



A Railroad Man's View of Early Nebraska

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Full Citation: Larry Gara, "A Railroad Man's View of Early Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 35 (1954): 137-146

Article Summary: Thomas E Calvert had been an engineer on the Burlington and Missouri Railroad. In this 1898 letter he describes the history of the railroad and its influence on the early history of the state.

See also the earlier Burlington and Missouri River Railroad article, ["The Plattsmouth Letters of Cyrus Woodman, 1869-1870."](#)

Cataloging Information:

Names: Cyrus Woodman, Thomas E Doane, Thomas E Calvert

Nebraska Place Names: Plattsmouth

Keywords: Burlington and Missouri Railroad

A RAILROAD MAN'S VIEW OF EARLY NEBRASKA

EDITED BY LARRY GARA

CYRUS Woodman had already spent nearly thirty years in the West when he journeyed from his Cambridge, Massachusetts home to superintend the building of the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad line which was to run from Plattsmouth to Lincoln, Nebraska. It was the summer of 1869, and the blistering heat made the unoccupied prairie land almost unbearable for Woodman, who was then fifty-five years old. His experience in the West had begun in December of 1839 when he left a newly-founded Boston law partnership to take a position as an agent in charge of Illinois, Wisconsin, and Missouri lands owned by the Boston and Western Land Company, a firm engaged in land speculation. For three years he labored as the western agent for the Boston company, and while he took care of his employers' lands he also learned a great deal about western land values, business methods, and social customs. After the company stockholders divided their lands and dissolved the company, Woodman, in 1844, joined Cadwallader C. Washburn as a law partner in Mineral Point, Wisconsin. The Washburn and Woodman firm operated in the entire Wisconsin-Illinois lead region. Besides practicing law, the partners bought and sold land and soldier's land warrants, extended credit to settlers wishing to enter government land, and took charge of lands owned by absentee owners. They gradually withdrew from law practice entirely and

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spent all of their time and energy in various land ventures, mining, the manufacture of high grade lead shot at their Helena shot tower, and the management of the Wisconsin Bank which they founded in 1853. When Washburn was elected to Congress in 1854 the partnership broke up, and Woodman, after a brief period in Europe and some independent business ventures, became the land agent for the St. Mary's Falls Ship Canal Company. Two years with the company taught him much about another western state, Michigan. In 1864 he left Michigan and completed his canal company work from a Boston office. It was his desire to retire to study and write history, but in 1869 he decided to accept an offer to become vice-president and supervisor in charge of building the Nebraska railroad.¹

Woodman entered upon his duties with little enthusiasm. He had previously lived in two frontier areas and was "too old to be attracted by the novelty of it." He arrived in Plattsmouth in July of 1869 and took an immediate dislike to the town. "Here I am," he commented, "in a little dirty one horse town, on the right bank of the Missouri engaged in building a Railroad westerly to a junction with the Union Pacific....There is no pleasure in being here and whether there will be any profit remains to be seen." He found Nebraska "a new country and a rough place." His boarding place was dirty and noisy. Furthermore he believed Plattsmouth a bad place for starting a railroad, since materials had to be transported by steamboat on the river from miles away. The combination of personal dissatisfaction, high temperatures, and bad food at the boarding house made him ill. "I have had considerable experience in Western life for almost thirty years," he reported, "and I call this a hard place for a stranger at least." Continued spells of nausea and dizziness afflicted Woodman until he returned to Cambridge for a month to regain his health.²

¹For a fuller account of Woodman's career, see Larry Gara, "Cyrus Woodman: A Biography," Ms. (Dissertation; University of Wisconsin, 1953).

²Cyrus Woodman to Miss Alfreda Andrew, July 3, 1869; Woodman to Peleg W. Chandler, August 1, 1869; Woodman to John N. Denison, August 12, 1869. Cyrus Woodman Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

By October of 1869 Woodman was back on the job. Crewmen had made good progress on the road during his absence. Woodman had agreed to stay in Nebraska for one year, and when the time expired he again journeyed to Massachusetts. He arrived there in June, 1870, and a month and a half later he learned that the crews had completed the road to Lincoln. He was especially pleased when the railroad's president, John W. Brooks, told him he was gratified to hear that they "had the best new road in the west." Woodman had insisted on using the best available materials and taking the time necessary to construct a safe and long-lived railroad. His chief engineer, Thomas Doane, backed him in the policy, and the road they constructed was made to stand up under the strains of western travel for years to come.³

Twenty-eight years after Woodman left his job on the Nebraska road Thomas E. Calvert, who had been an engineer at the time the road was built but was then general superintendent for the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company in Nebraska, described in detail the building of the road and its later influence on the state. Although written for promotional purposes, Calvert's narrative contains a wealth of material on the history of the railroad and the early history of the state:⁴

Lincoln, 5-22-1898

Dear Mr. Manderson:⁵

I have your letter of the 9th in regard to the building of the lines west of the Mo. River. While I am quite familiar with this subject there is some doubt in my mind as to what you would want, and give what I think may be of interest.

