

8-1-1933

Comment

John Ely Briggs

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Briggs, John E. "Comment." *The Palimpsest* 14 (1933), 315-316.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol14/iss8/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Comment by the Editor

IF BY LAND

In the annals of transportation, no single factor is so universal as waterways. Instead of separating people, the streams and seas have actually united them. The Mediterranean was the center of the ancient world in war and peace. River valleys form the geographical basis for a common culture and also serve as highways for invaders. The St. Lawrence and Mississippi valleys led explorers through the wilderness to the prairies of Iowa as inevitably as the ocean carried Magellan around the world. Only the air provides more complete access to everywhere.

Land, which is the natural dwelling place of man, imposes tremendous obstacles to communication. Indeed, the conquest of distance on land has been a longer and more complicated process than by either air or water. In the constant struggle to achieve proximity, many amazing discoveries have facilitated travel — the wheel, a smooth, hard-surfaced path, and mechanical power to increase speed. In a sense the combination of these three fundamental ideas was the most miraculous event of the nineteenth century, for it created the

railroads. Without railroads a new nation of a hundred million people occupying three thousand miles of territory from sea to sea could not have been built, and without railroads the Union might not have been preserved.

Yet this revolutionary means of contracting distance in terms of time and comfort was not adopted with enthusiasm or vision. People persisted in towing canal boats, patronizing the river packets, and migrating in covered wagons. Railroads were supposed to be dangerous, expensive, and impractical. And the first roads were no more than isolated experiments.

But eventually a continuous chain of railroads connected the commercial East with the agricultural West. A quarter of a century of controversy, indecision, and bold pioneering culminated when the iron horse paused triumphantly on the threshold of Iowa. During the next fifty years, while the commonwealths of the Middle West were adolescent, that mighty steed dominated the economic and political scene. Iowa was born too late to remember the canal epidemic, and is just outgrowing the railway age.

J. E. B.