

Disaster and Its Aftermath

At the turn of the century the Rock Island was recognized as a profitable, well-run railroad. Its management was stable, its credit good. It continued to pay modest dividends all through the panic of 1893. The road had a favorable rating on the Big Board and a good reputation in Iowa and in the fourteen states it served. Unlike the Burlington, its stock was not closely held. In fact, the setting was just right for a group of speculators to get control, inflate the capitalization and reap quick, unwarranted profits. That is exactly what took place.

In 1901 a group of promoters, which *Fortune* calls "The Big Four from the Prairies," bought heavily into the road. The quartet — also known as the Reid-Moore Syndicate — was composed of Daniel G. Reid; William H. Moore; his brother, J. Hobart Moore, and W. B. Leeds. William Moore, leader of the syndicate, made a fortune in organizing the National Biscuit and Diamond Match companies. The four had been active in organizing independent steel companies and having them absorbed into United States Steel. Thus, with the necessary means, they soon had firm control of the Rock Island.

It is not necessary to go into the financial picture painted by the new operators except to state they formed a pyramid of holding companies. In the words of Stuart Daggett, in his *Railroad Reorganization*, they had "three companies, of which one was to operate the railroad, one was to hold the stock of the operating company, and one was to hold the stock of the company which held the stock of the operating company!"

Never a compact system, the Rock Island soon became a hodgepodge of newly-built, merged and controlled roads without pattern and seemingly without plan. The system leaped from 7,123 miles of line in 1903 to 14,270 miles in 1907. Into the patchwork came the Chicago & Alton, the St. Louis-San Francisco and the Chicago & Eastern Illinois. In an effort to make the sprawled-out Rock Island a transcontinental, the Moores bought into the Lehigh Valley and the Lake Erie & Western through an affiliated syndicate.

The top-heavy, over-capitalized, over-expanded road finally went into receivership in 1915. Two years later it emerged from court control with its debts scaled hardly at all. Then it struggled along for another sixteen years until it sought protection of the courts again in 1933. The Big Four from the Prairies had left the Rock Island in such a financial state as to haunt it for nearly three decades.

During the Reid-Moore administration, how-

ever, there were some extensions made which became valuable assets to the Rock Island. One was the building of a short, direct line from the Twin Cities to Kansas City. This later became a new route, cutting through mid-America all the way from Minneapolis-St. Paul to the Gulf of Mexico.

The first item of improvement was the extension of the Rock Island over its own rails and by trackage rights from Albert Lea to the Twin cities. In comparison with the Minneapolis & St. Louis route, the new line had fewer curves and easier grades, which made for faster and more economical operation. When the extension was completed in 1902, through trains between St. Louis and the Twin Cities, operated jointly by the Rock Island and the Burlington, no longer used the M&StL from the Iowa-Minnesota border to Minneapolis.

This was fine for trips to St. Louis, but what about Kansas City? To reach the latter metropolis from principal cities in Minnesota, all passengers and freight routed over the Rock Island had to make a V-shaped detour to southeastern Iowa, thence southwest to Kansas City. Such a routing was costly, inconvenient and time consuming. To eliminate the roundabout passage, a short cut through Des Moines was commenced in 1901 and completed by 1913. It was the last significant railroad extension in Iowa.

The segment north of Des Moines was built by two companies. The Des Moines, Iowa Falls &

Northern Railway constructed the 70-mile line from the capital to Iowa Falls in 1903. Another firm called the St. Paul & Des Moines Railroad completed the line from Iowa Falls to Clear Lake Junction in 1909. The remainder of the route to Manly was secured by trackage rights over the Great Western.

South of Des Moines, the track from Carlisle to Allerton was largely built by the Rock Island's own construction crews. Work was started in 1911 and finished two years afterward. All the above-mentioned lines were acquired by the St. Paul & Kansas City Short Line Railroad, incorporated in Iowa on February 18, 1911. Also included in the purchase was the pioneer Des Moines Western Railway's line from Des Moines to West Des Moines (then called Valley Junction).

Although operated as an integral part of the Rock Island, the "Short Line," as it was called, was not formally purchased by the railroad until 1922. The name was perpetuated by the *Short Line Express*, which ran between the Twin Cities and Kansas City until March of 1958.

In 1922, when the Rock Island reached its 70th birthday, it decided to commemorate the occasion by a system-wide series of celebrations. Moreover, all the ceremonies were to be held the same day — October 10th. Each one followed the same pattern: a tree was planted and a stone marker

dedicated to a loyal employee, living or dead, or one who had been killed in the line of duty. Altogether over one hundred trees and monuments were used for this purpose, of which thirty-three of each were singled out for Iowa. Never in the history of American railroading has there been such a far-flung, coordinated effort made to commemorate an anniversary.

The men so honored run the gamut from section hands to presidents, with superintendents predominating, of which there are nine in Iowa. The presidents represented are James Grant of the pioneer Chicago & Rock Island Rail Road, George Greene and Charles J. Ives of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern, or its predecessor company. Markers in Davenport, Cedar Rapids and Burlington, respectively, are inscribed to these executives. Two of the road's great engineers, Grenville M. Dodge and Peter A. Dey, are remembered by stone markers in Council Bluffs and in Iowa City. Also in Iowa City is a tree and stone for Chief Surgeon William D. Middleton, whose Iowa-born grandson of the same name has carried on the railroad tradition by writing a beautifully illustrated volume entitled *The Interurban Era*.

The trees and monuments located in Iowa are:

Burlington: Charles J. Ives, president, BCR&N

Cedar Falls: William H. Given, superintendent

Cedar Rapids: George Greene, president, BCR&M

Cedar Rapids: Thomas H. Simmons, general freight agent

Centerville: Orin F. Young, trainmaster
Council Bluffs: Grenville M. Dodge, assistant engineer
Davenport: James Grant, president, C&RI
Davenport: Abel Kimball, superintendent
Des Moines: Charles N. Gilmore, superintendent
Eldon: Charles M. Martin, conductor
Estherville: Patrick Howe, roadmaster
Fairfield: Arial B. Copley, superintendent
Indianola: C. B. McLaughlin, agent
Iowa City: Peter A. Dey, chief engineer
Iowa City: William D. Middleton, chief surgeon
Iowa Falls: E. Olin Soule, traveling passenger agent
Manly: Wendell H. Stillwell, superintendent
Melcher: Charles T. Ames, superintendent
Marengo: Cornelius T. O'Brien, locomotive engineer
Mitchellville: Charles W. Jones, general manager
Montezuma: John Holmquist, master carpenter
Muscatine: Julius M. McCoskey, locomotive engineer
Newton: James Clifton, section foreman
Nichols: Frederick P. Washburn, conductor
Oskaloosa: John Givin, superintendent
Spirit Lake: Robert Mather, vice president
Stuart: Carroll Wright, attorney
Vinton: Irving Mitchell, dairy agent
Washburn: F. H. Tisdale, locomotive engineer
Washington: Robert Shields, roadmaster
West Liberty: Everett St. John, general manager
What Cheer: George A. Merrill, superintendent
Wilton: Benjamin B. Brayton, superintendent