

## Comment by the Editor

### *THE CONQUERING RAILROADS*

Railroad building during the third quarter of the last century was a glorious adventure. Men of vision saw an opportunity to transform a vast wilderness into productive Commonwealths. Great cities, teeming with population and hustling with industry, sprang up at the crossroads of commerce; while from north to south and east to west across the broad valley of the Mississippi spread the checkered fields of cotton, corn, and other grain. Men of wealth perceived unminted fortunes in constructing continental transportation systems. Here was a chance for men of courage to stake their money, skill, and reputation on the conquest of the prairies, and win an empire.

There can be no doubt of the tremendous influence of the railroads upon the development of the West. It took a hundred and fifty years for settlement to reach the Appalachians. Another half century was consumed in pushing the frontier to the Mississippi, even though the rivers flowed in the right direction to provide convenient routes of travel. But within the next fifty years, in spite of mountain barriers and desert spaces, the frontier

was eliminated entirely. Under the leadership of the railroad builders, the deliberate advance of the settlers became a headlong rush of speculators. The locomotive outdistanced the covered wagon. Towns were planned before the inhabitants arrived; and the means of marketing agricultural produce were provided before the prairie sod was broken.

But the rapid growth of the West was not, perhaps, an unmitigated benefit. It was great sport while it lasted; and as an example of business foresight, indomitable purpose, and tireless energy it is unparalleled in human achievement. Yet students of western history suggest that the prairie States were populated too fast to permit social and economic adjustments. The bewildered people, confronted with strange problems that they did not fully comprehend, sought relief from their distress in political action. The various agrarian movements in the seventies, eighties, and nineties were the inevitable consequences of the process by which the West was reduced to cultivation.

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