

## Main Line—West

The Illinois Central is generally thought of as a north-and-south railroad, with its main stem running from Chicago to New Orleans. However, with the completion of the branch to Omaha (it has trackage rights from Council Bluffs to Omaha) the Iowa Division earned the distinction of being a vital east-and-west main line. Through passenger service was provided between Chicago and Omaha. More important still was the increasing role the road played in funneling transcontinental freight through the Omaha gateway.

The Illinois Central competes on substantially equal terms with most of the six other Chicago-Council Bluffs-Omaha roads. True, it has the longest route, except for the circuitous Wabash, although it is only a scant five miles longer than the Chicago Great Western, which reached Council Bluffs in 1904. On the other hand, the "Omaha Branch" was built to the highest standards of its time, and it has been constantly modernized up to this day.

Having sketched the growth of the Illinois Central in Iowa, it is fitting that we discuss the part it played in social history and economic advancement. In other years there was no phase of rail-

roading so intimately associated with the region it served as its passenger service. And the Illinois Central had passenger trains on all its lines in Iowa. It provided a cheap, convenient way to travel from village and town to the metropolitan centers, particularly Chicago.

A glance at the 1913 timetable gives a representative picture of the golden age of passenger service in the state. There were five daily round trips from Chicago to Waterloo, two daily trains each way Chicago to Omaha, and three daily round trips between Fort Dodge and Sioux City. Sleepers were standard equipment on trains running from the Windy City to Omaha, Sioux City and Sioux Falls. The remaining branch lines had daily-except-Sunday coach service.

Being a later comer to Omaha, the road did not feature passenger service through that gateway without change to connecting lines. But in conjunction with the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway it exploited the Albert Lea gateway. Its *Chicago and Minneapolis and St. Paul Limited* boasted of an "Electric-Lighted Steel Sleeping Car, Buffet-Club Car, Free Reclining Chair Car and Coach, Chicago to Minneapolis and St. Paul; Dining Car Chicago to Freeport." On the return trip a diner was coupled on at Dubuque for Chicago.

Up to about the time of World War I the Albert Lea Route was an important, although secondary, line between Chicago and the Twin Cities.

It had to compete with the Burlington, the Milwaukee (then known as the St. Paul Road), the North Western, the Great Western, the Rock Island and the Soo . . . all having limited through trains between these destinations. The traveler in the early part of the twentieth century had an incredible amount of diverse routings available to him!

Mr. E. L. Holmes, passenger traffic manager of the Illinois Central, remembers the colorful pre-World War I days, when local ticket agents frequently had a supply of choice cigars. The stogies were left by traveling passenger agents from other lines trying to solicit business for their respective roads. Traffic, like kissing, often went by favor.

Holmes, who was born in Alta, Iowa, also recalls the resourcefulness of Illinois Central men in "getting" the business, capturing a major share of the Omaha-Chicago excursion traffic. The road featured \$8 weekend fares, leaving Omaha, Sioux City, and Sioux Falls Saturday afternoon and returning the following day. In almost every instance the excursions were crowded. Why? It happened that the Illinois Central passenger agent in Omaha, A. J. Lightfoot, had his own orchestra. The road obligingly provided a baggage car for his band with sufficient room for dancing. It is said some of the excursionists danced all the way to Chicago. That was competition hard to beat.

This was an era when "drummers," as commercial travelers were called, covered their territory

almost exclusively by rail. The Illinois Central sold 2000-mile mileage tickets at \$50 — “refund of \$10 if used within one year.” A smaller “book” of 1000 miles sold for only \$20. They were very popular with traveling salesmen, lecturers, and business men.

All along the road were station restaurants, most of which were operated by the Van Noy news concession. Dubuque, Fort Dodge, Albert Lea, Cherokee, Sioux City, and Omaha had (and some still have) lunch counters or restaurants to “feed the trains.” Indeed, employees were given the option of taking part of their wages in lunch tickets, or “pie cards,” as they were dubbed.

Mr. Holmes, who started working for the Illinois Central as a station helper at Alta for \$25 a month, remembers how his pie card “practically saved” him from slow starvation. He used his pass to go east, traveling on the proverbial shoestring. Like other young men in quest of adventure the Iowa railroader ran short of funds. Too proud to wire home for money, he faced the prospect of riding all day without eating. Then he remembered his pie card. It was good all along the Illinois Central.

Understandably, too, the pleasantest sound in his early days of railroading was the whistle of the little engine pulling the pay car. The pay train “made” the division once a month. In those days men were paid in hard money, often silver and

gold. Checks were unknown. Holmes considered Paymaster H. D. Warner "the most important man on the railroad."

The morale of the Iowa Division has always been high. Come flood or blizzard, when duty calls, the Iowa railroader is first to respond. A story is told by Otto H. Zimmerman, vice president of operations, who at the time of the incident was superintendent at Waterloo. It concerned an unexpected blizzard which struck Fort Dodge, filling the cuts with drifting snow and stalling trains. The wind blew so fiercely across the prairie it blinded the eyes of trainmen and made life miserable for anyone out on the line.

On that particular day there were twenty-seven men on the roster who were due to get their day off. But did they take it? No, not they. As the storm increased in violence the phone began to ring in the division office. One after another of the trainmen and engine men announced they were coming in to fight the storm. Several had bad colds, but they came anyway. Two were in bed sick, one with pneumonia. Their spouses called in, very apologetic that the men were not able to help out in the emergency.

