

Planked in Places

Burlington was the center of plank-road enterprise in Iowa. Enthusiasm for oak hard surfacing literally ran riot, sweeping all obstacles before it. Business men and farmers alike subscribed liberally, and even the municipality generously purchased stock with the proceeds of bonds floated for improvement purposes. The financial benefits received from these efforts were extremely disappointing, for the capital invested by the city and individuals was all lost. Ultimately, however, incalculable advantages accrued indirectly to the community as a result of this progressive spirit. The courage and initiative displayed was undoubtedly a deciding factor in placing Burlington upon the main line of a trans-continental railroad.

The construction of three plank roads radiating from Burlington was authorized. The first of these was legalized by the legislature on January 15, 1849. William F. Coolbaugh, of Des Moines County, Alvin Sanders, of Henry County, and their associates were empowered to build a graded road thirty feet wide between Burlington and Mount Pleasant, by way of Middletown and New London. The right of way, sixty feet wide,

was to follow the existing road as nearly as possible. Construction was to start within two years. If the company deemed it "necessary for the interest of the public," they were authorized to lay a "plank track not less than eight feet in width" on the grade, and charge additional tolls. The privilege of operating the road was granted for a period of twenty years, subject to extension if by that time the company had not received returns equal to the cost of construction, maintenance, operation, and reasonable interest on the investment.

Apparently, this company had difficulty in obtaining a right of way, for after nearly two years had elapsed, the General Assembly, on December 18, 1850, prescribed a more equitable method of acquiring "such ground as may be deemed suitable for that purpose". Meanwhile, however, work on the road was begun early in 1850 and the grade completed to the eastern edge of the city limits of Mount Pleasant late in December, 1851, a distance of about twenty-eight miles. It proved to be the most successful project of its kind ever accomplished in Iowa.

From the terminus of the road at Mount Pleasant an extension through Ottumwa to Oskaloosa was proposed. Another branch toward the northwest through Trenton and Deedsville (Merrimac)

to Brighton was also suggested. These extensions, however, did not materialize, and after a few years of more or less successful operation the plank road was paralleled by the Burlington railroad. Against such competition it could not survive, and soon fell into disuse and decay. It exists only in memory through traditions handed down from a former generation to people living in the immediate vicinity of the old right of way.

On January 21, 1851, the second of the Burlington plank roads was authorized, to be built by the "Burlington and Toolsborough Plank Road Company". Toolsborough was a promising little village located twenty-five or thirty miles directly north of Burlington near the mouth of the Iowa River in Louisa County. Interest in this road, however, seems to have shifted in favor of another running northwest, the construction of which was sanctioned by the legislature on February 4, 1851, to be built by a corporation known as the "Burlington and Louisa County Plank Road Company." While from its name the location and destination of the road appear to be indefinite, the intention of the promoters was to build directly to Wapello, the county seat of Louisa County, and possibly beyond to Virginia Grove. This was probably a strategic move to discourage the building of the Port Louisa road to Virginia Grove.

Burlington could not permit a rival town to gain any advantage which might later threaten its business supremacy.

Apparently the people of Wapello were more favorable to the Burlington outlet. The *Democratic Enquirer* of January 25, 1851, reported, "Burlington has started the project of a plank road to Wapello, by the Telegraph line, to secure the trade of Wapello, and Louisa County and of the eastern part of Washington County. The citizens of Louisa County are determined to have facilities for reaching the market and are energetic and liberal in their efforts." More than \$10,000 of the estimated capital of \$18,000 which had to be raised before a contract could be let, was said to have been subscribed by the people residing along the proposed route. The municipality of Burlington later loaned \$10,000 to the company, accepting its common stock as collateral security for the loan, which was never repaid.

That some construction work upon this project actually took place, there can be no doubt, for in the following autumn the Burlington *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* announced: "We have before alluded to the very substantial and perfect manner in which the Directors of this company are constructing their Plank Road which is going in a northwest direction from town; after reaching Virginia

Grove, it will be pushed on to Oskaloosa in Mahaska County.

"The company now has 12 miles of the road under contract, all to be completed next season. They have just finished a bridge across Flint Creek, which for exterior finish and substantial construction will equal any bridge in the west. After crossing Flint, the road follows the Telegraph Road, and the present contract will terminate not far from the farm of Mr. Kimball Chase. Upwards of a million feet of lumber are now being delivered along the route, and the entire road presents a very business-like appearance."

Just what portion of the road was ever completed can only be conjectured. Antrobus in his *History of Des Moines County* states that "some of its rotten remains existed along in the early '60's north of Flint Creek". Probably only short patches were ever finished. At any rate it was never entirely completed and placed in operation as a paying concern, for it finally ended in a financial debacle.

Farther down the river at Fort Madison, in Lee County, the "Fort Madison, West Point and Salem Plank Road Company" was organized. The right of way act, which was approved on February 5, 1851, was similar to others granted by the State, with one exception which allowed the

taking of sixty-five feet for road purposes instead of the usual sixty feet. No serious attempt was ever made to construct the road, however, as the plans were soon changed to make it a railroad similarly located, but never actually completed.

Below, at Keokuk, two roads at least were planned, upon one of which, it is said, about nine miles were actually completed. Aside from the Burlington-Mount Pleasant road, this was the most important stretch of plank road ever put into operation within the State. Legislation for the earliest of these Keokuk roads, which, it seems, was the second or third plank road project to be approved in Iowa, passed the General Assembly on January 15, 1849, the same day the Burlington-Mount Pleasant road was authorized. The act granted to William Brownell and his associates the privilege of constructing, between the towns of Montrose and Keokuk, a "graded and plank road, and to use the same" for twenty-five years. The route was to follow "the present line of road so far as may be practicable," and the grade was to be not "less than forty feet wide, and the plank or track not less than eight feet".

Another section of the act provided, "that the said William Brownell and his associates may erect toll houses, and toll gates, upon said road, and exact toll upon the same as follows: for each

carriage, wagon, cart or sleigh, drawn by two horses, oxen or mules, two and a half cents per mile, and one cent per mile for each additional horse, ox or mule, attached to the same vehicle; for every vehicle drawn by one horse, ox or mule, two cents per mile; for each horse and rider one cent per mile; for every head of horses, oxen, mules or cattle, led or driven one cent per mile; for every head of sheep, goats, or hogs, one half cent per mile; for merchandise (not including the furniture of emigrants) two cents per ton per each mile."

Inasmuch as the route of this road paralleled the Des Moines Rapids in the Mississippi, it was supposed to afford unusual promise as a profitable business venture on account of the tremendous amount of river commerce. During seasons of low water, many boats had to be unloaded and all freight, passengers, baggage, and supplies transported to the opposite end of the rapids by land on the Iowa side. Before this plank road was completed, however, the project was changed into a railroad.

The act for the second plank road to be built out of Keokuk was approved on February 4, 1851. It authorized, under the name of the "Keokuk and Desmoines Valley Plank Road Company", the construction of a graded and plank road "between

the towns of Keokuk and Birmingham in Van Buren county, by the town of Charleston in Lee county, on such ground as may be deemed suitable for that purpose, including any portion of the public highway, *provided* the travelling on such highway is not thereby interrupted." The cost of construction of this road was to be financed by a stock company, and a contract was let to the firm of Brownell and Sprott. Brownell was also the principal promoter of the earlier Montrose road.

It seems that for a time the building of the road was prosecuted with great vigor and efficiency, and that the company actually succeeded, during the remainder of the year 1851, in finishing and putting into operation a section at the lower end. This portion extended from Keokuk northward about nine miles, ending a short distance below the present Santa Fe viaduct. The graded portion of the road was completed at least as far as Charleston, ending opposite the Twenty Mile House.

So rosy did the outlook for its success seem that the officers seriously considered the feasibility of continuing it to Fort Des Moines at the Raccoon fork of the Des Moines River. These visionary plans, however, did not materialize, and after failing to operate the completed portion of the road at a profit, the company finally turned their property

over to the board of supervisors of Lee County who maintained and operated the road for a brief period. Eventually they "took up the planks and sold them for fire wood. The route, however, was not abandoned, but is still the principal highway into Keokuk from the northwest."

