



## The Plattsmouth Letters of Cyrus Woodman, 1869-1870

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: Woodman was an Easterner with an excellent reputation as a businessman. In 1869 he agreed to move to Plattsmouth to work for one year for the Burlington and Missouri Railroad in Nebraska. Unfamiliar with railroad building, he struggled with the problems he encountered there.

See also a later article about the construction of the Burlington and Missouri Railroad, ["A Railroad Man's View of Early Nebraska."](#)

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# THE PLATTSMOUTH LETTERS OF CYRUS WOODMAN, 1869-1870

Edited By C. L. MARQUETTE

In 1869, when the financial backers of the Burlington and Missouri River Rail Road Company, an Iowa corporation chartered in 1852 to construct and operate a line across that state (hereafter referred to as BMI), accepted the responsibility of extending their railway into Nebraska, they agreed upon two major propositions. One called for the formation of a new company; and promptly a Nebraska corporation, with the long title of the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company in Nebraska (BMN), was founded. It received all the rights and privileges, including the federal land grant of the Iowa company in Nebraska, and on July 4 broke ground at Plattsmouth for a rail line to stretch from that city to Lincoln and thence ultimately to connect with the Union Pacific at Fort Kearny, a distance of 172 miles. The second concerned the appointment of a resident manager to look after the business affairs of the company in that area. The implementation of this proposition was given to J. W. Brooks, president of the BMI since July, 1868 and one of its chief promoters—similar positions he subsequently held with the BMN. Forthwith, Brooks selected Cyrus Woodman, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, who, at a meeting of the board of directors of the BMN, was elected vice-president and to the board.

An eastern man with a good education and a wide variety of business experiences in Wisconsin, Illinois, and

Minnesota, Cyrus Woodman had earned the reputation among Boston men of being a sound and reliable business man with excellent judgment and a keen mind. He was born on June 2, 1814 in Buxton, Maine, where his father farmed and practiced law. In 1836, after graduating from Bowdoin College, he went to Boston and first entered the law office of Samuel Hubbard and later that of William J. Hubbard and Francis O. Watts. In October, 1838, he matriculated at Harvard Law School; and in the following July was admitted to the bar in Boston. Then, in December, as assistant agent for the Boston and Western Land Company, Woodman accompanied the agent, William S. Russell, of Plymouth, to northwestern Illinois where the company had large holdings near Winslow, in Stephenson County. During the summer of 1840, after a long and debilitating illness, Russell resigned his post, and the stockholders selected Woodman to act in his stead. Woodman held the position until 1843 when the company was dissolved. At that time, he purchased the Winslow properties.

Although Woodman held the Winslow properties until 1855, he ended his residence there in the summer of 1844 when he moved to Mineral Point, Wisconsin Territory, then the fastest growing settlement in the Lead District. Here he entered into a profitable partnership with Cadwallader Colden Washburn, formerly of Livermore, Maine, who later founded a set of flour mills at Minneapolis which today bear his name, and who served in Congress, the Union Army, and as governor of Wisconsin. The two men engaged in many enterprises: pettifogging, banking, mining, shot-manufacturing; but their greatest undertaking was that of land agents for men in the East and of land and timber speculation in their own right. When the partnership was dissolved by mutual consent after eleven happy and prosperous years, Woodman, now forty-one years of age, retired with a sizeable fortune to tend to the education of his children. In the fall of 1863, after spending some time abroad, he moved to Cambridge where he purchased a house on Kirkland Place.



Except for the time he would spend in the care of his investments, which were mostly in western pinelands, Woodman had hoped to live leisurely, enjoying the many books in his library, renewing personal contacts with old friends, one no less a person than Governor John A. Andrew, and making new ones. But that desire was not then realized. As a successful speculator and land agent, whose firm had enjoyed a wide and excellent reputation among the capitalists of the Boston area, Woodman's opinions on western business and political matters were much sought after and eventually brought him into close association with men interested in western railroads. Shortly, he was chosen by John W. Brooks, John M. Forbes, and Robert S. Watson to manage the final disposal of pinelands owned by the Michigan Pine Land Association of which the three men acted as trustees. These pinelands, which lay principally in lower Michigan, had come to the Association from the St. Mary's Falls Ship Canal Company which had constructed a canal along the St. Mary's River in the years from 1853 to 1855.

