

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Destiny Beckons Westward

Late in November of 1853, a lone horseman might have been seen drawing his mount up on the rim of the hills overlooking the Missouri River and gazing intently at the broad expanse lying before him. The rider was Grenville Mellen Dodge, a surveyor for the proposed Mississippi and Missouri Railroad which was to be constructed between Davenport and Council Bluffs, the swiftly mushrooming town on the Missouri.

A handsome, virile youth of 22, Dodge had spurred his horse in advance of his surveying party to catch the first glimpse of the mighty Missouri flood plain. Intelligent, wide-set eyes looked out from under heavy dark brows. His mouth was well shaped and generous; his dark hair framed an oval face. Dismounted, his slender frame proved of medium height.

As Grenville Dodge's glance swept across the river plain and scanned the hills on the opposite bank, his thoughts were already racing ahead toward the valley traversed by the Platte River



where his next surveys were destined to take him. At that moment, however, he could not have known that the little settlement of Council Bluffs, whose chimney smoke drifted upward through the trees, would become his family home. Neither could he divine that he would distinguish himself on the battlefield during a devastating civil war; that he would reconnoiter thousands of miles of the country facing him in the building of a famous railroad; that his burgeoning career as congressman, engineer, and financier would make him the friend and trusted ally of some of the greatest names in his country's history during the 60 years to come.

The years that had shaped this young man had held their share of hardship to quicken his ambition. Grenville Mellen had been born to Sylvanus and Julia Phillips Dodge on April 12, 1831, in Danvers (now Peabody), Massachusetts. The fact that Grenville was the second child to bear this name (the Dodge's first born having died in infancy) held no obvious ill omen for the youngster.

Of English stock, Grenville Dodge's forebears were in the main hard-working, respectable citizens, unmarked by eminence. His father was a kindly man, too generous for his own good; his mother diligent and principled. Both parents doted on young Grenville. Although the family was plagued with illness and ill fortune, Gren-



ville's all-consuming ambition simply kindled under adversity.

A brother, Nathan, was born in 1837 and a sister, Julia, in 1843. When the family ultimately settled in South Danvers, the father became postmaster and operated a bookstore. The boys attended school and assisted in the bookstore and at home.

An opportunity to work in the orchard and truck gardens of Mrs. Edward Lander's large farm outside Salem led Grenville by sheer accident to what was to become his career — engineering and railroads. This came about when young Grenville helped Frederick Lander, the son of Mrs. Lander, to construct a spur railroad track from the Eastern Railroad to an ice house on Wenham Lake. This opportunity gave him his first taste of surveying and construction. The 14-year-old youngster showed such promise in this field that Frederick, who had just graduated in civil engineering from Norwich University in Northfield, Vermont, insistently urged Grenville to prepare himself for the same course.

Between Mrs. Lander's stories of her ancestors' participation in the wars of 1776 and 1812, and his incipient enthusiasm for engineering, young Grenville's ambitions generated — first to be a soldier and then a builder. Of soldiering, he later wrote wryly: "After my first engagement I was willing to see the war end right there."



Preparatory schooling at Durham, New Hampshire, and Newbury, Vermont, enabled Grenville to enter Norwich University in the autumn of 1848. True to his ebullient nature, he participated in more than his share of pranks, one of which led to the suspension of his entire class for attending a forbidden dance in a nearby town. But not many hours of leisure were available; the money he used for his education had to be earned in odd jobs from field work to janitor's chores.

Norwich gave Grenville Dodge both the military training that prepared him for his Civil War commands and the vision to anticipate the immense importance of railroads to his country's progress. The school, founded in 1819 by former West Point Commandant Captain Alden Partridge, had been the first to offer the military-civil engineering curriculum in the country. It proved exactly tailored to Grenville's needs. Further bolstered by a post-graduate course at Captain Partridge's private school for practical instruction in field engineering where actual performance polished his academic learning, Dodge bore his diploma home in triumph in 1851.

In an address before the Vermont Society of New York in 1903, Dodge became nostalgic:

When a young boy I spent four years among the green hills, beautiful valleys and sweet, honest, hearty homes of Vermont. I thought then they were years of hard toil, of vexations and of submission to older boys who wore brass



buttons and sat down upon me severely, and I longed to see them over; but from that day to this they were my happiest hours, free from care and responsibility.

He went on to praise the lessons learned, the discipline of thought, mind, action, and the respect for authority drilled into him at Norwich.

Excited classroom discussions had winged Grenville's thoughts away from the settled East; his spirit responded to the challenge of the Great West. So he bade his family farewell and joined some of his Norwich classmates at Peru, Illinois. That summer, while waiting for a position to open up with the Illinois Central Railroad survey crew, he worked for G. W. Gilson surveying town lots.

