

## The Sioux City Elevated

When Sioux Citians living in suburban Morningside drive down town, they may notice two rusty iron cylinders standing a few rods to the right of the long viaduct. To the passing motorists, who know the history of those lonely landmarks, they are mute reminders of an exciting and colorful era in the city's early history. Upon those piers once rested part of the superstructure of the noted Sioux City Elevated Railroad, which half a century ago was an engineering marvel of the Middle West and the toast of the city.

In 1887 Sioux City was in the midst of the most frenzied boom in its history. The nation was prospering, the farming area surrounding the city was becoming rich and well developed, and the city itself was fairly humming with activity. It was growing so rapidly in population, area, and ambition that metropolitan greatness seemed just ahead. With a population of twenty thousand and with city limits sprawling farther each month into the surrounding countryside, continued rapid expansion seemed inevitable. At the same time that the city was experiencing these physical growing pains, it was also thriving commercially.



New industries were being established, the packing plants were beginning to assume real significance, the mercantile houses were prospering, and the railroads carried an increasing volume of goods and passengers to and from the city. A tremendous land boom was also in progress: farm and city real estate alike were selling at fabulous figures. Throughout the city, real estate promotions were being sponsored in anticipation of the city's future growth. While Sioux City was growing in size and power, it was also experiencing some of the troubles of most boom towns. Vice and lawlessness were real civic problems, as the spectacular killing of the Reverend Mr. George C. Haddock made abundantly clear.

It was natural that this boom spirit should create high hopes for the future and dreams of civic greatness. Out of these hopes and dreams emerged two realities. The first of the famous corn palaces was built, and it soon became one of the city's proudest attractions. Also, during 1887, the Sioux City Elevated Railroad was constructed.

Local transportation facilities had been lagging for several years as the city had continued its rapid growth. Only a few scattered surface lines, with cars drawn by either horses or cables, were in existence. Thus, it did not excite much surprise when the Sioux City Rapid Transit Com-



pany was formed for the purpose of constructing new lines. The founders of this company included many of the city's leading promoters and business men, with the result that the company had the advantage of ample capital and able direction. The roster of these men included the names of many who have loomed large in the development of the city. One of the founders, A. M. Jackson, is still alive and residing in Sioux City. Others who were instrumental in the founding of the company were James Booge, A. S. Garretson, John T. Cheney, D. T. Hedges, E. C. Peters, Ed Haakinson, James Jackson, and William Gordon. E. C. Peters was elected president of the company and William Gordon secretary. Mr. Peters was succeeded first by James Jackson and then by Ed Haakinson. Herbert Quick was a member of the law firm that represented the company in legal matters.

Although the organization of the Rapid Transit Company was not surprising, the bold scheme it proposed was enough to excite the least imaginative Sioux Citian. The new company actually planned to build and operate an elevated railroad! Inasmuch as only two elevated railroads then existed in the world, according to local promoters, the idea seemed especially daring and fantastic in this near-frontier setting. As the citizens



watched with increasing interest, plans for construction were slowly unfolded. The elevated portion of the new railroad was to extend from Third and Jones streets, in the business district, past the stockyards and packing houses, to Leech Street two miles east, thence for the remaining three miles to the east end of Morningside Avenue it would be a surface line. It took a bold imagination to comprehend these plans, for most of Morningside was then very sparsely populated.

Construction proceeded rapidly for several months and the elevated structure began to assume definite shape. The supports were about twenty feet in height, and upon these sturdy iron cylinders rested the roadbed and tracks. Along the two-mile stretch several small stations were located where the trains had scheduled stops, and long flights of stairs led from these stations to the ground below. In cold or stormy weather these little stations were to be the refuge for many a waiting passenger.

When the elevated portion of the railroad was finally completed and ready for operation, it was revealed that the total cost of construction was nearly \$500,000. In addition to this sum, over \$86,000 had been expended on the three miles of connecting surface line. Moreover, proper equipment had to be purchased. After considerable in-



vestigation a very small locomotive, of the orthodox steam type, was secured. Two small but brightly painted cars were also purchased, and brought all the way from Pittsburgh.

When Sioux Citians finally recovered their breath and began to examine their new railroad, they were proud almost beyond description. The newspapers of the city made much of it, for the elevated railroad not only augmented the city's inadequate transportation facilities but also seemed to be tangible proof of Sioux City's claim to greatness. The readers of the newspapers were never allowed to forget the claim that this was the third elevated railroad in all the world, that even Chicago could not boast of such a venture. When engineers from the latter metropolis actually came to examine the Sioux City elevated railroad before building a Chicago system, local pride rose almost to stratospheric heights. The elevated railroad took its place beside the corn palace as a feature attraction of the growing young city.

