

Dubuque & Sioux City Railroad

How and why John Edgar Thomson became president of the Dubuque & Pacific in 1859 would provide an interesting chapter in a biography of that great railroad executive. Thomson had built the Pennsylvania Railroad by sound expansion and through such uncanny foresight that for many decades it was known as "The Standard Railroad of the World." And, while Thomson headed the lucrative Pennsylvania, his almost boundless energy spilled over to the weak, ailing, 37-mile long prairie road that was the Dubuque & Pacific.

Perhaps Thomson was put on the Dubuque & Pacific to attract Eastern capital. He may have viewed the potentialities of the Iowa line as a feeder to the Pennsylvania — along with having designs on the Illinois Central. At any rate, his incumbency on the Dubuque & Pacific was short, but it marked the turning point in that road's future. Construction was resumed in the summer of 1859. By the end of the year, track was extended through the thriving town of Manchester to Independence. In the spring of 1860 its rails reached the western border of Buchanan County where a station was erected called "Jesup," named after Morris K. Jesup, brother of Frederick Jesup.

Morris Jesup held many of the Dubuque & Pacific's defaulted bonds and wished to reorganize the road and put it on a sound financial basis. To do this he forced the road into receivership. It was reorganized as the Dubuque & Sioux City Railroad Company and incorporated August 1, 1860. Although Herman Gelpcke was elected president (and he was to be followed by Edward Stimson), it was really Jesup who dominated the company. Jesup was active in its management for twenty-seven years. He held the presidency from 1866 to 1887.

Morris Ketchum Jesup was a God-fearing Connecticut Yankee who, after a meager education in New York City, entered the employ of Rogers, Ketchum & Grosvenor locomotive builders. After rising to become manager of their New York office he went into partnership in forming a small business dealing with railroad supplies on a commission. Later he switched to banking and with John S. Kennedy formed the house of Jesup, Kennedy & Company. This firm, specializing in railroad "paper," became very prosperous.

A person of varied talents and wide interests, Jesup was active in Protestant church work, in the study of natural science, and in numerous philanthropic organizations. He also helped finance Robert Peary's Arctic expeditions, but died before Admiral Peary discovered the North Pole. Cape Morris Jesup in Greenland was named for him.

Jesup saw to it that the Dubuque & Sioux City had funds to push westward. Waterloo soon rejoiced to the sound of the engine whistle. By the end of March, 1861, the railhead was established at Cedar Falls, six miles beyond Waterloo.

Cedar Falls had patiently waited for the railroad for seven years. Its 1,600 inhabitants were alternately elated or dejected by its progress or lack of progress. A cheerful note in the Cedar Falls *Gazette* brought joy to the people in the Cedar River Valley. Periods of inactivity and scant news of railroad construction elicited doubts and depression. In July, 1860, the Dubuque *Herald* made the prediction that trains could be expected in Cedar Falls in ninety days. The news was relayed with enthusiasm. Later the *Gazette* set the date at December 1st. But there were delays — winter came and went — and still no trains.

The spring of 1861, however, found crews grading the line, laying rails and building the Cedar Falls station. With this tangible assurance of a railroad the whole town prepared to greet the Dubuque & Sioux City with the most elaborate preparations ever planned in that community. A preliminary ovation would welcome the first train at five o'clock in the afternoon on Easter Monday, April 1, 1861. But the wonderful city-wide celebration proclaiming a new era for Cedar Falls was slated for April 11th.

The first train arrived on schedule with Engineer Cawley at the throttle and Conductor Northrup punching tickets in the coaches. Amid incessant whistling and continuous bell-ringing the locomotive steamed into town. When the train stopped, Chief Marshal John Milton Overman gave the signal for the bugler to sound reveillé. Then the train crew was escorted up town to the strain of patriotic airs befitting visiting nobility. At the American House the railroaders were toasted and dined.

Virtually every able-bodied citizen had a hand in the grand celebration. Men and boys ranged the river banks for cedar boughs. Women and girls wove these evergreens into elaborate festoons. The festoons lined the streets and also served as a triumphal arch spanning the railroad tracks under which the engine would go to receive a giant cedar crown to be placed around its smokestack.

To this crown were attached pennants eulogizing the men who built the line, and extolling the virtues of the railroad. On the pennants were such inscriptions as "Herman Gelpcke, the Fuel and Steam of the D. and S.C.R.R."; "Edward Stimson, Esq., The Tender of the D. and S.C.R.R."; "Platt Smith, the Driving Wheels of the D. and S.C.R.R."; "The Iron Horse, the Best Blue Blood of Modern Stock"; and "Ladies of Dubuque and Cedar Falls, The True Moral Conductors on the

Great Railroad of Life"; "Iowa, the Granary of the West"; and "Cedar Falls, the Paradise of the West."