Among the young women with whom he whiled away the crisp winter hours in Peru was the deep-blue-eyed Annie Brown, whose femininity was diminished no whit by her ability as a horsewoman and rifle expert. Dodge had no illusions about his social graces, but his shy diffidence may have been an intriguing quality, for Annie was to become Grenville Dodge's bride and later mistress of his proud house in Council Bluffs.

Dodge proved his engineering ability on the Illinois Central survey. In the fall of 1852, he was hired by Peter A. Dey, chief engineer for the Rock Island Railroad, to survey the Peoria branch. Later he accompanied Dey to Iowa to help survey the Mississippi and Missouri route, which became the Rock Island line.



It was the conclusion of this assignment which brought young Dodge to the western boundary of Iowa in 1853. Actually, he had won the race in surveying to the Missouri against three competing railroads. The Lyons and Iowa Central (Chicago, North Western) engineers were right behind him.

Dodge and his survey party were feted at a rousing reception in Council Bluffs a few days later. With impartiality, the community entertained the rival engineers when they arrived soon after Dodge. It would be 14 years before an "iron horse" would actually steam into the city. The Panic of 1857 and the Civil War were deterring factors in this eagerly looked for event.

Grenville Dodge evidently liked what he saw of Council Bluffs in 1853. In terms of opportunity for commerce, he foresaw bustling trade with the emigrant trains outfitting for their westward trek. Rising land values were sure to follow as Council Bluffs became a hub for business ventures radiating westward across the wide Missouri. His imagination had been captivated by the talk about a transcontinental railroad; certainly Council Bluffs would be a logical jumping-off point as well as a terminal for the western segment.

Subsequent forays through Nebraska convinced Dodge that of the four competing routes for a transcontinental line, the one that followed the 42nd parallel through the great Platte River Valley would prove most suitable for construction. In



Washington, the legislative kettle was boiling. The very year he surveyed Iowa, Dodge heard that Congress had passed a series of bills and grants for the construction of a railroad between the 32nd and 49th parallels. Unfortunately, Jefferson Davis, Secretary of War, scuttled the bill, hoping to force through authorization for the southern route. The enabling act that provided for a railroad following the 42nd parallel finally was passed by Congress and signed by President Lincoln in 1862.

Grenville's ripening romance with the lovely Miss Annie Brown led his thoughts to establishing a home. They were married at Danvers on May 28, 1854. So persuasive had Dodge proved in extolling the merits of the West that his family followed the newlyweds through Iowa to the Elkhorn River in Nebraska, where they took up land claims. Indian tribal wars uprooted them in less than a year, and the families moved to the safety of Council Bluffs in 1855. There, Lettie was born in 1855 and Ella in 1858.

In 1854 Dodge concentrated all the information he had accumulated about the overland route west into a map-directory which brought emigrants by the thousands through Council Bluffs. He wrote of this endeavor:

From my explorations and the information I had obtained with the aid of the Mormons and others, I mapped and made an itinerary of a line from Council Bluffs



through to Utah, California and Oregon, giving the camping places for each night, and showing where wood, water and fords of streams could be found. Distributed broadcast by the local interests of this route, this map and itinerary had no small influence in turning the mass of overland immigration to Council Bluffs, where it crossed the Missouri and took the great Platte Valley route.

Upon returning to Council Bluffs, Grenville bestirred himself during the financial panic, building the foundation of his later fortune. Railroad construction had ground to an impoverished halt, so young Dodge teamed with Judge Caleb Baldwin to found a banking house in Council Bluffs. He next pioneered with a mercantile wagon-freight line through to Denver. Later, a real-estate firm was added. In charge of the bank was Nathan Dodge, the trusted younger brother of Grenville, who had learned the rudiments of his post well by the time Colorado's gold strike brought men and money swarming through the community. Nathan spent 32 years as head of the Council Bluffs Savings Bank, still the city's largest.

Spurred to action by an outbreak of the Sioux Indian tribe to the north, Dodge organized the Council Bluffs Guards in 1856. His Norwich military training made him the local — indeed, a state — expert. Years later, in a letter greeting the Encampment of the 51st and 52nd Regiments of the Iowa National Guard held at Council Bluffs in August 1901, he wrote prophetically:

When I look back to the struggles we had to go



through in the Fifties to organize and maintain even a military company, without aid, laws or uniforms from the state, and see the interest the state and people take in such organizations now, the money appropriated and inducements offered, it is a great satisfaction to me and to all soldiers. . . . Now . . . the government is devoting much time to expanding and perfecting the National Guard, and I hope eventually to see it organized, officered, armed, equipped and drilled the same as our regular army, with pay and emoluments while on duty, thus making it a national reserve to our army, ready upon the call of our government to take the field as a complete organization. . . .

The young engineer returned to the work of building the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad through Iowa from Iowa City. The financial panic stopped the work again in 1857. He now came under the patronage of Henry Farnam and Thomas C. Durant, who financed Dodge's reconnaissance and surveys west along the 41st and 42nd parallels to the Rockies. These explorations only committed him more firmly to the belief that the 42nd parallel held vast superiority over any other route for the Pacific railroad. In a speech he later said:

It might seem strange . . . that although the Government spent millions of dollars in examining different routes for the Pacific railway, covering the country between the parallels of 32 and 49, which reports . . . were printed in eleven large volumes, no examination was made by the Government upon the most feasible route across the continent; that was left to private enterprise.



Abraham Lincoln's visit to Council Bluffs in August of 1859 resulted in an encounter with Grenville Dodge which has become one of the community's favorite historical vignettes. Lincoln had come upriver by steamboat from St. Joseph, Missouri, to examine some property which constituted the security for a loan he had made to Norman B. Judd, attorney for the Rock Island Railroad. The tall, spare barrister had achieved national stature through his debates with Douglas and would soon be a candidate for the presidency.

Since the transcontinental railroad was assuming national importance, Lincoln sought information about possible routes from Dodge. He bombarded the surveyor with questions until Dodge had divulged everything of significance his experience had taught him of the western territory.

"This interview was of the greatest importance to me," Dodge wrote. "It was a milestone in my life, and Mr. Lincoln never forgot it." This proved only the first of several interviews in which Lincoln sought opinions from Dodge. The view of the Missouri River Valley shown to Lincoln from a high bluff in the city impressed him. The spot is now marked by a monument which General Dodge unveiled in 1911.

Hoping that Council Bluffs and the Platte River route would be favored by Lincoln if he were the Chief of State, Dodge worked hard to recruit votes for him among the Iowa delegation at the



Republican nominating convention in Chicago in 1860. In Washington for Lincoln's inaugural, Grenville Dodge buttonholed influential persons to "sell" them on the most logical route for the railroad.

All too soon, the slavery issue exploded into the War Between the States. Realizing that a transcontinental railroad must yield precedence in the crisis, Dodge responded to the Union's need by offering his Council Bluffs Guards as a unit for Iowa's infantry regiments. But Governor Kirkwood preferred to hold this regiment in reserve for border protection from both Indians and Missouri hotheads.

Dodge eventually accepted the appointment as colonel of the 4th Iowa Volunteers, which he recruited and organized. On October 9, 1861, he was given command of the military post at Rolla, Missouri, and in skirmishes received a leg wound the following December. His troops then became a part of the Army of the Southwest under Brigadier General Samuel Ryan Curtis with Dodge commanding the 1st Brigade, 4th Division. Here he first served with Quartermaster Phil Sheridan, and this was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. The major engagement of his Brigade at Pea Ridge in the Arkansas hills proved the value of Colonel Dodge's firm discipline. Outnumbered by their Rebel opponents, all but the 1st Brigade were driven back on the right during the



bloody three-day battle in March 1862. Dodge wrote to his father:

It was a terrible three days to me. . . . I got off a sick bed to go to the fight, and I never got a wink of sleep for three days and three nights. . . . We lacked sadly in numbers and artillery, but with good judgment and good grit we made it win. My officers were very brave . . . many (men) who were too badly wounded to leave the field stuck to their places, sitting on the ground, loading and firing.

He described a desperate bayonet charge which was made by the black-coated 4th Iowa when it was without ammunition. The Rebels were routed and the 4th won the cheers of the entire Union force. Next morning an artillery barrage completed the victory in his troops' sector. Dodge concluded:

I escaped most miraculously. A shell burst right in front of me, and, tearing away my saddle holsters and taking off a large piece of my pants, never even scratched me. My clothes were riddled and I got a hit in the side that is serious, but did not think of it at the time.

He failed to mention that three horses had been shot from under him.

In his *Memoirs* of the southwestern campaign, he did mention that "I was hauled 250 miles over a rough road in an ambulance, and if any of you have had the same experience you can judge what I suffered." But a telegram delivered to him en route notified him of promotion to brigadier gen-



eral and "the promotion insured my getting well."

After his recovery in June 1862, Dodge was sent to General H. W. Halleck's command at Corinth, Mississippi. Sheridan, who had preceded him there, recommended Dodge as the indispensable man to rebuild the desperately needed Mobile and Ohio Railroad between Columbus, Kentucky, and Corinth. The road appeared to be past salvaging but Dodge bulldogged the reconstruction through that summer of 1862.

