

The Boom in Iowa

The early inhabitants of southeastern Iowa were energetic, progressive, and intelligent people, anxious to improve their situation upon every opportunity. They had pushed out into this newer western country with the expectation of prospering, and, being pioneers, they were willing to take chances with new ventures, despite the doubts of a cautious and conservative minority. During the first years of settlement, most of the commerce of the region moved in a north and south direction following the course of the Mississippi, though the swelling tide of western immigration was rapidly developing cross-channels of traffic which could no longer be ignored.

Keen business rivalry sprang up between Dubuque, Davenport, Bloomington (Muscatine), Burlington, Fort Madison, and Keokuk, as well as some of the inland towns. Each lost no chance to obtain any real or imagined advantage over another. Early sensing the importance of being located upon direct and principal lines of transportation, these embryonic cities took careful stock of the various means by which this traffic might be diverted past their doors. Ferries, roads, bridges,

taverns, each playing its own important part, were promoted to influence the westbound traveller in his choice of route.

The advantages and benefits to be derived from "plank roads" and "rail roads", already accepted by 1850 as improved forms of transportation in the east, were being actively debated in almost every growing community. The superiority of the railroad was everywhere recognized, but the excessive cost, as compared with that of the plank road, was thought by many to more than offset the advantages. In so new a country, the task of raising sufficient capital for the construction of a plank road was hard enough. Railroads were considered a luxury which Iowa would not be able to afford for many years. Besides, it was agreed that plank roads would probably prove less likely to disturb or destroy such well established transportation agencies as were then in existence, and in which large sums of local capital had already been invested.

"The citizens of Davenport hang their hopes of prosperity and growth on railroads", declared the *Davenport Gazette*, "those of Muscatine upon bridges; those of Burlington upon plank roads. Which is the best peg to hang our hopes on?" To this question the rival *Muscatine Democratic Enquirer* replied on September 28, 1850, "Why, the

plank roads and bridges for a new country to be sure! If you don't want your hopes to hang until galvanism can't revive them, give your reliance on railroads to Uncle Sam's expense and go to work for yourselves as your neighbors have done and are doing. Muscatine and Burlington are liberally spending their thousands, earned by hard work, in improving the country and extending their trade and influence. The *Davenport Gazette* seems to think that the Rock Island and LaSalle road can be built and continued on to Iowa City. We hope this undertaking will succeed, though we have our fears. If the citizens of Davenport and Iowa City had spunk enough to talk about a plank road, the scheme would look more reasonable."

This appraisal of the situation well illustrated the state of public opinion which existed at that time in southeastern Iowa with respect to transportation problems. Many acts of the State legislature confirm the fact that "plank road fever" had broken out in earnest throughout the region. Like a "flash in the pan", legislation bearing upon this subject flared up as one of the most prominent topics of public concern. While the Second General Assembly passed only three acts relative to the construction of plank roads, the Third General Assembly, which convened in 1851, enacted ten. By 1853, however, enthusiasm for this type of

highway had, in the light of actual experience, so subsided that only one belated act was sanctioned by the Fourth General Assembly.

Inasmuch as no general plank road corporation act was ever passed in Iowa, the promoters of each proposed highway were compelled to go before the General Assembly and secure permission to construct their particular road. These legislative enactments were almost all alike. In most instances it seems that a company was previously organized under the provisions of the general incorporation act, for the purpose of building a road, and then, before construction might properly begin, a legislative enabling act had to be passed granting the company authority to obtain the right of way.

Existing highways were sometimes incorporated into the route of the new road, and on other occasions an entirely new course was chosen. Most of the provisions of the plank road acts concerned the legal procedure in buying the right of way. If the officials of the company and the land owner failed to agree upon benefits and damages, the owner was usually required to apply to the sheriff of the county in which the land lay for a jury to assess the amount of damages.

Other matters included in the act pertained to toll charges and the amount of the road which had

to be completed before they would become effective; the number and location of toll-houses and toll-gates; the question of right of way for traffic; the rules of the road and penalties to be exacted for non-observance; and the restoration of the road to public use and reversion of the rights of private owners upon the expiration of the company's charter or if the road were abandoned or discontinued.

The first legislation relating to the subject of plank roads, it appears, was an act adopted by the Second General Assembly, on January 8, 1849, granting to "James Weed, of Muscatine county, John Culbertson, of Cedar county, William Abbey, of Linn county, and Thomas Way, of Benton county, and their associates," the privilege of constructing a graded toll road from Bloomington (Muscatine) in Muscatine County, by way of Tipton, in Cedar County, to the county seat of Benton County, "on the most practical route, to be ascertained by survey." This was a most pretentious undertaking, for "if the said James Weed and his associates shall at any time deem it necessary for the interest of the public, they may construct a plank track, not less than eight feet in width, in which case they shall receive an additional toll".

Due to the length of the road, the wavering

interest of the communities along the route, and the rivalry of Davenport for the inland trade, the required capital was not easily obtained. So matters dragged along through the summer of 1850. Meetings were held spasmodically, but they seem to have been poorly attended and lethargic. There was some talk of diverting the northern end of the road westward toward Iowa City. On October 1, 1850, a meeting of the citizens of Muscatine was held to appoint delegates to a Plank Road Convention to be held at the Half-Way House. The committee reported in favor of burying "all sectional and local irritations" and uniting "heartily with the citizens of Iowa City in forwarding the interests and the building of both places." Judge Williams, John A. Parvin, and George C. Stone were appointed as a committee to confer with Iowa City. Commenting upon this action, the editor of the *Democratic Enquirer* remarked that, "This looks like the result of sober second thought. Roll on the ball!" Although an act of the legislature, approved on February 4, 1851, authorized the construction of a plank road from Muscatine to Iowa City, these well intentioned plans came to naught.

It seems that nothing further was accomplished until the summer of 1851 when, on August 9th, the *Muscatine Journal* reported that a meeting

was "held in Tipton, Cedar County, Iowa, for the purpose of taking into consideration the necessity and practicability of surveying and constructing a plank road from Muscatine via Tipton, to Cedar Rapids, &c." At this meeting committees of three each were appointed from Cedar and Linn counties, to confer with a like committee from Muscatine to devise ways and means of defraying the expenses of a survey for the proposed highway.

On August 30th, a general Plank Road Convention was announced to be attended by "Delegates from all the counties interested in and favorable to the Muscatine and Linn County Graded and Plank Road," which was to "be held at the Court House in Tipton, on Wednesday, the 10th of September at 11 o'clock, A.M., to devise measures adequate to an early completion of the road. It is hoped that there will be a large attendance of delegates and citizens from all sections interested." Only lukewarm enthusiasm, however, was manifest at this convention. When the general public refused to become excited over the venture, the Muscatine papers likewise assumed an attitude of indifference. Nothing more was heard of Muscatine's super-highway to the northwest.

For a time interest turned to another route leading directly westward. On January 18, 1851, the General Assembly passed an act granting a right

of way to the Muscatine, Washington and Oskaloosa Road and Bridge Company. It is doubtful if the promoters had serious expectations of completing the entire project implied by its euphonious title. In reality the company was organized as a subterfuge for the purpose of selling stock in a visionary scheme for constructing a new type of bridge across the Cedar River nine or ten miles directly west of Muscatine. It is said that a facetious editor, discussing the subject, dropped the very appropriate remark, "what a long tail our cat's got."

After the usual campaign for the sale of stock, a contract was made with N. L. Milburn, of Paducah, Kentucky, the inventor of a newly patented suspension bridge, to supervise its construction. This elaborate structure was almost completed on April 3, 1851, when Joseph Bennett, president of the company, cautiously rode his horse across. He was compelled to turn back without touching the other side, however, because the approach was not finished. That night a severe storm totally demolished the entire structure, entailing a loss of more than \$15,000 to the stockholders. Dissension arose within the ranks of the officers regarding the future policy of the company. They were apparently unable to agree either on the type of bridge to build or its location. Meanwhile the

oncoming rumble of the "rails" so alienated public favor from plank roads that the illfated project was never revived.

Several other proposals for graded and plank roads farther south met with varying degrees of success. Some reached only the "paper" stage, while others were carried to completion. Port Louisa, a boom town on the Mississippi opposite Wapello, attained considerable prominence for a brief period as the likely point of crossing for a trunk-line railway. It was thought that so promising a place would be the logical location for a permanent road penetrating into the interior. Accordingly, the "Port Louisa, Wapello and Virginia Grove Plank Road and Bridge Company" was organized for this purpose. The act granting right of way was passed by the General Assembly on February 5, 1851, which, in addition to the usual features included in such an act, also contained provisions for erecting a bridge across the Iowa River at Wapello; "*provided*, said bridge is so erected as not to interrupt materially the navigation of said Iowa River." All these well laid plans, however, apparently came to naught. If any actual construction was ever accomplished upon this project, the available records fail to reveal the fact.

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