

A Metropolis of the Fifties

Northeast Iowa had been open to settlement twenty years and more before it was connected with the East by rail. The railroad reached Dunleith, opposite Dubuque in 1856. Not until 1857 was connection made at Prairie du Chien. But for many years steamboats had plied the Mississippi, and river ports had sprung up wherever natural passes through the bluffs gave access to the rolling prairies beyond. North of Dubuque, Clayton City, McGregor, and Lansing gave most promise.

A description of Clayton County in the *North Iowa Times* of 1856 accredits the county seat, Guttenberg, with a thousand residents, while McGregor and Clayton City with five hundred each had more business than Guttenberg. Perhaps the coming of the railroad to Dubuque diverted trade from the southern town. Navigation of minor streams had been attempted, but with no success, save for a few scows and flatboats that brought produce down stream. Ferry-boats at every port were busy; not the old rope and windlass type or the barge propelled with poles or many oars, but smart, fussy little steamers.

The rich soil of the region, open and easily worked was very tempting to the home seekers; and how they

came! They had been coming for twenty years, by boat, by rail, buckboard and covered wagon, ox teams and horses, some even afoot. Three horse ferries in operation at or near McGregor; one hundred and fifty wagons in Prairie du Chien at one time waiting to ferry to Iowa; increasing immigration after the railroad was completed! Norwegians in colonies of one or two hundred, middle aged and young, in quaint dress, bringing their great carved chests filled with household wares; "frugal, intelligent, good business men", "with piles of gold" bound for northern Iowa or Minnesota; stolid Germans with sleek ox teams; New Englanders, farmers, merchants, and professional men; fine young manhood from Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio; an occasional southerner for good measure. In the spring of 1860, ninety teams, two or three yokes of oxen each in a single day; five hundred cows and oxen by steam ferry in one week.

Districts which were accessible from the river filled up rapidly. Tremendous difficulties were encountered, yet they did not stem the tide of immigrants. And McGregor was their market. Wagons loaded with wheat set out for a two-hundred-mile haul over swampy lands, with tracks but poorly marked, with no bridges, with houses so far apart that nights often had to be spent on the open prairie in all sorts of weather. There was danger of miring hub deep in the summer, of being lost in a blizzard in the winter. And the prices

of produce were so low at river ports that, if the farmer were to realize anything at all for his work, he must choose the best time to go to market, spend as little time as possible on the road, and sleep under his wagon to obviate hotel bills.

Dubuque was the oldest of the northeastern towns and easiest of access from the interior. But for some years the vigorous young rival, McGregor, showed an active, healthy growth. The most marketable commodity was wheat, but corn, rye, and oats, live stock sent to market in droves, dressed meat, and hides found their way through McGregor to the South or East. Before 1857 the grain went inevitably South, to the elevators of Cairo or New Orleans.

The character of the population of McGregor was perhaps unusual. Because of the promise of future growth, in which every one believed, merchants and professional men of superior ability had been attracted thither, and already in 1856 the little group contained a number of such men. At this time railroad affairs began to interest them. The Milwaukee and Mississippi was creeping toward Prairie du Chien. Agitation was immediately begun for tributary lines from McGregor westward. But whether these roads were to be built sooner or later, the eastern line was bound to affect the business interests of McGregor. "The neigh of the iron horse cannot yet be heard", wrote Editor A. P. Richardson of the *North Iowa Times* in the first

issue of that paper, "but we see the influence of his approach in the increased activity of every man among us." Two lines from McGregor were already projected, "both sure to be built" and with "a country to sustain [them] that knows no equal".

In April, 1857, the new road sent its first train into Prairie du Chien. It was a gala day. Citizens from McGregor, Clayton, and other Iowa towns joined in fêting the excursionists from the Wisconsin towns along the route. It was a great day for them as well as for their neighbors! And their speeches of welcome showed that they were quite alert to their own economic advantages which were to be derived from the new railroad.

Fulfillment seemed commensurate with the promise. The improved mail service alone was of great benefit. Hitherto the busy Dubuque office had prepared the mail for delivery at the northern river ports in Iowa but three times weekly, and this service was subject to many interruptions. A steamer was chosen in season for a "mail boat"; if the mail arrived at Dubuque by rail or steamboat from the South or East without delay, service was fairly prompt—unless the office was swamped with mail. But when the river was ice-locked it was quite another matter. Even McGregor was without mail for a week at a time and points west, dependent upon stage delivery, were even more unfortunate. Henceforth the mail for northeastern Iowa

would be routed by way of Prairie du Chien to McGregor and there be made up daily, or biweekly, or triweekly for service westward as circumstances warranted.

Improved ferry service was inaugurated at once. A fine new steamer, the *Alexander McGregor*, plied to and fro eight times daily. Within three years the *Allamakee* was visiting Lansing, Johnsonsport, Nezeke, Clayton, and Guttenberg on a regular schedule. From these points were gathered the grain and minor products of Iowa and Minnesota; to them were ferried vast quantities of merchandise, "only limited by space in storage", to be conveyed inland by wagons. "The times about McGregor and the railroad station," wrote the editor, "partake of the nature of a protracted Fourth of July"; and no doubt the business of these other ports increased proportionately.

