Morton's History of Nebraska

Authentic—1400 to 1906—Complete

CHAPTER III CONTINUED (8)

The originators of this great enterprise evidently knew that its regular revenue would amount to but a small part of the operating expenses, and counted on receiving a subsidy from the federal government. But the subsidy of a million dollars was reserved for the slower daily mail which superseded the pony express. This brilliant pioneer object lesson in fast transcontinental service cost the demonstrators some two hundred thousand dollars in loss. By the act of Congress of March 2, 1861, the contract of the postoffice department with the Overland company of the old southern route for a daily mail over the central route included a semi-weekly pony express. The original company continued to operate the Pony Express under this contract by arrangement with the Overland company until it failed in August, 1861. The Express was continued by other parties until October 24 of that year when the through telegraph line had been completed.

In 1860, according to the report of the postmaster general, there was a tri-monthly mail by the ocean to California, and a semi-monthly mail from St. Joseph to Placerville, but during the year this was increased to a weekly between St. Joseph and Ft. Kearney, "for the purpose of supplying the large and increasing populations in the regions of the Pike's Peak and Washoe mines." There were two other mail routes to San Francisco—a weekly from New Orleans, via San Antonio and El Paso, and a semi-weekly from St. Louis and Memphis.

"By the 9th section of an act of Congress approved March 2, 1861, authority is given to the postmaster general to discontinue the mail service on the southern overland route (known as the 'Butterfield' route) between St. Louis and Memphis and San Francisco, and to provide for the conveyance, by the same parties, of a six-times-a-week mail by the 'central route,' that is, from some point on the Missouri river, connecting with the east, to Placerville, Cal. In pursuance of this act, and the acceptance of its terms by the mail company, an order was made on the 12th of March, 1861, to modify the present contract so as to discontinue the service on the southern route and to provide for the transportation of the entire letter mail, six times a week on the central route, to be carried through in twenty days eight months in the year, and in twenty-three days four months in the year, from St. Joseph, Mo. (or Atchison, Kan.), to Placerville, and also to convey the entire mail three times a week to Denver City and Salt Lake, . . . a pony express to be run twice a week until the completion of the overland telegraph, through in ten days, eight months, and twelve days, four months in the year, conveying for the government free of charge five pounds of mail matter. . . . The transfer of stock from the southern to the central route was commenced about the 1st of April, and was completed so that the first mail was started from St. Joseph on the day prescribed by the order, July 1, 1861. . . The overland telegraph having been completed, the running of the pony express was discontinued October 26, 1861. . . At the commencement of threatening disturbances in Missouri, in order to secure this great daily route from interruption, I ordered the increase of the weekly and tri-weekly service, then existing between Omaha and Ft. Kearney, to daily. . . By that means an alternative and certain daily route between the east and California was obtained through Iowa, by which the overland mails have been transported when they became unsafe on the railroad route in Missouri. In sending them from Davenport, through the state of Iowa, joining the main route at Ft. Kearney, in Kansas (Nebraska) the only inconvenience experienced was a slight delay, no mails being lost so far as known."

In the spring of 1860 an advertisement containing the schedule of the new enterprise was published in New York and St. Louis newspapers. It announced that the Pony Express would run regularly each week from April 3, 1860, that it would carry letter mail only, that it would pass through Fts. Kearney, Laramie, and Bridger, Great Salt Lake City, Camp Floyd, Carson City, the Washoe silver mines, Placerville, and Sacramento, and that the letter mail would be delivered in San Francisco within ten days of the departure of the express. Telegraph dispatches were delivered in San Francisco in eight days after leaving St. Joseph. W. H. Russell, president of the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company, was the mainspring of this remarkable enterprise. About five hundred of the hardiest and fleetest horses were used; there were a hundred and ninety stations distributed along the route from nine miles to fifteen miles apart, and each of the eighty riders covered three stations, or an aggregate of about thirty-three miles, using a fresh horse for each stage. In the spring of 1861 the express left St. Joseph twice a week—on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The maximum weight of the letters carried was twenty pounds. The schedule at first was ten days, but it was afterward accelerated to eight days. The time occupied in making the first trip between St. Joseph and Sacramento was nine days and twenty-three hours, not much more than half the time of the fastest overland coach trip between St. Louis and San Francisco by the southern route. At Sacramento the mail was taken aboard steamers, which made as fast time as possible down the Sacramento river for the remaining one hundred twenty-five miles to San Francisco. Sure-footed and tough Mexican horses were commonly used on the rough, mountainous stages. Heat and alkali dust in summer, snow and torrential streams in winter, and hostile Indians the year round, made these trips exceedingly difficult and hazardous. Armed men mounted on bronchos were stationed at regular intervals along a large part of the trail to protect the riders from the Indians. These riders of necessity were distinguished for remarkable endurance and courage, and many of them afterward became famous as hunters and Indian fighters on the great plains. The route of William F. Cody, who afterward became a permanent citizen of Nebraska, lay between Red Buttes, Wyo., and Three Crossings on the Sweetwater, a distance of about seventy-six miles, and one of the most difficult and dangerous stages of the whole line. Cody himself relates that in an emergency he continued his trip on from Three Crossings to Rocky Ridge—eighty-five miles—and then back to his starting point, Red Buttes, covering the total distance of three hundred and twenty-two miles without rest, making not less than fifteen miles an hour. The Pony Express was operated for eighteen months, or until it was superseded by the telegraph, which was completed in 1861. Considering its vicissitudes and hazards and its remarkable speed, so nearly approximating that of the steam railway train, the Pony Express was the most interesting and picturesque transportation enterprise of which we have any record. The Express followed the line of the old Oregon trail in Nebraska, passing trhough Big Sandy and Thirty-two Mile creek stations south of the Platte, and from Ft. Kearney westward by way of Plum creek, Cottonwood Springs, and O'Fallons Bluff to the lower California crossing then opposite the present Big Spring. It then followed the Julesburg route, reaching the North fork near Court House Rock, via Lodge Pole creek and Thirty-mile ridge. On occasion remarkably quick time was made by the Express. For example, a copy of President Lincoln's first inaugural address went from St. Joseph to Sacramento, approximately two thousand miles, in seven days and seventeen hours, and the distance between St. Joseph and Denver, six hundred and sixty-five miles, was covered on this trip in sixty-nine hours.

The Missouri and Western Telegraph Company completed the first telegraph line from Brownville by way of Omaha to Ft. Kearney in November, 1860, and the storeroom of Mr. Moses H. Sydenham, who still survives, a resident of Kearney, was used for the first office. This line was continued on to Julesburg by the same company, while Mr. Edward Creighton built the line west from that point to Salt Lake City, where it met the one coming east from San Francisco.

The first mail from the east to the Pike's Peak gold mines was established between Ft. Kearney and Denver in August, 1860. Ft. Kearney was a very important point on the great Overland route, since there was the junction of travel from Kansas City, Atchison, and St. Joseph on the southeast, and from Omaha, Council Bluffs and Nebraska City on the east.

"Ft. Kearney, in 1863 ,was a rather lonesome but a prominent point. It was a place of a dozen or more buildings including the barracks, and was established by the government in 1849. Here it was that the stages, ox and mule trains west from Atchison, Omaha and Nebraska City came to the first telegraph station on the great military highway. It was a grand sight after traveling one hundred and fifty miles without seeing a settlement of more than two or three houses to gaze upon the old post, uninviting as it was, and see the few scattering buildings, a nice growth of shade trees, the cavalry men mounted upon their steeds, the cannon planted in the hollow square, and the glorious stars and stripes proudly waving in the breeze above the garrison. The stage station—just west of the military post—was a long, one-story log building and it was an important one; for here the western stage routes from Omaha and Nebraska City terminated, and its passengers from thence westward had to be transferred to Ben Holladay's old reliable Overland line."

Though there was some steamboat traffic on the lower Missouri river before 1830, the American Fur Company, under the control of John Jacob Astor and his son, William B. Astor, with headquarters at New York and a branch house at St. Louis, prepared for the first regular navigation, extending to the upper river, in that year. The company built the steamer Yellowstone, so named, doubtless, because its farthest objective point was to be the mouth of the Yellowstone river. But on the first trip, in the spring of 1831, it was impracticable to go farther than Ft. Tecumseh, opposite the present city of Pierre. The following spring the Yellowstone reached Ft. Union, and this first trip established the practicability of upper river steamboat navigation. Ft. Benton soon came to be regarded as the head of navigation and retained that advantageous distinction as long as river navigation lasted. Missouri river steamboat traffic was largely cut off when the Northern Pacific railway reached Bismarck in 1873, and it was virtually abandoned when other railroads reached the river at Pierre in 1880 and at Chamberlain in 1881. It is probable that the last through commercial trip was made in 1878, and that the Missouri made the last trip for any purpose from St. Louis to Ft. Benton in 1885. Though carried on for forty years with great difficulty, owing to the notoriously shifty and snaggy character of the stream, this navigation was the chief medium of freight and passenger traffic between the East and the western plains, and was the right arm of the forces which began the structure of civilized society in Nebraska and of the first transcontinental railway whose beginning was also in Nebraska. Whether this greatest but ugliest—in temper as well as appearance—of all our great rivers will ever again be utilized for navigation depends upon the unsettled economic question whether future mechanical inventions and improvements shall constitute or reestablish it as a practicable rival or coadjutor of the railway. At the present time the chances do not encourage expensive experiment upon the river to fit it for navigation, and in 1902 Congress abolished the useless and sinecure Missouri river commission. But it is not improbable that this vast body of water will eventually be used for the irrigation of enormous areas of arid and semiarid but otherwise exceedingly rich agricultural lands. Engineering authority in support of this view is not wanting. Until the introduction of steamboats the river traffic of the fur companies was carried on by keel boats. They were usually from sixty to seventy feet in length, and, with the exception of about twelve feet at either end, were occupied by an enclosed apartment in the shape of a long box in which the cargo was placed. The boats were ordinarily propelled by a cordelle, a rope about three hundred yards long, one end being attached to a tall mast, while the other was in the hands of from one to two score men who traveled along the shore of the river and hauled the boat after them. When the wind was at all favorable a large sail was also used, and frequently the boat would make good progress against the current by the force of the wind alone. Poles and oars were used also as emergency required. It is not remarkable that by this clumsy and fearfully laborious method the ordinary voyage of the keel boat from St. Louis to the upper river was not accomplished in less than four or five months. The mackinaw was somewhat smaller than the keel boat and of comparatively temporary construction. It was propelled by four oarsmen, but was used only in down-stream trips. The frame of the bull boat, which was used on the shallow tributaries of the Missouri, was built of willow saplings lashed together with rawhide and covered with hides of bull buffaloes, which gave it its name. This craft was buoyant and flexible and well adapted for the sandy shallows of the Platte and others of the smaller rivers.

Bellevue was an important point in the later fur trading days, because, being the site of an Indian agency, boats passing up the river were subjected to a rigid inspection to see that they had on board no intoxicating liquors which it was unlawful to carry into the "Indian country."

The cargoes of the boats in the earlier river navigation consisted of merchandise for Indian trading, outfits for trappers and hunters, and stores for the military posts; and in addition passengers of all sorts and conditions. Capt. Joseph La Barge was the principal figure among the Missouri steamboat captains and pilots, and he characterized and distinguished his class just as Kit Carson and our own "Buffalo Bill" and others illustrated the great qualities and achievements of the scouts of the plains. He was born in 1815 of a French Canadian father and a Spanish-French mother. At the age of seventeen he entered the service of the American Fur Company at Cabanne's post. In the spring of 1833 he conducted a fleet of Mackinaw boats from that post to St. Louis. He was also employed by Major Pilcher, Cabanne's successor, and in 1834 by Peter A. Sarpy. Soon after this he began his career as pilot and captain of various steamboats on the Missouri—mainly on the upper river—which lasted till 1879. He died at St. Louis in 1899. La Barge named a steamboat built in 1854 and used on the Missouri river for the American Fur Company's trade, St. Mary, after Peter A. Sarpy's post situated just below Bellevue on the Iowa side of the river.

On the 7th of June, 1851, Father De Smet, accompanied by Father Christian Hoecken, took passage on the steamer St. Ange from St. Louis to Ft. Union, which was about three miles above the mouth of the Yellowstone, on the northern side. Several members of the American Fur Company with about eighty men were on the boat. "They," said the missionary, "went in quest of earthly wealth; Father Hoecken and I in search of heavenly treasures—to the conquest of souls." It had been a season of mighty floods, and the valleys of the Mississippi and Missouri were covered with water. The travelers were afflicted with malarial diseases in various forms, and about five hundred miles above St. Louis they were attacked by cholera, from which Father Hoecken died, after heroically ministering to the needs of his stricken fellow-passengers. "A decent coffin, very thick, and tarred within, was prepared to receive his mortal remains; a temporary grave was dug in a beautiful forest, in the vicinity of the mouth of the Little Sioux, and the funeral was performed with all the ceremonies of the church, in the evening of the 19th of June, all on board assisting." On the return of the boat in about a month the coffin was exhumed and carried back to Florissant for burial.

The annals of the times credit these noble priests with characteristic incessant devotion to their suffering fellow-passengers.

"In the year 1858 there were 59 steamboats on the lower river and 306 steamboat arrivals at the port of Leavenworth, Kan. The freight charges paid at that point during the season amounted to $166,941.35. In 1859 the steamboat advertisements in the St. Louis papers showed that more vessels left that port for the Missouri river than for both the upper and lower Mississippi. In 1857 there were 28 steamboat arrivals at the new village of Sioux City before July 1. There were 23 regular boats on that part of the river, and their freight tonnage for the season was valued at $1,250,000. The period from 1855 to 1860 was the golden era of steamboating on the Missouri river. It was the period just before the advent of the railroads. No other period before or after approached it in the splendor of the boats. All the boats were side-wheelers, had full-length cabins, and were fitted up more for passengers than for freight. It was an era of fast boats and of racing."

The provisions for the establishment of public roads are recited in the account of the proceedings of the several territorial legislatures; and account is also given of the building of territorial roads by appropriations of the federal Congress. The means of transportation and the amount and condition of travel in the territorial years before the completion of the Union Pacific railway are indicated in an interesting manner in the contemporary newspapers. In a report of a committee of the first council of the territorial legislature, on a bill chartering the Platte Valley & Pacific railroad company, it is stated that nine-tenths of the travel to the Pacific Coast passes along the Platte valley—from St. Louis by water to Independence, Weston, St. Joe, Council Bluffs, and occasionally Sergeant's Bluff, "and uniting at these points with those who come by land from the Platte valley at various points within two hundred miles, a little north of a due west line from Omaha, Belleview, and Florence." This report recites, also, that "thirty years ago Colonel Leavenworth, who then commanded the post in sight of this locality (Ft. Atkinson), called the attention of our government to the importance, practicability, and expediency of constructing a railroad by way of the Platte valley to the Pacific."

Acting Governor Cuming in his message to the legislature, December 9, 1857, states that, "The United States wagon road from the Platte river via the Omaha reserve to the Running Water, under the direction of Col. George Sites, has been constructed for a distance of one hundred and three miles, including thirty-nine bridges;" and he gives the names of the streams crossed by these bridges and the length of each bridge. Mr. J. M. Woolworth, in his little book, "Nebraska in 1857," notes that, "A year ago Congress established a military road from this place to New Ft. Kearney and appropriated $50,000 for its construction. That work is nearly complete, and runs up the valley of the Platte through all the principal settlements west of this." The territorial legislature memorialized Congress to grant to John A. Latta, of Plattsmouth, 20,000 acres of land in the valley of the Platte river, on condition that before October 1, 1861, he "shall place on said river a good and substantial steamboat and run the same between the mouth of said Platte river" and Ft. Kearney, and do all necessary dredging, "knowing that that there is a sufficient volume of water in said river which is a thousand miles in length." This visionary memorial sets out that the proposed method of navigation would be advantageous for government transportation among other things. In a joint resolution and memorial to Congress, the 5th legislature, in urging the bridging of the Platte river, states that "a military or a public road beginning at L'eau-qui-court and extending southward across the territory, has been located and opened under the direction of the national government, and has become a great thoroughfare, whereon military supplies may be expeditiously transported northward. It also affords an avenue of trade of great advantage and is now one of the prominent mail routes to the inhabitants of this territory and others, in said territory." The governor's message to the 7th legislature urges that "without a bridge over the Loup Fork the government road up the Platte valley is but a work half done." The governor's message to the 12th—and last—territorial legislature again urges the building of a bridge across the Platte river; and the same document informs us that "now four regular trains run daily between Omaha and North Platte, 293½ miles, and that the track is complete for 305 miles, 240 miles of roadbed having been constructed and 262 miles of track laid during the past season; also that there is a Howe truss bridge, 1,505 feet, across the Loup Fork and a pile bridge, 2,640 feet, across the North Fork."

