The Illinois Central Comes

It was a crucial moment in the life of Stephen A. Douglas. The House of Representatives was in solemn session, pondering over his bill to make "a Grant of Land to the States of Illinois, Mississippi, and Alabama, in Aid of the Construction of a Railroad from Chicago to Mobile". The measure had already passed the Senate but a strong undertow of opposition had developed in the House. A similar bill applicable to Illinois exclusively had been defeated two years before because of the opposition of the South and East.

A skillful lobbyist, an adroit politician, Douglas had toiled day and night in behalf of his bill for aid in constructing the Illinois Central Railroad. He had won the support of the Gulf States by extending the line from Cairo to Mobile, a plan that had captured the imagination of the entire Mississippi Valley. He had even made sure of the support of Iowa by accepting Senator George Wallace Jones's amendment to extend the road from Galena to the Mississippi opposite Dubuque. His activity among his own constituents was attested by the petitions and memorials that poured in from Illinois. It was September 17, 1850, when the

vote was taken and the proponents breathlessly awaited the results. The bill passed the House by a slim majority and was signed by President Fillmore on September 20, 1850. It was a brilliant victory for the stocky politician from Illinois.

The land grant bill of 1850 was the initial step in a benevolent policy of government aid to western railroads. It granted to the State of Illinois alternate sections of land for six miles on each side of a railroad that was to extend from "the southern terminus of the Illinois and Michigan Canal to a point at or near the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, with a branch of the same to Chicago, on Lake Michigan, and another via the town of Galena in said State, to Dubuque in the State of Iowa". The bill also granted a right of way through the public lands with permission to take all the earth, stone, and timber necessary for construction purposes. Land already sold or preëmpted was not to be disturbed, other land being substituted. All unsold government land remaining within six miles of the road was not to be sold for less than $2.50 an acre, or double the minimum price of ordinary public land. In case the railroad was not completed within ten years all money arising from the sale of the land, together with the unsold land, was to revert to the United States. Government troops and property

were to be carried "free from toll" and mail was to be carried at such rates as Congress might prescribe. The same "rights, privileges, and liabilities" were granted Alabama and Mississippi. The Illinois Central was the first land grant railroad in the United States.

The Illinois Central had its inception about the time of the Black Hawk War. It was Lieutenant Governor A. M. Jenkins who first proposed a survey for the building of a railroad through central Illinois from Cairo to Peru. The project kindled the imagination of many far-sighted men and by 1835 it was the center of an animated political discussion. The scheme crystallized on January 18, 1836, when the Illinois legislature passed a bill authorizing the construction of a railroad from the "mouth of the Ohio . . . to a point on the Illinois river, at or near the termination of the Illinois and Michigan Canal". A group of fifty-nine men comprised the corporation, the most prominent of whom were Governor John Reynolds, A. M. Jenkins, Pierre Menard, Sidney Breese, and Darius B. Holbrook. The capital stock of the company was set at $2,500,000.

Nothing was done under the charter of 1836 but it served as the backbone of a similar project in the Internal Improvement Act of 1837. Stephen A. Douglas was a Democratic member of this

"most memorable, and least creditable" of Illinois legislatures. Among the Whigs was one, Abraham Lincoln, who headed the "Long Nine" from Sangamon County. Both men favored the Internal Improvement Act whereby millions were appropriated in this hectic legislative saturnalia. The largest single appropriation was $3,500,000 for a railroad running from Cairo via Vandalia, Shelbyville, Decatur, and Bloomington, to some point near the southern terminus of the Illinois and Michigan Canal from whence the road was to be continued by way of Savanna to Galena. The wild orgy of spending was cut short by the panic of 1837 with little to show for the millions spent.

Still another attempt was made to construct a central railroad through Illinois. On March 6, 1843, the legislature incorporated the Great Western Railway Company, commonly known as the Holbrook Company after its president, Darius B. Holbrook. Large sums were expended but conditions were not favorable and the whole scheme ended with heavy losses to the promoters and nothing gained by the State.

The failure of the Holbrook Company demonstrated the need of federal aid and from 1843 to 1850 all efforts had been bent in this direction. Sidney Breese, sometimes called the "Father of the Illinois Central", introduced the first land

grant bill but it was left to Stephen A. Douglas, who entered the Senate in 1847, to steer his bill successfully through both houses of Congress.

