

The C. B. and St. Joe

The Council Bluffs and St. Joseph was one of many roads organized in the late fifties that had hardly begun to lay its tracks when the Civil War in one paralyzing blow halted all construction. Its charter, granted by the State of Iowa in July of 1858, authorized the company to build "from Council Bluffs to some point on the Missouri State line to connect with a railroad from St. Joseph to said line." Missouri was not content to rest upon the seasonal commerce of its arterial rivers: catching the contagion prevalent in the Middle West, it was pledging its credit to a number of railway building schemes. The Hannibal and St. Joseph was to transect the State, river-to-river; from St. Joseph the Platte County Railroad had the privilege of extending its rails to the northern border of Missouri; and the Iowa road was to be the last link in an iron highway from the merchant-houses of St. Louis to the eastern entrance of the Platte Valley.

After the war, the Council Bluffs and St. Joseph had simply its franchises, a few items of property — lands and bonds due from the city of Council Bluffs, a claim upon the national government for \$16,000, a partially cleared title to a right of way — and a grading, neglected for almost five years, to the south line of Mills County. The Platte County had con-

structed about a third of its line, but had not been able to make its first fifty miles profitable.

In the summer of 1865 a mass convention in St. Louis revealed an avid optimism for the continuance of the railroad projects. The officers of the Platte County road were in fact better qualified as scoundrels than as railway directors; but in anticipation that the Platte County would build toward the State border, the directors of the Council Bluffs and St. Joseph on September 23, 1865, made a contract with Willis Phelps of Massachusetts for the completion of their line. The contract was of necessity liberal to the engineer: its terms made Phelps practically the proprietor of the road; but Phelps was bound to have the road ready for service between Council Bluffs and the Missouri border at the end of two years.

Council Bluffs was elated. The *Bugle* reported, "The fact that the building of the road has been let has had its influence here and we notice that several sales of real estate to Eastern men have taken place within the last few days, and real property is rapidly advancing in price." Early the next spring, the directors announced, all the iron and rolling stock for the railroad would be at Council Bluffs; cars would be running to Pacific City by the first of July, and the entire road should be completed by the beginning of September.

In November Phelps's agent arrived, to make contracts for the cutting and delivering of ties and

bridge timber. He brought two comforting items of news: that Willis Phelps expected to have his iron shipped as far as St. Louis by the opening of navigation in the spring, ready to be sent up the Missouri on the first boats; and that H. W. Phelps, the managing partner of the constructing company, was coming with his family from Springfield, and intended to stay on the ground until the road was completed.

“Citizens along the line should be liberal towards the contractor in furnishing ties and other timber,” admonished the editor of the *Bugle*. “They should bear in mind that the high price paid for ties by the Pacific Railroad company, will not and cannot be paid by the contractor on this road. The Pacific company had forty miles to build, so as to be ready to have the same examined and a report made to the present session of Congress, and hence it was forced to pay an exorbitant price for ties and timbers — prices that will not be paid hereafter. We understand that Mr. Phelps is paying from forty-five to fifty-five cents for ties. If he cannot get them at that, he will get them out himself. He has made extensive purchases of timber land along the line and will get out his own ties and timber if citizens do not deal liberally with him.”

And the citizens of Council Bluffs were indeed liberal. In no case was it necessary for the road to purchase its right of way in Pottawattamie County, although property owners in Mills and Fremont

counties, outside the stream of overland traffic, were not as unanimous in liberality.

During the winter of 1865-1866 the Union Pacific speeded its activities to that unparalleled haste which it maintained until the Golden Spike was driven; in its insatiate appetite for materials, it laid the whole river front of Pottawattamie County under contribution for timber. The Council Bluffs and St. Joseph could not meet this competition. Phelps perforce bought his ties and bridge timber in Mills County, for delivery along the line of road in that county. The excavating machine was landed at St. Mary's, and was put to work near Pacific City. The track was laid, first, from St. Mary's to Pacific City, where the bulk of the timber was delivered. Construction followed to the north, from St. Mary's to Council Bluffs; and Phelps assured the citizens that by the first of August they might expect to see the C. B. & St. Joe locomotive on its tracks at the lower end of Bancroft Street.

By the first of August there was no locomotive in Council Bluffs, none in western Iowa; but if construction north of St. Mary's had not even been begun, there was a piece of news quite as cheering. The Messrs. Phelps, associated with one Smith and one Richardson, "both men of ample means," in the last week of July purchased the Platte County road. This change of ownership guaranteed complete construction between Council Bluffs and St. Joseph, already connected with St. Louis by the rickety

roadbed of the Hannibal and St. Joseph. The proprietors, buoyant as ever in their estimates, spoke of through service by the first of June, 1867; but one did not have to believe that to appreciate the material promise to Council Bluffs and to St. Louis.

Frequently during that summer of 1866 steamboats landed cargoes of iron rails at St. Mary's; in late August passenger and freight cars, from Michigan City, arrived; and the first locomotive completed its journey by rail and steamboat from Massachusetts. Construction at last pushed northward.

“Dinna ye hear the whistle blow?” the *Nonpareil* asked as December began. “The advance guard of the Council Bluffs & St. Joe Road is only three and a half miles from town. . . . This road has been pushing ahead quietly but steadily, till it is right among us before we are hardly able to realize it. When the track is laid to the depot in this city, the road will be done to the State line. Can't we get up some kind of a demonstration next week, to celebrate the coming of the first train of cars into Council Bluffs? Let us at least have a general coming together of the people to welcome the Iron Horse. This is an event that we have labored and waited and prayed for, these many years, and it should not be permitted now to pass by in silence.”

The floods and high water of the spring and summer, the slow and uncertain transportation of iron and rolling stock from the East, the more uncertain

hindrances of limited capital, had meant nothing more serious than delay. The road was peculiarly Council Bluffs' own. The money required for its building — the cost of labor, provisions, and wood materials — had been spent within the county. For the last fortnight of December, from fifty to a hundred teams owned in and about Council Bluffs had been hauling iron to complete the road into the city.

On the ninth of January, 1867, the Council Bluffs and St. Joseph was formally opened to Bartlett, with an excursion to "end o' track". "A number of the ladies and gentlemen of Council Bluffs and Pottawattamie County," recorded the *Bugle*, "had the pleasure of taking a car ride from our city for the first time in the history of her life. The day was cold, but the event was one of so much importance to our country, and the car so comfortable as to overshadow all else, and to cheer up our hearts, and turn the occasion into a jubilee."

The terminus, it must be said, was not very imposing. Bartlett, not far below the northern line of Fremont County, then embodied one hotel, one bar, one drug store, one grocery, a warehouse, and a handful of dwelling-houses. The editor of the little paper in Glenwood wrote of it: "This town was conceived in jealousy and malignity, and the founders have neither the enterprise or the ability to make it better than it is"; but that may have been jealousy.

In summer, however, the wealth of the farming lands that the little railroad made accessible was re-

vealed. The editor of the *Bugle* made the trip again: "It will pay any man who is housed up during the busy months, to take a trip over this road, and look at the vast fields of beautiful, luxuriant corn, wheat and oats. The Missouri Valley between here and Bartlett is wonderfully rich, and is now groaning, as it were, under vast loads of grain. Here you can look upon acres of as good corn as ever was grown. It waves like magic rods, and may produce magic results when ripened and gathered for the market." The little town of St. Mary's had been swirled away by the floodwaters; but Pacific City was perking up, and sawmills about Bartlett were buzzing.

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