



Transcript  
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**Michigan Radio Stateside Interview with  
Mark Harvey and Dan Austin | Michigan  
Central Station**

**Cynthia Canty:** It's Wednesday! Time to talk Michigan's history. Thirty years ago this week, January 5th, 1988, the last train left Michigan Central Station. That moment marked the end of nearly 75 years of people catching trains at the once-proud station. Dan Austin is with us. He's written three books about Detroit history and he is the founder of *historicroit.org*. We also welcome Mark Harvey, the State Archivist, here with us from the Michigan History Center. Happy New Year to both of you!

**Mark Harvey:** Happy New Year!

**Dan Austin:** Same to you!

**Cynthia Canty:** I remember Michigan Central. Actually, I had a great uncle who spent his career working in that building. I remember that final train 30 years ago, but boy, there are a lot of people who never knew it as anything but that big, hulking, empty, sad building between Corktown and Mexicantown. Dan, describe Michigan Central in its heyday and what it meant to Southeast Michigan.

**Dan Austin:** Well, when the building opened, it opened as the tallest rail station in the world. So, if you could imagine Detroit, with the advent of the automobile or the automobile really coming into its prime, Detroit was poised for greatness, and few things made as much of a first impression on people as the first building they saw when they stepped off the train. So, Michigan Central was a grand building showing a city on the rise. It was decked to the nines, it was designed by the same two firms that did Grand Central Station in New York, so it's kind of got like this Bozart side that the waiting room is done up like the old baths of ancient Rome with the 65-foot ceilings. I mean, this building made an impression on people, not just of the station but the city itself.

**Cynthia Canty:** So it's basically throwing down that card on the table saying, "We're terrific!"

**Dan Austin:** Yeah, "Detroit is such an amazing city, check out our temple of transportation," as you will. It was really an incredible way to kind of roll out the welcome mat, not just to people travelling, but to visitors, to people arriving in Detroit to

work at the auto factories. I mean, it was really a grand statement of what the Motor City had become and would continue to grow into.

**Cynthia Canty:** Mark Harvey, the station's about a mile or so west of the heart of downtown Detroit. Do we know why that location of Michigan Avenue and 14th Street was chosen?

**Mark Harvey:** We have some clues to it. The original station was located at Third and Jefferson, and Michigan Central Railroad was a growing business around the turn of the century, growing rapidly. In 1906 they start construction on a tunnel to connect with Canada, and, as Dan said, Detroit was booming. So, the thought was as the city expands, the idea was planted to locate that new station, that "temple of transportation," as I think Dan accurately pointed out, about three-quarters of a mile west, to encourage that outward growth.

**Cynthia Canty:** So Dan, when did construction start and how long did it take to build this "grand temple"?

**Dan Austin:** So, a building of this size took a few years. You know, it's not something you whip out overnight. So the construction began in 1910, and it wasn't until 1912 that we had the steel framework for the building up. Then, as Mark noted, the old station, which was downtown, burned on December 26th, 1913. So, they had to rush the new station into service early. It was supposed to open up the following month. The newspaper articles at the time said as they were extinguishing the last of the flames at the old depot, the first new trains were coming into the station, which is really pretty incredible if you think about it.

**Cynthia Canty:** It is.

**Dan Austin:** Um, you know, the Detroit can-do, nothing stops Detroit mentality.

**Cynthia Canty:** So after that rough start, how did things go for the Michigan Central Station in its first few decades?

**Dan Austin:** At first, things were great. I mean, again, the station opened in 1913. 1914, the World War I era, was the peak of rail travel in the United States. Yes, cars were there but there weren't freeways. The only other way to get around the Midwest was on these majestic Great Lakes steamers, so trains were really your only way to go. I mean, you had 200 trains a day leaving Michigan Central around World War I, and you're talking about thousands of passengers coming in and out of the station every day. It stayed good up until, you know, the 1950s, you had the freeway system come in. That really cost the station a lot of its travelers. By 1971, you know, the federal government stepped in and

created Amtrak because the for-profit rail companies were no longer profitable and had gone out of business. Then you had the oil prices in the early seventies, which kept that going for a little while, but it was only a matter of time before the American rail system kind of declined.

**Cynthia Canty:** So, the years marched on and even, am I right Mark, that Amtrak took control of the station in '71, and did some renovations?

**Mark Harvey:** Yeah, they tried to pump some new life into the station, and Amtrak in seventies reopened the ornate waiting room. But, there was no connection to the airport, it was still sitting west of downtown, and with the rise of automobiles, even with the energy crisis, it was disconnected and I think it was just an inevitability that it was gonna slowly peter out.

**Cynthia Canty:** Kind of withering on the vine. Dan Austin, did anything special mark that last train on January 5th, 1988?

