

Comment by the Editor

TO IOWA BY RAIL

If a stranger had inquired the way to Iowa more than a hundred years ago, he would have been told to follow the course of the principal waterways. As all roads once led to Rome, so the streams and lakes of North America brought the explorer, the trader, and the early settler to the garden of prairies between the mighty arms of the Father of Waters. For centuries the arterial routes to the heart of America were the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes-Fox-Wisconsin way and the Ohio-Mississippi-and-Missouri approach.

Then suddenly, within a decade, conditions were changed. The tremendous flood of population that came pouring through the forests and over the prairies required additional means of transportation. Dirt roads and meandering rivers were inadequate for the growing commerce over the great distances of the West. To the settlers who came into the upper Mississippi Valley a century ago, steam locomotives capable of hauling whole trainloads of produce on rail roads seemed to be the obvious solution of the transportation problem.

During the eighteen thirties the legislatures of Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois appropriated millions of dollars for internal improvements in the form of railroads. But financial stringency, the extensive areas of unsettled country, political manipulation, and other factors delayed construction at that time. Eventually, however, the enterprise of capitalists combined with necessity to revive the program of railroad building. Geography suggested an overland union of the Great Lakes with the Mississippi River, and men of vision began to dream of all-rail transcontinental routes.

Between 1848 and 1851, five railroads, following the course of settlement in service to commerce, commenced to stretch westward toward Iowa. The first to start actual construction was the Galena & Chicago Union, though the Milwaukee & Mississippi was undertaken in the following year. Both of these roads, being largely dependent upon local capital, progressed slowly. But the Rock Island and Burlington lines, having the advantage of the experienced management and extensive resources of the powerful eastern roads with which they were affiliated, were built in a remarkably short time.

The Rock Island construction train puffed into Rock Island on the anniversary of Washington's birthday, 1854, only a little more than two years

after the first rails were laid in Chicago. The Burlington reached the Mississippi in March, 1855. Three months later, the Illinois Central steamed into Dunleith, though two-thirds of the route to Chicago was over the track of the Galena & Chicago Union. Meanwhile, the latter road, having abandoned the original route to Galena, was building straight west from Junction. Arriving at Fulton in December, 1855, this predecessor of the North Western thus gained access to the Mississippi at two points in the same year. The Milwaukee, begun in 1849, was completed to Prairie du Chien in 1857.

All of the principal railroads that now cross Iowa reached the eastern border of the State within the short period of three years!

J. E. B.