

FRANK NOWINSKI

Sunk Deeply into Rock Island's Revival

by Laura Fletcher

ROCK ISLAND—Erected in 1901, the Rock Island passenger train depot was once a focal point of activity along the Mississippi River. Twenty-one ticket agents worked around the clock to service up to 32 departures and arrivals daily.

Like the city of Rock Island itself, the depot fell on hard times. The emergence of air travel diminished the train station's importance. By 1978, the last train had left the station, which closed its doors to the public. By the mid-1990s, the station had become a home to vandals and vagrants.

Designed by Charles S. Frost of Chicago, the building was on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1994 the city of Rock Island purchased the structure, hoping to make it serviceable to the community.

Those hopes were realized in 1999 when attorney Frank L. Nowinski of **Katz Huntoon and Fieweger PC** helped local hotel owners Joseph and Joan Lemon negotiate the purchase of the property.

Under the name "Abbey Station," the old depot today is one of the premiere banquet facilities in the Quad Cities. The success of the newly restored historic site is a reflection of the extraordinary revival of Rock Island, an urban renewal success story in which Nowinski has played a major role.

"He's just extremely dedicated," says Renaissance Rock Island President Brian Hollenback.

Nowinski is the chair of the Development Association of Rock Island, or DARI, a 65-member, dues-supported organization for commercial and industrial development.

"He has a tremendous amount of integrity and work ethic," says Hollenback. "We're virtually rebuilding the city block-by-block."

DARI, the Rock Island Economic Growth Corporation and the Downtown Rock Island Arts & Entertainment District, are part of umbrella organization Renaissance Rock Island. Those groups have been part of a revitalization movement that has become a national model for urban renewal, investing over \$150 million in renewal projects since its inception 20 years ago and \$15 million in 2011 alone.

Long a major hub on the Mississippi, Rock Island went through a period of blight in the 1970s that was worsened by the recession of the early 1980s and the collapse of the farm implement industry, which had sustained the city's economy. By the 2000 census, the city had lost close to 25 percent of its population.

Though a native of a predominantly Polish neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago, Nowinski has been actively involved in Rock Island's battle to restore its regional status from the beginning.

Following a stint at Loyola University Chicago School of Law, Nowinski's first job brought him to the Quad Cities region in the early '80s. He found a niche as a real estate lawyer when he realized that a local title company was overcharging lenders, and he decided to become an approved closing agent. This allowed him to not only write title insurance but to negotiate and close better deals for his clients.

"That portion of the practice kept expanding," Nowinski notes. "Since I've been practicing 32 years, a lot of people have had me close on houses several times—or I'll

has been recognized with numerous local, state, and national awards, including first-place honors in the 2007 City Livability Awards Program, sponsored by The U.S. Conference of Mayors and Waste Management.

An Amiable Demeanor

Nowinski's relationship with the city extends beyond his professional life.

Growing up at 47th Street and Pulaski in Chicago's St. Bruno Parish, the young Nowinski was surrounded by extended family. His mother was a homemaker and his father a machinist at the Wrigley chewing gum factory, where Nowinski worked during the summers from age 18 onward.

Nowinski's older brother, Thomas, who is eight years his senior, also worked at the factory throughout his college years before



represent one party on a transaction and then few years later, the other side will contact me."

Nowinski serves as counsel for the Quad City Area Realtor® Association and as a board member for the Community Foundation of the Great River, where he has both a permanent endowment and a charitable giving fund established in his name. In 2011 alone, his work as chair of DARI brought 10 new businesses to downtown Rock Island.

DARI and Renaissance Rock Island have gained national attention for their efforts on projects ranging from financial assistance for private businesses to education and aid for homebuyers at risk of foreclosure. The city

eventually becoming a criminal lawyer and judge. It was he who lobbied for Nowinski to have the opportunity to go away to school at Augustana College in Rock Island.

"I had been doing some teaching and I'd seen that college was an opportunity to experience, and I thought that would be a good thing for him," says Thomas Nowinski. "People said how great (Augustana) was."

Dale Haake, a fellow partner at Katz, Huntoon, and Fieweger and a Chicago northsider, was a senior at Augustana when Nowinski was a freshman. "It was a phenomenal experience," he says of his time at the school.

Nowinski excelled academically.

“Lawyers, in general, are pretty smart,” says Haake. “But even among the people I know and work with, Frank is one of the smartest. I’ve been with him in many, many meetings, especially with clients, where certain nuances of situation . . . lead him to a new line of inquiry or a whole (different) area where the client might need our services.”

Nowinski married his college sweetheart, Roxanne. The two have three children—David, 29, Joan, 27, and Steven, 16. They expect their first grandchild in March 2013.

In addition to his intelligence, Nowinski’s other great asset is his amiable demeanor.

“Frank brings a calming influence to the office,” says John Doak, also a partner at Katz, Huntoon, and Fieweger. That can be tremendously beneficial for a plaintiff’s litigator, he says.

“One of his best attributes is that he is non-confrontational. He’s not the least bit interested in one-upsmanship,” says Douglas Walker, a sole practitioner who has faced Nowinski many times in negotiations. “I can’t remember a situation when we didn’t address a problem, even a very serious problem, amicably. That’s very beneficial to his clients because they’re not left with some manufactured adversarial situation.”

Fighting Off the Alligators

Partner H. Karl Huntoon, who died in 2010, taught one of the most important lessons Nowinski has learned.

“Our long term philosophy is that we represent a business in good times and bad times, and hopefully for a long, long time,” Nowinski says. “It’s easier to represent a business when they’re doing well and you know you’re going to get paid. It’s worse when they’re in tough financial straits and if you don’t work things out, they won’t be able to pay you. That’s why we think it’s so important for the business that they have good representation when they’re in tough financial straits.”

In his career, many of Nowinski’s most memorable transactions have dealt with the financial struggles, rather than the successes, of businesses.

“These people worked very hard all their lives, did everything they thought they were supposed to do and circumstances take them down,” he says. “With a family farm, it’s like losing a child because (the farm has) been in the family for years and years.”

Those failing businesses that Nowinski was able to help save represent his greatest triumphs.

“If there’s a difficulty, he looks for a way to make it happen for everybody, to make it a win-win,” says real estate developer Dave Weiner, of David M. Weiner & Associates Inc.

“In my 40 years of commercial industrial real estate, we have had some real goofy, topsyturvy transactions and sometimes a curve ball thrown at us the day or two before a closing. He is just good at fighting off the alligators.”

His understanding of business law has served Nowinski in his work on the board of the Great River Bend Foundation. The foundation was set up 18 years ago with the mission of identifying critical non-profit programs and educational needs in the Quad Cities area and providing necessary funding.

As a board member, Nowinski helped expand the foundation to \$50 million in 2011. Its current funding stands at \$72.8 million.

“The biggest challenge has been keeping up with the growth of the foundation,” says foundation CEO Susan Skora. “Frank, as an attorney, was clearly a good counselor. The attorney’s ability to evaluate all alternatives is really so valuable.”

Proof of Improvement

Five years ago, the foundation determined that the best way to reduce the poverty rate in the Quad Cities area was to improve high school graduation rates.

With its “Achieve Quad Cities” initiative, it focused on the issue aggressively, establishing a common standard for graduation across school districts, funding a mentorship program for at-risk youth, and increasing donations to numerous organizations already working on the problem.

This year the initiative was able to cite clear-cut success. Since its start, the regional graduation rate has risen from 82 percent to 90 percent. ■