After five years of careful and profitable management, Woodman had substantially sold the acreage and in February, 1869 turned in his final report. In a letter to Brooks in which the final report was included, he announced that he was now ready to undertake work in another field. He had in mind the complete charge of the land department of the Union Pacific Railroad, and even asked Brooks to suggest his name as a suitable person for the position if the occasion arose. Apparently Brooks never did; but within ninety days he conferred with Woodman on the proposition of managing the construction and operation of the BMN which was still in the planning stage. In June, after a trip to the Plattsmouth area, Woodman accepted, agreeing to stay a year with the company. There remained only the formal election by the Board of Directors of the BMN and this was accomplished in November, 1869.

Meantime, Woodman had opened a company office at Plattsmouth and settled to a year of management, a year which proved a most unpleasant one. New at the game of



PLATTSMOUTH, 1872



railroad building, the knotty problems surrounding the construction of the line bothered him. He deplored the absence of good subordinates and even threatened to resign if the Boston capitalists behind the project failed to furnish him with competent help. He was irritated by the slowness with which the contractors acted, and wrote hard letters about the inadequacy of the town, of its lack of culture and of its roughness to his friends. He believed the town was poorly chosen as the eastern terminus of the road. The year couldn't move fast enough for him. He longed for his quiet study and friends in Boston and Cambridge.

These letters are valuable for that portion of the story which relates to the early construction of the BMN in Platts-mouth and adjacent area as well as a picture of the town in 1869-70. That Woodman was prejudiced is obvious. Had he pioneered in Nebraska at an earlier age—at the age when he went into the Lead District of Wisconsin—his picture of Platts-mouth may have been different. But in 1869, he was fifty-five and “on the downhill of life,” and the frontier held no attraction for him. He remained with the company at Platts-mouth out of a sense of duty and for selfish reasons. After his year, he retired to Cambridge where he died in 1889. He lies buried at Buxton, Maine.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The biographical facts for this short sketch of Woodman's life have been taken from Richard C. Overton, *Burlington West, A Colonization History of the Burlington Railroad* (Cambridge, 1941), *passim*; Cyrus Woodman, *The Woodmans of Buxton, Maine* (Boston, 1874), 64-65; George F. Emery, “Cyrus Woodman,” *Collections and Proceedings of the Maine Historical Society* (Portland, 1890), 2nd Series, I, 113-124; C. L. Marquette, ed., “Letters of a Yankee Sugar Planter,” *The Journal of Southern History*, VI (November, 1940), 521-546; Ellis E. Usher, “Cyrus Woodman: A Character Sketch,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, II (June, 1919), 393-412; S. M. Watson, “Cyrus Woodman,” *The Maine Historical and Genealogical Recorder* (Portland, 1889), VI, 317-332; Thomas M. Davis, “Building the Burlington Through Nebraska—A Summary View,” *Nebraska History*, XXX (December, 1949), 317-347.

Sunday, July 18, 1869<sup>2</sup>

Dear Charley<sup>3</sup>. . . . Left the R. R. at Pacific City six miles from here on the opposite side of the river and came from thence by stage through the Missouri river bottom. Plattsmouth has about 1200 inhabitants, situated in a narrow valley with bluffs on each side. We have had heavy rains and we travel around with our pantaloons rolled up or tucked inside of our boots. It is better than Mineral Point was when I first went there, for here we have sidewalks on the main street. It seems like old times. One Richard Vivian, a Cornishman recently from Portage City and formerly from Sparta,<sup>4</sup> keeps a tavern here. The table is fair, but my bed room is about 7 x 9. I hope to find more comfortable quarters soon.

Our head engineer got here about a week before me. We have hired office rooms over a whiskey shop, which will do for the present. The contract for grading the work for sixty miles was let before we got here and the contractors are vigorously at work. We hope to be running over the road within a year from this time. I shall be busy in getting ties, rails, locomotives, right of way and a thousand other things. Being a green hand, it will be up hill work for me.

