

## Line Relocation and Modernization

During the depression of the 1930's the Rock Island deteriorated physically, its morale was low and its finances precarious. Unfavorable economic conditions together with a heritage of burdensome fixed charges brought on the road's trusteeship in 1933. Things could hardly have been worse when John Dow Farrington left his post as general manager of the Burlington's lines in Texas to become chief operating officer of the Rock Island in 1936. Farrington, together with William H. Hillis, whom he brought in from the Burlington to become his assistant, set out to rebuild and modernize the run-down railroad. Rehabilitation began on all fronts, but the coming of the streamlined *Rockets* did more to usher in a new era in the public's mind than did any other single item.

When the *Des Moines Rocket* first came to Iowa City in 1937 (carrying the present PALIMPSEST editor and his bride home from their honeymoon) there were literally thousands of people lined along the track to see the silvery new streamliner. Two years later the *Rocky Mountain Rocket* was in service on an accelerated schedule between Chicago and Denver. In 1945 the road put the *Twin Star Rocket* in operation on the



1,363-mile run from Minneapolis to Houston. Serving Des Moines on its long course through the middle of America, the *Twin Star* attracted new passengers; and even today it is consistently well filled regardless of the season.

The last of the modernized fleet of passenger trains was the *Golden State*, which the road completely streamlined and placed on a 45-hour schedule between Chicago and Los Angeles on January 4, 1948. It superseded the somewhat shabby *Golden State Limited* and clipped over four hours from the running time. Diesel streamliners first came to replace steam in passenger service. Then the road gradually dieselized its freights thereby speeding up all trains. For example, in 1946, when the new "Rocket Freight" was instituted between the Twin Cities and Texas Gulf points, via Des Moines and Kansas City, it cut 24 hours from existing schedules.

Hand in hand with speeding up trains came extensive relocation on a system-wide basis. In Iowa, both the main stem to Omaha and the southwestern route to Kansas City and New Mexico abounded in troublesome curves and uneconomical grades.

Work began initially on the southwestern route, of which some 82 miles of new line was built. This was done in seven sections, reducing the total length by eleven miles. In the particularly bad section between a point east of Paris westward to



Centerville, a new 22-mile line shortened the route by 3.87 miles and reduced the grades from 1 per cent by 0.50 per cent. Relocation of the entire line including the Ainsworth to Brighton segment was completed on August 15, 1947.

The next big relocation project was the Atlantic Cutoff, finished in 1953. When completed, the new line resembled the string of a bow; and the old line the bow itself. From Council Bluffs to Atlantic the old route went north through Shelby, Avoca and Walnut, whereas the relocated line went through Hancock, shortening the run by ten miles. The Cutoff utilized 11 miles of the Great Western from a point just beyond Council Bluffs to Peter. The original line was subsequently abandoned except for the section between Shelby and Walnut, which is operated as a branch.

In 1954 six miles of new road was constructed near Adair, eliminating considerable curvature and complementing the Atlantic Cutoff. Again, on the other side of Des Moines about 1.50 miles of new line eliminated a stretch of difficult curves and grades near Colfax. All in all, the relocation projects in Iowa and elsewhere were of such magnitude that *Fortune* magazine sent Gilbert Burck, its top railroad authority, to do a comprehensive article on the Rock Island's rehabilitation in its December, 1944 issue.

Another aspect of the rejuvenated railroad concerned pruning branches which were unremuner-



ative and a drain on the company's finances. Foremost of these was the old Cedar Rapids & Clinton Railway, once a part of the BCR&N. This branch was totally abandoned, but the Rock Island did not pull out of Clinton. Instead, it secured trackage rights over the Davenport, Rock Island & Northwestern Railway between Davenport and Clinton.

In 1948 the Rock Island emerged from trusteeship "with a wide-open throttle and signal lights all green," as William E. Hayes put it in his *Iron Road to Empire*. John Farrington headed the reorganized company.

The Rock Island is now prosperous, efficient and modern. Much of its major lines in Iowa are protected by Centralized Traffic Control and automatic blocks signals. Although the significant relocation projects had been completed, the road built a new 11-mile branch from Earlham to Winterset in 1958. This took the place of the former Winterset-Summerset line, which was scrapped the same year. The relocated branch is shorter and has fewer grades and curves than the line it supplanted.

Current president of the Rock Island is R. Ellis Johnson, who started railroading as a file clerk on the Missouri Pacific at Osawatomie, Kansas, at fifteen. Eleven years later he switched to the Rock Island and has been with it ever since. He has held nearly every job in the operating department,



which included being assistant general manager and later general manager with headquarters in Des Moines, from 1950 to 1953.

Unlike some other Iowa railroads, the Rock Island is very much in the passenger business, and the *Rockets* continue to crisscross the state. With its major line relocations and up-to-date plant no road in Iowa has done more to re-equip itself for today's requirements and tomorrow's needs. The state's first railroad is still pioneering to maintain its enviable role in hauling freight and passengers with economy and dispatch.

Today, in 1963, the Rock Island Line continues to keep abreast of modern Iowa by providing efficient freight and passenger service. For example, in addition to its regular Rocket Freight service, piggyback — the carrying of highway trailers on railroad flat cars — is growing more muscular at a steady pace. The Rock Island offers this service to shippers to and from Iowa City, Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Davenport and Council Bluffs on a daily basis.

The *Rocky Mountain Rocket* to Denver and Colorado Springs operates through Davenport, Iowa City, Grinnell, Newton, Des Moines, Atlantic and Council Bluffs. Another fine train, the *Des Moines Rocket* is an all-Iowa special and provides daily service between Chicago and Des Moines. Other passenger trains popular with Iowans, are *Corn Belt Rocket* to Omaha and the



*Twin Star Rocket* which ties Iowa to Minneapolis-St. Paul on the north and to Dallas, Fort Worth and Houston in the south.

Throughout its history, the Rock Island Lines, like so many other pioneer railroads, have seen the face of America change many times. It not only has witnessed great events in history, but has been an inseparable partner in the development of the thousands of communities it serves in Iowa and in thirteen other states along nearly 8,000 miles of railroad.

Significant technological advancements have been made by the Rock Island during its 111 years of operation. A long list of railroading "firsts" can rightfully be claimed by the company through the years. Among the more notable is the first use of microwave in its vast communications network; introduction of especially adapted electronic computers in its automated yards at Silvis, Illinois, and Armourdale, Kansas, and in its administrative functions. Says R. Ellis Johnson, president:

In 1963 we are convinced that the Rock Island is a 111-year-old youngster capable of accommodating on its own system, and through its multi-interchange arrangements with other railroads, the transportation needs of all its customers.

We are proud of our high-speed Rocket freights, piggy-back hotshots and our fleet of Rocket passenger trains. Our railroad is imbued with a progressive spirit and it is our proud boast that no finer employees can be found anywhere.