The Great Western In Iowa

Slightly over one-half of the Chicago Great Western mileage is in Iowa today. Because the Hawkeye State has played an important role in the road's growth, a review of the antecedent companies in Iowa may be in order. One company's history, at least, goes back to 1870. It is that half mythical, half real Iowa Pacific, which palimpsest-like shows traces of cuts and fills and old rights of way here and there on the prairies. Many of the vestigial remains are hardly decipherable even to the student of railroad history. Until some patient antiquarian with a stout pair of legs and a liberal endowment can disclose the whole story of the ill-fated road, we will have to be content with fragments of its history.

The Iowa Pacific was graded from a point in Fayette County, called Fayette Junction, westward through Sumner, Waverly, and Hampton to Belmond in Wright County. Another section veered southwest from Belmond to Fort Dodge. The records seem to indicate that the company had laid only about a dozen miles of track in the vicinity of Waverly. A company titled the Dubuque & Dakota — nicknamed the Damned Doubtful — acquired some 95 miles of the old

Iowa Pacific right of way and laid tracks from Sumner to Hampton in 1879 and 1880.

Enter now the Stickney-controlled railroads. The Minnesota & Northwestern (a predecessor of the Chicago Great Western) purchased the Dubuque & Dakota's line from Sumner to Hampton in 1887. The Mason City & Fort Dodge (incorporated in Iowa, June 10, 1881) had built from Mason City to Fort Dodge in 1886, utilizing part of the abandoned Iowa Pacific grade. At this time the MC&FtD was controlled by Stickney interests, and in 1901 it was leased to the Chicago Great Western for one hundred years.

Stickney now extended the Mason City & Fort Dodge to fulfill his last major objective for the Maple Leaf system: a direct line between the Twin Cities and Omaha. The short Mason City-Manly Junction gap was spanned in 1901. The longest uncompleted section, the 133 miles from Fort Dodge to Council Bluffs, was finished in 1903. It featured a lofty bridge nearly a half-mile long over the Des Moines River at Fort Dodge. The 2,588-foot structure, reputed to be the second largest railway bridge in Iowa, entailed no loss of life in its building; the most serious accident being a smashed finger of one workman! From Council Bluffs the CGW had trackage rights into Omaha.

This completes the present Great Western except for the Clarion-Oelwein side of the triangle

near the center of the system so conspicuous on the map. As previously mentioned, the rails had already been laid from Sumner to Hampton — a part of that triangle. The western gap from Hampton to Clarion, 26 miles, was closed in 1902; on the eastern end, the 29-mile segment from Waverly to Oelwein was completed in 1904.

As was the case with many roads in the nineteenth century, the building of the Great Western was often done by construction companies affiliated with the railway. For example, on the Twin Cities-Chicago line, that portion of the road between Dubuque and Thorpe, Iowa, was built by the Stickney-controlled Dubuque & Northwestern, and on completion was promptly sold to the Minnesota & Northwestern. Again, land companies were formed to purchase rights of way and sites for depots and shops. The Iowa Development and the Iowa Townsite companies, which Stickney formed to acquire land, are still in existence today. Their book value, however, is now listed at $1.00 each!

The turn of the century witnessed the moving of the Great Western's shops from South Park, Minnesota, to Oelwein. The new shop headquarters were officially dedicated on September 28, 1899, but it was not until about four years afterward that they were fully equipped for repair work of all kinds.

It was intended that Oelwein should have the

shops in the early 90's, but the panic of 1893 and the business depression which followed postponed the road's plans. A. B. Stickney, however, was fully aware that the Iowa community was the logical place for the company's major repair base. The practice of bringing bad-order cars and faulty locomotives all the way to the St. Paul area from Chicago and Kansas City entailed much wasteful mileage. After many premature announcements, Stickney declared on February 21, 1898, at the opening of Oelwein's Hotel Mealey, that the shops would be built that year. The news caused much rejoicing and moved a local bard, Mary H. Millard, to write an eighteen-stanza poem on "Oelwein's Glory." Her verses ended with a stirring —

Long live the noble president
  Of western railroad fame!
And well may Oelwein's sterling men
  Pay honor to his name,

For in the years that are to come,
  Oft we'll tell the story:
How A. B. Stickney laid the road
  That led to Oelwein's glory.

