

The Union Pacific in Iowa

A tall, gangling visitor was introduced to Grenville M. Dodge at the Pacific House in Council Bluffs in the summer of 1859. Dodge, who resided in that growing river town, had surveyed the route of a projected railroad across Iowa and on into the Platte Valley. The caller showed great interest in the young surveyor's knowledge of the country and his enthusiasm for a transcontinental line passing through Council Bluffs. When the two had finished talking, Dodge declared, in an expression of the period, "He shelled my woods."

The visitor had very adroitly drawn out nearly all Dodge knew about a route to the Pacific. Nine months afterward, the inquisitive visitor was nominated president of the United States. His name was Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln never forgot his meeting with Dodge on the veranda of the Pacific House. In later years, before President Lincoln specifically named Council Bluffs as the eastern terminus of the "Pacific Railroad," he again conferred with Dodge. It is very likely that Dodge's counsel and knowledge greatly influenced Lincoln's decision. Indeed, Dodge had the measure of zeal necessary to promote the Union Pacific that Theodore Judah had for the Central Pacific.

On July 1, 1862, President Lincoln signed the Pacific Railroad Act under which the Union Pacific was chartered. Unfortunately, it did not clearly spell out the eastern terminus of the line other than it was to be built westward from the Missouri River. Aware of this shortcoming, Lincoln called in Dodge, who was now a brigadier general in the Federal Army, to discuss the matter. Later an executive order of November 17, 1863, was issued establishing the terminus at "the western boundary of the State of Iowa, east of and opposite to the east line of section 10, in township 15 north, of range 13, east of the sixth principal meridian, in the Territory of Nebraska." A subsequent order in 1864 spelled this out clearly.

Ground was first broken for the Union Pacific on the west side of the Missouri River near Omaha on December 2, 1863. Since Council Bluffs was without a railroad connection from the East until the arrival of the North Western on January 22, 1867, construction material came up the river from St. Joseph by boat. The first locomotives came by rail to St. Joseph, thence upstream to Omaha. As railroads built westward across Iowa some supplies were carted from the advancing railheads to Council Bluffs and ferried across the river to Omaha.

During this early period, the Union Pacific had a fleet of steamboats known as the "Railroad Packet Line." Among them were the *Metamora*,

Colorado, and *Denver*, plus scows and ferries operating between Council Bluffs and Omaha. The expedient of constructing a temporary trestle across the Missouri was resorted to during the winter of 1867-1868. But as soon as navigation opened up in the spring the bridge was dismantled.

Iowa's role in the Union Pacific would not be complete without further reference to Grenville M. Dodge, Council Bluffs's most distinguished resident. After a valiant Civil War career, General Dodge was appointed chief engineer in 1866. He succeeded his friend, former employer, and fellow Iowan Peter A. Dey, who resigned because of differences in policies. During Dodge's leadership, the Union Pacific was pushed to completion. In one year under his command 568 miles of line were located, built, and made ready for operation.

Following the junction of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific at Promontory Point, Utah, on May 10, 1869, Dodge left the Union Pacific and subsequently became chief engineer of the Texas & Pacific. Later he was associated with the Gould roads in the Southwest and assisted in the building and consolidation of nearly 9,000 miles of railroad. All told, he is said to have surveyed 60,000 miles of right-of-way and is regarded as one of the Nation's greatest railroad builders.

Dodge remained loyal to the Union Pacific the rest of his life. As a director during many of the years between 1870 and 1897, he continued to

take an active interest in the road. Born on a farm in Massachusetts in 1831, the renowned railroad builder, civil engineer, army officer, and statesman made his home in Council Bluffs during the mid-1850's. From that time until his death in 1916, the eastern terminus of the Union Pacific was "home." It is fitting that his three-story brick home with a mansard roof and large French windows is preserved as a local shrine. In 1964 the site received greater recognition when it was made a Registered National Historic Landmark, the second to be so favored in Iowa.

Coming back to the early development of the Union Pacific, it was not until 1872 or two years after Dodge resigned as chief engineer, that the first permanent railroad bridge spanned the Missouri River. The original single track structure was begun in 1869 under the direction of Theophilus E. Sickels. It was 2,750 feet long and consisted of 11 spans of 250 feet each. The approach on the east was by solid embankment and on the west by a cottonwood trestle, which was shortly replaced by a fill. The substructure consisted of 11 iron piers and one stone pier. Each pier was made of two cylinders braced together by cast iron struts and diagonal ties. When a storm blew down the two easterly spans in 1877 they were replaced by a timber trestle.

As tonnage increased and as newer lines built across Iowa to funnel more freight and passengers

to the Union Pacific, the bridge soon became inadequate and congested. A double track structure was the only solution to the problem. Work began on reconstructing the pioneer span in the summer of 1885 and it was opened as a two-track thoroughfare on October 1, 1887. The rebuilt bridge had five piers founded on pneumatic caissons. They were of limestone and granite. The roadbed rested on four through spans, and three deck-truss spans at each end. The location remained the same.

A novel addition on each side of the structure was cantilever arms which supported roadways for highway vehicles. A toll was charged for wagons and carriages crossing the bridge.

Perhaps the most interesting features to passengers on transcontinental trains were the symbolic figures at each end of the superstructure. At the east end, a colossal bronze buffalo head representing the wilderness of the Great Plains was placed high above the tracks. On the west, there was a lofty bronze bas-relief, showing a plow, anchor, and steam hammer, which stood for the agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing of the East.

