

Rounding Out The System

With the Iowa leased lines now owned lock, stock, and barrel by the Illinois Central, the expansion program in the Hawkeye State was pushed with vigor. The railroad endeavored to strengthen its position by building feeder lines. In 1887 the Cherokee & Dakota Railroad Company was organized to build a 96-mile line from Cherokee to the rapidly growing city of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Included in the project was another branch running southwest from Cherokee to Onawa, 61 miles long.

Tracklaying on the Sioux Falls branch commenced in Cherokee, September 26, 1887, and by October 30 the rails had been spiked down at Primghar, twenty-five miles to the north. This was at the rate of better than a-mile-a-day, excluding Sundays. Carlton Corliss, in his well-researched history of the Illinois Central, describes the exuberance of the crowd in the county seat of O'Brien County as seen by J. L. Peck, an eyewitness.

The crowd waited patiently, and at last the whistle of the engine was heard below the town. . . . The crowd gave a mighty shout. The construction train, loaded with iron rails, came near. The inimitable F. M. (Pomp) Mc-

Cormack, founder of the *O'Brien County Bell*, had gone down to meet the train, two miles below. He had mounted the high top of the engine, and, waving the Stars and Stripes and hollering and yelling at the top of his voice . . . he came in . . . patriotically breaking the Sabbath . . . Primghar was on the map!

Spurred to even greater efforts, construction forces of five hundred men determined to reach Sioux Falls, 72 miles distant, by Christmas Day. That would mean laying more than one and one-half miles of track each working day. So great was the progress that the last rail was hammered down in Sioux Falls at 11:30 p.m., on December 18, a week before Christmas. Mayor John F. Norton drove the last spike by lantern-light. The "tarriers" had averaged one and two-thirds miles of track-laying a day from Primghar. So grateful were the citizens, they refused to let the construction men sleep in their East Sioux Falls camp that frigid night. They hastily corralled a fleet of sleighs and took the tired men to comfortable beds in the Cataract House in Sioux Falls.

Regular train service between Sioux Falls and Chicago was inaugurated early in February, 1888, thereby linking the Windy City with the westernmost point reached by the Illinois Central. The Onawa branch was also put in operation in June of that year. At Onawa it connected with what is now the North Western's line running south to Council Bluffs.

The year 1888 likewise saw entry of the Illinois

Central to the thriving city of Cedar Rapids with the completion of the 42-mile branch from Manchester. Organized in 1886 as the Cedar Rapids & Chicago Railroad Company, the firm was sold to the Illinois Central shortly after it was completed.

John F. Merry

At this point it is appropriate to mention one of the best-liked Iowans ever to hold an important office on the Illinois Central. He was Captain John F. Merry of Manchester. Born in Ohio, brought up on a farm north of Manchester, Merry served in the Civil War and later turned to railroading, working for the Illinois Central from 1880 to 1911. Starting as an excursion agent, he rose to be assistant general passenger agent of the system. To Iowans and many people elsewhere he was "Mr. Illinois Central."

Of a warm, jolly disposition, John F. Merry was gregarious, popular, and above all, friendly. If ever a railroad had a goodwill ambassador, it was Captain Merry. Nor was his work limited by his title. Actually, he was an agricultural agent, industrial agent, immigration agent, publicity representative, frequently writing promotional booklets and homeseekers' guides. In reviewing his *Where to Locate New Factories* (1892) the Ottumwa *Daily Courier* said:

Captain J. F. Merry . . . is a versatile man. He can sing like a Sankey in a Methodist camp meeting or at a

Loyal Legion love feast. He can plead like a lawyer! He used to sell more goods than any man who ever called himself a competitor. He can recite an anecdote like an actor. . . . Captain Merry . . . now a railroad official . . . has found time to write a 160-page book, "Where to Locate New Factories." . . . Two years ago he issued a pamphlet on the Northwest, dwelling especially upon agricultural resources of the new counties in northern Iowa, along the Illinois Central Railroad. . . . He gathered the data for his book by driving all over the new counties, interviewing the farmers and reproducing much of their conversations. . . . Everything he argued therefore was backed by voluminous proof from the farmers themselves.

Up to the time of his retirement Captain Merry had compiled, with one exception, every pamphlet, leaflet, and circular concerning immigration issued by the Illinois Central since he started working for the road. His literature concerning the South had been so conservative and his facts so accurate that bankers, trust companies and lawyers, as well as homeseekers, constantly relied on his pamphlets.

Returning to the expansion program, there was the linking of Albert Lea, Minnesota, with the main stem in Iowa by way of the Cedar Falls branch at Mona on the Iowa-Minnesota state line. The road was extended to Glenville, Minnesota, in 1900. A right of way was purchased from that town to Albert Lea, but this section of the line was never built. Instead, trackage rights were acquired over the Rock Island between Glenville and Albert Lea. Now the Illinois Central had a direct

connection via the Albert Lea gateway to the Twin Cities over the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway. To round out the Albert Lea district trackage, mention should be made of the eight-mile Stacyville branch, opened late in 1897.

During this period by far and away the most significant undertaking was building to Council Bluffs. Heretofore the Illinois Central had trackage rights over the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha (Chicago & North Western) to Council Bluffs. But this agreement did not prove satisfactory, and it was later terminated.

Omaha, key city of the Missouri Valley and one of the fastest growing cattle markets in the Midwest, was still a long way from Illinois Central rails. Such a situation became intolerable. All the other railroads crossing the length of Iowa had made Omaha their goal — the North Western, the Rock Island, the Burlington, and the Milwaukee. Even the Wabash had built up to Omaha from Missouri, cutting across southwestern Iowa to reach its coveted goal. And it was a known fact that the Great Western, under the energetic leadership of A. B. Stickney, was coming south to Omaha. What was the trouble with the Illinois Central?

Stuyvesant Fish, at that time president of the Illinois Central, determined to see his far-flung railroad tap the Omaha gateway. Under his authority preliminary surveys were made to ascertain

the best route. The proposed line would diverge at Tara, west of Fort Dodge, the engineers agreed, and run in a general southwestern course to Council Bluffs, a distance of 131 miles. A new company called the Fort Dodge & Omaha Railroad was chartered September 14, 1898, to build the last and longest branch of the Illinois Central in Iowa.

Chief Engineer John F. Wallace was in general charge of the project. Wallace later gained worldwide fame as chief engineer of the construction of the Panama Canal. A novel feature of the undertaking was that the "golden spike" would be driven first instead of last. As it turned out, the initial spike was driven by a woman, although Superintendent Charles K. Dixon had been slated to do the honors. When the time for the ceremony came, Dixon, finding it impossible to keep the engagement, sent his wife in his stead. So it was that Kitty Dixon performed what heretofore had always been considered a man's prerogative. With more zeal than skill she finally drove the gold-plated spike home. The unorthodox event occurred May 25, 1899. Just 208 days later the last spike, without any fanfare, was driven by a man. The Illinois Central had at long last fulfilled its western destiny.