



Lines West!—The Story of George W Holdrege (Part 2)

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Article Summary: This article covers the period of the B & M’s greatest expansion. In 1887 Holdrege personally supervised the construction of 700 miles of railroad, making Lines West the largest in mileage of any railroad in the state of Nebraska.

See also [Part 1](#) and [Part 3](#) of this article.

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Names: George W Holdrege, Charles E Perkins, John Murray Forbes, Thomas L Kimball, Frances R Kimball, A E Touzalin, T J Potter, T E Calvert, Edward Gillette

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Photographs / Images: view of Holdrege c. 1884

LINES WEST!—THE STORY OF GEORGE W. HOLDREGE

BY THOMAS M. DAVIS

II

[George W. Holdrege was 26 years old when he came back across the Missouri River to Nebraska in 1873. Charles E. Perkins had told him, "We're going to show those people that the B. & M. means business."

Many of the familiar faces of 1869 were gone, for the Nebraska company had undergone a reorganization while Holdrege had been in Iowa; Perkins and John Murray Forbes, with the consent of the rest of the directors of the company, had taken over complete control of the management of the infant railroad.

As Assistant Superintendent, Holdrege's responsibilities lay in supervising new construction. Building the main line to Denver was his first major accomplishment. This line was completed on May 24, 1882, with Holdrege himself driving in the last spike at a point eleven miles east of Denver. By this time, he had been promoted to the position of General Superintendent of Lines West.

The author's story of the construction of this line, entitled, "Building the Burlington Through Nebraska—A Summary View," is recorded in the December, 1949 issue of this publication. To avoid needless repetition, and for the sake of conciseness and brevity, these years in Holdrege's life, namely 1873 to 1882, will be but briefly mentioned in this article.]

IN 1875 the B. & M. organized all of its Nebraska lines into a single division and Lincoln replaced Plattsmouth as the headquarters of the company.¹

Following the death of his wife, Emily Atkinson Holdrege, in 1873, Holdrege was confronted with the problem of arranging for the care of his son. For the first few months the child lived with his maternal grandparents in Boston, but as Mrs. Atkinson's health was failing Holdrege prevailed upon his mother and his unmarried sister, Laura, to take the boy to their home in New York.² In 1875 he bought a house in Lincoln and persuaded Laura to bring young Henry west and establish a home for him there.³

In September, 1876, Holdrege was sent by Perkins to confer with Thomas L. Kimball of Omaha, leader of the Union Pacific forces in the state, regarding the establishment of a connection between the two roads at Kearney.⁴ As these negotiations dragged on for several months, Holdrege took up temporary residence in Omaha, once again sharing living quarters with his young engineer friend, T. E. Calvert.⁵

Although Kimball refused all of Holdrege's proposals, the two men formed a close personal friendship. Kimball even made repeated attempts to lure Holdrege away from the B. & M. to work for the Union Pacific. Once, after an exceptionally attractive offer, Holdrege patiently explained, "I started with this railroad when it was nothing but a plan on paper. I'm going to stay with it and someday, perhaps, I shall be president of it."⁶

In spite of the persistent refusals on the part of each of these men to the proposals advanced by the other, the close friendship remained. When the interests of their respective railroads clashed, however, each man exerted every influence in behalf of the company he represented.

¹ G. W. Holdrege, *The Making of the Burlington*, 1921.

² Interview with Mrs. E. A. Holyoke, May, 1941.

³ Interview with Henry Holdrege, June, 1941.

⁴ Holdrege to C. F. Manderson, September 9, 1881.

⁵ Interview with Mrs. T. E. Calvert, June, 1939.

⁶ Interview with Miss Belle Kimball, June, 1941.

This led them into frequent conflict in the course of the next ten years.

Because of the intensity of the competition between the two railroads—a competition in which each company used every device at its command to impede the progress of its rival—it came as a considerable surprise to everyone when, on February 10, 1878, Frances R. Kimball, Kimball's daughter, announced her engagement and approaching marriage to George Holdrege. "A merger of monopolies," the *Omaha Herald* branded it.⁷ "A surprise to all their friends," said the conservative *Omaha Republican*.⁸

The wedding took place on April 23, 1878. The *Republican* described it in the following glowing terms:

A large number of our citizens were honored last week with the following invitation:

Mr. and Mrs. T. L. Kimball
Request your Presence at the
Marriage Reception of Their Daughter
From Three until Five
Friday afternoon, April 23,
Park Wilde Avenue, Omaha

Mr. Holdrege is known to our business public as the assistant superintendent of the B. & M. Railroad of Nebraska, in which capacity he has sustained business relations with our citizens, won high regard for his intelligence, his energy and his uniform courtesy. He is not only a "gentleman" but a "scholar", having spent four years at Harvard University, and not having by any means forsaken his scholarly pursuits.—In all respects Mr. Holdrege is a worthy member of a railroad management which is distinguished by an unusual number of well educated gentlemen.

To name Mrs. Holdrege as we must now speak of Fanny Kimball, is to praise her in the community and in others where her family has resided The ceremony took place at 2 o'clock, Reverend W. E. Copeland of Lincoln officiating and the bride and bridegroom being supported by sister Belle and brother Thomas. Only members of the immediate family, a few relatives and neighbors were present at the marriage.

Some 250 reception invitations were issued and out of the greater part addressed to citizens of Omaha, but a few were answered with regrets.

Mr. and Mrs. Holdrege left at 8 o'clock last evening in the Director's car of the railroad, for Lincoln. They begin

⁷ *Omaha Herald*, February 11, 1878.

⁸ *Omaha Republican*, February 11, 1878.

their married life in their own home at Lincoln, reserving the usual bridal tour for a later period in the season.⁹

Twenty-four hours after his marriage, Holdrege was summoned to Denver by General Manager A. E. Touzalin to appear before a Colorado legislative committee relative to obtaining state aid for the B. & M. should it decide to build an extension to Denver.¹⁰ Leaving his bride behind with the promise that he would be back in a few days, Holdrege left to join the General Manager and Vice-President Perkins in the West. On April 30, six days later, Frances Holdrege received the following letter: "Our work here is finished and I believe that we shall get what we want. Mr. Perkins is here and proposes some hunting in Phelps county. I think it best that I join the party. I miss you. Love, George."¹¹ Five days later he returned to Lincoln.¹²

A month later, on May 4th, Holdrege wrote to his wife from St. Joseph, Missouri: "Mr. Perkins thinks we should go east and consult some of the crowd regarding our B. & M. activities. This will delay my return home for a few days but will write you daily of my plans."¹³ Frances Holdrege was to receive many such messages in the course of the next twenty years for these were exciting times for the B. & M. As the daughter of a railroad man, she had learned to love the excitement but bemoaned the circumstances that left her at home while her husband gained triumph in the field of railroad construction.

The decade of the 1880's was the period of the B. & M.'s greatest expansion. It was during this same period that the first agitation against railroad rates and practices arose. Toward the end of the period the Burlington found itself involved in the issue of labor's right to organize and the form that this organization should take. In brief, this was a time the company demanded the full attention of the

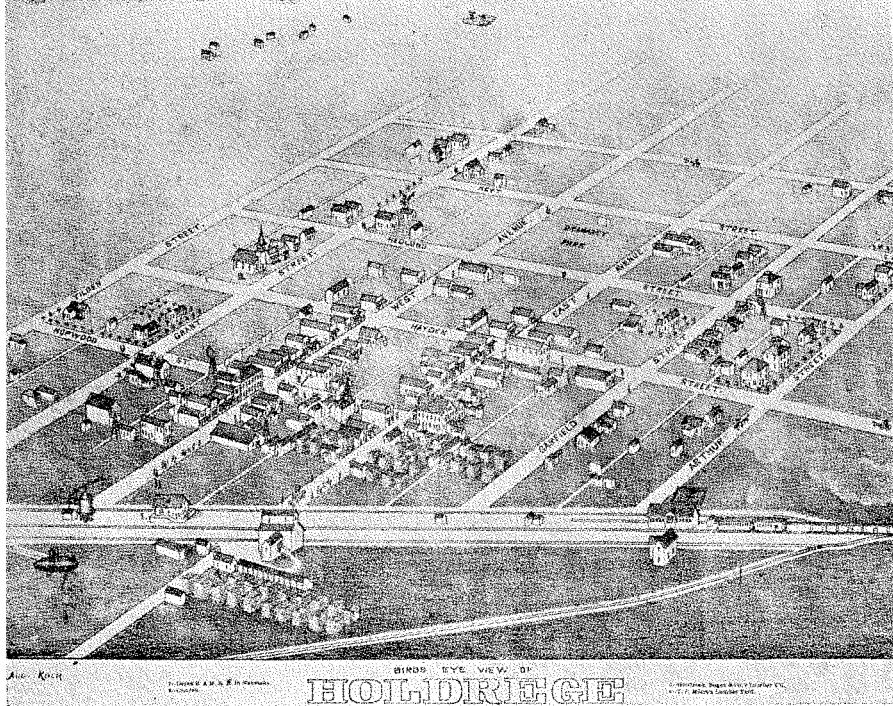
⁹ *Ibid.*, April 24, 1878.