As Land Commissioner, our Boston folks have engaged a man who is now the Land Commissioner on the Hannibal & St. Joe road,<sup>5</sup> and as secretary they have engaged a man

<sup>2</sup>This collection of letters is from the Letter-Press Books of Cyrus Woodman in possession of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and is used with the permission of the Society. To reduce them to a length suitable for publication without further deleting them, a few editorial liberties have been taken. Since all of the letters originated in Plattsmouth and all but one were sent by Woodman to Charles L. Stephenson, Galena, Illinois, to his brother, George Woodman, New York City, and to his wife, Charlotte Woodman, those parts of the heading, salutation and complimentary close containing such facts have been omitted. The salutation has been indented and placed on the beginning line of the printed portion of each letter. Eight periods across the page have been used to indicate the deletion of a paragraph or more, except at the beginning and end of the letters where four periods have been made to serve that purpose, here again to save space.

<sup>3</sup>Charles L. Stephenson was appointed steamboat inspector for the upper Missouri and Mississippi rivers by Lincoln in 1863 and held that position until his death. Stephenson was a Maine man and had migrated to Wisconsin in early territorial days, but he spent most of his life in Galena. He was a brother-in-law of the seven Washburn brothers.

<sup>4</sup>Both towns are in Wisconsin.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Doane. See Overton, *Burlington West*, p. 229.

<sup>6</sup>George S. Harris. *Ibid.*, p. 290.



now in the Burlington office. Mr. Thomas Doane, the engineer, is a pleasant man and I think we shall get along well together. We think we have good contractors for the grading. I am fearing more trouble about getting ties than anything else. Have sent a man to explore the country down river and engage all the ties he can. Timber is very scarce here & we expect to be obliged to bring most of our ties up river on steamboats.

This is rather a poor site for the terminus of the railroad. We have to bring the track down two miles under the bluff where there is but a narrow space between the river and the bluff and where we must go to a heavy expense to save ourselves from being washed into the river, and to make additional room. I am rather disgusted with the site, especially as there is in all respects an admirable site ten miles up the river<sup>7</sup>. . . . The poetry of settling up a new country has all gone, and I could only be contented to stay here by constant employment. I shall be in Nebraska most of the time for a year. . . .

July 25, 1869

Dear Wife<sup>8</sup>. . . . This little town of 1200 inhabitants is not particularly interesting to me. I do not feel now as I did when I first went into the West, now nearly thirty years since. Then I was young; now I am on the down hill of life and do not look at things any longer with the rejoicing eyes of youth.

I am not ambitious of either fame or riches and do not feel any spur to induce me to work hard for either. My position here brings me into connexion with some of the ablest business men of Boston, whom it is pleasant and advantageous to know. Besides, it gives me something to do, and enables me by my daily labors to support my family and perhaps to be of some service to the country. It also gives

<sup>7</sup> In two letters to John W. Brooks, President of the BMN, one on May 26, 1869, after he had made an exploratory trip to Plattsmouth, Lincoln and Bellevue, and the other July 2, 1869, just before he left Cambridge for Plattsmouth to take his position as managing director, Woodman expressed the belief that Bellevue would make the best terminus for the road. The directors of the BMI at one time had in mind a project to bring their road down to the river opposite Bellevue. *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>8</sup> Cyrus Woodman married Charlotte Flint, daughter of Ephraim Flint, of Baldwin, Maine, at Winslow, Illinois, January 5, 1842. The Woodmans had six children, two of whom died in infancy.



me a position which may enable me to be of service to Frank,<sup>9</sup> if he should become a civil engineer.

I thought it best, on the whole, to accept the position, though I cannot say that I have much heart for it.

For offices, the Railroad Company has temporary rooms with a groggery underneath

Sunday, Aug 1, 1869

Dear Charley. I have recd your letter of the 26th inst. It is too hot to say much. I will only say that you do not want to come here at present, if you know when you are well off. There is but one tavern here worth running, and there you will find no comfort. I am boarding there, but pray for deliverance. I have not yet been able to find better quarters. It is kept by Frank Vivian, a Cornishman, who formerly kept a tavern at Sparta. He and Messmore married sisters.

