

# ON TRACK IN ROCHELLE

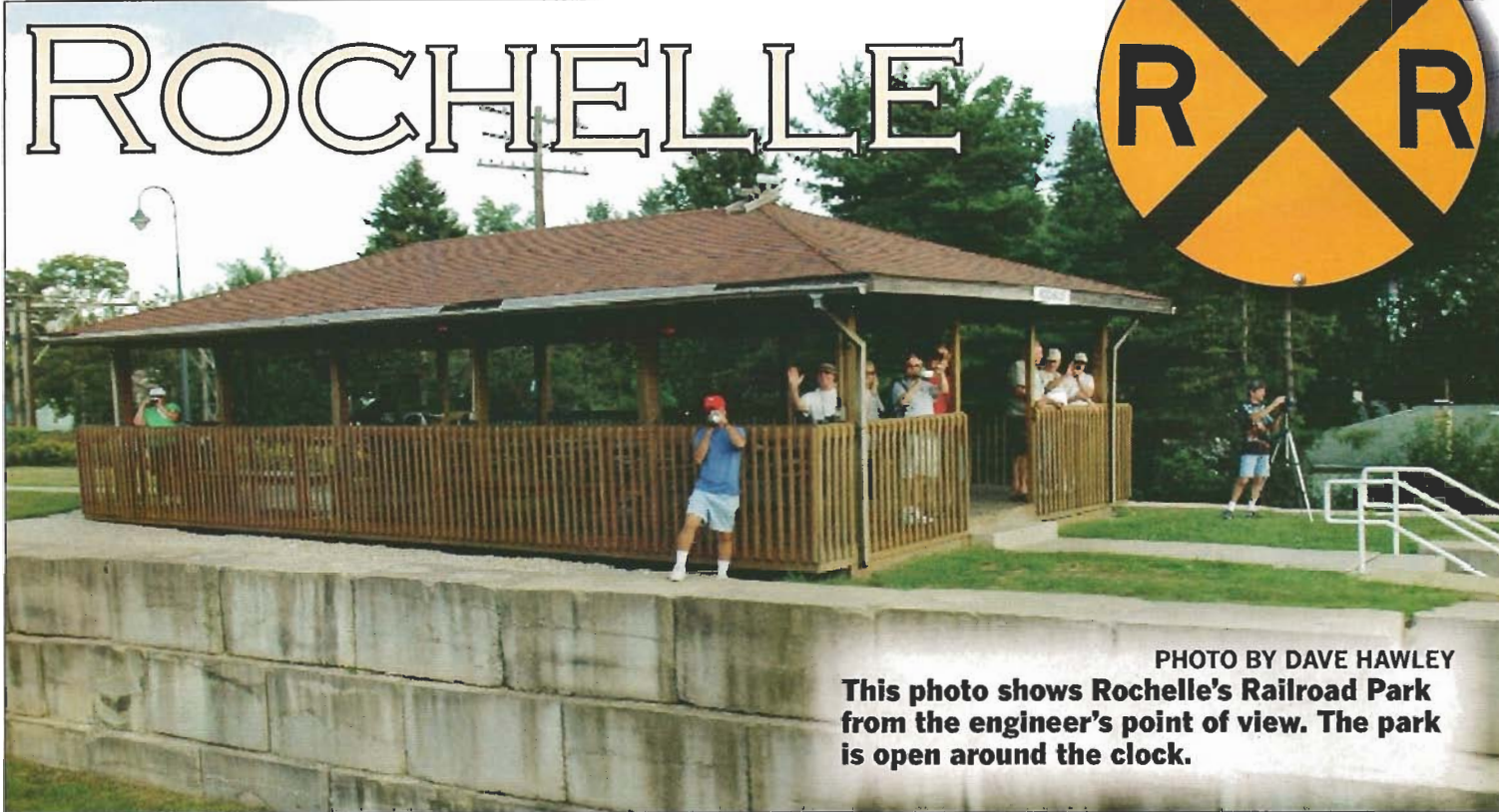


PHOTO BY DAVE HAWLEY  
This photo shows Rochelle's Railroad Park from the engineer's point of view. The park is open around the clock.

