

McMILLAN'S INTEGRITY AND LOYALTY

By E. A. JOHNSON*

About the year 1881, the Wabash Railway company constructed, and for some years operated, a line from Albia to Des Moines, Iowa. The Wabash already had in operation a line from St. Louis via Moulton to Ottumwa, and perhaps planned extending the Albia-Des Moines line to Moulton, thus making a direct and much shorter mileage between St. Louis and Des Moines. Why this was not done I do not know. Neither is it germane to this story, but it is a fact that after a few years that portion of the line Albia to Harvey, some twenty-seven miles was abandoned and St. Louis-Des Moines trains were routed via Ottumwa, thence over the Rock Island rail to Harvey, where again on its own rail the Wabash entered the Iowa capital city.

After his graduation from college at Monmouth, Illinois, in the mid-nineties, Fred C. McMillan engaged in railroad work in Chicago. He afterward became widely known in the Iowa business and financial world. I first met him in a casual way at Bussey, the acquaintance ripening into an intimate friendship extending for almost a half century. The occasion of our first meeting related to railroads and railroading, in which he had been interested from his youth. As he grew older his ambition centered on the attainment of an executive position or management of railway properties.

While holding a clerical position in Chicago, one day seated at a lunch counter he chanced to overhear a conversation between two men discussing this abandoned section of the Wabash lines. Returning to his office and consulting available maps he learned something of the location of the abandoned rails in relation to other rail connections, and envisioned an opportunity. Securing a leave of absence he boarded a west-bound Burlington

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train through his Alma Mater city on to Albia, arriving there at noon. After a light lunch he essayed to walk the long abandoned line to Harvey, which at that time was but little more than a weed-overgrown right-of-way and two streaks of rust.

About three o'clock in the afternoon he reached Bussey and footsore, weary, and prompted by hunger and thirst, decided to rest and recuperate. It was a warm, sultry March afternoon, the day following St. Patrick's in the year 1897, yet remembered by some as the day of the great Corbett-Fitzsimmons prize fight at Carson City, Nevada, I believe.

During a lull in business I had stepped just outside and was standing beside the bank front door enjoying a breath of the fresh spring air. From the direction of the Burlington depot I noted the approach of a stranger. Accosting me he inquired for a place where sandwiches and soft drinks could be purchased. I informed him and returned to my work in the bank.

A few minutes later he entered the bank and asked where he might buy a Chicago daily paper, remarking he wished to read the account of the big fight on the previous day. There being neither a newsstand nor paper boy in town, and having finished with my *Chicago Record*, I gave him my paper.

Thanking me he lingered a moment and told me briefly the purpose of his visit in that part of the country. He explained that he contemplated the resurrection and rebuilding of the abandoned railroad through the town, thus forming a sort of belt line or feeder for the Wabash and Rock Island lines at Harvey and the Iowa Central Railway at Albia.

COAL LAND DEVELOPED

At this point I shall digress to explain that a few years previously one, James Andrew Jackson Powers, a former coal operator in Missouri, had come to Bussey and opened a mine a short distance outside the town. Later was or-

ganized the OK Coal company, largely financed by local people, which with Powers at the head had begun development on a more extensive scale. At first the mine output was hauled in wagons and loaded on cars for shipment. Later a tram line was built and with mules as the motive power, the output was hauled in the mine cars to the station at a substantial savings in cost.

But, ambitious for still greater production and more extensive operation, the OK Coal company, under Powers' management, had at great cost sunk a shaft two miles from town and equipped it with expensive machinery, based on the assumption that a big tonnage in sight the C. B. & Q. Ry., better known as the Burlington, would build a switch to the mines in order to secure the output of coal for distribution over its lines.

The theory was good, but in practice a complete flop, as the Burlington railway treated with utter indifference all efforts to secure the switch, without which the coal could not be moved. The mine was ready, and the town filled with miners attracted by prospects for work in the new mine. Months passed and nothing was done.

In my talk with McMillan I saw Powers passing along the street and called him into the bank, introduced him to McMillan who then unfolded to Powers his plans, as he previously had to me. Powers was at once interested as he saw a possible solution of the difficulties in which he found himself. He voluntarily pledged all his business and his influence to the success of the proposition.

The hour was growing late and McMillan now with something tangible in sight, postponed the balance of his trip to Harvey and boarded the east-bound train for Monmouth to confer with an associate who might be interested with him in the rail project.