In addition to these plank road projects along the river, several other companies were formed in the interior, primarily for the purpose of building roads to connect with those which were already pushing westward from the Mississippi. Much enthusiasm was evidenced and many people seemed to regard the plank road as a panacea for all the ills of the country.

In February, 1850, after some previous agitation upon the subject, a plank road meeting was held at Ottumwa, "to discuss the construction of a plank road from Ottumwa, to intersect the Burlington and Mt. Pleasant Plank road at Mt. Pleasant. Uriah Biggs was appointed President of the meeting; Thomas Ping and John C. Evans, Vice Presidents, and Bertrand Jones, Secretary. There was universal sentiment in favor of such a road, and a committee of twenty delegates, prominent citizens, was designated to represent the county at a Plank road Convention to be held at Mt. Pleasant on February 27th. When the subscription books were opened, Ottumwa responded

with \$8,700, Agency City with \$5,000 and Ashland with \$4,500."

Nothing, however, seems to have come of the Ottumwa-Mount Pleasant proposal, and the following year on February 5, 1851, right of way was granted to the "Ottumwa and Libertyville Plank Road Company", which expected to become a link in the Keokuk-Des Moines road. This venture also proved to be futile and nothing further was heard of it.

On the same date, a road was authorized from Mount Pleasant through Deedsville to Brighton, upon which, likewise, little actual work was ever done. One other belated road, under the name of the "Mount Pleasant and Fairfield Plank Road Company", was approved on January 18, 1853. This was the last of the series of statutes to be enacted in behalf of the plank road movement within the State of Iowa.

It seems that the principal obstacle to the construction of this highway was the bridging of the river "Chicauqua" (Skunk) near the present village of Rome, and the construction of a long wooden trestle across the "bottoms" west of the bridge. The company immediately went to work on this project. Sawmills were moved into the nearby timber to saw out the heavy dimension material which was to be required for its construction.

One of the sawmills, owned and operated by John A. Thomas, was near the mouth of Honey Creek about a mile above the bridge site.

This wooden bridge was to be located on the township line, close to the old ferry, at a place where the stream could easily be forded during seasons of low water. When the proposed bridge was about half finished, and some work had been accomplished on piling for the trestle which was to be thrown across the low land, the entire undertaking was swept away by a flood. This so discouraged the promoters that no further work was ever done on the project.

A highway bridge was finally built, on what was thought to be a more favorable site about a mile down stream. More than seventy-five years later, the present bridge on United States Highway 34 was constructed only a few feet south of the site originally proposed for the plank road bridge. It is said that some remains of the old twenty-four-inch square, sawed oak piling intended for the trestle were still in existence though badly decayed. They were buried under the new earth fill which now extends across the lowlands on the west side of the river.

Thus, Iowa's first pretentious effort to get out of the mud came to an end. Considering the newness of the country, the meager capital available, and

the limited equipment and facilities for road building, the plank road movement was a remarkable manifestation of energy and resourcefulness. And yet the plank road companies all failed in a few years. The principal reason for the brevity of their popularity and usefulness was the swift development of the railroads which rendered less efficient means of transportation obsolete.

The Burlington *Tri-Weekly Telegraph* described the proper sphere of railroads and hard-surfaced highways prophetically on February 20, 1851. "Railways, with all their value, and they are of priceless worth to man, are yet the thoroughfare for the citizen away from his home — for the journey, the travel, the tour; but the plank road is for home use — for the transit which is begun and ended in a day or its fraction — which gives to him who uses it a double value or occupation for the hours of the day — which increases the happiness and comfort and profit of the farm, that foundation of all the institutions of society."

After eighty years, it is only necessary to substitute the word "hard" for "plank" to make that statement appropriate to the present situation. Now, even as then, waterways, railroads, hard-surfaced highways, and country by-roads, each has its particular functions in our complex modern civilization.

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