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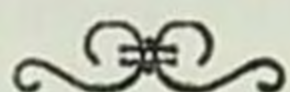
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The Race to Council Bluffs

The Chicago & North Western has more miles of track in Iowa than any other railroad. It was first to cross the state and first to feature through passenger service in conjunction with the newly-formed Union Pacific-Central Pacific transcontinental route in 1869.

The North Western-Union Pacific-Southern Pacific's strategic middle line was the standard way to travel between Chicago and San Francisco. Other transcontinentals came: the Northern Pacific, Great Northern and Milwaukee on the north; the Santa Fe, the Rock Island-Southern Pacific's "Golden State Limited," and the Southern Pacific's "Sunset Route" on the south; and the newer Burlington-Rio Grande-Western Pacific line, which closely paralleled the first transcontinental. Yet for some 86 years the strategic middle route, with the Chicago & North Western at the eastern end, dominated transcontinental rail travel.

Today, alas, the North Western no longer participates in through cross-country passenger serv-

ice. On the other hand, it is still a mighty factor in handling transcontinental tonnage. Great long freights still barrel through Iowa, but the glory of its named limiteds and plush streamliners is now only a nostalgic memory.

The story of the North Western in Iowa begins with the race to Council Bluffs. It concerns three trunk lines, all struggling to reach the coveted Council Bluffs-Omaha gateway first. Associated with the enterprise was a New Jersey railroad builder who rose to great heights, and a grandiose railroad scheme which fell to abysmal depths. Leaving out Western mountains and Indians, the drama in building across Iowa has much of the heroic qualities which characterized construction of the storied Union Pacific.

The byways which led to the North Western in Iowa go back to the ill-fated Iowa Central Air Line Rail Road Company — organized in 1853. Also known as the Lyons and Iowa Central Railroad, the Iowa Central was to run in more or less of a straight line from the little Mississippi River town of Lyons via Iowa City to Council Bluffs. At Lyons a lofty bridge was to carry the Air Line across the Mississippi.

The Air Line lost no time in dispatching surveyors and charting the road. It also did considerable grading between Lyons and Anamosa. At other points there is evidence of work done, and it is said an old grade can still be seen east of Iowa

City. The Air Line received extensive local aid, mostly in the form of bonds issued by counties along its route in exchange for stock of the road.

Meanwhile, what was to be Iowa's first operating railroad, the Mississippi & Missouri, was being surveyed westward from Davenport in 1853. It likewise had planned to go through Iowa City on its way to Council Bluffs. Crews of the two rival lines often met; and competing promoters vied with each other in soliciting funds for their respective enterprises. All along the routes surveyors were greeted with enthusiasm.

Council Bluffs, for example, welcomed Grenville M. Dodge, of the Mississippi & Missouri, with a lavish reception and ball. A few days later equal elation was shown rival surveyors of the Air Line. Agents of the two railroads exhorted towns and villages to support their companies and get on the "great through route" across Iowa. Public meetings were held, and each party spoke in glowing terms of his projected line.

The Air Line is said to have had about 2,000 Irish immigrants, including their families, camped in Lyons to expedite construction of the road. But the visionary project was doomed from the start. Its principal backer, H. P. Adams of Syracuse, New York, absconded with the bonds and left the counties with taxes to pay and Irish laborers to feed. Many of these workers were forced to settle for groceries and dry goods in place of wages.

Because of the latter item, the defunct line was dubbed "The Calico Road." It was subsequently discovered that Adams was a fugitive from justice with a criminal record. While the Air Line was permanently grounded, certain aspects of its corporate existence appeared later to play a very significant role in the North Western's history.

No sooner had one contestant dropped out of the race for Council Bluffs than another took its place. The newcomer was the Chicago, Iowa & Nebraska Rail Road, organized January 26, 1856. It had the backing of several up-state New Yorkers, including Lucius B. Crocker of Oswego, and Thomas T. Davis and Austin Meyers, both of Syracuse. Others lending financial help were John Bertram, a sea captain of Salem, Massachusetts, Oakes Ames of North Easton, Massachusetts, and Alfred W. Johnson of Belfast, Maine. Milo Smith was the chief engineer.

Construction began at Clinton in 1856. By June, 1859, the road had reached Cedar Rapids, 81 miles distant. This was farther west than the Mississippi & Missouri, which had completed its line from Davenport to Iowa City by January 1, 1856, and halted there for several years. But down the Mississippi River a third railroad was pushing its rails across the prairie. Called the Burlington & Missouri River, later known as the Burlington, it proudly reached Ottumwa in August, 1859.

