

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.

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