## Railroads equal relaxation

*Story by William Karr*

**A**

n estimated 35,000 to 40,000 train hobbyists visit Rochelle's Railroad Park annually, and several enjoy it without leaving the automobile they drove.

Trains became a part of Rochelle's community spirit when tracks were laid in 1853. A group of Rockford investors bought the land as soon as they heard the railroad was being built. Next to the tracks, a camp developed where workers building the tracks lived while on the job. One of those investors was a man named Lane. Since he was the primary person suggesting the camp, Rochelle was known as Lane until 1866. At the spot where the camp was, there are two adjoining lots currently known as Rochelle Railroad Park.

Freeport families sharing the hobby of train watching and model train enthusiasts may come to the park 24 hours a day, seven days a week. From the north, travel down Highway 20 to the Rochelle exit, and turn on 251. Stop at 124 N. 9th St. Observers will see two main tracks which carry 60 to 120 trains a day in opposite directions. ⇨

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“ The Rochelle Railroad Park was the first park in the United States created (so that people could) take pictures of trains. The pavilion sits on three levels of concrete blocks. It sits up there so visitors can take a picture of the engineer sitting in his locomotive.

—Rochelle Tourism Director Ross Freier

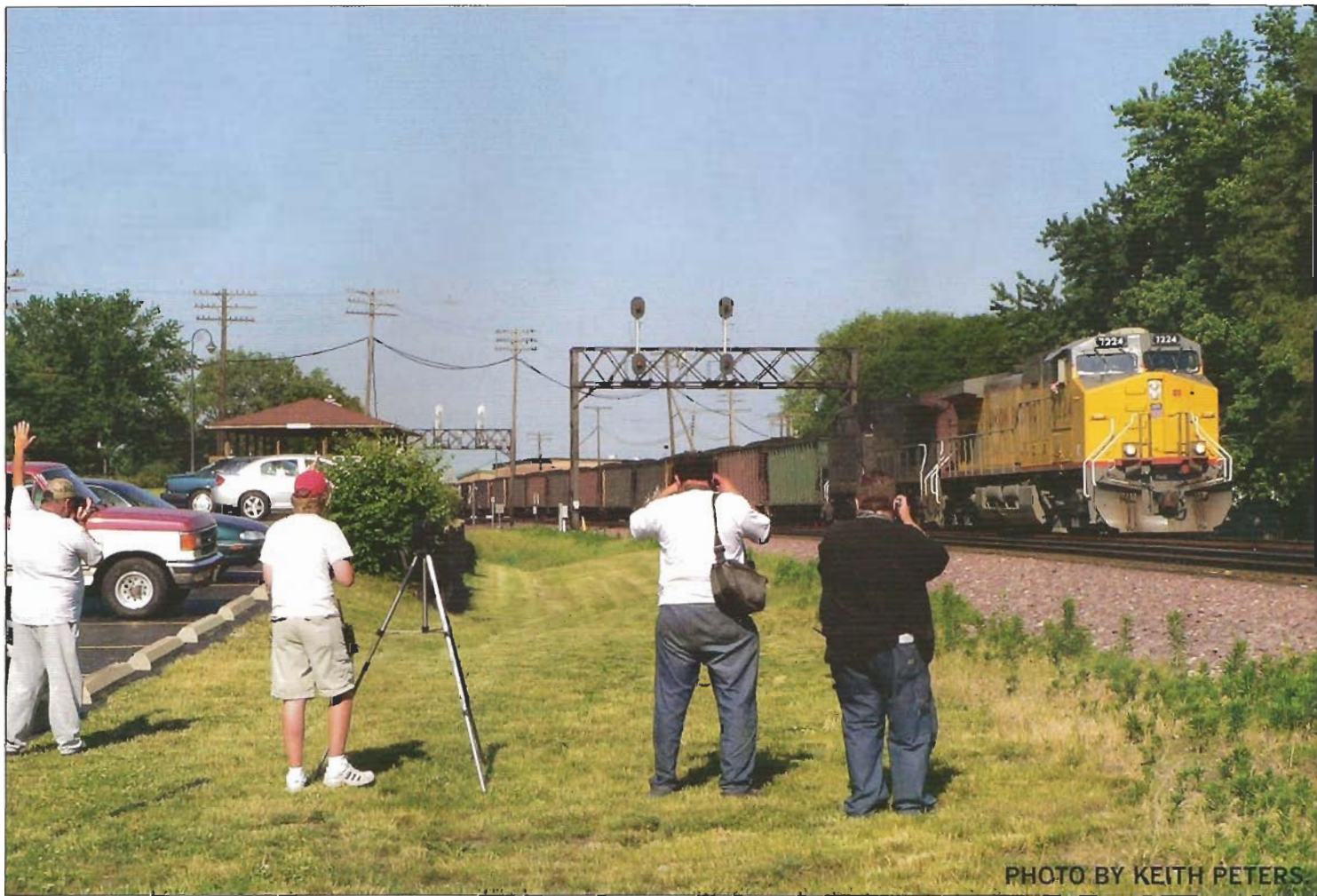


PHOTO BY KEITH PETERS

The City of Rochelle acquired the land for the park in 1995. Two residences stood on the property. By 1998, the park officially opened with a pavilion occupying space where one house stood. Within the first full year of operation, the second house became a gift shop, but vendors did not stay. At that early time, the Rochelle Tourism & Visitor's Association was an advisory committee to Rochelle City Council. In 2003, the committee was modernized to assume all management responsibilities for the park, and Ross Freier was appointed director.

“The Rochelle Railroad Park was the first park in the

United States created (so that people could) take pictures of trains,” asserts Freier “The pavilion sits on three levels of concrete blocks. It sits up there so visitors can take a picture of the engineer sitting in his locomotive. Some engineers tell me they take pictures of people photographing them. There is a ramp so people using wheelchairs can also see.”

A major discussion occurred when the Tourism & Visitor's Association considered the problem of safety for children and adults. There was no intention of building fences on the perimeter because they would obstruct picture taking. Since parkland butts up against



## FOR MORE

**Rochelle Railroad Park**  
**Where:** 124 N. 9th St.,  
Rochelle