³Woodman to Thomas Doane, July 8, 1870. Woodman Papers.

⁴Copy of a letter from Thomas E. Calvert to Charles F. Manderson, May 22, 1898, in the Burlington Archives, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois. Permission to publish this letter has kindly been granted by the Newberry Library and the Burlington Railroad.

⁵Charles Frederick Manderson (1837-1911) moved to Omaha after the Civil War. He participated in the Nebraska constitutional conventions of 1871 and 1875 and was elected to the United States Senate in 1883. After two terms in the Senate he retired from politics and became general solicitor for the Burlington Railroad west of the Missouri River. (John D. Hicks, "Charles Frederick Manderson," *Dictionary of American Biography*, XII, 231.)

If any other facts are wanted I can probably get them for you.

The land grant which induced our people to build the B. & M. in Iowa and the extension of that grant to the 100th meridian which started the building of the B. & M. in Nebraska you know more about than I do.⁶ It is probably not generally known by the people of our state that at the time of the construction of the Road, those immediately in charge, Mr. Cyrus Woodman, V. P. and Managing Director and Mr. Thos. Doane, Chief Engineer, looked upon the venture with considerable doubt, and at various points during the progress of the work considered quite seriously the stopping of the work and the forfeiting of the land grant. As late as the beginning of the year 1870 Mr. Woodman in a letter giving his views expressed himself as doubtful if it would pay to extend the Road beyond a point where Hastings now is. Fort Kearney was finally selected as the point near which a junction should be made with the Union Pacific. The fact that it was the only point west of the Big Blue River having a name and being shown on the maps in that vicinity, had probably much to do with its selection. The land grant conditions required that a junction be made with the Union Pacific at some point east of the 100th meridian, it having been made at Kearney nearly 50 miles east of the 100th meridian, that much less line than originally contemplated at time grant was obtained was built, and the corresponding land grant forfeited, it being decided at that time by those in charge that the land and business in sight would not warrant the expenditure necessary to build a R. R. beyond Kearney.

It should be remembered that while the Burlington extension in the trans-Missouri country was after the completion of some of the Pacific Roads. The latter were built for through business and obtained their revenues from that source for many years making no effort at first to develop local business; while the Burlington Lines were built with

⁶July 3, 1864 Congress amended the Pacific Railroad Act of 1862 to provide a land grant for an extension of the Iowa Burlington through Nebraska so as to connect with the Union Pacific. The Burlington's directors differed over the wisdom of accepting the grant and undertaking the construction of the Nebraska road. Eventually the Nebraska Burlington obtained fifty thousand acres of land from the state in addition to the 2,500,000 acres which they obtained from the Federal Government. (Thomas M. Davis, "Building the Burlington Through Nebraska—A Summary View," *Nebraska History*, XXX [September, 1949], 318-320; Richard C. Overton, *Burlington West: A Colonization History of the Burlington Railroad* [Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1941], pp. 292, 313).

the hope of building up and deriving its revenue from local business entirely.

The Burlington Lines east of the Mo. River were completed through to Pacific City—near present Pacific Junction—November 27th, 1869, and although it was shown by examination to those locally in charge west of the Mo. River lines that Bellevue was from an engineering and a commercial standpoint the best point from which to start a line west and they evidently had hopes up to the early summer of 1869 that possibly they might persuade the Union Pacific to join them in building a bridge at that point,⁷ they abandoned the idea of starting from Bellevue in the early part of July 1869 for on the fourth day of that month ground was broken and work begun at Plattsmouth for the extension west from that point. The line was opened to Lincoln July 20th, 1870, and completed to Kearney in September 1872. The line Crete to Beatrice was completed in the summer of 1872 after which no more lines were built until 1878.

During the years 1872 to 1874 (The Grasshopper years)⁸ the business was very discouraging especially in the new and sparsely settled country west of the Big Blue River. In 1874 we ran from Crete west, a tri-weekly mixed train going through Crete to Kearney one day and returning the next. As an indication of the business which that train did it is related that on one round trip it did not earn one cent from either freight or passenger business. Westbound it had a quantity of free freight for the grasshopper sufferers in Smith County, Kansas. Eastbound the next day it had one green hide removed from the carcass of a cow killed by the locomotive on its way west the day before and it looked for a long time as though we had indeed built too much R. R.

In 1878 things began to look more encouraging and the line Hastings to Red Cloud was built. From this time on, various branches were built from year to year. The line to Denver via Red Cloud was finished May 25th, 1882. The last extension of that line, 254 miles from west line of Red

⁷July 18, 1869 Cyrus Woodman confided to his old friend Charles L. Stephenson, "I am rather disgusted with the site, especially as there is in all respects an admirable site ten miles up the river..." (Clare L. Marquette, ed., "The Plattsmouth Letters of Cyrus Woodman, 1869-1870," *Nebraska History*, XXXII [March, 1951], 47.)

⁸The worst grasshopper attacks came in 1874. That year the Indians prepared food from a mash of grasshoppers, and numerous pioneer settlers returned to their native sections. (*Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State* [New York, 1939], pp. 59-60.)

Willow County to Denver, was built complete in 198 working days.

During the years 1883 to 1886 there was great activity in Railroad building in the country west of the Mo. River; during one of these years the Burlington Company did work on and completed some part of, nearly one thousand different miles of Railroad.

At the time the work of construction was begun at Plattsmouth, the country was fairly well settled to Lincoln, west of a line north and south thru that point there was not much of what we would today call civilization. There were a few houses where Crete now is. That there was not much to warrant the supposition that there would be a town there is shown by a letter written by Mr. Doane Sept. 6, 1870 in which he says "I have decided to change the name of Blue River City to Crete. The town on the summit is named Highland and everybody thinks it will be a better station for business than Crete." Highland was afterwards changed to Berks.

West of Crete there were a very few settlers, one between Crete and Dorchester and three or four near Friend. Otherwise the country was a blank. A few straggling herds of buffalo, some jack rabbits, coyotes, etc. There was not a blade of the fine blue joint grass that now has covered the country and furnishes the rich hay and pasture of our prairies. Nothing but the short buffalo grass which, while green for a short time in the spring, is dry and brown by mid-summer and by autumn was so dry as to break underfoot almost like glass. The difficulty in getting water on the high lands where no streams, in the early days, before we discovered the present cheap methods of sinking to the inexhaustable water bearing strata, was a very serious matter in these days. The hot autumn winds were frequent and severe then. While they come now but occasionally and it is to be hoped that with the further settlement of the country the tilling of the soil and the planting of more trees they will become less and less frequent and finally disappear entirely as has the grasshopper plague. The experience in the change of grasses seems to uphold the theory advanced by an old German Ranchman of the Frontier who says "Goes der Bufflo, Comes dis blue joint."

This change in grasses is one of the most marked changes that has come over the country. The blue joint has rapidly killed out and taken the place of the buffalo sod—one can hardly call it grass, and this has extended westward until now there is but little buffalo grass in Nebraska.

In places there has been marked changes in the character of the soil. East of Lowell where in the early 70's the

Railroad caused to be planted trees along its road to protect it from snow there was in places very sandy soil the wind and shifting sand, where the light sod was removed during planting, wore the bark off the young trees and they soon died. Now farmers are raising crops of grain successfully on this same land. Near Hastings when the trees were being planted it was noticed the soil was quite sandy, where now it is black loam with no sand apparent. The theory has been advanced that the working of the soil with its exposure to frost and moisture has disintegrated the fine soft particles of sand making them finer each year until the sandy nature has in places disappeared.

Up to 1871 buffalo were frequently seen in small herds as far east as where Fairmont is today built. On one occasion while the road was building in 1871 a settler who with his family and worldly belongings loaded in a lumber box wagon had just selected a piece of government land and was getting his effects out on the ground preparatory to starting a home, saw a few buffalo passing near his land and hurriedly kicking what remaining property he had in his wagon out on the ground started off after them leaving his family standing guard. After some hours he returned, but without any meat.

On another occasion in 1872 when the track laying force was laying track near Kenesaw a small herd passed near, when one powerful fellow in the gang threw a crow bar over his shoulder and started out to make a capture, but he returned before long without having captured anything.

In July 1870 Mr. Doane writes in a report of a trip from Fort Kearney to the Republican. "At Fort Kearney we obtained a military escort of Major Gustave Von Blucher and 5 men with 6 mule wagons. We drove S. West to Turkey Creek making a passage of 50 miles without water. We saw tens of thousands of buffalo. No Indians were in sight. Saw a few white men on the Republican who the Major said were horse thieves."

