more established and regularly used. Cinders, a byproduct of burning wood for steam, were also sometimes used as ballast.
Cut	A trench dug through a hill to provide a more level path for the roadbed.
Emigrant car	A train car rented by someone moving from one location to another, to transport their belongings.
Express company/Express messenger	A company specializing in shipping small packages.
Extension	Any additional length of track or a new branch off of a main line of track.
Fastenings	A system of iron or steel members used to attach rails to ties and other rails.
Fill	Arguably the opposite of a cut; the process of adding material/dirt to a depression to create a solid and relatively flat path upon which the roadbed is built.
Freight bill	Part of the paperwork necessary to move freight from its point of origin to its destination.
Freight train	A train that carries freight cars only.
Grade	The vertical slope of the roadbed.
Grader	A railroad employee who works to shape the roadbed upon which the tracks are laid.
Grading	The process of preparing the roadbed.
Grain elevator	An agrarian structure that stores grain brought in by farmers until it can be loaded onto grain cars.
Iron rails	Rails made of iron. These were softer, more fragile, and prone to breakage. This was the standard material used in the early years of railroad construction in the United States. Eventually, iron was replaced by steel, which was stronger, heavier, and more reliable.
Journal boxes	Enclosures on a truck assembly that house the ends of the axles and keep the bearings lubricated. Without the proper amount of lubrication, bearings fall victim to friction—they heat up and melt, destroying the integrity of the trucks, which could lead to derailment. Early versions contained plain bearings and oil-soaked rags. Modern versions are sealed, filled with lubricant, and contain sets of roller bearings. There are now also “hot box detectors”

	located along the tracks to detect problems before they become emergencies. Also called axle boxes. ²⁶
Junction point	Where two or more railroad lines intersect.
Lightning train	An “express” in modern terms, it would leave a city, then travel a long distance without stopping at smaller towns, until its destination.
Main line	Generally, a main line is a primary set of tracks, such as the Winona & St. Peter or the Dakota Central. At the local level, the term could be used to describe the primary track through a town or yard.
Mixed train	A train with both freight and passenger cars.
Rail yard	The area that contains the major infrastructure of the railroad in a given town. It can include additional sidetracks, spurs, warehouses, water tanks, coal houses, and all other equipment and structures needed to operate the railroad in that location.
Rails	The pieces of iron or steel upon which the wheels of a train are run.
Roadbed/railbed	The prepared earthen foundation that supports the ballast, ties, and track.
Rolling stock	A collective term that refers to locomotives, tenders, cattle cars, flat cars, passenger cars, cabooses, work cars, wrecking cars, etc.
Rotary plow	A plow incorporating a circular set of blades, similar to modern snowblowers.
Roundhouse	A semicircular facility used for the servicing and storage of locomotives, usually surrounding or adjacent to a turntable.
Section house	A house built for the person(s) responsible for maintaining a particular stretch of track.
Sidetrack	A short length of auxiliary track (up to a mile long) used to store and rearrange cars.
Siding	A length of auxiliary track parallel to a main track that allows one train to pull over to allow another train to pass.
Snow bucking	The process of driving a locomotive and plow into an accumulation of snow to clear the track.
Steel rails	Rails made of steel. Railroads replaced iron rails with steel, as they were able.
Stockyard	An area near a town’s rail yard where animals under transport would be let out for exercise, food, and water before continuing their journey, if they had not yet reached their destination.
Surveying	The process of determining the features of a land area in order to construct a map, define a route, or other such purposes.
Surveyor	A skilled worker who determines the path along the ground to place the railbed, using specialized techniques and tools.

Switch	The mechanism that allows trains to pass from one set of tracks to another.
Tender	The car that carried a locomotive's fuel (either wood or coal) and water, always located directly behind the locomotive.
Terminus/Terminal	The "end of the rails" or the end point for a particular railroad line. It could be a temporary status until additional construction extended the line further.
Ties	The wooden crossbeams that support and hold the rails. Ties are supported by the ballast.
Timetable	A chart that details the times a train arrives at and departs from stops along the railroad line (also sometimes referred to as "time cards" in the newspaper articles).
Track	The combination of rails, fasteners, and ties.
Trucks	The assemblies that hold the wheel sets of a car.
Turntable	A large rotating mechanism that allows individual locomotives or cars to "turn around." Usually located at the ends of railroad lines and also often found near roundhouses, where they could be used to direct cars to specific bays for maintenance.
Water tank	Large, generally elevated reservoir for the storage of water, which was the critical element in the operation of steam engines.
Way car	Another name for a caboose.
Wedge plow	A V-shaped piece of metal used in snowplowing. The point of the V heads into the snow to throw it to either side of the track. This was the style of plow available during the winter of 1880–81.
Wye	A Y-shaped track configuration that facilitates three-point turns; an alternative to a turntable. The locomotive would go up one arm, back into the other arm, then pull forward, back onto the main rail. (Also sometimes spelled <i>why</i> or just <i>Y</i> .)
Work Train	Used by the railroad for work purposes, not shipping freight or passengers.