

# THE PALIMPSEST

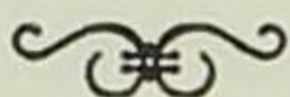
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## The Iowa Central

Iowa had long dreamed of a north and south main line. Back in pre-Civil War days that prince of pioneers, Josiah B. Grinnell, headed a company to fulfill that mission. But the war came and the project was dropped. Later an energetic twosome composed of David Morgan, a New Sharon schoolteacher, and Peter Melendy, a Cedar Falls newspaper editor, gave much zeal and some capital to the enterprise. Considerable grading was done, between Albia and Oskaloosa, between Cedar Falls and Toledo, and also in the vicinity of Tama, and then, because the money ran out, the undertaking languished. What was termed the "Grandest Railroad Project of the Age" turned out to be a fiasco. It looked as if the longitudinal rail line was an empty dream. Such, however, was not the case. Today the main stem of the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway cuts right through the midriff of Iowa from the Minnesota border to within a few miles of the northern rim of Missouri.

The story of the Iowa Central Railway which



eventually became the M&StL's main line in Iowa, is the old dream with new twists: a different group of backers, an altered route, and an exceedingly humble beginning. And for some forty years this section of the road was independent of the M&StL. Here's how it started.

When coal was discovered in the vicinity of Eldora the problem of cheap transportation became of paramount importance. This led to the formation of the Eldora Railroad and Coal Company on February 7, 1866, to build a railway to Ackley, sixteen miles north. At Ackley the Eldora road would connect with the east-west road which is now the Illinois Central. By July, 1868, the new road was completed, but its connection with the outside world was not entirely satisfactory. It was finally decided to build twenty-eight miles south from Eldora, to tie in with the east-west main line of the Chicago & North Western at Marshalltown. A new company, the Iowa River Railway, headed by Charles C. Gilman (who was also president of the older road), took over the Eldora line on September 1, 1868. Just before completion, on September 30, 1869, to be exact, the River Railway became the Central Railroad Company of Iowa. Now it threw away its mantle as a purely local road to carry on the tradition of Morgan and Melendy and become an important north-and-south route.

Marshalltown welcomed the formal opening of



the new road by a gala celebration on January 7, 1870. Indeed, the shops and general offices were to be removed later from Eldora to Marshalltown, and the latter town had reason to be proud. The road athwart central Iowa would be operated from *central* Iowa at Marshalltown. Great things were expected of the new company, for the cross-state vertical line was to become — and finally did become — a reality.

Physically, the north-and-south route from Mason City to Albia was completed in 1872, but it was many years before it came into its own economically, financially, and strategically. For the next three decades the road was to remain in precarious financial condition with a round of receiverships, shifts in management, and constant name-changing. During the mid-seventies Isaac M. Cate succeeded Gilman to the presidency, and shortly afterward Josiah B. Grinnell was appointed receiver. Grinnell's hectic trusteeship lasted only about two years when he was superseded by H. L. Morrill. Finally on May 5, 1879, the road emerged from the court's hands as the Central Iowa Railway.

The Iowa road was dubbed the "Hook and Eye" because in the early timetables the initial "C" was placed on its back across the top of the "I" so that the former initial resembled a hook and the latter an eye. The railway continued to expand during periods of solvency. Apparently the char-



ter forbade building branches, for all the offshoots from the main stem were constructed by separate companies and then sold to the Central Iowa. Most important of these additions was the New Sharon Coal Valley and Eastern, incorporated January 29, 1880. By January 7 of '82 the name was changed to the high-sounding Chicago, Burlington and Pacific, and on April 1 of the same year the road was sold to the Central Iowa. Eighteen-eighty-two also saw the completion of the road from Oskaloosa to the west bank of the Mississippi opposite Keithsburg, Illinois.

Meantime dirt was flying in Illinois. The old Peoria and Farmington Railway (chartered March 27, 1869) was purchased by the Central Iowa Railway (of Illinois), and it was pushing westward to the "Father of Waters." In 1883 the Central-Iowa-of-Illinois line started operating from Peoria to Keithsburg, 88 miles.

To cross the Mississippi a small paddle-wheel steamer, the *William Osborn*, churned its way from shore to shore with its quota of four freight cars. When the river was frozen — well, passengers either walked across, or they, together with freight, rode on sleighs. At least one winter, however, when navigation ceased, the pioneer railroaders constructed a temporary wooden trestle. When the ice melted in the spring the jerry-built trestle was removed so that river traffic could be resumed. The first permanent bridge was com-



pleted at Oakville in 1886. It had eight spans of through-truss design and a 362-foot swing draw.

Here, then, was the Central Iowa's route very much as it is today: from Mason City through Marshalltown and Oskaloosa to Keithsburg and Peoria in Illinois. The northern terminus, as we have said, was at Mason City, but this was later extended northward to Manly in Worth County. The gap between the latter town and Albert Lea, Minnesota, was closed in 1877 when the M&StL and the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern (now the Rock Island) finished a joint line linking the two communities.