We have not comfortable office quarters yet, but hope to get them soon. This is a little one horse town where no white man should come for pleasure. There is a beautiful prairie country for 100 miles west from here and it will be soon all settled up for that distance. The crop is large & fine and a good many settlers are coming in. When the weather is cooler I will try to get a pass for you, if you should still want to come. You can come by rail through Dubuque directly to Omaha by the Northwestern. Perhaps you can get a pass on that route.<sup>10</sup> The depot is at Council Bluffs, where you would find B. F. Thomas<sup>11</sup> selling groceries "wholesale & retail." From there you can run down some 15 miles to "Pacific City" where a stage leaves for this place twice a day. This staging is hard in muddy time. There is also a stage every other morning from Omaha to this place 20 miles.

<sup>9</sup> Frank Woodman, the second of the Woodman children, was born in Mineral Point, September 26, 1846. His early education was obtained abroad and in the preparatory schools of the East. He studied engineering at Harvard, and spent his vacations on the railroad in Nebraska, investigating timber plots for his father, and in travel. He never went into railroading, but became mechanical engineer at and subsequently owner of a knitting mill in Charleston, West Virginia. He died in 1918.

<sup>10</sup> The BMI was not opened for through business between Chicago and East Plattsmouth (on the east bank of the Missouri River opposite Plattsmouth) until January 1, 1870. (Overton, *Burlington West*, p. 231.) The Northwestern and Rock Island roads were ready in 1869.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas had been a private banker at Mineral Point.

If I were not very busy, I should be very homesick. I should be glad to see you here if you could be comfortable, but you could not be either night or day at present.

I find a very clever man here, John D. Simpson,<sup>12</sup> brother of Matt Simpson. He is respected here. He lived at Galena for a time, about 1840 to 1843 & has been at Mineral Point. His face looks very familiar. I think he must resemble Matt, though I forget how Matt looks. Matt has a Gov't Office in Indiana.

I expect to start for St. Jo tomorrow and go to Lexington to see if I can get ties. We are getting some ties from 600 miles down river.

Sunday, Augt 22, 1869

Dear Charley . . . . In about three months the cars will get through from Burlington to the opposite side of the river from this place. I shall then feel not so far out of the world as I do now. The distance to Burlington is to be about 290 miles, I think, and as I shall have the run of that road I shall not feel penned in here, as I now do.

I have changed our office since I wrote you, & the change is for the better, though nothing to brag of. We still have a saloon underneath. I am at the same miserable tavern, though trying to get into better quarters. Would take a house and hire a cook if I could find the right man, but the right man for any place is hard to find.<sup>13</sup>

My greatest want now is a man of brains, [Ms illegible] and honesty to see to everything relating to transportation

<sup>12</sup>Simpson was born in Huntington, Pennsylvania, September 12, 1826. At the age of fifteen he went to Galena where he clerked in a store for three years. From Galena he went to Delphi, Indiana; but the year 1850 found him employed in Mineral Point, Wisconsin as a bookkeeper, a position he held only a year when he again returned to Indiana. He went to Plattsmouth in 1856 where he held various municipal and county offices. In 1863 he left the state for Denver, Colorado and resided there about four years. When he returned to Plattsmouth he engaged in business, served as agent for the American Express and the BMN at various times. (A. T. Andreas, *History of Nebraska* [Chicago, 1882], p. 504.) On April 26, 1870 Woodman wrote his sister that he was boarding at the Simpson home. The family consisted of Simpson, his wife, and a daughter about 14 years old. (Woodman to Susannah L. Usher.)

<sup>13</sup>In a letter to J. N. Denison, Boston, treasurer of the Company, Woodman wrote that he and Doane were unable "to find a decent boarding house. If we could get a housekeeper who would give us well cooked food, I should buy a house which had been condemned, but which the citizens here have not paid for as they agreed to. . . . It is a little mean town and always will be." (Woodman to Denison, August 21, 1869.)



of materials and getting them across the river and who knows also about equipping and running a railroad. We have bought the steam ferry boat "President" and she is coming round here from Burlington, and have bought a barge upon which we hope to transport loaded cars across the river. The boat cannot reach the eastern shore on account of low water. We shall have to lay track half or three quarters of a mile on a *sahbar* [sic] to get to deep water and then land at a poor place under the bluff on this side, where we shall have to unload everything if we do not succeed in getting loaded cars across the river, which is greatly to be desired. We have contracted for 10,000 tons of iron and 60 to 80,000 ties, all of which, with a great deal more stuff is to be got over this miserable river.

