

Pruning the Branches

When the Burlington built its branches in Iowa there were no motor vehicles and modern highways. During the horse and buggy era it was desirable to have a plentiful supply of feeders so that any point had a railroad within a day's wagon drive. The automobile and truck changed this. What was formerly an all-day trip for Old Dobbin now took hardly an hour by car. Furthermore, the flexibility and convenience of the motor car made such inroads into branch-line travel that all Iowa passenger trains in this category were discontinued by 1959. The final run of this type was the little motor train shuttling between Creston and St. Joseph.

It was inevitable that some branches faced partial or total abandonment due to changing conditions. A few should never have been built and others had outlived their usefulness. Again, some sections of a line faced retirement because of track relocation to provide better grades and more efficient operation. Occasionally floods made rehabilitation of marginal branches unfeasible.

Iowa's first abandonment came in 1889 when the 11-mile Albia-Moravia stub line quit. It had been constructed as the Albia & Moulton Railway

in 1880 to forestall Jay Gould's extending a line from southern Iowa to Des Moines. It served no purpose, for Gould completed his extension anyway, and the Burlington-backed company died.

The influence of Gould, as we have seen, also led to the extension of the Alexandria, Missouri-Van Wert line another 95 miles further westward to Shenandoah. The addition was never profitable, and most of it was abandoned by 1945. In 1958 the 28-mile stretch of original line between Centerville and Corydon was likewise scrapped.

Main line relocation between Fairfield and Batavia, nine miles, and between Murray and Creston, 21 miles, rendered the pioneer routes in these segments unnecessary, and they were abandoned in 1900 and 1901 respectively. On the Albia-Des Moines branch, completion of the Red Rock Dam made relocation imperative. The Burlington's rails between Swan and Des Moines accordingly were pulled up in 1967, and trackage rights were arranged over the Norfolk & Western from Swan.

Probably the branches most vulnerable to highway competition were the marginal lines originally built to narrow gauge. They were the old Burlington and Western, the Fort Madison-Batavia branch and the Des Moines-Cainsville, Missouri line. Most of what was the B&W took the count when the Winfield-Oskaloosa line folded in 1934.

That portion, however, between Coppock and Martinsburg was sold to the Minneapolis & St.

Louis, which then bought the 13-mile Oskaloosa-Tracy section but later abandoned it.

Thin traffic brought about the retirement of the upper end of the Fort Madison-Batavia branch. First the Batavia-Birmingham section was lopped off, and by 1956 the line was cut back to Stockport. Insufficient tonnage also accounted for the abandonment of most of the Keokuk-Mt. Pleasant line in 1932 save the Salem-Hamill portion.

Scrapping of the Des Moines-Cainsville route was due to several factors. To begin with, the entire line was built with curves and grades acceptable for narrow gauge running but quite unsuitable for modern railroading. Then, coal mines at the Missouri end of the line were worked out. This prompted abandonment of the road south of Osceola in the 1930's. A bad flood, in June 1947, severely damaged the road north of Osceola, dooming that section, too. Piecemeal curtailment of service resulted in the whole Des Moines-Osceola portion becoming a memory by 1957. To protect freight service from the state capital to the West, trackage rights were secured over the Chicago Great Western from Des Moines to Talmage, on the "Q's" main line.

Other total abandonments included the Sedan-Elmer, Missouri, line in 1936, and the Indianola branch by 1961. The former's demise resulted from unprofitable coal mines in northern Missouri, the latter because of meager traffic. Indianola,

however, is still served by the Rock Island road.

Turning again to southeastern Iowa, one finds the long branch extending from Viele to Carrollton, Missouri, partly dismembered. First the Unionville, Missouri-Moulton segment was abandoned early in the 1950's, and by 1969 the remainder of the line in Iowa ceased operation.

Railroad competition, which prompted building of most of the five lines running in a southwesterly direction from the main stem to points on the Missouri River, became economically redundant by the mid-1960's. One by one, parts of four of these failed to earn their keep and were subsequently abandoned. The lower end of the Red Oak-Hamburg branch was cut back to Riverton in 1961 after a washout. The Clarinda-Corning, Missouri, and the Clarinda-Bigelow, Missouri, branches were likewise severed. The former abandonment between Clarinda and Westboro, Missouri, was effective partly in 1958 and the remainder in 1961; the latter, from Clarinda to Skidmore, Missouri, was authorized piecemeal in 1941 and 1961. Finally, the "long side" of the loop of the Chariton-St. Joseph, Missouri, line was separated between Mt. Ayr and Grant City, Missouri. This resulted in the "Burlington Formula" of 1944 protecting an employee, in the event of abandonment, from reduction in pay by the use of a displacement allowance.

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