The third and final rebuilding of the strategic bridge took place in 1916. It was found that the superstructure of the 1887 bridge was not strong enough for the demands of heavier trains, although the substructure remained in almost perfect condition. The piers were accordingly left intact, but

all the spans were removed. In the center part of the bridge, four new pin-connected Pratt truss spans were placed on the five sturdy masonry piers. On the east approach, an assortment of spans, including three deck-girders, one tower and one riveted Pratt truss, characterized the rebuilt structure. The west approach was rebuilt with one deck-girder, a tower, and two Pratt truss spans.

By an ingenious system of shifting the old spans northward and easing the new structure into its place on permanent piers, traffic was held up for only 10 hours. Indeed, the actual movement of the individual spans required hardly longer than 15 minutes. The bridge was closed shortly after 11 a.m. on December 23, and by 9:40 p.m. the first trains whistled over the rebuilt structure.

The spanning of the Missouri River by the Union Pacific has been emphasized because it was the first railroad to bridge that waterway in Iowa. With the exception of the Illinois Central, which crossed the Missouri in 1894, there is to this day no other railroad bridging the "Big Muddy" between Council Bluffs and Omaha.

Until the pioneer bridge was built, passengers were obliged to ride a shuttle train from connecting lines to the river bank, where they alighted to go by ferry to Omaha. This double transfer was necessary because the three railroads which entered Council Bluffs from the East terminated several blocks from the bank of the Missouri.

After the Union Pacific spanned the river, it ran "dummy trains" from Council Bluffs directly to Omaha. For a time these "bridge trains" consisted of flat cars covered with awnings. The railroad also bought a controlling interest in horse car lines serving the two cities and had them connect with the "dummies." By 1887 the Union Pacific had hourly "bridge service" from Ninth and Broadway in Council Bluffs to South Omaha, with several stops in Omaha.

The problem of a permanent depot in Council Bluffs was not resolved until the road's eastern terminus was definitely established. The railroad and the City of Omaha went to court in endeavoring to make the Nebraska metropolis the terminal. But a Supreme Court ruling, in 1875, confirmed Lincoln's decision that Council Bluffs was to be the legal terminus.

Thereafter, the Union Pacific outdid itself in making its eastern gateway a terminal befitting the stature and importance of the Nation's first transcontinental route. It erected a commodious two-story brick building with walls 24 inches thick. An unusual feature was a truncated cupola in the center of the structure.

Inside, passengers were awed by a 20-foot high ceiling and a spacious corridor, which had at its threshold the inscription "Where the West Begins." A grand ballroom or banquet room, two large parlors, and 36 palatial sleeping rooms fur-

nished in attractive black walnut suites helped to make it a showpiece and the pride of everyone in Council Bluffs.

In the "first class" dining room occupying the north wing, sumptuous meals were served for 75¢. Special Sunday dinners proved very popular with townfolk and travelers alike. There was also a barroom, serving mostly "mixed" drinks, and a barber shop. The usual complement of waiting rooms and baggage rooms along with a newsstand and lunch counter were provided. Five express companies were also housed in the building, which was opened in 1879.

For "foreigners" of limited means, there was the "Emigrant House" — a 50-room frame building west of the terminal. A bakery, laundry, land office, and cold storage facility were housed in the wooden structure. Although the accommodations were Spartan in contrast with the luxurious quarters in the main building, they provided low-cost housing for thousands of immigrants who poured into the West.

The new terminal fostered business expansion and home-building in the vicinity of the "transfer." The giant station, however, soon began to lose much of its importance as connecting lines acquired running rights to Omaha over the Union Pacific's bridge.

Trackage-wise the Union Pacific hardly enters Iowa at all. The original single track main line ran

from what is now Union Avenue and South 12th Street, Council Bluffs, to the western border of the state, a distance of about three miles. The current double track "high iron" extends from the eastern end of the Missouri River bridge to Union Station Transfer — a distance of 2.08 miles. But it is only by taking cognizance of *track-miles* that the role of the company is apparent. Industry spurs and yard tracks tally an additional 82.14 miles.

The bulk of the trackage is in the Union Pacific's yard, where freight trains arrive from and depart for the West Coast and intermediate points. Thus, Council Bluffs is still a busy and vital terminal at the eastern end of the giant system. The terminal area embraces about 725 acres. Included in the facilities are the yardmaster's and master mechanic's offices, diesel house where locomotive running repairs are made, and a coach yard.

As a passenger terminal, however, Council Bluffs has largely been superseded by Omaha. None of the Union Pacific's crack "Cities" streamliners stop on the east bank of the Missouri River, and only a few passenger trains of other roads use this once-busy station. The historic structure was partly torn down in 1938 to make way for a mail terminal built that year. Only the north wing of the old building remains, and this has been revamped for today's modest traffic. In 1951 the mail terminal was remodeled and a conveyor system installed to expedite operation. From 50 to 55

cars of mail are worked here daily for western points and about 15 for eastern destinations. It is said that at one time Council Bluffs was the third largest terminal railway post office in America based on the volume of mail handled.

Currently all railroads entering Council Bluffs, with the exception of the Illinois Central, use the Union Pacific for freight or passenger service, or both, in reaching Omaha. Day and night luxurious streamliners, local passenger trains, long freights, and incessant switching movements keep the bridge a-throb with activity. True, the Union Pacific's main line extends only a couple of miles into Iowa, but it is the Nation's busiest and most strategic railroad gateway to half a continent.