

Planked from Keokuk

One hundred years ago, when the citizens of Iowa were first assuming the responsibilities of statehood, highways and transportation were ever uppermost in their minds. Little did they dream of the vast improvements which were to take place in this field during the first one hundred years of the State's history.

So important did the matter of transportation appear to the early citizens of Iowa, that in the First Legislative Assembly considerable attention was given to legislation relating to this subject. On January 24, 1839, a charter was granted to the "Burlington and Iowa River Turnpike Company" providing for the construction of an improved highway over which tolls were to be charged. This was the beginning of Iowa legislation providing for toll roads.

Following Iowa's attainment of statehood in 1846, the matter of roads assumed such paramount importance that 28 of the 125 chapters of the "Acts of the First General Assembly" dealt with highway legislation. In most cases these laws merely laid out the roads without providing for their maintenance.

The first graded toll road was chartered on January 8, 1849. It was to connect Bloomington (now Muscatine) with the county seat of Benton County, via Tipton. Additional toll charges might be made for travel on planked sections. An act, approved on January 15, 1849, authorized the building of a plank road between Keokuk and Montrose, running along the Iowa shore of the Mississippi. This road was intended to facilitate the lightering of the river boats, so they might pass over the Des Moines Rapids. Before it was completed, however, it was supplanted by a railroad, one of the first built in Iowa.

The schedule of tolls provided by law for the Keokuk-Montrose road was as follows: carriage, wagon, cart, or sleigh drawn by two horses, oxen, or mules, two and a half cents per mile and one cent per mile for each additional animal attached to the vehicle; vehicle drawn by one horse, ox, or mule, two cents per mile; horse and rider, one cent per mile; each head of horses, oxen, mules, or cattle, led or driven, one cent per mile; each head of sheep, goats, or hogs, one half cent per mile; merchandise (not including furniture of immigrants), two cents per ton per mile.

Such graded and improved roads were not built from public funds, but were undertaken by private individuals or companies which hoped to make a

profit. There was much discussion of routes, costs, and charges. On February 8, 1849, the *Keokuk Register* contained a lengthy article on the subject of roads. The following rough estimate of the cost per mile had been made: lumber at \$9 per thousand feet, \$1,400; leveling and laying, \$240; engineering and superintending, \$100; contingent, ten per cent, \$178 — total per mile, \$1,958.

The editor commented that this estimate of the cost of lumber in Iowa was too low; it should have been not less than \$15 per 1000 feet and the total cost of lumber would be about \$2,112 per mile. Estimating engineering, gates, bridges, and contingencies at \$500 per mile, the total cost, according to the editor, would be about \$2,612 per mile. The profits on plank roads in the East had, however, been beyond the most sanguine expectations of the projectors.

In an article printed in the February 22, 1849, issue of the same paper, a correspondent considered the construction of a plank road to be built from Keokuk to the Racoon Forks, along the main highlands dividing the waters of the Des Moines and Skunk rivers. Such a road was imperatively demanded; the construction of a railroad was yet a long way off and a plank road could be built to the Forks without crossing a

single stream or ravine of consequence, the natural surface of the proposed route being so gently undulating and nearly level that it need not be disturbed in the way of grading, except to elevate the track sufficiently to carry off the water. The white oak timber bordering the route was considered sufficient to build the road. This correspondent estimated the total cost per mile at \$2,000.

On February 4, 1851, the sixth plank toll road was authorized by the General Assembly. It was to be built by the "Keokuk and Des Moines Valley Plank Road Company" between the city of Keokuk in Lee County, via Charleston, to the town of Birmingham in Van Buren County, a distance of some sixty-nine miles. This road, from which branch roads were to be built to the important towns, was expected to become a great artery of commerce, heading inland from Keokuk, the "Gate City", where much river-borne traffic was compelled to disembark at the "foot of the Rapids", and thence proceed inland by stage or wagon on up the valley of the Des Moines.