In 1890 Oelwein had about 800 people; a half century later the population had risen to 7,801. A large part of this increase may be attributed to the removal of the shops to Oelwein and the subsequent enlargements of the repair facilities. Contemporary accounts describe the main shop quar-

ters as two large buildings separated by a transfer pit and table. The one structure housed the general storehouse, the machine and erecting shop, the boiler shop, and the coach shop. The other building embraced the freight car shop, the blacksmith shop, and the paint shop. Some idea of the size of the layout may be gleaned from the fact that fifteen tracks were to go into the machine and erecting shop, six into the coach shop, and five into the boiler shop.

A novel feature in one of the smaller buildings was a recreation room called "Liberty Hall," where employees could spend their leisure time. The "club room" with reading matter is said to have been personally paid for by Stickney.

When Walter P. Chrysler came to supervise the shops from the Colorado & Southern in 1907, he found them among the most modern in the country. In his autobiography, *Life of An American Workman,* he describes them in glowing terms:

> They were the biggest shops I had ever seen. Sixteen or eighteen locomotives could be hauled inside them. In the winter darkness they were brilliantly illuminated with sputtering bluish arc lamps. There were great cranes aloft that could lift a locomotive in their chains. Everything was marvelous, and when I saw the transfer tables I felt like applauding. Best of all, everything in those shops was to be in my charge. . . .

Chrysler rose to become superintendent of mo-

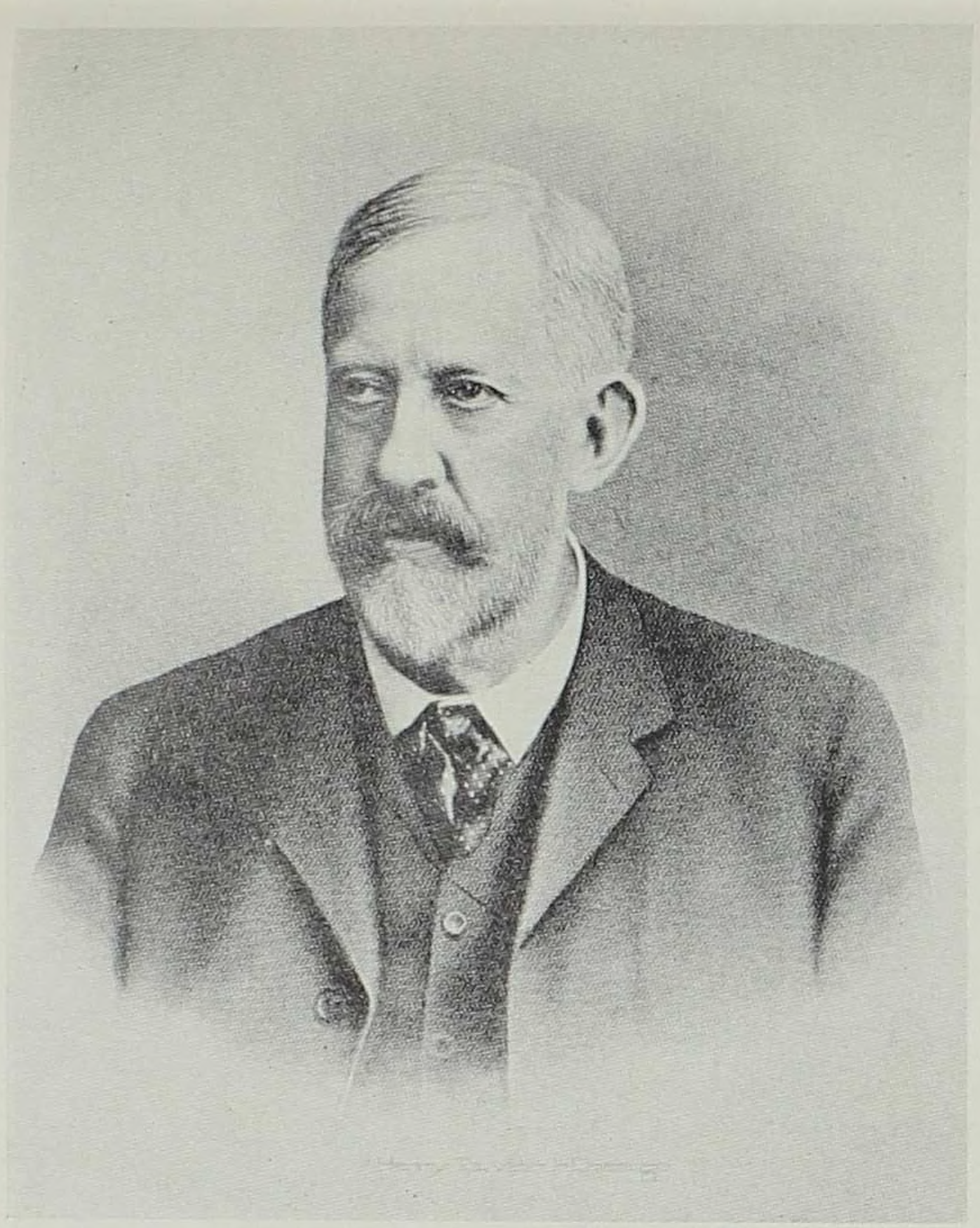
tive power for the Great Western but left the road after a tiff with Stickney's successor, Sam Felton. From the Maple Leaf system he went to the Pittsburgh plant of the American Locomotive Company as works manager. He subsequently quit "Alco" to try his hand at automobile manufacturing and later founded and built the huge Chrysler Corporation. It is significant that Oelwein remembers him as the owner of the town's first automobile — a Locomobile.

During Stickney's reign the locomotives were almost as individualistic as he, for their stacks were painted a bright red; the Great Western itself was frequently referred to as "The Red Stack." In a day when there was great rivalry between steam roads and electric interurbans Stickney had his company operate in close harmony with the Waterloo, Cedar Falls & Northern. The interurban operated over CGW tracks from Waverly to Sumner, whereas Stickney's road had running rights over the "juice" line from Denver Junction to Waterloo. This rapprochement was further strengthened when L. S. Cass, head of the interurban, was made a vice-president of the Great Western.

Stickney vigorously fought to get legislation enacted prohibiting discrimination in rates. He dared to say what he thought anywhere and at any time. At one important traffic meeting in the East he complimented the railroad presidents on

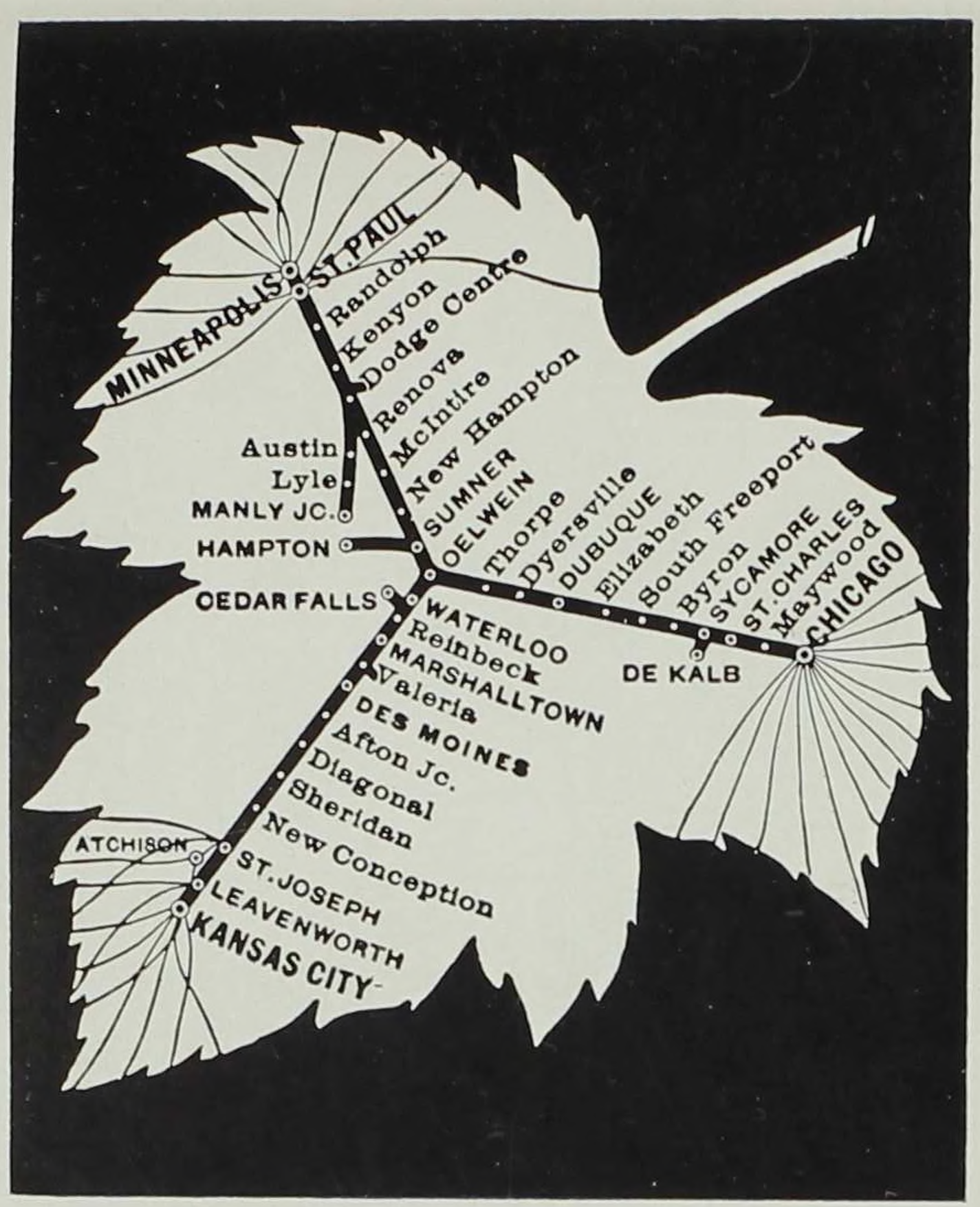
their honesty, integrity, and fine character, saying he would trust any one of them with his entire personal fortune. Then, according to the recollection of a former Great Western official, he added: "But, gentlemen, as railroad presidents I would not trust any one of you with my watch!" Stickney knew that once the presidents left the meeting, the rate agreements which they had just made would promptly be broken. In a booklet entitled *Railway Rates* (1909) Stickney also advocated tariff simplification and devised his own system which, he asserted, would reduce the rate sheets from an estimated 4,000 volumes to just 31.

Rumors of an impending financial crisis at the Great Western offices drifted through Wall Street during the first days of 1907. The year had opened propitiously for businessmen and investors, but the unconfirmed reports of low earnings and unpaid obligations were a harbinger of the famous panic of 1907. Despite a floating debt of $10,653,000, on January 7 Samuel C. Stickney denied a report from New York "that a receiver had been or was about to be asked for the Chicago Great Western Railway." However, cabled news from London which came in the next morning confirmed the rumor. The British noteholders had met with A. B. Stickney and reached a decision on the company's financial plight. Out of their conference came a plan to place the railroad into bankruptcy "to maintain the status quo during the



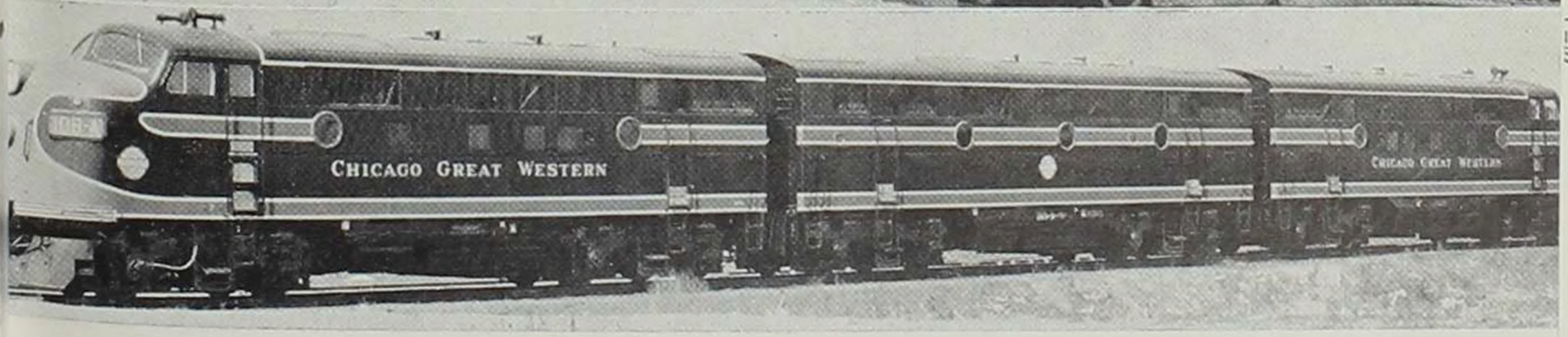
(*Minnesota Historical Society*)

