

## From Bellevue to Cascade

Beside the North Fork of the Maquoketa River, situated on the line between Jackson and Dubuque counties, lies the town of Cascade. As a pioneer village it was neglected by all the early railroad building activities, and the lack of such transportation threatened for a generation to doom the community to oblivion.

At intervals for thirty years, various projected railroad schemes included Cascade on their route, only to fail, one by one, leaving the community in deeper despair. The earliest of these proposed roads was the "Ram's-Horn", first broached in 1848. It was to have extended from Keokuk to Dubuque by way of Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, and Cascade. An "air line" directly across Iowa, passing from Bellevue through Cascade, was suggested, but interest in this road was soon overshadowed by a more promising "Southwestern" route from Dubuque, which likewise pledged a station at Cascade. The organization of the Davenport and St. Paul seemed promising but it "also went up in thin air".

If ever a community had reasons to feel discour-



aged Cascade certainly did. Outside aid had apparently failed, and it seemed that the town would have to build the railroad if there was ever to be one. Various citizens bestirred themselves.

On October 13, 1876, Dr. W. H. Francis of Cascade wrote to Captain M. R. Brown of Bellevue concerning the feasibility of constructing a narrow gauge road from Bellevue to Cascade. The matter "met with instant favorable response on the part of the people of Bellevue." All winter the subject was discussed. On March 9, 1877, a meeting was held by the citizens of Bellevue for the purpose of organizing and financing a preliminary survey for a narrow gauge road to Cascade.

Not until August 4, 1877, however, was the Chicago, Bellevue, Cascade and Western Railroad Company organized at Bellevue. This arrangement was apparently not entirely satisfactory, for another meeting was held at Garrytown and a third at Cascade on August 30th when final details were settled. Officers and a board of directors, including three men from each township on the route of the proposed road, were elected. It appears that capable, energetic men were chosen, who believed that the road could actually be built. From the name of the company it may be assumed that the promoters held high hopes that the new railroad might eventually become an im-



portant link in a trunk line across the State connecting with the Milwaukee narrow gauge then building westward to Galena from the lakes.

The project was eyed jealously by Dubuque, for the "gate city" did not welcome competition at Bellevue. According to a *Cascade Pioneer* editorial in September, 1877, D. A. Mahoney was urging "the business men and capitalists of Dubuque to take active steps to build, or assist in building a Narrow Gauge Railway to Cascade," and warning them that "the loss of the trade of the southern part of the county" would be incalculable. He warned his fellow citizens that Cascade was "putting her shoulder to the wheel" in behalf of the Bellevue project.

"The time for action has come," declared the editor of the *Pioneer*, "and our people have organized for a purpose, and that purpose is to secure a home market for the products of the surrounding country, and an outlet for other markets" by establishing rail connections with the grain market at Galena to the east and with the thriving cities on the Missouri River. "We understand", he continued, "that Dubuque business men scoff at the very idea of the people of this section having the financial ability to construct the road. We beg to differ with them on that point, and refer them to the directory elected to manage the

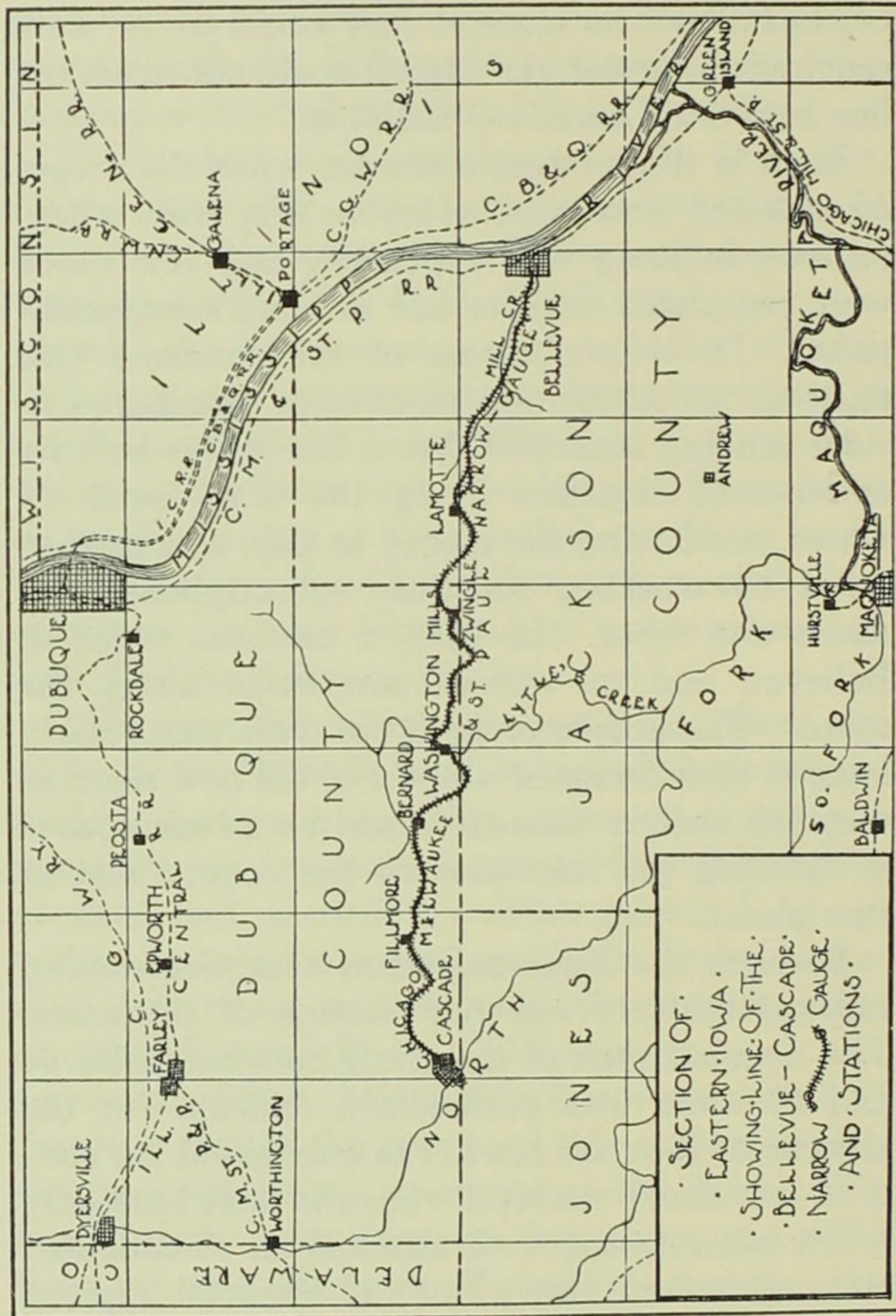


organization who alone if they chose to, or were required to furnish the capital could construct the line between Cascade & Bellevue."

Even in those times, however, when the wages of unskilled labor were as low as fifty cents a day, railroad building was expensive, and few roads were completed without one or more reorganizations. The capitalization of the company was fixed at \$200,000, and stock was distributed in sums ranging from \$5000 to a few shares held by enthusiastic boosters along the way, some of whom, not having the money to pay, arranged to assist by working out their subscriptions with teams and labor. In 1878, a tax was voted in Bellevue and in various townships along the route. The people of Bellevue were particularly loyal in their financial support of the new road, as they felt such a railroad would be advantageous in securing the relocation of the county seat at that place.

Perhaps the most important task confronting railroad builders was the location of the route. The determination of the grade between Bellevue and Cascade was particularly difficult, for the altitude of the river town was only about six hundred feet above sea level while the table land only a few miles to the west attained an elevation of eleven hundred feet. But the financial support







which might be expected from the various communities that were directly benefited was as important as the engineering factors in determining the location of the right of way.

At the lower end of Bellevue, Mill Creek empties into the Mississippi, and it was the valley of this little stream that afforded the only practicable opportunity of reaching the prairies inland. For a distance of about two miles, the line runs on the north side of Mill Creek, then crosses to the south side for about three miles, and thence returns to the north side, climbing steadily all the while until it emerges upon the uplands. Passing on westward with a great sweeping S curve, the road reaches the first station at the town of La Motte, eleven miles from Bellevue. A mile and a half east of La Motte is a long siding which is used for "doubling", since the grade ascends there at the rate of about one hundred feet per mile.

Beyond La Motte the topography of the country is of bold relief, and the line contains many stiff grades and sharp curves. Passing Zwingle slightly more than four miles west of La Motte, the line continues down grade to Washington Mills on Otter Creek, twenty-two miles from Bellevue. About fourteen miles from Bellevue, the road passes into Dubuque County and thence along the county line between Dubuque and Jack-



son counties through Bernard and Fillmore to Cascade. At two sharp curves the right of way dips over into Jackson County for a distance of about a mile in each instance. Nineteen and six-tenths miles of the entire route lies in Dubuque County and sixteen miles in Jackson.

With very little ready cash in the treasury but with unswerving faith that the job could actually be accomplished, the directors launched bravely upon their undertaking and on September 19, 1878, the first ground was broken at Cascade. According to the *Cascade Pioneer*, it was an event "that will never be forgotten by the present generation. It was a grand gala day for Cascade and five thousand people were present to participate in the happy occasion." The line was partially graded to Washington Mills, and some work was done at Zwingle and La Motte that year.

By the close of the season, however, the cash was practically exhausted and a reorganization was imminent. On January 7, 1879, J. W. Tripp resigned the office of president whereupon Vice-president James Hill assumed the management until March 1st, when he was made president. On May 9th, George Runkel, acting in behalf of J. F. Joy, a Detroit capitalist, proposed to take over the unfinished road and complete it without



further delay. The offer was accepted and the old company's franchise was transferred at Zwingle on May 17th to the Joy interests, operating under the name of the Chicago, Clinton, Dubuque & Minnesota Railroad Company. The new management prosecuted the work of construction with vigor, and on January 1, 1880, the road was completed from Bellevue to Cascade.

"At Last We Have It!" proudly announced the *Cascade Pioneer*. "On Monday it became apparent that the track would be completed to the town on Tuesday. Although no general celebration was announced, yet a large number of people gathered at the depot to see the last rail laid and the train come in. The laying of the track to the depot was completed at noon. Engineer Allen Woodward and his fireman, Sam Elmer, on No. 2, were patiently waiting for the completion of a switch east of the depot, while an immense crowd of men and boys occupied every available space on the cars, to enjoy their first ride on the narrow gauge."

As soon as the switch was completed, "Woodward seized the bar of the throttle valve of No. 2" and backed the train up the track "as far as the O'Brien place," then, reversing the lever, he "sent the little engine flying towards Cascade, and in a few minutes drew up at the depot" where



a cheer of welcome went up from the multitude. Vice-president Runkel honored the members of the press by inviting them to ride in the cab of the engine. Among the number were John Blanchard of the *Monticello Express*, Tom Duffy of the *Dubuque Herald*, and the editor of the *Pioneer*.

More than fifty years have now elapsed since the celebration of this notable event in the history of Cascade, but the little narrow gauge trains still make their daily trip from Bellevue and return. At seven in the morning, after the arrival of the mail at Bellevue, the little engine and cars, constituting the mixed train, begin their "up" trip, which is made on the leisurely schedule of ten miles per hour. Between stations, however, considerably greater speed is attained than the schedule indicates, as one hour is allowed for climbing the steep grade up Mill Creek to La Motte. When business is heavy or the track is slippery, this is accomplished by "doubling". The train is divided and part is taken up and side tracked at the summit while the engine and crew return to the bottom of the hill for the remainder of the train.

There is always considerable switching at the stations en route, "spotting" cars at the elevators, coal sheds, and stock-yard platforms, as well as the work of loading and unloading the local freight at the depots. Much of the scheduled time



is consumed in this manner, especially at Cascade where one hour and ten minutes is allowed for the turn around and work in the yards. At 11:25 A. M. the train begins its "down" trip to Bellevue, where it arrives in due time at 2:40 P. M.

A ride on the downward journey is a delightful experience. At places the train travels high on the edge of a precipitous bluff where wonderful vistas greet the eye in every direction. Again the track leads through deep valleys close to a crystal-clear, gurgling little stream, hemmed in on either side by rocky ledges. But most of the way the route is across open farming country, more prosaic though none the less beautiful.

For the amount and quality of service expected, the road is well equipped with motive power and rolling stock. There are in use about fifty box cars, thirty-eight stock cars, twenty-six coal and flat cars, and one caboose. The passenger equipment consists of two coaches both of the combination express and passenger variety. Four engines, numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4, constitute the motive power of the road. A rotary snow plow is used to remove the deep drifts from the numerous cuts through the hills. The engines are of regular type, one with four drivers and three with six drivers about four feet in diameter. They are all equipped with automatic couplers and air brakes.



Occasionally, when in need of repairs, they are loaded on a specially constructed flat car and transported to the Milwaukee engine shops at Dubuque or Marquette where they are repaired without being removed from the car.

Compared with modern transportation units, the little engines, cars, and coaches seem Lilliputian, yet for the territory served they are adequate. The trains are operated as efficiently and perhaps more economically than their more impressive neighbors out on the main line. Freight has to be transferred at the Bellevue terminal. Two small coal cars are required to handle the standard load of thirty tons, five narrow gauge box cars of grain fill only one large box car, and two narrow gauge stock cars make up one standard gauge carload of hogs or cattle. Formerly the task of loading and unloading was all done by hand and sometimes as many as ten or twelve men were employed in this operation, but in recent years modern machinery has been installed. A clam-shell bucket loader is used for transferring coal, and belt conveyors for grain and corn.

There can be no doubt that the building of the narrow gauge saved the life of Cascade. In 1876 it was only a straggling village, "lazing along side of a sandy street". It had once been a way station on the Western Stage Company line,



“but that means of transportation had long ceased to exist, when the railroads came west of the Mississippi river.” Only the existence of a few churches seemed to hold the town together. Then along came Isaac W. Baldwin with a few cases of type and a Washington hand press. Apparently “he had about as much excuse for running a newspaper in this village as he would have had peddling peanuts in a grave yard”, but he exerted a decisive influence on public opinion by his *Pioneer* editorials. Cascade got its railroad, and in consequence grew into a prosperous community of more than twelve hundred inhabitants.

From time to time there have been several attempts to induce the Milwaukee to transform the road into a standard gauge, but the company has always maintained that the business was not sufficient to warrant the unusual expense due to the topography of the country.

Thus the sole survivor of the narrow gauge railroads in Iowa continues to function, perpetuating the history of an early phase of railroading. Tourists in northeastern Iowa who come across the Bellevue-Cascade railroad for the first time find it an interesting surprise. What impresses them as an amusing curiosity is none the less a genuine railroad of vital importance to a number of substantial communities.

BEN HUR WILSON