The grant of 1850 injected new life into the project for a great central railroad through Illinois. When the legislature assembled at Springfield in January, 1851, Darius Holbrook and Sidney Breese attempted to revive the Great Western Railway, but their proposition was frowned upon by most of the legislators. Charges of bribery and fraud filled the air, the leading citizens of Illinois were maligned, and a malicious political fight boded no good for the bill.

Suddenly, in the midst of the debate, a business-like memorial was presented by Robert Rantoul in behalf of a group of wealthy New York and Boston capitalists. These men proposed to build a railroad "equal in all respects" to the one running between Boston and Albany and in return would pay the State a fixed percentage of the gross receipts in return for the land. It was an excellent, clear-cut proposition that met with the hearty approval of the legislators, and on February 10, 1851, Governor Augustus C. French signed a bill incorporating the present-day Illinois Central Railroad Company.

The company was granted a perpetual charter, and was exempted from all property taxes. The

remains of the old State surveys and gradings, together with the federal land grant and right of way, was also conferred upon it. In return, the company was to complete the main line in four years and the branches in six. It was to build a first-class road and release the State from any responsibility connected with the grant. Finally, it was to pay Illinois seven per cent of the gross earnings of the company.

On March 19, 1851, a few eastern capitalists met in a dimly lighted room in New York City and formally organized the Illinois Central by designating themselves as directors, by accepting the articles of incorporation and making provision for the various requirements contained therein, and by electing Robert Schuyler as president. Schuyler was most active in organizing the corporation and guiding it through its formative years. He was an experienced railroad executive, controlling or directing such companies as the New York and New Haven, the Boston and Albany, the Alton and Sangamon, and the Great Western.

Equally important was Robert Rantoul, a leading Massachusetts lawyer, who succeeded Daniel Webster in the Senate. Rantoul was most influential in securing the charter from the Illinois legislature, and shaped the financial policy of the company. Prominent among the other directors

were Gouverneur Morris, Jonathan Sturgis, David A. Neal, Joseph W. Alsop, Franklin Haven, John F. A. Sanford, and Thomas W. Ludlow. All of these founders were men who "lived and moved in the healthy atmosphere of commercial probity and stood high in the estimation of their fellowmen. The enterprise upon which they pinned their faith they promoted and sustained to a large extent with their private fortunes."

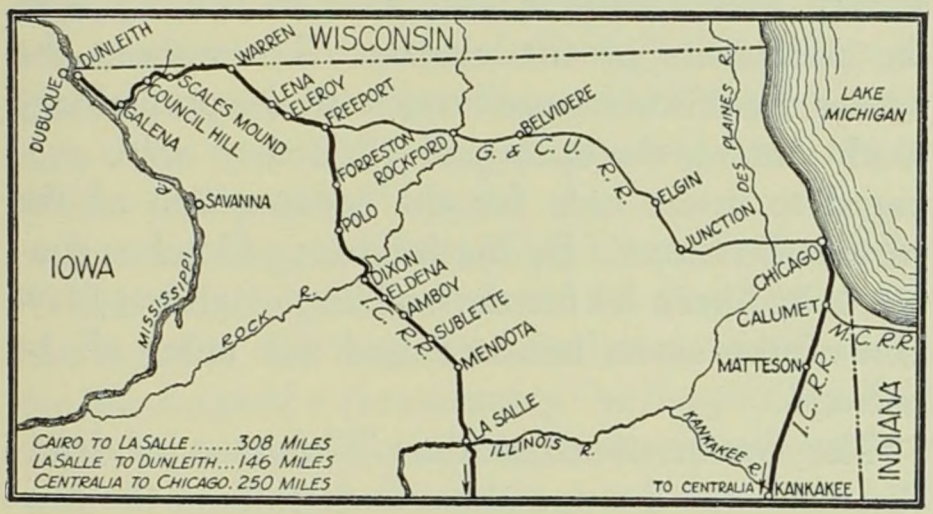
The charter stipulated that work on the main line must commence by January 1, 1852, and must be completed within four years from the date of incorporation. Six years were allowed for completing the branch lines. Within three days after the organization of the company, Roswell B. Mason was appointed chief engineer. Mason was a man of action, skilled in engineering and in railroad construction. He had proved his worth working under Schuyler as superintendent of the New York and New Haven. Several of the engineers who found employment under him in the building of the Illinois Central distinguished themselves in later life. Thus Timothy B. Blackstone built the Chicago and Alton Railway system and was for thirty-five years its president; Henry B. Plant founded what is now the Atlantic Coast Line System and the Plant System of hotels and steamship lines in the South; Grenville M. Dodge

became a major-general in the Civil War and the chief engineer of the Union Pacific.

