

The "First" Locomotive

Somebody once humorously said that Dick Steele was the first to make love by the holding of hands. I should like to believe this. I should like to believe that the originator of Sir Roger de Coverley was the very first to hit upon such an agreeable pastime. Everybody who has tried it would be grateful to him, I am sure, if the discovery were properly his; but I fear that Dick was merely one in a long line of amorous swains to learn what was originally discovered by Adam in the Garden of Eden.

However it may have been with Dick, my point is that the word "first", whether used in relation to the holding of hands or in connection with more serious if not more interesting matters, is a tricky word that has enticed many an eager historian into error. Let me illustrate by a story of the first locomotive to run west of the Mississippi, a story which has revealed itself to me in a study of pioneer lecturers who travelled on foot, on horseback, by wagon and sled, and finally by primitive railroad to lecture in the West. The story itself, it seems to me, is not without interest. To any Westerner whose boyhood was spent before the days of the airplane, the first engine west of the Mississippi is an object of fascinating speculation in comparison with

which the Lindbergh trans-Atlantic flight (or the subsequent Lindbergh baby) pales into insignificance.

When was it, then, that "the first locomotive, destined to be used in the vast territory that lies between the Mississippi river and the Pacific ocean," actually made its appearance? Let the records reveal the answer, not in the order in which they were made, but as they might have been found by an historian.

Let us suppose that our historian happens upon an item in the *Des Moines Iowa State Register* of December 11, 1872. There he finds :

"AN ANCIENT LOCOMOTIVE. — The ancient and honorable old locomotive, John A. Dix, of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad, has just come out of the shops, under a new name, No. 77, and when you see it boys, take off your hat. The Dix is a remarkable machine. It was the first locomotive that came into the State, was brought over on the ice in the winter of '54-55 to take position on the track of the old M. & M. road just commenced. It has been in almost constant use ever since — and with the exception of a new boiler and smokestack, is about the same machine she was eighteen years ago, when placed in service. Mose Hobbs ran the Dix eight years steady. It is estimated that that Dix has run in her time, about a million miles — equal to more than forty times around the globe, and seems good enough to repeat the same distance."

From this evidence, what are the claims of the "John A. Dix"? Is the item convincing? It was written only eighteen years after the event in question. There is a familiar reference to the engineer which would point to personal acquaintance with Mose Hobbs; hence we might assume that the reporter knew whereof he spoke when he said that Mose Hobbs had had the engine in charge for eight years, nearly half the time it had been in Iowa. Might it not be logical to believe that Hobbs would be sufficiently interested in so remarkable an engine to inquire into its not very extended history? Possibly the *Register* reporter had Hobbs's own word that the "John A. Dix" was the first locomotive to be brought into the State. What better authority could one wish?

Although the reference to date is somewhat vague, there are other details which seem to bear the earmarks of authenticity. What would be more natural, for instance, than to name the first locomotive in honor of the president of the new railroad, John A. Dix? The reference to the transportation over the ice, too, appears convincing. It has the concreteness of the words of an eye-witness. Historians agree, moreover, that the coming of the railroads west of the Mississippi preceded the building of any bridge over that river. Shall we concede the honor to the "John A. Dix"?

Before we do so, let us consider another item or two. The words of a Muscatine pioneer, whose honest in-

tentions I shall not question, appear in the *Muscatine Saturday Mail* on July 2, 1898 : "In the summer of 1855 railroad iron was landed from steamboats on our [Muscatine] wharf and road building begun towards Wilton. A small locomotive and a few flat cars were brought here on a barge from Rock Island. This was the first locomotive west of the Mississippi. The engine and cars were used to transport iron and ties for constructing the road."

Now, you see, we are definitely concerned with "the first locomotive west of the Mississippi". It is somewhat disappointing that we have here, not an imposing "John A. Dix", but only "a small locomotive and a few flat cars". We are confronted, too, with a later date, "the summer of 1855". We might, with an impatient gesture, decline to consider this unnamed engine further were it not for a brief notice in the *Muscatine Daily Journal* of October 12, 1855 : "Heretofore the progress of the railroad [being built from Muscatine] was very much retarded from want of facilities to obtain ties and rails. This will be alleviated now by the arrival of the locomotive. This locomotive is only intended for construction purposes and will not be used when the cars are placed on the road, which it is expected will be in about twenty days."

Although the dates in the two statements do not wholly coincide, may we not assume that both items refer to the same locomotive? At any rate, we are no

longer entirely at the mercy of reminiscence; we are confronted with a contemporary document.

What, now, of the "John A. Dix"? Shall we yield to its claims to an earlier date, or shall we be skeptical because of the demands of a rival which offers a somewhat later date but an apparently more convincing kind of evidence?

If, however, we are to base our judgment upon contemporary records, we must reckon with an account in the *Davenport Gazette* of July 21, 1855, which states that "the first locomotive west of the Mississippi" was the "Antoine LeClaire". It was transported across the river on a boat two days previous, July 19, 1855. We are assured later by another Davenport paper that the "John A. Dix", instead of being the first to cross the Mississippi, was really the seventh; and instead of arriving "in the winter of '54-55, actually arrived on February 16, 1856. It was, however, "brought over on the ice," the bridge not yet having been built.

May we not now feel that our quest is at an end? We have placed our reliance only on the best possible evidence — contemporary records. It was not the "John A. Dix", and it was not the nondescript locomotive at Muscatine which was the first to turn wheels west of the Mississippi. It was the "Antoine LeClaire", named in honor of "the father of Davenport".

We might now feel satisfied were it not for still another newspaper notice : "Clear the Track — The new

Locomotive *Burlington*, made her first trip yesterday evening. She proceeded a short distance beyond Running Slough. We understand she performed admirably. The 'Whistle' created quite a stampede about town, as well it might, it being the first locomotive whistle that ever was heard on the Upper Mississippi." This item from the *Burlington Telegraph* was quoted in the *Muscatine Journal* of December 9, 1853, more than a year and a half before the advent of the "Antoine LeClaire".

Contemporary records? Where now is our unquestioning faith in such will-o'-the-wisp evidence? However, if my reader is still hopeful, I shall quote only once more, this time from the *Daily Indiana State Journal*, Indianapolis, December 28, 1852: "The first Locomotive, named the 'Pacific', was placed upon the track of the Pacific Railroad at St. Louis, on the 2d inst. It was the first railroad engine ever set in motion on the other side of the Mississippi."

I am inclined to believe, of course, that some locomotive probably was the first to be operated west of the Mississippi. It seems logical to suppose so. Possibly this locomotive was the "Pacific". On the other hand, perhaps it was the "John A. Dix." I have read that she was a remarkable machine.

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