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Article Summary: Nebraska's transportation routes through the Platte Valley and along the Missouri River played a large part in the creation of Nebraska Territory. The white society of Nebraska settled along these transportation corridors and received essential supplies from the freighting companies and steamboats that used them.

*Scroll down for complete article.*

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Photographs / Images: "Building the Union Pacific Railroad in Nebraska," illustration by A.R. Waud from *Beyond the Mississippi*, 1867; steamboats at the Omaha river front; "The Stage Coach Carried No Diner" (University of California Extension Division); Union Pacific Railroad Station, Omaha, 1877

## THE INFLUENCE OF TRANSPORTATION UPON NEBRASKA TERRITORY

BY DONALD F. DANKER

TRANSPORTATION routes, methods and facilities were important factors in the beginnings of Nebraska. A major reason for the organization of the territory and the resultant replacement of the Indian society with that of the white men was that Nebraska was bisected by the Platte Valley, a natural highway to the West. Politicians and railway promoters sought to utilize that highway for a railroad route, and the Organic Act was designed in part to hasten that utilization. Another natural highway, the Missouri River, played an integral role in the establishment and development of Nebraska communities from the first settlements of the preterritorial period until statehood. The social structure of Nebraska Territory was built to a large degree along those two routes of communication; the Platte Valley and the Missouri River. Territorial Nebraskans were transportation conscious. The promoters of each embryo town professed to believe that their project was on the only logical railroad route and therefore must prosper.

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Nebraska remained the highway to the West throughout the territorial period, and its economic and social growth was conditioned by this fact. Many Nebraskans sold goods and services to the thousands of emigrants. Others utilized the trails themselves and engaged in the business of freighting, which was of considerable importance. In the last years of the territorial period, the long-awaited railroad exerted influences upon Nebraska life which were based on more tangible evidences than anticipation.

The Platte Valley route was influential in attracting the nation's attention to the Nebraska region and was an inducement to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. However, the Missouri River was territorial Nebraska's chief link with the "States." The population of Nebraska was concentrated along the river, often in villages and towns with steamboat landings. In 1855 94 percent of the population lived in the river counties, and in 1870 59 percent.<sup>1</sup>

The *Western Engineer* was the first steamboat to ascend the Missouri River as far as the Nebraska region. It reached Fort Lisa, a fur trading post several miles above the present site of Omaha, in 1819. Steamboats became an important factor in the fur trade after the voyage of the American Fur Company's *Yellowstone* in 1832. Steamers replaced the pirogues, the bateaus, the keel boats and the mackinaw boats that had been in use. An American Fur Company boat made an annual trip up the river from 1831 until 1845 and at more irregular intervals until 1862.<sup>2</sup>

River traffic increased with the opening of the area to settlers. The river provided convenient and comfortable transportation to Nebraska pioneers. Many recalled their steamboat trips as pleasant experiences. The voyage to Nebraska on a luxurious vessel was, in fact, a rather poor

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<sup>1</sup> Nebraska territorial census, 1855, Ms; United States census, 1860 and 1870.

<sup>2</sup> Phil Chappell, "History of the Missouri River," *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society*, IX (1905-1906), pp. 277-283.

preparation for the realities of the Nebraska frontier. The diary of Mollie Dorsey provides an account of a trip from St. Louis to Nebraska City in 1857 on the *Silver Heels*.<sup>3</sup> Like many other emigrants, the Dorsey family had come by railroad to St. Louis and there boarded a steamer. Mollie embarked upon the voyage, hoping to have "a jolly time." Her diary indicates that she was not disappointed.

March 30. We started from St. Louis at sunset yesterday, I believe there are 500 passengers . . . lots and 'slathers' of young men. . . . The cabin is like a parlor but the staterooms are suffocating. Could not sleep last night for fear of an accident. This is my first journey on the water and I am a little nervous. . . .

We have a motley crew, persons of every form, size and color. . . . Fussy old ladies; anxious mammas in mortal terror lest their youngsters should fall overboard; giddy young girls; frolicksome children; fascinating young gents and plenty of bachelors. . . .

The immigration to Kansas and Nebraska is immense. . . .

April 4th. We have fine music, both vocal and instrumental. There is a creole porter who plays the guitar, and when he sings I almost feel as if I were ascending so lovely does it sound. . . .

Father and Mother are enjoying themselves. . . . They are fond of singing and have met some good singers. We are almost like one family, such good cheer and good fellowship and I never had a nicer time.

April 10th. We arrived last night as sunset, two weeks from the day we started from Indianapolis. The boat was greeted by the boom of artillery. The levee was full of people mostly boys and men. . . .

We left the 'Silver Heels' with regret. Dr. Latta, Mr. Irish and all the gents came on shore to bid us good bye. . . . I never had a better time and Captain Barrows said our family made the trip more pleasant.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the happy account of the days spent on the *Silver Heels* is the letter of another girl who came to Otoe County in 1857, not in a steamboat but in a covered wagon. The Shaw family had just completed the journey

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<sup>3</sup> The *Silver Heels* was described as "a beautiful side wheel boat." Chappell, *op. cit.*, p. 310.

<sup>4</sup> Mollie, *The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories 1857-1866* (Lincoln, 1959), pp. 5-11.

from Wisconsin to Nebraska and the daughter, Hannah, wrote the following to the folks at home.

"Here we are at last (after a long and tiresome journey) living in a tent. . . . We are not going to build untill we get our planting all done. . . . Mother has grown very poor, she weighed 140 before we begun to fix to move, when we got to Iowa City 127 Ft. Desmoine 124, Neb. City 120, she could not have traveled much further. We all feel real weak."<sup>5</sup>

The steamboats were centers of attraction and interest in the Nebraska towns. The opening of the river in the spring was a major event of the year. The editor of the *Rulo Western Guide* published an article on August 13, 1858, in which he gave a summary of the first five months of navigation on the river for that year. The first boat up the river in 1858 had been the *Platte Valley*. "She was hailed like the Star of Bethlehem and received as a messenger sent from Heaven bringing glad tidings and great joy to the different points along the Missouri River that have been shut out from all the resources of trade either exporting or importing for many months."

Eight boats had arrived at Rulo in March 1858, thirty-two in April, twenty-three in May, twenty-six in June, twenty-seven in July and thirty in August. The boats would stop at Rulo on their trip upstream and again four days later on their return journey.<sup>6</sup>

Omaha was no less interested in the river traffic than was the smaller town of Rulo. The business at the Omaha water front in May 1857 was brisker than any other place in the city. The editor of the *Nebraskian* reported that five steamers currently were tied at the wharf. The *Silver Heels*, the *E. A. Ogden* and the *Emma* were discharging freight. The *Washington City* was moored just above the landing and was being used as a floating hotel, and the

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<sup>5</sup> Hannah to brother and sister, Nebraska Territory, July 11, 1857, Ms., Shaw family papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>6</sup> *Rulo Western Guide*, August 13, September 17, 1858.

*Omaha* had stopped on her way downstream, her trip to Sioux City having been completed. A baby had been born on the *Silver Heels* on the trip up and had been named for the boat.<sup>7</sup>

The steamboats added an element of color and gaiety to the society of territorial river towns as well as performing the very necessary services of carrying goods and passengers. The entry for May 2, 1857, in the diary of Erastus Beadle, a temporary resident of Omaha, illustrates the various functions fulfilled by the steamboats. Beadle wrote:

Just as we crossed on the ferry between four and five o'clock on our return from the Bluffs, the Steamer "Silver Heels" came up with colors flying and a band of music that was animating in the extreme. She gives a dance to the Omaha people this evening taking them on board and going up to Florence by moonlight there finishing the dance and returning tomorrow morning.

The Steamer "Hannidal" (sic) came up during the night and was laying at our levee this morning. She had on board 200 Danes going to join the Mormons. Her cargo was mostly lumber we can now get pine siding for \$50 per thousand planed and matched pine flooring \$65. per thousand and pine shingles for \$7.50 per thousand. This is cheaper than we ever expected to get pine lumber here. . . .<sup>8</sup>

The statement was made in 1857 that "There is not a river in the West in which a good boat is so liberally supported as in the Missouri River. . . Steamboat officers and their crews are better paid in the Missouri than any other river, the boats that run in it make more money than they could anywhere else. In fact the Missouri is the great river of the West. The people who are employed on it, live faster and better then on any other stream in the known world."<sup>9</sup> The wages of the steamboat crews varied with the size of the boat, the profits expected and other factors. Phil E. Chappell, a steamboat clerk from 1856 until 1860, recalled

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<sup>7</sup> *Omaha Nebraskian*, May 27, 1857.

<sup>8</sup> *To Nebraska in '57, A Diary of Erastus Beadle*, (New York Public Library, 1923), p. 38. Beadle soon returned to New York state and there became senior partner in the firm which published the widely read Beadle's Dime Novels.