Another railroader, chairman of the local Order of Railroad Conductors, phoned to say that his wife was in the hospital awaiting a serious operation. "I can't go out on a run, because they are going to operate on her soon," he explained, "but

I'll come down to the roundhouse and help any way I can." And he did. He was in the roundhouse from midnight to five in the morning, helping to get engines in shape to keep the line open. Indeed the conductor worked right up until the time the hospital phoned him.

Not a single man of the twenty-seven had to be called. They knew when they were needed and they came.

The Illinois Central prided itself on up-to-date equipment and on-time operation of its principal trains. Often the humble local was an institution to the communities it served. Ruth Suckow, in her homespun Iowa novel, *Country People*, brings out this fact in describing her fictitious town of "Richland."

"For one thing," she writes, "there was a railroad, the main line of the Illinois Central which connected Richland directly with Chicago." And the institution? It was "... the morning 'Clippers,' the Chicago train, by which clocks were set and risings timed. . ."

The "Clipper" was No. 28 eastbound and No. 27 westbound. In 1913 it left Waterloo at 7:10 a.m., arriving in Dubuque at 10:30 a.m. Returning, the through train departed from Dubuque at 3:45 in the afternoon and rolled into Waterloo at 7:15.

The day of the branch line local has long since gone, but the Illinois Central's handsome brown

and gold main line passenger trains still speed across Iowa. The *Hawkeye*, an overnight express, runs the entire length of the state on its way from Chicago to Sioux City. It has coaches and sleepers with a "set-out" Pullman for Waterloo.

In addition, the *Land O'Corn* provides fast daytime service between Chicago and Waterloo. It carries an attractive diner, featuring tasty Southern-style meals. A novel item in the "consist" are specially designed flat cars, on which ride Flexivans, or truck trailers. These containers, carrying United States mail, are quickly transferred from flat car to truck at several major points on the line. By this method distant off-line communities receive the benefit of fast rail shipment to the nearest station where, without breaking bulk, mail is taken by truck to its ultimate highway destination.

In the more leisurely era before World War I nearly every station boasted of cattle pens, and freight trains picked up stock along the line. Cattlemen rode drovers' cabooses, furnished with mattresses for sleeping, to market and returned in comfort on regular passenger trains. Stock pickups were often scheduled to move trainloads of cattle from the west in the spring for fattening, and out to market in the fall.

Cattle on the hoof is still a significant item in today's tonnage, but dressed meat predominates. The Illinois Central claims to move more meat and meat products in Iowa than all other railroads in

the state combined. This is not to say the road neglects wheat and corn, manufactured goods, lumber and millwork, coal and gypsum. Tractors made in Iowa and clay products from the Fort Dodge area are standard items found on many through freights. But more than anything else the Iowa Division is the "Main Line of Meat."

To expedite meat and other perishables and general freight, the Illinois Central operates a fleet of "symbol" trains. There is the "CC-6" for example, a manifest freight operating at near-passenger-train-speed between Omaha and Chicago. (One "C" in the name stands for Council Bluffs, the other "C" for Chicago.)

An Illinois Central switch crew picks up meat and livestock cars in the transfer yard of the South Omaha Terminal Railroad and transfers them to Council Bluffs. At the latter point the CC-6, or "hotshot" as railroaders call it, is made up for Chicago. The manifest runs non-stop the 135 miles to Fort Dodge. Here another crew takes over for the 100-mile trip to Waterloo. This is along beautiful high-speed track, equipped with automatic train stops. CC-6 fights the grade out of Des Moines River Valley and is soon wheeling along at 60 M.P.H. At Waterloo, headquarters of the Iowa Division, cars are set out while others are added. A fresh crew takes the train the rest of the way across the state. Nearing the Mississippi, the long freight weaves between limestone bluffs in

the hilly country on the way to Dubuque. At Dubuque the CC-6 parallels the Mississippi, then veers to the right through silvery lattice steel girders to cross the Father of Waters. Ahead in Illinois is a tunnel, some sharp curves, and then more or less straight track all the way to the great city of Chicago.

Today the Illinois Central has substantially the same mileage in Iowa that it had at the beginning of the twentieth century. With the exception of the retirement of a 30-mile segment of the Cherokee-Onawa branch between Onawa and Anthon, there have been no abandonments. As a matter of fact, in 1955 the Illinois Central purchased jointly, with the Rock Island, the Waterloo Railroad connecting Waterloo and Cedar Rapids. Formerly an electric interurban line, the 64-mile Dieselized property gives the Illinois Central an additional freight route to Cedar Rapids together with a valuable belt railway in Waterloo.

From a two-state railroad with a third of its mileage in Iowa, the Illinois Central later built south and to a limited extent east. It now serves fourteen states, going east to Indianapolis and Louisville and south to the Gulf of Mexico. It also goes to Birmingham and nearly reaches Texas on the branch to Shreveport. It has 6,500 miles of line in all three districts — Eastern, Southern, and Western — by which the Interstate Commerce Commission classifies the carriers geographically.

Once a crude prairie railroad with 60-pound rail on unballasted roadway, the main line of the Illinois Central in Iowa now is basically in 112- and 115-pound rail on crushed rock ballast with the remaining "old standard" 90-pound rail steadily being replaced. It is largely protected by block signals and automatic train control. In the days of steam, well-kept Pacific, Mikado, and Mountain type locomotives characterized its fast passenger and time freights. The more economical Diesels have since taken over. Like all the Illinois Central's rolling stock, they are kept up to a high state of efficiency.

In the future as in the past, the modern Iowa Division (the second biggest of all the Illinois Central's nine divisions) and its terminals, will continue to be the strong east-and-west line of the strategic Chicago-to-Gulf railroad. Time will only increase its importance to Iowa and to the nation.