Alpheus B. Stickney

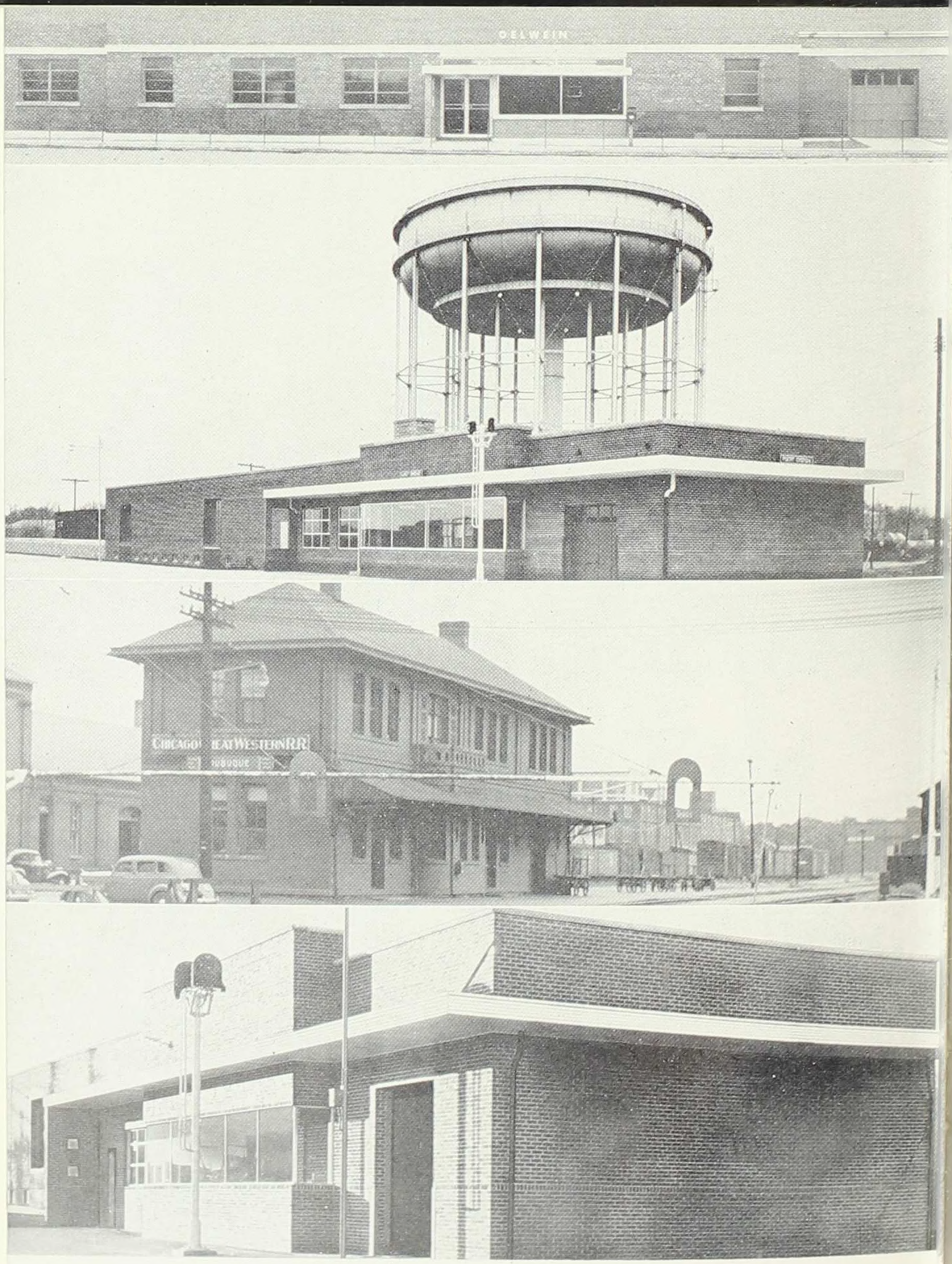


The Famous "Maple Leaf" CGW Trademark

CGW Locomotives *(top to bottom):* Texas-type
Trailer-on-flat-cars in St. Paul
Kansas City-Twin Cities day train on final run
(Courtesy Ernest Sevde)
1,500-h. p. Diesel