By the mid-eighties all the branches had sprouted and grown and were duly absorbed by the Central Iowa. They included the 22-mile Belmond line veering off the main stem at Hampton; the 34-mile Story City Branch running westward from Minerva Junction (near Marshalltown); the 26-mile State Center feeder from Newburg; the 14-mile stub out of the old Grinnell & Montezuma Junction to Montezuma; and finally the 28-mile branch to Newton running north-northwest from New Sharon. All and all, the Central Iowa had a system of nearly 500 miles, less than 100 of them outside the Hawkeye State.

Such a railroad patrimony purchased and absorbed throughout the years needed a coat of arms or a trade-mark to lend prestige and distinction. So thought J. P. Nourse, the general passenger



agent. Action followed inspiration, and the road's official emblem made its debut in the May, 1887, timetable. Like Mark Twain's map it was truly the only one of its kind.

Under a hodgepodge of arms, hands, circles, and bands came this descriptive gobbledegook: "An excutcheon, inverted, or PER Paly BENDY, AZURE, Nebuly on an annulet sable, between four hands gules, One hand rampant gardant, three hands grabant, and all hands around. Our motto will be, 'The Handy Line' — (Battle cry Hi! Hi! Hi!, the last syllable prolonged.)"

It took the foreclosure of 1888 to get rid of this nonsense; and the Iowa Central Railway, the new company, henceforth operated without a coat of arms or a battle cry. Incidentally this was the last name-change the road had as an independent company.

To recapitulate, the lineage of the Iowa Central begins with the Eldora Railroad and Coal Company which in succession became the Iowa River Railway, Central Railroad Company of Iowa, Central Iowa Railway, and finally the Iowa Central. Another Iowa road, the Chicago, Burlington and Pacific, came into the fold in 1882. About the same time the Peoria & Farmington (an Illinois road) came under Iowa Central interests and was soon completed from Peoria to the Mississippi at Keithsburg.

In common with most roads near the end of the



nineteenth century the Iowa Central was quick to make traffic alliances at terminals. These alliances depended on the road's presidents who came and went with the ups and downs of management. When Cate ruled at Marshalltown — and he held office for about a dozen years — the Milwaukee Road was the favored route from Mason City to the Twin Cities. Cate's short-term successors, Alfred Sully and Elijah Smith, made little change, but when A. B. Stickney gained control he promptly made the northern connection his own Minnesota & North-western, now the Chicago Great Western.

The Iowa Central had long pioneered in through passenger trains, and its Twin City-St. Louis service, in connection with the Milwaukee on the north and the Wabash on the south, achieved considerable popularity. But Stickney did more. Being an audacious and independent thinker, and above all an individualist, he had his own ideas. They were, to say the least, far ahead of his time. Today we think of through sleepers from the east to points west of the Mississippi as being the brain-child of Robert R. Young of the Chesapeake & Ohio. Not so. In the mid-eighties Alpheus Beede Stickney inaugurated cross-country "Woodruff Chair and Sleeping Cars" from the capital of Minnesota to the capital of Ohio.

Before me I have a yellowing timetable dated November 7, 1886. It shows Train No. 4 leaving



Minneapolis at 6:30 p. m. (St. Paul at 7:05) and arriving at Columbus, Ohio, at 4:10 a. m. two days later. The routing: Minnesota & Northwestern and the Central Iowa to Peoria, Illinois, thence the Indiana, Bloomington & Western (now the New York Central) to destination. Returning on No. 1, passengers left the Buckeye capital at 9:00 a. m., and at 8:30 on the evening of the second day they arrived in the Mill City.

When Russell Sage, the New York financier, replaced Stickney in 1890, the northern connection reverted to the Milwaukee. Sage and General Francis M. Drake, onetime governor of Iowa, were active in the management of the Centreville [*sic*], Moravia & Albia Railroad which the Iowa Central operated until 1910. This road, which linked all the towns in its title, was subsequently electrified and is now an interurban freight line controlled by the Iowa Southern Utilities.

The Sage regime, although not outstanding in itself, produced some very able railroaders. General Manager C. H. Ackert in later years left the old Hook and Eye to head the Southern Railway, and Master Mechanic John Player went from Marshalltown to a similar position on the far-flung Santa Fe system. Along with "home guards" the Iowa Central always had a large quota of "boomers." Indeed it is said with a measure of truth that one "never saw the same crew twice." Itinerant railroaders from coast to coast often took a hitch



on the Hook and then settled elsewhere. Never a wealthy road and at times run-down, it did the best it could with the equipment at hand. If a man passed muster on the Iowa Central he was trained for the exigencies of railroading almost anywhere.

When Sage relinquished the presidency in 1897 he was followed by Horace J. Morse and then a year or so later by Robert J. Kimball. In the coming era of big business and consolidations, the Iowa Central would have to buy or be bought. Clearly the former was out of the question. That was the status of the "Marshalltown Route," as Iowans affectionately called their home road, as the new century dawned.