

The Iowa Route: A History of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railway

Simon Cordery
Western Illinois University

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2015 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution

Recommended Citation

Cordery, Simon. "The Iowa Route: A History of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railway." *The Annals of Iowa* 74 (2015), 428-429.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12243>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

the Little House books and other writings by Wilder. Hill makes cogent observations about Wilder's prose, noting the ways that it draws on her farm newspaper columns but lacks the polish of the finished children's books. A rough estimate suggests that notes, photographs, and maps take up almost as much space as the text of the manuscript itself. The exhaustiveness of the notes at times does make reading the book an exercise in turning pages back and forth. While it is possible to read the memoir through by itself, the notes draw readers in, and one often finds oneself relying on the notes to explain background and context.

In sum, *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography* is not just the publication of Wilder's memoir. The editor and publisher have successfully blended two types of books for two audiences. One book is the memoir itself, the entertaining story of Laura's youth, including many details that are not given in the Little House books. These include the birth and death of a younger brother, the family's year-long stay in a small town in Iowa, and descriptions of several neighbors' teenage pregnancies. This book will appeal to anyone with an interest in true stories about women and childhood in the nineteenth-century American Midwest. The other book is a compendium of what we know about Wilder's life, how she came to write the memoir, and how *Pioneer Girl* fits with her other works. This book is a work of scholarship that will set the standard for Wilder studies for years to come.

The Iowa Route: A History of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railway, by Don L. Hofsommer. Railroads Past and Present. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. xii, 292 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$75.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Simon Cordery is chair of the Department of History at Western Illinois University. He is the author of *The Iron Road in the Prairie State: The Story of Illinois Railroad* (forthcoming, 2016).

Railroads opened Iowa to settlement and cultivation, integrated the state into a national economy, and challenged local power. By 1900, they were numerous and nearly omnipresent, but much of the state's railroad network has disappeared since then. Don Hofsommer, a veteran historian of the midwestern railroading scene, offers a useful, informative, and thorough history of one of those vanished corporations, the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railway (BCR&N). He builds on his earlier histories of the Minneapolis & St. Louis and the Iowa Central railroads, both of which figure prominently in the book under review, to show how the BCR&N was "representative of innumerable enterprises that popped up around the United States during the age of railways" (ix).

Events beyond Iowa drove the creation of the BCR&N. As Chicago grew in prominence and power, Iowa's civic leaders sought ways to avoid fueling that city's development. The BCR&N was one of several efforts to do that. The line opened in 1871 as the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Minnesota, its boosters hoping ultimately to connect St. Louis with Minneapolis. By 1877 passengers and freight could travel from Minneapolis to St. Louis, with the BCR&N providing the link from the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad (CB&Q) at Burlington to the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railroad at Albert Lea. Strategic alliances, most notably with the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad (CRI&P), and occasional antagonisms, especially with the CB&Q, show how the BCR&N was neither master of its own destiny nor even a particularly important player in the world of railroads.

Building ahead of demand to create customers was a tried and true technique of the railroad age. The BCR&N did exactly that, nowhere more spectacularly than in its race to Spirit Lake, an expanding vacation spot it marketed as "a little bit of Eden" (153). Reaching the lake in 1882 ahead of rival Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul, it built a hotel and operated steamboats to attract vacationers from as far away as Georgia. Competition dampened revenues already reduced by government regulations, however, and by 1884 the CRI&P controlled the BCR&N, squeezing the smaller company between two behemoths, as the CB&Q was angered by the Rock Island's incursion into its backyard in Burlington. Under Rock Island patronage, the BCR&N expanded into Dakota Territory, and in 1902 the CRI&P purchased the BCR&N outright. Unfortunately the Panic of 1893, successive dry seasons that dropped Spirit Lake by eight feet, and the disastrous takeover of the Rock Island by an investment syndicate ended the BCR&N's independent life. An epilogue recounts an extended denouement to the abandonment of the Rock Island in 1980. Four separate lines continue to use track originally built by the BCR&N, including the thriving Iowa Northern Railway, but the "Iowa Route" itself is a distant memory.

This is an important book for anyone interested in the history of railroading and in nineteenth-century Iowa. *The Iowa Route* is written from the perspective of and about the major investors and managers who funded and operated it. It is well produced, boasting excellent illustrations and many maps, though the latter are all from contemporary railroad publications and some parts are difficult to decipher. Nevertheless, this elegantly written book places the history of the BCR&N in its larger context and serves as an admirable addition to the growing literature on Iowa's railroads.