

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XXXV

ISSUED IN MAY 1954

No. 5

Copyright 1954 by The State Historical Society of Iowa



Ft. Dodge, Des Moines & Southern

Iowa's biggest interurban — the Fort Dodge, Des Moines & Southern Railway — began as a small coal carrier running from mine to connecting railroad. Later it expanded and became a common carrier hauling freight, passengers, mail, and express. A subsequent metamorphosis changed it from steam to electric operation with greatly increased mileage. It has operated streetcars and buses in the past. In one way history repeats itself: the road began its existence almost exclusively as a freight line; it evolved to a point where passenger revenue exceeded that from tonnage; today it is again primarily a carrier of freight with gypsum products its chief revenue producer. But it has grown from a three-mile line to approximately 150 miles. Its operating revenue exceeds a million dollars a year, making it a Class I carrier.

In the eighties one of the largest coal operators in Boone County was the Clyde Coal Company. That firm sank its first shaft mine at Incline, west of Moingona, in 1885. The manager was Hamil-

ton Browne, an energetic and experienced operator, who later became as active in railroading as he was in mining. He and his associates formed the Boone Valley Coal & Railway Company, chartered February 23, 1893, to run from Fraser to a point on the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway called Fraser Junction. Fraser was named after Norman D. Fraser, vice-president of the company. The road was built to haul coal from mines in Fraser to the M&StL connection. The directors were Hamilton Brown and O. M. Carpenter of Boone; Norman D. Fraser and David R. Fraser of Chicago; and S. T. Meservey of Fort Dodge. Browne headed the company.

The Boone Valley Coal & Railway Company opened late in 1893 with about three miles of track. It commenced operation with a "40-ton locomotive." For the year ended June 30, 1897, the road hauled — with the help of another engine — 122,838 tons of coal. Two years afterward a company called the Marshalltown & Dakota Railway purchased the property of the BVC&Ry. The new road, headed by Hamilton Browne, was chartered "to build . . . from Story City . . . via Fraser, Gowrie, Manson, Pocahontas, Laurens and Hartley to Sibley, Ia., 145 miles, and thence northwest into southeastern South Dakota." It completed its line westward from Fraser Junction to Gowrie in 1899.

In 1901 the name was again changed, this time

to the Boone, Rockwell City & Northwestern Railway, with Browne again serving as president. The next year a new company took over the road under the banner of the Newton & Northwestern Railroad with Browne as chief executive. The N&NW, to quote *Poor's Manual of Railroads* for 1903, owned "two large bituminous coal properties, which have been profitable producers for years. . . . The output from the mines at present is about 400 tons a day, but this will be increased upwards of 1,500 tons a day during the current year."

Extensions were pushed from Fraser to Newton on the east, and from Gowrie to Rockwell City on the west. The biggest engineering feat, however, was bridging a tributary of the Des Moines River near Fraser. To span this valley a lofty wooden bridge 156 feet high and 784 feet long was erected. A million feet of lumber went into the long trestle. The entire line, Newton to Rockwell City, was completed in 1904.

One of the new towns along the line, Napier, took the maiden name of Hamilton Browne's wife, Mary L. Napier. Browne was not to remain president much longer, for a group of New Englanders secured control. In 1905 a Bostonian named Homer Loring headed the company. Among the new directors was Henry W. Poor, a well-known private banker, who, with his father, Henry V. Poor, inaugurated *Poor's Manual of Railroads*.

A branch was built from Goddard to Colfax in 1905, serving mines in the Colfax community. The Newton & Northwestern was now a line over 100 miles long. But it went from a comparatively small community on the east to a still smaller town on the west. Its principal source of income was coal, yet several mines were already becoming unprofitable. The road needed new industries, bigger and better terminals, and, most of all, fresh capital.

Enter now another company — the Fort Dodge, Des Moines & Southern Railroad, incorporated in Iowa on February 16, 1906. New Englanders furnished the needed capital, and Homer Loring of Boston was made the road's president. Further east-and-west expansion stopped, and, instead, the new managers looked to the gypsum area of Fort Dodge on the north and to the industries of Des Moines on the south. The FtDM&S acquired control of the Newton & Northwestern, along with the Fort Dodge Street Railway (a local trolley line) and the Ames & College Railway. The latter company, a two-mile steam dummy line organized on September 9, 1890, operated from Ames to the Iowa State College. To connect with the dummy line a seven-mile extension from Kelley to Ames was built.

The main feature of the improvement program was the electrification of new lines: Fort Dodge to Hope and Des Moines to Midvale. Overhead

wires were also strung on the N&NW between Midvale and Hope. The Ames-Kelley branch was likewise electrified. This meant high speed, frequent interurban service from the capital to Fort Dodge. The remainder of the system continued to be operated by steam, as did freight service on the entire railroad. Company coal furnished fuel for the new turbine-driven power plant at Fraser.

The \$2,500,000 improvement project featured large, 53-foot interurban cars built by Niles Car Company. With interiors furnished in mahogany, leather upholstery, and clerestory windows, they were the pride of central Iowa. Fast through service on the 85-mile run between Des Moines and Fort Dodge commenced late in 1907. Entry into Des Moines was over the tracks of the local street railway.

The expense of electrification proved too much for the company and it became bankrupt. In 1910 Homer Loring and Parley Sheldon of Ames were appointed receivers. To expedite the handling of heavy freight by electric locomotives, the receivers converted the line from 600-volt to 1,200-volt operation. About that time the road extended a branch from Niles to Ogden with running rights over the M&StL for two miles to nearby mines. Later the FtDDM&S had an interest in the Ogden mines, but labor troubles and floods made the operation impracticable. The Ogden branch was eventually abandoned.

Troubles continued to beset the management. The mines at Colfax were worked out, and the Colfax-Goddard branch was ripped out. Indeed, the whole line from Midvale to Newton proved to be a mistake, and abandonment by the receivers was authorized in 1912. Meanwhile, the road west of Hope, hitherto operated by steam, was electrified. This meant all-electric operation of the entire system.

In the spring of 1912 a disastrous flood washed out the center span of the "High Bridge" near Fraser. It took a dozen men seventy days to replace the old structure with a modern steel span costing \$110,000. To this day it provides the road's passengers one of the best scenic views in the state.

The road was sold under foreclosure in 1913 to the bondholders, Old Colony Trust Company of Boston, for \$3,900,500. The name remained the same, and Homer Loring continued as president. It is significant that "The Fort Dodge Line," as it was called, differed from many contemporary interurbans in that it aggressively solicited carload freight business. It followed steam-road practices in operating rules and it interchanged with trunk lines. When the government took over the railroads during World War I the FtDDM&S was taken over also. It was one of the few interurbans operated by the United States Railroad Administration.

Some idea of the fast growing freight business is attested by the fact that the road had 2,500 freight cars in 1918. It was said to have more cars for its size than any other road in America! Apart from freight the road once boasted of two parlor-observation cars with wicker seats, smoking compartments, and high-quality Brussels carpets. An excess fare of 25 cents was charged between Des Moines and Fort Dodge, and porter service was provided.

In line with the road's policy to serve more industries, it purchased the Crooked Creek Railroad in 1916. This pioneer carrier was chartered on November 8, 1875, and began operating a year later. It started as a 3-foot gauge, 8-mile line extending from Judd, on the Illinois Central Railroad, to coal mines at Lehigh. President and general manager was Walter C. Willson of Webster City. Willson was the first coal mine operator of importance in the Lehigh district.

In the middle eighties the Crooked Creek was widened to standard gauge and operated in conjunction with the Webster City & Southwestern Railroad, which had a 14-mile line from Border Plain Junction (on the Crooked Creek) to Webster City. A. K. Hamilton of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, who headed the Webster City line, was also a director of the CCRR. In 1892 the Crooked Creek bought the WC&SW, and around 1900 the road from Judd to Border Plain was scrapped.

When the FtDDM&S purchased the historic little road, it constructed its own line to Border Plain from Fort Dodge. That portion of the Crooked Creek from Border Plain running northeast to Brushy was taken up. A short cut between Evanston and Brushy was built, providing a direct route from Fort Dodge to Webster City. The entire line was electrified. The Crooked Creek's roundhouse was still standing in Webster City in 1954.

Changing conditions led to the forming of the Fort Dodge, Des Moines & Southern Transportation Company in 1924. Bus service was inaugurated between Boone and Ames; also to Des Moines. The bus subsidiary, however, was later sold. In the twenties, with the exception of Des Moines-Fort Dodge service, all passenger rail operation was discontinued. Local streetcar operation in Fort Dodge and Ames also ceased.

The road suffered from financial reverses in the late twenties, and in 1930 Clyde H. Crooks, who succeeded Homer Loring as president in 1920, was made receiver. In 1942 the company was reorganized as the Fort Dodge, Des Moines & Southern Railway with Crooks as president. Upon his death, four years afterward, Vice President & General Counsel Walter R. Dyer headed the road.

The boom in construction following World War II saw an increased use of gypsum and

greater business for the road. To handle longer trains, three 16-wheel "steeple cab" locomotives were purchased from the Oregon Electric Railway in 1947. These husky four-truck jobs greatly expedite freights up the $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent grade west of Fraser.

Recent improvements include modernizing the power plant in Fraser. This means cheaper power for the railway and more kilowatt hours for communities to which the company sells electricity. Under the stewardship of Arthur P. Wheelock, who succeeded the late Walter Dyer as president in 1953, continued progress is assured. Delivery of 200 new steel boxcars is part of the present rehabilitation program. Dieselization of some of the road is in the offing. At any rate, the Fort Dodge-Des Moines Line, as it is now called, will continue to be an important factor in providing the heart of Iowa with modern and efficient freight service.

FRANK P. DONOVAN, JR.