CGW Locomotives *(top to bottom):* The famous "Red Bird"
The "Blue Bird" *(Courtesy Electro-Motive)*
Loading mail at Council Bluffs
(Courtesy Henry J. McCord)
Latest Diesel types



Familiar CGW Stations in Iowa *(top to bottom):* Oelwein
Fort Dodge
Dubuque
(Courtesy Henry J. McCord)
Marshalltown

time necessary to prepare a first mortgage bond covering all the indebtedness of the road, and to obtain a vote of the stockholders on this measure." At this London meeting the elder Stickney declared that the financial climate in the United States was so unhealthy that the 7 per cent note obligations could not be met. Bankruptcy seemed to be the only answer. Wall Street reacted to the news with a wave of selling, and before the ticker closed on January 8, 1908, Chicago Great Western stock was selling for 4¾.

Stickney and C. H. F. Smith of St. Paul were appointed co-receivers of the railroad by the court, but within a year's time Stickney severed all his connections with the Great Western and for the remainder of his life lived in retirement at St. Paul.

In 1909 the road was sold and its properties conveyed to the Chicago Great Western *Railroad,* a newly formed company. That year Samuel M. Felton became president, an office he held until 1925, after which he served as chairman of the board until his death in 1930. Sam Felton had started his career as rodman for the Chester Creek Railroad (now a part of the Pennsylvania Railroad) in 1868. For the next twenty years he served in various capacities such as engineer, chief engineer, general superintendent, or general manager on a dozen roads. He headed the East Tennessee, Virginia & Georgia (now Southern) in

1890, and up to the time of his CGW appointment he had been successively president or receiver of another dozen roads, including the Mexican Central and the Chicago & Alton.

With the Felton management came fresh capital, an item sorely needed to rehabilitate the Great Western. Indeed, an almost complete physical regeneration characterized his incumbency. Even the "Maple Leaf" was discarded and a "Corn Belt Route" emblem used in its stead. Much of the motive power was run-down and obsolete. The most popular type locomotive, used in both freight and passenger service, was the Prairie (2-6-2). (The designation "2-6-2" indicates a locomotive with a 2-wheel leading truck, 6 driving wheels, and 2 wheels following the driver.) In the motive power reformation the Prairies used on passenger runs were rebuilt into faster and easier riding Pacifics (4-6-2). The Prairies in freight operation were changed from compound to simple cylinders and provided with superheaters. Forty new Consolidations (2-8-0) were in service or on order by the second year of Felton's administration. Finally, ten Mallet Compounds were placed in operation to expedite tonnage on the one per cent grades between Stockton, Illinois, and Oelwein. They were of the 2-6-6-2 wheel arrangement, with a tractive force of 81,175 pounds each. Later the Mikado (2-8-2) type made its appearance; these were followed by Diesels.

The millions poured into the system also accounted for grade reductions, a new bridge across the Mississippi at St. Paul, block signals between Chicago and Oelwein, and rail motor cars to cut down the cost of passenger operation. The Great Western pioneered in utilizing self-propelled vehicles in local service. The annual report of June 30, 1911, shows three 200-h.p. McKeen gasoline motor cars on the roster. At this writing one of the McKeens is still in service shunting cars in Winona, Minnesota, having been converted to a switcher several years ago. In 1924 the road took delivery of its first gasoline-electric car, which, incidentally, was Electro-Motive's first rail motor vehicle, too. Known as the M-300, it hauled General Manager C. L. Hinkle's 85-ton business car on a trial run from Chicago to Oelwein, much to the surprise of all concerned. As a final tribute to Felton's presidency, the CGW's Western Division won the coveted Harriman safety award in 1924.

When Sam Felton became board chairman in 1925, Nathaniel L. Howard, an Iowan, succeeded him as president. Born in Fairfield, March 9, 1884, Howard was educated at Parsons College in his home town and at the United States Military Academy at West Point. He started railroading as a civil engineer for the Burlington and subsequently became division superintendent at Hannibal, Missouri. With the outbreak of the

first World War he went into the army and was commissioned a colonel in 1918. After the conflict he returned to the "Q" as assistant to the federal manager, and following government operation he rose to be superintendent of transportation of that road. In 1924 he was made general manager of the Chicago Union Station Company and the following year took his Great Western appointment.

