

Enter the Omaha

A very important factor in strengthening the North Western's position in the Midwest was its purchase of control of the Chicago, Saint Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railway Company in 1882. At one stroke it obtained a bow-shaped line, 1,147 miles long (including branches), from Elroy, Wisconsin, through the Twin Cities to Sioux City and Omaha. It also had a nearly-completed branch from Hudson to Bayfield, Wisconsin, on Lake Superior.

This railroad gave the North Western a direct line to the Twin Cities from both Chicago and Omaha. It likewise gave the controlling road an outlet to the Ashland area on Lake Superior. In every way it was an asset in rounding out the North Western.

The Omaha Road, as the CStPM&O was called, evolved from the consolidation of the Chicago, Saint Paul and Minneapolis and The North Wisconsin railways in 1880 under the name of the Chicago, Saint Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railway; and the purchase of the Saint Paul and Sioux City Railroad Company in 1881. These lines brought with them other companies which they had garnered before the merger. The man

who tied the assorted railroads together was Henry H. Porter.

Porter came west from Machias, Maine, to seek his fortune. Bound for California at seventeen, he stopped off in Chicago for temporary work. He found a job as a junior clerk in the office of the Galena and Chicago Union Rail Road, predecessor of the North Western. He soon rose to be general ticket agent and is said to have issued the first coupon ticket west of Chicago. During the cholera epidemic of 1854 he took a turn at braking and sometimes served as conductor when regular trainmen were ill.

Employment on other railroads, a partnership in the lumber business and associated activities, made Porter forget about the Golden West. Chicago became Henry Porter's home port. In 1869 he was made a director of the Rock Island, which soon controlled the North Western. In this roundabout way he again became interested in his first Chicago employer.

The panic of 1873 gave Porter the opportunity to buy and reorganize bankrupt railroads. First it was the West Wisconsin, linking Elroy and Hudson. He offered it to the North Western at cost. The offer was refused. The latter's directors felt they already had "too much railroad." Porter bided his time. If they wouldn't buy his modest little package at bargain rates, he would get a big bundle of roads, tie them up neatly, and command

a good figure. And that is precisely what he did.

The West Wisconsin Railway Company was reorganized and acquired by the Chicago, Saint Paul and Minneapolis Railway Company, which the Porter syndicate controlled. The latter was afterward consolidated with other roads, forming what was popularly called "The Omaha." When tied together, the assortment presented an attractive package custom-made for the North Western and was promptly bought at a price. Having made the desired sale, Porter, who headed the Omaha, then relinquished the presidency. His place was taken by the young and energetic Marvin Hughitt, by this time vice president of the North Western.

Let us roll back the years again and trace the Omaha's antecedents on their trek to Iowa. To do this we must begin with the Sioux City and Saint Paul Railroad Company. It was the southern counterpart of the Saint Paul and Sioux City Railroad Company, and was later sold to that company. The first road built *up* from Sioux City; the second *down* from St. Paul. The point of junction was St. James, Minnesota.

Surveying parties started work from St. James in a southwesterly direction in March, 1871. Gen. Judson W. Bishop, the chief engineer, relates in the *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* how he "with team and driver, covered spring wagon, and his old army 'mess kit' with six days' rations and forage, a large pocket compass, and the best

maps then obtainable, started to find and mark by his wagon wheels, an approximate line across the uninhabited country from St. James to Sioux City."

Although "the wagon was steered by compass over the desolate prairie as a vessel would be guided across the ocean," the line of the present Omaha Railroad between St. James and Le Mars, Iowa, is not at any point "more than eighty rods distant from that wagon trail of . . . 1871."

In September of 1872 the line was completed to Le Mars, and from that point trackage rights to Sioux City were obtained over what is now the Illinois Central. This agreement with the Illinois Central is still in effect.

Two hazards of early-day operation were drifting snow and hordes of grasshoppers in summer. The first was rectified by widening the cuts, erecting double lines of snow fences and planting trees to stem drifts. The 'hoppers posed more of a problem. They not only slowed trains by making it difficult for the locomotive drive-wheels to get traction, but also ruined the farms, thereby reducing the freight revenue. To combat this situation, Bishop and his associates formed what was dubbed "The Grasshopper Syndicate."

They purchased acres of the road's land-grant holdings in the heart of the grasshopper districts. One of these areas was near Sheldon. Here they broke the sod and planted wheat. But the "little

hoppers outnumbered the wheat plants five to one." This time, however, Bishop and his men were ready. They had an armada of "land boats." That is, plates of sheet iron eight feet long by four wide, turned up at each end. In these pan-like boats was liquid coal tar. The boats were pulled in unison across the field by a fleet of horses in front and to the sides of the iron rigs, to which they were attached by wires. As the phalanx advanced across the field from north to south, the grasshoppers jumped from under the horses' feet. Another jump or two and they landed in the sticky tar. A few weeks later the process was repeated.

Expansion was continued by an affiliated Minnesota corporation called the Worthington and Sioux Falls Railroad Company, linking the two communities in its name by 1878. The next year the company built a branch south from Luverne, Minnesota, to Doon, Iowa.

Another branch to the Iowa border left the main stem at Lake Crystal (south of Mankato), and ran in a southeasterly direction to Elmore, all in Minnesota. It was completed by the Saint Paul and Sioux City Railroad Company in 1880.

Entry into Omaha was effected by a series of affiliated roads on the west side of the Missouri River in Nebraska. By 1881 a through route was opened between Sioux City and Omaha.