

THREE RAILS TO ONAWA

By Donald L. Reed

The following study is an adaptation from an M.S. thesis submitted by Donald L. Reed at the University of Omaha in 1966. The thesis in whole gives an accurate, detailed history of Onawa, its people and the political, economic and social influences which led to the formation and development of the town.

A group of individuals met in Monona County, Iowa, in May, 1857, for the purpose of organizing a land company and making plans for the establishment of a town. The group decided to use the name of the county and called themselves the Monona Land Company. Since they needed a name for the new community, a committee was formed to select an appropriate one. Timothy Elliot, the chairman of the committee, knew and liked Longfellow's poem "Song of Hiawatha," and was enchanted by the word "Onaiweh" in it. The translation of this Indian word was "wide awake." Being impressed by both the word and its definition, Elliot derived the word Onawa from it, which was readily accepted by the new land company.¹ Since Monona was an Indian name meaning "peaceful valley," what could have been more appropriate than to call the new community a "wide awake" village in a "peaceful valley."

Moreover, the founding fathers of Onawa were wide awake, as they planned to insure the success of their new adventure with adequate means of transportation. Consequently, the exact location of the town appeared to be the result of an agreement between the Iowa Central Air Line Railroad Directors and the Monona Land Company.² They agreed on an ideal site for a settlement and a terminal for a future railroad, approximately 60 miles north of Council Bluffs and 40 miles south of Sioux City, Iowa. To encourage railroad construction in areas such as Onawa, the Federal Government gave land and money grants to facilitate the building of railroads and

accelerate the settlement of the West. As a result, the railroads speedily organized to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Government.

On May 15, 1856, the federal government issued a land grant to the State of Iowa to aid in the construction of a railroad from Lyons City, north to Maquoketa.³ At Maquoketa, it would intersect with the Iowa Central Air Line Railroad and turn west to be aligned as closely as possible to the forty-second parallel, terminating at Onawa.⁴ This generous land grant included odd-numbered sections, six miles in depth, on each side of the railroad; however, if the land adjacent to the railroad had been previously pre-empted, the railroad grants could be extended to a depth of 15 miles.⁵ On July 14, 1856, Iowa accepted the land grant and transferred the land to the newly-formed Iowa Central Air Line Railroad Company.

Since a railroad enhanced the possibility of having a profitable farming enterprise and solvent community, the promoters of the new communities in the Mid-Missouri Valley attempted to induce the railroad companies to construct a line through their towns. During the winter of 1858 and 1859, the communities of Sioux City, Council Bluffs, and Onawa held joint meetings to accelerate railroad building in their areas. They hoped to develop a plan whereby the three towns would be connected by railroads within three years. To give additional encouragement to the railroads, the communities proposed to give local swamp land to them.⁶ This swamp land grant never materialized in Monona County; moreover, it took a great deal of additional work and planning before a train entered this portion of the Missouri Valley.

One of the most important individuals in the history of railroads in Iowa was John I. Blair, a member of a group who founded the Chicago and North Western Railroad Company.⁷ Blair first considered building a railroad from Marshalltown, Iowa, to Onawa and then south into Council Bluffs.⁸ As Blair began his first survey across Iowa on June 15, 1863, his interest was drawn to Onawa by C. E. Whiting, a member of Blair's survey party and a chartered member of the Monona Land Company.⁹ This party surveyed a line across western Iowa, closely approximating the forty-second parallel, to

Onawa. As they entered Onawa, Blair was impressed with the little town and implied that it might be an ideal location for his railroad.¹⁰ However, even with the survey completed and Blair's avowed approval given, Onawa was not given assurance of a railroad in the near future.

The following year, Blair organized the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad Company, and railroad fever ran high in Onawa. Pessimism gradually replaced optimism, as the completion date was moved farther and farther into the future. To add to the community's woe, Blair decided to build his railroad to Council Bluffs rather than to Onawa. It seemed like a psychological game being directed by the railroad magnates in order to entice lush gifts from the eager communities. Blair's railroad from Marshalltown to Council Bluffs was completed in January, 1867.¹¹

It was not until the Sioux City and Pacific had received free right-of-way, 20 acres for a depot, and an \$8,000 money grant from Onawa, that the railroad was finally completed to Onawa from Council Bluffs, in November, 1867.¹² The following year it was extended to Sioux City, and Onawa had a railroad running north and south through the broad Missouri Valley.

