

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?

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