From his command of 8,000 troops, he assembled a remarkably efficient construction crew—ferreting out each man's talents whether blacksmith, lumberjack, carpenter, trackman, and solved the problems of supply, protection, and material without outside personnel. Forrest's raids were frustrated by Dodge's ingenious defensive tactics in fortifying every bridge and station as a blockhouse. He was finished in August.

From this remarkable demonstration, Dodge's reputation brought him a series of challenging assignments. He rebuilt two segments of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad in Mississippi and other lines needed for supply from Chattanooga to Atlanta. Ordered to rebuild the Nashville-Decatur road in 1863, his corps restored 182 bridges and 102 miles of track within 40 days. During the preparation for the Atlanta campaign, Dodge's corps astounded General Sherman by bridging the Chattahoochee River at Roswell, Georgia, with a



double-track structure 710 feet long and 14 feet above the water within a space of three days. And this after a forced march of 31 miles to reach the site!

Restoration of these railroad lines proved critically essential to the Union's success. It is regrettable that public hero-worship attaches inevitably to battle heroes; General Dodge as a railroad miracle worker remains a practical genius without the romance. He served where he was most needed, but it cost him the opportunity for glamorous personal acclaim.

General Dodge's organization of a successful spy system for the Union illustrates his unique gift for filling a vacuum. Dismayed by the inaccuracy of most of the reports coming from the army's informants, Dodge recruited and trained a cadre of secret service agents whose information proved invaluable to General Grant.

Alvin Harlow, in an article in *Trains Magazine* in June 1948, wrote:

I have been unable to find elsewhere in history such an example of an able and valiant commander of combat troops who also built railroads and bridges and maintained a remarkable intelligence system.

Thomas Shehan of Danvers, Massachusetts, in an address before the Council Bluffs Rotary Club in May 1963 called Dodge "the most underrated figure of the Civil War."

From October 1862, when he was assigned com-



mand of the Second Division of the Army of the Tennessee, until late October 1863, when he commanded the Left Wing of the 16th Army Corps, Dodge participated in a dozen battles in Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee.

Promotion to the rank of major general came on June 7, 1864. Soon after that he led his corps of volunteers into the battle of Atlanta, where General James B. McPherson was killed. Dodge, himself, received a near-fatal head wound from a ricocheting bullet at the log breastworks before Atlanta on August 19. His wife came to nurse him. She, then, brought him back to Council Bluffs for convalescence, where the grateful town staged a parade in his honor.

It was two months before Dodge could return to duty. His next major assignment came in December. It was administering the Department of the Army of the Missouri to rid the State of guerrillas who were terrorizing the citizens. The new commander outwitted the jinx of his post by threatening sentence of death to guerrilla and southern-sympathizing protector alike. Order was restored in a matter of 60 days, but not before Dodge had narrowly escaped assassination in St. Louis. Grateful citizens gave him the engraved silver platter which is now displayed at the State Department of History and Archives in Des Moines.

While the War Between the States rose to a



bloody crescendo, Indian tribes were using the critical times to win back the territory on which the white man had encroached. All through the West, Indians were wiping out wagon trains, murdering settlers, destroying telegraph lines, immobilizing freight and mail deliveries, and intimidating the weakened army posts.

To General Dodge, who had been appointed commander of all United States forces in Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, and Utah, fell the order to restore peace. Early in 1865, General Dodge moved into residence at Fort Leavenworth, and his family joined him there. The Dodges' third daughter, who was called Annie as a child, was born there March 7, 1866.

Through the rigors of a desperately bitter winter, Dodge gave heart to the discouraged troops, restoring the telegraph and carrying out punitive action against the Indians with equal force. Some of the most colorful and sanguinary incidents of Dodge's memoirs can be read in his account of the Indian campaigns. He became almost a legendary figure to the red men, who had earlier christened him "Long Eye" because of his ability to see great distances with his surveying instruments.

Over 600 miles of telegraph line were rebuilt between Omaha and Denver in 13 sub-zero days and nights. His troops chased the Indians north and south of the main emigrant routes so that the stages could roll again within 17 days. When



Union soldiers resigned, Dodge organized companies of Rebel prisoners to do the fighting and pitted loyal Pawnees against renegades to augment his forces.

Obstruction from Washington after Lincoln's death prevented his "mopping up" operations which might have settled the Indian question permanently. His certainty that the Pacific railroad could not go through until the Indians were quelled had led Dodge to refuse an offer to become chief engineer for the Union Pacific. He now felt that his army task was over, so Grant's offer of a post in the army "regulars" held no enticement for him.

As the summer of 1866 approached and Dodge watched the first tentative progress of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific building toward each other, his impatience to become a part of it could no longer be curbed. In May he resigned his army commission to join the Union Pacific.

GENEVIEVE P. MAUCK