

Railroaders and Newspapers

The Dubuque Controversy of 1867

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RAILROAD DEVELOPERS of nineteenth-century Iowa used their contemporary communications media regularly and with great relish to encourage public awareness of railroad developments. They helped towns acclaim completion of the tracks through their communities with spectacular celebrations, attracted orators to hold forth on the rich prospects of railroad growth, and provided end-of-track excursions to call attention to their achievements. The typical town newspaper served as a ready instrument for advertising these activities but also was a natural forum for differences of opinion among companies vying for local control. In the fall of 1867, for example, the Dubuque & Sioux City Railroad found itself in conflict with a new rival, the Iowa Falls & Sioux City Railroad, and their battle entered the journalistic arena. The Iowa Falls Railroad founders planned to take over the Dubuque Railroad's construction and land grant rights in western Iowa after the Dubuque directors seemed to lose interest in reaching Sioux City. Both sides took to the newspapers to justify their claims. Their public rivalry was typical of many which occurred in post-Civil War America.

The dispute developed from disagreements among the leaders of the Dubuque Railroad about extending their road. In 1865 the company stopped building after its line reached Iowa Falls, 143 miles west of Dubuque and less than half-way to its Sioux City destination. Tensions had been growing among the directors of the company, but open disagreement occurred when Platt Smith, the Dubuque line's vice president and attorney, repeatedly pushed to extend track westward while the other directors consistently opposed such extension. Smith knew that the company's exclusive right to its remaining land grants would cease in the year it stopped building. The railroad received

sections of federal land for building a given number of miles of track, as specified in a contract with the state government. The state had received responsibility for administering the grants through the federal Iowa Railroad Land Grant Act of 1856. If a company did not continue construction after a deadline stated in the contract, the state legislature could assign the remainder of the grant to someone else. Platt Smith foresaw that, by the legislature's spring session of 1868, the Dubuque line might well be vulnerable to such a move.¹

Unable to spur his associates to action, Smith deliberately produced the situation he had feared, so that he might guarantee the road's completion. For several years he had known the railroad builder John I. Blair of New Jersey. This elderly promoter was famous in Iowa for his successful construction of the Cedar Rapids & Missouri River Railroad, and for his association with the powerful Ames group of Union Pacific Railroad investors. Smith persuaded Blair to join him in a new company which they announced on October 1, 1867 as the Iowa Falls & Sioux City Railroad. With this obvious threat to the remaining land grant, the directors of the original Dubuque line bitterly denounced Smith and fired him as their attorney. Thus began a public-relations war between the Dubuque and Sioux City Railroad founders and the Blair-Smith faction. Their principal weapons were lengthy open letters in the Dubuque and Fort Dodge newspapers. Editors between these two towns reprinted and commented on these open letters as well. Clearly the Iowa town newspaper was an arena for the struggle of local business ideas.²

All of the protagonists in this dispute had come to their positions through established routes to success. Platt Smith had emigrated to Iowa from upstate New York in 1839 and had educated himself in law and business in Jackson County, Iowa, during the 1840s. He passed the bar in 1843, joined a Dubuque law firm in 1847, and was admitted to practice in the Iowa and United States Supreme courts. In 1853 he drew up the charter for the Dubuque & Pacific Railroad. He represented that firm in several important

¹On the Iowa Land Grant Act of 1856 see Roscoe Lokken, *Iowa Public Land Disposal* (Iowa City, 1942), 238.

²*Dubuque Daily Times*, 1 October 1867; "Dismissal of Platt Smith," *Dubuque Herald*, 22 October 1867.

cases, defended its rights in the newspapers, and lobbied for it in the legislature. He stayed with the company when it reorganized in 1860 as the Dubuque & Sioux City Railroad. At that time Morris K. Jesup, a New York iron products merchant and financier, acquired stock control of the company. Jesup brought in his associates John S. Kennedy and Charles L. Frost as directors. By 1865 other directors included Jesup's banker brother Frederick; Henry L. Stout, another banker; steamboat-line president Jesse P. Farley; railroad executive Edmund L. Stimson; and Roswell B. Mason, former chief building engineer of the Illinois Central Railroad. These men, all Dubuquers, were Platt Smith's opponents. They did not want to extend their track west of Iowa Falls.³

There were three reasons why the Dubuque and Sioux City directors would not extend their line. By 1867 there were indications that the New York men (especially Morris K. Jesup) were losing interest in Iowa railroad investment. A second reason was that the Illinois Central Railroad might soon lease the Dubuque line, a possibility which encouraged the Dubuque leadership to stabilize company structure rather than to expand. The city's newspapers during 1867 reported intense rivalry between the Illinois Central and the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad for the traffic through the region. Finally, on October 1, 1867, the Dubuque line's general manager, Jesse P. Farley, announced the lease of the Dubuque & Sioux City Railroad to the Illinois Central in the *Dubuque Daily Times*.⁴

A third reason for the directors' refusal to extend Dubuque & Sioux City track was their distaste for Platt Smith. The attorney had continually pushed for correct procedures and had opposed declaring any dividends before the company had made a real

³The author describes Platt Smith's legal achievements and other activities in "Platt Smith of Dubuque: His Early Career" *Palimpsest* 58 (May-June 1977), 94-95. For company attitudes about western track extensions see John F. Stover, *History of the Illinois Central Railroad*, (New York, 1975), 131.

⁴Stover, *History*, 132; "Railroad War", *Dubuque Herald*, 17 October 1867. Letters of the directors show the possibility of a lease of the Dubuque and Sioux City line to the Chicago & Northwestern (R.E. Mason to Morris K. Jesup, 12 November 1866) or to the Milwaukee (Platt Smith to William Boyd Allison, 28 July 1867). See Extracts from Letter Books, Papers Concerning Cedar Falls & Minnesota Litigation, 1887-1890, Illinois Central Archives, Newberry Library, Chicago, 27, 10-11 (hereafter Extracts, ICRR Archives). See also *Dubuque Daily Times*, 1 October 1867.

profit. In 1865 he became concerned over the interlocking directorates of the Dubuque line and the partially constructed Cedar Falls & Minnesota Railroad, which the Dubuque & Sioux City finally leased in 1866. At Smith's insistence, the directors rearranged offices and board memberships to avoid the appearance of collusion. This made the directorates look better on paper, but the power structure remained the same; the 1866 lease merely formalized the larger company's control of the smaller. Although the directors thus followed Smith's advice, his nagging about fine points of the law made him unpopular. The atmosphere within the linked companies was not good. In 1866, Smith wrote to Morris K. Jesup that there were rumors of a "ring" in New York which was dividing up company gross income without concern for meeting expenses. Smith denied reports that he was aiding this ring. He undermined his own credibility, however, because he put his Dubuque company stock up for sale. This step reduced his holdings so much that it gave the board in New York an excuse to disqualify him as a director and vice president on June 21, 1867. In 1865 Smith had resigned his offices in the Cedar Falls & Minnesota Railroad, and in January of 1867 he began offering his Cedar Falls & Minnesota stock for sale. In a letter to Jesup he lamented that "a decent self respect" obliged him to withdraw from a firm which regarded him as "a clog and an encumbrance." Obviously the Dubuque & Sioux City directors then felt little call to adopt Smith's proposals for extending the line.⁵

PLATT SMITH'S next alliance was ominous, from the Dubuque directors' point of view, because John I. Blair's record inspired both their respect and fear. Starting as a boy clerk in his cousin's general store, Blair had built a merchandising empire in New Jersey and upstate New York. He became a partner of the

⁵The Cedar Falls & Minnesota Railroad had some importance in the railroad strategy of its time. The Iowa Central, which was building north from the Missouri border, hoped to acquire it to complete a north-south link across Iowa which would connect the Twin Cities and St. Louis. The 1866 lease to the Dubuque and Sioux City frustrated this aim. See Don L. Hofsommer, "The Grandest Railroad Project of the Age," *Annals of Iowa* 44 (Fall 1977), 129-136. See also Extracts, ICRR Archives, 8, 10; Thomas C. Cochran, *Railroad Leaders 1845-1890* (New York, 1953), 465; *Dubuque Daily Times*, 29 October 1867.

Scranton brothers in their iron foundry and with them organized the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad. When that company reorganized in 1858, Blair retained his interests in it but also invested in western railroads. After attending the 1860 Republican party convention in Chicago, he made an exploratory visit to Cedar Rapids, the western terminus of the Chicago, Iowa & Nebraska Railroad. He made this trip at the invitation of the financier Oakes Ames, who had just built the line from Clinton, Iowa. In 1861 Blair returned to Iowa to help build the Ames brothers' (Oakes and Oliver) next project, the Cedar Rapids & Missouri River Railroad, which reached Council Bluffs in January of 1867. In 1864, also with the Ames brothers' backing, Blair won control of the Sioux City & Pacific Railroad. He persuaded Congress to authorize a rerouting of this line so that it connected Sioux City with a junction near Missouri Valley, Iowa. The takeover offended several investors who were also Dubuque & Sioux City stockholders. These men then left the Sioux City & Pacific with resentment and they blamed Platt Smith, also an investor in both companies, for allowing Blair to intrude. The Sioux City & Pacific was completed in February of 1868, but the Dubuque and Sioux City men did not forget its beginnings. To them it represented the first time Platt Smith had hurt their company by supporting a Blair takeover. The advent of the Iowa Falls & Sioux City company was the second.⁶

Platt Smith and John I. Blair received legislative support in their efforts from Congressman William Boyd Allison of Iowa's third district. As a young lawyer from Ohio, Allison had migrated to Dubuque, was elected to Congress in 1862, and quickly became a spokesman for railroad interests. He was president of the Dubuque Railroad Bridge Company (later under Illinois Central control) and many of his closest associates were railroad investors: Morris K. Jesup, Henry L. Stout, Oakes and Oliver

⁶Anthony L. Cassen, ed., "Surveying the First Railroad Across Iowa: The Journal of John I. Blair," *Annals of Iowa* 35 (Summer 1960), 322; John I. Blair, "Attending a National Convention and Seeing Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 26 (July 1944), 23-44; Charles E. Ames, *Pioneering the Union Pacific* (New York, 1969), 80, 85; E. D. Branch, "Railroads Came to Council Bluffs" *Palimpsest* 10 (June 1929), 201-232. In his letter against Platt Smith, Charles L. Frost referred to the stockholders' withdrawal from the Sioux City and Pacific, and Platt Smith's reply to him agreed that it had so happened. For the letter of Charles L. Frost see *Dubuque Daily Times*, 27 October 1867.

Ames, and President John Douglas of the Illinois Central among them. Platt Smith pressured the congressman to work for an extension of the building deadline for the Dubuque & Sioux City and John I. Blair used Allison to get congressional authorization for rerouting the Sioux City & Pacific.⁷

When Smith and Blair dropped the news of their new company, the Iowa Falls & Sioux City Railroad, into this intense, competitive society, the Dubuque & Sioux City directors denounced and fired Smith. Morris K. Jesup revealed his deep anger at his former attorney: "while in our employ, receiving our money, acting as our Counsel, he was plotting our destruction." The leading newspapers which reported the controversy were the *Dubuque Daily Times*, the *Dubuque Herald*, and the *Fort Dodge Iowa Northwest*. Ordinarily their most vitriolic battles of the day concerned Reconstruction of the South rather than railroads. The thoroughly Republican *Daily Times* argued in favor of Radical Republican policies for southern assimilation and regularly denounced Democratic southern sympathizers as "copperheads," a term which it often applied to its local rival, the *Dubuque Herald*. The latter paper was frankly Democratic, had "copperhead" views about blacks, and drew further fire from the *Daily Times* for its support of President Andrew Johnson's approach to Reconstruction. The *Herald* editor, Dennis Mahony, was an Irishman who had been imprisoned during the Civil War for seditious activities, but when he returned to Dubuque he was elected sheriff. A colorful, unpredictable character, he had disputed with Platt Smith in 1857 in an open-letter debate over the location of the Dubuque & Pacific Railroad station. In spite of such violent differences on other matters, however, neither of the Dubuque papers was strongly partisan for either side of the quarrel between the Dubuque & Sioux City and Iowa Falls & Sioux City companies. Both favored whatever policy would extend the rails to the Missouri River.⁸

The letter which opened the newspaper war between the two companies appeared in the *Fort Dodge Iowa Northwest*. Seven leading citizens of Fort Dodge had signed it and addressed it to

⁷See Leland Sage, *William Boyd Allison* (Iowa City, 1956), 77-78, 89-90, 109.

⁸Extracts, ICRR Archives, 18; William J. Petersen, ed., "Source Material of Iowa History: The Mahony-Smith Letters on the Dubuque & Pacific Railroad, 1857," *Iowa Journal of History* 54 (October 1956), 335-360.

Platt Smith and John I. Blair. The group's leader was Benjamin F. Gue, an eminent journalist, historian, and politician, who was also publisher of the *Iowa Northwest*. The letter asked Smith and Blair to clarify rumors of a new railroad company that might take over the Dubuque & Sioux City's western segment. The correspondents also asked whether the Illinois Central would guarantee the Dubuque line's bonds and they wanted to know the prospects of immediate rail extension westward. Platt Smith replied in the *Dubuque Daily Times* and the *Dubuque Herald* as well as in the *Iowa Northwest*. He confirmed the founding of the Iowa Falls & Sioux City Railroad Company, which the *Daily Times* had announced eight days before. Smith stated that the line's extension would depend on whatever management remained in control, but that the Illinois Central could not guarantee the old Dubuque & Sioux City bonds. He asserted that he and Blair had ample resources to complete the track to Fort Dodge by January 1, 1869. Developers reacted to whatever appeared in the newspapers, for after Smith's replies both factions became active in the Fort Dodge area. The *Fort Dodge Iowa Northwest* noted that Smith and Blair were "making arrangements for active operations all along the line," while Dubuque directors John S. Kennedy and Jesse P. Farley were in town "looking up the right of way and perfecting arrangements for pushing the road to this point with vigor."⁹

The correspondence among the Dubuque directors shows how sensitive they were to what appeared in the papers. Five days after Smith's letters had all appeared Morris K. Jesup instructed John S. Kennedy to answer Smith publicly. Kennedy apparently anticipated this order, as he published a reply to Smith in the *Daily Times* the day before hearing from Jesup. Smith responded in the same newspaper three days later. In a week their opposing letters appeared together in the *Iowa Northwest*. Kennedy declared that the present directors had made

⁹The Gue et al letter may have been strategic rather than spontaneous. Its authors included the lawyer-politicians Galusha Parsons and John F. Duncombe. The latter was already (or was shortly to become) a director of the Iowa Falls & Sioux City Railroad. The letter's original date was September 26. See the *Fort Dodge Iowa Northwest*, 9 October 1867, for both this and the Platt Smith letter. See also "Railroad Men," *Fort Dodge Iowa Northwest*, 23 October 1867.

sacrifices, such as buying up stock and bonds to support the extension to Iowa Falls and to ease the firm's cash troubles. He challenged Smith's credibility because Smith continued to act as vice president and director even though his inadequate stockholdings had disqualified him. Kennedy said that he had offered Smith a chance to reinvest a month earlier, but that Smith refused. Kennedy concluded indignantly, "I can compare his conduct throughout to nothing but the long-eared animal, that, after drinking, kicked the bucket in token of its gratitude."¹⁰

Such an attack might have made some men recoil in dismay, but Platt Smith had developed his skills through a criminal defense practice in frontier Jackson County. His self-education in law and business had given him a hard-hitting, common-sense style and a gift of satire. He shrugged off the matter of questionable practice with the remark: "I do not expect to have anything more to do with that company." Then he struck at the "sacrifices" of the Dubuque directors. Kennedy had alleged that some had bought bonds to supply money to the company while others bought stock to give basis for voting-in the extension to Iowa Falls. Smith charged that the directors had misappropriated funds for the extension in order to pay favored suppliers for equipment the directors were buying at inflated prices. The directors had acquired the bonds, Smith continued, by manipulations which enabled them to purchase at about thirty cents on the dollar. By this means, he said, "they increased the indebtedness and lowered the credit of the company." He added that the trading from Iowa Falls to Fort Dodge would increase the debt by at least \$1,500,000 more. In closing, Smith called Kennedy a "wolf" and warned that if investors and the public trusted him and his associates, "he will suck your blood and serve you right."¹¹

Charles L. Frost, on behalf of his fellow Dubuque directors, responded to Smith's charges in the *Dubuque Daily Times*. He did not meet Smith's arguments directly, however, but took the offensive and made new accusations. Frost charged that Smith's colleague John I. Blair aimed to seize the land grants of two other

¹⁰Extracts, ICRR Archives, 18. For John S. Kennedy's letter see *Dubuque Daily Times*, 13 October 1867, and *Fort Dodge Iowa Northwest*, 23 October 1867.

¹¹*Dubuque Daily Times*, 13 October 1867; *Fort Dodge Iowa Northwest*, 23 October 1867.

railroad companies in the region, and he accused Blair and Smith of planning to acquire the Eldora Railroad and Coal Company to gain the coal deposits in the area. He emphasized the link between the previous quarrel and the present one: "Platt Smith foreshadowed his recent movement in plotting the destruction of the Dubuque & Sioux City Railroad, by throwing into the hands of Blair the Sioux City & Pacific Railroad, which was acquired by the Dubuque & Sioux City at great expense for the benefit of the company." Smith's reply appeared in the *Daily Times* and the *Herald* two days later. He stated that the Dubuque directors were the ones who had tried to seize the Eldora Railroad and Coal Company, and that Blair would never take over the land grants of another railroad company unless he had full support from the people of the region in question. Smith admitted that he had allowed Blair's "gobbling up" of the Sioux City & Pacific, but he said that the Dubuque directors who had resigned at the time "could no more [have worked] on that team, than a tortoise could trot a race with Dexter." Frost had also expressed the fear that, once in control, Blair would not build to Sioux City as planned but would turn south to some point on the Cedar Rapids & Missouri River Railroad or the Sioux City & Pacific. Smith answered that the land grant contract with the state could contain a guarantee of construction to Sioux City. Such a guarantee did occur ultimately, but throughout the newspaper debate the Dubuque & Sioux City supporters played on the public's fear that the new line might not travel directly to Sioux City.¹²

JOHN I. BLAIR had stayed above Smith's battle with the Dubuque directors by remaining in the East until late October. Henry L. Stout, a more moderate Dubuque director who wrote to John S. Kennedy in New York on October 25, predicted a hard fight over the land grant in the legislature. He therefore suggested that Congressman Allison talk to Blair before Blair came west, to lessen tensions between the factions. At the same time, Jesse P. Farley wrote to Kennedy that Smith had answered Charles Frost. Farley thought that "the matter had been discussed about

¹²For Charles L. Frost's letter see *Dubuque Daily Times*, 27 October 1867, and for Platt Smith's see 29 October 1867.

far enough" in the newspapers. In a later letter to Jesup he enclosed Kennedy's newspaper letter against Platt Smith and reported that Edmund L. Stimson, a former president of the Dubuque line who disliked Smith but wanted to let Smith and Blair take over the western line extension anyway, had visited Farley's Dubuque office. Stimson had conceded that Smith and Blair were simply "more able and ready" to take the road west. Farley resented both Stimson and Stout for their moderate attitudes which he thought made them almost as treacherous as Platt Smith. Farley told Jesup "if Smith should fail in his clandestine movements, he is a ruined man."¹³

When John I. Blair finally returned to Iowa on the first of November, he took steps to reduce hostilities. He wrote to John S. Kennedy from Cedar Rapids and invited Kennedy to travel with him on Blair's Sioux City & Pacific Railroad to discuss the situation. This ride did not occur, but Blair did talk to Jesse P. Farley in Dubuque, and told Farley that he would express his views in the papers in a few days. Blair's statement appeared in the *Fort Dodge Iowa Northwest* on November 20. Blair defended his record of building railroads in Iowa and pointed out the opportunities that the nearly completed Sioux City & Pacific was opening. He indicated that he and his associates had resources enough to build lines for "clean cash" without elaborate stock programs or immediate dependence on land grants. He alleged that the Dubuque & Sioux City (and its predecessor the Dubuque & Pacific) together had used up over 600,000 acres of land grants to build only 143 miles of track. Blair doubted that even the Dubuque company's earnings under the Illinois Central lease could pay the interest on the Dubuque line's mortgage debt of \$3,860,000. Blair concluded that no "capitalist in the country, knowing the facts, can be induced to furnish the means to complete the road under the present organization."¹⁴

Blair intended his analysis to counter new developments in

¹³See Henry L. Stout to John S. Kennedy, 25 October 1867; Jesse P. Farley to John S. Kennedy, 29 October 1867; and Farley to Morris K. Jesup, 15 November 1867 all in In-Letters to New York Office, Dubuque & Sioux City Railroad Company, Illinois Central Archives, Newberry Library, Chicago, vol. I, 1867-1868 (hereafter In-Letters, ICRR Archives).

¹⁴John I. Blair to John S. Kennedy, 30 October 1867, In-Letters, ICRR Archives; *Fort Dodge Iowa Northwest*, 20 November 1867.

Fort Dodge. Thomas Sargent, a land agent of that town, had written to the Dubuque line's general manager, Jesse Farley, to reassure him that Fort Dodge would still trust his company. Sargent knew that Farley and John S. Kennedy had been disappointed when they visited Fort Dodge and found unfavorable local attitudes toward their company. Sargent assured Farley that as a rule local opinion favored the Dubuque faction and that Farley and Kennedy must have run across some exceptions to that rule during their visit. Sargent believed that a vigorous Dubuque construction effort from Iowa Falls would have an "overwhelming" local effect which would change legislators' minds when they would later vote on the grant assignment. Sargent recommended that the Dubuque directors not fight the *state's* resumption of the land grant, but that they should otherwise meet their rivals "at every step." A few days after this letter Sargent joined with thirty-three other Fort Dodge men to publish an open letter to the Dubuque directors which appeared in the *Dubuque Daily Times* under the title "Censure Recalled." This statement denounced Benjamin Gue's original Fort Dodge letter which had condemned the Dubuque company. The new letter claimed to "recall" derogatory resolutions published with the Gue letter. Nevertheless, the new statement closed with a cautious reminder of Fort Dodge's expectations.

In view of the exertion now being put forth to extend the road to this place by your company and the apparent good faith with which you are now at work, we hereby tender you our sympathies and cooperation and in order to secure our confidence and full support, it will only be necessary for your company to persevere in the speedy completion of the road.

In a later letter signed "O" in the *Dubuque Herald*, Sargent also disputed the statement Blair had published upon his return west. Sargent complained that Blair in his 1866 presidential report to the Sioux City & Pacific stockholders had discounted the practicality of bridging the Missouri River at Sioux City. Blair had actually said that the territory just west of the river was too rugged for economical construction of the line, based on an engineer's survey. This and others of Blair's actions had made Sargent fear that the old promoter wanted to cut off northwest

Iowa. Blair might have preferred options that best avoided close competition with other lines or that took his lines through territory still available for land grants, and he had a reputation for bypassing towns or areas he thought unprofitable.¹⁵

Platt Smith published his reply to Sargent's statement in the *Dubuque Herald* of December 2. Smith reviewed the main points he had made before and revealed that the Dubuque directors had once bragged about deceiving Fort Dodge people and making them "eat dirt." Smith thus implied that the directors had given a false impression of their intent to build the line and had even boasted of the sham. Dubuque manager Jesse Farley answered Smith a week later in the *Dubuque Daily Times* and denied that he had ever heard any of the directors make such a boast. Smith had also repeated that the Dubuque directors had voted several times not to extend track beyond Iowa Falls; to this Farley added: "I am inclined to believe these official assurances only meant the company would not build any more under [Smith's] management."¹⁶

John F. Duncombe, an Iowa Falls & Sioux City Railroad director who was also a lawyer, Democratic politician, and publisher in Fort Dodge, also replied to the *Dubuque Herald* letter signed "O," whom Duncombe identified as Thomas Sargent. In the *Herald* of December 29, Duncombe stated that while he respected Sargent, he felt the man was misinformed. The Dubuque and Sioux City company, Duncombe maintained, did not have any solid construction program. It was merely building and grading near Iowa Falls, Webster City, and Fort Dodge to impress legislators who lived in or near those towns. With this piece of correspondence, the open-letter war closed and the adversaries prepared to lobby for the land grant in the 1868 session of the legislature.¹⁷

¹⁵Thomas Sargent to Jesse P. Farley, 21 October 1867, In-Letters, ICRR Archives; *Dubuque Daily Times*, 9 November 1867; John I. Blair, "Report of John I. Blair, President of Sioux City Branch, Union Pacific Railroad Company," Blairstown, N.J., 1866, 6-7, Sioux City & Pacific File, John I. Blair Papers, New Jersey Historical Society, Newark.

¹⁶See the letter of Jesse P. Farley, *Dubuque Daily Times*, 10 December 1867.

¹⁷For the letter of John F. Duncombe see *Dubuque Herald*, 29 December 1867. This man's role as a co-founder of the Iowa Falls & Sioux City Railroad appears in his memoir to the historical compiler of the Illinois Central. See Statement of John F. Duncombe to William Head, Historic Compiler, Illinois

NEWSPAPERS in the towns between Dubuque and Fort Dodge had paralleled the prompt and interested railroad coverage of their larger neighbors. Most outspoken for the Blair-Smith side was the *Eldora Ledger*. On October 9 its peppery editor, R. H. McBride, reprinted an editorial from the *Dubuque Herald* which was favorable to the Dubuque & Sioux City Railroad. The editorial praised the old company for extending the line as far as Iowa Falls and blamed delays beyond that on "lack of capital." McBride tore this defense apart, and called the Dubuque company a parasite "whose feeble and sickly existence the legislature should crush out this winter." Denouncing the "men of the east," McBride called on the Dubuque directors to "step aside and give us a new deal." McBride threw his support to Platt Smith with editorials each time he reprinted a Smith letter. On October 30 he reviewed Smith's arguments with Charles L. Frost and found both men's behavior amusing. McBride commented that "Mr. Smith is now after his 'particular friend,' Charles L. Frost, and attempts to surprise and surround that gentleman." McBride expressed support for the Eldora Railroad, and hope for the town's future success with its coal resources: "So let the railroad giants wrestle, the work goes bravely on, Alden and Webster City will get a track, and Eldora, instead of a branch road, will be on the great through line from St. Paul to St. Louis." McBride's prophecy came true to a considerable degree and he exercised a potent influence on the Eldora line's ultimate development.¹⁸

Other small-town newspapers varied widely in their attitudes. In the *Tipton Advertiser* for November 7 a correspondent styled "Viator" reported on a trip to Sioux City. He said that people of that region were favorable to the Iowa Falls & Sioux City Railroad and believed that it should have the land grant. The *Cedar Valley Times* in Cedar Rapids did not comment directly on the controversy until January 16, 1868, even though its town also hosted John I. Blair's main offices. Then it reprinted with approval an *Iowa Northwest* editorial which held that the land grant should go to the new company. The *Hamilton Freeman* of

Central Railroad Co., Chicago, 1897, Miscellaneous Collections, Illinois Central Archives, Newberry Library, Chicago.

¹⁸*Eldora Ledger*, 9, 30 October 1967; Don L. Hofsommer, "A Railroad and an Iowa Editor: A Case Study," *Annals of Iowa* 41 (Fall 1972), 1102-1103.

Webster City reviewed the John S. Kennedy-Platt Smith exchanges in November and promised to get Charles L. Frost's letter before the public as soon as possible.¹⁹

The *Cedar Falls Gazette* shared the *Dubuque Daily Times'* hatred of "copperheads" and President Andrew Johnson, but the *Gazette* described the event of the "railroad war" objectively. It announced the Illinois Central's lease of the Dubuque & Sioux City Railroad, summarized Platt Smith's first letter, and reported his dismissal as company attorney. It reported the end of the "war" in its January 17 issue and on February 14 described the bill for extension west of Iowa Falls. By then the bill had passed the House and included the restriction that the westward road could not reach south of the southern boundary of Cherokee County. This clause answered one of the *Gazette's* concerns. With the land grant practically in hand, the Blair group had proposed to build from Fort Dodge to Onawa, thirty miles south of Sioux City. This route would have given Blair and his associates complete control of trade into Sioux City because the only rail line into the town would have been their Sioux City & Pacific. The *Gazette* had urged that its readers be "fully alive to this important issue." The Cherokee County line clause showed that the legislature was also alive to the issue, and had acted upon it. Cherokee County was so far to the northeast of Onawa that building from Fort Dodge to that town was out of the question.²⁰

By the beginning of 1868 the public and editorial mood tended to favor the Iowa Falls & Sioux City company over the Dubuque directors. On December 27, 1867, the *Dubuque Herald* reprinted an editorial from the *Sioux City Register* which also had appeared in the *Fort Dodge Iowa Northwest*. The writer held that the state should resume the land grant and give it to a company that would build promptly: "we have been cheated out of a railroad for twelve years." The *Herald* added, "the above are our sentiments exactly." The *Iowa Falls Sentinel* optimistically reported the end of the quarrel on January 15, 1868. The headline announced: "Important Railroad Movement; End of the War between the D. & S. C. and Blair's New Company." The agreement between the companies gave all rights in the line west of Iowa

¹⁹*Tipton Advertiser*, 7 November 1867; *Cedar Valley Times*, 16 January 1868; *Hamilton Freeman*, 6 November 1867.

²⁰*Cedar Falls Gazette*, 31 January 1868.

Falls to the new company, which took responsibility for building the road to the Missouri River. A "disinterested third party," the State Census Board, would hold the contract which would become inoperative if another company tried for the land grant. Otherwise the regional disputants could argue their claims before the legislature. The *Sentinel* concluded: "There can be little doubt that the road will be completed through as fast as possible, and that all that fine portion of Iowa beyond Iowa Falls [will be] opened up to the outside world."²¹

Events of the spring postponed the achievements which the *Sentinel* anticipated. The exact route for the new road was controversial.

Considerable excitement prevails among interested parties, in regard to the project by Blair & Co., to run the D. & S. C. R. R. west by the Maple River route; the Hon. Platt Smith comes out in a letter to the *Times* in favor of the route; he says it is more feasible and of easier grade, besides being but a little longer. In the meantime, petitions are flowing into the legislature from parties along the route, asking that the old survey be adhered to.

Representatives from various counties read petitions in the legislature which asked to have the line built "as originally surveyed," and criticized "any action by which the line of the Dubuque & Sioux City Railroad can be changed."²²

In addition to the route question, another difficulty arose. During March the legislature passed an amendment to a land grant bill which provided that, before accepting a land grant, a railroad company had to agree that the state had power to regulate freight or passenger rates. Railroad men reacted angrily. John I. Blair suspending building on the Iowa Falls & Sioux City and refused the land grant. On April 18 Blair's assistant gave an interview to the *Hamilton Freeman*. He described the amendment as "very unfriendly and detrimental to the best interests of the state." The *Freeman* agreed and later supported a statewide movement to repeal the amendment. This petition drive, which the railroads organized, was unsuccessful. John I. Blair returned

²¹*Dubuque Herald*, 27 December 1867; *Iowa Falls Sentinel*, 15 January 1868.

²²*Iowa Falls Sentinel*, 5 February 1868; *Iowa General Assembly, House Journal*, 25 January 1868, 119; 30 January 1868, 151.

to New Jersey and ran for the office of governor in the fall election. He lost. By the spring of 1869 the railroad men gave in. The *Iowa Falls Sentinel* announced that Blair had returned, accepted the offensive amendment, and reapplied for the land grant. On July 8, 1870, Blair's men drove the final spike of the Iowa Falls & Sioux City track, three miles west of Storm Lake.²³

Route disputes and the regulatory amendment created a tense atmosphere in the legislature. The bill to resume the land grant had passed both houses by March 5. On March 8 a bill to carry out the contract between the Iowa Falls & Sioux City and Dubuque & Sioux City railroads was introduced into the House. This measure (House File 271) was the subject of "angry and involved debate" until passed on March 25. During the argument, a member offered an amendment which would have withheld land from the Iowa Falls company until the road was complete to Sioux City. This amendment failed, but a representative from Dubuque secured passage of an amendment which required the railroad to follow the conditions of the original act. Then the whole measure passed the House. Marked regional differences were apparent in the petitions from constituents and in the expressions of legislators. Generally the eastern districts favored the regulatory amendment while the West feared that demanding rate regulation would further delay rail construction.²⁴

Legislators in Iowa were thus restrictive of the railroads in their decisionmaking. The Iowa Falls & Sioux City could not build line south of Cherokee County and the state reserved the power to regulate rates. Iowa's General Assembly at this time clearly was not under the control of railroad men and "railroad management regarded the state legislature as an unpredictable and certainly an independent body." In order to sell their projects to the legislature, the railroaders usually had to persuade its constituents. The railroad men's letters and the newspaper editorials indicate the nature of the public whose support they hoped to cultivate. In the Dubuque-Iowa Falls contest, the open letters intelligently discussed legal questions, organization, and

²³Iowa General Assembly, *Senate Journal*, 24 March 1868, 370; *Hamilton Freeman*, 18 April 1868; *Iowa Falls Sentinel*, 8 March 1869.

²⁴*Iowa State Register*, 11 March, 11 April 1868; Iowa General Assembly, *House Journal*, 25 March 1868, 468; Earl S. Beard, "The Background of State Railway Regulation in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History* 51 (January 1953), 21-22.

securities. Clearly part of the intended audience was well-informed businessmen, lawyers, and politicians. The editors themselves, such as R. H. McBride of Eldora or Benjamin Gue and John Duncombe of Fort Dodge, were of this class. Such men were also often emigrants from New England or the Middle Atlantic states who brought eastern business experience and connections to their activities in Iowa. People of this class provided lay leadership in the churches, sat on town councils and county boards, involved themselves in the school system, and elected the state legislators. Even much of the leadership of the 1870s Grange movement came from such local businessmen. The newspapers provided a powerful instrument by which the railroaders conveyed their message to these alert and influential people. Farmers and laborers whose livelihoods depended on the transport of produce were also attuned to railroad issues. Fiery disputants and editors who called each other donkeys, wolves, and parasites also made entertaining and thus attractive reading for these intended audiences. From either the business or public point of view, the Iowa town newspaper was a constantly available and powerful medium of information about business conflict.²⁵

In the Dubuque railroad controversy of 1867, Platt Smith and John I. Blair won the right to build west of Iowa Falls to Sioux City and thus obtained the land grant applicable to that line. Their newspaper expressions helped convince the public that they had the organization and the resources to complete the task. The Dubuque & Sioux City directors were not as well-organized, nor were they as anxious, to complete their original task and they ended as losers in the conflict. Yet their fight publicized fears that the Blair group's construction might deviate substantially from the planned route. Platt Smith reassured the public that the state could hold the Iowa Falls company to the original route by a guarantee in the contract. But in a later shift of position he strengthened reports of a route deviation by stating a preference for the Maple Valley route. Such announcements drew heavy reactions from northern and western legislators. They then introduced petitions from their constituents in de-

²⁵See Leonard F. Ralston, "Railroad Interests in Early Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 41 (Winter 1973), 1146-1147 and Myrtle Beinhauer, "The Development of the Grange in Iowa, 1868-1930," *Annals of Iowa* 34 (April 1959), 611-618.

fense of the direct route. The Dubuque directors deserve credit for initiating concern about route changes and keeping it in the public mind, even though they did so for their own reasons. The contract provision that the line could not run south of Cherokee County reflected the ensuing popular pressure. As a result, John I. Blair was obliged to build the Iowa Falls & Sioux City Railroad, more or less directly, to Sioux City.

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