

# Tom Kacich | Days numbered for what was once a key UI laboratory

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It's almost the end of the line for a building in the middle of the University of Illinois campus whose life has covered two distinct modes of transportation.

Aeronautical Laboratory A, originally known as the Locomotive Testing Laboratory, stands at an odd angle near the corner of Springfield and Goodwin avenues in Urbana. It owes its unique configuration — on a southwest-northeast axis — to the fact that a railroad spur from the old Illinois Traction System interurban line once ran into the building, carrying railroad locomotives and cars.

The laboratory, a gussied-up name for a 117-by-43-foot brick building, was built in 1912 and formally dedicated in May 1913.

Its purpose was primarily to test the railroad locomotives that in those days carried most Americans from city to city. Few people envisioned what was immediately ahead, a means of transportation that would be greatly advanced with the war that was building in Europe.

But for a few more years, railroads — the same ribbons of commerce that helped settle Champaign County and brought the University of Illinois here — would be king. And the Locomotive Testing Laboratory would be a star attraction on campus. Townspeople would be invited to open houses at the building where they could watch the powerful steam engines put through the paces while standing in place ("Forty-five miles an hour but standing still" was the headline in a Farmers Weekly Review story about the laboratory). When state



Photo by: The News-Gazette

This 105-year-old building at the southwest corner of Springfield and Goodwin avenues, once the University of Illinois' Locomotive Testing Laboratory, is to be demolished this summer.

legislators were brought from Springfield for their biennial tour of campus, the lab was always a stop. It was said to be one of only three such facilities in the United States, at a university that established the first railroad engineering department in the country in 1908.

On occasion, rail lines would bring their locomotives here to be tested, prompting unusual stories in the newspapers.

The old Urbana Courier reported on one such event when it wrote that downtown Urbana "onlookers could hardly believe their eyes when they saw a mogul Illinois Central freight locomotive — one of the largest types ever made — pass through Main Street on the street rail tracks."

The 182-ton IC locomotive couldn't come over from Champaign on the Illinois Traction System tracks because the turns were so tight, the newspaper said, so it was brought down from Chicago to Glover, east of St. Joseph, on the Chicago & Eastern Illinois line, where it was transferred to the ITS. The big freight engine was tugged through the country and Urbana by an electric locomotive at a low speed, the big engine's frame covered with an "insulated shield" so it wouldn't come in contact with trolley wires.

By 1940, however, the railroad industry was changing and fewer of the big steam engines were being tested at the UI. The university "streamlined" its specialized railway engineering program and incorporated it into other engineering fields. And when World War II arrived, the university pivoted and started an aeronautical engineering program, essentially replacing the trains with planes. The last straw was when the locomotive testing lab became an aerodynamics lab, complete with a wind tunnel used to test model airplanes.

Later this summer, the 105-year-old laboratory, oddly perched within a parking lot on the engineering campus, will be demolished, said Steve Breitwieser, a spokesman for the UI's Facilities & Services Department.

"The decision to close the building and move forward with the decommissioning process was due to structural concerns," he said, adding that it was related to masonry piers that are bowing inward.

As for the site's future,

Breitwieser said, the 2017 Campus Master Plan Update shows the area north of the lab as the location of a proposed integrated research lab.

Meanwhile, the UI continues to offer a laboratory program in railroad engineering research that is within the department of civil and environmental engineering and is headquartered

on the campus of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Construction Engineering Research Lab in northwest Champaign, about five miles northeast of the old locomotive lab.

Tom Kacich is a News-Gazette columnist. His column appears on Sundays.