Do you happen to know an Asst Supt on a Railroad or any other man who is familiar with Railroad business that is all right & whom I can get? If so see if he will come at once and at what price and advise me without delay. I am on the lookout everywhere for such a man, and shall engage the first one I can get that will be likely to fill the place.

As you imagine I am pretty well disgusted with this place. I do not feel like sacrificing all the comforts of life for a much longer period. The prospect of pecuniary advantage in the future is not a sufficient inducement. With my economical habits I do not feel the want of money badly enough to make me willing to stay here much longer, unless I can have at least one man who has had railroad experience and knows what is wanted here and how to do it. I want no more to do with such matters than I have with the Chief Engineer's department, and that is to decide upon the general course and give general directions. The difficulty is to find the right men who are not engaged.

I have given our Boston men to understand that I must have men here competent to manage all such matters of detail—intimating that I shall quit, if I do not soon get them. I have asked them to send such a man if they can find him.

Our Land Commissioner, as I have written you, is engaged. I see no suitable place here for you. I wish there was. There are places for young men at from 60 to 200 dollars a month in the engineers department and next year we shall want a freight agent and other men that will command \$2000 a year, but I see nothing that will pay you to remove to this place. . . .

[P. S.] You ought to be here to see the characters there are. I have not a high opinion of the crowd. There are doctors here with canes that look as wise as owls!

Augt 22, 1869

Dear Brother<sup>14</sup>. . . I am here, alone as it were, with much to perplex & annoy me, and shall leave to retire if I can, though I could do well pecuniarily by staying. I get a salary of \$5000. and contingent advantages which may be worth considerable in the course of time.<sup>15</sup> But money may be bought at too dear a rate, especially when one, like myself, with economical habits, has enough to last him through the little time at longest that he may remain in this world. If I were twenty years younger and could have my present position, I should consider it a very fine one. As it is, I am ready to leave it as soon as I honorably can.

There are no head men here yet except the Chief Engineer and myself. We have yet no Secretary & Treas. nor man to look after the transportation of rails, ties, etc. & the transfer of them across the river. We have not yet got along far enough to bring any materials across the river, but we shall have a steam ferry boat here in ten days and I shall need somebody badly to look after these matters of detail, in regard to which I have no experience. I have been trying to get two or three men here of the right kind, but have not succeeded as yet. I must have somebody soon, or I shall desert the ship. I have not been able to get a decent boarding place and have been half sick in consequence. . . .

Octr 17, 1869

Dear Charley. Here I am again. Have been here nearly a week. I feel pretty well. The weather is cool and I do not apprehend any further trouble this year in regard to my health. I am in hopes to get home at Christmas to remain a couple of months before coming out here again. I am still boarding at the miserable "Platte Valley House," but have a prospect of getting into a private family in the course of a week or two. We are getting ready to transfer loaded cars across the Missouri river, but we encounter obstacles of

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<sup>14</sup> George Woodman, born December 17, 1818, was a lawyer, banker and broker at 30 Pine Street, New York City. After leaving Wisconsin, Cyrus Woodman became a silent partner in the firm of C. & G. Woodman.

<sup>15</sup> Numbered among the contingent advantages were the privileges of the purchase of stock and bonds. Woodman subscribed for \$150,000 in stock (J. N. Denison, September 29, 1869) and \$50,000 in bonds (J. N. Denison, January 27, 1870). On November 26, 1870, he wrote Lee Higginson & Company, Boston, and told them he wanted to reduce his stock to 1,000 shares "which I hope to keep until it shall be worth par."



various kinds, the worst of which now is that the Burlington road has not yet got its track to the river opposite here, where our ferry would be two miles. Now we are ferrying fifteen miles to a switch that we have put in to the Council Bluffs & St. Jo R. R. where it runs near to the river. We are not yet in order to transfer loaded cars, but hope to be so this week. We are now obliged to unload the cars. We have just received a locomotive on the other side of the river and are looking for another daily, and hope to get one on this side of the river this week so that we can begin to lay track and receive loaded cars on this side.<sup>16</sup> This is new business to me. I have two men hired to see to getting materials here and to getting it across the river, paying each at the rate of \$4000. per annum. They must take all the details off my shoulders. I put the responsibility of all these matters on them so far as I can. The general responsibility rests on me but not all matters of detail. We shall lay all the track possible this fall, before the ground freezes up, but whether it will be ten miles or sixty remains to be seen. Next May I hope that we shall begin to sell lands. In the meantime the lands must be examined, and a great deal of clerical work done to get ready for selling.

