

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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## Iowa's First Railroad

The Rock Island was the first railroad to reach Iowa, the first to lay track in Iowa, and the first to bridge the Mississippi River. It was the second road to cross the state, and now operates more miles of railroad than any other railroad in the Hawkeye State—2,075 miles compared with 2,053 miles for the North Western. Currently it is the only road in the state featuring passenger service both east-and-west and north-and-south.

Few, if any, American railroads had such a galaxy of engineers as had the pioneer Rock Island. It served as a training school for several young men who later became distinguished engineers and national figures. Two of these engineers, who surveyed and built the line westward from the Mississippi, came back to make their homes in Iowa.

Under the direction of Chief Engineer Henry Farnam, of the newly formed Mississippi & Missouri Rail Road, Peter A. Dey and his assistant, Grenville M. Dodge, were sent to blaze the trail



of what is now the Rock Island across Iowa. Specifically, they were to survey the most feasible route for the M&M from Davenport to the Missouri River. This was in 1853, before there was a foot of railroad in the state. Their subsequent report pleased Farnam and led to further surveys and ultimately to the completion of the line to Council Bluffs years later.

The two men made an admirable team. Peter A. Dey, born in the beautiful Finger Lakes country of central New York and educated at Geneva College, entered railroading as a surveyor for the Erie. From the Erie Railroad he went to the Erie Canal, gaining valuable engineering experience all the while. Sensing greater opportunity farther west, he joined Joseph E. Sheffield and Henry Farnam, who had teamed up to build railroads in Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois. Not content with reaching Chicago, Sheffield and Farnam set their sights farther west. And Dey went with them.

It was while constructing the Chicago & Rock Island Rail Road in the prairie country beyond Chicago that Dey met and hired young Grenville M. Dodge, a twenty-one year old New Englander who had studied engineering at Norwich University in Vermont. Fired with the "railroad fever," so prevalent at that time, Dodge had come west where Dey first encountered him as a surveyor for the Illinois Central Railroad. Dodge soon became Dey's right-hand man, his "wonderful energy"



causing Dey to remark that "if I told him to do anything he did it under any and all circumstances."

Later Dey and Dodge went their separate ways, but their paths crossed many times. When they retired after gaining distinction in their respective spheres, they both came back to live along the Rock Island: Dey in Iowa City and Dodge in Council Bluffs.

It was the Chicago & Rock Island Rail Road and affiliated interests which backed the Mississippi & Missouri Rail Road, incorporated in Iowa on February 5, 1853. The M&M was essentially the western extension of the former road, which linked the two cities in its name in 1854. First president of the Mississippi & Missouri was John A. Dix, a prominent New York politician. William B. Ogden, who later gained fame as the builder of the early North Western, was vice president. Equally outstanding was Consulting Engineer John B. Jervis, well on the way to being reckoned as one of the Nation's great engineers and railway contractors. The directors included Dix, Ogden, Farnam and Sheffield plus a newcomer, Thomas C. Durant. Dr. Durant, as he was called, hailed from the Berkshires, had studied medicine in Albany, New York, and had come west about ten years later. Brilliant, unpredictable and daring, he gave up medicine for the more adventurous role of a railroad promoter and builder.



The Mississippi & Missouri was intended to go in three directions from Davenport. One line would go west through Iowa City; another would run southwest; and a third northwest. As it turned out the Iowa City line and the southwestern extension to Muscatine were built first. There was considerable discussion as to which side of the river the road would take after leaving Rock Island. Muscatine, Washington and Oskaloosa wanted the road to run on the east side to a point opposite Muscatine, where it would cross to Iowa. Iowa City and Davenport wanted the road to go directly west through their communities. The latter faction won, and Davenport became the eastern terminus.

Ground was broken in Davenport on September 1, 1853, with an elaborate ceremony witnessed by two thousand. The first shovelful was dug by Antoine Le Claire, proprietor of the popular Le Claire House, which Emerson visited in 1856. Le Claire, a 300-pound Indian and French-Canadian, at first opposed the railroad but later relented and sold part of his property for the right of way. He also purchased \$25,000 in stock in the new road, and his residence became the first passenger station. Other heavy stockholders included the town of Davenport, which subscribed to the extent of \$75,000; Scott County with \$50,000; and individuals totaling \$100,000.

On July 19, 1855, the first locomotive in Iowa



arrived at Davenport, being ferried across the Mississippi. It was an American-type (4-4-0) named *Antoine Le Claire*, with bronze statues of its corpulent namesake on two sides of the sand dome. By the end of August excursionists were riding to Walcott, a distance of twelve miles.

Construction, however, slowed down because of the retirement of Joseph Sheffield from his partnership with Henry Farnam in railroad contracting. Farnam subsequently formed a new partnership with Thomas Durant, and building went on. But the alliance was not a happy one, for Durant proved to be harder to work with than Sheffield. Construction to Iowa City was under the immediate supervision of John E. Henry.

Tracklaying not only continued on the Iowa City road but also on the Muscatine route, which left the main line at Wilton Junction. The branch to Muscatine was completed first, with a fitting ceremony in that community on November 20, 1855. The weather and the mud militated against much of a celebration, yet nearly the entire population braved the rain to witness the event.

Far more dramatic, nevertheless, was the hectic construction westward to qualify for a \$50,000 subscription from Iowa City, provided the first train reached there by January 1, 1856. Christmas day saw the rails still about two-and-a-half miles from Iowa City. As the temperature dropped, machinery froze and numbed hands and feet



greatly retarded the work. It looked for a time as if the deadline would not be met. But the citizens of Iowa City turned out to help the tracklayers under the personal supervision of Henry Farnam.

Within two hundred yards of the station the engine "froze up" to harass construction. Not to be deterred, willing hands laid temporary rails to close the gap. Others, armed with pinch bars, coaxed the "dead" locomotive, inch by inch, to the final goal. Amid cheers from railroaders, townsmen and visitors, "end of track" was reached as church bells pealed the coming of the new year. Upon completion, Charles Stickles, the locomotive engineer, dropped unconscious beside his engine and had to be carried to the depot.

On January 3, the day of the big celebration, the temperature dropped to eighteen degrees below zero. In spite of the frigid weather, a rousing welcome greeted the special train from Davenport. Crowds followed the train as it gingerly edged into Iowa City over makeshift track. A cannon boomed. After the engine stopped, a procession of warmly-clad celebrants marched to the "Old Capitol" accompanied by three bands.

Little did the crowd know that the festivities marked the end of steady construction for many years. The panic of 1857 along with management difficulties resulted in sporadic progress determined by conditions to meet Federal and State land grant bills.