This Keokuk and Des Moines Valley Plank Road Company had been organized under the general incorporation laws of the State of Iowa on December 10, 1850, anticipating by nearly sixty days the legislative approval of its activities. In 1926 the *Keokuk Citizen* reproduced from the col-

umns of the *Des Moines Valley Whig* the following account of the organization of the company:

"Their principal place of doing business is in the city of Keokuk. . . . The amount of capital stock incorporated is one hundred thousand dollars. No portion of said capital stock has yet been paid in. The conditions on which said stock is to be paid in are, that it is to be collected by the directors at their discretion by installments of not exceeding ten per cent on each share subscribed, and at periods of not less than ninety days, first giving thirty days notice in some newspaper published in the city of Keokuk."

Ver Planck Van Antwerp was chosen president of the company. On March 17, 1851, the company issued a "Notice to Lumbermen", asking for bids on more than a half million feet of lumber. This notice revealed many of the details of the construction of the road:

"Sealed proposals will be received by the President and Directors of the Keokuk and Des Moines Valley Plank Road Company at their office in the city of Keokuk, up to the 11th day of April next, for the delivery of 633,600 feet (board measure) of plank eight feet long, not less than five nor more than ten inches wide, and three inches thick; and 79,200 feet (board measure) of plank sixteen feet long, six inches wide and three inches thick, either

of White Oak, Burr Oak, Red Elm, Mulberry, Sugar Maple, Black Walnut, Norway or Yellow Pine, and to be from good sound timber, free from sap, bad knots, wind shakes, and other imperfections impairing its strength or durability, to be full on the edges and of the full thickness specified.

"The plank to be delivered in lots along the line of the road within five miles of the city of Keokuk, at such intervals as the Board shall direct."

The first call for payment on stock was issued on April 12, 1851: "The subscribers to the capital stock of this Company are hereby notified that an installment of ten dollars on each share subscribed to said stock, is required to be made to Wm. S. McGavic, Esq., treasurer of the company, at his office in the city of Keokuk, on or before the 20th day of May next."

At the same time a "Notice to Contractors" was published, asking for sealed bids on the construction of about 12,620 cubic yards of embankment at various points and four stone culverts, one at each of the points described. The contract was let to the firm of Brownell and Sprott, who had been authorized to build the plank road from Keokuk to Montrose in 1849. William Brownell of Keokuk was the senior partner.

On May 8, 1851, the editor of the *Des Moines Valley Whig* rejoiced "that 16 miles of plank road

from Keokuk to Birmingham is under contract and about half to be completed in 1851; the balance to Charleston to be completed in the spring of 1852; the whole distance to Birmingham to be completed next year." As usual these predictions proved too optimistic, but eventually the work got under way, the right-of-way was "graded and bridged", and finally, it is said, the planking was actually laid some sixteen miles north from Keokuk.

The road was constructed of stringers and planks cut from the surrounding timber. Three stringers of black walnut, six by six, were laid lengthwise and planks, "eight feet long, two inches thick [specified as 3 inch], and of whatever breadth they squared" were laid across the stringers. It appears that at first the planks were laid on loose, but later, due to warping of the boards which lay next to the wet earth, it became necessary to spike them down to the stringers with 30-penny, cut-iron spikes, which eventually pulled out or rusted off. Anyone who has known unpaved Iowa roads in the spring can imagine what happened to these stringers and the loose planks.

The route of the "Old Plank Road", reminiscently spoken of as "The Slab" by early settlers, began at 14th and Main streets (or more precisely at the alley between 14th and 15th streets), in Keokuk, veering to the north of east until it inter-

sected the present Plank Road Street, which begins at 16th and Blondeau. Then sweeping more toward the north, above the head of Price's Creek, it came out on the present route of Federal Highway 218. Thence northward it followed the general route of the present paved highway, weaving back and forth across it in places to take advantage of more favorable grades and to avoid the deep gullies at the head of Sugar Creek.

At the site of the present high school in Keokuk was the Plank Road Tavern, better known as "Farmer's House". At 16th and Blondeau was the "water-house" and tavern, popularly known as "Dutch Mary", where water might be had for the horses and beer for the drivers. This proved to be an agreeable combination. On Blondeau Street, between 16th and 17th, stood the first tollhouse and gate. A block farther on, between 17th and 18th streets, was the Rummell Tavern, also a popular place with the teamsters.