I expect to stick by until the Land Department is in good running order. I shall then hope to quit Nebraska, to return only occasionally. I do not care, if I can help it, after next year to do any business for other people. I want to be free to come and go when and where I please. My private business will give me as much as I shall want. . . .

November 18, 1869

Dear Charles. This is Thanksgiving Day! It would be pleasant to be at home rather than in this "land of d--d realities." The day is not much observed here. It is a New England Institution and does not seem exactly at home any where else. This week I went to board in a private family from New England, where we have good food and a clean

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<sup>16</sup> In a short letter to his son, Frank, October 24, 1869, Woodman wrote that "we got our first Locomotive safely landed on this side of the river last night." Andreas simply mentions the time as September, 1869. (Andreas, *History of Nebraska*, p. 489.) The engine was apparently called "the American Eagle."

table cloth and some homelike comforts.<sup>17</sup> When I get my room furnished and my stove going I shall be pretty well fixed for a new country—though I cannot say that I desire to stay here another minute, and am hoping that I may be able to get home to Christmas though something may turn up to prevent a consummation devoutly wished. I find that I am getting too old to be wandering about in this way. To-day it has rained and the mud reminds me of old times in Mineral Point where we walked about with trousers rolled up or inside our boots. Part of the day the sun shone out pleasantly, but now—at sunset—the clouds look dismal, and makes one homesick to look at the sky above and the mud beneath. I often think of the days gone by and of the many friends who have gone to that bourne from which no traveler returns. Viewing it in that light, the “mining country” looks desolate to me. I should almost feel like a stranger in a strange land in travelling over it again. “Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity.”<sup>18</sup> The world is not so attractive to me as it used to be, and the remainder of life looks so short that I want to spend the rest of it peacefully if I can and not in the whirl of railroad excitement, where everything is done in a hurry.

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<sup>17</sup> This was the home of F. W. D. Holbrook, assistant engineer of the road. Holbrook received his education in the Boston common schools and at the English High School on Bedford Street. He never attended college, “but I have studied alone and comprehended the greater part of the courses of our Scientific Schools, have seen graduates from each, gauged myself with them, and know that they are hurried through their course without that comprehension of what they are studying which they would derive with more time and thought.” (Holbrook to Cyrus Woodman, March 24, 1871.)

After Woodman's departure from Plattsmouth, Holbrook wrote three articles for the *Chicago Railroad Gazette* in which the officials of the road found some objectionable phrases that allegedly delayed land sales. In an article entitled “Track-Laying in Nebraska” in the issue of September 23, 1871, page 285, designed to describe to eastern engineers the obstacles encountered in western railroad construction, Holbrook described the territory west of Lincoln as “unsettled and destitute. . . of both wood and water.” Further he mentioned that wells had “to be sunk from 100-110 feet to obtain water even for drinking purposes. . . .” Moreover, Holbrook was accused of starting malicious rumors against Charles E. Perkins, Superintendent of the Iowa road. Holbrook wrote Woodman to intercede on his behalf with the Boston owners, acknowledging his indiscretion on the first count, but stoutly maintaining that he had never given any public utterance to any rumors about Perkins. (J. W. Brooks to Woodman, October 7, 1871; Holbrook to Woodman, November 1, 10, and 14, 1871.)

<sup>18</sup> See Chapter 1, Verse 2, Book of Ecclesiastes or the Preacher.



We have an engine here and a little track laid about our depot grounds. We want to lay ten miles of track as soon as possible and must lay it before the 15th of February, if we would secure 50,000 acres from the state. We have everything about ready for the first ten miles except our ties, which our tie contractors have failed to supply in full for lack of transportation. If we had the ties here we would complete our ten miles in three weeks. The ties are coming along slowly and we shall lay our ten miles if we have to bring the ties across the river on ice on a handsled. We hope that our ferry boat will run from two to four weeks. . . .

November 28, 1869

My dear brother. I enclose herewith a letter to C & G W. We are getting along as well as can be expected with our railroad, considering that the Missouri river is between us and our material. It is a great impediment. The weather at present is mild for the season and we are able to cross loaded cars on a barge towed by our steamboat. Last week it looked very much as though the river was about to close, as the weather was cold and ice running freely. We are just fairly beginning to lay track, and are in hopes to get ten miles done by the first of January. Whether we shall continue to lay track all winter is doubtful. Our road will all be graded to Lincoln by the 1st of January, and the sooner we get our track down the sooner we shall get our lands, which we are anxious to get and sell. We have perhaps two miles of track and side track laid in and near town. This week I hope we shall get the track two or three miles out of town if the weather is at all favorable.

The road from Burlington, Iowa to the opposite side of the river was completed last Friday and the first train came through on that day.<sup>19</sup> It will be a month yet before the road will be in proper condition to admit the running of regular passenger trains. I have hoped to get home by Christmas, but I now think I shall not go home until some time in January. After getting one's foot into an enterprise like this it is difficult to get it out at will.

The cool weather agrees with me and I now feel very well. I begin to feel however that I am too old to stay out here long to help settle up this new country. I have helped settle up one new country in the West and that is enough . . . . It is not improbable that I shall be connected with this road for years, but I hope after the 1st of July next that I

<sup>19</sup>November 26. See Overton, *Burlington West*, p. 231.

will not be obliged to spend more than six or eight weeks in a year here. I am one of the Directors, and at present Managing Director, under the general direction of the President.

I am now boarding in the family of Mr. Holbrook, the assistant Engineer and am much more pleasantly situated than I was before going there. Mr. Doane, our head Engineer, and a few others board there. We get along comfortably now. How it will be in very cold weather is uncertain. Fuel is scarce & high. Wood land west of the Missouri is scarce. Our westward bound freight will consist largely of coal and pine lumber. I think the road from here to Lincoln will do a moderate paying business from the 1st of September next, if not before. . . .

December 15, 1869

Dear brother. . . . I think with you that the market will be glutted with R. R. bonds. There seems to be a fever for railroad building in this part of the world. A road of 140 miles will give us 1,200,000 acres of fine farming prairie lands. These lands, we hope may pay or nearly pay the cost of the road, and that the road itself will do a good business when the country becomes better settled.

We still hope to get 10 miles of track laid by the first of January. If we get it laid by Feb. 15 it will secure us 50,000 acres of land from the state.

Our bonds are not in market and I know not whether any can be bought. When I get home I can find out. They will be held at from 85 to 90. They bear 8% interest, secured by mortgage on the road and on two thirds of the lands.

I was at Lincoln a few days since—a prairie town of about 1200 inhabitants. The residents are looking forward to a great future but are doomed to disappointment. They are holding & selling lots for a great deal more than they are worth. . . .

Sunday, December 26, 1869

Dear Sir [George F. Emery]<sup>20</sup> . . . . I have at times felt very lonesome and homesick in this "land of d-d realities." . . . and wish that I had never agreed to come here for a year as I did. But I was flattered, foolishly perhaps, by the offer that was made to me by some of the best and ablest railroad men of N. England to come out here and take the general

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<sup>20</sup> Emery was a lawyer in Maine. He and Woodman attended Bowdoin College at the same time.



oversight of the building of a railroad. A moderate salary was some object, a pecuniary interest in the road which seems to promise well, was another object; the advantage that it might ultimately perhaps be to my oldest son who is intending to become a civil engineer was still another object, but the pleasure and advantage direct & indirect which I thought I might perhaps find by being brought into direct business relations with some of the most prominent men in Boston was perhaps the leading object that I thought might be attained by coming out here. Since being here, however, I have often felt that I would sacrifice all these advantages if I could be but placed quietly at home again. . . .

January 1, 1870

My dear Charles. . . . The prospect now is that in the course of a week or ten days I shall leave this "land of d--d realities" and go home for a few weeks. Our great point has been to get ten miles of road done before 15th of February, as this will secure us a grant of 50,000 acres of land from the state. I hope that we shall have the ten miles done in a week from today.