That was the railroad picture in Iowa when a tall, well-built, 58-year old businessman, John Insley Blair of Blairstown in the Kittatinny Mountains of northern New Jersey, left his tiny community to attend the Republican Party National Convention in Chicago May 16, 1860. He was one of about 500 delegates to the great political rally, at which there were over ten thousand spectators.

When the convention ended, with Abraham Lincoln duly nominated for the presidency, the delegates were invited on a free trip to Iowa. John Blair eagerly accepted the invitation. He went with a party of three hundred by rail to Dunleith (opposite Dubuque), thence by boat from Dubuque to Clinton. At the latter town they boarded "the cars" on the newly-completed Chicago, Iowa & Nebraska Rail Road for Cedar Rapids. The visitors were dined and entertained at the end-of-track community, and told of the wonders of the West. On returning, Blair wrote in his diary:

"I Consider this Road [the Chicago, Iowa & Nebraska] Considering its extension with the land grant on the 200 Miles West of Cedar Rappids, one of the Most desirable and if Rightly Managed ought to pay."

Spelling and grammar were not subjects in which John I. Blair excelled. But when it came to vision, business foresight and making money, he had few peers. Blair was destined to return to

Iowa in 1862 and build railroads faster and more extensively in that state than anyone else — before or since.

Blair never went to high school. At ten he is said to have declared: "I have seven brothers and three sisters. That's enough in the family to be educated. I am going to get rich."

At eleven he went to work in a country store at Hope, New Jersey, not far from Belvidere where he was born in 1802. When eighteen, he owned a store at Gravel Hill. Nine years later he had a chain of five general stores in northern New Jersey, and he operated four "flouring-mills."

Always alert to new business opportunities, Blair branched out into mining, manufacturing and railroading. Modest success in mining at Oxford Furnace, New Jersey, led to an active part in founding the Lackawanna Coal & Iron Company in 1846. Later, with his son DeWitt Clinton Blair, and Oakes Ames as partners, he established the Lackawanna Steel Company to make rails. Heretofore nearly all steel rails had been imported from England. Blair was also one of the original directors of the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad, and soon became its biggest stockholder.

At sixty, when most men are thinking about retirement, John I. Blair began his remarkable career as a builder of western railroads. When he came to do business in Iowa in 1862, the Hawkeye State was ready to do business with him. The Cedar

Rapids and Missouri River Railroad had been organized on June 14, 1860, to extend westward from Cedar Rapids to the "Big Muddy." More important, from the investors' standpoint, was the fact that the road persuaded the Iowa General Assembly to turn over the land grant of the defunct Iowa Central Air Line to the very much alive Cedar Rapids & Missouri River Railroad.

The new railroad had capital provided mostly by eastern financiers, among whom were John Bertram, Lucius B. Crocker, and Oakes Ames. These men, it will be recalled, were also instrumental in building the Chicago, Iowa & Nebraska Rail Road. In addition, the Cedar Rapids and Missouri River Railroad had the backing of John Weare and John F. Ely of Cedar Rapids, and G. M. Woodbury of Marshalltown. Crocker became first president and W. W. Walker secretary. With capital and a bountiful land grant, the road built westward from Cedar Rapids. But it lacked the drive, soon to be provided by John Blair, the "human dynamo let loose in railway-mad Iowa."

Blair appears to have first taken a hand in the road's management in 1861. After that, dirt began to fly. By the end of that year the track reached Otto Creek Station (now Chelsea), 41 miles west of Cedar Rapids. In 1862 the road was completed to Marshalltown. Two years later (1864) it reached Nevada and in 1865, Boone. Now it was over halfway across the state.

In the meantime, the Mississippi River had been bridged, replacing a slow, cumbersome ferry. The bridge was started in 1858; and the following year a 7-span McCallum truss, built of wood, connected Fulton, Illinois, with Little Rock Island, 1,400 feet from shore. It was not until 1864, however, that the deeper western channel of the Mississippi, from the island to Clinton, was bridged by Howe truss spans. The draw span was of the Bollman pattern. Subsequently, the whole structure proved to be too light, and it was replaced over the years by heavier and stronger pin-connected Pratt trusses.

While Blair was blazing his own trail across Iowa, his two competitors were not idle. Far to the south the aggressive Burlington had reached Albia in 1866. But the Mississippi & Missouri (soon to become the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad), which formerly set the pace in Iowa railroad building, was marking time in Grinnell.

Thanks to additional land grants made available to Congress and the energetic leadership of Blair, the Cedar Rapids and Missouri River Railroad went all-out in construction. The railroad builder from New Jersey, along with his young assistant W. W. Walker, made a splendid team. Together they visited towns and villages along the projected route. Both were shrewd traders. They often pitted one town against another in seeking dona-

tions, station lands, bonds. They matched their wits against promoters of the Burlington and the Rock Island in enlisting public support and in seeking both public and private aid.