The second tollhouse was at the "Four Mile House", almost directly opposite the site of the present county home farm. Later, when the railroad took over, this was known as Mooar Station. The third tollhouse, about eight miles out, was near the present town of Summitville. Then came the Messengerville tollhouse, with Robert Pipkin as tollman, and Dickey Brown's Tavern and Feed-

post at Mount Clara, later a station on the railroad running north from Keokuk. "Nine Mile House" was located at the "Montrose Turn", not far from the present intersection of Routes 218 and 61.

The official end of the Plank Road was at the town of Charleston about one-fourth of a mile south of the old railroad station which has now been abandoned. Here was "Soller's Tavern", a ramshackle, one-story frame building, large enough to accommodate the many travelers who chose to stop there. While the road was actually graded to the twenty-mile house, about four miles beyond Charleston, it is probable that no planks were ever laid on this section.

The grade, generally about thirty feet wide, so followed the higher ground along the divide between the Des Moines and the Mississippi, that few bridges and culverts were required for the road. There was one small bridge in the city of Keokuk and another more pretentious one, known as the "High Bridge", was built across a tributary of Sugar Creek in the southwest quarter of Section 21, Montrose Township. It consisted of a high trestle several hundred feet in length, built of square-sawed timbers, and had a railed roadway wide enough for two teams to pass. Teamsters did not use the bridge much in dry weather,

but when the rains came in the fall of the year they were compelled to pull onto it to avoid the impassable mud.

Many a teamster drove regularly between Charleston and Keokuk. One trip down and back, about thirty miles, hauling mostly corn, wheat, oats, seeds, and hay to the market was considered a day's work. For their services teamsters charged at the rate of \$4.25 for a load of 30 hundred weight ($1\frac{1}{2}$ tons). Sometimes they were able to pick up a "pay-load" going back but more often they "went up" empty, since many of the stores along the route did their own teaming.

For a time this was indeed a busy highway, and during the gold rush, which was at its height about the time the plank road was finished, as many as twenty-five or thirty ox-teams in a row might be counted, loaded out for the Far West. From Charleston they followed the old Mormon Trail across the prairies of Iowa to Council Bluffs.

On June 19, 1855, the editor of the Carthage (Ill.) *Republican* wrote: "On Friday last, we crossed the river from Hamilton to Keokuk, and passed over the plank road to Boston, Charleston and Farmington on the Des Moines River, and on to Bonaparte and Bentonsport. . . . We think we saw one hundred wagons pass each way daily, coming to Keokuk loaded with grain, flour, bacon

and etc., and returning with furniture, castings, groceries and other goods."

Eventually other farm to market roads were developed and supported by public funds. These were not hard surfaced but they were patronized largely by the farmers in dry weather, making it unnecessary for them to pay toll on the plank roads. This cut the income of the Plank Road Company to the place where it could no longer maintain the road in first class condition. Loose planks and chuckholes caused much complaint. Poor road conditions lost tolls and less toll money meant poorer maintenance.

Railroads also were creeping into the territory, and it seemed to the directors that the only solution to their problem was to convert their property into a railway. They were able to secure from the General Assembly an act approved on March 18, 1858, which authorized the Keokuk and Des Moines Valley Plank Road Company "to locate, establish, construct, maintain and operate by horse or steam power, a Rail Road upon the track of the present Plank Road; and that they be further authorized to extend the track of said Railroad down Main Street, in the city of Keokuk, as far as the intersection of Main Street and Second Street in said city." The city, however, must first approve this extension of the track.

The impending war between the States discouraged this undertaking, however, and eventually the company failed. The Plank Road then fell into the hands of Harry Fulton, but it seems he could do little better, and matters gradually drifted from bad to worse. Finally, after a long legal controversy, the Plank Road came into the possession of Lee County. The board of supervisors struggled along with the problem for a few years and finally gave up in discouragement.

As the last straw, the "High Bridge" became so dilapidated that it was officially condemned and one night it was "razed to the ground by the wind". The board of supervisors then took up the planks on the road and sold them for lumber and firewood. The Plank Road, as such, came to an end, but the route is still the principal highway out of Keokuk towards the north. Plank Road Street in the city of Keokuk is a reminder of this once pretentious pioneer undertaking, now one of the local traditions handed down from the former generation which used the old Plank Road.

BEN HUR WILSON