We have sixty miles of iron bought and paid for, and twenty six of it on this side of the river. We have everything bought or contracted for except ties. We want 100,000 of them more than we have yet engaged. I hope we shall soon have them under contract. They cost us one dollar apiece here. The cost of building & maintaining railroads on this side of the Missouri is enormous.

We transfer loaded cars on a barge by the aid of the Steam Ferry boat, "President", Captain Butt, whom you know. We got started late in transforming [sic], but the weather has been very favorable. The floating ice stopped us for a few days and low water for a few days. The River is closed above and below us, but here it is open, and I think now the chance is about even that it will remain open as long as it has. The river is gorged above and below and the weather is not very cold. We have now hardly any floating ice. One or two cold mornings sets it running and a week of right cold weather would close the river.

Next season, if you are down the river as far as Burlington, I can get you a pass over the Railroad to this place. I sit writing to you in a house on the bluff. I can see the river below me; then a sand bar extending  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile to the Eastern shore; then the Missouri bottom skirted with timber; then bottom lands extending some four miles to the

Iowa Bluffs. I can, as I sit, look up the river bluff a dozen miles and down the river a mile or more.

I wish I had a place here for you. The best place for you would have been that of Land Commissioner, but there was no chance there, as there was thought to be no man equal to Mr Harris, the Land Comr on the Hannibal—St. Jo Road for that place, and I had nothing to say in the selection. To our local treasurer<sup>21</sup> we pay \$2000 & I thought it no object for you to come here at that price. The only other place worth mentioning is that of Superintendent, in which office a good deal of experience is desirable [sic] . . .

Sunday March 20, 1870

My dear Charles. . . . We had a furious blow here for 48 hours or more beginning Monday morning & ending Wednesday forenoon, accompanied by zero weather and some snow. The river has shrunk to a few hundred feet in width. It closed over last Wednesday morning, but is open again now. Our ferry boat was able to do nothing for a week, owing to the ice, low water and wind. We are now under way again, and hope to give our track layers materials as fast as they will want it.

You charge me with being an old man that cannot stand much and that owing to my feeble old age I ought to get out of this country as soon as possible! Now I am not so d--d old as you may think. It will be 44 years from the 2d day of June next before I reach the age of 100 years. I expect to continue until that time! After that, I will admit that I am old and on the down-hill side of life. At present, I am young and frisky [sic]. I am afraid, however, that I shall get less frisky [sic] as warm weather comes on.

My labors here will cease sometime between this & the first day of July, and then I shall have free course "to run and be glorified."

It was 30 years last month since I found you at Capt. Moore's log cabin. Think of the changes in the mines within that time! . . .

May 10, 1870

Dear Charles . . . . There will be a sale of lands and lots at Lincoln on the 6th of June. There will probably be a small crowd there to attend the sales. If you would like to see the crowd, you will want to leave Burlington as early as the

<sup>21</sup> William C. Brown.



night of the 4th of June. The sleeping car and dinning [sic] car train leaves Chicago at 10:45 A.M. and Burlington about 9 hours later, I suppose. This train leaves Burlington every evening except Sunday, and will bring you to Pacific Junction 5 miles from here. There you will get out (about 8 or 9 O'clock A. M.) and take a car to East Plattsmouth, where you will take a ferry boat to this place. At the Junction, ask the operator to telegraph me that you are coming. An omnibus will take you from the cars at East Plattsmouth to the Brooks House on this side. I am in a private family and there is no chance for you there, for which I am sorry. The Brooks House is just opened and you will be able to survive there for a day.

You must decide for yourself whether you will join the land sale crowd or come a little later when it will be more quiet & when hotel accommodations will probably be better. The sale of lands in June is by the State and for cash. The chance to make is to buy for cash and sell on long credit, if there is any chance to make at all. I see no other chance of speculation here, and I shall take no hand in this, probably. Still, there may be a chance to make a good turn. You had better get Corwith or Felt<sup>22</sup> to come with you. You will not want to stay here long. I am sorry that I cannot offer you greater attractions. . . .

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<sup>22</sup> The Corwiths were engaged in banking and land speculation in the Lead District. They and Washburn and Woodman joined in many speculative ventures together. The Corwiths were well acquainted with Elihu B. Washburne, Congressman from that district of Illinois. Felt was also a private banker in Galena.