The reception committee was composed of 128 representative citizens headed by Chief Marshal Overman. It also included Mayor J. F. Jaquith and Master of Ceremonies Sheldon Fox. In spite of inclement weather the celebration was staged with railroad-like reliability. When the locomotive came to a slow stop the big cedar lei was lowered so it encircled the puffing smokestack. Through the mud and rain a cavalcade of carriages and wagons met the train and took the honored guests to the Overman Block. Here they listened to welcoming speeches, to which Platt Smith responded on behalf of the railroad. In the evening they repaired to the American House for dinner accompanied by the Germania orchestra from Dubuque.

At ten o'clock the celebrants danced in Overman Hall, dimly lit by candles and swaying kerosene lamps, and redolent of the ever-present cedars. The party is said to have lasted until sun-up. Among those who could not stay to the end was Editor George D. Perkins of the *Gazette*. He left early to go down to the editorial office on the first floor, light a tallow candle and write as follows:

The Railroad is completed, the cars running regularly into Cedar Falls, the event so ardently wished for, so long

expected, yet so long deferred, the advent of "the Iron Horse" into our city is at length realized, and the "Metropolis of the Great Cedar Valley and its Tributaries" is bound with iron bands to the great commercial marts of the world.

The Civil War ended further construction except for a feeder line called the Cedar Falls & Minnesota Railroad Company, incorporated April 16, 1858. It was controlled by Platt Smith, Roswell B. Mason and others largely associated with the Dubuque & Sioux City. Most of the stock was held locally. Peter Melendy of Cedar Falls, an avid railroad enthusiast, and William McCoy, were given the contract "to grade and tie" the first ten miles of line. This was between Cedar Falls and Janesville. They also subcontracted the remainder of the road to Waverly. Messrs. Melendy and McCoy fulfilled their terms of the contract for the grading, but the company failed. In his autobiography Melendy tersely relates:

McCoy and I took contract on the Cedar Falls and Minnesota Railroad, from Cedar Falls to Waverly to Grade, Bridge, Culvert and Pile — on the 29th day of September, 1860. Company failed and we lost \$3000.

Later the road was reorganized. After many delays it was completed to Waverly the latter part of 1864.

Construction crews and tracklayers advanced rapidly west from Cedar Falls following the close of the Civil War. By June, 1865, rails were

spiked to ties in Boyd; by October trains were running to Ackley. On June 1, 1866, through service was inaugurated from Dubuque to Iowa Falls, 143 miles from the Mississippi. The fledgling railroad now was almost halfway across the state.

On each train came an influx of hearty immigrants: settlers from New England and the eastern states, homesteaders from the central states, sturdy foreigners from the Scandinavian countries, and a heterogeneous mixture of newcomers from England, Ireland, and Scotland.

While the Dubuque & Sioux City was plodding slowly westward, other roads were racing across Iowa to Council Bluffs and Omaha. The first transcontinental railroad was nearing completion with Council Bluffs as its eastern terminus. The road which won the race across Iowa to meet the Union Pacific would more than likely get most of the traffic and be a favored connection. At different periods during the spectacular contest to reach Council Bluffs first, the Burlington, the North Western, and the Rock Island forged steadily westward in their effort to win the prize.

Back in Chicago a railroad president sat in his office greatly disturbed by this turn of events. He was John M. Douglas, the new head of the Illinois Central. The year 1867 was a trying one, for the Illinois Central had come through the Civil War badly battered and almost bankrupt. Moreover,

the road's line west was a big disappointment to him. Three great railroads were rushing to Council Bluffs, and his own Illinois Central was marking time at the Mississippi. Its Iowa connection was accessible only by ferry; and the Dubuque & Sioux City's rails petered out on the prairie scarcely halfway across the state. To be sure, there were some friendly men on the Dubuque & Sioux City board, but the Illinois Central had only a nominal interest in the property. What if a competing line gained control of the Iowa road? The Illinois Central's route from Freeport to Dunleith would wither and die. The predicament is summed up by Carlton J. Corliss in his *Main Line of Mid-America — The Story of the Illinois Central*:

. . . it was learned on good authority that Jesup and associates had lost interest in completing the road to Sioux City and were flirting with the idea of disposing of their holdings to a rival railroad company. It seemed almost certain that if the Illinois Central did not take steps to gain control of the Iowa lines another Chicago railroad would do so, thus depriving the Company of its most logical and profitable western connection and practically shutting it out of northern Iowa.

After carefully studying the problem and conferring with associates, John Douglas determined it was time for the Illinois Central to step in and complete the Dubuque & Sioux City to the Missouri River.