McGregor was absorbing business that belonged, logically, to her northern neighbor, Lansing. Howard, Winneshiek, Floyd, Cerro Gordo, and Mitchell counties in Iowa, and Mower, Freeborn, Faribault, and Blue Earth counties in Minnesota contributed to the steady procession that at certain times of the year wound in and out from the McGregor hills actually day and night. For a mile up the river bank the warehouses extended, fourteen of them at the "peak" of prosperity. The grain brokers contended sharply for the produce, and at certain times McGregor merchants claimed that

they equaled Chicago prices for wheat and corn. The city maintained lines of scales and a market master to assure fair play. A teamster might stand all day long in line before his turn came at the scales; then he would unload speedily at a warehouse, enter one or more of the wholesale houses, and make ready for the return trip, freighting lumber, hardware, dry-goods, and groceries to the interior.

The first attempt at railroad extension westward from McGregor was the project of local and western capitalists. "The necessities of the world are to be supplied from the West", Judge Jedediah Brown, an ardent promoter, declared in a speech in October, 1856, "and ox-teams are too slow for the rescue of half famished Europe." O. C. Lee, a McGregor banker; H. D. Evans, Aaron Newell, and other McGregor merchants; Frank Teabout, builder and inspiration of Frankville; E. E. Cooley, attorney for the road; and W. F. Kimball of Decorah were all prominent in the development of northeastern Iowa and the railroad. The new company was incorporated on June 2, 1856, under the name "McGregor, St. Peter's and Missouri River Railroad Company".

The preliminary survey was made in July, 1856. The route of the old "military road" connecting Fort Atkinson with Fort Crawford through the Yellow River Valley was advocated as the most favorable route to the hill-tops. McGregor men had hoped

earnestly that a route would be found through one of the several precipitous coulees, the natural outlets for their trade with the table lands to the west. But the valley of the "Bloody Run", formerly Giard River, was chosen by the engineers.

Then a lively campaign for finances began. The new project was given publicity through the press of northeastern Iowa, and of Dubuque, Milwaukee, and LaCrosse. Promoters counted upon aid from the counties through which the new road would pass. Not only business men would subscribe, but farmers. "Let each man feel", wrote a correspondent from New York, "that he can afford to give the value of his farm or village lot as a bonus for the railroad, as it will be the means of quadrupling his Real Estate if he wishes to sell, and in the same proportion increase his facilities to cultivate his land, dispose of his produce and to procure the comforts and luxuries of life if he wishes to keep it." Deacon Clinton of Waukeshaw, Wisconsin, solicited aid for the road; he advised the farmers to subscribe half of their lands. Some did, to their sorrow!

Then too, the counties would engage to bond themselves and take stock in the new enterprise. To be sure, the experience of neighboring States in financing projected railroads had been rather disastrous. Moreover, the message of Governor James W. Grimes, on December 2, 1857, had questioned not only the wis-

dom of the policy but its legality in spite of a favorable court decision in 1853. He urged legislation for the control of such "perversion" of authority and warned the people that much of the seven million dollars already voted by Iowa counties was bound to be lost. Nevertheless the legislature, within sixty days, passed an enabling act, approved by the Governor, authorizing Clayton County "to issue bonds to aid in the construction of certain railroads therein mentioned."

In accordance with this act the County Judge, Eliphalet Price, duly advertised the project for aid to the Dubuque and Turkey Valley Railroad and the McGregor, St. Peter's and Missouri. In April, 1857, the bonds were voted, \$100,000 for each road, bonds to bear ten per cent interest and the terminus of both lines to fall within Clayton County. Everywhere town meetings were held; stock was subscribed, but payable only if the road connected with the town! As for McGregor, whether the road should wind through the valley of the Yellow River or the Bloody Run was not of much consequence. Would not the depot be placed at the foot of her main street, and sites for warehouses treble in value!

The year 1857 was bad for any project, and 1858 was the year of devastating floods in Iowa. How could a gangling little railroad, poorly financed at best, prosper? The promoters were congratulating them-

selves upon being able to avoid "Eastern incumbrances" in spite of the fact that, poorly built as the road was bound to be, they estimated its cost at \$42,000 a mile!

Troubles came speedily. The directors sought alliance with the Milwaukee and Mississippi by lease or sale, but that line was having troubles of its own and the Iowa road was sold under the hammer. Its fortunes may be followed under various names: Northern Iowa, building to the state line of Minnesota; McGregor Western; McGregor and Sioux City.

Work progressed haltingly; a new and better survey was made, but the road bed was unsubstantial and no iron was laid. In 1861 Timothy Dwight, the contractor constructing the road bed, left town suddenly without paying his men. They waited a few days and then raided the company store at Monona, seized blankets and food, and marched to McGregor to demand their wages. "Jack" Thompson was at the bank negotiating for funds; thither they went, a noisy mob; Father Nugent, priest of the parish, mighty in body and in will, quelled the riot; when assured they would be paid, the men dispersed. The first engine arrived in October, 1863; a crew trained in steamboat service was chosen, and in March, 1864, the first train entered Monona. In 1864 the road was awarded a grant of land, and work progressed more rapidly.

By this time, although citizens of McGregor were reaping mighty harvests in business because of the

Prairie du Chien terminal, they began to realize that the extension of the railroad westward was not an un-mixed blessing. While the retail trade enjoyed by local merchants was bound to follow the road westward, the future hope lay in the wholesale business and for that the situation was ideal. Every year from 1857 to 1864 showed a vast increase. Seven barges bore the loads of grain and merchandise to and from Prairie du Chien. Tracks were laid through the warehouse for easy transfer of goods. Four hundred, five hundred, even a thousand teams in a day were recorded. Three million bushels of wheat passed through McGregor in 1861. "In all human probability [McGregor] will never encounter a dangerous competitor west of the Great Lakes", wrote the editor of the Freeborn County (Minnesota) *Standard*, and McGregor citizens thought so too. Rash prophesy! Ill-placed hopes! By the time the road had reached Ossian in April, 1869, McGregor merchants were fully aware of the disasters to come.

The land grant of 1864 stipulated that the road should start from the foot of Main Street, McGregor. The directors of the McGregor Western meant to comply, and the citizens looked forward to the day when a bridge would span the Mississippi at McGregor. And then — the depots at Prairie du Chien were transferred northward, opposite the valley of the Bloody Run! North McGregor was to have the main depot and the elevator! McGregor business men felt

that they had been betrayed. Their representatives attempted to get a bill through the Iowa Assembly to bar the construction of a bridge at North McGregor; they sought the favor of the river men who did not want bridges at all.

When the McGregor Western Railroad failed to make sufficient building progress, the State transferred the land grant to the McGregor and Sioux City Railway Company in 1868. The line was to be completed in 1875, but this company was scarcely more successful than its predecessor. From Calmar to Algona the rails were laid in 1869 and 1870 and there building stopped. Another reorganization was effected and the land grant was assigned to the McGregor and Missouri River Railroad Company. Eventually the road came under the control of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul and in 1878 the State transferred the land grant to that road. "Eastern incumbrances" were necessary to make the railroad possible, but the consequences to McGregor were calamitous.

The Chicago, Dubuque and Minnesota had meanwhile extended its line beyond McGregor; but it had not received the "furious support" of the early days. A tax was voted and stock subscribed but the road was regarded with a suspicion that it scarcely deserved. Nor was the popularity of the railroad increased when the grade along the levee was raised so high that the city was compelled to fill the street to the level of the

second story of the buildings, a very costly proceeding. The city retaliated with an injunction which, though it did not stay the work, did arouse the animus of the company against McGregor. This road also became a part of the Milwaukee system.

In 1869 the first temporary "pontoon" bridge was constructed. Piles were driven on the islands and permanent tracks were laid; in the winter the track was laid across the ice. This development was resisted by McGregor because of its portent. The citizens kept demanding the depot which they did not get; when a permanent bridge was proposed they blocked its construction and succeeded in suspending awards of land until the depot was promised. They refused to donate a right of way or build a depot. All this bore bitter fruit.

It would be unfair to indict the railroad for the misfortunes of McGregor. The location of the town, ideal for river trade, was wrong for railroad traffic. There was no room for trackage and warehouses or for the manufacturing interests needed to foster growth. But that the decline of this potential metropolis was hastened by the policies of the railroads is surely true. Discrimination was obvious and persistent. The freight rate to Clayton, Lansing, and LaCrescent was sixty-five cents; to McGregor, seventy cents. "If there ever was a city or community", wrote the editor of the *Prairie du Chien Courier*, "taxed, deceived, murdered

by railroad extortion then is the city of McGregor, Iowa, that same."

One of the first cases to come before the new Iowa Railroad Commission was *W. and J. Fleming, McGregor v. C. M. and St. P. Railway*, because of discrimination in rates on lumber shipped from Wisconsin towns and from McGregor. The railroad company was forced to readjust rates. Iowa and national laws were enacted to prevent pools and discrimination; but by that time "big business" had absorbed or crushed most of the smaller wholesalers.

In May, 1864, the editor of the *North Iowa Times* had written: "McGregor is badly hurt by a railroad west that already keeps two hundred and fifty teams a day out of our town; and one of these fine mornings both sides of the river will be waked up by the rattle of a train on a bridged Mississippi and then a *whistle* will be the most that any of us will know of the present local benefit of the railway." And so it came to pass! In the list of pioneers of Mason City, Algona, Emmetsburg, and "points west" are found the names of many of the builders of McGregor; but enough remained, sharing the fortunes of their town for good or ill, to stamp upon McGregor the intelligent appreciation and fine culture of the East, and to lay the foundation for development of modern McGregor, which offers to its environs, not staples, but food for the soul in beauty of scenery and hearty welcome to the sojourners with-

in its bounds. And how they come! North, South, East, and West meet upon her streets. And when the "bridge" shall finally span the Mississippi "at or near the foot of Main Street, McGregor" the hurrying tourists can not change the fate of the "Pocket-City", for only rarely are to be found the things which she now offers.

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