

Asa Whitney in Iowa

Asa Whitney was no idle dreamer. Schooled in the commercial world, consulted by the shrewdest business men of his time, Whitney was a man of action as well as vision. He was born on a farm at North Groton, Connecticut, in 1797, but made his way to New York before he was twenty. Soon he was hard at work in a great commercial house. Between 1825 and 1836 he traveled extensively abroad, especially in France, where his resemblance to Napoleon Bonaparte caused frequent comment. Upon his return to New York he went into business for himself. He prospered in real estate and commerce until the panic of 1837 left him almost penniless.

Undaunted by his losses, Whitney set out for China in 1840 where he remained about fifteen months engaging in business for himself and acting as an agent for several New York firms. So profitable were his ventures in the Chinese trade that upon his return he never again worked for personal gain.

During his sojourn in China Whitney compiled statistical information to show that a transcontinental railroad across the United States would be

of great importance in stimulating commerce with the Orient. His vision and his enterprise were demonstrated soon after he returned to New York in 1844. It was not long before he presented his plan for a transcontinental railroad to Congress. Whitney favored the route from Lake Michigan to the Pacific via South Pass. This route, the resourceful Yankee contended, was far enough north to include much unoccupied but fertile land which could be sold to provide funds for railroad construction. Whitney's proposed transcontinental line cut straight across northern Iowa.

Having presented his plan to Congress, Whitney set out to survey his route and confirm his judgment. He chose Milwaukee as the starting point, purchased wagons and equipment to make the survey, and enlisted an enthusiastic party of young men in his venture.

Whitney left Milwaukee on June 19, 1845. He proceeded westward by way of Prairieville, Fox Lake, Fort Winnebago, and Mineral Point to Prairie du Chien. From Prairie du Chien he wrote a New York editor on June 30th: "There are many good routes for a road from the lake to the Mississippi; and a road may be built any where in a straight line without any serious obstructions or heavy expense, requiring no expensive embankments or excavations, and no difficult streams to

cross. The country is fast settling; and the railroad would settle it much faster than it could itself be built. I am *now* perfectly satisfied of the feasibility of my plan. . . . I shall leave here tomorrow or next day for the Missouri”.

Whitney waited for some time at Prairie du Chien, hoping to secure a guide, but no one volunteered. The intrepid trail-blazer was nonplussed. “Without a guide and with but one laboring man”, he wrote, “I felt a heavy responsibility, and no small reluctance in leading the young gentlemen with me into probable danger and severe hardships and fatigue; but they, to a man, said ‘Go on, we will follow you, we cannot turn back.’ ” Crossing the Mississippi at Prairie du Chien, Whitney and his party of surveyors struck out boldly across northern Iowa. They crossed the Turkey River at Fort Atkinson.

As they journeyed due westward through present-day Winneshiek, Chickasaw, and Floyd counties, still without a guide, they crossed the different tributaries of the Turkey, Wapsipinicon, and Cedar rivers. A letter from one of the party dated ninety miles west of Prairie du Chien on July 14th complained of hot weather and slow progress. The thermometer, around what is now Charles City, stood at 98° in the shade and the party had traveled “only 10, 13, to 17 miles a day,

having sometimes to unload their wagons three times a day, to cross streams of water."

As far as Clear Lake their journey led them westward through the Neutral Ground. From Clear Lake, Whitney headed in a northwesterly direction, hoping to find the dividing ridge between the waters that ran north into the Minnesota River and those that emptied into the Des Moines. Apparently he traveled a short distance into what is now southern Minnesota but returned quickly to Iowa. The party crossed the Des Moines in the vicinity of Estherville after "felling trees for a bridge".

Westward they plodded until they reached the Spirit Lake region which Whitney described as "a number of small lakes, forming the head waters of the little Sioux, emptying into the Missouri". Soon they crossed the Floyd and the Big Sioux.

They had now entered present-day South Dakota, all the while following a due west course. A short time later Whitney recorded the "White Stone or Vermillion; then Jaques' river, and then the great, the grand Missouri, 15 miles below the great bend, making a distance from the Mississippi of more than 500 miles, *over the finest country upon the globe*, capable of sustaining more than three times the population of the same space in any other part of the world!"

Whitney was delighted with his success as an explorer. "Before leaving Prairie du Chien", he wrote, "I fixed upon a route through which I would like to pass to the Missouri and with compass in hand made it within five miles of the point started for."

He did not, however, minimize the difficulties. His youthful companions, he declared, had encountered "many hardships, much fatigue, hard labor, hunger, and thirst. I cannot say too much for them, nor can too much praise be awarded for their conduct. Unused to any labor, I feared it would be hard upon them, but they never flinched; were ready to wade through mud, water, and grass to their neck, with our provisions upon their heads; to swim rivers, to fell trees for bridges, and all other fatigues necessary for the accomplishment of our object."

But it was the rich lands of Iowa through which his transcontinental railroad was to pass that thrilled the enthusiastic Whitney. "No swamps, no marshes, no flooding of rivers, except in the vicinity of the Wabisipinica, and then but a small distance, and undoubtedly the most healthy country in the world. — I have never found the atmosphere so pure." The surface of the land was "gently rolling" with just enough undulating to let all the water run off.

With uncanny foresight Whitney prophesied the agricultural greatness of Iowa. "The soil of this vast country", he declared, "is as rich as it can be — none richer. In the whole distance, I did not see one half acre of useless, bad land; all covered with the best of grasses for cattle, and when cured, good hay. The farmer will want but the plough, the seed, the scythe, and the sickle."

During the next seven years Whitney carried on an amazing newspaper publicity campaign. With unflagging energy he spoke before public meetings and to legislatures in many States. Although he did not succeed personally in building a transcontinental railroad he lived to see the Union Pacific constructed and work on three other roads begun.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN