

## FORT DODGE AND THE DES MOINES VALLEY RAILROAD

By *Mildred Throne*\*

Iowa's railroad fever in the late 1860's overshadowed all other interests, even politics. Four east-west lines and one north-south road had begun construction in the mid-1850's: the Burlington & Missouri River at Burlington; the Mississippi & Missouri at Davenport; the Chicago, Iowa & Nebraska at Clinton; the Dubuque & Pacific at Dubuque; and the Keokuk, Fort Des Moines & Minnesota (later rechristened the Des Moines Valley) at Keokuk. Whereas the four east-west roads were all heading for the Missouri River, the Keokuk road was building up the valley of the Des Moines River in a northwesterly direction, through the center of the state.

The four east-west roads had been given shares in the first Iowa railroad land grant in 1856. The Des Moines Valley grant had been provided by the state from the lands granted in 1846 for the improvement of the Des Moines River. The Civil War had stopped construction on the roads for four years, but, with the war over, all resumed building as rapidly as possible.

Every town on the proposed lines watched and waited "for the cars"; all fought for a place on the rails; and the roads were ready to be wooed, for a price. Should towns not contribute rights-of-way, depot sites, and sufficient cash, surveyors could very easily bring them to terms by threatening to build around them. Every town had its own story: the fight to get the Des Moines Valley to build into Fort Dodge in Webster County is only one of the many struggles going on in Iowa during these years.

Railroad excitement ran high in Fort Dodge by 1866. To the east, the Dubuque & Sioux City (originally the Dubuque & Pacific) had reached Iowa Falls by April 16, where it seemed temporarily bogged down by what Benjamin F. Gue, editor of the *Fort Dodge North West*, called a "desperate struggle" between the Illinois Central and John I. Blair for control of the road.<sup>1</sup> That this road would come through Fort Dodge, when and if its

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<sup>1</sup>Fort Dodge *North West*, Jan. 23, 1867; Carlton J. Corliss, *Main Line of Mid-America, The Story of the Illinois Central* (New York, 1950), 149.



financial troubles were resolved, was certain, but Fort Dodgers were impatient. To the southward the Des Moines Valley had reached Des Moines on August 29.<sup>2</sup> If this road lived up to its name and continued to build along the river, it would of necessity pass through Fort Dodge. Prospects for both an east-west and a north-south line were therefore promising, but too many towns had not given the proper financial encouragement to prospective railroads and had found themselves bypassed. Such must not be the fate of Fort Dodge, warned Gue.

Two courses of action were open to Fort Dodgers in order to insure the north-south line. The citizens could build a railroad south to the rapidly progressing east-west North Western (the original Chicago, Iowa & Nebraska) at Boone, or they could spend their money to encourage the Des Moines Valley to speed its tracks northward through Fort Dodge. The town toyed with both ideas. In the fall of 1866, when it had seemed that the Dubuque & Sioux City was more interested in building a branch north from Iowa Falls than in pushing west to Fort Dodge, a local company had been formed to build a road south to Boone.<sup>3</sup> This "paper" road had been named the Upper Des Moines Valley Railroad.

On the board of this proposed road were two Fort Dodge men who played big roles in the fight with the Des Moines Valley — John F. Duncombe and Cyrus C. Carpenter. Duncombe, a leading financier, whose railroad interests were wide and whose close connection with the Dubuque & Pacific was well known, had divided loyalties. Carpenter, a professional politician, was at this time Register of the State Land Office and was soon to be Governor of Iowa. He was a Republican, and Duncombe was a Democrat, and thus they were bitter political rivals. But where politics divided neighbors, railroads brought them together, and the two men worked side by side in the interests of Fort Dodge and her railroads. Editor Benjamin F. Gue, another Fort Dodger in the forefront of the fight, joined Duncombe and Carpenter to make up the "Big Three" in the ensuing controversy with the Des Moines Valley.

The crux of the whole matter was simply that Fort Dodge wanted a railroad. Prospects and promises were good, but results were lacking. While the Dubuque & Sioux City dallied, the Des Moines Valley sent surveyors

<sup>2</sup> Dwight L. Agnew, "Beginnings of the Rock Island Lines, 1851-1870" (Ph.D. thesis, State University of Iowa, 1947), 282.

<sup>3</sup> Fort Dodge *North West*, Sept. 5, Oct. 3, 31, 1866.



north to tempt and tantalize the various towns and villages of the Des Moines valley. Whether the Fort Dodge threats of forming an independent company had any influence in speeding the surveys north of Des Moines is not known, but Fort Dodge's paper railroad may have been drawn up for just this purpose. In December of 1866, while Fort Dodge was busily holding meetings to organize the Upper Des Moines Valley Railroad Company, Charles Pomeroy, soon to be elected to Congress as the Representative from Iowa's Sixth District, of which Fort Dodge was the center, received a letter from General Hugh T. Reid, one of the officials of the Des Moines Valley. Reid advised him that the company had completed plans to continue the road up the west side of the Des Moines River. Fort Dodge, on the east side of the Des Moines, would have preferred the road there, but they were willing to settle for the west side so long as they got their railroad. Reid further advised Pomeroy that the railroad would survey a line to Fort Dodge provided the citizens of that town contributed \$300. Such demands were the accepted practice, and Editor Gue did not hesitate to sponsor a drive for funds. "Will any property owner hesitate a moment?" he asked. "A subscription paper will be prepared at once, and if we are to have the Valley Road at Fort Dodge, we have no time to lose."<sup>4</sup>

The Upper Des Moines road was at once forgotten, and railroad meetings were called, committees appointed, resolutions passed, and subscription papers circulated—all in the interests of the Des Moines Valley. Carpenter was one of the committee appointed to "make an examination of the approaches to Fort Dodge." He was also selected, along with Gue, C. R. Richards, Pomeroy, and Theo. Hawley, to confer with the railroad officials.<sup>5</sup> In January of 1867, D. W. Kilbourne, president of the Valley Road, wrote to a friend in Fort Dodge, assuring him that the line would be completed in eighteen months.<sup>6</sup> Fort Dodge rejoiced.

Through the spring and early summer months, the people of the Des Moines valley waited. At last, on July 13, Chief Engineer J. M. Otley informed Gue, Pomeroy, "and others" in a terse note that he would begin his survey on July 15, that he would reach Fort Dodge in about two weeks, and that he would expect to receive "the necessary funds" upon arrival. To insure the collection of the money for the survey, Gue reminded his readers of what had happened to Boonsboro, where the \$400 demanded by

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 12, 1866.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 19, 1866.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Jan. 23, 1867.



the railroad had not been forthcoming: "Otley promptly left them and run [sic] his line just east of Montana, leaving Boonsboro out farther than the North Western did." Take warning, Gue advised Fort Dodge, and "have the money ready by Saturday."<sup>7</sup>

That the Des Moines Valley surveyors were running their lines some miles west of the Des Moines River, a route not directly "up the Valley of the Des Moines" as the land grant had specified, did not disturb people in 1867. Later, when it became evident that the railroad was not going to send its main line through Fort Dodge, but was putting it six miles west across the river, planning to serve Fort Dodge by a spur or the use of the tracks of the Iowa Falls & Sioux City (the western branch of the Dubuque & Sioux City), Gue and Carpenter entered into a whole-souled verbal battle with the corporation. The quarrel did not change the route of the railroad, but it did leave bad feelings that helped pave the way for considerable antimonopoly, anticorporation, and antirailroad sentiment later. And Carpenter, who led the fight, was Governor of the state when the stringent "Granger Law" was passed in 1874.

In 1867, however, Fort Dodge still hoped to convince the Des Moines Valley to come into the town on the east side of the river. Why they should expect this, when the entire survey was being made on the west side, is a mystery. Perhaps, in their innocence of railroad tactics and their strong desire for a railroad, they thought they could influence the decisions of the company. Eastern Iowa cities, where railroads were already established, could have disabused them of this belief. As time passed, and no iron was laid on the projected route, and when the demands of the railroaders became more peremptory, the people of the Des Moines valley began to realize that in spite of land grants and local aid, the railroaders would have the last word.

The session of the Iowa General Assembly of 1868 made several efforts to bring the railroads to submission. The lands originally granted to the Dubuque & Pacific were resumed and regranted to the Iowa Falls & Sioux City, a company organized by Platt Smith of Dubuque and John I. Blair of New Jersey in October of 1867.<sup>8</sup> Into this act a proviso was incor-

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, July 24, 31, 1867.

<sup>8</sup> *Laws of Iowa, 1868*, Chaps. 26, 124; Corliss, *Main Line of Mid-America*, 153. These two lines, the Dubuque & Sioux City, which had built as far as Iowa Falls, and the Iowa Falls & Sioux City, which reached the latter city in 1870, were later combined into the present Illinois Central Railroad in Iowa.



porated: "The company accepting the provisions of this act shall at all times be subject to such rules, regulations, and rates of tariff for transportation of freight and passengers as may from time to time be enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Iowa."<sup>9</sup> This was the "Doud Amendment," introduced by Elias Doud of Van Buren County and accepted by the legislature by an almost unanimous vote. Efforts in this and previous legislatures to regulate freight and passenger rates on railroads had repeatedly failed, but the legislators were not averse to stating their power to pass such regulations, even though they did not at that time choose to use it.<sup>10</sup> The fact that the bill passed with only a handful of dissenting votes made it look as though Iowa lawmakers were ready to "lay down the law" to the railroad corporations.

The railroads had naturally combined to fight regulatory legislation, or even the threat of it. Des Moines was full of lobbyists — "the buzzards of the General Assembly," according to a Democratic member of the House, Lysander W. Babbitt of Council Bluffs. The lobbyists put up a good fight against the Doud Amendment but without success. Their activities thoroughly angered Babbitt, who was editor of the *Council Bluffs Bugle*. On one railroad bill his patience wore so thin that he introduced an amendment:

*And be it further enacted, That railroad companies in this State are hereby authorized and empowered to take all the property both personal and real of the people of this State for their own use and benefit, it being understood that the construction of railroads within the State is a just compensation therefor.*<sup>11</sup>

Babbitt admitted that his amendment was made "in sport," but added that even so, "the proposition . . . would barely satisfy the grasping avarice of the railroad companies." When the Doud Amendment passed, Babbitt was pleased, although he believed that "there are not over ten men in the Legislature, who would be in favor of exercising the power at this time." John I. Blair was not so sure of this, and it was rumored he was on his way to Des Moines to make "some astounding declarations in regard to the action of the Legislature." "From what I can learn," Babbitt concluded, "Mr. Blair and other railroad men are laboring under the delusive

<sup>9</sup> *Laws of Iowa, 1868, 66-7, 167.*

<sup>10</sup> Earl S. Beard, "The Background of State Railroad Regulation in Iowa," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY*, 51:21-2 (January, 1953).

<sup>11</sup> *House Journal, 1868, 422.*



belief that they own the State of Iowa, and that the members of the Legislature are mere tools in their hands to carry out their schemes."<sup>12</sup> That the members of the General Assembly stood up to the lobbies and to Blair in 1868, however, is evidence that the railroads did not yet "own the State of Iowa" and that there was a growing discontent with the dictatorial methods of the corporations.

The Des Moines Valley road also came in for its share of punishment during this session of the Assembly. No progress had been made on the road, and people were tired of paying for railroads and getting nothing for their money. Timed to coincide with a campaign against the Des Moines Valley was the revival of the almost defunct Upper Des Moines Valley Railroad at a meeting at Montana (now Boone) in Boone County. Gue was elected president of the proposed road, and resolutions were passed urging the legislature to resume the lands granted to the Des Moines Valley and turn them over to a company that would build the road as planned. "If the Legislature adjourns without resuming and regranteeing the Valley lands," Gue warned, "it requires no prophet to foretell that we shall have no Railroad." The roads should not be permitted "to levy contributions on the towns or counties through which they pass," he continued, "but be absolutely required to so locate the depots as will best accommodate the people, towns and cities along the route. The people have paid dearly enough already for the building of these roads, and they now have a right to demand protection from any exorbitant demands from railroad companies."<sup>13</sup>

Rumors that the Des Moines Valley officers were going to "sell out" to the Pennsylvania Railroad, "which now has a complete line from Philadelphia to Keokuk in this State," helped to spur Fort Dodge to action. If the Pennsylvania bought the Des Moines Valley, Gue warned, the road would be continued west from Des Moines to join the Union Pacific at Council Bluffs, thus leaving Fort Dodge and northwestern Iowa "out in the cold." Do not let these "cormorant corporations" cheat us out of our railroads, urged Gue.<sup>14</sup>

Success now seemed to crown these efforts of the people of the Upper Des Moines valley. Their representative in the Assembly, Jackson Orr,

<sup>12</sup> Council Bluffs Bugle, Apr. 2, 1868.