¹⁰ B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1878.

¹¹ Letter in author's collection.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*



This view of Holdrege, about 1884, is reproduced from *The First Presbyterian Church of Holdrege, Nebraska*, a commemorative history published in 1937, page 5.

railroad executive.

At the beginning of the period, on January 1, 1880, Perkins assumed the presidency of both the C. B. & Q. and the B. & M.¹⁴ At the same time the purchase of the B. & M. by the C. B. & Q., and their subsequent consolidation, was announced.¹⁵ With the completion of this transaction, it was decided to move the headquarters of the Nebraska division to Omaha.¹⁶ It was further decided that, in view of the contemplated expansion in the West, the management of the western division should remain separate from the management of the eastern lines of the company. After considerable deliberation by the Board of Directors, it was decided to divide the management of the road into two divisions, each headed by a general manager. The dividing line between them was to be the Missouri River. The manager of the lines west of the river was to be titled "General Manager of Lines West," the other would be known as "General Manager of Lines East."¹⁷

For operating purposes, "Lines West" was immediately divided into four divisions. The first of these consisted of the lines from Omaha and Plattsmouth to Kearney and from Crete to Beatrice—237 miles. The second was known as the Nebraska Division and consisted of the lines from Nebraska City to Central City and from Nemaha to Nebraska City—178 miles. The third was the Atchison and Nebraska Division, consisting of 221 miles. The fourth was the Republican Valley Division, from Hastings to Indianola and from Red Cloud to the Big Blue River—256 miles.¹⁸ All trains were to be dispatched from Lincoln. The Burlington shops remained at Plattsmouth.¹⁹

On March 23, 1879, just after his promotion to the position to General Superintendent, Holdrege wrote to his wife, enclosing the following clipping which gives a clear insight into the character of the man at this time.

¹⁴ Omaha *Republican*, January 2, 1880.

¹⁵ B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1880.

¹⁶ Holdrege, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1881.

¹⁸ Omaha *Herald*, April 10, 1880.

¹⁹ B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1881.

With Mr. Touzalin as General Manager and Mr. Holdrege as Superintendent of the B. & M., a strong team will pull at the interests of that part of our Nebraska system of railroads, which is doing so much in the rebuilding of our state. Mr. Holdrege enjoys a wide personal popularity and is reported to be among the best of railway managers.²⁰

"Please," he wrote her, "do not think me vain in enclosing this clipping. You must not divulge this to your father or anyone else. It is bad enough to send such an item to you personally."

In 1880 George and Frances Holdrege's first child, a son, was born. It was a great loss to them when the baby died a few months later. In 1882, their second child, Mary, was born, to be followed by Susan, in 1884, and Leeta, in 1887.²¹

The one activity outside of their home to which the Holdreges were greatly devoted, was hunting. Both were excellent marksmen.²² Every summer Mrs. Holdrege went on a two month's camping trip with friends to Wyoming, but Holdrege was seldom able to join her. Only once did he raise any protests against her hunting activities. In 1885 he wrote, "I do not know if the Indians there are dangerous or not, but I hope that in the future you will not journey so far from Fort Laramie without a military escort."²³

By 1880, the management of the company had settled down to what one executive called, "our family," the "family" consisting of those officials who had started out with the road in the early Seventies and had gradually been promoted to positions of greater authority as operations became more complex.²⁴ In a letter to his wife, Holdrege explained, "I am afraid that our personal life henceforth will have to coincide with the demands placed upon me by the company."²⁵ The intimates of the Holdrege family thus became increasingly those of other executives of the road—C. E. Perkins, A. E. Touzalin, T. J. Potter, T. E. Calvert,

²⁰ Holdrege Mss.

²¹ Holyoke interview.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Holdrege to Mrs. Holdrege, July 18, 1885.

²⁴ Interview with G. H. Loomis, June, 1941.

²⁵ Holdrege to Mrs. Holdrege, August 9, 1883.

P. S. Eustis, J. R. Lowell, J. W. Deweese, T. M. Marquett and C. H. Morrill.

All of these men had risen from the ranks to positions of authority. In the Seventies, Perkins had been a vice-president living in Burlington. In the Eighties he had become head of the company. Touzalin had started out as assistant land commissioner in 1870, but, during the decade, had risen to land commissioner, general manager, and, finally, first vice-president of the company. Potter had started as a member of the line crew, then, through various promotions in the East, had finally become general manager. Calvert had been just one of several apprentices to Doane in 1870, but by the end of the period was chief engineer of Lines West. Marquett had begun as the original attorney for the company, but by 1880, being well advanced in years, had turned over most of the Burlington business to J. W. Deweese, who became its official legal representative. Eustis had risen from the position of clerk in the passenger department to that of general passenger agent, and Lowell, who had been Touzalin's assistant for a number of years, was, in 1880, the general freight agent. These were the men who formed the inner circle of B. & M. management and who were to guide its destinies for the next ten years.²⁶

On December 24, 1882, a few months after his successful supervision of the building of the Denver extension, Holdrege received the following letter from Potter: "I hand you herewith three letters with enclosures addressed by the president to yourself, Mr. Calvert and Mr. Campbell. Will you please forward those to the other two? To the expressions of approval contained in the resolutions of the Board, and here in the president's letter, and to the practical evidence of the Christmas present which is enclosed, I wish to add my own personal and official commendation. The extension to Denver will always remain a monument to those who had it immediately in charge."²⁷

Two months later Holdrege received the promotion

²⁶ Loomis interview.

²⁷ Holdrege Mss.

which established him as the actual leader of "Lines West." In February, 1883, Touzalin contracted pneumonia. Although he recovered, he never regained the strength to resume his duties with the company. This man, whom Perkins had favored as his eventual successor, was forced to retire for reasons of health. A few months later, he died.²⁸

Touzalin's retirement created a problem in Burlington headquarters as to his successor. Temporarily, Potter was raised to the dual position of vice-president and general manager, with offices in Chicago. To fill Potter's vacancy in Omaha, the post of assistant general manager was created for Holdrege. To replace Holdrege as general superintendent, the Board chose Calvert, who still retained his title of chief engineer.²⁹

After Touzalin's death, these appointments remained permanent. No official rearrangement of titles was made however, for two years, when, at a meeting of the Board, Potter was named vice-president, Holdrege became general manager of Lines West and Calvert became chief engineer of the whole system. In commenting upon the Board's action, the *Omaha Bee* said:

The promotion of Mr. Holdrege, to the position of General Manager of the B. & M. in Nebraska, west of the Missouri River, is a deserved recognition of his ability as a practical railroad man. The B & M, which he has virtually managed for several years, is one of the most important railway systems of the west, and its efficiency is largely due to the supervision of Mr. Holdrege.³⁰

The *Chicago Tribune*, the same day, commented:

The appointments do not signify any radical change in the management of the Burlington. Vice-president Potter simply relinquishes the title of General Manager and Holdrege simply assumes the title which he has actually carried for three years. The action does give both men more freedom in handling their affairs.³¹

Among the problems confronting Holdrege as general

²⁸ Holdrege, *op. cit.*

²⁹ *Omaha Bee*, July 7, 1883.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, April 10, 1885.

³¹ *Chicago Tribune*, April 10, 1885.

manager were the political forces in Nebraska who desired to curb railroad rate charges, and the competition with the Union Pacific over further expansion in the northwest section of the state. While protecting himself from the attacks of the first by organizing a powerful and efficient political force of his own, Holdrege was able to devote his main efforts to expanding.³²

In 1883, Holdrege wrote Perkins, "We can shorten our Denver line by 28 miles if we build a line from Kenesaw through Kearney and Phelps counties, to make a connection with the Republican Valley line at Oxford (a new town eight miles east of Arapahoe)." Perkins asked if the country wasn't very poor in that region. "We have built through a lot worse," Holdrege assured him. "Do we need it?" Perkins inquired. "We do," replied Holdrege, "for aside from shortening the line to Denver, the proposed line would straighten out the road bed and it would be through a region where we would not have to worry about floods wiping out the track." "Then go ahead and build it," Perkins replied, and work was begun on the Kenesaw cut-off at once.³³

On November 15, the *Omaha Bee* recorded the progress of this line:

Nearly every day Nebraska opens up a new railroad. The most recent internal improvement of this kind is the completion of the B & M branch from Kenesaw to Minden (one of the two important towns through which this line is to pass). It is finished and the first train passed over yesterday. It was a mixed train and went from Hastings to Minden, and return, each way. The stations on the line are Hastings, Juniata, Kenesaw, Hartwell [sic] and Minden. Hartwell is a new town. The line is known as the B & M cutoff. Work is pushing ahead from Minden toward the Republican Valley.

West of Minden, in the sparsely settled region of Phelps County, Burlington officials planned a town which would serve as a division headquarters for a proposed line paralleling the Republican Valley line. As a tribute to the man who had planned and built the cut-off, the new town was named Holdrege.³⁴

³² Loomis interview.

³³ Holdrege Mss.

³⁴ Interview with W. W. Turner, Secretary of Lincoln Land Co., February 10, 1941.

