

Transportation by Land

The dramatic migration known as the westward movement reached the Iowa country several years before the outbreak of the Black Hawk War. By 1824 a spray of settlers from the crest of the first immigrant wave to cross the Mississippi fell into the Half-breed Tract, the only portion of Iowa-land then open to the pioneer. At the time the Black Hawk Purchase was first occupied by white settlers, the lands on the east and south were still almost uninhabited by white men. The population of Illinois in 1830, for example, was only 157,445, most of which clung to the rivers that formed its southern borders. With the exception of a small island of settlement in the mineral region, the northern half of Illinois contained less than two people per square mile. Galena was the county seat of Jo Daviess County, which sprawled eastward from the Mississippi to Lake Michigan and as far south as Rock Island.

It was through such a wilderness tract that many an Iowa pioneer traveled overland on foot or on horseback, by covered wagon or by stage-coach. Settlers traveled along dim, dreary trails from Lake Michigan across the vast prairies of

Illinois "rarely broken by cultivation" and without any possibility of shelter.

The same lack of roads characterized early Iowa. In 1839 John Plumbe reported that the "natural surface of the ground is the only road yet to be found in Iowa District; (Territory,) and such is the nature of the soil, that in dry weather we need no other. The country being so very open and free from mountains, artificial roads are little required. A few trees taken out of the way, where the routes much traveled traverse the narrow woods, and a few bridges thrown over the deeper creeks, is all the work necessary to give good roads in any direction." Plumbe had not, apparently, traveled over the Iowa prairie in the spring or after heavy rains. At such times the absence of public roads and bridges made travel very difficult. Although laws were passed for the surveying and laying out of roads, the same conditions prevailed for years after statehood was achieved.

The movement of settlers into and through Iowa was noted by many editors. During the first two weeks of October, 1846, a total of 582 wagons were ferried across the Mississippi at Burlington. In 1855 the Burlington *Telegraph* chronicled six or seven hundred immigrant teams crossing daily at that point. "About one team in a hundred

is labelled 'Nebraska'; all the rest are marked 'Iowa'."

That same year the Muscatine ferry puffed to and fro, carrying five immigrant wagons at every trip into Iowa. At Rock Island hundreds of muslin-covered wagons, bearing wives and children and household goods, and driven by stalwart men seeking a new home in the mighty West, crossed the Mississippi weekly into Iowa. "Daily — yes, hourly", the Dubuque *Tribune* exclaimed, "immigrants are arriving in this and neighboring counties from Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois." There were many records of this kind.

The onward march of the covered wagon pioneers was also chronicled in inland towns. The Oskaloosa *Times* declared that the town was "almost constantly thronged with movers' wagons and herds of cattle". Sometimes the progress of the prairie schooner was fairly rapid. In August of 1857 August Ridley and his wife took only twelve days to go from Dubuque to Estherville in their covered wagon.

Those who traveled in the spring were not so fortunate because of swollen streams and boggy, bottomless sloughs. The Skunk River bottoms, for example, were "known and dreaded" by travelers from "Maine to California". Emigrants considered themselves lucky if they escaped with-

out having to be "pulled out at least three or more times."

Equally dreaded was Purgatory Creek in Calhoun County which today is spanned by railroad and highway bridges and offers no barrier to travelers between Sioux City and Fort Dodge. It was not so in covered-wagon days. "Purgatory Slough!", exclaimed a Sioux City editor in 1859, "What a name! And oh! what a slough! we hear those exclaim who have been so unfortunate as to be caught in it. We heard one individual say that it took four yoke of oxen to pull his light buggy through this slough. The bottom of it has never yet been found, and it is thought by some that it has fallen out, leaving nothing there but black miry mud, a contest with which it is thought must at least equal the supposed torments of Purgatory — hence the name."

The first settlers were frequently hemmed in by just such adverse obstacles as Purgatory Slough. His claim staked out and his crop sown, the pioneer had a never-ending use for his wagon. Supplies had to be purchased at some remote settlement; produce had to be hauled overland. A trip to the mill provided an interesting although not always easy diversion. Sloughs were frequently soft, streams swollen, and roads impassable. Often the pioneer had to fell trees across an un-

bridged creek. "Then he would unyoke the oxen and make them ford or swim across. Having carried the grain in bags to the opposite bank, he would take the wagon apart and carry it over piece by piece. All safely across, he would reassemble the wagon, reload the grain, reyoke the oxen, and move on slowly across the prairie."

The horse-drawn wagon — sometimes it was a buggy — was the means by which the pioneer went to church and quarterly meeting, log raisings, and quilting parties, to political gatherings and elections, to Fourth of July celebrations and Christmas festivals. When winter came and the snow lay deep upon the ground, he moved his wagon box to a bobsled and traveled swiftly over the snow-mantled countryside. The use of the farm wagon and the sleigh continued until well into the twentieth century; indeed it required the automobile and the paved road to drive the horse and wagon from the highway. The transition from the livery stable, the wagon maker, the blacksmith, and the harness maker to the garage, the filling station, and the mechanic can be readily recalled by Iowans born in the twentieth century.

Bad roads prevailed in Iowa for well nigh a century. Indeed, although the casual overland traveler has no such problem to face, many a farmer is still isolated by deep snow and muddy

roads. The farm-to-market program is still far from complete in 1946.

It was not merely the covered-wagon pioneer who suffered because of the bad roads. The stagecoach companies — such as Frink & Walker and the Western Stage Company — played heavy rôles in the transportation system prior to 1870. In 1859 the *St. Charles City Intelligencer* declared that the Western Stage Company was probably the “most extensive” corporation in the State of Iowa. “The Company”, the editor asserted, “employ fifteen hundred men, and over three thousand horses, and own more than six hundred coaches. The capital invested is a million and a half of dollars. The field of their operations is in Iowa, Wisconsin, Missouri and Nebraska, and they are now running a regular line of stage to Fort Kearney, three hundred miles west of the Missouri.”

But size was no criteria of a company's ability to perform good work; in 1858 the *Council Bluffs Bugle* sarcastically congratulated the Western Stage Company for its “untiring energy and perseverance in bringing every mail to this city, for the last three weeks in a wet and pulp-like state, perfectly saturated with water and wholly unreadable. . . . We are sickened at the sight of every mail that arrives. . . . This western stage

company have proved an intolerable nuisance, and we should think it high time that the department at Washington were taking notice of these faults and the destroying of the mail matter."

A Mills County pioneer recalled the lumbering coaches that furnished communication with the outside world. "Two lines of these coaches formerly ran through the county, one, the St. Joseph and Council Bluffs line, running by way of Sidney, Tabor, Glenwood, and thence to Council Bluffs, and the route of the Western Stage company, through from one county seat to another, and these lines formed the only mode of public conveyance from one point to another. The trips of the stages were originally made weekly, then semi-weekly, and finally daily, as the growing business warranted such an increase of facilities. The life of the traveler in those days was by no means a pleasant one. When steep hills must be ascended, or muddy bottoms crossed, the passenger — wearied as he was by the swaying and rough usage of hard driving — was expected to descend and mount the hill or cross the bottom on foot." Although the stagecoach was a colorful part of our pioneer development, most Iowans were glad to trade it for the railroad coach.

The advent of the iron horse was one of the most significant events in Iowa history. The first

railroad to connect the Mississippi with the Atlantic seaboard reached Rock Island opposite Davenport on February 22, 1854. The next year the Mississippi was tapped by railroads at Dubuque, Clinton, and Burlington. In 1857 a fifth railroad reached the great river opposite McGregor. Five of the ten railroads linking the Mississippi with the Atlantic before the Civil War reached the Father of Waters opposite Iowa.

As the iron horse approached the Mississippi from the east a wave of enthusiasm swept over Iowa and there was a vociferous demand that railroads be extended westward across the Hawkeye State. Ground for the first railroad in Iowa was broken by Antoine LeClaire at Davenport in 1853. Iowa City was reached by the Mississippi and Missouri, now the Rock Island, in 1856. Ottumwa, Waterloo, and Cedar Rapids had railroad connections with the Mississippi River ports by 1860, by which time more than five hundred miles of track had been laid in Iowa.

Iowans were enthusiastic about the speed of railroad travel in those early days. On August 7, 1861, the editor of the *Ottumwa Courier* recorded: "We made the trip to Des Moines, by rail to Eddyville, thence by stage, attended the State Convention all one day, and returned in just two days and ten hours, of course riding two

nights in succession. This was quick and would have been pleasant but for the heat and dust. It is a magnificent country between here and Des Moines rendered peculiarly attractive just now by the most magnificent crop of every production the eye ever rested upon."

The Civil War halted railroad construction for a time but work was promptly resumed after 1865. A mad race across the State ensued as each railroad company sought to be the first to make connections with the Union Pacific at Council Bluffs. The race was won by the North Western on January 22, 1867. Two years later, in 1869, the Rock Island and the Burlington reached Council Bluffs. The Illinois Central, which arrived at Sioux City in 1870, made connections with the Union Pacific the following year.

After the main river-to-river railroads were completed, thousands of miles of track were constructed in a giant web in Iowa. By 1880, 4,977 miles of track had been laid — a decade later this figure stood at 8,412 miles. During this era of rapid expansion the railroads were charged with many abuses. Although they had been given about one-ninth of the total area of the State to aid them in construction and notwithstanding the fact that counties, cities, and private individuals had purchased stocks or bonds and granted lands

and valuable right-of-way privileges, the railroads were soon charging high rates, indulging in ruthless competition, discriminating against towns and shippers, and flagrantly violating all just practice through the long and short haul clauses. The Granger Law and the establishment of a Railway Commission in 1878 were two of the highlights in the fight against these abuses.

Iowa editors, however, early recognized the economic, social, and cultural values that accrued from linking towns with bands of iron. "Not far in the future", the *Washington Record* declared on July 24, 1867, "the sound of Railroad cars will be rumbling down from the North, and we shall hear the cry in our streets, 'all aboard for Keokuk!' Then the Keokukians and the Washingtonians will be neighbors. They will cultivate our acquaintance; their business cards will adorn our counters and desks. We will hobnob together — eat ice cream, drink lager, and visit one another; they will buy our pork and we will stock up our groceries from them. We will stop and take dinner and have a friendly chat with them while on our way to St. Louis and the Gulf with our market stuff. Then the Gate City of Iowa, instead of being farther off than New York, will be our next door neighbor, with only the village of Mt. Pleasant between."

A Davenport editor rejoiced in 1868 when comfortable sleeping cars were placed on the Rock Island line between Davenport and Des Moines. Previously it had taken "great courage and resolution" to leave "family, friends, and spring mattress behind" and set out for the State capital. Now one could "go to bed like a Christian in Davenport, and wake up in innocence in Des Moines." As the years passed better rolling stock and equipment, better terminal, siding, and switching facilities, smoother roadbeds, and stronger bridges added to the speed, safety, and convenience of railroad travel.

In 1914 an all-time high of 10,018 miles of track fairly intermeshed the Hawkeye State. Iowa, with two per cent of the total population of the United States, possessed about four per cent of the railroad trackage. At the peak of railroad development no point was more than twelve miles from train service. Since 1915 there has been a steady decline in railroad mileage, the total on the eve of Pearl Harbor being 8,938 miles, or 1,080 miles less than in 1914.

The advent of the automobile and the paved road, the competition of bus and truck, the revival of waterways transportation, the growing popularity of the airways, the gradual decline of towns on stub lines, and the unprofitable operation of

parallel lines were factors in this decline. The inauguration of the Burlington Zephyr and Rock Island Rockets, and the performance of North Western and Milwaukee streamliners may help in slowing down this trend. The railroads today form the very backbone of transportation in Iowa, handling more than ten times as much freight as do the giant towboats that ply the Upper Mississippi.

Few Iowans could have realized what a tremendous change would result from the introduction of the automobile on the American scene. A half century ago, in 1895, there were only 300 automobiles in the United States. In 1900 there were 8,000 motor cars in this country — about 75 of which were in Iowa. Between 1910 and 1930 the number of autos in the United States increased from 370,000 to 26,523,779. William Howard Taft was the first President to ride to his inauguration in an automobile — the very year (1909) auto production first climbed to over one hundred thousand. An entirely new vocabulary sprang up as a result of this revolution in transportation. The mode of living of the people was changed. Even the Amana Society, which had withstood the coming of the railroad, could not withstand the disintegrating influence of the paved road and the motor car.

The first automobiles in Iowa were viewed with a mixture of suspicion, derision, and hate. A Davenport man is said to have brought the first "horseless carriage" to Iowa. This was a steam car — a single cylinder locomobile. In 1897 it was acquired by G. W. Haskell of Cedar Rapids. W. G. Dows is said to have brought the sixteenth Haynes car made to Cedar Rapids in 1899. These novel playthings could make ten miles an hour — if they ran — and terrified horses ran away whenever one appeared. A noted Iowa aviator, Clarence Chamberlin of Denison, recalls the fury of neighbors and farmers when the Chamberlins acquired a "newfangled horseless carriage" in 1902 — the first such "infernal contraption" in Denison.

Iowans were quick to adopt the automobile. The number in 1905 was 1,650, still small enough for newspapers to chronicle any unusual feat. In 1904 the *Clinton Mirror* of July 16th noted that F. L. Butzloff had taken a "flying trip to Chicago in his automobile with some Clinton guests. Leaving home at six o'clock, stopping for dinner and rest about two hours, they arrived at their destination at seven in the evening, making about eleven hours actual traveling. Boys made the trip on their wheels a while ago, their cyclometers registering 148 miles — so that Mr. Butzloff's auto ran

nearly fourteen miles an hour. It is not very far to Chicago in the twentieth century."

The automobile soon proved it was here to stay. Mass production had first been employed in 1900 and the first speedometer made in 1901. The first car to cross the continent took 61 days to do it in 1903. Head lamps were included as standard equipment in 1904 and tire chains introduced in 1905. Manufacturers pioneered with front bumpers and electric horns in 1906 and the left-hand drive became popular in 1908. The first closed bodies were built in 1909 and the trend toward streamlined bodies began in 1910. In 1911 some 50 motor trucks were operating on Iowa highways. Between 1910 and 1915 motor registration in Iowa soared from 18,870 to 145,342.

The steadily increasing number of automobiles was a primary factor in the development of our modern paved highways. Between 1849 and 1853 a number of plank roads had been authorized by the State legislature. Only three were actually built, the one between Burlington and Mount Pleasant being the longest and perhaps best constructed. The "Good Roads" movement was inaugurated in 1884; thirty years later Iowa had over 100,000 miles of roadway established and maintained by county and township officials. The creation of the Iowa State Highway Commission

in 1904 was an important step in the movement toward a uniform road system. The Commission was strengthened in 1913. In 1917 the State accepted a gift of about $2\frac{1}{4}$ million dollars from the Federal government. This money was matched by the State and the entire amount spent for better roads. Hard surface highways developed out of the substitution of the automobile for "Old Dobbin". High speed cars and mud roads were incompatible.

It was the 1920's that witnessed such a phenomenal change in the Iowa scene. Registration of automobiles and motor trucks soared from 440,701 to 784,450 between 1920 and 1929. In 1920 there were only 25 miles of paved roads in Iowa. Between 1921 and 1932 about 3,400 miles of Iowa highways were paved — the peak paving years being 1928, 1929, and 1930. When Iowa observed its centennial in 1946, her primary — State controlled — highways consisted of 5,459 miles of paved roads, 2,335 miles of graveled roads, 727 miles of bituminous surfaced roads, and only 36 miles of earth roads. Only a flash flood now and then reminds modern motorists of the days when the Skunk River bottoms were known and feared from Maine to California.

The changes in overland transportation during the past century have been nothing short of phe-

nomenal. It took the Mormon pioneers five months to cross southern Iowa in 1846. In 1934 the Burlington *Zephyr* whizzed between Council Bluffs and Burlington in three hours and thirty-two minutes, averaging 73.3 miles an hour. In 1856 it took the Mormon handcart expeditions at least a day to pull their wagons twenty miles while the Rock Island *Rocket* can speed from Chicago to Omaha in less than ten hours.

The streamlined auto and the paved road make it possible to record equally phenomenal changes. In 1904 a motorist required eleven hours to make the trip from Clinton to Chicago. In 1946 a motorist can drive from Council Bluffs to Chicago in shorter time and with greater comfort. Modern trucks and busses are making equally impressive records.

In 1923 motor busses were, for the first time, recognized as public carriers and placed under the supervision of the Iowa Railroad Commission. Twenty years later bus lines carried a total of 17,148,762 passengers on Iowa roads, traveling a total of 334,902,175 miles. The covered-wagon pioneers would be fairly dazed by the speed of modern highway and railroad travel in Iowa — not to mention travel by air which is another story.

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