<sup>13</sup> Fort Dodge North West, Feb. 12, 1868.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Feb. 5, 12, 1868.



introduced a bill calling for the resumption of the lands originally granted for the Des Moines Valley Railroad. The resulting bill did not actually resume the lands; rather it regranted them to the same road, but with certain stipulations spelled out. Whereas the original grant to the Keokuk, Fort Des Moines & Minnesota in 1858 had required the road to be built "up the Valley of the Des Moines River," the new act specified that the grant was "to aid in the construction of a railroad from the city of Keokuk up and along the valley of the Des Moines river by the way of the city of Des Moines to the northern line of the State"; furthermore, the road should be built "into the town of Fort Dodge."<sup>15</sup> That a bitter squabble would result over the meaning of the "valley" of the Des Moines River was naturally not foreseen at the time. To the people of Boone, Webster, and Humboldt counties, the "valley" meant just that, since the river flowed through their territory; to the railroad, "valley" assumed a much wider interpretation. This led to an acrimonious exchange of letters between the Des Moines Valley officers and Carpenter, who spoke for his neighbors, but in the spring of 1868 this was in the future. When the General Assembly adjourned, the members had reason to feel that they had successfully defied the power of the railroads.

This feeling did not last long. While an uneasy peace existed for a time between Fort Dodge and the Des Moines Valley, trouble appeared from another direction. The Doud Amendment had been incorporated into all railroad legislation passed during the session, including that relating to the Iowa Falls & Sioux City. The roads seemed willing to accept, more or less gracefully, stipulations regarding routes and time limits for building, in return for potentially profitable land grants, but when it came to the threat of regulation of their right to charge what the traffic would bear, they rebelled. Blair's trump card, of course, was a threat to stop all work on the Iowa Falls & Sioux City unless the Doud Amendment were repealed. As much as he wanted the land grant, he refused to accept it with the string of state regulation attached. The Fort Dodgers, most immediately affected by this action, promptly forgot about "cormorant corporations." "Dubuque papers say that work is to be stopped at once on their Road," wrote Gue, "and that nothing more will be done until the absurd tariff restriction is removed. At a large meeting of our citizens held at the Court House last night, action was taken to do all in our power for the removal of the re-

<sup>15</sup> *Laws of Iowa*, 1858, Chap. 99; 1868, Chap. 57.



striction which is so seriously embarrassing Rail Road building in Northwestern Iowa."<sup>16</sup> A dozen or so leading men of northwestern Iowa, including Carpenter and Gue, circulated a petition urging the Governor to call an extra session of the legislature to repeal the offending amendment.<sup>17</sup> Thus quickly did the railroads reassert their influence. But Governor Samuel Merrill, not sure that an extra session would kill the amendment, refused to comply with their request. The whole thing actually proved a tempest in a teapot. Blair, faced with a stubborn state administration, gave in early in 1869 and accepted the terms of the land grant.<sup>18</sup>

That this was not accomplished without some private understanding is suggested in a letter to Carpenter from John F. Duncombe, whose many interests included those of the Illinois Central and its subsidiaries, the Dubuque & Sioux City and the Iowa Falls & Sioux City. Carpenter's "faithful labors in this enterprise" had been appreciated, Duncombe assured him; now there was something else he could do. Blair was ready to give in on the question of the amendment, but he was having trouble convincing the directors of the Illinois Central. Duncombe's letter, written in February, 1869, gives a good insight into the behind-the-scenes operations of the roads and their backers:

I am . . . urging Mr Blair to accept the Land Grant. This he would do, if the Ill Cenl would take it. Last week Mr [John M.] Douglas Pres. Ill Cenl promised me to use his influence with their Board of Directors to get them to agree to take the road if our Co. should accept the Grant. Now I will tell you what would help in the matter. If you would get Gov. Merrill to ask OConner [sic. Henry O'Connor] Atty Genl his opinion, as to whether any R R Co accepting under that tariff restriction under our constitution requiring . . . "all laws of a general nature to have a uniform operation" could be in any manner interfered with unless the law was made general and of uniform operation as to all RRs in the state. Now if you can get the Gov. to ask this question of OConner as atty Genl, get his opinion as it doubtless will be, that no special law can be made, that will not apply to all RR, we will have one other good trump in our game. I would want the

<sup>16</sup> Fort Dodge *North West*, June 10, 1868.

<sup>17</sup> Copy of petition, dated Aug. 27, 1868, and signed by S. T. Davis, A. R. Appleton, and D. T. Hedges of Sioux City; C. C. Carpenter, Theo. Hawley, and B. F. Gue of Fort Dodge; and L. L. Hunter and W. C. Willson of Webster City, is in the *Cyrus Clay Carpenter Papers* (State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City).

<sup>18</sup> Beard, "Background of State Railroad Regulation in Iowa," 23.



opinion for Blair's use in getting all O. K. and would like to have you explain to the Gov. the object and have him explain to OConner. OConner expressed to me a willingness to do all he could for us, and I know the Gov. would help us if he could. . . . A letter from other state officers to Mr Blair as favorable as they could make them sent to me, in relation to the state ever dealing unjustly or impartially toward any particular road would help.<sup>19</sup>

Attorney General Henry O'Connor had already published an opinion during the 1868 session of the legislature, upholding the power of the state to regulate the railroads within its borders, but concluding with the advice that it would be best to "hesitate long and deliberate carefully" before using that power. "Railroads have done much to make us what we are as a State," he continued, "and the disposition of the people should be, as I believe it is, to foster and encourage, not to oppress them."<sup>20</sup> Such was the tightrope which public officials walked. Privately many were on the side of the railroads; publicly, when popular opinion demanded, they tried to keep a close rein on the corporations, but they hastened to assure the roads that the rein of the Doud Amendment was a threat and not a promise. Gue did his share in reassuring "the Blair Company . . . that no Legislature will ever attempt to actually regulate the rates on this line of road, and leave the North Western free to fix its own rates." Any such attempt to "enact a special law to cripple or regulate a particular railroad, would not for one moment stand the ordeal of our Courts," he added. Rumors that the North Western was making a "formidable and determined effort" to gain control of the Dubuque & Sioux City had helped to spur Blair and the Illinois Central people into an acceptance of the conditions of the land grant.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, another argument between the people of the "valley of the Des Moines" and the directors of the Des Moines Valley Railroad was in the making. The General Assembly in 1868 had voted to allow towns and counties to give aid to railroads through the voting of a tax of 5 per cent of the value of their taxable property,<sup>22</sup> and townships immediately began

<sup>19</sup> Duncombe to Carpenter, Feb. 2, 1869, *Carpenter Papers*.

<sup>20</sup> [Henry O'Connor], *Opinion of the Attorney General of the Power of the Legislature to Regulate Tariffs on Railroads in the State of Iowa* . . . (Des Moines, 1868), 13.

<sup>21</sup> Fort Dodge *North West*, Feb. 25, 1869.

<sup>22</sup> Earl S. Beard, "Local Aid to Railroads in Iowa," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY*, 50: 24 (January, 1952); *Laws of Iowa, 1868*, Chap. 48.



providing this aid through special elections. From fighting the Valley Road, the citizens of the valley had turned once more to wooing it.

At Fort Dodge a meeting drew up resolutions, promising a 5 per cent tax to the Des Moines Valley, providing the road would "within ninety days after such levy, permanently and definitely locate the line of their road from the city of Des Moines to Fort Dodge, crossing the Des Moines river to the east side at such point as the Company may select, and locating a depot on said east side at such accessible point within the limits of said town of Fort Dodge as will best accommodate the interests of said town." Furthermore, half of the tax was to be applied to the depot and grounds, the other half to building the roadbed through the township. This seemed a reasonable request to Fort Dodge. After all, they were supplying the money — surely they should have some voice in the way it was spent. When the board of the railroad turned down the proposition as one "they could not intelligently enter into," Fort Dodgers received some inkling of future troubles.<sup>23</sup>

The pendulum of public opinion at once swung in the other direction. Fort Dodge's township — Wahkonsah — put on the ballot for the October election a provision for a 5 per cent tax in favor of the Iowa Falls & Sioux City only. No doubt the wily Duncombe had a hand in this. He made elaborate promises to the voters: the Iowa Falls & Sioux City, he said, would build the depot on the grounds chosen by Fort Dodge, using one quarter of the tax for that purpose; they would use the money only in extending the road to Fort Dodge and spend all of it within the township; in lieu of some of the money, they would accept labor and material as part-payment; and they would not ask for any of the funds until the iron was laid into Fort Dodge. Also, they promised that the rails would reach Fort Dodge by November 1, 1869, or the tax would be forfeited. The fact that at this very time Blair was refusing to do any further work on the road until the obnoxious Doud Amendment was repealed seems to make these glowing promises illusory, but the voters ignored the contradiction and voted, 213 to 130, in favor of a tax for the railroad.<sup>24</sup>

The Des Moines Valley naturally opposed a tax which favored only the east-west road. William Leighton of the Keokuk firm of Kilbourne, Leighton & Company, the lessees of the road, insisted that the tax should be

<sup>23</sup> Fort Dodge *North West*, Aug. 12, 1868.

<sup>24</sup> Letter quoted in *ibid.*, Oct. 22, 1868.



divided between the two roads. If this were done, he assured Fort Dodge in October of 1868, "the Valley Road will be running cars into the city of Fort Dodge by 1st December *next year*." A Mr. McCrea of the road visited Fort Dodge in October with more promises. If the township gave the road "liberal aid," he suggested, they would have "cars running into Fort Dodge by the *last of December, 1869*." If not, he warned, "the company will be disposed to take all the time allowed them by law." The Valley Road, he claimed, had just succeeded in raising \$2,000,000 in the East and was ready to resume construction.<sup>25</sup> The contradiction in this statement with the story put out by the roads that the Doud Amendment would prevent Eastern capital from investing in Iowa roads does not seem to have occurred to Gue, in whose paper McCrea's statement appeared.

The transition from defiance to promises and then to threats by the Des Moines Valley must have been confusing to the voters and taxpayers of Webster County. In August, 1868, the directors of the road had refused offers of aid because of the requirements tied to them; by October, officials of the road were both promising and threatening, in an effort to obtain such aid. Surely this changing attitude played its part in the growing distrust of railroads during the late sixties and early seventies.

While Fort Dodge argued and haggled with the Des Moines Valley, the Iowa Falls & Sioux City was hard at work. On a Saturday in May, 1869, Mrs. Cyrus C. Carpenter stood for hours by the newly-laid tracks. "But we watched & waited in vain," she wrote her husband, "& as the sun began to sink low in the west, I started home to get my supper, & just as I took my seat at the table I heard a fine, loud snort & whistle, & I knew 'The Year of Jubilee' had come to Ft. Dodge."<sup>26</sup>

Happy with one railroad, Fort Dodge seems to have signed a truce with the Des Moines Valley in the early months of 1869. Gue praised the road at every turn — it was "a splendid line of road"; in fact, quoting the *Des Moines Register*, it was "one of the greatest lines on the continent." Gue also reassured the alarmists who began objecting to the proposed location of the road west of Fort Dodge. "We had a long conference while at Des Moines, with the officers of the Road," he wrote, "and they declare without any hesitation, that the road will be built into Fort Dodge in good faith,

<sup>25</sup> Leighton letter from printed circular in *Carpenter Papers*; also quoted in *Fort Dodge North West*, Oct. 22, 1868. McCrea promises in article in *ibid.*, Oct. 29, 1868.

<sup>26</sup> Mrs. Carpenter to Carpenter, May 23, 1869, *Carpenter Papers*.



and that work will be crowded next season with great energy." In February the question of local taxes in aid of the roads had been resolved by the state supreme court's decision that the law was unconstitutional. This was only a temporary halt to the granting of local aid, however, for the 1870 legislature passed a slightly different act that proved acceptable to the supreme court.<sup>27</sup>

Hostilities resumed between Fort Dodge and the Valley Road in the fall of 1869, when it at last became evident that the Des Moines Valley intended to build its main line six miles west of Fort Dodge. Governor Merrill had even intervened in the interests of Fort Dodge, but with no success. In October he advised Carpenter that everything possible would be done "to secure the Road as originally intended," but he held out little hope. A hurried call for a meeting at Fort Dodge resulted in a resolution by a committee consisting of Gue, Carpenter, and several others that the town was "ready to render any reasonable amount of material assistance which said company might ask," and that the committee was authorized "to offer any reasonable sum . . . to induce them to build said road into the town of Fort Dodge in accordance with the spirit of the law conferring the land grant."<sup>28</sup>

Carpenter left Fort Dodge at once for Keokuk, to talk with Hugh T. Reid, head of the construction company, but all his arguments failed. The road refused to consider changing the surveyed route so as to come directly into Fort Dodge. C. B. Richards, one of the town's attorneys, wrote to Carpenter that "our friends here . . . are of the opinion that Gen Reid is acting in bad faith has not now and has not had any intention of coming here, and does not want to run their road in here." Richards suspected that the real reason for insisting on building west of Fort Dodge was that speculators who owned lands around the site of a town that was being planned at the junction of the Iowa Falls & Sioux City and the Des Moines Valley were back of it all. Emmett Carpenter wrote his brother that he agreed with this interpretation: "the Valley Company & John I Blair and the whole villainous pack of them will have a good time if they attempt to kill Fort Dodge. Garoe, Page & Merritt own an interest with the R. R. Co.

<sup>27</sup> Fort Dodge *North West*, Jan. 28, Feb. 11, June 10, 24, 1869; Beard, "Local Aid to Railroads in Iowa," 24-5.

<sup>28</sup> Merrill to Carpenter, Oct. 5, 1869, *Carpenter Papers*; Fort Dodge *North West*, Oct. 7, 1869.



in the land where the Depot is to be located. They expect to make a big thing out of it."<sup>29</sup>

The threat of a competing road had worked before, so Fort Dodge tried it again. Subscriptions of \$70,000 were obtained at a meeting, and more promised. Resolutions were passed, asking the legislature to transfer the land grant of the Des Moines Valley to the new road. Gue and Carpenter were again prominent in this movement, together with Pomeroy and Duncombe. "There is a storm gathering in our State among the people who have been wronged and outraged by these unscrupulous capitalists," Gue thundered. "The river towns have a large score of wrongs and oppressions counted up for future settlement, and the inland towns are going before the Legislature to join hands with them this winter, to determine whether our State is to be ruled by railroad companies, or by the people." Just a year and a day before this outburst, Gue had been scolding these same river towns for refusing to agree to a cancellation of the Doud Amendment.<sup>30</sup> But the shoe was now on the other foot in Fort Dodge, and Gue saw no merit in consistency.

The newspapers of the Mississippi River towns joined in the hue and cry. The Dubuque *Herald* stated flatly that "the treatment of Fort Dodge by the Des Moines Valley road is the meanest we have seen for a long time. . . . Let their land grant be taken from them; they have violated the conditions upon which it was given and are not entitled to it." The Davenport *Journal* also attacked the railroad and warned the officers that Fort Dodge was "rather too large a place to be thus dodged."<sup>31</sup>

Carpenter had labored long in the interests of his home town, and now "his blood was up." Colonel C. H. Perry, vice-president of the Valley Road, wrote a long letter to the Des Moines *Register*, justifying, with many underscorings, the position of his road and denying that they had violated the terms of their grant by surveying the line west of Fort Dodge. The proposed line was "attributable solely to the character of the country and the location of the city," he claimed. They could not "traverse extensive

<sup>29</sup> C. B. Richards (Oct. 21), and Emmett Carpenter (Oct. 24), 1869, to Carpenter, *Carpenter Papers*; Fort Dodge *North West*, Oct. 14, 1869.

<sup>30</sup> Geo. B. Sherman to Carpenter, Nov. 8, 1869, *Carpenter Papers*; Fort Dodge *North West*, Nov. 5, 1869; Oct. 28, Nov. 4, 25, 1869. For role of river towns, see George H. Miller, "Origins of the Iowa Granger Law," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 40:657-80 (March, 1954).

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Fort Dodge *North West*, Nov. 4, 1869.



quagmires and almost impassable ravines and gulches," he added. Furthermore, their proposed route would soon transform a "fertile desert" into a flourishing countryside "peopled with a thrifty population." Within ten days Carpenter had replied in an open letter to Perry, published in the *Register*, replete with just as many underscorings, in which he proposed "to correct some of the statements" Perry had made. The argument resolved itself into a disagreement over the meaning of "up and along the valley of the Des Moines river," with Carpenter and the Fort Dodge contingent insisting that "valley" be interpreted very narrowly, the railroad believing that "valley" was an inexact term, subject to wide variations. Perry's references to "quagmires" and "ravines" also aroused Carpenter's ire, as did the suggestion that the road would transform a "fertile desert" into a prosperous community. Why not, asked Carpenter, "promote the welfare of the people who had already pushed their way up toward the source of the Des Moines river, and rendered the construction of a railroad possible," instead of building through an empty countryside in the hopes of attracting a new population? Admitting that to build the road directly along the river would be more expensive, Carpenter insisted that the land grant was made to take care of just such additional expense. Colonel Perry did not see "quagmires" and "ravines" along the river, as he claimed, continued Carpenter; "it was town lots" that he saw.<sup>32</sup>

As a state official, Carpenter held annual passes on all the railroads of Iowa, including one on the Des Moines Valley. On the day that he wrote his letter to Perry he returned his pass to D. W. Kilbourne, president of the road. Kilbourne did his best to soothe the ruffled Carpenter, saying that he was "as anxious . . . to run the road through Fort Dodge as you can be, if it is at all feasible and can be done at an outlay of money we are able to meet." He further denied knowing anything about "town lot speculation" and insisted that he was not aware that any of his partners were engaged in such a business. He closed by returning the pass, hoping Carpenter could see his way clear to keeping it.<sup>33</sup>

Although Carpenter's letter to Perry did not have any results as far as the location of the road was concerned, it did do him a great deal of good politically. The people of northwestern Iowa now looked to Carpenter as

<sup>32</sup> The Perry and Carpenter letters to the *Des Moines Register*, dated Nov. 18 and 27, 1869, respectively, were republished in the *Fort Dodge North West*, Dec. 9, 1869. Emmett Carpenter to Carpenter, Dec. 10, 1869, *Carpenter Papers*.

<sup>33</sup> D. W. Kilbourne to Carpenter, Dec. 9, 1869, *Carpenter Papers*.



their voice of protest. Gue considered the letter "perfectly overwhelming"; Pomeroy wrote from Washington that he hoped Carpenter would "follow it up" in his report as Register of the State Land Office; Thomas Sargent of Fort Dodge congratulated him on his "withering reply," adding that there were "Frog ponds, sloughs, muskrat houses, &c" along the route chosen by the road, and accusing H. D. Merritt, the division engineer, of misleading the railroad "in his anxiety to form a junction with the Iowa Falls & S. C. R R near his farm so as to make his individual lands valuable."<sup>34</sup>

By the time the legislature met in January, 1870, Fort Dodgers were ready with a "Memorial of the People," signed by a committee made up of Carpenter, Gue, Duncombe, and others, asking that the land grant of the Des Moines Valley be resumed by the state and regranted to a new line to be built from Des Moines "up and along the valley of the Des Moines River via Boonsboro, Montana, and Fort Dodge, to the north line of the State, in the direction of the southern bend of the Minnesota or St. Peters river." To emphasize this, Carpenter wrote another long letter to the *Register*, going over the whole story again and accusing the Des Moines Valley of "gross and inexplicable evasion of the law."<sup>35</sup>

Those who fought hardest for the resumption of the Des Moines Valley land grant ignored the fact that by the law passed in 1868 the railroad had until the end of 1870 to complete the road. This fact weakened their struggle to take away the land grant on the basis of noncompliance with the terms of the grant, since the railroad still had some twelve months to fulfill the requirements. Fort Dodge put up a good fight, however, and so did the Des Moines Valley. In fact, all the railroads of the state had a corps of lobbyists in Des Moines, trying to block every move made in the legislature to impose regulations on transportation. The Des Moines Valley resumption bill was only one of the railroad bills before the General Assembly of 1870: efforts were made to change the basis of taxation of the roads; and another tariff regulation bill was introduced. Most of the regulatory bills passed the House but met defeat in what Gue angrily called the "Railroad Senate."<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Gue (Dec. 7), Charles Pomeroy (Dec. 16), and Thos. Sargent (Dec. 20), 1869, to Carpenter, *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Carpenter letter quoted in Fort Dodge *North West*, Jan. 20, 1870; resolution in *ibid.*, Jan. 27, 1870.

<sup>36</sup> Beard, "Background of State Railroad Regulation in Iowa," 25-6; Fort Dodge *North West*, Mar. 31, 1870.



The resumption bill lost out in both houses. Introduced into the House by Galusha Parsons of Webster County, it was referred to the committee on the judiciary, which held long hearings, Carpenter appearing in the interests of his neighbors, a Mr. Strong speaking for the railroad. A majority of the committee opposed the bill, while a minority of Parsons, William Mills, and Fred O'Donnell of Dubuque, and H. O. Pratt of Floyd County urged its adoption. In the Senate a similar bill was approved, with certain amendments, by a majority of the railroad committee, but a minority of H. C. Bulis of Winneshiek, Charles Beardsley of Des Moines, E. S. McCulloch of Lee, and J. G. Patterson, who represented Chickashaw, Floyd, and Howard counties, opposed its adoption. The bill failed in the House by a vote of 51 to 38, in the Senate, 21 to 20, indicating that the House might be more of a "railroad" body than the Senate. That the railroad men had used every possible tactic to gain support for their side is indicated by the fact that they even approached Carpenter. "I was so glad that Gen. Reid found one man that was incorruptible," wrote Emmett Carpenter to his brother when he heard of it.<sup>37</sup>

Gue, one of the leaders in the fight for resumption, was especially bitter at the defeat:

The House of Representatives has finally reached a vote on the bill for the protection of 30,000 people in Polk, Boone, Hamilton, Webster, and Humboldt counties in the Valley of the Des Moines river, against the most unblushing fraud and swindle ever perpetrated by a set of railroad sharpers. The House after a full hearing has by a vote of 51 to 38 endorsed that swindle and thus declared that the people have no rights that railroad companies are bound to respect. The railroad lobby which has reigned supreme at Des Moines this winter has openly boasted that it was able to defeat any legislation that was not acceptable to their employers, but we have never until now been willing to believe that they could really so control the Iowa Legislature.<sup>38</sup>

When the session of the General Assembly closed on April 13, and the railroad men had won all along the line, a celebration was in order. Gue reported on the festivities:

The Railroad Lobby felt so jubilant over their success in defeating

<sup>37</sup> *House Journal*, 1870, 330-36, 485; *Senate Journal*, 1870, 291, 320, 355-6; *Fort Dodge North West*, Feb. 17, 1870; Emmett Carpenter to Carpenter, Apr. 17, 1870, *Carpenter Papers*.

<sup>38</sup> *Fort Dodge North West*, Apr. 7, 1870.



the various demands of the people before the Legislature, such as resumption, tariffs and taxation, that they organized as the Third House and gave the two other houses of the General Assembly a complimentary supper at the Savery. — Bailey of the Northwestern superintended the business, and we learn that the wine and brandy was worthy of the occasion, and supplied in generous quantity.<sup>39</sup>

Carpenter hastened to assure his neighbors that they had nothing to complain of in the activities of their representatives in Des Moines. The men from the "Valley" had done their best, he wrote, but "railroad influence" was "stronger than argument." Certain men were always ready "to make indecent haste to do the bidding of a Railroad Company," Carpenter explained.<sup>40</sup>

One act passed by the Thirteenth General Assembly which met with the approval of the "Third House" was a bill introduced by Senator William Larrabee of Fayette County. This bill provided for a 5 per cent local tax to aid railroads. It was practically the same bill as the one recently declared unconstitutional by the state supreme court, but this time it passed that barrier, possibly because of a change in the personnel of the court.<sup>41</sup> Thus the way was again opened for increased local aid, and the counties once more jumped at the chance to woo the railroads to come their way.

The people of the Des Moines valley, having failed to bring the Valley Road to terms, turned once more to the old threat of a competing road, a threat which had worked in the past. On April 12, the day before the legislature adjourned, the stockholders of the Fort Dodge & Minnesota Railroad (originally the Upper Des Moines Valley and then the Des Moines, Fort Dodge & Minnesota) met at Fort Dodge and elected a new board of directors made up of the leaders of the fight with the Des Moines Valley. Gue, Duncombe, and Carpenter were on the board, together with Congressman Charles Pomeroy, State Representative Galusha Parsons, and many others. The following day the directors met and elected officers: Gue was made president; Duncombe, vice-president; W. N. Meservey and E. G. Morgan of Fort Dodge, secretary and treasurer respectively. A surveyor

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Apr. 21, 1870.

<sup>40</sup> Carpenter letter dated Apr. 18, 1870, published in *ibid.*, Apr. 28, 1870.

<sup>41</sup> *Laws of Iowa, 1870*, Chap. 102; Beard, "Local Aid to Railroads in Iowa," 24-5; *Fort Dodge North West*, Mar. 31, 1870.



was hired to locate the road, and by the middle of May he had begun a preliminary reconnaissance of the area.<sup>42</sup>

Duncombe, who had interests in the Iowa Falls & Sioux City, and who was close to John I. Blair, the motivating spirit of that road, knew something about the problems of railroad building, and he soon lost patience with the naivete of his associates. "The truth is," he wrote Carpenter, "from Gue down none of our people *really* have any idea of the difference between talking about building a RR & building it." "You & I know," he continued, "that it takes an everlasting sight of everlasting *hard work*. But the most of men think RRs are built by some kind of Jack O'Lantern scheme by which every body in them are to get rich & are to rob the people & get great plunder." Duncombe was having trouble controlling the board, he wrote, and had asked them to give him authority to go ahead and make decisions. He had plans for getting subscriptions to finance the road and for pushing support for a 5 per cent tax, now legal since Larrabee's bill had passed.<sup>43</sup>

A week later Duncombe wrote a letter that was published in the *North West*, urging the people of the area to rush subscriptions for the road. He warned that there was a move afoot to build a road from the Webster County coal mines north to the Minnesota border, locating it east of Fort Dodge. "With a railroad five miles east of Fort Dodge, and five miles west of Fort Dodge, our bright prospects are FOREVER RUINED." He painted a glowing picture of the prosperity that his road would bring, but warned "Let the enterprise die . . . and building will stop, trade will be seriously injured, and Fort Dodge property can't be traded off for baulky mules."<sup>44</sup> On the same day that his letter appeared in the paper, Duncombe wrote to Carpenter, urging him to contribute an article in support of stock subscriptions. Realizing that local capital could not build a railroad, Duncombe added, he had approached Blair in the hope of attracting Eastern funds, but he had little hope for help from that direction, "for the reason that this is no land grant."<sup>45</sup> Any effort to build local roads without the aid of a land grant and Eastern money was almost certainly doomed to failure.

<sup>42</sup> Fort Dodge *North West*, Apr. 21, May 12, 1870.

<sup>43</sup> Duncombe to Carpenter, May 21, 1870, *Carpenter Papers*.

<sup>44</sup> Duncombe letter of May 30, 1870, in Fort Dodge *North West*, June 2, 1870.

<sup>45</sup> Duncombe to Carpenter, June 2, 1870, *Carpenter Papers*.



Carpenter did his best to help in the campaign for subscriptions and also to allay the Fort Dodge's suspicions of Duncombe himself. "The only way we can succeed in our railroad project," he wrote "... is to resolve that no little petty jealousy, or enmity, whether well or ill founded, against this or that man, whose circumstances make him prominent in this all-important enterprise shall influence our action in this matter one particle."<sup>46</sup> This sentence refers to Duncombe, whose financial success made him a cause of envy, whose dictatorial manner made him a number of enemies, and whose role as a Peace Democrat during the war had not been forgotten. That Carpenter, who had so often been the butt of Duncombe's political attacks, could forget these and write in support of him in the interests of Fort Dodge should have had some influence on potential investors. But such was the confusion of politics, personalities, and the desire for railroads in Fort Dodge, that Carpenter did not succeed in swinging the townspeople over to the side of Duncombe and his railroad. Thomas Sargent explained the attitude of Fort Dodgers to Carpenter:

Rail Road matters are all exciting with our citizens — A meeting was held yesterday and the day before — another is to be held tonight — wish you were here to participate. On the one side is Duncombe Smeltzer Meservy Richards & Slawson — the sole directors of the Minn. Co. — on the other side is the DVRR — and except such as Duncombe can honeyswaggle — the citizens are in favor of DVRR Co — We take the position that if it [the 5 per cent tax] goes to the DVRR we at once establish a competing line from Fort Dodge, through which competition we may expect a Reduction in freight & fare to all points east & south — on the other hand if it goes to Duncombe & Co it will fall into the hands of John I Blair — that great R R monopolist — and this competition is all lost.<sup>47</sup>

The reason for this fear of Blair is that at about this date he had appeared in Fort Dodge, had conferred with Duncombe, and had gone north to inspect the proposed line of road.<sup>48</sup> Evidently prospects of a competing road had aroused Blair's interest in the proposed Fort Dodge & Minnesota in spite of the fact that it had no lucrative land grant. The people of Fort Dodge, believing in the advantages of competition, and forgetting

<sup>46</sup> Carpenter letter of June 7, 1870, in *Fort Dodge North West*, June 16, 1870.

