

## The "Boston Group" and the B&M

Western ingenuity and optimism could plan railroads in the mid-nineteenth century, but it took eastern capital to build them. In Boston, in New York, in Detroit, there were men with money, men eager to build railroads. John Murray Forbes in Boston, Erastus Corning in New York, James F. Joy and John R. Brooks in Detroit were the men who would be important to the future of the B&M.

While the forty-six Iowans were meeting in Burlington, these easterners were pushing their Michigan Central Railroad toward Chicago. Even before they reached that rising city on Lake Michigan — on May 21, 1852 — they had begun to investigate the Illinois railroad picture. As in Iowa, so in Illinois, local groups were planning railroads. The Michigan Central people, who came to be known as the "Boston Group" because of the leadership of John Murray Forbes, a thirty-nine-year-old financier, soon gathered together these scattered Illinois roads into the nucleus of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy. But railroad builders of the 1850's knew no horizons; they constantly looked beyond the "end of track" for new projects. The Boston Group sought to tap the the wheat and corn lands of the Midwest. When

less than a month after the meeting in Burlington, Erastus Corning received a letter telling him of this Iowa project, he was interested.

Richard P. Morgan, chief engineer of the Peoria and Oquawka Railroad in Illinois — a road, incidentally, of which James W. Grimes was a director — was in Burlington in early 1852. On February 21 Morgan wrote to Erastus Corning, sending him a copy of the land grant memorial to Congress which the B&M incorporators had prepared, and suggesting that possibly the Michigan and New York financiers would like to add their endorsement. Morgan was well aware of the strategy of the Boston Group, a strategy which included railroad expansion westward in rivalry with the Michigan Southern and Rock Island roads.

Meanwhile, Grimes had gone to Washington on his mission. Back in Burlington, a letter came "from Detroit" for Charles Mason, who was out of town. Mrs. Mason wrote her husband on March 7: "You have a letter come from Detroit on Rail Road business, and I gave it to Coolbaugh." Possibly this might have been a letter from James F. Joy, already a magic name in railroading. Sometime during that spring of 1852 a most important meeting — for the future of the CB&Q and the B&M — took place in Boston, whether by accident or design is not known. In the lobby of the American House three men met:

James W. Grimes, director of the Peoria and Oquawka; Elisha Wadsworth, president of the Aurora Branch; and Chauncey S. Colton, of the newly incorporated Central Military Tract. These three decided that if their three Illinois roads combined and built to the Mississippi at Burlington they would form an important western outlet for the Michigan Central. The Michigan Central people in New York and Detroit agreed.

The incorporators of the B&M were well aware of the importance of these events to their railroad. Interest now began to turn from the proposals for an Indiana-to-Iowa road to a Chicago-to-Burlington road, since it was obvious that any road reaching Burlington would want to build farther west. During the late spring and summer of 1852 railroad meetings were held all along the projected line from Burlington to Ottumwa. The latter city had already been host to a meeting in favor of the Indiana-to-Iowa road in January; by February opinions had changed, and a new meeting gave its entire support to the Burlington and Missouri River project as the one more likely to succeed. In December Grimes managed to push a resolution to Congress through the Iowa General Assembly, asking for land for four east-west lines, over the opposition of a few die-hards who favored north-south lines along the Mississippi. "I have succeeded in the principal object for which I came here, viz., upon the subject of railroads," Grimes

wrote his wife on December 18. "We had a fierce struggle for four days, but won . . . triumphantly."

Sometime early in 1853 word came from Joy and Brooks in Detroit that the B&M might expect financial aid from the Michigan Central interests, provided the directors of the Iowa road could show evidence of progress. In reply, the directors of the B&M resolved to "proceed with all energy, means, and resources in our power" and to open subscription books "in all the counties along the line of road." Albert Hebard was immediately sent on a preliminary exploring and surveying expedition along this "line of road" from Ottumwa to Council Bluffs. Today the main line of the Burlington follows almost exactly this original and hasty survey, except for a slight deviation at Vilisca.

The eastern Iowa counties, meanwhile, were voting bonds for aid to the railroad, and a Michigan Central civil engineer, Henry Thielsen, had been sent by Forbes to survey the route from Burlington to Ottumwa. In June Forbes's brother, R. B. Forbes, made an inspection trip from Burlington to Mount Pleasant, and shortly thereafter Coolbaugh and Tallant of the B&M met with Joy and Brooks in Galesburg. From this time on the B&M began rapidly to lose its local character; on July 2 the directors elected John W. Brooks to the presidency, and the B&M moved closer to the CB&Q interests.