I recall some further talk with Powers, speculating on whether or not we had just been listening to a balmy breeze, and wondering if we would ever again see the young promoter. I do not remember our conclusions, but if to the effect we had seen the last, doomed we were

to happy disappointment, as within a week or ten days McMillan was back with further plans for the rehabilitation of the abandoned miles of railroad, title to the right-of-way of which, under the Iowa law, within the year would revert to adjoining landowners.

After some further investigation of business prospects at other stations—Hamilton, Lovilia, and Tracy—thus armed McMillan made a trip to St. Louis in an effort to secure an option on the twenty-seven miles of abandoned rail, of which, the then management seemed to be oblivious.

After some months of fruitless negotiation, the Wabash company itself decided to reconstruct the abandoned lines and extend the line south to Moulton, thus making it, as now, the direct line, St. Louis to Des Moines. At the same time the Wabash executives agreed to assume the tentative contracts as made by McMillan, including his agreement with the OK Coal company to furnish the ties and steel for the mine switch, the OK Coal company to provide the right-of-way and do the grading. On the basis of this agreement the work of grading proceeded and was completed to the right-of-way of the Burlington road.

The Burlington road lying between the Wabash lines and the mines, to reach the Wabash, the Burlington railway had to be crossed under, over, or at grade, thus necessitating a crossing treaty between the two roads. To this from the beginning the Burlington employed delaying tactics until it appeared the Wabash would be compelled to force by law the crossing. In the meantime the offending road let it be known it would now consider a treaty to connect the mines with its own lines, this after refusing all previous efforts, thereby causing nearly a year's loss of time.

MCMILLAN'S PLANS BLOCKED

Powers was called to Chicago and there, though it meant a complete repudiation of his solemn agreement with McMillan, entered into an agreement with the Bur-

lington road. The formal break came at a night meeting held at our bank attended by the so-called directors and officers of the OK Coal company, McMillan and myself, but no attention was paid to him or others who argued in favor of complying with the Wabash contract, and Powers as usual had his way either right or wrong.

Thus did McMillan see two years of hard work and effort go for naught. I gave him such encouragement as I could, assuring him he would yet be successful, and only time was needed to prove this true. To draw mantle of charity where and whenever possible, I am inclined to the belief that in the beginning of his negotiations with the Burlington, it was not his wish to contract—rather a ruse as he thought, to induce the Wabash to force the crossing, but the effect only made the offending road all the more obstinate.

His failure with Powers did not injure his status with the Wabash, as he was immediately appointed General Freight Agent for Iowa and northern Missouri, with headquarters in Des Moines. There he made contacts that resulted in much better opportunities in his chosen work of railroading and financial success.

Powers, in the meantime, after a few years of indifferent success, found himself in financial difficulties and as a last resort appealed to McMillan for assistance. Though he never regained confidence in Powers, yet in the goodness of his heart, he directed him into channels where he obtained help, only to again fail, and finally died a financially broken man.

McMillan some years later resigned his position in the Wabash Company and acquired control of the Iowa Falls & Northern railway, an independent line from Des Moines to Iowa Falls. During the financial panic year of 1907, he constructed and extended the line to Mason City, then after a year or two he sold the entire line to the Rock Island Railway company and persuaded that road to extend the line southward from Des Moines through the rich coal fields of western Marion and Lucas

counties on through Chariton to Allerton, there to connect with the main Rock Island-Kansas City to Chicago line. He was placed in general charge of the project, which he carried through to a successful conclusion, thus making the Rock Island the shortest mileage of all rail lines between St. Paul and Kansas City.

I could go on and on giving much more information on his business ability, but the foregoing is sufficient to show the character and business ability of the man.

LOYAL TO HIGH IDEALS

He is much interested and devoted to his church, the United Presbyterian denomination. In the year 1921, he was the one lay member of this great church to accompany two high church officials on a world tour of the Presbyterian missions. This tour required nearly one year to complete and many thousand miles' travel, embarking on boat at New York and landing at San Francisco on their return.

Just one more incident to show his lofty principle and unswerving loyalty to his friends. During his employment with the Wabash railway, Joseph Ramsey, then president of the road, and he became intimate personal friends. Many years after termination of his connection with the company, Ramsey in poor health was absent on leave to recuperate. Some of the directors, not too friendly to Ramsey, proposed to declare the office vacant and offered the position to McMillan. Though a position of this kind would have been the attainment of his most cherished ambitions, yet in the absence of Ramsey's voluntary resignation, he indignantly declined to accept.

In all the years of our acquaintance and business association, in success or adversity never have I known him to be guilty of an unworthy act, and never has he wavered in his loyalty to his friends. His steadfast friendship through all our sorrows, trials and reverses is far beyond computation and finally his Christian life and upright character has been his finest contribution to the world.

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