Tall, slim, and white-haired, Howard had a West Point bearing, but at the same time he was democratic and friendly. In contrast, Felton was somewhat austere, being brought up in the old school of railroading, which was rough and autocratic. It was during the administration of these totally different men that amazing developments in passenger service took place.

After a trip abroad Sam Felton became greatly impressed with the trim, clean appearance of British locomotives. Perhaps he saw the immaculate looking coaching stock of England's Great Western Railway; at any rate he came back with some new ideas for his Great Western. He had Oelwein "streamline" a conventional Pacific-type locomotive so that all outside pipes were concealed. The driving rods and cylinder heads were polished, the wheels painted red, the spokes golden. Engine No. 916, in short, had everything but a coat of arms! It, along with four cars, one of which was a baggage-mail unit, was painted Ve-

netian-red with gold lettering. The train was named the *Red Bird* and put on a non-stop run between the Twin Cities and Rochester, Minnesota, via Dodge Center. The CGW had trackage rights from Dodge Center to Rochester over the North Western.

Six years after the *Red Bird* appeared, Oelwein came out with another "bird" which fluttered even more in the limelight. Convention was tossed to the winds when the road's draftsmen designed a deluxe, three-car, gasoline-electric train for companion service with the *Red Bird*. The resourceful Oelwein craftsmen took the original underframes of the old McKeen cars and then built anew. One car had a six-cylinder, 300-h.p. Electro-Motive engine at the head-end followed by a railway post office and baggage compartment. The next unit was a passenger coach seating seventy-four. It had deep seats, spacious windows, and wide aisles covered with sound-proof linoleum. But the crowning achievement was the last unit: a parlor-observation-club car with a rounded end, anticipating today's streamlining. Its low-backed reed chairs, upholstered in soft old rose and shimmering blue mohair, were the last word in travel elegance. A deep-yielding Wilton carpet of blue-gray and some artistic wall-bracket lamps added to the smart decor. The car also had two complete Pullman sections in which the seats could be quickly converted to lower berths. The latter

were very much appreciated by sick folks going to the Mayo Clinic for treatment.

The motor-train was painted blue, with striping and lettering in gold leaf. Called the *Blue Bird,* the novel little "streamliner" was put into service in the ominous year of 1929. It operated between the Twin Cities and Rochester via Red Wing. Unfortunately, the *Blue Bird* had a short life, for the depression curtailed travel, and the increased use of automobiles took many of the short-haul riders.

While the mighty "Pennsy" and the equally powerful Sante Fe made headlines by inaugurating air-rail service from coast to coast in conjunction with the Transcontinental Air Transport ("The Lindbergh Line"), the Great Western officials launched their own plane-train operation. This, too, began in 1929. Through-ticketing arrangements were made with Universal Air Lines, and bus service was provided between Chicago's Grand Central Station and the Municipal Airport. One went by Great Western train to Chicago, thence by UAL plane to St. Louis or Cleveland. Leaving Des Moines (for example) at 9:00 p.m. on a sleeper, one's train steamed into Grand Central at 7:35 next morning; and by 9:45 one's tri-motor plane left the airport for St. Louis, arriving at the latter city by 1:00 p.m. The flight to Cleveland, however, required a layover in the Windy City until 4:00 p.m.; arrival time in Cleveland

was 7:45 p.m. This, too, was an interesting, although short-lived, experiment.

From the days of Stickney until the Great Depression, the CGW showed great ingenuity in providing extensive passenger service on main lines and branches. It featured daily through sleeping cars from the Twin Cities to Los Angeles in conjunction with the Santa Fe at Kansas City. Through Pullmans were also provided from Minneapolis-St. Paul via " K C" to Dallas and Houston on the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad. Such Chicago-Twin City trains as the *Great Western Limited,* later the *Legionnaire* and still later the *Minnesotan,* were bywords in the Midwest. The *Nebraska Limited* (Twin Cities-Omaha) was also a favorite, but the *Mill Cities Limited* (Twin Cities-Kansas City) was usually the most popular on the system. In its heyday it was a common sight to see from three to five Pullmans on the *Mill Cities Limited.*

Iowans were particularly fond of their *Chicago Special,* a through train which highballed from Des Moines to the Windy City, making only a limited number of stops. Advertised as "an inviting train to enter — a comfortable train to ride on," "Des Moines' Own Train to Chicago" is now only a memory.

