

Comment by the Editor

LINCOLN CAME TO COUNCIL BLUFFS

Late in the afternoon of August 12, 1859, a flat-bottomed, stern-wheel steamboat churned up the Missouri River to the landing at Council Bluffs and swung her gang-plank ashore. Among the motley throng that disembarked came the "Honorable Abe Lincoln" — tall, travel-stained, leisurely. Climbing into the omnibus, he rode two miles or more across the level river-bottom land to the frontier town at the foot of clay-colored bluffs. Scarcely had he registered at the double-porched and sagging-floored Pacific House before W. H. M. Pusey, a former acquaintance in Springfield, learned of his presence and straightway arranged a public reception for that very evening.

The next morning, from a high bluff above the town, Lincoln gazed up and down the tortuous course of the yellow Missouri. Between the Iowa hills and the river lay a flat unbroken field of grass and sunflowers, while beyond the river in Nebraska, four miles away, sprawled the rival town of Omaha. "Many railroads will center here", remarked the uncouth statesman with prophetic vision.

This observation was not as casual as it sounded. Lincoln had been interested in railroad development

for several years, and his trip to Council Bluffs was partly for the purpose of studying the natural advantages of that locality as a railroad center. On Sunday evening, after an informal talk on the porch of the Pacific House, he met Grenville M. Dodge who was even then reputed to know more about railroads than any two men in the country.

“Dodge,” inquired Lincoln, “what’s the best route for a Pacific railroad to the west?”

“From this town out the Platte Valley”, was the instant response.

“Why do you think so?” drawled the Illinois attorney. The young engineer launched upon a spirited defense of the route he had recently explored. Adroitly, by means of questions that implied a doubt, Lincoln learned the secret hopes and half-made plans of the railroad builders. Apparently he was convinced that Council Bluffs was the most likely junction for the Iowa railroads and the proposed Pacific trunk line. Three months later he bought a lot in Riddle’s subdivision near the terminus-to-be of the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad.

The act of Congress which authorized the creation of the Union Pacific Railroad Company provided that a line should be built from a point on the western boundary of Iowa to be fixed by the President of the United States. Amidst conflicting opinions and selfish influences President Lincoln again sought the advice of General Dodge, and received the same reply he had elicited four years before. On Novem-

ber 17, 1863, the President located the eastern terminus of the Union Pacific Railroad at a point on the western boundary of Iowa in the township containing the city of Omaha — thus permitting a range of six miles north and south. But this did not satisfy the directors of the company who wanted the road to end in Omaha instead of across the river. After weighing the probabilities of obtaining a more favorable decision, they asked the President to be more specific, whereupon he definitely fixed the terminus in Council Bluffs!

J. E. B.