

## NEBRASKA'S APPARENT HOSTILITY TO RAILROADS.

BY THE HONORABLE J. W. JOHNSON.

Secretary of the Nebraska State Board of Transportation.

**T**O understand the causes for apparent hostility of the people of Nebraska towards railroads, it is necessary to know the conditions peculiar to this state, under which the railroad interests and farming interests have grown side by side during the last twenty-five years.

Uncle Sam looked out over his broad domains and saw a patch of rich prairie land, two hundred miles wide and four hundred miles long, uninhabited, unproductive, without value, bringing in no revenue to the general government, and serving no useful purpose to man. To change these conditions and convert this prairie wilderness into farmer's homes and cornfields was the natural impulse of a government whose strength and prosperity is in the policy that each citizen may own his home. On this prairie food producing was the only possible industry. "I will sell this land to farmers in small pieces at a mere nominal price," said Uncle Sam, and he offered it at \$1.25 per acre; but there were no buyers. There were thousands of homeless farmers, willing to endure the hardships of frontier life; but they had no money to pay even a poor man's price; besides, the country was hundreds of miles from market, and farming without transportation was impracticable. Railroad transportation was absolutely necessary. Railroads require tonnage from the very start, and on this wild prairie it would take years to build up a farming community that would produce any considerable amount of tonnage. Other states had been pioneered by the farmer first; but in these other states various other industries were practicable, and these other industries established local trade stations, made home markets that could be reached by wagon transportation; and the farmer pioneer lived many slow but happy years on the frontier before he heard the whistle of the locomotive. But here was a state that could develop only the farming industry, and its market was hundreds of miles away. The railroad must be the pioneer. In other states the farmer had been the pioneer, and the railroad had come only after the communities had been established, the industries partly developed, and the tonnage prepared.

To build railroads requires labor, labor demands the cash and takes no risk, and so the creation of these necessary transportation facilities was dependent on either capitalists or the government for funds. The government had no fund that it could use for that purpose. The government had faith in the ultimate success of the enterprise, but it had no money. The capitalist had money but his faith was weak. The proposition to establish a successful farming community on a then almost rainless prairie, was tinged with much uncertainty. "When I have parted with my cash," said the capitalist, "and have built a railroad on this prairie, will nature reverse her laws and send the necessary rain, and will the farmer, hearing the voice of the locomotive follow it up to the western slope? I can lay down my ties and iron, and my locomotives will ride these prairies; but will the American farmer, who has been trained as a woodsman pioneer, face these brazen skies and endure life on this treeless prairie during the period of years that must elapse before abundant rains will come, when he can rest in the shade of trees planted by his own hand?" To secure the co-operation of capital, the government found it necessary, not only to subscribe as a business partner which it did in the case of the Union Pacific road, but also to grant land subsidies to this and other corporations. In the case of the Union Pacific a national necessity of far greater importance than the mere development of Nebraska, required the building of the road, even at the risk of whatever extravagance may have been incident to the enterprise. "In order to enlist the capitalist in these western enterprises," said the government, "and to recoup his railroad interest against the early years of light tonnage, I will convey to him as a part of the bargain, a small portion of this land; but as between the former and myself I will remove every feature of bargain and sale, I will remit even the nominal price of \$1.25 per acre, and will give him the land free, requiring only that he build his home and become an actual settler in the new state.

At the time these negotiations were negotiated between these three parties, the government, the railroad and the farmer, the arrangements were highly satisfactory. The two later parties to the contract, entered heartily into the enterprise, and the rapid development of the new prairie state is one of the most splendid examples of

material progress in all history. The rain-fall increased with the plowing of new fields, and as the settler pushed to the frontier, turning the sod further and further up the western slope, showers came down from the skies that had never rained before.

In less time than many of the more eastern states occupied in passing through the period of hard frontier life to reach statehood, Nebraska had leaped to the front rank as a food-producing state, with a population of over one million people and a well equipped railroad plant of over five thousand miles.

Prosperity, when it comes slow, begets content; but rapid development and sudden creations of wealth give an opportunity for jealousy, the most subtle of all evil forces to creep into the evil mind. Whatever is true of Nebraska in this respect, is also true of the whole country, manifested in each separate state against such enterprises as are most active and conspicuous. Business jealousy is the twin brother of ambition and is always a sign of upward evolution.

When the homeless and landless tenant farmer of Ohio and Illinois saw the consummation of this three-cornered deal between the government, the railway and the farmer, whereby this domain was divided and given away to the two latter for the mutual benefit of all three, it seemed to him the proper thing to do. But a few years later after he had availed himself of its generous provisions, had become a farmer citizen of the new state, when the period of uncertainty as to rainfall had passed, when the new state was teeming with a heavy immigration, the railroad pushing its rapidly growing plant in all directions, when land had risen in value from nothing to \$15 and \$20 per acre, it then occurred to him, by the assistance of the politician, that the farmer class had been wronged in the donation of even a small portion of the public domain to the capitalists. Thousands of farmers who came into the state after the homestead land had been largely pre-empted by the earlier settlers purchased this railroad land on long time, and thereby became debtor tenants for a term of years to the railroad corporation. The relation of debtor and creditor or of tenant and landlord always has and always will be unsatisfactory. It matters not what uncontrollable circumstances may have brought this condition about, or how just and equitable the contract upon which the relation exists. So long as the truth remains that the earth was created for man, so long will each man feel in some degree, that somehow or in some way he ought to have the right to own and control the ground beneath the sky above that particular spot he calls home. This home instinct, this desire to own one's home, inherent in every breast, while it is the strength of the nation and one of the vital forces of human evolution, is, and will continue to be, a source of irritation and jealousy so long as the right to acquire property honestly is unlimited, and the ability to acquire is unequal. By what right do these eastern corporations own this western land? was and still is the one question in the mind of the Nebraska farmer, and his inability to see the equity and expediency that the government recognized in these land grants is, in my opinion, the source from which has grown whatever of jealousy exists against the railroads in Nebraska. If Nebraska farmers have manifested more hostility toward railroads than the Pennsylvania farmers, it is because it was Nebraska land and not Pennsylvania land that was given away and owned for a time by the railroad corporation. It may occur to eastern people to condemn Nebraska farmers and say that they, of all others, have less cause to complain, because they, of all others, profited most by the Homestead Law and the quick development of the new state. It may occur to New England farmers that they of the east have been most wronged in the giving away of the public domain of which they were in part owners, to a community of farmers who were patronized and set up in business of the General Government, at the expense of other agricultural states. And they may feel grieved that this new commonwealth west of the Missouri river with its slow rate of transportation to the seaboard, has been made a successful rival of their interests; but whatever criticism may be urged by eastern people against Nebraska farmers, I want to ask those who are inclined to judge harshly, if the scene of these land gifts to corporations had been in Ohio or Pennsylvania, would not Ohio or Pennsylvania instead of Nebraska be recognized to-day as typical anti railroad states?

But the land question has not alone created the anti-railroad sentiment in Nebraska. There is but one particular industry, the food industry, in this state. The farmers produce, and the railroads carry to the eastern market. It is not unnatural that a jealousy