

Plumbe's Railroad to the Moon

When a pioneer of Dubuque proposed a trans-continental railroad, people thought his imagination had deserted his reason. But he was a man of action as well as of vision. He called a meeting. Some came to scoff and went away convinced; some came convinced and went away skeptical; and some came skeptical and went away enthusiastic. Those who grasped his idea started action which was to culminate years later as a significant phase of the great westward movement.

In 1836, when Wisconsin Territory was considered the *Ultima Thule* of civilization, John Plumbe, Jr., of Dubuque mentioned in a private conversation the feasibility of an "Oregon Railroad". Two years later he issued a formal call for a public meeting to discuss the project. Under the pen name of "Iowaian" he wrote in the *Iowa News* for March 24, 1838: "As a devoted friend of Wisconsin in general, and Du Buque in particular, I beg permission to offer through your valuable journal, a few crude remarks for the consideration of my fellow-citizens, touching a subject, which as it presents itself to my view, is one of vital interest to us, and national importance to the

country. I refer to the connexion of Lake Michigan with the Mississippi River, by means of a Rail-Road passing within our Territory." The proposal, he thought, was "paramount to any other that might be suggested" because the topography of the country was admirably suited for steam transportation, and because such an undertaking would promote national prosperity. Furthermore, concluded Plumbe, "with all due deference for the opinions of those who are disposed to procrastinate, I am well convinced myself there is no time like the *present*."

On March 26th, the meeting of Dubuque citizens convened at the courthouse. Captain Francis Gehon, United States Marshal, was chosen chairman of the gathering and Plumbe was selected as secretary. After a discussion of the plan, six resolutions were formulated. A committee of five prominent citizens — John Plumbe, T. S. Wilson, Dr. T. R. Lurton, David Sleator, and Dr. John W. Finley — was instructed to draft a memorial to Congress stating the advantages of "a project which nothing short of American enterprise would even contemplate, but which we shall as certainly *complete* under the name of the *Atlantic and Pacific Railway*." Copies of the proceedings were sent to the Territorial newspapers and to the *Washington Globe* for publication. The resolu-

tions were forwarded to Governor Henry Dodge, to Congressional Delegate George W. Jones, in whom the citizens reposed full confidence, and to Senators "Lynn" (either Lyon or Linn), Norvell, Buchanan, Wright, and Webster.

The memorial to Congress, drafted by the committee of five, was published in the *Iowa News* on April 7, 1838. "That the connexion of Lake Michigan with the Mississippi River, at or near the Borough of Du Buque, by means of a Rail Road, to be located upon the most eligible ground within the Territory", argued the petitioners, "is a subject of such vast importance not only to the entire population of Wisconsin, but to the American Nation generally, as to warrant the confident belief that your honorable bodies [Senate and House of Representatives] will, without hesitation, grant us the object of our respectful and most earnest prayer, by immediately appointing an Engineer to locate a route in conformity with the foregoing proposition and report thereon."

In addition to the reasons given by Plumbe in calling the meeting, the committee stated other advantages. The railroad would provide access to a rich agricultural territory and the virgin lead mines. Its terminus on the Mississippi would command a portion of the fur trade. And the line would constitute "a permanent link in the great

chain of direct steam communication between the extreme East and Far West, which the determined spirit of American enterprise has decreed shall speedily connect the waters of our two opposite oceans." Thirty-one years were to elapse before the hope of those memorialists became a reality.

The meeting was not without effect. On May 21, 1838, George Wallace Jones presented in the United States House of Representatives a petition "praying for the survey of a route for a railroad from the Mississippi river, at Du Buque, to Milwaukee, Wisconsin Territory." Years later Delegate Jones mentioned this petition in his *Autobiography*. "I was amazed at the temerity of my constituents," he wrote, "in seriously sending me such an unheard-of prayer. Nevertheless, I felt in duty bound to present the petition, and did so, when it produced a great laugh and hurrah in the house, members singing out to me that it would not be long before my constituents would ask Congress to build a railroad to the moon."

Meanwhile, Congress was not indifferent to the need for better transportation facilities in the West. Senator Lucius Lyon of Michigan on December 13, 1837, had introduced a bill making an appropriation for certain highways in the Territory of Wisconsin. This measure passed the Senate on March 30, 1838, only four days after

Plumbe's public meeting in Dubuque. The House Committee on Roads and Canals reported the bill with some proposed amendments on April 13, 1838, more than a month before Jones submitted the railroad petition. On June 6th the road bill was discussed in the Committee of the Whole House. At that time Jones probably insisted upon including the railroad project, for the House adopted the measure with several amendments as recommended by the Committee of the Whole. In this form the bill carried an appropriation for surveying the railroad in Wisconsin. Though the Senate objected, the House insisted on its amendments and the bill became a law on July 7, 1838, with a provision appropriating \$2000 for "a survey and estimate of the cost of a railroad from Milwaukee to Dubuque". During the next session of Congress the Secretary of War, in a statute approved March 3, 1839, was directed to apply the appropriation "to the survey of the most eligible route for a railroad from the town of Milwaukee, on Lake Michigan, to such point on the Mississippi river as may be deemed most expedient."

Whether the plan would have been successful without the personal influence of Territorial Delegate Jones can not be determined. The fact that Plumbe and Jones were cordial friends seems sig-

nificant. It was Plumbe who called a meeting to petition President Van Buren to appoint Jones Governor of the Territory of Iowa at the time of its creation. And it was Jones who urged the railroad memorial with his "usual energy and boldness" and later recalled that he had the satisfaction "of knowing that the survey was actually made from Milwaukee to Dubuque for the great road which is now in successful operation across the Rocky Mountains."

John Plumbe was born in Wales sometime in July, 1809, and in 1821 came to America with his parents. Previous to his coming to Dubuque in 1836 he had had some experience as a railroad builder. He was an assistant to Moncure Robinson in the survey and location of a railroad across the Alleghanies in Pennsylvania. "To those who did not know John Plumbe," wrote John King in 1869, "I will say that he was a well educated man and a ready writer; that when he came to Dubuque he was an able correspondent of the leading newspapers in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Cincinnati and St. Louis." Several of his articles, signed "Iowaian", were published in the *Iowa News*. He was always advocating something. At public meetings, often called at his behest, he almost invariably served as secretary. He was also secretary of the Lyceum

and the local Iowa Temperance Society. As might be expected of a citizen so public spirited, Plumbe served as one of the trustees of the town of Dubuque in 1837 and was reëlected in April, 1838.

A year after the meeting that petitioned Congress for a railroad, he wrote *Sketches of Iowa and Wisconsin*. The purpose of the book was to direct "the attention of Emigrants and others, to a portion of the United States, which all, who have examined it, unite in representing — to use the words of a distinguished English traveller — as 'one of the finest domains that nature ever offered to man.'" The entire account is a description of the country in 1839. A prominent place is given to the status of the railroad and to the prediction that in the future the United States will have a "free Railway, unparalleled in extent; and forming, when completed, the greatest thoroughfare in the world!"

Plumbe never gave up the hope of a Pacific Railroad. In the early forties he was in Washington watching the progress of his plan. On March 26, 1847, he addressed an audience in Dubuque which resolved, "Unanimously, that this meeting regards John Plumbe, Esq., as the original projector of the great Oregon Railroad." Two years later he went to California by way of the southern route and became convinced of the

practicability of his railroad plan. Popular imagination is sometimes slow in grasping new ideas, and Plumbe suffered from living before his time.

He was a very modest man and when Asa Whitney gained wide popularity as the originator of the Pacific Railroad plan, he did very little to correct that impression. As a matter of fact, "Whitney was in Europe when Plumbe was devoting the prime of his life to this great enterprise. Whitney did not begin his agitation of the question until Plumbe had written and spoken volumes on the subject, and labored for it nearly ten years. The main reason why John Plumbe was not known as the ablest writer in the West, on Western interests and Western railroads, was because all his communications were published *incog.*"

Besides having an interest in railroads, Plumbe contributed to the field of photography. He was one of the prominent photographers of his time and by 1845 he had a main office in New York and branches in thirteen leading cities. As an inventor he devised a Plumbeotype which was advertised as "a reproduction on paper of a Daguerreotype". In order to gain recognition for this process he began on October 31, 1846, to publish the *Popular Magazine*, and in December of the same year *The Plumbe Popular Magazine*, a monthly publication, took its place but suspended

issuance within a few months. The Plumbeotype was never patented.

Dreamers who live in the future are likely to find their contemporaries unsympathetic. Magnificent hopes are dismissed as impractical. Disappointment is the lot of the most progressive men. On May 30, 1857, the Dubuque *Daily Express* announced the "melancholy suicide of John Plumbe" on the previous day. It was the tragic ending of a man whose hopes were long in coming to fulfillment.

The *Agricultural Press* published at West Urbana, Illinois, commented upon his death. "Mr. P. might have been a wealthy man, had he lived for himself alone, but when he was prospering he wanted all those around him to share in his prosperity, and as he gave others opportunities to swindle him, and never having retaliated in turn, or at all desired to, we presume that in his later years he might have found himself in rather limited circumstances, which has, no doubt, had its effect in shortening his life."

Plumbe ended his life nineteen years after he called the public meeting in Dubuque to endorse his railroad plans. Had he lived twelve years more he would have seen his "railroad to the moon" completed at Promontory Point.

JACK T. JOHNSON