<sup>47</sup> Sargent to Carpenter, June 23, 1870, *Carpenter Papers*.

<sup>48</sup> Theo. Hawley to Carpenter, June 20, 1870, *ibid.*; *Fort Dodge North West*, June 23, 1870.



past differences, turned at once to the Des Moines Valley rather than let Blair, who already controlled their east-west line, have a hand in a north-south outlet.

Meanwhile, the Des Moines Valley had been making overtures to Fort Dodge. On June 9 Gue reported a rumor that the directors of the railroad had "determined to solve the difficulty that stands in the way of perfecting the title to the lands claimed by said company by building the road into and through Fort Dodge as provided by law."<sup>49</sup> Here again is the echo of the importance of land to a railroad. The grant as restated in 1868 made it necessary for the road to build into Fort Dodge if they wanted to get a clear title to the promised lands. The company published a map, showing the line of their road going into Fort Dodge. Either they did this because they had decided "at this late day to comply with the law," said Gue, "or they are seeking to defraud the people." A week later Gue reported further and brighter prospects. Officials of the road had visited Fort Dodge and had held a conference relative to the location of the main line through the town. They had an arrangement with the Iowa Falls & Sioux City to run into Fort Dodge on the line of that road, but they now believed that they could build their own line into the town, "provided the local aid consisting of five per cent. taxes and swamp lands could be secured to aid in the work."<sup>50</sup>

Another conference was called, and Hugh T. Reid stated the company's terms:

The *right of way* to be given to said company free of charge, and also depot grounds in Fort Dodge and Badger township, to be given to said Co., at such places as the Co. may select, not exceeding ten acres at each place free of charge; the citizens of Fort Dodge and vicinity to subscribe and pay to said Des Moines Valley Rail Road company as the work progresses through and above Fort Dodge, sixty thousand dollars.

A further requirement was that the "townships of Fort Dodge and Badger each . . . vote and pay a tax of five per cent." A committee consisting of Gue, Sargent, Samuel Rees, Theo. Hawley, and others was appointed to consider the offer. So quickly had sentiment changed in Fort Dodge that the committee at once reported substantial acceptance of the railroad's

<sup>49</sup> Fort Dodge *North West*, June 9, 1870.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, June 9, 16, 1870.



offer, agreeing to take 200 shares of stock at \$100 each in addition to the requested 5 per cent tax. Duncombe and his directors made a counter-proposal in behalf of the Fort Dodge & Minnesota, the last paragraph being intended to allay fears that the Blair interests would control the road: "Our Company will contract with no Company to turn over this road until built. We intend to build the road if aided by our people."<sup>51</sup>

A further meeting of the committee and the two roads resulted in a compromise in which Duncombe surrendered. He agreed that all who had subscribed to his road would be released and urged to take stock in the Des Moines Valley. His only stipulation was that the Valley Road would build into Fort Dodge on their own tracks instead of using those of the Iowa Falls & Sioux City. When Duncombe surrendered, he did so gracefully. He gave the road free right-of-way through his lands and donated the depot grounds in Fort Dodge, and he and the other directors of the Fort Dodge & Minnesota came out in strong support of voting the 5 per cent tax to aid the Des Moines Valley. "Our people chose the D. M. V. R. R. Co.," they wrote, "and while we thought it better to aid the other company, that company is now entirely out of the field, and our only hope is in the Des Moines Valley Company." Fort Dodge voted overwhelmingly for the tax: 288 for, 93 against.<sup>52</sup>

The railroad war was over, and each side had won concessions. On December 22, 1870, a train of the Des Moines Valley Railroad crossed "the new bridge and ran into Fort Dodge."<sup>53</sup> The counties north of Webster County now began to take hope. Engineers surveyed the road north to Emmet County, and people in Estherville were promised "a vigorous push northward of the Valley Road next year and its early completion to the State line."<sup>54</sup>

But the Des Moines Valley seems to have exhausted its resources in reaching Fort Dodge. Four years later it was still there, with the promises of building northward still unfulfilled. Bondholders at last forced the sale of the road, whereby it was split in two at Des Moines, the southern half going to John E. Henry of New York City; the northern portion, to be known as the Des Moines & Fort Dodge Railroad, to Colonel C. H. Perry. The road was gradually pushed northwestward to Ruthven in Palo Alto

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, June 23, 1870.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, June 30, Aug. 18, 25, Oct. 13, 1870.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 29, 1870.

<sup>54</sup> Estherville *Vindicator*, Nov. 16, 1870.



County, where it joined the Milwaukee road. Today it is a part of the Minneapolis & St. Louis system, having been purchased by that road in 1915.<sup>55</sup>

Whatever the future, Fort Dodge was pleased with itself in 1870. The town had two railroads, and prospects looked bright. That the competing roads did not bring immediate prosperity, an enlarged population, and reduced freight rates soon took the edge off this satisfaction, however.

The Fort Dodge-Des Moines Valley story is only one of many occurring throughout Iowa during the late sixties. The peremptory demands of the railroads had to be met if already established towns were not to be bypassed and destroyed by "railroad towns." By 1870 the Middle West was on the verge of the agrarian revolt that brought stringent "Granger Laws" in Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois. The anger aroused by what were considered the high-handed methods of the railroads was one of the seeds of this revolt—an antirailroad sentiment that has long been misrepresented as wholly a farmer-corporation conflict.

<sup>55</sup> Accounts of the sale of the Des Moines Valley appear in the *Keokuk Gate City*, May 28, June 11, Nov. 12, 19, 26, 1873; Jan. 21, Feb. 25, 1874; and in the *Des Moines Register*, Jan. 23, 1874. See also Frank P. Donovan, Jr., *Mileposts on the Prairie: The Story of the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway* (New York, 1950), 57, 64, 69, 140, 162-3, 217.