

## Across the Prairies of Iowa

On June 15, 1861, before the completion of the transcontinental line, came the startling announcement that the "Telegraph line through Jefferson City, Mo., has been torn down by order of Gov. Claib. Jackson." Thus war swept across the path of progress. R. C. Clowry, superintendent of the Missouri and Western Telegraph Company, immediately issued a statement that "telegraph dispatches would come through from St. Joseph uninterrupted." Apparently, however, the service was intermittent, for in October there was a rumor that the Missouri and Western Telegraph Company had decided to put up a line across Iowa from Council Bluffs to the Mississippi River. "Rebellion in Missouri has rendered telegraphing across that State uncertain if not impracticable, hence the change from Missouri to Iowa."

In November an agent of the Illinois and Mississippi Telegraph Company spent several days in Council Bluffs "making preparations to commence the construction of the line from this side of the State eastwards." The newspaper carried an advertisement for laborers to work on the new line, from which it is evident that the company meant business. Thus the transcontinental line was to be rerouted across the prairies of Iowa, connecting

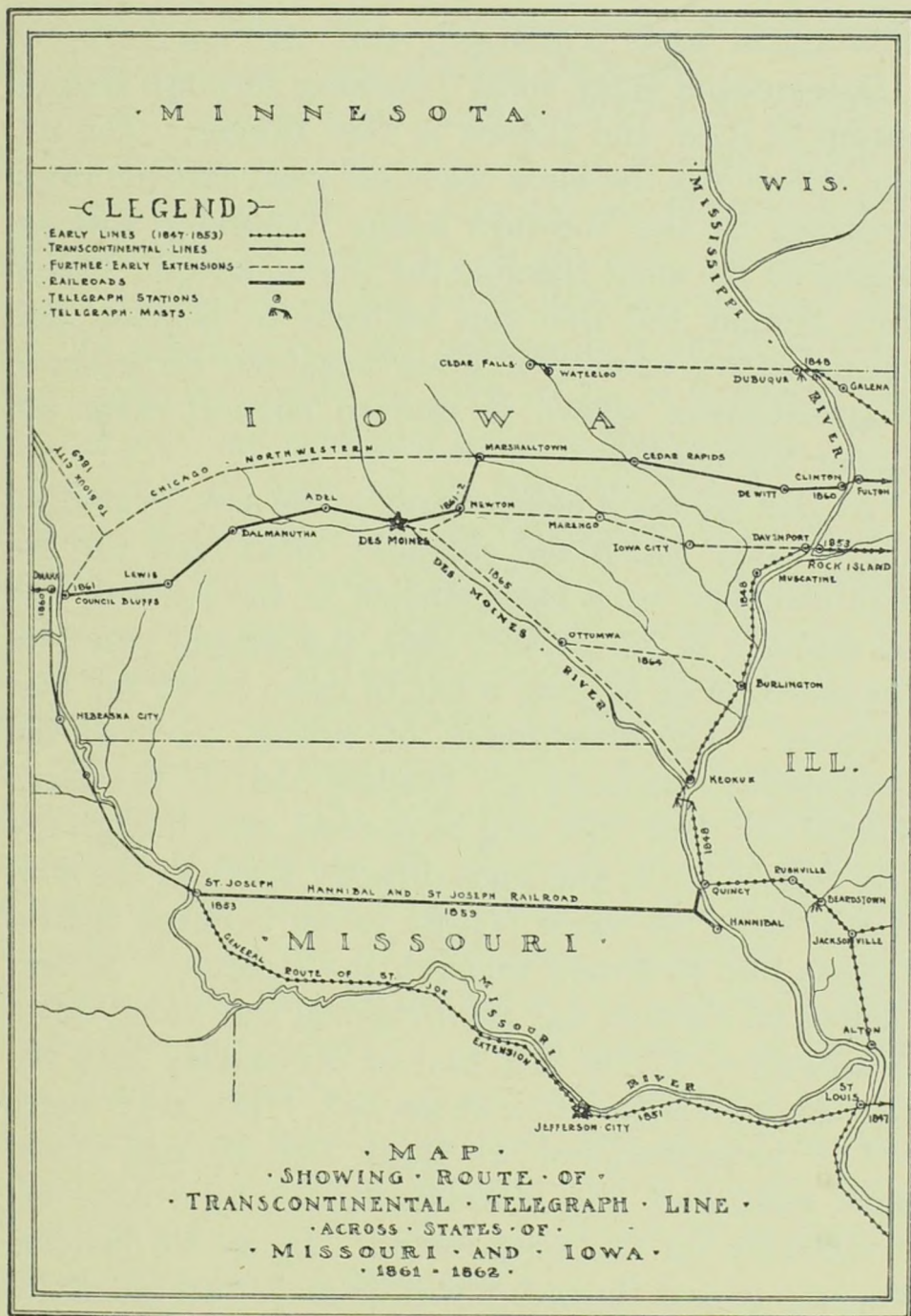


with eastern lines at Chicago, so as to be entirely in loyal territory. The Pacific Telegraph Company was to be given exclusive use of the wire, however, so that the addition of a second wire would be necessary to accommodate way messages of Iowa stations. The cost of this local wire would have to be borne in part by the several communities to be served. Council Bluffs was asked for fifteen hundred dollars to defray the expense of an office there, while other cities were expected to make similar donations or do without telegraphic service.

Since this was an emergency line, to be constructed as quickly as possible with the least expense, the shortest route across Iowa was sought. At that time Cedar Rapids, the terminus of a line building westward from Clinton, was apparently the most available point in Iowa at which to make contact with an established line. Early in 1860 the telegraph had reached Clinton from Fulton, Illinois, and from there had been extended through DeWitt to Cedar Rapids. The plan was to build on westward to Marshalltown along the route of the projected Cedar Rapids and Missouri River Railroad and at the same time work east from Council Bluffs.

The route from Council Bluffs followed the Mormon Trail as far east as Lewis. There the road forked into three branches: one taking a southeasterly direction through the lower tiers of counties; the middle trail, and the shortest way, known as the Fontanelle road, leading to Des Moines through





FROM A MANUSCRIPT MAP DRAWN BY BEN HUR WILSON



