

The
PALIMPSEST
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THE EDITOR

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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THE PALIMPSEST

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Burlington Westward

Highways — the arteries of commerce and communication — have always contained the life-blood of community growth and prosperity. To increase and improve such facilities promotes the general welfare. Conversely, to cut off or stifle the normal flow of commerce spells ruin. These axiomatic principles were well understood by the alert founders of river towns along the eastern border of Iowa. From the beginning of settlement road building was inseparably associated with the development of the Commonwealth.

When, in the spring of 1833, the first settlers crossed the Mississippi to make their new homes in the Black Hawk Purchase, the only semblance of roads they found were the Indian trails. Since these paths usually followed the most practicable routes, they became the wagon roads of the pioneers. As settlement increased, the problem of locating new roads and improving those already well established attracted much attention.

Most of the main highways were provided by law. For example, on January 25, 1839, the Territorial legislature appointed Enoch H. Sexson and Daniel Strong of Des Moines County and Grinder Wilson of Henry County, to lay out a road, "commencing at Burlington, in Des Moines county, thence to Trenton, thence to Joseph York's, thence to Lee's, and then west to the Indian boundary line." Such "Territorial roads" followed the most eligible route between settlements, regardless of section lines. Indeed, most of the land had not yet been surveyed.

In a sense the Territorial highway from Burlington westward was the actual beginning of the great "Burlington Route" westward. On January 17, 1840, the legislature appointed a commission to review the route of this road in Des Moines County and recommend improvements. At an extra session in the following summer, the Legislative Assembly directed the Governor to "appoint a competent surveyor, or engineer, whose duty it shall be to relocate" this Territorial road "as nearly on a straight line" from "the northwest corner of the public square in the old town of Burlington" to the western boundary of the county, "as the nature of the route will permit". The route led west to the road through "Dutch Town"; thence, in a northwesterly direction to a

point where it turned due west into Middletown; thence, again in a northwesterly direction to where it crosses the line between Des Moines and Henry counties, in section 31, Pleasant Grove Township. It is probable that this point of entrance into Henry County was not far from the place where the present United States Highway 34 now crosses the county line.

Even before 1839, there was doubtless considerable travel in this same general direction between the river and such fast-growing pioneer settlements as New London and Mount Pleasant, for, in 1837, when New London and Center townships in Henry County, through which this road was located, were first surveyed by United States Deputy Surveyor Charles H. Fish, he marked off on his field maps a distinct trail across the open prairie, commencing near this point on the Henry County line, passing through New London, on out to Mount Pleasant, and beyond, roughly paralleled by the Territorial road legally established in 1839. However, between New London and Mount Pleasant the old "pre-survey trail" seems to have run, in places, from a half to possibly a mile farther north. This, no doubt, was due to the necessity of keeping on higher ground, as there were no grades or bridges over the creeks and gullies intersecting the route.

The decade from 1840 to 1850 was a period of exceptionally rapid internal development. But the building and improvement of the highways did not keep pace with the times. In the brief span of a few years, many of the small pioneer villages grew into towns of importance. This was particularly true of the "Port of Burlington", through which thousands of eastern immigrants were continually entering the Iowa country. Often the ferries were swamped with business for days at a time, while the highways were fairly choked with the slow-moving traffic of the pioneers' wagons. During wet seasons, the muddy highways made travel almost impossible.

Toward the end of the decade, as the traffic multiplied almost four-fold, the inadequate transportation facilities became intolerable. Complaint abounded. Newspaper dispatches and travelers from the east spoke of wonderful highway improvements in the older sections of the country. Miles of road, they said, were paved with planks.

In the vicinity of Chicago the "plank road" fever became something like an epidemic. The apparent success of this type of hard-surfacing was a direct challenge to the people of the trans-Mississippi region. Indeed, one such road pointed finger-like from Chicago toward Burlington for a distance of nearly sixty miles.

BEN HUR WILSON

Planked from Burlington

By 1847, the citizens of Burlington, Mount Pleasant, and intervening communities, being keenly alive to the grave necessity of improving their connecting highway, were discussing the possibilities of constructing a new all-weather road. It was then supposed that railroads were too expensive; and besides, there would be little advantage in building a line "beginning nowhere and ending nowhere," without rail connections.

In view of the abundance of hard-wood timber readily available along the route of the proposed highway, it was likewise agreed that the construction of a plank road might not only be practicable, but profitable. During the summer and autumn, local meetings were held at different places along the route to discuss the project, and in the following winter the "Burlington and Mount Pleasant Plank Road Company" was organized by a number of prominent local citizens. The articles of incorporation were published in the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* on February 8, 1848.

A. W. Carpenter, J. F. Henry, William Walker, and J. G. Foote were authorized to sell stock at Burlington; T. L. Sergent and C. Chi-

chester at Middletown; D. Hendershott and Loudon Mullen at New London; and A. Saunders and A. B. Porter at Mount Pleasant. Preliminary surveys of the route were run and by fall the officers felt justified in requesting legislative authority to obtain a right of way and construct the road. Accordingly, on January 15, 1849, the Second General Assembly of Iowa granted to William F. Coolbaugh of Des Moines County, Alvin Saunders of Henry County, and their associates the privilege of constructing a graded road thirty feet wide from Burlington to Mount Pleasant, by way of Middletown and New London as near as practicable to the existing highway, provided that work be started within two years.

This act also included other important details. For instance, should any property owner "refuse his or her consent to the location of said road through his or her premises," three disinterested persons were to assess the amount of damage, if any, suffered by the owner. Provision was also made for the collection of such reasonable tolls as the county commissioners of each county might determine. These rates were to be posted in a conspicuous place at each toll house or gate. If at the end of twenty years the tolls had not paid for the construction, maintenance, and operation of the road, the period might be extended.

It was further stipulated that the right of way should be not less than sixty feet in width, and that if at any time the company, "deem it necessary for the interest of the public, they may construct on said grade a plank track not less than eight feet in width, in which case they shall receive such additional toll to be established by the county commissioners."

While general enthusiasm prevailed in favor of the new highway, it was not built without opposition. A small minority of ultra-progressive individuals, who were already partial to the "iron horse", advocated the immediate construction of a railroad. They were convinced that time and money spent on plank roads would be utterly wasted, and subsequent experience justified their contention. On the other hand, there were some contented citizens who also discouraged the project. Writing in the Burlington *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* on December 10, 1850, one who styled himself, "Anti-Corduroy", expressed his views rather sarcastically: "This is a progressive age — Railroads, plank roads, and steam boats have taken the place of the more staid and sober method of traveling pursued by our forefathers, and although there are many more lives lost now than at any former period, yet this is an age of improvement — we are born in a hurry — edu-

cated in a hurry — get rich and poor in a hurry — live in a hurry”. What would he think now?

Some opposition was also encountered by interests favoring the route of the old “Agency Trail”, one of the “military roads” established in the Iowa country by an act of Congress approved on March 3, 1839, when an appropriation of five thousand dollars was made for “the opening and construction of a road from Burlington through the counties of Des Moines, Henry and Van Buren, towards the seat of Indian agency on the river Des Moines”. Many considered this a superior and more direct route west.

The year 1850 was an anxious one for the promoters and officials of the new company. Many weighty problems had to be solved and tremendous obstacles had to be overcome before the work could progress. Chief among the difficulties were the selection of a route and obtaining the right of way. Preliminary surveys and estimates of cost had to be made, and reports returned to the board of directors and stockholders. Considerable trouble, it seems, was encountered in securing individual concessions for the right of way, until the Third General Assembly clarified the condemnation procedure.

Adequate financing next became the paramount issue. The directors found that it was one thing

to sell the company's stock and obtain subscription lists, but quite another to actually get sufficient money to meet the payrolls and bills for material. Nevertheless, enthusiasm for plank roads ran out of bounds. Whether this agitation was inspired by the need of better roads or by the hope of big profits to stockholders is not clear.