As the community had hoped, the railroad stimulated the economic development of the town and the whole valley. New markets were opened bringing larger profits for the community. With an opportunity to earn larger profits, additional settlers moved into the area, increasing local land values. Some believed the railroad guaranteed that Onawa would be able to keep the county seat, thereby adding diversity and prosperity to the community. The total benefits derived from the railroad were many; moreover, as the Missouri Valley prospered, Onawa grew and prospered, also.¹³

In order to attract additional business, the railroad constructed a stockyard which made it possible for the farmers in the Onawa area to ship livestock by rail. These yards were adjacent to a railroad spur, so the animals could be driven directly into the livestock cars. The railroad, also, furnished, without charge, water, scales, and feed bunks, to further encourage the use of the iron horse.¹⁴ Shipping by railroad was

definitely more profitable than driving livestock to market as had been done in the past.

Since most farmers sold to local livestock buyers, the stockyards were used mainly by the purchaser. The buyers were speculators, who attempted to buy the livestock from the farmer and sell for a profit to the processor. It was an interesting game between the farmer and buyer in price manipulation and stock watering, to see who could gain the greatest advantage.¹⁵ The farmer, however, was usually at a disadvantage because of inadequate market news and the shrewdness of the buyer. Nevertheless, the stockyard and the livestock buyer increased the prosperity for the community through the use of the additional markets created by the railroad.



—Courtesy of Onawa Public Library

**Crowds gather at the Onawa station to await
the arrival of the train.**

The local railroad facilities added considerably to the community. The new depot, coal shed, water tank, section houses, and roundhouse increased the property valuation of Onawa. More important to the community than the buildings was the employment created by the railroad. This new mode of transportation, indeed, added a needed diversification in the agrarian-based economy of Onawa.

With one railroad extending north and south, and easy access to the Missouri River, Onawa had excellent transportation connections throughout the Missouri Valley. Community interest, then, shifted in an attempt to obtain a direct east-west route which would expand the hinterland of Onawa. In addition, competition between two railroads would produce more favorable rates for the community. Railroad talk began to center on a railroad running east-northeast, through the Little Sioux Valley, and one farther to the east, through the Maple Valley.¹⁶ The westerly route from Onawa would cross the Missouri River at Decatur, Nebr., thence west across Nebraska.

Local groups attempted to pressure the railroad companies to build another line into Onawa; however, they had little effect upon the powerful railroad magnates in the East. The Chicago and North Western Railroad Company had a monopolistic control of the Mid-Missouri Valley through its subsidiary, the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad Company. In order to prevent competitive railroads from encroaching upon their territories, the large railroads formed subsidiary branches in areas close to their own routes. The Chicago and North Western formed such a subsidiary in 1871, called the Maple Valley Railroad.¹⁷ This move was necessitated by the Illinois Central's energetic move into the Missouri Valley.

The Maple Valley Railroad was to run east from Onawa to the Maple River Valley, then northeast to Mapleton, Ida Grove, and finally west into Carroll, Iowa. J. I. Blair organized the corporation with capital stock of \$1,000,000. With the beginning of the grading east of Onawa, excitement swept through the community, as it appeared the town would soon have a second railroad. The enthusiasm soon died when construction was shifted from Onawa to Fort Dodge in 1873, and the completion date was extended.¹⁸

Five years later, the Maple Valley Railroad was completed and began operating to Mapleton from the east. That same year, a bill was introduced in the United States Senate to provide for the construction of a railroad bridge across the Missouri River. The bill passed the Senate, but was defeated by the House.¹⁹ It appeared that the railroad would soon be

built to Onawa, but no farther west.

Excitement again swept the community as rumors spread that one railroad after another was going to build through the area. First, the Eldora and Missouri River Railroad was supposed to be constructed to Onawa.²⁰ Then, the Milwaukee Railroad considered the construction of a railroad through the Little Sioux Valley. Finally, the talk shifted to the St. Paul Railroad building down the same valley from Spirit Lake, Iowa, but again, this rumor never materialized.²¹ Whether or not the railroad companies precipitated these rumors to prevent competitive lines from encroaching on their territory cannot be ascertained, but the continual flow of false rumors created bad public relations in the community.

Meanwhile, a fight for a railroad bridge across the Missouri River was blooming into a final showdown between Onawa and Blair, Nebr. The Chicago North Western officials seemed to favor a bridge between Onawa and Decatur. The Sioux City and Pacific, their subsidiary, favored a bridge at Blair. During 1881 and 1882, the controversy raged with the threat of the Milwaukee building a bridge near Onawa, if the Blair route was accepted.²² Surveyors were busy at both sites.

Congress again became involved in the controversy when a bill was introduced authorizing the building of a railroad bridge across the Missouri River. This bill was introduced on Jan. 9, 1882, in the House; it provided for the construction of a bridge, but the exact location was not specified. While Congress studied the proposal, both Onawa and Blair publicized the advantages of their particular area. The Onawa-Decatur faction expounded the fact that solid rock footing was found in their region, which would be an outstanding base for a bridge.²³ Both communities were confident they would obtain the bridge.

By the summer of 1882, the Onawa-Decatur faction had lost the battle, and the construction of the bridge began at Blair.²⁴ It was to be built by the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad at the cost of \$1,500,000 and completed by December, 1883.²⁵ With the first battle lost, the communities of Onawa and Decatur began investigating other possibilities in order to secure a bridge.

A local group in Onawa, headed by Addison Oliver, a political power in western Iowa, and Mitchell Vincent, a prominent local contractor, organized the Missouri River and the Iowa Railroad in 1883 to build from Correctionville, Iowa, to Onawa and westward to Decatur.²⁶ Another railroad company was formed in 1884, named the Nebraska Central Railroad, which planned to construct a railroad from Decatur to Onawa, thence to Mapleton. The company supposedly obtained \$15,000,000 from London to proceed with their plans. Meanwhile, in 1884, Congress approved a plan to build a bridge at Decatur.²⁷ In addition, the Chicago Milwaukee and St. Paul announced plans to build a railroad from Defiance, Iowa, to Onawa and Decatur.²⁸ The Rock Island began to obtain right-of-way in Woodbury County with future plans which included Onawa. Enthusiasm was felt throughout the community when it looked as if all railroads were headed for Onawa and points west. Survey crews were bustling in the area.

Having been disappointed by railroad talk in the past, many were skeptical of the new rumors. Some of the newspaper men believed the Nebraska Central was merely a name used by the Chicago and St. Paul to challenge monopolistic control of the Mid-Missouri Valley by the Chicago and North Western. Others claimed the Nebraska Central was a front for the Central Pacific, or maybe a front for the Chicago and North Western, in an attempt to gain independence from the "Omaha Pool"²⁹ in order to find a shorter route to Ogden, Utah.³⁰ Whatever the reason for the increase of the railroad rumors, the railroad companies were going to force the mighty hand of the Chicago and North Western.

On July 1, 1884, the Chicago and North Western took over control of its subsidiary, the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad.³¹ The following month they bought the stock of the Maple Valley Railroad, another subsidiary, which had been completed to Mapleton.³² Because the Defiance Railroad line backed by the Milwaukee Railroad, began surveying in the vicinity of Onawa, the pressure was on the Chicago and North Western. In 1885, the Chicago and North Western established a survey line through the Maple Valley and west to Onawa.³³ The con-

struction of the railroad began in 1886, and in November, 1886, the first train arrived in Onawa from Mapleton.³⁴ At last, Onawa had a second railroad.



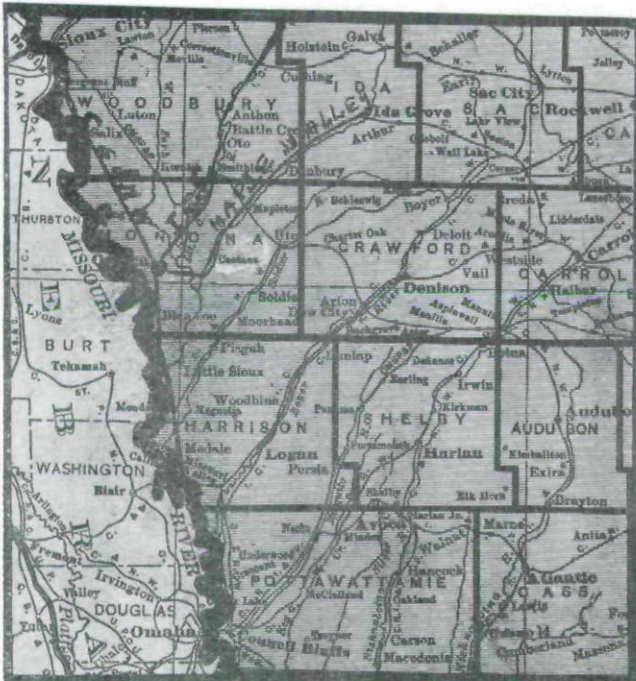
—Courtesy of Onawa Public Library

**Group waits for the arrival of Wm. Jennings Bryan in 1896
at the Chicago-Northwestern depot in Onawa.**

With additional trains entering Onawa, the Chicago and North Western had to increase its local facilities. A 40,000 gallon water tank and a 96 by 16 foot coal shed were constructed. Additional employees were also needed. Furthermore, when the railroad obtained the mail contract from the stagecoach company, communication in area quickly improved.³⁵

In 1887, the rapidly expanding Illinois Central started a survey crew through the Little Sioux Valley from Cherokee, Iowa, to Onawa with the hope of successfully competing for the Mid-Missouri Valley with the giant Chicago and North Western. The officials of the Chicago and North Western planned on building a railroad bridge at Decatur in order to accelerate the opening of the West for additional travelers and settlers. Since the Illinois Central was interested in building a railroad in the Little Sioux Valley, the local railroad group, Missouri River and Iowa Railroad, relinquished all interest to this territory.³⁶ By July, the new railroad agreed to build a line to Onawa and another to Sioux Falls, S. D., to be called the Cherokee and Dakota Railroad Company. It was capitalized at \$4,000,000, and work was begun immediately.

Since it was hoped that this railroad would be completed by fall, Addison Oliver immediately strove to obtain right-of-way in the Onawa vicinity. The railroad was to enter Onawa from the northeast. Because the Illinois Central hoped to build on west, the line was located two blocks north of the main street and ran completely through Onawa.³⁷ The depot ground was donated to the railroad by some public-spirited citizens of Onawa.³⁸ Some of the people, however, were not so generous, as they were tired of tactics used by the railroads. Farmers were complaining that the surveyors were ruining their crops by continually crossing them. One farmer said, "One more trip through my cornfield by the surveyors and I will not have to harvest it."³⁹ While a few tempers were riled, railroad planning moved rapidly ahead.



—Courtesy of Onawa Public Library

Map of Onawa area and railroads through the valley.

Mitchell Vincent, a local contractor, obtained the contract for the construction of the railroad from Smithland, Iowa, to Onawa, which was a total of 36 miles. The entire railroad from Cherokee, headquarters of this branch of the Illinois Central, to Onawa, was 59 miles in length. Because the grading had to be completed within 60 days, Mitchell Vincent's company immediately began work.⁴⁰



—Courtesy of Onawa Public Library

The Illinois Central depot in Onawa.

Railroad building during the latter part of the century was done by sheer human and animal strength. Graders, mormons, dirt slips, dump wagons, and excavator graders drawn by horses or mules, were used.⁴¹ Disks and plows were used to help loosen the soil before the bigger machines could be utilized. As many as 24 head of horses were used to push and pull some of the large machines. Besides animal strength, it took a great many men to drive the horses, dig with spades, shovels, picks, use adzes, and push wheelbarrows. An enormous amount of brute strength and hours of toil were needed to build a railroad during this era.

In October, 1887, the first locomotive on the Illinois Central Railroad line arrived in Onawa.⁴² Although trains could travel on the track, the depot and turn-table had to be finished before regular service commenced. That winter the Illinois Central built a water tank, a coal shed, and a stockyard.

Onawa had three railroads by 1887; moreover, rumors circulated that a fourth railroad was being planned for the community.

In 1888, railroad planning centered on extending the railroad west from Onawa to Decatur. The main obstacle was the Missouri River, and it was questionable whether a bridge was financially feasible. The Decatur and Western Nebraska Railroad Company originated such a plan, but it failed.⁴³ The following year the Rock Island Railroad surveyed a route from Dunlap, Iowa, to Onawa, and the community was elated that a fourth railroad was soon coming to town.⁴⁴ This plan never materialized. Then, in 1891, the Illinois Central talked of extending its line to Decatur, but, as before, this proved to be only a rumor. Onawa, indeed was forced to settle for a maximum of three railroads.

The advantages of having more than one railroad were many. Because competition between the different railroads precipitated low freight rates, the community, especially the farmer, had the opportunity to reap higher profits. This was noted as the farmers from Decatur, a town with no railroad, but easy access to one at Tekamah, Nebr., transported their grain over the ice during the winter to Onawa to take advantage of a two cent gain, per bushel, on grain.⁴⁵ Furthermore, they could ship cattle from Onawa to Chicago and save six dollars per car under the rates from Tekamah to Chicago.⁴⁶ Lower freight rates gave a definite economic advantage to Onawa.

There was a problem created by the railroad which was disgusting to many of the people of the community. The railroad gave tramps a way of travel, and "jungles" were formed near the freight yards in many communities. Onawa had as many as three small "jungles" where tramps stayed overnight, or for longer periods. They often begged for food from door to door, which was a nuisance. Some women were afraid to answer their door because of this. If the tramps could not get food, they would take an ear of corn from the stockyards or grain elevators. They parched the corn for eating or made a warm brew from the corn by smashing the kernels and using it like coffee grounds.⁴⁷ While the tramps created problems,

there were none which the town marshal could not handle.

There were other minor problems that arose because of the railroad. One of the most common incidents concerned livestock which wandered onto the tracks and were killed. This often resulted in a lawsuit, and the farmer was sometimes able to collect from 50 to 60 dollars in damages. On other occasions, the hitting of livestock would derail a complete train, which caused a great deal of damage.⁴⁸ Sometimes pranksters harassed a train with some mischievous tricks. One evening a group of boys placed a huge snowball on the track. This action caused the engineer to bring the train to a screeching halt because he thought it was a rock. Such incidents were bothersome, but not serious.

As in the past with the stagecoach, the arrival of a passenger train usually attracted a crowd of people who wanted to see who came in and to obtain news of happenings in the larger neighboring cities. The influence of the railroad was being felt throughout the entire community.

Some of the financial benefits derived by the community were the income paid to the depot agents and section hands, who were residents of the town. Section hands, in the 1870's and 1880's, were earning \$1.10 and \$1.25 per day.⁴⁹ When an exceptional amount of work had to be done, a construction train with migratory workers was used. The migratory workers, often Italians from the Chicago area, temporarily contributed to the general prosperity of the community.⁵⁰ The first fall the Illinois Central operated in Onawa, its payroll ranged up to \$800 per week.⁵¹

Another benefit was the demand created by railroad construction. For example, it took a great many ties to build a railroad. This demand encouraged A. T. Fressenden, local businessman, to seek a contract to supply them. After obtaining a contract to supply 16,000 ties for Omaha, he began to cut ties from the cottonwood groves in the Onawa vicinity. He used local employees, both farmers and laborers, and began shipping them down the Missouri River to Florence, Nebraska, in rafts containing from 800 to 1,000 ties.⁵² Other opportunities developed in the building of the railroad, which used local contractors and laborers. Besides contributing to

the growth of the whole Missouri Valley, it was a profitable enterprise for a young, growing community.

Although some of the railroad monopolistic tactics and false rumors created poor public relations in Onawa, the three railroads converging on the community established outstanding transportation connections with the rest of the nation. Moreover, the railroads opened new trade areas, brought additional settlers to the community, helped to provide a diversified economy, and enhanced the development of a prosperous community. Although all of the community's ventures were not successful, the most serious problems were solved and Onawa had become an important, well established county seat town in the long Missouri Valley Basin. The railroads indeed helped to contribute to the success of this community.

FOOTNOTES

¹Monona Land Company, Minutes of the meeting in May, 1857.

²*Ibid.*

³*Sioux City Iowa Eagle*, August 22, 1857.

⁴Monona County Abstract Company, Railroad Title, May 15, 1856, to May 26, 1897.

⁵Arthur Frances Allen (ed.) *Northwestern Iowa, Its History and Traditions, 1804-1926* (3 vols.; Chicago: The S. J. Clark Publishing Company, 1927), I, 267-68.

⁶*Sioux City Iowa Eagle*, December 18, 1858.

⁷Ruth A. Gallaher and William J. Petersen (ed.), "Number of Towns," *The Palimpsest*, XXIX (January to December, 1948), 165.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Anthony L. Cassen (ed.), "Surveying the First Railroad Across Iowa, Journal of John I. Blair," *Annals of Iowa*, XXXV (July-April, 1959-61), 336. J. I. Blair came from New Jersey to attend the Republican Convention in Chicago in 1860. Being interested in the West, he extended his trip into Iowa and was impressed by the financial opportunity he observed. He returned to Iowa in 1862, at the age of sixty, and entered the railroad business. He expanded his enterprise when he formed the Iowa Railroad Land Company for the purpose of disposing of railroad land grants. He died at the age of ninety-seven after building a total of 803 miles of railroad in Iowa, during his lifetime.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 332.

¹¹Gallaher and Petersen (ed.), "Number of Towns," *The Palimpsest*, XXIX (January to December, 1948), 166.

¹²*History of Western Iowa* (Sioux City: Western Publishing Company, 1862), p. 250.

¹³Allen, *Northwestern Iowa*, I, 268.

¹⁴Interview with Bruce Harlow, April 9, 1966. He is a seventy-eight-year-old native of Onawa, Iowa. His father was a livestock buyer,

member of the city council, and sheriff of Monona County. Mr. Harlow helped his father in the livestock business.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*History of Monona County, Iowa* (Chicago: National Publishing Company, 1890), p. 338.

¹⁷*Monona County Gazette*, March 18, 1871.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, September 6, 1873.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, March 27, 1879.

²⁰*Ibid.*, August 23, 1878.

²¹*Ibid.*, May 27, 1880.

²²*Ibid.*, February 2, 1882. Decatur is located west of Onawa on the Nebraska side of the Missouri River.

²³*Ibid.*, May 16, 1882; *United States Congressional Record*, 47th Congress, 1st Session, December 5, 1881 to February 9, 1882, XIII, 280.

²⁴United States, *Statutes at Large*, 47th Congress, 1881-1883, XXII, 113-14.

²⁵*Monona County Gazette*, August 3, 1882.

²⁶*Ibid.*, September 6, 1882.

²⁷*Ibid.*, June 19, 1884.

²⁸*Ibid.*, March 15, 1883.

²⁹The "Omaha Pool" was an agreement among the Union Pacific, Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy, Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific, and the Chicago North Western to set rates whereby their operation would be a financial success. They agreed to pool all business between Chicago and Council Bluffs, and the net profits were to be divided equally between the railroad companies. Benjamin F. Shambough (ed.), "The Omaha Pool," *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XXII (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1924), 569-70.

³⁰*Monona County Gazette*, April 17, 1884.

³¹*Ibid.*, June 26, 1884.

³²*Ibid.*, August 1, 1884.

³³*Ibid.*, May 13, 1886.

³⁴*Ibid.*, November 18, 1886.

³⁵*Ibid.*, November 18, 1886.

³⁶*History of Monona County*, p. 338.

³⁷*Monona County Gazette*, July 28, 1887.

³⁸*History of Monona County*, p. 338.

³⁹*Monona County Gazette*, July 28, 1887.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, July 21, 1887.

⁴¹A mormon was a dirt leveler and an adz was a broad type axe used to cut planks, ties, etc.

⁴²*Monona County Gazette*, October 20, 1887.

⁴³*Ibid.*, July 19, 1889.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, July 11, 1889.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, February 15, 1900.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, May 26, 1881.

⁴⁷Interview with Bruce Harlow.

⁴⁸*Monona County Gazette*, October 2, 1879.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, December 22, 1887.

⁵⁰Interview with Bruce Harlow.

⁵¹*Monona County Gazette*, December 22, 1887.

⁵²*Ibid.*, June 3, 1880.

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