Fontanelle and Winterset; and the northern, or "Dalmanutha stage road", passing through Dalmanutha to Adel and thence to Des Moines. The latter, which was the most travelled road and the route followed by the Western Stage Company, was selected as the most feasible for the telegraph. From Des Moines the line ran on east to Newton and thence across country in a northeasterly direction to Marshalltown, where it was to connect with the Cedar Rapids line.

At Des Moines a controversy arose over providing the subsidy which the company demanded for the establishment of a local station in the capital. At an election in November, 1861, the people voted on the question of levying a tax to raise \$3000 for that purpose. The newspaper, of course, favored the proposition, warning its readers that if the issue should fail "no office will be opened, and, though the line will be built, and pass directly through the city, it will be of no more benefit to the citizens than a clothes line stretched through the streets." Nevertheless on election day the proposal was voted down decisively — 127 to 178, and on November 13th the Des Moines *Register* commented, "We may sadly err in judgment, but we think Des Moines would have consulted her interests better by voting affirmatively on the proposition. If, as we believe, the vote of last Saturday will delay for an indefinite time Telegraphic communication with this city, it will probably be conceded after awhile by the ene-



mies of the loan, that they didn't see into a millstone any farther than the law requires."

Work on the telegraph line went forward rapidly. By Thanksgiving the editor of the *Register* wrote: "If we are unable on account of impecuniosity (Thunder! what a word!) to go and see the Elephant, the elephant has concluded to come and see us. In other words, the telegraph is about to visit this obscure locality to give us an opportunity to look at pole and wire, and guess at the balance. The poles have all been set up between this place and Council Bluffs, and also as far eastward as Sternberg's, 14 miles from Des Moines. From Newton the line will pass to Marshalltown, and thence to Cedar Rapids. Wire stringing was commenced in this vicinity yesterday under the supervision of Mr. [J. W.] Morse, a gentleman highly skilled as a Telegraph operator. The line will have been completed from the Missouri to the Mississippi river against the 1st of January, giving somebody, but not us, the benefit of a streak of intelligent lightning, which reaches from the Atlantic seaboard through Salt Lake City to California. The Telegraph, so far as this State is concerned, is a *Sweet* operation [E. D. L. Sweet was superintendent], but so far as the short-sighted action of our own people is concerned, it is a fit subject for re-Morse! We never indulge in puns. Too small a business."

Something must have been done to remedy this sad state of affairs, however, for on December 18th



messages were exchanged between Newton and Des Moines newspapers. "Compliments of the *Free Press*, and congratulations upon the opening of telegraph communications through our State", wired H. S. Winslow from Newton, and added the query, "What do you think of Old England?" In response, Frank W. Palmer of the *Register* flashed back, "Des Moines takes great pleasure in being connected by 'linked lightning' with Newton, and hopes the bond thus formed may never be sundered. As to Old England — let her 'bile.' "

Telegraph communication had also been opened between Des Moines and Omaha, "and a spirited conversation was held the other day between Mr. Morse, the operator at this point, and the operator at Salt Lake City." The line worked "extraordinarily well, requiring but 12 cups for 190 miles," which signified excellent insulation. In Des Moines the office was located on Third Street, and it is recorded that one day a cow, overcome with curiosity, walked up and stuck her head in the south window.

The first regular telegraphic news column carried in the *Register* appeared on January 14, 1862, being "War Dispatches" from Washington dated January 12th and from Cincinnati dated January 13th. The editor was delighted and, being in a jubilant mood, expressed his opinion of the occasion in his gayest manner. "Ever since Adam was an infant," he wrote, "the City of Des Moines, or the site whereon it is located, has been cut off from the exterior



world. We have had no Railroads. We have had no Telegraph. We have been excluded from the activities of commerce. Situated midway between the two great rivers of the continent, without anything but coaches and stage roads to connect us with the rest of mankind, our condition has not been the most pleasant in the world.

“Today our situation is immensely improved. We have the privilege of reading the latest dispatches in our own paper. The lightning and telegraph company have at length made us even with the Mississippi cities; and, blessed be the stars of our destiny, we are even also with the Capital of Nebraska Territory, which although two hundred miles West of us in the land of the aborigines, has been favored with dispatches for the past year. We are a proud people — we are proud that the capital of Iowa has, in a lightning sense, overtaken Omaha, and Brigham Young, in the race of civilization! (That’s sarkasstikal). Sound the hewgag and rejoice.”

The work of construction progressed rapidly all along the line. Within a fortnight after negotiations began in Council Bluffs, the Marshall County *Times* reported that “arrangements had been completed for the construction of a telegraph line to this place; and for its completion the present year.” And this good news was “no humbug”, continued the editor. “The probabilities of its failure are not among the possibilities. We are bound to have a



telegraph to this place, and that too within the next forty days. Then, Marshalltown, situated in the center of Iowa, where less than fifteen years ago, only one broad prairie met the view, will be able to receive the news of any great event from Washington, but a few seconds behind its reception at New York. No longer will our river friends be able to enjoy early news, three days before it can be got to this place. Farewell then to tri-weekly mails for our medium of latest intelligence, and for the current prices. But in place of these antiquated institutions, we can hail with joy the lightning-winged messenger, and the rugged rolling roaring rattling rapid rail road iron horse. All hail the Telegraph and the Rail Road."

On November 26th, the agent of the Pacific Telegraph Company, J. L. Smith of Des Moines, was in Marshalltown contracting for telegraph poles to be used between Newton and Cedar Rapids. The holes would all be dug by Thanksgiving. The line between Council Bluffs and Newton was reported to be ready for the wires, and it was hoped that within two weeks the telegraph would be in operation through Marshalltown.

Those were exciting times. In the midst of war, when rapid communication with all parts of the country was needed as never before, a gap in the transcontinental line of electric communication was being closed. The danger of continual interference by guerrilla warriors in Missouri would be over.



Here was history in the making, obvious to everybody. The completion of the first trans-Iowa telegraph, a span in the long line from coast to coast, was awaited anxiously.

About the first of December, however, progress on the section between Cedar Rapids and Marshalltown seems to have faltered. The contract for building that portion of the line was to be executed by the railroad company, and there were some hints that the telegraph would not be completed ahead of the railroad. "But we think our doubting Thomases had now as well soothe their fears in that direction," wrote the editor of the *Marshalltown Times* on December 10th, "for we are not only to have two wires here, but a third to devote exclusively to local business. The fact that we are to have an office as soon as the wires are put up to here, is not only a sure fact, but it is a fixed and sealed one."

A week later five tons of wire had arrived and the poles were all set between Marshalltown and Newton. Eastward, however, progress was not so rapid, though the work was by no means standing still. Just before Christmas the instruments for the Marshalltown station arrived and were installed in G. M. Woodbury's office. The line was completed to the west by the end of December, and on January 7, 1862, the *Times* contained the following item:

"The telegraph, which six weeks ago no one had the remotest idea would ever see this place before



the railroad did, is now in working order with all points either east or west on any telegraph line. We are now able to send or receive intelligence from California, New York or Boston, as easily and as quick, as we could two months ago hear from any point three miles distant. But such in fact is the case. Dispatches have already been received from Cedar Rapids, Chicago, and from Newton."

Thus the trans-Iowa telegraph began regular operation at all points along the line on the same day. On January 14, 1862, the Marshalltown *Times*, like the Des Moines *Register*, published the first telegraphic news received directly. "The Iowa City, Davenport, and Chicago papers, arriving two and three days after our paper was issued," declared the Marshalltown editor proudly, "brought only the same news our patrons had read in the *Times*."

At first the new wires worked beautifully. On February 7, 1862, says the Council Bluffs *Nonpareil*, "the telegraph lines between Salt Lake, U. T. and Boston, Mass., were connected and direct communication between those two points established,—thus placing Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Chicago, Council Bluffs and Salt Lake in instantaneous communication with each other. Boston and Salt Lake exchanged congratulations and the time of night, the difference being about four hours." This immediate intercourse over a distance of twenty-five hundred miles was considered marvelous.



On account of the great haste with which the line was built across western Iowa, the wire was sometimes stretched between buildings in the towns, and from tree to tree or even along fences in the country. One woman objected to having the wire strung over the house, for, she said, when she wanted to lick the kids she did not propose to have the whole world hearing her.

Curiosity concerning the mechanics of the telegraph was universal among the people along the line. "But how can messages be carried over wires?" was one of the questions most frequently asked. To be honest, to answer this query briefly and yet in a manner to dispel skepticism was a puzzle. A common reply was, "Suppose there was a cat with a tail long enough to reach from Council Bluffs to Cedar Rapids. If you stepped on the tail at Council Bluffs the cat would certainly yowl in Cedar Rapids." Not a bad analogy. Ignorance as to the use of the telegraph was nevertheless wide-spread. On one occasion a man of some education refused to receive a telegram from a friend whom he knew well, because he did not recognize the handwriting.

Haphazardly built as it was, the line proved entirely unable to withstand the ravages of the weather, and during the first winter it went out again and again. "We are somewhat disappointed this morning", says the *Nonpareil* on January 28, 1862, "in not being able to give our readers more extended telegraphic reports. A snow storm was raging in



the eastern part of Iowa all day yesterday, in consequence of which the lines were not in good working order." That the Iowa line left much to be desired as a medium for the dissemination of news may be gleaned from the following complaint which appeared in the *Omaha Republican* of March 26th. "The telegraph line across the State of Iowa, shabbily constructed in the beginning, and always unreliable, is rapidly subsiding into a sort of chronic nuisance. An inferior article of low priced wire, suspended upon bean poles and corn stalks, it is down with every breath of the wind, and just when it is most needed it is utterly worthless. We have had but one 'live' report from that quarter for almost a fortnight, and that was on yesterday afternoon. The effort was too much for it, however, and it collapsed. The Hannibal and St. Joseph line, in the palmiest days of secessionism in Missouri, when the rebel raids were most frequent was a paragon of perfection and reliability compared with this miserable abortion — this humiliating failure. We sincerely hope that its management may pass into other hands, and that speedily, or that it may be abated by proper authorities."

The service was gradually improved, however, the weak places being strengthened, and the line across the prairies of western Iowa along the Dalmanutha stage road remained in operation, playing an important rôle in the transaction of the nation's business until the completion of the Rock Island Rail-



road to Council Bluffs in 1869. This railroad paralleled the telegraph west of Newton, and it was not long until a new and better line constructed along the railroad displaced the pioneer telegraph. The old, historic line was thereupon torn down, and the poles were sold by the mile to the farmers residing along the route.

Barton Garvin purchased two miles of these poles, which he removed to his farm seven miles south of Lewis, using them for fence posts and for joists in sheds and barns. Some are said to be still in a fair state of preservation. One extra-long pine pole served for some time as a tavern sign-post at the Seven Mile House on the road south from Lewis, operated by Robert Mackrill. But this relic was eventually chopped down lest a venturesome English traveller, who wagered a two-bit piece that he could climb the pole, should fall and injure himself.

Thus passed the first trans-Iowa telegraph, having served its purpose and prepared the way for more and better lines.

BEN HUR WILSON