In Council Bluffs, where "railroad fever" was so pervasive, an enthusiastic crowd greeted Blair and Walker on July 9, 1866. The two spoke in Burhop's Hall on a stage flanked by "first citizens" amid a backdrop of American flags. At the other end of the hall a band aroused the audience to religious fervor. The following resolution was passed:

Resolved, That we feel under obligations to Messrs. Blair and Walker, the gentlemanly officers of said company, for their visit to our place, and for the interest manifested by them in the early completion of their road to our city, and for the free, full and frank expressions given by them of the prospects for the speedy completion of their road, and of the future prospect of our city.

John I. Blair must have beamed with the results of the meeting. Heading the subscription list was Major M. Turley with a gift of eighty acres of land in Council Bluffs for a depot and other railroad buildings. One business house donated \$2,000; eleven subscribers pledged \$1,000 each, and 106 other signatures brought the total up to \$36,000.

The popular demand for a railroad is evinced in the zealous words of Editor William S. Burke of the Council Bluffs *Nonpareil*. Said he:

It would be better for every lot owner in the city to donate one half of his possessions — be they much or little — if, thereby, these railroad connections could be secured, than to own twice what he now has and allow them to go elsewhere. Without her railroads, we would scarcely give a baubee for the best vacant lot in Council Bluffs; with them, we will see how rapidly every stagnant impulse will be stirred into life, and the flush of a radiant but permanent prosperity mantle all the future.

Shortly after the Council Bluffs meeting Walker advertised in the *Chicago Times* for five thousand laborers to expedite construction to the Missouri River. The last lap of the race was on!

Meanwhile, the Chicago, Iowa & Nebraska Rail Road, it may be added, was leased on July 3, 1862, to the Galena and Chicago Union Rail Road Company and by modified lease on December 10, 1869, to the Chicago and North Western Railway Company.

The Cedar Rapids and Missouri River Railroad was leased on July 8, 1862, to the Galena and Chicago Union Rail Road Company and by modified lease December 1, 1865, to the Chicago and North Western Railway Company.

We have seen that the race across Iowa began when the Rock Island (Mississippi & Missouri) first built westward from Davenport, thereby getting a head start. Next came the Burlington (Burlington & Missouri River), which soon forged ahead of its pioneer competitor. Lastly, the North Western (Chicago, Iowa & Nebraska and the

Cedar Rapids and Missouri River railroads) appeared as a late comer. All three were in a close and exciting race at various stages of their mad rush across Iowa.

The Rock Island had such distinguished engineers as Peter A. Dey and General Grenville M. Dodge. But bankruptcy and management dissension retarded its progress. The Burlington had President James F. Joy and an able young superintendent by the name of Charles E. Perkins. Moreover, it was financed by the "Boston Group." Finally, there was the North Western. And in Iowa, Blair was the North Western, and the North Western was Blair.

The race ended differently from the way it started. The first road came in second, the last first, and the Burlington at the tag end. In other words, the race ended with the North Western first; the Rock Island second; and the Burlington last.

The Burlington had, perhaps, man for man, the ablest management, to say nothing of the solid support of conservative Boston bankers. But the North Western had Blair. It was as simple as that. Blair was absolute boss.

In the case of the Rock Island, very competent engineers were hamstrung by management difficulties. As for the Burlington, the management was of the best, but the Bostonians were cautious. Not so with John Insley Blair. He had the power,

the money and engineering talent. He dominated the Cedar Rapids and Missouri River Railroad. He was owner, manager, and financier. While others waited for the necessary funds, or for a nod from the front office, Blair was in the field — building, building, building.

West of Boone, construction started in December, 1865. By the following spring the railhead was within fifteen miles of Denison. A few months later the husky Chicago "gandydancers" were hammering spikes and surfacing track down the valley of the Boyer River. On September 15, 1866, ground was broken for the Council Bluffs depot with an elaborate ceremony accompanied by the Council Bluffs Brass Band. On Tuesday, January 22, 1867, the last rail was laid in front of the new station, marking the completion of the first railroad into town.

Ironically, General Grenville M. Dodge, who helped survey the Rock Island across Iowa, was the principal speaker to celebrate the North Western's arrival. By this time, however, he was chief engineer of the rapidly-building Union Pacific, and he welcomed the railroad from the East with genuine enthusiasm. He looked for the day when "five great trunk railroads" would serve Council Bluffs and when it would become "a railroad centre . . . second to none in the State of Iowa."