

THE PALIMPSEST

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From Coast to Coast

The age of telegraphic communication began in 1844 with the completion of a line between Washington and Baltimore, forty miles in length. Within three years, men of enterprise and vision like Henry O'Reilly and Ezra Cornell had built lines down the Atlantic seaboard and across the mountains to the Mississippi River. Extending northward from St. Louis through Alton, Jacksonville, and Quincy, Illinois, the telegraph first reached Iowa in the fall of 1848. Keokuk, Burlington, and Bloomington (Muscatine), being placed in direct communication by wire with eastern and southern cities, began to assume a metropolitan aspect. About the same time another branch through Springfield, Peoria, Peru, and Galena, Illinois, terminated at Dubuque. By 1850 these lines were tied in with the lake lines and thus the States were "fenced in" by wire.

Telegraph building had begun with a rush but the

decade of the fifties brought a lull, especially in the west. Business depression and political uncertainty probably had their influence, although indifference and prejudice on the part of the public, and poor service, mismanagement, and inefficiency on the part of the telegraph companies afford a more plausible explanation. Even though the wires were often down, just when rapid communication was most desired, and though the system deserved the abuse as well as the praise intermittently heaped upon it, nevertheless the enormous value of the new invention was generally recognized. The early telegraph, with all its irregularity of operation, was a boon to the newspapers, while the railroads were not slow to utilize the wire for train dispatching. With the unification of several independent lines in the hands of the Western Union Telegraph Company in 1856, the service began to improve and the way was opened for systematic progress.

But while the network of lines continued to spread in the east, only haphazard and insignificant progress was made west of the Mississippi. In 1853 a make-shift line was pushed up the river from Muscatine to Davenport, reaching the latter city at about the same time as a line which was constructed westward from Peru to Rock Island. A similar line may have been built to Iowa City from Muscatine as early as 1852, and it is altogether probable that the telegraph reached Mount Pleasant upon the completion of the Burlington and Missouri River Rail-

road to that point in the autumn of 1856. Farther south, in Missouri, the construction of lines radiating from St. Louis proved more energetic. Telegraphic communication was opened to Cape Girardeau on March 21, 1850, completing a direct circuit to New Orleans, and during the following year a wire was strung up the Missouri River by Tal O. Shaffner through Jefferson City to Weston on the western border of the State, where a station was opened on October 4th. It was not until March, 1853, however, that a telegraph office was first opened in St. Joseph. This line along the Missouri River was supplemented in 1859 by a second across northern Missouri following the route of the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad.

For several years the St. Joseph office served western Iowa with telegraphic news, being much closer than any other station. St. Joseph was also the principal point from which intelligence was relayed by pony express across the plains, and later the St. Joseph line was destined to form an important link in the proposed transcontinental telegraph.

Talk of connecting the Atlantic and Pacific seaboards by wire had begun during the first years of telegraph building. The agitation gradually increased and, there being small promise of sufficient immediate revenue to warrant so great an outlay of private capital as would be necessary to construct the line, pressure was brought to bear upon Congress for a subsidy sufficient to build and maintain

a line across the continent. On June 16, 1860, Congress passed an act "to facilitate Communication between the Atlantic and Pacific States by Electric Telegraph." The government proposed to contract for the use of a telegraph line to be built within two years from western Missouri to San Francisco. For such service as much as forty thousand dollars annually during a period of ten years was to be available, though the contract would be awarded to the lowest bidder — on the assumption that more than one line might be built.

That previous work had already been done, however, looking toward telegraphic communication across the plains is evident from a paragraph in the *Scientific American* of December 24, 1859, which reads: "Parties are now engaged in constructing the line on the mail route between St. Louis (in Missouri) and San Francisco (in California), and about 300 miles are completed at each end." The wires were to be connected through to New York by way of St. Louis and Buffalo. It was hoped that this line would eventually become an important connecting link in the proposed transmundane telegraph, passing up the Pacific Coast and across Bering Strait to Russia, where it would connect with a line being built by the Russian government westward across northern Asia. The practicability of establishing telegraphic communication between Europe and America by means of a submarine cable across the Atlantic seemed doubtful at that time.

Meanwhile the people of western Iowa and Nebraska had watched the progress of the telegraph with keen interest. On April 26, 1860, the *Pacific City Herald* reported that the Missouri and Western Telegraph Company had been organized at St. Louis on April 16th and that active steps had "already been taken by the company to secure subscriptions for the extension of lines to Omaha, Nebraska City, Council Bluffs, and Fort Kearney." Omaha contributed five thousand dollars.

Instrumental in the organization of the new company were men of wealth and wide experience in telegraph construction, enthusiastically confident of the future for communication by wire. Edward Creighton of Omaha, who had built hundreds of miles of telegraph in the east, was elected general agent, and R. C. Clowry, destined to become president of the Western Union Telegraph Company forty-two years later, was chosen secretary and superintendent. The Missouri and Western Telegraph Company absorbed the old Missouri River Telegraph Line extending from St. Louis to Kansas City and the Kansas Telegraph Line running from Kansas City through Leavenworth and Atchison to St. Joseph.

Toward the end of June the work on the extension from St. Joseph to Nebraska City was progressing rapidly. The ground had been marked for the poles as far as Brownville, Nebraska, "and a lot of fixtures for the line" had arrived at Nebraska City.

“What efforts are being, or have been made, to secure an extension of this line to Council Bluffs?” queried the *Nonpareil*. “If we don’t watch the corners we shall soon be behind all the towns on the Missouri River.”

It was thought that the telegraph would be completed to Omaha by the middle of August and from thence it would be “built directly west towards the gold fields of Kansas” [Pike’s Peak] and would “reach Fort Kearney — nearly two hundred miles from the States, on the route of the Pony Express and California Mail — by the first of November.” But it was September 1st before the poles were all up between Omaha and St. Joseph, while the wire was not strung and the line put in working condition until ten days later. Whereupon the Omaha *Nebraskian* became a daily paper.

Work on the line westward from Omaha continued with energy. A telegraphic dispatch from Omaha on September 20th reported that the poles “are set within ninety miles of Fort Kearney, and although they have to be hauled fifty miles on the western portion of the line, the company is putting up five and six miles per day. The poles will be up to Fort Kearney by the middle of October, and the wire about the first of November. The company has pushed the construction thus rapidly in order to have the line ready to transmit the November election news by pony express from Kearney, which insures a gain of nearly two days upon the present

time." This construction schedule was successfully maintained and the line completed by the first of November so that the news of the election of Abraham Lincoln reached Fort Kearney by wire.

Nor could the people of central Iowa become accustomed to the anomaly of receiving Washington and New York news on the east-bound stage from Council Bluffs. When the telegraphic report of President Buchanan's last annual message to Congress was received in Des Moines by stage from Omaha, the editor of the *Register* could not refrain from saying, "This thing of getting eastern news from the west in advance of any other source of information, is a striking satire on the neglect of our people to establish telegraphic lines from the Mississippi river to the interior." Scarcely more than a year later the world had been put to rights in Iowa so that east was east and west was west again.

Meanwhile Edward Creighton was active in interesting eastern capitalists in the organization of the Pacific Telegraph Company to fill the gap in the transcontinental line between Julesburg, Colorado, the western terminus of the Missouri and Western, and Salt Lake City, the eastern end of a projected California line. When this work should be completed the whole line west of Omaha was to become the Pacific Telegraph and secure the government subsidy. Mr. Creighton himself undertook the work of construction between Julesburg and Salt Lake City.

“Ere the spring months of 1861 pass over our heads,” commented the editor of the Council Bluffs *Nonpareil* on November 3, 1860, “the line will be completed to Denver City, and ere the close of the coming year, to Salt Lake City, where it will meet the line now extending eastward from San Francisco.” The *Scientific American* for July 13, 1861, contained the following statement of progress on the western end of the transcontinental telegraph: “A train of twenty-five wagons, 228 oxen, eighteen mules and horses, and fifty men, left Sacramento on the 27th of May, with materials to build a line of telegraph from Fort Churchill to Salt Lake City — a distance of 500 miles. They hope to have it done by the 1st of December, and by that time the line from the Mississippi to Salt Lake will be finished.” This prediction was too sanguine, however. Although the wire was up east of Salt Lake City early in 1862, the western section was not ready until several months later.

While building in the vicinity of Salt Lake City, Mr. Creighton was somewhat concerned as to the attitude which might be assumed by Brigham Young toward the intrusion of the telegraph into his domain. As chief elder of the Mormons his authority was supreme, and at that time his word amounted to almost absolute law throughout the Mormon empire. In order to win the friendship of Brigham Young the construction company asked his son, who happened to be in the lumber business, to furnish

the telegraph poles in that section. His price, which appeared reasonable, was promptly accepted and a contract was drawn accordingly. Some time later the son informed the contractors that his bid on the poles was too low, and that he was losing money on the job. A new contract was at once made at a higher figure. Not long after the drawing of the new contract a messenger came saying that Brigham Young wished to see the telegraph contractor. With much apprehension Mr. Creighton went to the home of the Mormon leader. Upon being ushered into the library he introduced himself as the representative of the telegraph company.

“Is it true that my son entered into a contract with you to furnish poles for the telegraph?” inquired Mr. Young.

“Yes, sir”, replied Mr. Creighton.

“Is it also true that the price agreed upon in this contract was subsequently raised?”

Mr. Creighton nodded his assent.

“Let me see those contracts”, said Brigham.

Whereupon Mr. Creighton took the documents from his pocket and handed them over. After scrutinizing the two contracts for a moment Brigham Young crushed the new one in his hand and threw it into the fire. “The poles will be furnished by my son in accordance with the terms of the original contract”, he said.

The telegraph line from coast to coast was completed and placed in operation on October 22, 1862.

Symbolical of the achievement of bringing the opposite ends of the country into contact by means of the longest electric circuit in the world, the first continuous message to be flashed over the wire from San Francisco to New York was a pledge of national unity. "The Pacific to the Atlantic sends greetings; and may both oceans be dry before a foot of all the land that lies between them shall belong to any other than one United Country."

BEN HUR WILSON