The Herald of July 13, 1866, gives an account of the excursion of the members of the legislature to the end of the Union Pacific road beyond Columbus. The excursionists took dinner at that place, and at the after-dinner ceremonies Andrew J. Poppleton presided and Dr. Thomas C. Durant, General Hazen, George Francis Train, Gov. David Butler, Thomas W. Tipton, John M. Thayer, and the ubiquitous Colonel Presson, then chaplain of the territorial house of representatives, made speeches. It is suggestive of the relations of the Union Pacific corporation to politics for many years afterwards that the speaking list at this banquet comprised most of the well-known republican, and some of the democratic politicians of the territory. The Herald of June 22, 1866, notes that George Francis Train had just made the quickest trip on record from Omaha to New York, via St. Joe, in eighty-nine hours. The same trip is now made in forty-two hours. The Nebraskan of today, however, is not proportionately faster than his pioneer predecessor in other phases of his daily life. In May, 1867, passengers went from Chicago to Denver in five days—by rail over the Chicago and Northwestern and the Union Pacific roads to North Platte and thence by Wells, Fargo & Co.'s mail and express line.

A striking illustration of economic conditions on our western frontier is afforded by a statement in the Nebraska City News that at Ft. Kearney the price of corn is $3.50 and $4 a bushel, and from $3 to $4 a bushel a hundred miles west of Nebraska City. Illustration of the feeling of desert-like isolation in the territory as late as 1859 is found in Omaha correspondence of the Advertiser which notices the arrival of the Florida, the first steamer of the season, "amid the shouts and cheers of the multitude, and the booming of cannon under the charge of Captain Ladd's artillery squad. It is the earliest landing made in this vicinity for many years." The Advertiser of March 3, 1859, says that the completion of the Hannibal & St. Joseph railroad was celebrated at the place last named on the 28d inst. on a grand scale. "The completion of this road will take a surprising amount of emigration off the river which will be poured out opposite southern Nebraska and northern Kansas and speedily work its way into these portions of the two territories." The Nebraska City News rejoices that a depot of federal military supplies has been established at that place; and May 29, following, the News wagers that three times more freight and passengers have been landed at the Nebraska City wharf this season than at any other town. The News of May 21, 1859, says Alexander Majors estimates that from four hundred to six hundred wagons would be sent out from Nebraska City that season, and about as many from Leavenworth.

The Advertiser says that "The little boat built for the purpose of navigating the Platte river passed here going up on Sunday morning. It was a little one-horse affair, and will not, in our opinion, amount to much. If the Platte river is to be rendered navigable, and we believe it can, it requires a boat sufficiently large to slash around and stir up the sand, that a channel may be formed by washing." The Omaha Nebraskian notes that forty boats will navigate the Missouri river the coming season—two will run daily between Liberty and St. Joseph, and three daily between St. Joseph and Omaha, all in conjunction with the Hannibal and St. Joe railroad. On the 11th of August following the same paper notes that the Kearney stage made a quick trip to Omaha in thirty-three hours, carrying six passengers. On the 25th of the same month the Nebraskian announces that Colonel Miles had chosen Omaha City as the place of debarkation and reshipping his supplies to Ft. Kearney.

At the height of travel to the newly discovered gold mines in the vicinity of Denver there was sharp rivalry between Nebraska City and Omaha and other minor starting places, such as Brownville and Plattsmouth. As early as 1854 the Omaha Arrow, with a wish no doubt aiding the thought, insists that Omaha has "the great advantage of being on a shorter line by many miles than any other crossing below this from Chicago to the north bend of the Platte, and the south, or Bridger's Pass, and the crossing of the Missouri river is as good, to say the least of it, at this point as at any other in a hundred miles above the mouth of the Platte." The Nebraska City News takes a traveler's guide to task for stating that the route from Plattsmouth is direct, when Ft. Kearney is in fact forty miles south of a line west from that starting point and half a mile south of Nebraska City. It is observed in the item that no government train had ever gone out from Plattsmouth, all traffic of this kind starting from Nebraska City because it was the military depot.

TO BE CONTINUED