At any rate the citizens of Burlington voted, at the expense of the taxpayers, to take stock in the local plank roads and pledge the city's credit to raise funds to assist private corporations in building them. Having been authorized to invest from \$5000 to \$10,000 in the stock of the Burlington and Mount Pleasant Plank Road Company, the council borrowed the money, loaned it to the company, and took stock as collateral security. In all it seems that two such loans were actually made for the Mount Pleasant road, each in the sum of \$10,000, the second being made in 1852. These loans, together with others to similar companies and to railroads, later caused the city of Burlington no little financial embarrassment. The legality of the transactions was questioned and carried to the Supreme Court of the United States. It is said that nearly a half million dollars in principal, interest, and costs, were finally involved before all these obligations were fully liquidated nearly a half century later.

Perhaps the route of the old plank road may best be described in two sections. First, that lying between Burlington and New London, which is rather definitely associated with existing highways; and, second, that part which lies between New London and the western terminal of the road at the eastern limits of the city of Mount Pleasant, which, except for a short distance at the west end, bears little or no relation to present-day roads. The beginning is well marked, for on May 11, 1930, the Stars and Stripes chapter of the D. A. R. of Burlington placed a boulder with a bronze tablet on the lawn of the Washington School along the route of the Old Plank Road as it passed westward out of Burlington, inscribed: TO COMMEMORATE THE AGENCY TRAIL AND THE PLANK ROAD, PATHWAYS OF THE PIONEER.

On the same day a similar marker was dedicated at the site of Jimtown, a pioneer settlement and tavern of considerable importance located at approximately the half-way point of the road. There, about 1840, James Duke, a Hoosier, established what was known at the time as the "Duke Hotel". He was a jovial hail-fellow, very popular and well known by everybody on the highway as "Jim". When a trading post and a few houses sprang up about his tavern, the place was dubbed "Jimtown", of which only a vestige

still remains to mark the spot. Yet in spite of its short life and inconsequential history, the location of few places is better known throughout the length and breadth of southeastern Iowa, especially by the older generation.

From Burlington westward the plank road followed the route of the old Territorial highway, running along the south edge of the present Tri-State Fair Grounds; thence, bearing toward the northwest to the place where the Agency Trail continues westward, forming a Y. From this point the diagonal stretch follows substantially the route of present State Highway 80, to the place where it forms a junction with United States Highway 34, about six miles west of Burlington. There it turned directly westward, following the route of the present paving into Middletown, at which place it swung northward across the present right of way of the Burlington railroad and paralleled it along the north side all the way to New London. Opposite the east end of Main Street, it curved westward, passing the present electric light plant, and continued on into the main part of town on Main Street.

On the west division, between New London and Mount Pleasant, the road veered sharply toward the northwest, from a point a short distance west of the southwest corner of the public square

in New London. On this diagonal section in the west part of town may still be seen what is probably the best and most extensive relic of the old grade, including the site of a bridge that once spanned a small ravine. Not even the slightest remnant of the bridge remains, and where it once stood, a big elm tree is now growing.

The road continued on this course until it crossed the present Burlington right of way, and then swung to the westward, keeping on the uplands north of the tracks, following gentle curves to a point about four miles east of Mount Pleasant. From there it followed the line between sections 12 and 13 and 11 and 14, to a point opposite Ross's spring about a mile east of town. The remainder of the way to the east end of Washington Street in Mount Pleasant coincides with the present paved highway. The extreme west end of the grade may yet be easily discerned on the bank just north of the paving along the hillside west of the State Hospital switch. Instead of planks laid flat for travel, the old grade now bears upright planks for advertising. It has long been a favorite location for all manner of signboards.

Some conception of the type of construction employed by this company may be gleaned from a report made by H. W. Starr, a promoter of Burlington, before a meeting of citizens called at

Mount Pleasant to consider certain building problems. According to excerpts published in the *Keokuk Register* on February 8, 1849, "steep inclinations" were to be avoided, no grade ascending more than one foot in thirty or forty. "The road should be graded wide enough for two tracks. Two stringers, twelve by three, four feet apart, and centre to centre, are laid down flatwise and well imbedded in the earth. Across these at right angles, three-inch plank, eight feet long, are laid. The earth is then to be well packed up to them, and the earth track sloped towards the ditches, and the road is complete. Many minor points such as fastening down the planks, breaking joints, carrying off the water, preventing ruts alongside are to be attended to.

"As to durability," the report continued, "experience is limited. One set of stringers will outlast two or three coverings of plank. The wear of the first year is equal to the next six. On one road, the passage of 16,000 teams wore a hemlock plank down one inch. Oak or pine is thought to be better than hemlock."

These specifications for the proposed road, while somewhat at variance as to minor details, correspond closely with the following retrospective description of the old road by A. M. Antrobus, a contemporary observer of unusual accu-

racy, in his *History of Des Moines County*. "A roadway about thirty feet in width was graded so the surface of the road was from 18 inches to 2 feet above the surface of the land adjoining. Sawed stringers, 4 x 6 inches and of various lengths, were laid down on the graded surface about six feet apart. Sawed oak planks three inches in thickness and eight feet long were laid and spiked on the stringers. Such was the road constructed by the Burlington and Mount Pleasant Plank Road Company. The planking part was not laid in the center of the graded portion, but to one side of the center. Toll gates were established at suitable distances, usually about four miles apart, and consisted of a long 3 x 6 inch scantling, which was made to swing on an upright post for a pivot. The gatekeeper was usually an Irish woman whose husband was in the employ of the company in seeing that the planks were in place. The operating expenses were light, but the cost of maintenance great."

From such descriptions the physical appearance of the road may be imagined. But the more intangible human relations have been lost through the lengthening perspective of the passing years. What of the daily life along the old highway? Who tended the toll gates? Where were the taverns, and who were their proprietors?

One may walk for miles along the old abandoned grade, where it may yet be traced through pasture and field westward from New London, and lose himself in speculations concerning many unknown facts which have apparently been lost to posterity with the passing of the pioneers. He may conjure up again the phantom wagon trains and people them with ghost-like personages, journeying outward to their new homes in the west, or, perhaps, to California in quest of gold. Who were the teamsters and stage drivers, making regular journeys over the clattering planks? What manner of carriages, wagons, or coaches did they employ? How did the road fit into the economic scheme of things at the time, and what was its influence upon the future development of the Commonwealth? Concerning these questions history reveals only fragmentary glimpses.

The consensus of opinion seems to indicate that white oak was the principal timber employed in the construction of the road, most of which came from small sawmills located relatively close to the right of way. Some planking, however, was obtained from the woods along the Skunk (Chicauqua) River. Probably more than five million feet of good oak were used.

There were a number of taverns along the route of the plank road, the principal ones perhaps

being the Eight Mile House at Middletown, the Duke Hotel at Jimtown, Boak's Hotel at New London on the corner opposite the southwest corner of the public square, and of course those located at Mount Pleasant near the end of the road. Jobe's Hotel, a two-story brick building, was later remodeled and converted into the Female Seminary. Other hotels were built in Mount Pleasant as a result of the plank road boom, one of which, the "Grand", is still operating.

Stage-coaches changed horses in Danville at the place where Alfred Schroeder now lives. The stage driver would blow a horn when within half a mile of the stables where fresh horses were to be supplied, so that all would be in readiness when the coach arrived. To change teams was the work of only a few minutes, and the stage would be on its way again. The clatter of hoofs, the rattle of wheels, and the rumble of planks could be heard a long distance.

Jimtown, the halfway point, located between Danville and New London, was perhaps more picturesque than any other place. There was located a big "turn out", where traffic was diverted toward the northwest past the "Steamboat House" and Crawfordsville to Iowa City; and south toward Lowell, Augusta, and Denmark. Extra-wide planking was laid at this "turn out",

as it was a place of unusual activity. Life at Jimtown centered about the tavern (still standing). The barroom was especially popular among the teamsters, who were hardy, rugged fellows, always ready for fun and mischief. Heavy drinking was common, and long evenings were spent in playing poker and other games of chance.

On one occasion, a company of fortune hunters, who had gone to California from Mount Pleasant during the gold rush, were returning after an absence of several years. They stopped at Jimtown on their last night away from home, and decided to divide their stake of gold. This proved to be a sad mistake for some, who arrived home penniless the next day, having lost their share in gambling throughout the night.

The first toll house and gate at the west end of the road on the east edge of Mount Pleasant stood on the north side of the road opposite Jobe's Hotel. Another was located four miles east of Mount Pleasant, north of the present Burlington railroad tracks, known as the "Billy Toll House". Next came New London, then Jimtown, Danville, Middletown, West Burlington, and the one at the beginning of the road in Burlington, making eight in all, or an average of one every four miles, on the stretch of planked road which was approximately twenty-eight miles in length.

Even less is known concerning the schedules, rules, and drivers on the road. Only a few names remain associated with the road, and these are gleaned from the memory of the oldest survivors. Henry Penny, Jerry Malling, Ben Talley, and Clampit Nugent were teamsters who drove regularly between Mount Pleasant and Burlington. There were doubtless many others whose names have been lost. Traffic rules gave loaded wagons traveling west the right of way. Much difficulty was frequently encountered in the interpretation of these rules, which sometimes resulted in disputes and trouble between drivers.

One forenoon when a heavily loaded wagon going east between Mount Pleasant and New London met a lightly loaded stage going west, the driver of the clumsy wagon refused to yield the road. The stage driver also was obstinate and held out on technical grounds, insisting that west-bound traffic should have the right of way. There they stood facing each other for hours, in a contest of endurance. Finally, about three o'clock in the afternoon, at the insistence of the passengers, the stage driver pulled off the road and went around, giving the teamster a good cursing as he passed.

Historically considered this "Burlington Route" westward has been one of the most im-

portant highways in the State. First it was a Territorial road. Then in a later decade it became the most notable example of hard surfacing with wood. But the planks were soon abandoned in favor of rails. After a lapse of sixty years, on this same stretch of highway, beginning at the Burlington Fair Grounds and running westward, John F. Deems built in 1913, at his own expense, the first mile of strictly rural concrete highway in the State of Iowa. This experimental sixteen-foot slab costing \$20,000, laid without elaborate preparation or engineering advice, by the rule of common sense, still exists and, considering its age and heavy use, is in remarkably good condition. United States Highway 34, of which the old plank road was an integral part, is likewise distinctive in that it was the first east and west highway to be paved entirely across the State.

Here then, is, indeed, an historic road, representing the entire gamut in the evolution of highway construction. From Indian trail to super-highway of concrete is a stirring chapter in the annals of transportation, yet it has all been experienced within the lifetime of men who are still living.

BEN HUR WILSON

From Planks to Rails

After a heroic struggle, throughout the summer and autumn of 1851, the construction of the Burlington and Mount Pleasant Plank Road was apparently completed by the middle of December. In spite of unfavorable weather, the event was celebrated at Mount Pleasant. According to the *Fairfield Ledger*, a "very large delegation attended from Burlington" and the editor regretted that conditions prevented Fairfield from being more numerously represented. "Good roads are undoubtedly a great convenience", he wrote, "and we congratulate our Mount Pleasant friends on their good fortune in having so convenient an outlet to the river. We hope at an early day to celebrate the completion of the Fairfield and Mount Pleasant Plank Road, and then won't we have a great time! Hurrah for plank roads! They are the very thing."

The spring and summer of 1852 was probably the heyday of successful operation for the Burlington and Mount Pleasant road. The tide of westward migration was high, and the development of agriculture was producing an ever increasing amount of east-bound freight. Building

of all kinds required a great variety of materials, staple groceries and dry goods were shipped in, and other merchandise had to be hauled overland from river ports. For a season or two the new road accommodated this traffic, promising a happy solution of local transportation problems.

Not only was the plank road used for strictly utilitarian purposes, but for social and pleasure parties as well. On Sundays and holidays the wealthy people of Burlington, taking advantage of the excellent condition of the new roadway, drove out to Mount Pleasant and back in their carriages. The popularity of the road inspired J. Fox Abrahams of Burlington to compose verses to the tune of "Suzanna".

Oh, Mount Pleasant, you are the place for me,
I won't leave home till dinner time,
I'm coming back to tea.

The wet autumn and winter of 1852-1853 proved to be disastrous for the promoters of the new highway. By midwinter the seasonal decline of immigration had seriously reduced the income, and the ravages of the elements were already beginning to play havoc on the grade and superstructure. As the novelty of the new road wore off, farmers and tradesmen avoided payment of tolls by using older routes paralleling the planked highway. This was particularly true in Henry

County between New London and Mount Pleasant, where the old Territorial highway remained open only a short distance to the south of the new plank road. Teamsters soon learned that even a fair dirt road was preferable to a plank road out of repair.

The crisis seems to have arrived early in the spring of 1853. On March 14th the officers went before Judge M. L. Edwards at Mount Pleasant, asking that relief be granted in the form of an abatement of "the existing dirt-road, running from Mount Pleasant in the direction of Burlington, so far as the same runs by the side of the plank road belonging to said company". At the same time the privilege of operating the plank road was extended, "to continue and be in force until the expiration of fifteen years" after January, 1853.

According to the terms of the new license, the company promised to keep the plank road "in good order and in a safe traveling condition". The following schedule of maximum rates was prescribed: "For a four-horse vehicle, per mile, 3 cents; for a three-horse do, $2\frac{1}{2}$ cents; for a one or two-horse do, 2 cents; for a two-ox do, 2 cents; for a four-ox do, 3 cents; for each additional yoke, $1\frac{1}{2}$ cents; for a horseman, $1\frac{1}{2}$ cents; for each head of loose cattle, horses or mules, $\frac{1}{2}$ cents; for each head of hogs or sheep $\frac{1}{4}$ cent."

The company was required to report its financial condition annually. After deducting expenditures for repairs and operation and allowing a dividend of ten per cent on the original cost of the road, the proceeds were to be divided between the counties of Des Moines and Henry, "in proportion to the length of the dirt-road discontinued in said counties". If the company should "abandon said road as a plankroad," then the portion of the highway in Henry County, "with all its appurtenances, and all of the rights and interests of said Company therein," was to be forfeited to and become the property of Henry County.

It appears that this monopoly afforded but slight temporary relief, and that within a relatively short time the road became almost impassable in many places, having fallen into a state of decay faster than the company was able to make the necessary repairs. This was due, in part, to laying the planks directly on the ground. The black loam and clay subsoil of southeastern Iowa held water a long time. After a rain the heavy planks soaked in mud beneath and baked in the hot sun on top. Consequently they soon warped and twisted out of shape to such an extent that no amount of nailing could hold them in place.

Travel was precarious if not dangerous. To step on a plank at one end might make it fly up at

the other, thus impeding progress and occasionally crippling horses and oxen. This caused much criticism of the management, and great dissatisfaction on the part of the regular patrons of the highway. Moreover, the fault grew constantly worse. Replacement of warped planks was the only effective remedy, and the company finally gave up trying to keep the track in repair.

Meanwhile, the rumble of the "iron-horse" was heard in the east. Sentiment in favor of railroads gradually increased. And so the Burlington to Mount Pleasant plank road, built at enormous expense of capital, energy, and native hardwood timber, was abandoned. In fact, many of the plank road promoters transferred their efforts to railroad building as a more promising field.

Opinion favoring the construction of a railroad had so crystallized by the close of 1851 that a large number of influential citizens organized a company which they named the "Burlington and Missouri River Rail Road Company", and incorporated in January, 1852. The principal object of the company was declared to be the construction and use of "a Rail Road extending from Burlington, to the most eligible point on the Missouri River, and along the most eligible routes, passing centrally through the second tier of Counties north of the south line of the State of Iowa".

Although officers and directors were elected at a meeting held in Burlington on January 17, 1852, permanent organization was apparently not completed until November 25, 1853, by which time plans for the sale of stock had so far advanced that prospects of success seemed assured. Preceding this, it appears that preliminary surveys had been commenced as early as July, 1853. Among the fifty or more listed incorporators of the railroad company were many individuals previously associated with the plank road venture. William F. Coolbaugh was elected president of the railroad company, Oliver Cook, secretary, and John G. Foote, treasurer. J. C. Hall and A. W. Carpenter were members of the executive committee, as was A. B. Saunders of Mount Pleasant. It was natural that these men, trained in promotional and executive activities, should turn their attention to railroad building. Indeed, the articles of incorporation of some of the plank road companies expressly stated that, should public interests later demand it, they were to be transformed into railroads.

It is said that individual subscriptions for stock in the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad were comparatively small, usually ranging from one to five or ten shares. This was probably due to the stringency of the times and to the sad ex-

perience of people who had previously invested in the plank road shares sponsored by the same promoters. Obligations for shares were payable in installments, but not more than twenty-five per cent could be demanded in any one year, nor more than ten per cent at any one time. That public opinion, however, favored the building of the railroad, there can be no doubt, for most of the counties along the route voted by substantial majorities in favor of large bond issues to aid in construction.

The years immediately following were times of political turmoil and financial stress. Matters moved slowly for the supporters of the new railroad. In a report to the stockholders on September 1, 1855, Secretary J. C. Hall announced that most of the grading, ditching, and tying as far as Ottumwa had been "placed under contract, and between forty and fifty thousand dollars expended at different parts of the road. Owing to a severe pressure in the money market, in the latter part of 1854 and the first months of 1855, the Company found it impractical to carry on the work, and it was consequently suspended, and the laborers dispersed."

These contracts were let to farmers and other individuals along the way for short stretches of only a mile or two in the vicinity of their homes, upon which they worked intermittently, according

to the condition of their crops, the weather, and the ability of the company to pay. As might have been expected under such circumstances, progress was slow and altogether unsatisfactory.

Early in 1855 a continuous railroad was completed from Chicago to the Mississippi River opposite Burlington. This company, looking for an outlet toward the west, was anxious to foster the progress of the new railroad from Burlington to the Missouri River. During the following summer a single contract was let to Clark, Hendrie, and Company, "a responsible, wealthy firm, to construct and deliver the road in complete running order, by June 1857, from Burlington to the Skunk River, a distance of 35 miles, at a price of \$22,500". This company went to work energetically. By September the grade and ties were ready for the rails as far as Mount Pleasant.

While actual construction was begun in May, 1854, it was not until January 1, 1856, that the first locomotive was operated over any portion of the road. James Putman, writing in the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*, states that on that date, "the first Locomotive on the 'B & M'", named the "Burlington", an old-fashioned wood burner with a funnel-shaped stack and brass trimmings, ran "from the foot of Jefferson street down to Market" and out as far as the end of the track beyond

Wilhelm's and back. The "whole trip must have been at least a mile and a half".

The year 1856 was a most successful one for the "B & M". Progress was more rapid and conditions actually began to look rosy for the new railroad. Congress granted to the State of Iowa a large amount of the public domain, to assist in the completion of four trunk-line railways across the State. This land grant was acknowledged by the State on July 14th, and on the 25th the "B & M" accepted a portion amounting to 287,199 acres. Apparently the financial difficulties of the company were over, at least for the time being. In May the road was completed to Danville, thirteen miles out from Burlington; in June to New London; and in July to Mount Pleasant. It was not until a year later, however, on June 17, 1857, that the entire contract extending the road to the Skunk River was completed. As President Charles Elliott Perkins said later, "while the promoters held visions of a transcontinental line, the road, at that time, had more ambition than mileage."

Daily train service was immediately inaugurated between Mount Pleasant and Burlington, where connections were made by ferry with the Chicago and Burlington road. The Mississippi was not bridged at this point until August 13, 1868.

Previous to this a few freight cars had been ferried over, but most of the freight and all of the passengers were unloaded on each side and conveyed across the river by boat. As the rails advanced, the western end of the railroad became the eastern end of the stage lines, and thus, little by little, the frontier was pushed back across the prairies of Iowa.

While the route of the railroad followed the general direction of the plank road, the line was straightened. Between Middletown and New London, however, the two right of ways were parallel and adjoining. In fact they overlapped in places, as is shown by a quit-claim deed from the plank road company to the Burlington & Missouri, filed at Burlington on June 10, 1858.

Much of the old plank road right of way was abandoned outright, and there are a number of resolutions on record at the courthouse in Mount Pleasant, passed by the board of supervisors of Henry County, indicating that the main highway was soon changed back to the old Territorial road of former days. Many of the planks and bridges were not removed by the company and remained on the ground until they "rotted out", some being discernible for nearly fifty years after the road was abandoned. Others were bought for "little or nothing" by farmers residing

along the route, who put them to various uses, such as flooring in stables and feed lots. East of Middletown, fences long remembered by the early settlers were made by digging a trench in which the old planks were stood upright in the ground and the earth well tamped to hold them in position. An old schoolhouse is yet in existence in which the three-inch white oak planks were used as walls. It is said that the first sidewalk laid in New London "running from the brick house of Dr. J. H. Philpott on Mechanics Street, north to the depot," was made by sawing the old planks into four foot lengths and nailing them crosswise on longitudinal stringers.

Thus passed into oblivion an important pioneer enterprise. Traces of the old plank road have all but disappeared, but the memory of it still lingers and its former significance is perpetuated in the place names it made familiar. Many have intimated that the plank road from Burlington to Mount Pleasant died ignominiously, yet who shall say that such a progressive instrumentality which served a useful purpose, even for a brief time, and prepared the way for the further advancement of transportation facilities, was an utter failure or that its sponsors labored in vain?

BEN HUR WILSON

Comment by the Editor

A PERSONAL FACTOR

"The business I came up to attend to will be arranged pretty comfortably, I think, though I have been compelled to manage tolerably shrewdly", wrote James W. Grimes to his wife one Sunday morning in December, 1850, from Iowa City. "There is some opposition in the House of Representatives, but I think I shall succeed in quelling it before any final action is had. I shall return as soon as it is safe for me to leave. I think I am doing a great deal of good for Burlington by being here."

The president of the Burlington and Mount Pleasant Plank Road Company was at the State capital for the purpose of persuading legislators to grant his corporation the power of eminent domain as well as the privilege of using portions of the public highway for their toll road. His mission was successful, for on December 18th a statute containing such provisions was enacted. Whether or not this legislation was a boon to Burlington, it certainly facilitated the construction of the plank road.

Two months later, when "a great railroad and

plank-road fever" afflicted the business interests of his city, Mr. Grimes confided to his father that he had invested \$4000 in the plank road to Mount Pleasant. "I think it will pay well", he wrote. Encouraged by that hope, no doubt, he was willing to assume "the entire responsibility and management of the work" of construction. At the same time he was officially and financially interested in the Peoria and Oquawka Railroad which would soon connect Burlington with the markets of New England.

Progress is seldom accidental. In the story of any achievement, some dominant source of volition may be discerned. Improvements in transportation are not created by wishing, nor is causation revealed in legal records and statistical information. The personal factor is the vital element. He who would appraise the rise of Burlington will find a master key in the career of James W. Grimes.

J. E. B.

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