

The Slim Princess

In 1936, the last narrow gauge railroad in Iowa ceased operation. This was the Milwaukee's 35-mile Bellevue and Cascade Branch. Of the dozen slim gauge lines in the state, the Cascade road lived to be the oldest and the best known. The "narrow-gauge fever" which spread across the country in the 1870's led to the construction of about 565 miles of 3-foot gauge in Iowa. But in nearly every case, these 3-footers were purchased by large railroads, widened, and continued operating. Several branches of the Burlington, one of the North Western, and the now-abandoned Lehigh spur of the Fort Dodge, Des Moines & Southern were originally three feet wide.

We have seen how the Milwaukee's Waukon Junction-Waukon, Beulah-Elkader, Clive-Boone branches, and the Des Moines-Fonda segment of the Spirit Lake line were built to narrow gauge and later widened. This left the Cascade Branch not only the sole narrow gauge in the Hawkeye State, but the last on the entire Milwaukee system. Because of its historic and sentimental importance, we will dwell on it at some length.

The little road came into existence because the people of Cascade feared their inland town would

be more or less doomed if it did not have a railroad connection to the outside world. One by one plans for railroads going through the community failed to materialize. If its citizens were to be on a railroad it was evident they would have to build one themselves. Finally, on October 13, 1876, Dr. W. H. Francis of Cascade wrote to Captain M. R. Brown of Bellevue concerning the feasibility of constructing a narrow gauge road from Bellevue to Cascade. The idea met a favorable response in Bellevue. So, with high courage they incorporated the Chicago, Bellevue, Cascade & Western Railway on January 30, 1878. Ground was broken in Cascade on September 19, and the route was partly graded to Washington Mills. Little, however, was done beyond that point to reach the eastern terminus at Bellevue, on the "River Road." Early in 1879, J. W. Tripp resigned from the presidency, and his place was taken by James Hill, who was formerly vice president.

The road had exhausted its finances when George Runkel, acting on behalf of the Joy interests, came along to refinance the line and complete it. By the end of 1879, he had the entire railroad in operation, and the following year it was taken over by the Chicago, Clinton, Dubuque & Minnesota Rail Road. A few months later, the Milwaukee purchased the latter company, which included the "Cascade" narrow gauge.

Probably because of the prevailing interest in

narrow gauge railroads and on account of the rugged topography of Jackson and Dubuque counties through which the road ran, a 3-foot width was selected. At any rate, the line abounded in steep grades and sharp curves. About six miles west of Bellevue there was a 5-mile grade, much of which was at 2.8 per cent. Once the trains reached the summit, they careened for a little over a mile down hill into La Motte. Other roller coaster grades appeared east of Zwingle, near Washington Mills, and midway between Fillmore and Cascade. In fact, there was only one section nearly level, this being the 4-mile stretch east of Fillmore.

On account of the long, steep grades, trains frequently had to "double" the hills. In this operation a train is divided on a siding at the bottom of a hill so the engineer can take one part up at a time. After the "head end" is safely up-grade and set-out, the engineer returns for the remainder of his train. Upon surmounting the hill again, the two parts are coupled together, and the whole train highballs down the line.

The Bellevue & Cascade Railroad had an interesting and characteristic assortment of motive power. It began business with two trim, straight-stacked 4-4-0's, outshopped by Pittsburgh Locomotive Works. Later, as trains became heavier, a secondhand Brooks Mogul, or 2-6-0 type, was purchased. A still more powerful Consolidation

was acquired, which had seen service on the storied South Park line in Colorado. Two more secondhand Moguls, both constructed by Baldwin, were later put on the roster.

At first the line operated regular passenger service; but as riders decreased with the coming of the automobile, mixed trains prevailed. In February, 1907, one of the latter came rollicking downgrade across the curved trestle near Washington Mills and derailed. Several freight cars, along with the passenger coach, fell about forty feet, killing two riders and a crewman. This was the only fatal accident to passengers in the history of the road.

In the early period, cattle proved to be a lucrative source of revenue, and the branch had thirty-eight stock cars to haul this type of traffic. Since all freight had to be transshipped at Bellevue, due to the break in gauge, livestock and other commodities were delayed in transit. Because of this drawback and the fact that the narrow gauge rolling stock was limited in number and in carrying capacity, many and varied were the complaints of service and equipment.

Finally, shippers sought to have the Board of Railroad Commissioners compel the Milwaukee to widen the track to the standard 4 feet 8½ inch gauge. The Commission had power to broaden the gauge of any railroad if it appeared to be "reasonable and just."

When hearings were held in 1915, the Milwaukee took the stand that it would not be feasible to build a standard gauge railroad on the slim gauge right-of-way. Furthermore, to relocate the branch where necessary, and to reduce the grade to a maximum of 1.5 per cent would cost about \$2 million. In view of the losses sustained in operating the line, the Milwaukee contended it could not afford to widen, rebuild, or relocate the branch.

Speaking in behalf of shippers I. W. Troxel, a civil engineer, argued that the cost of relocation would be slightly under a million dollars. To broaden the gauge on the present alignment, he put the figure at \$451,115, which was about \$100,000 less than the railroad's estimate for the same project.

At the hearing, travelers and shippers had the opportunity to voice their complaints, which ranged all the way from the "*fear of accident*" and the allegation that narrow gauge detracted from the value of land, to such tangible items as crippling of hogs and inadequate bedding of livestock in the transfer at Bellevue.

After pondering over the matter, the Commission ruled out more than half of the complaints on the ground that they were not peculiar to narrow gauge operation but were common to branch service as a whole. Moreover, it reminded the complainants that the Act "does not contemplate that the location or route of the road shall be changed;

authority is given the Commission to make orders only with reference to the gauge, and it cannot order a change of route or relocation of any part of a road."

The Commission also had quite a time in trying to determine the amount of loss sustained by the branch. How much of the deficit should be assigned to the narrow gauge and how much to the rest of the railroad? There was a wide divergence of opinion on the matter, and no conclusion was reached.

Another furor resulted from the Milwaukee's arbitrarily limiting the grade to 1.5 per cent. On this issue Commissioner Clifford Thorne vigorously dissented. He pointed out the 21-mile Creston, Winterset & Des Moines Railway, which commenced operation between Creston and Macksburg in 1912, had an elevation of 5 per cent. The Commissioner, however, failed to add that the road with the toboggan-like grade was virtually insolvent, and, as a matter of fact, it was dismantled in 1918.

Weighing all the testimony on both sides, the Commission concluded "that it was not feasible to standardize the Cascade Branch of the C. M. & St. P. Railroad upon its present alignment and grade." As a corollary it declared, "That to require the Cascade Branch to be standardized would be in effect, a confiscation of the property of said branch line." That ended for all time the like-

lihood of Iowa's lingering narrow gauge being converted to standard; and the decision ultimately sealed the fate of the diminutive carrier.

The little trains continued to whistle through the hills and struggle up the grades, hauling fewer passengers and less tonnage as highways improved. It was a friendly, picturesque anachronism living on borrowed time. Operating on a marginal basis at best, the road rolled up alarming deficits during the early depression years. Finally, the Milwaukee, in poor financial health itself, petitioned to abandon the branch. The petition was granted and abandonment authorized in March, 1933.

But, in a last-ditch attempt to continue operation, a new company known as the Bellevue & Cascade Railroad was formed. The Milwaukee agreed to sell the line on easy, long-term payments, and service was resumed with rail motor units hauling mail and express. After a valiant attempt to make both ends meet, the new operators came out very much in the red. Regretfully they called it quits, and in January, 1936, Iowa's narrow gauge relic was sold for scrap.