

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## The Burlington Comes

A triumvirate of men — a lawyer, a financier, and an engineer — brought the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad to Iowa. The lawyer, James Frederick Joy, was destined to see his name become a synonym for the entire Burlington System. The financier, John Murray Forbes, gave to the Burlington a "character and stability" which distinguished it sharply from most other roads of that day. The engineer, John W. Brooks, served as a director of the Burlington for a score of years and as president of the Iowa and Nebraska divisions. Constantly confronted by almost insuperable odds, Brooks proved himself "a perfect Napoleon" as a manager and engineer and was a vital element in the history of the road.

The coming of the Burlington to Iowa is replete with thrilling incidents. Although its corporate history began in Illinois, the prologue had its inception in the law office of James F. Joy in Detroit



in 1845. New Hampshire born, a graduate of Dartmouth College and the Harvard Law School, Joy had come west to Detroit in 1836 to practice law. Within a few months he saw the Michigan legislature appropriate millions for railroad construction across the State. During the ensuing years the Michigan Central was constructed from Detroit to Kalamazoo while the Michigan Southern was built from Toledo, Ohio, to Hillsdale. The panic of 1837 paralyzed further construction, whereupon a loud clamor arose for early completion of the roads by private capital.

Joy was among those who urged the sale of the property to a private company. He found an ardent supporter in John W. Brooks, a twenty-six-year-old engineer and former superintendent of the Auburn and Rochester Railroad. Although the Michigan Central was in "shabby" condition, Brooks and Joy felt it would be a profitable investment if it were rebuilt and completed to Lake Michigan. Brooks accordingly went east in the fall of 1845 in search of financial support.

Fortune led Brooks to the counting-room of John Murray Forbes, a wealthy Bostonian who had won a considerable fortune in China. Fascinated by the prospect of sponsoring a railroad through the Michigan wilderness, the young financier agreed to support the project, and



straightway hired Daniel Webster to draft a charter that would be acceptable to eastern capital.

When Brooks returned to secure the approval of the Michigan legislature, he found the State had placed its railroads on the bargain counter. The Michigan Central Railroad Company agreed to buy the Detroit-Kalamazoo road for \$2,000,000, but the successful consummation of this act rested on Forbes's ability to raise sufficient funds in six months to pay for the property.

Forbes pitched into his task with enthusiasm. His good judgment and integrity quickly won the support of eastern capital and on September 23, 1846, the Michigan Central took possession of its property. Forbes was elected the first president and Brooks was appointed superintendent. By the spring of 1849 the old road had been rebuilt and extended to New Buffalo on Lake Michigan. More than six million dollars were required in the purchase, construction, and equipment of this line which still serves as a main artery of travel to Iowa by way of Chicago.

Both Forbes and Brooks realized that the rapidly expanding traffic was bound to invite competition. Some New York financiers had purchased the Michigan Southern road and commenced building around Lake Michigan. At the same time a railroad was projected along the southern shore



of Lake Erie to connect Toledo with Buffalo, New York. The completion of these two projects would give the Michigan Southern an all-rail connection between the Atlantic seaboard and Chicago, thus relegating the Michigan Central to the position of a purely local road. The directors of the Michigan Central promptly accepted the challenge by granting their officers unlimited powers to cope with this new and dangerous rival.

It was Joy who struck the first blow. Trained to detect loopholes in legal documents, he found the charter of the New Albany and Salem "conveniently vague" to allow that southern Indiana road to build a "branch" around Lake Michigan. While Brooks was engaged in racing the Northern Indiana construction force around Lake Michigan, Joy sought to procure an entrance into Chicago over the Illinois Central track. In the litigation that followed he obtained the services of Abraham Lincoln and an agreement was reached whereby the Michigan Central purchased \$600,000 in Illinois Central bonds as the price for the privilege of using that track. Finally, the Michigan Central stockholders invested heavily in the Great Western of Canada in order to obtain direct access to the east by way of Ontario.

The first through train from Lake Erie entered Chicago on May 21, 1852, over the track of the



Illinois Central. It was a brilliant victory for the Michigan Central. The Michigan Southern had been running trains from Indiana into Chicago as early as April 22, 1852. A thirteen mile gap in Indiana, however, prevented it from beginning through service from Toledo until a day after the first through train of the Michigan Central.

But the rivalry between the two roads did not stop at Chicago. The smoke of battle had hardly cleared on this front when the Michigan Central found the rival company subsidizing and building the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad to the Mississippi. Would the Michigan Central accept the challenge? Did the ultimate returns on the capital invested justify the continuance of such devastating competition? The Michigan Central men looked to their financier for the answer.

Forbes realized that the gold rush to California was "the direct cause of the construction of four-fifths of the Western railways" begun after 1849. And while he did not minimize the economic, political, and military value of a transcontinental railroad, he was convinced that the rich prairies of Illinois and Iowa would yield the railroad investor his richest harvest. In 1852 Forbes wrote Edward Everett Hale that "the strong hands and empty stomachs of Europe, and the rich *Dollar-an-acre* Prairies of the West" must be



brought together by business methods and philanthropy. "California", he asserted, "is a cypher in comparison, a mere producer of the *measure* of value, not of value itself." Heartened by such glowing prospects, the Michigan Central directors determined to extend their line westward.

As chief counsel for the Michigan Central, Joy was delegated to rummage through the Illinois railroad charters to find an outlet to Iowa. Since the Rock Island was already under construction and the Illinois Central and the Galena and Chicago Union were extending their lines into northwestern Illinois, Joy scrutinized the charters leading to the southwest. Unable to find a road that stretched clear across the State, the resourceful Joy hit upon the idea of combining four roads that sprawled aimlessly in a southwesterly direction between the Illinois and Mississippi rivers. Three of these — the Aurora Branch, the Northern Cross, and the Peoria and Oquawka — had been incorporated in February, 1849, by local capitalists. The Central Military Tract Railroad had been chartered by irate citizens of Galesburg on February 15, 1851, when the Peoria and Oquawka was surveyed. If the charters of these companies could be amended to permit the welding of the terminals together so as to give the Michigan Central a direct run into Chicago, the company



would have little to fear from its chief competitor.

The Michigan Central managers lost no time in opening negotiations. Fortunately, they found each road in a receptive mood, for local capital had proven utterly inadequate. Indeed, three of the companies had already made overtures for aid in the East through such men as Chauncey S. Colton of the Central Military Tract Railroad and James W. Grimes, a director of the Peoria and Oquawka. By agreeing to furnish the required capital, the Michigan Central secured amendments to their charters at a special session of the Illinois legislature in June, 1852, which included the desired changes and made the project acceptable to conservative eastern investors. Forbes immediately set to work raising funds to push active construction. He had acted none too soon, for some of the companies were already on the verge of being connected with the Rock Island and would thus have been absorbed by the Michigan Southern interests.

The nucleus from which the present-day Burlington System developed was the Aurora Branch Railroad, a company that had been incorporated to build a single or double track railroad from the "town of Aurora" northward to some "eligible and convenient" point of connection with the Galena & Chicago Union Railroad. Contracts on the

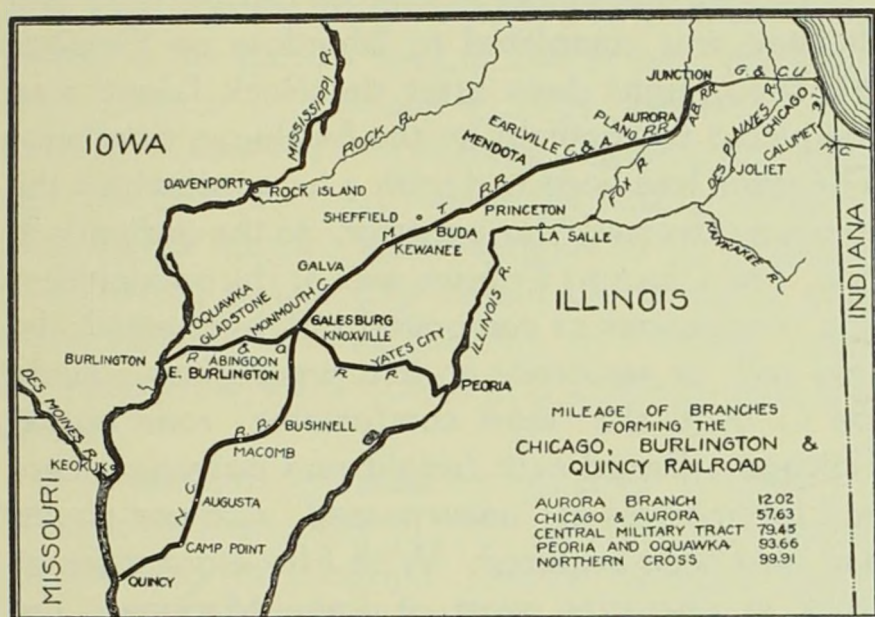


Aurora Branch were let late in 1849 and on September 2, 1850, the road was opened for business to Junction (West Chicago), twelve miles directly north of Aurora. On October 21, 1850, through train service was inaugurated between Aurora and Chicago over the crude second-hand strap rail tracks of the Aurora Branch and the G. & C. U. Passengers paid \$1.25 for this forty-two mile trip; potatoes, wheat, and shelled corn were transported for five cents a bushel; oats and buckwheat for three and a half cents; and barley at four and a half cents. The tariff on flour and salt was sixteen cents a barrel, while lumber could be shipped for \$1.50 per thousand. The equipment of the Aurora Branch at that time consisted of a second-hand locomotive and passenger car together with two freight cars borrowed from the Galena company. In 1933 the equipment of the Burlington, which traces its corporate beginnings to the Aurora Branch, included 1300 locomotives, 1200 passenger cars, and 60,000 freight cars.

A number of changes were made in the Aurora Branch charter by Joy. First, the name of the corporation was changed to the Chicago and Aurora Railroad Company. Next, the new organization was permitted to increase its capital stock to a sum not exceeding two million dollars. Finally, the C. & A. was to extend in a southwest-



erly direction from Aurora to a point at least fifteen miles north of La Salle where it was to intersect the Illinois Central and also form a junction with the Central Military Tract Railroad. The



point selected, an uninhabited prairie in 1850, grew in a twinkling. Organized as a town in 1853, Mendota had 1800 inhabitants by 1855.

The first meeting of the Chicago and Aurora stockholders was held in Chicago on July 6, 1852. The directors and officers of the Aurora Branch were retained in office, but the presence of Joy and Brooks on the directorate signified the influence of eastern capital. The stock of the company was promptly over-subscribed, the *Chicago Democrat*



observing that the road was controlled by a "stronger and wealthier" group of capitalists than any other company. In the following year, 1853, Joy became president of the road.

Construction began at Aurora during 1852 and the line was completed to Mendota on October 20, 1853, eight days after the Rock Island was completed to Sheffield by the Michigan Southern. The track had been laid with a new rail which the company deemed "far superior" to the ordinary T rail. The *Chicago Tribune* was of the opinion that this "continuous or compound rail, over which the cars roll, as smoothly as if it were glass", made the C. & A. the "most comfortable" road out of Chicago. Brand new freight and passenger cars and locomotives of "unsurpassed" size and power had also been acquired. With fifty-eight miles of track in operation west of Lake Michigan, the Michigan Central was prepared to throw the full force of its energy into the development of the Central Military Tract Railroad.

This company had originally planned a connection with the old Rock Island and La Salle Railroad. The amendment to its charter dated June 19, 1852, authorized the C. M. T. to construct a road from Galesburg "in a northeasterly direction, on the most direct and eligible route towards the City of Chicago, to a point . . . on or near



the line of the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad, or on or near the line of any other railroad or railroads connecting with or extending to the said City of Chicago". The route from Galesburg to Mendota was selected for its beauty and fertility. "If Illinois is the garden spot of the West," the *Chicago Tribune* of January 4, 1854, asserted, "the Central Military Tract is more certainly the garden spot of Illinois, and when this road is finished, piercing the 'garden spot' through its very centre, it will bring to our city an amount of trade and travel greater than all that we now derive from the various railroads connecting Chicago with the interior."

A preliminary estimate by engineer William P. Whittle on December 1, 1851, had put the cost of constructing the proposed Central Military Tract Railroad at \$13,224.80 per mile. A passenger and freight depot at Galesburg costing \$2500 and some first class passenger coaches costing \$2000 attest the modesty of Whittle's estimates. Yet without more than local support, the progenitors of the C. M. T. did "not expect to carry the enterprise to a successful issue".