The company was given considerable latitude in locating the road, for only five specific points — Dubuque, Galena, Chicago, Cairo, and the southern terminus of the Illinois-Michigan Canal — were specified in the charter. Mason divided the territory to be surveyed into seven districts and appointed division engineers over each. Timothy Blackstone was stationed at La Salle and B. B. Provoost was quartered at Freeport to supervise the survey from Dunleith to Eldena. The other engineers were placed at Chicago, Urbana, Vandalia, Jonesboro, and Decatur. Throughout the summer and fall Mason visited the various locations, consulted with his engineers, and late in the fall had "substantially" completed the profiles and maps of the route.

During the survey and throughout the construction of the road, the company was confronted with bitter contests and sectional rivalries all along the route. Savanna and Freeport were intensely jealous and each took active measures to secure the railroad, even going so far as to institute legal proceedings to force the company to choose the one instead of the other. Galena was hostile to the extension of the road to Dunleith, realizing it would mean the end of her commercial greatness.

Despite such opposition and bickering, the route was selected entirely on its economic and engineering merits. The main line from Cairo to La Salle was quite straight, only slight variations being made to include such important towns as



THE ROUTE OF THE ILLINOIS CENTRAL

Vandalia, Decatur, and Bloomington. One stretch of track south of La Salle extended sixty miles without a curve. On the Galena branch, the route via Freeport was finally selected and an arrangement made with the Galena and Chicago Union whereby the Illinois Central would build the road to Dunleith and both would enjoy a joint use of the track into Chicago. The location of the Chicago branch, now the main line, was selected in preference to one farther east, and Centralia was designated the junction point.

The formal construction of the Illinois Central was begun on December 23, 1851, when ground was broken at both Cairo and Chicago "amidst elaborate ceremonies, the salutes of cannon, and the ringing of bells". These proceedings were merely perfunctory in character to comply with the provisions of the charter. Throughout the winter the officers were busy with the preliminary work and by the spring of 1852 they were prepared to invite bids for the construction of the various divisions. By the following October contracts had been let for the building of all but fifty-two of the seven hundred and five miles of the railroad.

The construction of this "Colossus of Rail-Rhodes" was a stupendous undertaking, the proposed road being more than twice the length of the New York and Erie — at that time the longest railroad in the United States. The latter road, moreover, ran through a thickly populated region while the Illinois Central was surveyed through a virtually uninhabited wilderness.

Such sparsely populated country afforded few laborers — a serious problem in any such undertaking. The company was obliged to establish recruiting stations at New York and New Orleans. It also sent labor agents to Montreal, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Louis-

ville, and Saint Louis. Agents for rival companies lurked about the I. C. construction camps to entice workers away with offers of better pay. Unskilled laborers received one dollar a day, and in 1853 the workers between Galena and Dunleith struck for $1.25 a day and regular hours. About one hundred men marched through the streets of Galena to present their demands to the contractors. The standard working day was from ten to twelve and one-half hours.

A noted Iowan, Henry Clay Dean, declared the Illinois Central workers were the "real builders" of the road. Such men, he declared, would enjoy the blessings of a free country "as long as the wild shriek of the iron horse mingles its reverberations with the majestic murmurings of the father of floods."

Cholera spread a withering hand over the Mississippi Valley during the building of the road. Men at work one day were in their graves the next, one hundred and thirty dying at Peru within the space of ten days. Men who were not stricken "scattered like frightened sheep". The prevalence of fever and ague, and the fact that it was dangerous during the summer months to eat either beef or butter, or to drink milk because of the "milk sickness", alarmed the workmen and added to the difficulties.

Still another foe to construction was the presence of numerous saloons and the sale of whisky to the workmen. Drunken brawls and riots were not uncommon and in December, 1853, State troops were called into La Salle following a riot in which a contractor was murdered, another man killed, and several others wounded. At Cairo a citizen was killed following a drunken riot and one hundred and fifty laborers left in a body. The company made every effort to drive out the whisky dispensers, according to Mason, but they continued to "menace the work, and every new construction camp that was established was followed by the location of one or more of these disreputable groggeries."

Despite such handicaps the work proceeded with astonishing rapidity. The first section of track to be opened on the Illinois Central was the fourteen mile stretch between Chicago and Calumet. Opened on May 15, 1852, it formed a junction with the Michigan Central which ran the first passenger train from Detroit to Chicago over this Illinois Central track on May 21st. The Michigan Southern and Northern Indiana had previously entered Chicago from Toledo via Englewood over the Rock Island tracks on April 22, 1852. This company had insisted that the Illinois Central must build a viaduct to cross its track. Clashes

had occurred between the workmen of the two roads, but the Illinois Central finally sent laborers to build the crossing under cover of darkness. The watchmen of the M. S. & N. I. were taken by surprise and overpowered, and by dawn the crossing had been effected. Thus another link had been welded in the chain of railroads that were shackling the Mississippi Valley with the Atlantic seaboard.

The opening of the track to Kankakee on July 11, 1853, was hailed with enthusiasm by the Chicago *Democratic Press,* which declared the "magnificent thoroughfare" through central Illinois was "greater far than the Appian Way". "It will be the beginning of a proud era in the history of our city and State", the paper declared, "when the fiery courser first turns his head in the direction of his predestined track over the prairies of Illinois, the rivers and plains and gorges of Kentucky, Tennessee and Alabama."

The main trunk of the road, extending from Cairo to La Salle and embracing 308 miles of track, had to be completed within four years from February 10, 1851. The first sixty miles between La Salle and Bloomington were opened for business on May 16, 1853, and a week later the first passenger train was operated over the route. Spurred by promises of a liberal bonus, the con-

tractors engaged extra tracklayers and teams to cart iron a few miles in advance of the regular party where the extra party would commence work. When the regular party reached this point they in turn would go on a few miles in advance and continue their labor. The main track was completed and officially opened by January 1, 1855. "What more need be said", queried the Chicago *Democratic Press* on December 23, 1854, "of the energy and skill of those who have achieved this work? They need no eulogy from us — they have written one for themselves — written it in broad lines across our State — lines that are as immovable as the everlasting hills!"

Next to be completed was the Galena branch, which extended from La Salle through Mendota, Dixon, Freeport, Warren, and Galena, to Dunleith opposite Dubuque. The track between La Salle and Mendota was opened on November 14, 1853. During the year 1854 the road was completed between Freeport and Galena, the Galena and Chicago Union assisting the I. C. by transporting its rails and equipment from Chicago. The road was opened to Warren on January 9th, to Scales Mound on September 11th, and to Galena on October 30th. The leading citizens of the surly mining town were invited to participate in a free excursion to Rockford, a treat which the

Galena *Advertiser* believed would put a "final extinguisher" to Galena's old notions of travel by rail. The track from Mendota to Freeport was opened on February 1, 1855, leaving only one more link to be forged to cement Iowa with Chicago on the east and Cairo on the south.

It was a scant seventeen miles from Galena to the Mississippi and Iowa where the arrival of the railroad had been anxiously awaited. In the five years between 1850 and 1855, little Dunleith across the river from Dubuque had leaped from a population of five to 700. An engine house with a capacity of twelve locomotives was almost completed; a splendid freight house of "Dubuque Marble" graced the bank of the Mississippi; and the Argyle House was said to be one of the finest hostelries in the West.

The track was finished to Dunleith early in June, 1855, and some Pottawattamie Indians were given a ride on a construction car. An eye-witness declared the Indians "whooped and hallooed until they rivalled the neigh of the iron steed. But the shriek of that animal evidently took them down for one poor Indian jumped nearly three feet in the air when the engineer let his 'critter' loose." It was on June 12th that the railroad was officially opened to the Mississippi and another outlet provided for the resources of Iowa.

Dubuque turned out in gala attire on July 18, 1855, to celebrate. Cannons roared, bands blared out martial music, and the people sweltered in the hot sun. It was fitting that George Wallace Jones should be the president of the day. It was even more fitting that the speaker of the day, Senator Stephen A. Douglas, should reply to the toast: "*The Illinois Central Railroad.* — The great work of the age. Its roots firmly planted in the fertile soil of Kentucky and Missouri, its trunk and branches nourished by the genial climate of Illinois, and the heavy dews of Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota descending on its head, how can it but flourish?"

Meanwhile the Chicago branch remained unfinished. The track had been opened to Urbana on July 24, 1854, and to Mattoon on June 25, 1855, a week after the Dubuque celebration, and construction work was concentrated on the 77 mile stretch between Mattoon and Centralia. The last spike was formally driven on September 26, 1856. At that time the company owned 83 locomotives, 52 passenger cars and 1249 freight cars. The 705 miles of the "best built railroad in the West" had cost $26,568,017, or $37,600 a mile.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN