

Branching Out

Under Tracy's administration the Rock Island pursued a policy of conservative growth. It was in better financial health than the competing North Western and nearly on a par with the energetic but stable Burlington. Indeed, from June, 1870, to June, 1873, John Tracy also headed the North Western and dictated its policies. He likewise was a strong factor in keeping the Iowa Pool intact, thereby prorating revenue between the three roads on traffic through the Omaha gateway. For over a dozen years the Pool stabilized rates and discouraged competition in Iowa.

Expansion continued all the while Tracy held office. In southern Iowa a branch was constructed from Washington, on the Leavenworth line, due west through Sigourney and Oskaloosa to Knoxville, reaching these communities in 1872, 1875 and 1876 respectively. To serve prosperous towns in the rich farm country in the vicinity of the state capital, a branch was run from Des Moines to Indianola, passing through Carlisle. It was constructed by the Des Moines, Indianola & Missouri Railroad in 1871. By the fall of 1872 the line had been extended along the Middle River Valley from Summerset to Winterset. The 26-mile addi-

tion was under the charter of the Des Moines, Winterset & South Western Railway.

The only other branch built in Iowa during Tracy's regime was the 15-mile Newton & Monroe Railroad, linking the two towns in its name by 1877. Primarily a coal road, it was a reorganization of the Iowa, Minnesota & North Pacific Railway, chartered to build to the Minnesota boundary.

It was during Tracy's presidency that Iowa had its first train robbery. The date was July 21, 1873; the place, on a remote spot on the main line in the hilly uplands near Adair. On that day No. 2, the eastward night express was expected to carry a \$75,000 shipment of gold. Anticipating the valuable bullion, Jesse James lay hidden in a bank near the right of way. Jesse and his confederates had previously loosened a rail, and as the train labored up-grade they pulled the track out of line with a stout rope.

Upon seeing the gap in the track, Engineer John Rafferty whistled for brakes with one hand and reversed the engine with the other. But it was before the widespread use of air brakes and the train could not be stopped in time. The locomotive derailed and turned over, killing Rafferty and seriously injuring his fireman. Meanwhile, two robbers rifled the express car while others in the gang relieved passengers of their money and jewelry. After the bandits galloped away with the loot, it

was estimated that they had collected about \$3000 from the head-end cars and almost as much from the 200 frightened passengers. In the words of the popular ballad:

Jesse James all alone in the rain
Stopped an' stuck up the Eas'-boun' train;
Swayed through the coaches with horns an' a tail,
Lit out with the bullion and the registered mail.

The bounty was small because the prized gold shipment had been held over for another train. It was the Rock Island's first train holdup; and, if not especially lucrative for Jesse James, it was successful as far as the desperadoes were concerned. Although a special train of armed guards was quickly dispatched from Council Bluffs to round up the criminals, and posses soon combed the state, no trace of the bandits was found.

With the coming of Hugh Riddle to the presidency in 1877 construction of feeder lines continued at an accelerated pace. Up to the first World War branch lines were considered a source of strength on any railroad. Branches made the haul by horse and wagon shorter; and, generally speaking, the road which blanketed its territory with lateral lines got most of the local traffic. For this reason the Rock Island embarked on a policy of throwing out laterals along its main line to Council Bluffs. These were short and confined to the road's legitimate corridor across Iowa. In every case the railroad was careful not to encroach upon

the Burlington's territory in the south and the North Western's to the north.

The first "lateral" west of Des Moines was from Menlo to Guthrie Center, 15 miles. It was completed by the Guthrie & Northwestern Railroad in 1880. Next came the line intersecting the main stem at Atlantic, running north to Audubon and south to Griswold. The northern lateral, built by the Atlantic & Audubon in 1878, measured 25 miles. Its southern counterpart, the Atlantic Southern, finished its 15-mile line two years afterward. The two little roads closely followed the East Nishnabotna River.

In the same pattern another lateral extended in both directions from Avoca, following the West Nishnabotna River upstream to Harlan and downstream to Carson. The upper road was completed in 1878 under the charter of the Avoca, Harlan & Northern Railroad; and the lower in 1880 by the Avoca, Macedonia & South Western Railroad.

During this period an alternative route between Davenport and Muscatine was built along the west bank of the Mississippi River. It was shorter and better constructed than the original line via Wilton and soon commanded most of the traffic. The old road between Wilton and Muscatine was relegated to local service until abandoned in 1934.

Meanwhile, the Keokuk & Des Moines continued to be leased, a rather dilapidated property 162 miles long with wheezy locomotives operating over

light iron rails. In a day when steel rails were rapidly coming into use the "K&D" had only a score of miles so equipped. Thanks to the Rock Island, money from the lessee was forthcoming to build a 4-mile branch from Mt. Zion to the Indian-named town of Keosauqua, nestled within the horseshoe bend of the Des Moines River. Constructed by the Keosauqua & Southwestern Railroad in 1880, the stub line, like the river, abounded in curves.

It will be recalled that the Des Moines & Fort Dodge was once part of the through line from Keokuk to Fort Dodge, formerly known as the Des Moines Valley Rail Road. When the Des Moines Valley was split in two, the southern part became the "K&D," and, as we have seen, it was leased by the Rock Island. But the northern segment continued an independent and orphan-like existence. Somehow it managed to finance an extension from Tara to Ruthven, passing through Rolfe and Gilmore City. The 55-mile line also served the new towns of Plover, Mallard and Curlew, named by the road's president, Charles E. Whitehead. It appears he was an avid hunter, and the names of stations reflected his choice of game, which was plentiful in that part of Iowa.

When the Rock Island later planned to run a line to the northwest corner of Iowa, the town of Gowrie on the Des Moines & Fort Dodge looked like a favorable starting place. So the DM&FtD was leased in 1887. Hardly had the road come

under Rock Island control when a court battle began to shape up between the Board of Railroad Commissioners and the DM&FtD. The trouble arose over the abandoning of a 6-mile segment of the latter road between Tara and Fort Dodge in 1878. The railroad subsequently had running rights over the Illinois Central between those two points. But passengers complained of poor connecting service and demanded the old line be reinstated. The Commission thereupon ordered the derelict line rebuilt. The railroad appealed the decision before the Iowa Supreme Court and won.

Nor did the trials of the Rock Island in leasing the DM&FtD end here. In good faith the lessee speedily constructed the Gowrie & Northwestern Railway, extending from Gowrie to Sibley, 110 miles. The entire line was in operation by November, 1900, it being built in a little more than a year. While the Rock Island officials were being congratulated on a job well done other interests began buying into the Des Moines & Fort Dodge. What was thought to be a routine extension of the lease, when the contract expired in 1904, turned out to be a bitter struggle for control. Edwin Hawley, the New York financier who headed the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railroad, had his associates quietly buying stock in the line. By 1905 they had control, and the M&StL forthwith leased the Des Moines & Fort Dodge. A decade later it was purchased. Thus the Rock Island ended by pay-

ing substantial trackage rights from Des Moines to Gowrie on a railroad it formerly operated!

To integrate many of the separate but controlled railroads into the expanding Rock Island, a major consolidation took place on June 2, 1880. The new consolidated company was called the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railway. It took over most of the associated roads which heretofore made up the Rock Island system. In Iowa all the separate companies were absorbed with the exception of the Guthrie & North Western, the tiny Keosauqua & Southwestern, the Avoca, Harlan & Northern and the "K&D." The first two were subsequently purchased in 1890, the Avoca road in 1899 and the "K&D" not until 1924.

Up to this time the Rock Island had halted its westward building at the Missouri River. With the election of the dynamic Ransom R. Cable to the presidency in 1883, a vigorous policy of expansion beyond the "Big Muddy" took place. It soon saw the Rock Island running into Denver and Colorado Springs in the west; and to Oklahoma and Texas in the southwest.

There was one plum, nevertheless, which was yet unplucked right in Iowa. That was the profitable Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railway, in which the Rock Island already had an interest. But Cable, never satisfied with half-way measures, wanted absolute control, and got it, with Ransom Cable as chairman of the board.