The entrance of the Michigan Central into the C. M. T. was followed by the election of John W. Brooks to the presidency. Under his able direction the road was completed and placed in



operation to Galesburg on December 7, 1854. In his report to the stockholders on April 2, 1855, Brooks listed the sources from which construction funds had been derived. A total of \$727,111.80 had been raised on the 9861 shares of stock. Of this amount eastern capitalists had paid \$541,925 on 7225 shares while western subscribers had advanced \$185,186.80 on 2636 shares. Although the road had been "so far completed as to be open to public use", only seventy-five dollars had been called on each one hundred dollar share. Despite this fact one-sixth of the western shareholders had been able to contribute an average of only  $42\frac{1}{2}$  per cent on the amount called. A total of \$1,491,000 in first and second mortgage bonds bearing seven and eight per cent interest had been sold at a discount. Smaller items listed by Brooks brought the total receipts to \$2,413,955.52. Against this sum the company had spent \$2,299,786.25 or \$28,747.32 a mile for construction and equipment.

The C. M. T. earned \$451,895.49 in its first year of operation ending April 30, 1856. The rolling stock consisted of 19 locomotives, 6 first-class passenger cars and 2 baggage cars, 50 coal and 51 platform cars, and 116 house freight cars. The company had experimented successfully with a rebuilt coal-burning locomotive and had accordingly



ordered four new coal-burning engines. These were "so constructed as to burn the smoke", thus avoiding one "serious objection" to coal as a fuel.

The Peoria and Oquawka, which had been authorized to build a railroad from Peoria to the "town of Oquawka", served as the means of closing the final gap in the line to the Mississippi. On July 1, 1853, the C. M. T. had arranged to have this company locate its road within the southern limits of Galesburg in order to provide a connection to Burlington. On October 3, 1854, the P. & O. made a joint contract with the C. & A. and the C. M. T. leasing its road between Galesburg and the Mississippi for three years following its completion. The track to East Burlington was opened for traffic on March 17, 1855.

The arrival of the iron horse on the banks of the Mississippi opposite Burlington was a proud event in the history of that city. A grand celebration was held on May 31st at which the "beauty and fashion" and "chivalry and power" of Ottumwa, Agency City, Fairfield, Mount Pleasant, New London, Keokuk, Davenport, and other Iowa towns mingled with the "selected" elegance and talent of the East. Arriving in ten "superb" passenger cars drawn by the "huge and gallant iron horse", the guests, among whom were Lewis Cass, Stephen A. Douglas, and Mayor Boone of



Chicago, received a warm greeting by the reception committee headed by Governor James W. Grimes. The evening was delightfully spent in music and dancing, speeches and feasting.

Only one segment, the Northern Cross Railroad, remained unfinished. Originally included in the Internal Improvement Act of 1837, the old Northern Cross was planned to traverse central Illinois by way of Quincy and Springfield. The first locomotive in Illinois was alleged to have been put in service on the eight mile track running eastward from Meredosia on November 8, 1838. During the ensuing years, however, the road had rotted away and on February 10, 1849, citizens of Quincy and vicinity had revived the title and in 1851 this company was authorized to construct a branch line "through the Military Bounty Tract, and terminating at the most convenient and eligible point at or near the southern termination of the Illinois and Michigan Canal". This act had been amended in 1852 to allow the Northern Cross to connect with a railroad leading into Chicago. Only twenty miles had been completed north of Quincy by January 19, 1855, when the Michigan Central took charge. The remaining eighty miles were completed by January 31, 1856.

It was not until 1864 that the web of steel, upon which the Joy-Forbes-Brooks triumvirate had been



spinning for a dozen years, was completed. By 1855 Joy had become president of both the Chicago and Aurora and the Central Military Tract Railroads. Two years previously the *Chicago Democrat* had expressed a hope that the Michigan Central would consolidate the names as well as the roads so that the editors could "with a single scratch of the pen" let the people know what they were talking about. The Chicago and Aurora was incorporated as the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad Company on February 14, 1855. This company absorbed the Central Military Tract Railroad on July 9, 1856, under the caption The Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Rail Road Company. On April 28, 1864, this company purchased at foreclosure the Northern Cross which had been previously named the Quincy and Chicago. That portion of the old P. & O. which had been built between Peoria and East Burlington was acquired in the grand consolidation of June 24, 1864, when the company assumed its present-day title: Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN