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Horse Railways

When and how the propaganda for horse railways in Iowa began, would be hard to trace. An old historical sketch of the McGregor Western Railway states that the scheme was tried on the road bed built a short distance for that line, but the venture was short lived. A correspondent from Ossian to the *North Iowa Times* on April 2, 1862, refers to "Bowman's Horse Railway plan"; but the moving spirit in northeastern Iowa seems to have been Richard P. Morgan, a civil engineer of St. Ansgar, Iowa. His first propaganda, in that paper at least, appeared on October 10, 1860, and urged the operation of a horse railroad from McGregor to the interior of northeastern Iowa.

McGregor was smarting with resentment because the new steam road was to follow the valley of "Bloody Run" a mile north. The railroad engineers retorted that no broad-gauge road could ever ascend the steep hills that led from the Pocket City. But a horse railway could!

Indeed, not only at McGregor was the proposition launched. A horse railroad was proposed from Dubuque, through Elkport, Elkader, and Clermont. The editor of the *North Iowa Times* announced that

the idea "seemed very popular" in the "rival town" down stream.

And what was the scheme which was to surmount the impossible! A two-column newspaper article published in 1862 described such a railroad. The track was to be laid on a macadam base, the ties far apart and the rails of light weight with a six-foot gauge. Station houses with dining rooms and sleeping quarters were to be maintained at convenient points. Cars, each five and one-half by sixteen feet in dimensions and made of wood, were to have a capacity of one hundred and twenty-five bushels. The wheels, also of wood, were to have three-inch tires, with detachable flanges so that the car might travel by road or street to the railroad. These cars, to be owned when desired by the farmers themselves, could be used for freight or passengers. They could be drawn by the farmers' own teams at a speed of from eight to ten miles an hour. The author also suggested that passenger coaches with a capacity of thirty persons might be run on regular schedule, horses to be relayed every ten miles.

The estimated cost of building one hundred miles of such a road was \$500,000; maintenance \$10,000 a year. Nicholas Wood of Manchester, England, was alleged to have computed for the British government the relative value of horse and steam power, and proved that when speed was not demanded "the horse was

the cheapest by over fifty percent". Furthermore, "cheap transportation is what wheat and lumber always have, and always will demand."

In April, 1862, the McGregor and Fort Atkinson Horse Railway Company was incorporated. Its capital stock was \$500,000 in fifty-dollar shares. All stock was to be legal tender for freight tolls. Meetings were held and diligent efforts made to interest McGregor citizens. Some considered it feasible; some ridiculed it. Old "Bill" Hardin, landlord of the famous Elkhorn Hotel some six miles or more from McGregor, informed the correspondent of the *Times* that he thought it a very fine plan; he suggested that the road circle his tavern and return to town on a second track!

But the matter did not rest. In 1864, a "Tram or Horse Railway" was proposed from Johnsonsport to Waukon "with every prospect of success". The correspondent declared that many of the steam railroads of Indiana were trams first, and prophesied that the same development would occur if the scheme were tried in Iowa. Even as late as 1873, Governor C. C. Carpenter was quoted as being in favor of a government-owned series of freight railroads to be used by any one who wished to put his vehicles thereon. He believed the plan feasible for Iowa. This must surely have referred to some sort of horse railroad.

As for northeastern Iowa, little was accomplished.

But Mr. Morgan was a good propagandist; he was aware of the farmers' difficulties in transporting their produce to the distant steam railroads. By 1866, when there was no longer any hope of building horse railroads, he began fostering narrow-gauge roads with light engines, able to surmount difficult grades. That scheme seemed more practical. Such a road was projected from McGregor to Des Moines, and was partly constructed. For many years it did service before being transformed to standard-gauge proportions.

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