

THE PALIMPSEST

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Council Bluffs in 1865

Where, poised the directors of the Union Pacific Railroad, — could anyone tell them where their railway began? “I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, do, upon the application of the said company, designate and establish” the eastern terminus of the railroad from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean “on the western boundary of the State of Iowa, east of and opposite to the east line of section 10, in township 15 north, of range 13, east of the sixth principal meridian, in the Territory of Nebraska.” Fiat. Council Bluffs, born Kaneshville, deserted by the Mormons on the doorstep of the Platte Valley, fed by the commerce of the Overland Trail and laved by the Big Muddy, was to grow up into a railroad town.

Some railroad towns were boom towns — raucous affairs of board-shack saloons and canvas-walled hotels, that flaunted their expensive ugliness for a lit-

tle while and vanished as quickly as they appeared. But Council Bluffs, because Grenville M. Dodge had talked with his friend the President and because Abraham Lincoln was a man of wisdom, was to be a terminus, the focal point where several railways should meet. The Union Pacific was not to thrive alone. In September, 1865, Springer Harbaugh, Government Director of the railroad, reported: "The Union Pacific Railroad cannot be speedily, vigorously, nor economically constructed until we get railroad connections with the east."

The Chicago, Iowa and Nebraska Railroad, lately become the Iowa arm of the Chicago and North Western, was running cars to Boone, a hundred and thirty miles east of the Missouri. The Mississippi and Missouri Railroad was open to Grinnell. Two other railroads pointed westward, the Burlington and Missouri River line and the Dubuque and Sioux City road; both lagged within walking distance of the Mississippi, unwilling or unable to build a mile beyond the proceeds of their land grants.

In September the Union Pacific made its first vigorous strides. Nearly a mile of track was being laid each day. Eighty miles of iron rail, four locomotives, an abundant supply of spikes and chairs, switches and switch stands, even several passenger cars, were that autumn unloaded from Missouri River steamboats upon the landing at Omaha. Thirty platform cars and four or five box-cars were carrying supplies to "end o' track". The grading

crew was within sight of Columbus. At Omaha machine-shops, a round-house and a transfer table, shops for boiler-makers, coopers, carpenters, and painters, were being built. And Director Harbaugh railed: "The several railroads of Iowa pointing to connections either at the terminus or at some point on the main trunk of this grand chain, do not appear to be making that rapid progress in construction westward, which I would suppose that their interest would warrant, the State of Iowa desires and which would contribute so greatly in the prosecution of this national work."

If the citizens of Council Bluffs speculated on the day when the first railroad should enter the corporate limits, if they relaxed into visions of grandeur, they did so at the close of day. From sunup to sundown they were too busy.

One of the town's newspapers was Copperhead, the other Radical. In intervals between belaborings of each other and of the "railroad way-station" across the river, each gave valiant testimony of the busyness of their town.

"Council Bluffs is a city containing a little over 3,000 inhabitants and does as much business as any city on the eastern border of the State containing three times the number of inhabitants. Its business houses, though not so numerous as in some of the cities on the Mississippi river, are much more extensive and each one does as much business as three or four of the Mississippi river houses. The trade is

principally with freighters and merchants, who trade with, and do business in the mining country west of us, and when one of our heavy houses fails to make sales of a thousand or more dollars a day, the proprietors begin to look blue and say, 'Times are dull — nothing doing.' ”

“In pork packing, Council Bluffs may be regarded as a new beginner; yet we notice that in three years the number of hogs packed have increased from 8,000 to 25,000, which shows a healthy state of affairs”.

“In ready-made clothing, Council Bluffs is a long ways ahead of any city on the eastern border of the State; and in boots and shoes she defies competition. In hardware, iron, nails, &c., no city on the eastern slope of the State can show more extensive establishments. In short every branch of trade and industry is more extensive here, and is pushed ahead with more energy according to the number of inhabitants than at any other point in the State.”

The Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad and Packet Line ran tri-weekly boats from Council Bluffs and Omaha to connect with the trains at St. Joseph. Three freight companies were running teams to Boone, meeting the Chicago and North Western there; and the Western Stage Company brought four or six stage-loads of passengers from Des Moines and Boone every day into Council Bluffs. The People's Line had five packets on the river scurrying between Sioux City, Council Bluffs, Omaha, and St. Joseph. A stage line to Kellogg linked Council

Bluffs with the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad. There were other packets, other stages.

And there was this message to the East: "We say, then, to all who are looking for homes, 'come this way.' If you desire to live in town, there is no point in the United States that offers you inducements superior to those held out by Council Bluffs; our people have capital, and they have energy, and the amount of work in the city would be increased tenfold, if workmen could be had. . . . But if you prefer to 'farm it,' we can offer you lands not inferior, in any respect, to the best the sun shines upon, and at such prices that the sum necessary to buy a 'potato patch' in the East, will here buy you a farm. . . . When you make up your mind to 'move West,' buy your ticket to Council Bluffs."

But how long was it to be until the city had no need of its stage-coaches?

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