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The Rock Island

Council Bluffs' first experience with railroads had not been pleasant. The Mississippi and Missouri Railroad Company, organized as long ago as December, 1852, should have been the first to build a railroad across Iowa into Council Bluffs. The company had once made a gesture of compliance; officers had come into Council Bluffs and performed the customary prerequisite—that is, they had raised subscriptions from the townspeople. But they had gone away, leaving to the citizens a bad taste and a deficit.

In May, 1856, the national government granted to the State of Iowa several hundred thousand acres of its public lands to aid in the construction of a railroad to Council Bluffs. These lands were pledged to the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad, whose line had staggered into Iowa City on the first of the year; but the railroad showed no inclination to gather its energies for another push westward. Grenville M. Dodge, assistant engineer to Peter M. Dey in the survey of the Mississippi and Missouri, had settled at Council Bluffs and accumulated a mass of information, from emigrants and from his own explorations, of the highways of overland travel and of the volume of western trade: in 1857 he was invited to visit the Mississippi and Missouri
company offices in New York and make a detailed report.

The directors were assembled, and Dodge’s paper was given to the secretary to be read: as the perfunctory voice droned through the data in behalf of the extension of the road, the directors walked out. One of them, leaving, protested because he had been asked to hear such nonsense. But Thomas C. Durant and Henry Farnam remained. They believed that a Pacific railroad would soon be created, which would justify the extension of the Mississippi and Missouri to the western river; and Dodge was authorized to begin work at Council Bluffs, if he could obtain local aid, and build eastward through Pottawattamie County.

What happened is obscure. The company promised to build fifty miles of railroad east of Council Bluffs, if the city would issue bonds to the road to the amount of three hundred thousand dollars. The bonds were pledged. The company graded four miles of the road at a cost of perhaps forty-five hundred dollars, secured a third of the bonds, and then . . . comes the veil. General Dodge in his autobiography says simply, “And then we were called east to continue the road from Iowa City west. . . . In 1861 we discontinued the work because of the Civil War.”

Accordingly, no tears were shed in Council Bluffs when the Mississippi and Missouri, having extended its line to Kellogg, fell upon hard times. In December, 1865, came news that the railroad had been sold,
with all its interests and privileges, to the Chicago and Rock Island Company. "There will be a rattling among the dry bones on the line of the M. & M. ", exulted the Nonpareil. "The object of the C. & R. I. Company in making the purchase, is to push the road through at the earliest moment, to secure a connection at Council Bluffs with the Pacific Road, and our readers may rest assured this will be done, for the company has the money, and their every interest is at stake in having this connection made without delay.'"

The Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad Company was created to take over the bankrupt road; and in August, 1866, the holding company and the original Chicago and Rock Island, an Illinois company, were merged.

Obviously the Rock Island had to build its line to the Missouri. The Chicago and North Western was vigorously building west of Boone; and the completion of a through freight line by a competitor would leave only way business for the Rock Island. There was a gap of a hundred and fifty miles that had to be closed.

By the fall of 1867 construction was humming. Seventeen hundred men were at work, and the contractors were advertising for three thousand more. Bridges were being built in Davenport, ready to be transported as they were needed. While the line of finished track was still east of Newton, the company stationed a representative, William Reynolds, at
Council Bluffs, whose main function was to act as a good-will emissary.

As the new year began, grading had been completed forty miles west of Des Moines, and the company engineers were engaged in making the permanent location through Pottawattamie County. Editor Babbitt visited Des Moines: "We had a conversation with some of the managers of this road and they informed us that it was their intention to complete the road to Council Bluffs within one year, notwithstanding the fact that they had two years to complete it in."

Meanwhile the Council Bluffs and St. Joseph Railroad, pausing awhile at Bartlett, had gathered itself for another spurt. Its fellow corporation, the St. Joseph and Council Bluffs Railroad, risen from the ashes of the old Platte County Railroad, had been shaken out of its lethargy. Earnest construction had not been easily begun; the merchants of St. Louis and St. Joseph had had to do a great deal of shouting and pointing-with-alarm at the advancing tentacles of business-hungry Chicago; and newspapers had had to become emphatic in their reproof. "To-day," declared the Bugle, "all Western Iowa, Nebraska and the territories north and west of them are completely cut off from St. Louis, while trade and communication is open and prosperous with Chicago. This trade, which amounts to hundreds of thousands of dollars every day, and results in the shipment of thousands of tons of goods over the
Chicago & Northwestern Railroad, naturally belongs to St. Louis; but she has lost it for the time being, if not forever, because she has been sleeping for the past eight or ten years.' Sometime in the late months of 1867, the St. Joseph railroad began to build. By the spring of 1868 construction had reached Forest City: meanwhile the Council Bluffs road had reached the southern border of the State, passed it, and without the little formality of authorization by the State of Missouri had continued to build southward. In June a gap of only thirty-five miles separated the two roads. On Wednesday, August 19, 1868, the first through train from St. Joseph arrived in Council Bluffs. The second railroad into Council Bluffs had been completed.

The steam shovels of the Rock Island construction gangs were cutting very slowly through the tough "blue clay" of the hills of western Iowa. Only the immense force of six thousand men and three thousand teams carried the work forward at a fair pace. By October, 1868, the road was completed fifty-six miles west of Des Moines, and by the end of the year twenty miles more had been finished. Construction was careful; "the best constructed railroad in Iowa" was to be the Rock Island's boast. And the Chicago and North Western, anticipating that the Rock Island would attempt a faster time between Chicago and Council Bluffs, in the spring and summer of 1869 relaid its Iowa Division with heavy rails of the "Fish Plate" pattern.
On the twelfth of May, 1869, the first train of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific entered Council Bluffs. There was another event to be celebrated: two days before, Leland Stanford and Thomas C. Durant had had occasion to telegraph President Grant from Promontory Summit, Utah, “The last rail is laid, the last spike driven. The Pacific Railroad is completed.” Mayor D. C. Bloomer was in charge of ceremonies. The fire company, the ladies’ societies, the town band and the artillery squad had places in the day’s proceedings. Appropriately, as a part of the ceremonies saluting the future of Council Bluffs, the cornerstone of the Ogden House was laid — that hostelry, completed three days before Christmas, which was the showplace of Council Bluffs, the finest hotel between Chicago and San Francisco.

“East, West, North, and South, the iron tracks are laid, and the iron horse drags his long train of cars, loaded with passengers, freight, and live stock, to and from our city in every direction. But this is not all, added to this we have the great Missouri river — a natural highway — upon whose turbid waters float one hundred steamers loaded with commercial traffic. Let us be proud, we have a right to be. Let us rejoice, for in this respect we have great cause for rejoicing.” Council Bluffs had become a bang-up town.

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