



The Railroad Builds The Plaza

The neighborhood of West Broad St. and Westfield Ave., near the railroad, in the year of grace, 1918, was a junkman's paradise. Nature had had no part in creating this curious jumble of shoddy, frame buildings—a run-down lumber yard, an old saw mill, tenements, stores, shanties and outhouses—set crazily on corners and in a triangle between narrow intersecting streets. Here man had done his best to malign nature and had made a huge success of it. The bottle-neck bridge under the railroad, at the entrance to Westfield Ave., and the up-grade railroad crossing on Broad St., made two-way travel difficult and at times dangerous. The railroad practically cut the town in half.

Looking from the club car windows as their special whizzed by, the gentry of Plainfield held their noses and remarked, "So, this is Westfield—whew!" On the opposite slope, the stately stone edifice of Methodism seemed to point a finger of scorn at its motley surroundings and say to all who passed that way: "Fellow citizens, it's time to put your house in order. Cleanliness is nigh akin to Godliness."

The improvement under consideration involved the reconstruction of the entire section, and could not be undertaken unless the Central Railroad Co. agreed to assume the major portion of the costs. It was necessary, therefore, to await the opportunity for a diplomatic exchange of views with officials of the road. One day Town Engineer Vars informed Senator Pierson that railroad engineers were surveying west of the depot with the idea (so he understood) of rebuilding the Westfield Ave. bridge.

"I see!" observed the Senator, and soon found occasion to drop casually into a seat beside William G. Besler, president of the Central Railroad, who lived in Plainfield, on a morning train bound for New York. Negotiations began when he suggested that, in rebuilding the bridge, the underpass be widened from forty to seventy feet. "It would lessen the risks of accidents at the Broad St. crossing," the Senator invited; then added cautiously, "It might be a good idea to do away with that crossing and divert all traffic to Westfield Ave." The idea appealed to Mr. Besler because he knew a law was pend-

ing which would require railroads to eliminate all grade crossings. Here was an opportunity to save the cost of building a second bridge. "That's a joint project," he parried, "let's find out what it will cost."

The plan drawn by the railroad engineers with the aid of Town Engineer Vars went beyond anything Messrs. Besler and Pierson had conceived. It provided for the elimination of the grade crossing and the removal of all buildings on both sides of Westfield Ave. and Broad St. within 200 feet of the underpass, which was to be moved 100 feet to the west and widened 120 feet. The railroad engineers estimated the entire cost at \$430,000, of which Westfield was at first asked to pay twenty per cent and finally ten per cent. The plan met with general approval, but after a little inside arithmetic, Engineer Vars was convinced that it would cost considerably more than estimated and so advised his associates confidentially.

In the protracted discussions which followed Senator Pierson kept in the background. Mayor Evans represented the Town and proved a skillful pleader. "We have told our people what this project will cost," he explained to Mr. Besler. "Our Council will never agree to a change. But I believe (he already knew) that they will accept your original figure." Finally, Mr. Besler gave his approval, and Westfield's share was fixed at \$43,000.

When completed and the claims of property owners satisfied (including the erection of a new office building for Tuttle Bros.), the total cost had mounted to \$773,000. Levi Hart, who owned the disreputable shacks in the Clark St.-Broad St.-North Ave. triangle, held out to the last for \$50,000. And he got it. Incidentals—not unexpected—added \$20,000 to Westfield's share, which in all, was \$63,000—for a physical transformation!

When again they met on the train, the railroad president said to the state senator, "Pierson, I congratulate you. Your town got all the best of that transaction." The senator adjusted his specks. "Well, now, Besler," he drolled, "it turned out better than any of us planned at the start and it will always stand to your credit that the Central Railroad did handsomely by the Town of Westfield."