This proud acceptance of the new railroad was also reflected in confident plans for expansion. Promoters expected that the elevated would soon be extended in both directions, and that eventually a network of elevated roads would spread throughout the city. Immediate plans were made to extend the elevated structure to Prospect Hill



on the west and thence to Riverside as a surface line. Eventually, optimists assumed, the elevated would be built out to the end of Morningside and as far beyond as possible. To this day, the motorist on the highway between Sioux City and Sergeant Bluff can plainly see the cuts and grades which were made in anticipation of the eastward extension of the rapid transit line. Lots were sold as far as ten miles beyond the city limits of Morningside, and it was hoped that the elevated road would be a potent factor in accelerating the growth of the city in that direction.

By the close of 1887, the new elevated railroad was substantially completed. From little more than an exciting dream, it had become both a civic attraction and a prosperous business enterprise. The patronage of the elevated road increased yearly, together with the profits. This prosperity soon resulted in the installation of new equipment, for the increased number of passengers required more facilities. A new locomotive and four more cars were purchased, so that two trains of three cars could be operated.

Fares on the new railroad were fairly low, much to the satisfaction of regular passengers. One could ride from the business district of the city to the end of the elevated structure for five cents, and for five cents additional from that point to the



end of the surface line on Morningside Avenue, a total distance of five miles. The problem of the conductors, however, was the great number of persons who rode on passes. As lots in Morningside and beyond had been sold, a common inducement was to offer the purchasers free transportation on the elevated. Because the real estate promoters were in many cases also among the founders of the railroad, this practice spread until on occasion all the passengers in a train might be riding free of charge.

According to the newspapers of that day, the life of the railroad for the first five years of its operation was prosperous and relatively uneventful. Except for an occasional injunction or damage suit, there was little to worry about as far as the company was concerned. Each year, the elevated became increasingly integrated into the transportation network of the city and into the life of the community. According to Merritt Peters, however, who was a conductor, life was far from dull. On one occasion, a train collided with an irate mule. The result was a clean-cut decision in favor of the mule, inasmuch as he walked away, while the train remained in the repair shop for several days. On another occasion, when an important party caucus was scheduled, the train somehow neglected to stop at any of the stations



where the members of the opposition faction might be waiting.

In 1892, the Rapid Transit Company had an exciting year. Because of the increasing competition from surface lines, the elevated was forced to become partially electrified. This not only improved service but it also added another feather in Sioux City's civic cap, for this was one of the first electrified railroads in the nation.

Something far more exciting, however, happened during that year. In May, the Floyd River went on one of the most destructive rampages in its long history of devastation. A veritable wave of water swept down the river valley into Sioux City, and it came with such speed and force that hundreds of people living in the city's lowlands had no real warning. Many in desperation fled to the tracks of the elevated railroad where they found security from the rising flood. For several hours the excited refugees anxiously watched the swirling water rise nearly to the track, then slowly recede. The newspapers of the city made much of the heroic rôle of the elevated railroad, so that its virtues were even more widely publicized than before.

Late in the year, however, the first omens of impending disaster were noticed. In Sioux City and throughout the nation business began to fal-



ter, banks began to be viewed with scepticism, and the first stages of the panic began to appear. By 1893 the economic crisis had struck with full force. Bank failures occurred in large numbers, industries toppled, and a host of commercial enterprises went into permanent eclipse. Instead of the hope and rosy optimism of the boom days, despair and pessimism became prevalent. Sioux City was involved very deeply in this nation-wide panic, and her banks and business enterprises went down along with those in most other cities and towns. Among the organizations forced into bankruptcy was the Sioux City Rapid Transit Company, which had been shaken both by financial collapse and loss of patronage. James Jackson was appointed its first receiver, and after his death A. M. Jackson assumed that responsibility. Thus, at the end of 1893 the elevated railroad was perilously close to going out of operation.

After the worst of the panic had passed, patrons hoped that the elevated would emerge from bankruptcy and again take its place as an established civic enterprise. As the tide of recovery rose higher and the elevated railroad still faltered, however, the full force of the blow which the panic had struck began to be apparent. Truly, it was a mortal blow. Weakened by the panic, the elevated road was unable to meet the fierce compe-



tition from electrified surface lines. Year after year the books showed a deficit.

In 1897, ten years after the road had been established and four years after it went into bankruptcy, the elevated ceased operation. The last train sped over the two-mile stretch, the stations were closed, employees were discharged, and the long and arduous job of dismantling began. The last span was removed only a few years ago, as a safety measure for the railroad trains that passed beneath.

To the few who have lived through those exciting years, the elevated railroad remains as a vivid memory of one phase of Sioux City's growth and evolution. In one short, stirring decade the boom expanded and collapsed, the panic came and passed, and a new and more substantial era was inaugurated. From a boom town Sioux City changed into a thriving and prosperous city, and out of high hopes and splendid dreams emerged solid achievement.

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