

THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XLV

ISSUED IN OCTOBER 1964

No. 10

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Building Up From Missouri

The Wabash Railroad is famous in song and story. In his book, *The Hobo's Hornbook*, George Milburn includes a colorful ballad entitled "The Wabash Cannonball."

From the waves of the Atlantic to the wild Pacific shore;
From the coast of California to ice-bound Labrador,
There's a train of doozy layout that's well-known to us all—
It's the "boes" accommodation, called the Wabash Cannonball.

Great cities of importance we reach upon our way,
Chicago and St. Louis, Rock Island — so they say —
Then Springfield and Decatur, Peoria — above all —
We reach them by no other but the Wabash Cannonball.

Now listen to her rumble, now listen to her roar,
As she echoes down the valley and tears along the shore.
Now hear the engine's whistle and her mighty hobo's call
As we ride the rods and brakebeams on the Wabash Cannonball.

The legendary "Wabash Cannonball" of hobo fame stood for a mythical train which went far beyond the track of the railroad it made famous. As

a folksong the "Cannonball" had another long run in juke boxes throughout America. Either way, it is indicative of the sprawled-out Wabash system, which is the only major United States railroad with its mileage almost equally divided between the Eastern and Western Districts.

Operating from Buffalo to Omaha and Kansas City, the Wabash fell into the anomalous category of being both an "Eastern" and "Western" carrier, although technically it was grouped in the Eastern District. Furthermore, in the days of Jay Gould, the Wabash became the cornerstone of a railroad empire which very nearly reached from coast to coast.

Currently the Wabash has 209 miles of line in Iowa and serves such cities as Council Bluffs, Des Moines, Ottumwa, and Keokuk. During the zenith of Jay Gould's administration it operated about 565 miles of line in the state. Its history in Iowa and elsewhere is one of dramatic growth but followed by a series of receiverships and reorganizations. From a chaotic past, however, it has emerged to become a stable and prosperous railroad.

The beginning of the Wabash in Iowa goes back to the old North Missouri Railroad, which was building northward and westward from St. Louis. In the late 1860's, the North Missouri extended to the Iowa state line at Coatesville, Missouri. It was anxious to build to Ottumwa and

Cedar Rapids to connect with other rapidly building railroads in those communities. Ultimately the North Missouri hoped to be a part of a new through line linking St. Louis with the upper Midwest.

Plans to extend into Iowa were broached at a preliminary meeting held in Cedar Rapids on September 27, 1865, at which A. W. Fagan, of St. Louis, presided. Delegates from Iowa and Missouri formed the St. Louis & Cedar Rapids Railway to build from the terminus of the North Missouri at Coatesville to Cedar Rapids. J. P. Farley, Dubuque County, and George Gillespie, Wapello County, were the prime movers in launching the new road.

On October 23, 1865, the company was duly incorporated with H. G. Angle, of Cedar Rapids, president; C. C. Warden, of Ottumwa, vice president; and E. L. Burton, also of Ottumwa, secretary. Very little progress was made, however, until H. H. Trimble, of Bloomfield, succeeded to the presidency in the fall of 1868. By December of that year, the road built into Appanoose County and established the town of Moulton. Two years later the tracks reached Ottumwa amidst wild rejoicing.

This called for an elaborate banquet at Taylor & Blake's Hall on July 26, 1870. After the festivities a special train took the celebrants over the newly constructed route to St. Louis. Contempo-

rary accounts suggest the trip was a merry one with abundant refreshments for all.

The "Iowa extension" was operated under lease by the North Missouri; and, like the lessor, it was soon in financial straits. In 1871, Morris K. Jesup became trustee, and four years later it was reorganized as the St. Louis, Ottumwa & Cedar Rapids Railway. Meanwhile, the North Missouri had gone under the hammer to emerge as the St. Louis, Kansas City & Northern Railway, which continued to lease the Iowa road.

In spite of the "Cedar Rapids" in its name, the 43-mile road from the Missouri border to Ottumwa apparently gave up all hope of reaching the former city. Des Moines now became the objective of the St. Louis management. Then the notorious New York financier, Jay Gould, got control of the St. Louis, Kansas City & Northern, consolidated it with his other railroad holdings, and changed its name to the more embracing Wabash, St. Louis & Pacific Railway. Thereupon railway management in America, to say nothing of the public, was to witness some swift, unexpected, and far-reaching changes.

Gould wanted Des Moines in his orbit. He enlisted the support of influential people in Iowa's capital city to achieve this end. Prominent citizens, railroad builders, and business men of Des Moines all joined the "Wabash syndicate" to expedite construction. They incorporated the Des Moines

& St. Louis Railroad, January 27, 1881, which was to be built from the capital to Albia, a distance of 68 miles. On November 6, 1882, the first passenger train steamed into Des Moines from St. Louis.

Ostensibly, the Des Moines & St. Louis was a local road. James S. Clarkson, who had been editor of the *Iowa State Register* and postmaster of the city, headed the enterprise. John S. Runnells, also of Des Moines, served as vice president. Secretary of the road was Frederick M. Hubbell, who was active in promoting narrow-gauge lines radiating from the city. Probably the best known of all was Jefferson S. Polk, treasurer of the company. He was a leading figure in building a 3-foot gauge line to Adel and in later years fostered the construction of interurban electric lines as well as local trolley routes in Des Moines. But behind these men was the wily brain of Gould. From the time of its completion, the Des Moines line was operated under lease by the Wabash.

The Wabash now had an outlet to Des Moines over its own rails and in conjunction with affiliated roads. It was at best a patchwork of local lines haphazardly linked together. From Des Moines to Albia trains operated over the Des Moines & St. Louis, thence on Francis Drake's Centerville, Moravia & Albia Railway to Centerville; and from the latter point over the Missouri, Iowa & Nebraska Railway to Wabash rails at Glenwood Junction, Missouri, a few miles south of the Iowa-Missouri

state line. The remainder of the way to St. Louis was, of course, over the Wabash.

In May, 1883, Jay Gould with a party of Wabash executives visited Des Moines. One can visualize the shy, reticent financier coldly inspecting the railroad facilities. Not given to comment, his mind was always active as to ways and means of building up his railroad empire. Whatever may be thought of his business ethics, it was he who did much to bring the Wabash to Des Moines. He had plans for extensive expansion in Iowa, one of which was in southwestern Iowa, where the Wabash had built into Council Bluffs.