**Dan Austin:** Not really. You know, the newspapers at the time covered it, television stations, whatever, but it was an old relic of an older era, a bygone era. And it had been declining for so long. In '88, that was in the past and it was just kind of on the outskirts, the giant, hulking building, Bozart's behemoth, that had already been kind of grimy and run-down. So, people just kind of said, "See ya later." Keep in mind, Detroit was also still on the decline. The 80s were not a great time for Detroit. It was losing population, the Devil's Night fires, crime, so it was one of those things where, like so much of the city, we just turned our backs on it and walked away.

**Cynthia Canty:** Except for the scavengers and the scrappers, because certainly now they've had decades to hurt the building.

**Dan Austin:** Yeah. It was not long after the station closed that the scrappers got to work and ripped it apart. You saw sconces being stolen, chandeliers, marble. Vandals got in and spray-painted graffiti everywhere. It really was an undignified way to end what had been this grandiose building. A symbol of pride quickly became a symbol of Detroit's decay. You know, I mean, I don't think that there's been a building, other than maybe the Packard Plant, but even that's questionable, that has been used to illustrate Detroit's decline as much as Michigan Central. I mean, even when you're looking at these movies like Transformers and Batman vs. Superman, you know, when they want to show a war-torn, destroyed kind of building, they always go to Michigan Central Station.

**Cynthia Canty:** When you talk about ruin porn, which is a phrase many people despise, but that kind of epitomizes it, doesn't it?

**Dan Austin:** Yeah. It does. I think it's also important to note here, I know that the Moroun family, which owns it and the Ambassador Bridge, takes a lot of heat for the station's condition, but they bought it in 1995. The scrappers and vandals had already had their go at it by that time. Now, clearly he didn't do a whole lot to stabilize it and prevent further decay until more recent years, working with Mayor Duggan, but I mean this building had been open to trespassers and vandals for seven years by the time the Morouns took over.

**Cynthia Canty:** And here we are in 2017, where we see a younger generation who aren't particularly interested in cars, who would welcome a good train station, and there have been ideas for ways to use Michigan Central through the years. Dan, what have been the sticking points?

**Dan Austin:** (Laughs) Money. I mean, it all comes down to money. You know, you're looking at a building that's so big. Its 18 stories tall, the waiting room would probably take 100 million dollars on its own. You've got stone missing, marble missing. I'm not an architect, or a construction engineer, but probably \$250-300 million. It's just really hard to make that money work. I think there are some things that are going in the building's favor these days, unlike the previous 30 years, such as you have a lot of investment and restoration of historic buildings in downtown Detroit. We're seeing building that we never thought we be open, building that closed before I was born, now being restored. That certainly helps. When you look at '09, when the Detroit City Council passed a resolution to use economic stimulus money to tear it down, which fortunately they were unable to do because of its placement on the National Register of Historic Places, things have changed a lot in the past nine years. Things have finally swung in its favor, but unfortunately that price tag is still going to be a big hill to overcome.

**Cynthia Canty:** We were all having kind of a discussion on New Year's Day about the question: Right now, as we talk, in 2018, is the building structurally sound? Could it be put to good use, or is it been too long and now it's too damaged?

**Dan Austin:** I think that it's still salvageable. Any building, if you're willing to throw money at it, is salvageable. Granted, I'm a preservationist, I'm a building-hugger, but I can't think of anyone who wouldn't want to see this building saved. I mean, if Detroit can turn around this symbol of its decay and turn it into a symbol of rebirth, that would be just such a story for Detroit, you know, a symbol that we have finally overcome and reclaimed our rightful placement as one of America's greatest cities.

**Cynthia Canty:** Let me ask you, Mark Harvey, as the Michigan History Center perspective, in your gut, do you believe we will see a new chapter and a new life for Michigan Central?

**Mark Harvey:** I hope so. I think an interesting postscript to this is about four years ago, the Archives of Michigan was contacted by an individual who leading up to those last days of the station being open in 1988, was in contact with the employees of the railroad that had been ordered just to clear materials out. As often happens with company records, employees are not wanting to throw them away. They just took the materials out and saved them. They got passed from one place to the other and became overwhelming, and we were contacted unfortunately maybe a little too late, because a lot of them were in bad condition. We were able to salvage a large portion of the as-built architectural drawings of the station. If you know anything about architecture, it's a little bit different to get the as-builts than presentation copies, and we know that there's copies of the original elevations at Burton Historical Collection at the Detroit Public Library. But these are the drawings that would be in the building and used by facilities staff, and are just an incredible trove of information about the inner workings of that structure. So, do I think it's going to happen? I hope so. Can it? I think we have the records to enable that.

**Cynthia Canty:** Well, I'll tell you what. As just someone who, as I said, remembers it, as it was a wonderfully vibrant building when I was a kid, and then remembering that final train. Hard to believe it's been 30 years. Certainly, I think all of us can agree, in our lifetimes, that we would sure like to see that building come back to life again.