Buffalo in the territory traversed by the Burlington lines were seen as late as 1883 just west of Wray, Colorado where there was one small herd.

From 1870 to 1874 these animals were slaughtered by the thousands, apparently without any object in view except a desire to kill. In the Platte Valley just east of where the town of Lowell now stands, where the overland trail came into the valley from the south one could in the autumn of 1871 stand in any spot and count as many as one hundred carcasses just as they had fallen when shot, the robe still

on, none apparently having been touched after having been shot. This wanton destruction soon killed off what were not driven out by the incoming settlers.

In 1874 I made practically the same trip from the Platte to the Republican referred to above as having been taken in 1870 by Mr. Doane. The country was same as he found it but the Buffalo were gone. Not one to be seen in that country. It seems almost impossible that the destruction of these animals could have been so rapid.

This country referred to as the *waste*, of 24 years ago, is now that beautiful agricultural country around Holdrege, from which is shipped each year millions of bushels of surplus grain, besides large quantities of other farm produce.

When the line of road was located through to Fort Kearney in 1871 and the locations selected for side tracks at which it was hoped to build the future towns it seemed necessary that some one make a beginning and the Railroad Company arranged to have built at each point four small two-story frame houses. These buildings though quite small appeared to be immense in the mirage so frequent in those hot summer days and could be seen for many miles, there being no trees in sight anywhere or other things that raised above the surface of the plane. The stations so located were named from Crete west with names having first letter in alphabetical order.⁹ Later new points sprung up at Friend, Sutton, Saronville, Hastings, and Newark.

The building of the road presented no engineering difficulties. Those things that troubled were mostly of a financial nature. Beginning as they did construction work without tools or facilities, such as were provided later the first work was of course done at a great disadvantage. Materials seemed to be difficult to obtain on account of the limited railroad facilities leading to the timber country. The ferrying of cars and freight over the Missouri River caused considerable annoyance. The outlook for business as the road progressed was not always encouraging and the eastern treasury was drawn on more than was comfortable during construction and for a number of years after construction was completed. The company were fortunate in having so thorough and competent an engineer in charge of the early work as Mr. Doane and so far-seeing a Managing Director as Mr. Woodman. Many criticisms were made in regard to the thoroughness of the work and the what

⁹Chief engineer Thomas Doane named the towns Crete, Dorchester, Exeter, Fairmont, Grafton, Harvard, Inland, Juniata, Kene-saw and Lowell.

seemed at the time unnecessary expenditure of money on so doubtful a proposition. Mr. Woodman in defending the policy being pursued writes "I feel that there is generally more danger of building a road too poorly than too well and my council is to err if at all on what I think to be the safe side of true economy."

I have referred in the above mostly to the original land grant road for while it is but a small part of the present Burlington System west of the Missouri River it is that around which most interest centers and which gave the Burlington a foothold in the great American desert; the subsequent extensions were made after that desert had practically faded away and they were but every day events except possibly as regards their rate of construction, and the rapidity with which communities have sprung up and started off in the routine of business.

The old idea of towns springing up in a day was frequently almost realized. At Alliance, Nebraska the towns people when the town had been started less than a month attempted to organize for town government, and discovered that not a single individual had been a citizen long enough to hold office under the statutes which require a two months residence in the town, and on the fifth week they held an old settlers picnic.

When one considers the rapid extension of Railroads into the trans-Missouri country during the quarter of a century just passed, from the British possession on the north to the Gulf of Mexico on the south and the great flood of immigration that has followed and covered this vast territory and that there has been made and rounded out in that short space of time a vast empire. That while in the early days the lines of the Burlington System west of the Missouri River had little or no surplus to carry out but were taking in free, food to support temporarily the few straggling settlements that they might not turn back, and that now from a comparatively small belt of this trans-Missouri territory covered by their line the Burlington is carrying *each day* to the markets of the world of its surplus, horses, cattle, sheep, hogs, poultry and dairy products grain and feed nearly *one thousand carloads*. One must realize that a wonderful change has come over the great American desert, almost as if by magic.

I regret that I was unable to send you this sooner but we have been so busy that I found it necessary to make a Sunday job of it and I do not feel satisfied with what I have given you now. There are probably many things that

could be given that would interest magazine readers that I have not given—if anything suggests itself to you let me know. This scrawl ought to be rewritten but I haven't time.

T. E. Calvert