**Gift Shop:** 10 a.m. to  
6 p.m. seven days a week  
during the summer

**Online:** [www.rochelle  
railroadpark.org](http://www.rochelle<br/>railroadpark.org)

**Contact:**  
(815) 562-5939

**Live Web Cam:** Sign  
up at [www.trains.com](http://www.trains.com)

busy railroads, preoccupied visitors could have horrible accidents.

"What we did was to devise a single sign. It features the common railroad sign and other signs people see on railroads," Freier says.

"Six of those signs outline the Railroad Park so everyone notices these signs as they walk around. When a person sees the signs, they know they are crossing into an area that is too close to the tracks. They also know they are at the limits of property owned by Rochelle."

Other signs are posted on buildings with written material about railroad history. In addition to trains, the most active location in the park is the gift shop. Visitors have free Internet access to enjoy various railroad Web sites either inside or at a picnic table. After tuning in to FM 106.9 on a car or home radio, people can listen to dispatch calls. The same dispatch traffic can be heard on a portable radio in the pavilion.

Another feature inside the gift shop is the ATCS display. It shows the layout of actual tracks of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad, east to Aurora and close to the state line. Visitors also see a portion of Rochelle's Union Pacific tracks. They will know what trains have clearance to move and where other trains are setting.

"Larry Bunce of Railroad Relics travels all over the

country buying railroadiana, which is a collection of items formerly used by railroad employees," explains Freier. "Right now, we have an original steam conductor's railroad cap. There are also mugs, T-shirts, disposable cameras, snacks and even dining car china."

Freier's job is to plan the future of the park. Within the next year, he hopes to create a recreational vehicle parking area complete with power and water hook-up. He is currently negotiating with a Rochelle restaurant owner to put a café in the gift shop. One of the best times of year to visit the railroad park is during Railroad Days, which are held the first weekend in June.

Visitors also can become part of Hobo Village in the woods behind the park. This is the place people can build their own campfire and roast a meal or marshmallows. No admission is charged because expenses are paid by grants and a 5 percent hotel/motel tax.

"We have plans to continue adding new amenities and features to the Rochelle Railroad Park, as well as form new partnerships in the future," Freier said. "We are always striving to improve upon the Rochelle Railroad Park but to do so with the original intent of the park in mind. It is a park for fans of the rails." □