For many traveling men the Iowa communities of Oelwein and McIntire had a very special significance. It was at these stations that sleepers

were set out or added. True, some trains managed to get by McIntire without shuffling equipment, but at Oelwein, never! On some runs the night train from Chicago set out a couple of cars at Oelwein for Kansas City; another car or two was shed at McIntire for Rochester, Minnesota. The balance of the train continued to the Twin Cities. On the eastbound trip, sleepers were added. The arrangement varied with the year, the season, and the routing. The point is that any evening train going through Oelwein was generally shunted around midnight or very early in the morning. The test of an experienced traveler was to sleep through Oelwein. If he succeeded he was regarded as a 32-degree veteran by seasoned drummers.

Occasionally, switching cars at Oelwein caused complications. The late Sigmund Greve recalled a classic incident of this kind. On the day in question a porter took the shoes from his Twin City car into one of the other sleepers where he could have the companionship of a fellow-porter. After polishing the shoes, he started back to his Pullman but became confused and ended up in a Kansas City sleeper. Well, Oelwein came and went and so did the shoes — to Kansas City. Consternation reigned after the error was detected, but it was too late. When the train arrived in St. Paul the passengers were obliged to walk in their stocking feet about a block and a half to the nearest

hotel. Here they were met by a passenger representative, who took their measurements and provided them with new pairs of shoes, compliments of the Chicago Great Western!

The automobile and streamlined service on other competitive roads, better equiped to run fast trains, caused gradual retrenchment in CGW passenger service. But the plucky Great Western continued to fight a losing battle. As late as 1935 it tried a new plan: that of providing tourist-sleeper operation on the Twin Cities-Chicago run at coach rates. Instead of paying first class fare, the passenger merely bought a coach ticket and paid for his berth.

The depression years were trying to all railroads, and the Great Western was no exception. A high standard of maintenance had reached its peak about the time of World War I. After that it perceptively declined. Government operation during the war was responsible for diverting traffic to other rival lines. The Great Western's high joint-facility costs hung like a millstone around its neck. A relatively high percentage of foreign cars on its rails made the per diem charges soar.

In 1929 Victor V. Boatner, formerly head of the Peoria & Pekin Union, succeeded Howard to the presidency. Boatner in turn was followed in 1931 by Patrick H. Joyce, who continued as president for fifteen years. Before coming to the Great Western, Joyce had been a prominent railway

supply manufacturer. He aided in founding the Liberty Car & Equipment Company and in 1918 became its president. The following year he headed the Liberty Car Wheel Company and, when it merged with the Illinois Car & Manufacturing Company in 1921, he was elected president of the combined firms. The latter organization became the Standard Steel Car Company in 1928, and it in turn was sold to Pullman-Standard Car & Manufacturing Company in 1930. Joyce was successively vice-president of the "Standard" firms.

During the early thirties a fleet of modern Texas type (2-10-4) engines appeared on the motive power roster. In 1936 the seemingly dormant Great Western ingenuity recrudesced with the inauguration of trailer-on-flat-car operation over the 425-mile route between Chicago and St. Paul. Here, again, the road pioneered in a new type of service. While the CGW did not originate the idea of truck trailers by rail, it did operate the first service of this kind over *comparatively long distances on a permanent basis*. In 1939 trailers were also rolling on flat cars between Chicago and Council Bluffs.

No amount of ingenuity, however, could stem the decline in car loadings as a result of the Great Depression. The plight of the road was so serious that it went bankrupt in 1935. Joyce was appointed a co-trustee by the court; at the same time

he continued as president of the corporation. Reorganization was effected in 1941, and the Chicago Great Western *Railroad* became the Chicago Great Western *Railway*. The successor company is generally referred to as the second Great Western *Railway*, since Stickney's road as far back as 1892 had the identical name.

During World War II the Great Western hauled a record tonnage, due in no small measure to the admirable performance of the Texas-type locomotives. These Baldwin- and Lima-built engines were equipped with boosters, giving them a maximum starting tractive force of 97,900 pounds. In the late thirties Oelwein modernized them still more with lightweight rods and disk wheels. With the advent of Diesels, modernization was on the other foot; the internal-combustion engine modernized the Oelwein shops rather than the shops modernizing the locomotives. Today Oelwein's shop facilities are strictly up to date, being completely revamped for all-Diesel repair.

FRANK P. DONOVAN, JR.