

Expansion Under Gould

A glance at the map shows the Wabash's line between Council Bluffs and Chicago is long and circuitous, dipping down as it does into northern Missouri. The Burlington, North Western, and Rock Island railroads, on the contrary, had more direct lines between these points. Gould was as aware of this drawback to his company as he was that the Milwaukee was also pushing its rails across Iowa to Council Bluffs, which it completed in 1882.

Gould knew it would not be feasible to build an additional line all the way across Iowa in the face of well-entrenched competition. There was another alternative, however, which he often had recourse to elsewhere. That was to buy a secondary railroad and extend it to suit his purpose. Gould was an old hand in stringing railroads together by getting control and then merging, leasing, and building until he came up with a new through line. As often as not the "through" road would be hastily built and poorly maintained, but it served to harass its competitors and extend the "Wizard of Wall Street's" railroad dominion.

Gould had his eye on the 142-mile Missouri, Iowa & Nebraska Railway, which extended from

Keokuk through the northeastern corner of Missouri to the Iowa communities of Centerville, Corydon, Humeston, and Van Wert. From Van Wert to Shenandoah, on the Wabash's line to Council Bluffs, it was only ninety-five miles. Thus, by extending the short line a little less than a hundred miles westward, the Wabash would have a shorter route from Council Bluffs to Chicago and other eastern points.

It should be noted that the Wabash also served Keokuk. It entered that river town, in 1871, by a bridge across the Mississippi River, on which it had trackage rights. From Keokuk a branch extended down to the main line of the Wabash at Bluffs, Illinois, seventy-five miles to the southeast.

Meanwhile, the Burlington became alarmed over Gould's designs. It was generally understood that southern Iowa was strictly Burlington preserves. But there was no stopping the obstreperous Gould. The Burlington tried to get control of the Missouri, Iowa & Nebraska first; but was outgeneralled by the quick-thinking, fast-acting Wabash president. Once having gained controlling interest in this shortline, Gould had it leased to the Wabash. Then he set out to close the gap by extending the Missouri, Iowa & Nebraska westward to Shenandoah.

Here he was checkmated by Charles Perkins of the Burlington, who threatened reprisal by building into Wabash territory elsewhere. Gould then

compromised by granting the Burlington a half-interest in the extension. The connecting line, known as the Humeston & Shenandoah Railroad, was thereby completed as a joint enterprise in 1882. It reduced the Wabash's mileage from Council Bluffs to Chicago by nearly 100 miles.

Another sidelight on these developments was that General Francis M. Drake, who headed the Missouri, Iowa & Nebraska, was also president of the little road linking Centerville with Albia. Known as the Centerville, Moravia & Albia Railroad, it was leased to the Missouri, Iowa & Nebraska and operated in conjunction with the latter company. In 1880, however, the Wabash leased the Moravia line. In so doing it gave the Wabash a through route from Des Moines to St. Louis over affiliated roads, as we have previously seen.

During this period Gould sought to strengthen his hold in south-central Iowa by leasing the narrow gauge line running from Waukee to Panora, a distance of twenty-eight miles. Jefferson S. Polk, who was active in extending the Wabash to Des Moines, headed the shortline. The 3-foot gauge carrier was leased to the Wabash in 1881. At that time it was known as the Des Moines North Western.

To bring the narrow gauge into Des Moines, a new company was formed in 1881 and partly financed by Gould interests. Under the impressive title of the St. Louis, Des Moines & Northern, it

built from Des Moines to Waukee, with a branch from Clive to Boone. The 42-mile road was completed in 1882. For many years the great railroad builder and Civil War general, Grenville M. Dodge, headed the company. Dodge was also active in extending the Gould lines in the southwestern part of the country.

The new management planned to run the narrow gauge up into the Storm Lake region, and considerable grading was done in that area. But, after extending the rails from Panora to Fonda, the Wabash went into receivership with a resounding crash in 1884. Thereafter, Gould's empire began to crumble.

The two narrow gauge lines reverted to their owners and, after a round of bankruptcy, they were merged into one company and widened to standard gauge. In 1894 the Milwaukee Road gained controlling interest and, five years afterward, purchased the shortline. Today the ex-narrow gauge lines perform the important function of bringing the Milwaukee into Des Moines over two separate routes.

Jay Gould's "short cut across Iowa" never lived up to its expectation, and even under Wabash management retained the status of a branch line. After the Wabash bankruptcy the Missouri, Iowa & Nebraska was reorganized and run independently as the Keokuk & Western Railroad. Later it was taken over by the Burlington and run as a

secondary line. In recent years it has undergone piecemeal dismemberment until nothing remains west of Centerville except for a 13-mile stretch between Corydon and Humeston and a shorter stub connecting Clearfield and Merle.

As for the Albia and Centerville road, it eked out a precarious existence when cast adrift by the Wabash. General Drake, who later became Governor of Iowa, continued to head the shortline for many years. After his death it was electrified and operated as an interurban electric railroad. The line north of Moravia was later abandoned, but the rest of the property operates today for freight service only as the Southern Iowa Railway.

With the shrinkage of mileage in Iowa occasioned by receivership, the Wabash Railroad's Des Moines-Albia line no longer connected with the rest of the system through affiliated roads. Fortunately, the Rock Island had a connection between the Des Moines and the Ottumwa branches of the Wabash. Arrangements were made for running rights over the Rock Island from Harvey, on the Des Moines line, to Ottumwa via Givin, a distance of thirty-seven miles. While a round-about routing, it served to keep the Wabash system in lower Iowa united. For many years afterward, however, the track between Harvey and Albia remained unused because of light traffic and competition from a parallel and better equipped line of the Burlington.

Detouring Des Moines-St. Louis trains via Ottumwa, nevertheless, turned out to be slow, cumbersome, and in many ways unsatisfactory. The solution was, of course, to build a short, direct route between Albia and Moulton. This was finally done by incorporating the Moulton, Albia & Des Moines Railroad, in 1899, to construct the desired link. The 28-mile road was completed that year and promptly sold to the Wabash. The new line closely followed the abandoned right of way of the Burlington from Albia to Moravia; and from Hilton to Moravia it actually used the old roadbed.

The region between Albia and Centerville is awash with memories of mines and miners, for coal hauling was once a major source of revenue. Extensive mine branches and spurs formerly dotted the area when mining was at its peak. The Wabash's once-flourishing coal trackage south and west of Tracy was locally known as the "Pumpkin Vine." While much of the mining is no longer profitable, the Tracy yard still has enough trackage to handle 110 cars.

Perhaps there was no comparable area in Iowa that had such a welter of partly-built railroads paralleling each other. The region abounds in derelict branches, abandoned mine spurs, and defunct electric railways.