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Article Summary: In the mid-1920s the Burlington Railroad attempted to increase freight traffic by running "Nebraska Purebred Dairy Sires Specials," trains carrying purebred dairy cattle to be exchanged for mongrel stock. Ultimately, the Burlington hoped that dairying in the state would expand to include processing and cheesemaking plants.

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Photographs / Images: Burlington Dairy Sires Special at Bayard, Nebraska, 1924 (2 views); scrub and purebred sires contrasted at Sterling, Nebraska, 1924

PUREBRED DAIRY SIRE DEVELOPMENT IN NEBRASKA

BY C. CLYDE JONES

AFTER the sharp depression of 1920-22 had run its course, the Burlington Railroad faced the problem of reviving freight traffic in its western territory. Agricultural incomes had failed to respond strongly to the general business recovery of 1923, leaving farm groups basically discontented. The Burlington had a long history of interest in the welfare of its farm customers and it naturally exhibited concern in the early 1920's.

The problem was of particular importance to John B. Lamson, head of the Burlington's Agricultural Development Department. Lamson believed that the railroad's business depended to a great extent on favorable public relations, but he did not think that public relations propaganda could change farmer sentiment. He set forth his philosophy toward the troubled years after World War I in a speech

C. Clyde Jones, Head, Department of Business Administration at Kansas State University, will be remembered by readers of Nebraska History as the author of previous articles dealing with the agricultural development work of the Burlington Railroad.

before members of the Western Railway Executives and the American Railway Development Association in 1926.

To try to soothe the farmer's irritation by . . . public relations propaganda will not effect a cure. The cause of the irritation must be removed. This can be done by helping the farmer to diversify his production, improve the quality of his livestock and crops, reducing his overhead by producing more per acre through the adoption of better methods; assist to better prepare his crops for market, and aid him in widening the market for his products. This may not be a popular program, but it is safe and sure. The railroad can be of great assistance along this line. The agricultural departments of the railroads are doing effective public relations work, creating better feeling by improving farm conditions. This line of work, combined with good service and courteous treatment on the part of employees, will do more than anything else to improve farmer sentiment.¹

Lamson's 1926 estimate of the farm situation and the necessary remedial measures were valid for the entire 1923-1929 period. In essence, he proposed diversification of risks and reduction of farm costs. In view of the World War I expansion of wheat acreage into grazing regions, it made good sense to encourage grain farmers to devote more attention to livestock, poultry and dairying. At the same time, production costs could be lowered through better methods. The task of convincing the farmers in Burlington territory remained.

Lamson's department decided to approach the problem through the medium of an education campaign, directed fundamentally toward the "dirt farmer." The Burlington and other companies had experimented before the war with special trains to carry the message of better agriculture to the farmers. "Seed corn gospel trains" in 1904 and 1912 and "alfalfa specials" in 1904 and 1913 had demonstrated the practicality of such a device.² Accordingly, the Burlington sponsored a number of livestock, poultry and dairy

¹ Mimeographed copy of speech, dated December 3, 1926.

² A thorough discussion of these early efforts is in C. Clyde Jones, "The Agricultural Development Program of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad," (Ph.D Thesis, Northwestern University, 1954), and a shorter version may be found in the same author's "A Survey of the Agricultural Development Program of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad," *Nebraska History*, XXX (1949), 226-256.

trains in the 1920's. Of special interest to Nebraskans was the "Nebraska Purebred Dairy Sires Special" of 1924.

The 1924 campaign to improve dairying in Nebraska was a part of the general plan to encourage diversification and to reduce production costs. In the previous year, the Burlington had operated a "Purebred Sires Special" in Colorado to promote better and more economical livestock production among wheat growers. In cooperation with the Colorado College of Agriculture, the Denver Union Stock Yards and certain business interests, the railroad sent out a special train which stopped at 29 stations. More than 25,000 persons visited the train and viewed exhibits. The principal attraction was the trading of purebred bulls and boars for scrub animals at each of the stations.³ The popular reception accorded the "special" convinced the Burlington that Nebraska should have a similar tour. The Nebraska campaign differed from its Colorado counterpart in that purebred dairy cattle, instead of high grade beef cattle and swine, were exchanged for mongrel stock.

Since 1913, the Burlington had encouraged dairy development in Nebraska through exhibit cars and through the purchase and shipment of purebred dairy stock for Nebraska farmers. In 1924, the company helped establish the Nebraska Dairy Development Society. Ultimately, the Burlington and other interested parties wanted to expand dairying in the state to the point of development of processing and cheesemaking plants. The "Nebraska Purebred Dairy Sires Special" was the highlight of this long-range plan.⁴

The newly formed Nebraska Dairy Development Society, the agricultural school of the University of Nebraska, and the stock breeders of the state joined the Burlington in the 1924 campaign. The plan adopted followed for the most part the method used in the Colorado campaign: purebred

³ Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Omaha Agricultural Files, 73.1, "Colorado Purebred Sires Special." These files, now deposited with the Nebraska State Historical Society, will hereinafter be referred to as CBQ (Omaha).

⁴ CBQ (Omaha), 73.4, "Nebraska Dairy Development Society."

animals were traded for scrubs and the scrubs removed from service as sires. The Burlington hoped to show farmers the difference between high-grade stock and scrubs and to demonstrate the proper care and feeding of dairy herds.⁵

The Nebraska campaign eventually surpassed its Colorado predecessor in size if not in importance. Company officials benefited a great deal from the experience of a year earlier; but the greater success in Nebraska probably resulted from more careful planning. Two teams, each composed of one railroad agent and one college representative, made preliminary tours of proposed communities and personally investigated each farmer considered to receive a purebred animal.⁶ The agents "interviewed every party recommended and in all cases . . . examined their farms and gave strong consideration to the man. . . ." They made every effort to select men of good character and ability in order to assure the greatest possible success of the program.⁷

As an additional safeguard, the campaign officials signed a formal agreement with the proposed recipient of each sire. Under the terms of the contract, the purebred sires committee agreed to furnish one purebred bull in exchange for the farmer's scrub animal. The committee then had to ship the scrub to Omaha for sale and slaughtering. The farmer promised, for his part, to give proper care to his new bull and to use it for breeding purposes. Further, the recipient had to agree to show the purebred and his progeny to a formal inspection party in 1925 and could not dispose of the bull, except by special permission from the committee, for at least two years. If a Boys' and Girls' Dairy Calf Club existed in his community, the farmer was obliged to furnish gratuitously to the club the bull's breeding services. The committee finally entered into 31 contracts of this type.⁸

⁵ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, "Nebraska Purebred Dairy Sires Special." See undated manuscript by Val Kuska entitled "Railroad Building for the Future."

⁶ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, H. L. Ford to Val Kuska, July 28, 1924.

⁷ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, Ford to Kuska, August 18, 1924.

⁸ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, copy of contract in files.

After completing the preliminary work, Burlington officials drew up the schedule for the tour. The plans called for the train to be in Lincoln on Sunday, October 5, for public inspection; then it was to run until October 23 through 31 towns. Railroads and college officials determined where meetings should be held, giving due consideration to the needs of various communities. Several communities by-passed by the selection committee asked to be included. One such town, Milligan, succeeded in getting on the schedule after final arrangements had supposedly been made. The president of the local bank, C. Smrha, wrote a lengthy letter to Val Kuska, Burlington agent, at Omaha, requesting that the "special" be routed through Milligan because of the large farming area served by the town. He pledged the support of the local commercial club for any program planned by the Burlington. He pointed out that Milligan had never had a special train because the town was located on a branch line; the very novelty of such an event would assure success.⁹ Kuska referred the letter to J. B. Lamson and H. L. Ford, agent in charge of scheduling, recommending to Ford that the request be honored; meanwhile, he assured Smrha that all possible consideration would be shown in the case.¹⁰ Banker Smrha's efforts were not in vain, since Milligan became one of the regularly scheduled stations on the tour.¹¹

While the tour was being arranged, the Burlington and the college representatives prepared the train. The "Purebred Dairy Sires Special" consisted of twelve cars: three carried livestock; two contained dairy exhibits; one served as a demonstration car; two held feed and equipment; and one provided accommodations for personnel accompanying the train. Significant features of the program were the exchange of stock, comparison of scrubs and purebreds, demonstrations of high-grade milk cows from Nebraska College of Agriculture herds, and lectures and ex-

⁹ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, Smrha to Kuska, May 6, 1924.

¹⁰ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3 Kuska to Ford, May 10, 1924, and Kuska to Smrha, May 10, 1924.

¹¹ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, copy of schedule.

hibits to show the results obtained through better sires and proper management. A certain crowd-pleaser was a contest in guessing the number of pounds of milk produced in a year by a Holstein cow, "Miss Mystery." The winner in each community was to receive a set of milk scales—a very appropriate prize since the main purpose of the contest was to encourage the use of scales to record milk production. The entry blanks for the contest also served as registration forms for follow-up purposes. No announcement of the record or winners was made until the end of the tour.¹²

Statewide press and radio gave active assistance to the campaign. Will Maupin and H. H. Biggar, two of the leading farm writers in Nebraska, covered the entire tour as members of the official party.¹³ The radio coverage was novel. A Denver radio dealer installed sending and receiving sets aboard the train so that daily broadcasts might be made as the tour progressed. Microphones picked up actual sounds of the animals being fed and milked; station KFKX of Hastings relayed the broadcasts to other parts of the state.¹⁴ The radio programs, plus over 18,000 column-inches of news print, gave widespread publicity to the campaign.¹⁵

Local communities played a major role in the ultimate success or failure of the campaign. A number of towns gave away several purebred heifers as prizes, with Alliance businessmen giving away a total of ten cows.¹⁶ York and Hebron held mock trials at which the jury recommended scrub bulls to die,¹⁷ while an essay contest created special interest among school children in Seward. The subject was "Why there should be purebred sires on every farm." The

¹² CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, varied items; also see *Omaha Daily Journal-Stockman*, October 9, 1924.

¹³ Maupin and Biggar wrote for the *Omaha Bee* and the *Omaha Journal-Stockman* respectively.

¹⁴ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, Nebraska College of Agriculture press release 3777-W.

¹⁵ O. O. Waggener, *Western Agriculture and the Burlington* (Chicago, 1938), p. 31.

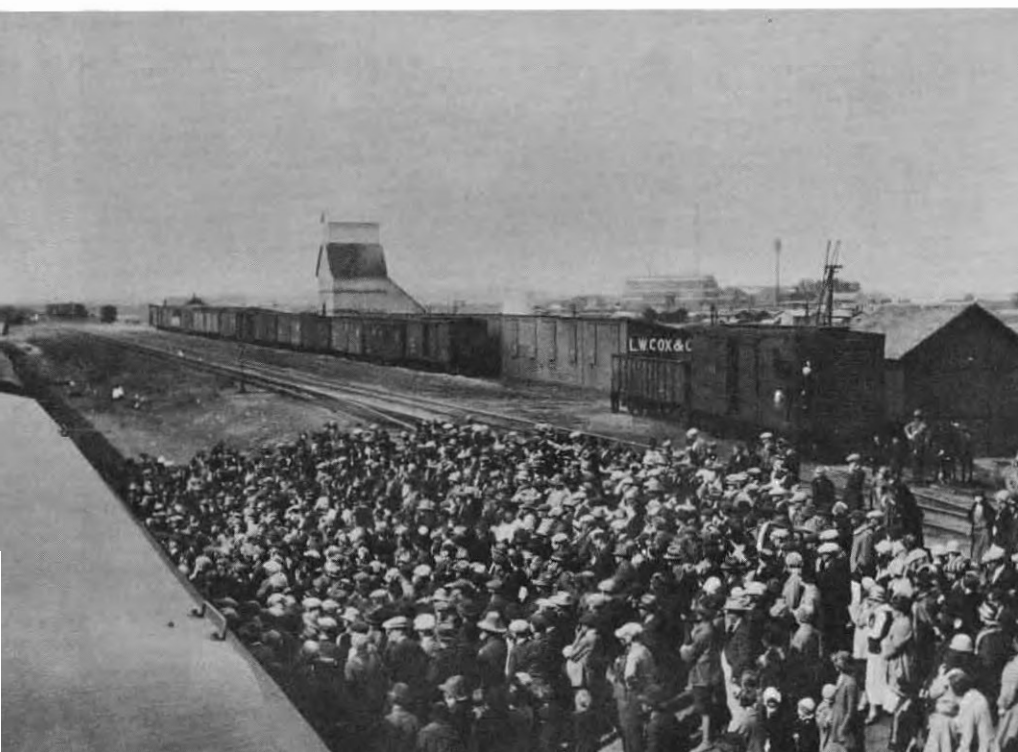
¹⁶ *Omaha Daily Journal-Stockman*, October 7, 9, 13, 1924.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, October 7, 1924; *Nebraska Farmer* (Lincoln), November 8, 1924.



Above—Burlington Dairy Sires Special at Curtis, Nebraska
1924

Below—Burlington Dairy Sires Special at Bayard, Nebraska,
1924





Scrub and Purebred Sires Contrasted

(At Sterling, Nebraska, 1924)

first prize winner received a purebred heifer.¹⁸ In addition to those special events, many communities held free picnics and barbecues, special sporting events, and sales.¹⁹

The "Nebraska Purebred Dairy Sires Special" was well attended. A total of 71,335 persons passed through the train between October 5 and October 23. The average attendance was 2,229, with a high of 4,066 at Broken Bow and a low of 734 at Greeley.²⁰ The average was over two and one-half times as great as for the Colorado tour. Val Kuska declared that conservative estimates placed the number of persons who saw or heard the demonstrations and lectures at 135,000. The figure represented approximately 10 per cent of the population of Nebraska in 1924.²¹ If sheer popularity were the gauge, the "special" was an unqualified success. Over 10,000 people entered the "Miss Mystery" guessing contest in which a Milligan farmer won the grand prize.²² Will Maupin estimated the cost of the tour at \$25,000, exclusive of the value of the livestock exchanged.²³

Subsequently, the Burlington and the University of Nebraska conducted an extensive follow-up campaign to keep the basic objectives before the public and to measure the significance of the tour. In December, the campaign committee met in Lincoln to outline a plan for immediate action. The members decided to write letters to each farmer who received a purebred animal; they planned training sessions, arranged by the college people, to teach feed and management procedures; they agreed to transmit requests and inquiries regarding purebred sires to the breeders who

¹⁸ *Omaha Daily Journal-Stockman*, October 7, 1924.

¹⁹ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, outline of program.

²⁰ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, "Exchanges and Attendance Record." The *Omaha Daily Journal-Stockman*, October 11, 1924, reported that around 8,000 persons gathered at Broken Bow to see the train but that only half were able to register.

²¹ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, "Railroad Building for the Future."

²² CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, F. L. Taylor to H. H. Biggar, November 8, 1924.

²³ *Omaha Bee*, October 23, 1924.

had furnished the stock; and they proposed trips to inspect the animals.²⁴

In the ensuing months, the campaign officials watched with interest the development of the purebred sires. The bull exchanged at Elwood had died during the early winter and had to be replaced by the Burlington in February, 1925. When Val Kuska visited the farms at Milligan and Geneva, he found a remarkable difference in the progress of the two bulls; he wrote the Milligan Chamber of Commerce to express his disappointment over the lack of care given the purebred bull left there. He urged the Milligan men to encourage the farmer to exercise better measures, and at the same time he expressed the feeling that the railroad had been partly to blame for not having kept in closer touch with the farmer.²⁵

Not all of the complaints were against the farmers. The committee received a vigorous complaint from the recipient at Grant; he wrote that his bull was small for its age and that he was greatly disappointed in the animal. "If . . . you would of give a bull instead of a calf it would of been a better advertisement for the breeder . . .," he said.²⁶ It was of considerable interest to note that eighteen months later, the Grant bull was "the pride of the community" and had developed into one of the best animals exchanged.²⁷

An unfavorable aspect of the tour came to light when F. L. Taylor, Burlington agent, reported that dairy cow "scalpers" were taking advantage of the enthusiasm created by the "special" and were "bootlegging" inferior stock into Nebraska from Texas. He claimed that two carloads of "Jersey cows" were sold at Trenton shortly after the train had been there and a car each unloaded at Benkelman

²⁴ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, minutes of campaign committee meeting, Lincoln, December 15, 1924.

²⁵ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, Kuska to Ford, January 6, 1925; Ford to Lamson, February 13, 1925; and Kuska to Milligan Chamber of Commerce, January 3, 1925.

²⁶ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, Joe Peregrine to Ford, March 7, 1925.

²⁷ *Omaha Daily Journal-Stockman*, September 29, 1926.

and McCook.²⁸ While the communities probably suffered as a result, the sales did testify to the influence of the campaign.

Apparently pleased with the results of the follow-up campaign, the committee arranged a second inspection trip for September and October, 1926 to obtain additional first-hand information on the sires and to arrange exchanges among those owners who desired another trade.²⁹ The *Omaha Daily Journal Stockman* covered the visit at each farm and carried a human interest story or a report on each bull inspected.³⁰ Afterwards, H. L. Ford wrote to the local committees which had worked with the "special" and suggested that they keep their communities informed as to the accomplishments of the sires; he hoped to encourage farmers to make more use of the purebred animals.³¹ Reports from the inspection trip showed that the bulls had gained an average of 825 pounds, had served 995 cows (99 of which were purebreds), and had sired 503 calves within two years. Over 400 of the cows bred belonged to neighbors of the recipients. Six of the bulls had won first prize in livestock shows the past two years. The 31 farmers purchased 133 cows (including 11 purebreds) after obtaining the sires, while some 1200 head of high-grade cows had been shipped into the communities. Fifty-nine additional purebred bulls had been imported since October, 1924. Ford estimated that the butterfat content in milk increased 37½ per cent in the area covered by the "special." The number of cow-testing stations increased from two to ten.³² No one could say precisely how many of the cow-testing stations were erected as a result of the "Purebred Dairy Sires Special" or exactly how much of the increased butterfat content in milk could be attributed to the Burlington cam-

²⁸ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, F. L. Taylor to campaign committee, April 11, 1925.

²⁹ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, "Outline of Follow-up Tour."

³⁰ September 25 to October 7, 1926.

³¹ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, Ford to local committees, October 12, 1926.

³² CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, H. L. Ford, "Special Report on Follow-up Tour," October 12, 1926.

paign. Furthermore, the Burlington was not solely responsible for any definite number of purebred dairy cattle being brought into Nebraska between October, 1924, and October, 1926. Of certainty, however, was the fact that many farmers owned purebred stock for the first time through the trade which they made with the "special"; the number of cows bred to purebred bulls increased appreciably in each locality; and the hundred thousand or more people who saw or heard the demonstrations and lectures better understood the virtues of purebred dairy stock. The Burlington and the University of Nebraska distributed more than a hundred thousand pieces of literature on dairying.³³ The campaign continued to receive publicity for several years.

In 1931, the Burlington obtained a final report on one of the purebred bulls exchanged in the 1924 campaign. The *Nebraska Farmer* carried a story about a Minden farmer, Owen Daily, who had received a gold medal from the Nebraska Dairymen's Association for outstanding achievements.³⁴ O. O. Waggener, Burlington agricultural development agent, upon reading the news, recalled that Daily had been appointed custodian of the Burlington Holstein bull traded to the Minden Calf Club in 1924. Waggener investigated further to see if he could trace Daily's success to the Burlington "special." Consequently, the railroad agent found that the Minden farmer had used "Pieb," as the Holstein was called, to sire the Daily dairy herd. But before any conclusive proof of the worth of his progeny had been established, "Pieb" was slaughtered because he had become unruly and a menace to the community. Later, Daily's herd of Holsteins, composed almost entirely of the Burlington bull's daughters, won the gold medal when the state cow-testing association released its records for 1930.³⁵

³³ Waggener, *Western Agriculture*, p. 31.

³⁴ *Nebraska Farmer*, January 31, 1931.

³⁵ CBQ (Omaha), 73.3, O. O. Waggener, "When Bluebloods Meet" (unpublished manuscript, 1931).