As the railroad situation stood at the end of 1883, the B. & M. found itself with complete coverage in the South Platte region of Nebraska with a network of rails extending from east to west through the southern tier of counties and proposed branches in the tier north of them which, when completed, would form another route through the state.³⁵ If the company were to undertake any further expansion, it would have to be in the country lying north of the Platte River which the Union Pacific regarded as its private domain. Fearful lest they might be caught off-guard as they had been in 1882 when the B. & M. suddenly decided to build on to Denver, the officers of the Union Pacific prepared to take steps to forestall any extensions that the B. & M. might be planning. Some of these steps did not escape the notice of the press, and the *Omaha Bee* pointed out:

The railroad campaign in Nebraska has already opened. Surveying parties are abroad in the land. The Union Pacific Company is determined to cover the central tier of counties with two extensive branches—The Omaha, Niobrara and Black Hills and the Grand Island and St. Paul Branch. The former will be pushed directly northwest from Albion, through Cedar Valley, with the Black Hills as the objective point. The latter will run nearly parallel with the main line through the Middle Loup Valley with the evident intention of heading off the B & M, and prevent that company from getting a foothold in the north. The vigilant manager of the latter is not likely to be checkmated or driven from the field by a display of superior force.³⁶

Holdrege's plans remained indefinite after the completion of the Kenesaw cut-off. This was because Perkins and the other directors were more interested in determining the ultimate terminus of their road than in building branch lines in Nebraska. Their chief concern was whether Denver would remain the westernmost point.³⁷ Their deliberations created a great flurry of excitement in the press. One writer speculated:

It is reported that the Burlington road has leased, or is about to lease, the Denver and Rio Grande Road. If this proves to be a fact it will be a serious blow to Gould who has

³⁵ B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1883.

³⁶ *Omaha Bee*, September 6, 1884.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, September 20, 1884.

been making strenuous efforts for some time past to deprive the Burlington and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe roads of direct outlets to the Pacific Coast. This virtual consolidation of the Burlington, the Atchison and the Denver and Rio Grande roads would form a combination that would control all of the Rocky Mountain business.³⁸

The *Chicago Tribune* speculated:

It would not be at all surprising if, after all, the C. B. & Q. and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe were to consolidate, as both roads are owned by about the same people. By this means the companies, so powerful as to throw Jay Gould's combination into the shade, would not only be able to control about all of the Rocky Mountain business, but they would have a better and more direct line to the Pacific than any of Gould's lines.³⁹

The temptation was great to build on to the Pacific coast. For three years after the completion of the Denver line, allowances were made in the Burlington budget for surveying parties to find a route through Utah. In every instance the verdict was the same: it could be done but the cost would be almost prohibitive.⁴⁰ By the summer of 1884 the lure of the coastal connection became overwhelming. It was at this precise moment that Perkins and Holdrege conceived the idea of establishing a connection with the Pacific Northwest instead of with California.⁴¹ This proposal had several advantages. For one, the engineering difficulties were not so great. For another, it would necessitate the building of a line into the northwestern region of Nebraska and thus open up a region heretofore lacking rail connections with the east or west.

Offsetting these advantages were the handicaps of crossing the Platte River and heading into Union Pacific territory. The old feud with that road would be reopened, and every advantage would lie with the Union Pacific whose main line already touched the southern end of this region, making the matter of supply a simple one.⁴²

Once the decision to go ahead had been reached it was

³⁸ *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), May 9, 1883.

³⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, May 19, 1883.

⁴⁰ Turner interview.

⁴¹ B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1883, 1884.

⁴² J. R. Hickox, *Memorandum of Holdrege's Life* (1938).

essential to maintain the utmost secrecy. Not even the engineers leading the survey parties in the field were told of the final terminus of the line.⁴³

The problem of establishing a satisfactory base of operations also had to be met. Central City was too far north and east. Grand Island would have been ideal, but the B. & M. had no connections to it.⁴⁴ Eventually it was decided that an extension would be made from Aurora to Grand Island on the old Nebraska Railway line, but that no hint of the main purpose of the extension should creep out.⁴⁵ To minimize the importance of the project, it was decided that the B. & M. should carry on further construction in the South Platte territory at the same time. This included a route running from Odell, Nebraska, south into Kansas.⁴⁶

On February 6, 1884, a contract was let for the extension to Grand Island, causing one editor to comment: "The B & M does business sudden and solid."⁴⁷ Another said: "The B. & M. are destined to cut the Union Pacific at every important turn in the state."⁴⁸

Burlington locating parties immediately took to the field. These scouting parties were far in advance of the construction crews and planned the route that a new road would follow. A contemporary account gives a vivid description of planning the route for the Grand Island extension:

The personnel of a railroad locating party consists of a chief of the party, transitman, head chainman, back flagman, stake marker, stake driver, levelman, rodman, topographer, and his assistant, draftsman, cook, two line teamsters and a supply teamster. When there is much timber to cut, more or less axmen can be employed to advantage and in rough country, inaccessible for wagons, a pack train is essential, consisting of three packers and about twenty pack animals, governed according to nature of the work involved. Where the meat diet depends on game, a hunter had best be employed. We must add a dog also, for a camp without one was, to us, the same as a home without children.

⁴³ B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1883, 1884.

⁴⁴ Hickox, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Loomis interview.

⁴⁶ Hickox, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ *Chicago Tribune*, February 8, 1884.

⁴⁸ *Nebraska State Journal*, February 10, 1884.

Our first work was to locate a line from Aurora to Grand Island. Our living in camp was not a hardship even in winter. The tents were of heavy canvas covered by a fly used as an awning in summer. The tents were well staked to the ground and a ditch made around the sides and end to drain water away. Earth was heaped around the base of the tents to keep out wind and a small sheet iron stove gave all the warmth and hot water desired. A board divided the space inside so that half of it was used for sleeping quarters. On the frozen ground we piled in a foot or more of straw covering it with a wagon sheet upon which our blankets were placed.

It was arranged that each of the boys would take his turn of the week, making a fire in the stove fifteen minutes before rising time, so that the tent would be warm and the water hot for the rest of us. Good wood and kindling was acquired the evening before.⁴⁹

By May 1, 1884, the B. & M. had completed its extension to Grand Island and Holdrege had ten surveying parties in the field north and west of that city.⁵⁰ He started work immediately on yards in Grand Island to be capable of holding all the supplies which construction of the new line would demand.⁵¹ Further south, near the town of Holdrege, he had three more locating parties in the field, for he had been authorized to build an extension due west from that point. Three more surveying groups were operating south of the Republican Valley, in Kansas, laying out a route to Colorado Springs in the event that the directors might yet decide on a southern coastal route.⁵²

Holdrege called upon Edward Gillette, renowned western railroad surveyor, to lay out his northern line and asked that he complete his work in one trip so that no more parties would have to be sent out later. Gillette did not finish his job until July, 1885.⁵³ By that time, however, he had marked the route as far as the South Dakota line. Gillette later recorded some of his adventures on this project:

In January of 1885 we started the line from Broken Bow to the northwest. The weather was extremely cold and blizzards were frequent. Corn was ten cents per bushel and by far the cheapest fuel. The weather was not allowed to interfere with our work and we were on the line every day.

⁴⁹ Edward Gillette, *Trail of the Iron Horse* (Boston, 1910), p. 48.

⁵⁰ B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1884.

⁵¹ Loomis interview.

⁵² General Manager's Report to Perkins, 1884 (Holdrege Mss.).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1885.

In order to obtain the best line the country afforded with reasonable work, much surveying was necessary, and frequently, after the line was supposed to be the best, and the final location made, it was discovered that important changes could be made and the line had to be relocated.

On following up the Middle Fork of the Loup we came to Stem's Ranch. The cowboys were amazed to see a railroad party in that country and could not believe that a railroad would penetrate that wild region. We received valuable information from these cowboys about the country to the West.

Two members of our party disappeared around Dock Lake near Whitman.—we inaugurated a search for them— three days later one of the hunting party found Jack in some rushes in a demented condition, still holding on to his rifle. He was too far gone to give an account of his wanderings, but in a few days explained how he became lost. The next spring the bones of the horses of the other man were discovered. Wolves, of which there were many, had consumed their remains.

As Spring advanced the mosquitoes and horse flies were so bad that all the game left the country. Our horses suffered terribly. I was riding a white horse which at times almost looked black. On clapping my hand to his nose, fourteen horse flies were killed. We had been all winter and a good part of the spring getting through the sandhills and we had met no one outside of our party except Indians. Water was scarce and deep wells were required in many places. We generally paid something for water, especially for the horses.⁵⁴

By the end of the summer of 1885, Holdrege was well on his way toward having all three parallel lines running through the South Platte territory from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains. In the south he had completed the line from Republican City, Nebraska, to Oberlin, Kansas, a distance of seventy-eight miles.⁵⁶ From Holdrege he had built to Elwood, opening up a new county west of Phelps.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, he was transporting huge quantities of material to Grand Island. By October 1, he was prepared to begin an invasion of Union Pacific territory.⁵⁷

On October 17, late in the afternoon, he sent an agent of the B. & M. to file articles of incorporation for two new lines in Nebraska. The first line he called the Omaha and North Platte Railroad, and, according to the articles, it was to commence at Omaha and run in a southwesterly direction through Douglas, Sarpy, and Saunders counties to Ashland.

⁵⁴ Gillette, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁵⁶ *Nebraska State Journal*, September 9, 1885.

⁵⁷ Hickox, *op. cit.*

This was the long dreamed of Ashland cut-off which finally had been made possible by the laying of tracks to the Omaha stockyards the previous year. From Ashland, however, the road was scheduled to turn northwest and run through part of Saunders, Dodge, Butler, and Colfax counties, paralleling the Union Pacific. Thence the road was to run westward through the central tier of counties already served by the Union Pacific, to a point in Custer County, connecting there with the other new road, to be called the Grand Island and Wyoming Central. This other line was to be a continuation of the North Platte line. Nominally the road would begin at Grand Island and run through parts of Hall, Buffalo, Sherman, Custer, Blaine, and Logan counties, thence northwest to the Wyoming and Nebraska line. Branches were to be built from this line.⁵⁸

News of this incorporation hit like a bombshell on the state. One editor declared: "From conversations with gentlemen who seem to know, the new incorporations seem to be an inception to invade all territory heretofore exclusively controlled by the Union Pacific and its branches."⁵⁹

The day after these articles were filed a reporter called upon Holdrege to discuss the effect of the Burlington proposal.

"Is the northern line an assured fact?" Holdrege was asked.

"The matter stands precisely in this way," he replied, "We have secured our articles of incorporation, and we propose to submit the scheme to the Board of Directors in Boston, who have not yet approved it. If we get their consent, the road will certainly be an assured fact."

"What will be the route of the new road?"

"Surveying has already commenced in Colfax County north of the Platte, and we shall commence work on other parts of the line as soon as possible. The survey will in all probability be completed so that the active work of construction can start next spring, providing the directors decide to build the road. No, sir, we propose to build the road inde-

⁵⁸ *Nebraska State Journal*, October 18, 1885.

⁵⁹ *Omaha Bee*, October 18, 1885.

pendent of any local aid. It will be constructed with our own money."⁶⁰

Holdrege's announcement, as he had hoped, caught the Union Pacific completely unprepared. What he publicly proposed was not only to invade northwestern Nebraska but to run a line along the North Platte River directly paralleling the Union Pacific. The wording of the articles of incorporation stated that this road would extend through exactly the same towns that the Union Pacific did. Thus, there would be two roads, running side by side, not farther than two miles apart, across the whole state of Nebraska.

Holdrege's announcement came just two weeks before the annual meeting of the Burlington directors in Chicago. They enthusiastically endorsed his plans, and work proceeded through the winter in preparation for the big drive in the following spring.⁶¹ In January, one observer from Grand Island pointed out:

The picket men for the several railroads pushing into the northwestern country are skirmishing at a lively rate already, and there is every evidence that the battlefield will be contested with a full force of recruits as soon as spring fairly opens. A little act transpired the other night which will give our readers an idea of the eagerness with which the Union Pacific and the B. & M. are preparing for the fray, and the watchfulness with which they contemplate the other's movements. It seems that the Union Pacific had their grade established and stakes set west of Howard City where the B. & M. was to cross their extension. Saturday the resident engineer [of the Burlington] quietly engaged all the available men and teams and during the night effected a crossing over the Union Pacific grade, laid 400 feet of iron ties, the distance required by law, and now holds sway. Thus gaining possession, they require the Union Pacific folks to establish a new grade, at least one foot lower than the present one, and inconvenience that company in more ways than one. The ties and heavy iron were hauled a distance of 25 to 30 miles by team, as the B. & M. have no road yet laid west of here, and over the success of their midnight labors, the engineers are accordingly feeling good.⁶²

On February 3, 1886, further progress was reported on the northwest extension:

Dirt has begun to fly on the extension of the Union Pacific

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, October 19, 1885.

⁶¹ B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1885.

⁶² *Omaha Bee*, January 19, 1886.

west from Howard City, the line crossing the B. & M. nine miles west of Howard City and continuing from there straight west up the south Loup to the mouth of Elk Creek where the survey is being run northwest in the direction of Broken Bow. In order to retard the progress of the Union Pacific as much as possible the B. & M. have put down a mile of track directly across the Union Pacific survey.⁶³

A week later the same correspondent recorded:

A train consisting of 34 carloads of rails and ties arrived from the east yesterday over the B. & M., to be used in the construction of the Grand Island and Wyoming Central. Teams were upon the ground immediately to convey the same northwestward about 35 miles where the several gangs are at work. The company already has built considerable additional side track for the accommodation of the necessary material upon its arrival and things begin to look lively in that part of the city.⁶⁴

With the coming of spring in 1886, work continued at a faster pace on the B. & M. extension. During the legislative session of the preceding winter, Holdrege had maneuvered through the legislature a bill providing that if 400 feet of track were laid anywhere, it could not be torn up but must be recognized as a part of the company's extension. By this device he was able to annoy the Union Pacific, and consequently delay them for some time.

The two roads used different tactics in trying to out-build one another in this region. The Union Pacific would grade its line for many miles in advance of its track-laying crews. Hence, it might have a hundred miles graded and only twenty of track laid. The Burlington would let these graders go unmolested for many miles, then suddenly, under cover of night, lay four hundred feet of track across the Union Pacific grade at several strategic places, thus destroying all that the graders had accomplished. In discouragement the Union Pacific graders would have to begin again at the place where the track layers were then located. Consequently, their progress was slow.

Holdrege, on the other hand, used all of his force for grading a few miles, following this by using it as a track laying unit. This also was very slow, but it caused less

⁶³ *Ibid.*, February 3, 1886.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, February 10, 1886.

interruption from the opposing forces than did the Union Pacific's method.⁶⁵

By the end of the year, the B. & M. had laid 100 miles of track on its new extension. One of the members of the Burlington line crews recounts:

It seemed that towns sprang up as fast as they were laid out just ahead of the track laying crews. Some went up, it seemed, overnight. Of course, they were mostly wooden shacks. One Saturday night in Whitman a stag party was pulled off in a saloon. The saloons were the first to shack up, it seemed, in a new town, a sort of necessity for the class of help used at that time. The cowboys were in on this party as well. There being no women, the men who were to be women at this party had on straw hats and linen dusters procured from a sort of general store run by the Wheelander brothers. I don't believe that at this time this particular outfit had 25 dollars for the government license to sell liquor, so when a stranger was caught peeping through the window he was promptly hauled in and when he would not say what he was there for the boys shot holes in the floor to make him dance and then made him spend his money treating the crowd. After that was done they baptized him with beer down his neck and rode him out of town. Doc Middleton, the bartender at that party, was later one of the Jesse James gang.⁶⁶

The year of 1886 was the one of greatest construction that Holdrege had yet undertaken. Three hundred seventy miles of rails were laid. In addition to the hundred miles on the Grand Island extension he had supervised the construction of 250 additional miles. On the line from Holdrege west, he had advanced as far as Curtis. Actually, his lines that year were built on nine different fronts, so that he was engaging nine different crews at one time.⁶⁷

Still he pushed on northward and westward. By the end of 1886, a western reporter announced:

General Manager Holdrege has shown his usual sagacity in tapping this region and in running his line through to the coal fields of Wyoming. With the present rate of extension, the enterprising B & M will soon bring the vast coal fields of the Fillerman region to the very door of B & M settlers.⁶⁸

A hundred miles had been built in 1886. A hundred

⁶⁵ Loomis interview.

⁶⁶ Dietrich to T. E. Calvert, October 9, 1910.

⁶⁷ B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1886.

⁶⁸ *Nebraska State Journal*, September 6, 1886.

more miles were built in 1887, taking this road to the new town of Hyannis. Hyannis had been named by T. E. Calvert. He wrote to a friend:

When I was a small boy, our family used to spend the summer on the Cape at Hyannis. There was never a hotter place than that. One day I heard my father say that Hell was never any hotter than Hyannis. From that time on, there had always remained with me an identity between these two places. While working on the grade around the new townsite in the sand hills, I heard one of the men say, that it was the hottest that he had ever been and that Hell couldn't be any hotter. Immediately the idea occurred to me, Why not call this new town Hyannis, which was, you see, synonymous with Hell.⁶⁹

On the line covering the central tier of counties in the South Platte region Holdrege drove his crews to complete the construction to the Colorado state line, a distance of eighty-nine miles. In the same year he finished his line from Omaha to Schuyler in the east, giving him another outlet on the Union Pacific. To connect with his Holdrege extension, which now reached into Colorado, he constructed a line from its previous terminus to the Wyoming state line, a distance of 144 miles. At the same time he built an extension north from Central City to Burwell, a distance of fifty-four miles, and started another line from Republican City to Oberlin.⁷⁰

In the single year of 1887, Holdrege personally supervised the construction of 700 miles of railroad, making Lines West the largest in mileage of any railroad in the state of Nebraska. Just as he was planning to continue at this rapid pace throughout the following year, an event occurred which caused him to temporarily cancel all plans for further construction—the great Burlington strike of 1888.⁷¹

[To be concluded.]

⁶⁹ Calvert to Manderson, 1898.

⁷⁰ B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1886.

⁷¹ B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1887.