<sup>9</sup> *Weekly Morning Bugle*, Council Bluffs, Iowa, August 19, 1857.

that captains received about \$200 per month, clerks, \$150, mates, \$125, and engineers, \$125. The highest paid and most important member of the crew was the pilot. The safety of the boat rested upon his skill and knowledge. He was in complete charge of navigation and was expected to know each snag and mud bank in the changing river. It was said that the best pilots could navigate at night by the familiar barking of the dogs of farmers who lived near the river. Because of the pilot's worth and because of the influence exerted by the "Pilots' Benevolent Association," his trade association, the Missouri River pilot commanded monthly wages as high as \$1200.<sup>10</sup>

In August 1857 the Council Bluffs *Weekly Morning Bugle* published a list of forty-eight boats which were operating on the river and stated that twelve more were being constructed. The estimated total value of the boats was \$1,269,000, with an average of \$26,957. The estimated total tonnage was 29,300 and the average individual tonnage was 623. The value of the boats ranged from \$51,000 down to \$5,000.<sup>11</sup>

The steamboat trade was one of considerable risk. The river was difficult to navigate, and the ships' boilers sometimes exploded. The number of wrecks on the Missouri is impressive.<sup>12</sup> No insurance could be obtained against explosions, and cargo and hull insurance came only at high rates.<sup>13</sup> There were many wrecks in the Nebraska area. The Nebraska City *News*, reported on April 28, 1866, that "fragments of the late steamer Gen. Grant have been floating down the river during the entire day. We noticed several tin pans and boxes passing the levee. Drift wood fishermen recovered a barrel of flour and two boxes of tobacco." Another newspaper account indicates that some steamboat owners were determined that the large insurance

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<sup>10</sup> Chappell, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-286.

<sup>11</sup> *Bugle*, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Charles P. Deatherage, *Early History of Greater Kansas City*, (Kansas City, 1927), Chap. XX.

<sup>13</sup> Chappell, *op. cit.*, p. 291 and Peterson *op. cit.*, p. 269.

premiums were not paid in vain. The report stated, "The Steamer Gus Linn, was snagged last Sunday morning, about eight or ten miles below here and sunk immediately. . . . One of the causes of the accident was a very heavy insurance on her, which has sunk many a boat before."<sup>14</sup>

The steamboat traffic was at its zenith just before the Civil War. The war, with its guerrillas and other hazards, curtailed the use of the river. However, it was a more deadly foe than river snags or guerrillas that finally drove the steamboats from the Missouri. The railroads provided competition that the boats could not meet. An old river man wrote with evident regret, "Like the cowboy and prairie schooner, the steamboat is a thing of the past. The whistle of the first locomotive, as it reverberated through the Blacksnake Hills, on the completion of the Hannibal and St. Joseph railroad to the Missouri river, at St. Joseph in 1859 sounded the death knell of steamboating on that stream. It was the beginning of the end."<sup>15</sup> Steamboating died slowly. The boats continued to serve points on the river not yet reached by the railroads for many years. When in 1873 the Northern Pacific Railroad reached Bismark, North Dakota, the day of the steamer was done.<sup>16</sup>

The river steamers had made important contributions to the beginnings and development of Nebraska Territory. They brought thousands of persons to the territory, including both the permanent settlers and the emigrants who would outfit in Nebraska for the trip to Utah or California. The boats brought goods for Nebraska's merchants and needed items to individuals and when Nebraska's farms started to produce, the steamers made the trip down the river loaded "to the guards" with corn and potatoes. Steamboats also brought to Nebraska an element of excitement, adventure, and romance, a cargo welcomed by the citizens of the river towns.

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<sup>14</sup> *Dakota City Herald*, April 21, 1860.

<sup>15</sup> Chappell, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

The Missouri River was the chief highway over which Nebraskans imported and exported goods throughout the territorial period. However, pioneer Nebraskans based their hopes for Nebraska's future on the overland trails, not the river. Railroads were regarded as the key to the rapid development and prosperity of the region, and Nebraska residents depended upon the natural travel routes to attract the railroads. They agreed with the traveler from Massachusetts, Samuel Bowles, who had written, "This valley of the Platte, through these Plains, is the natural highway across the Continent. . . a smooth hard, stage road is made by simply driving over it; a railroad awaits only sleepers and rails."<sup>18</sup>

The transcontinental railroad was delayed first by sectional rivalry and then by war. Nevertheless the Platte Valley route was important to the development of Nebraska territory. The heavy use of Platte Valley trails continued after Nebraska became a territory. When the migrations to Oregon, California and Utah lessened, the discovery of gold in Colorado drew more travelers westward. The river towns of Omaha, Florence, and Nebraska City benefited as outfitting points for emigrants, and the holders of ferry privileges at these points received considerable revenue. A thin line of settlement began to extend inland along the Platte Valley. Settlements at Fremont, Columbus, Grand Island and Kearney City were established before 1860, all depending to a greater or lesser degree upon income derived from selling goods and services to emigrants.

An enterprising group of persons sought to profit from the overland trade by establishing ranches along the trail. The function of these ranches was to sell food and supplies to travelers. Livestock raising was only incidental to the primary purpose. Stage coaches made regular stops at some ranches, breaking the monotony for the passengers and the ranch keepers. The proprietors of the ranches were a hardy and brave group, for they lived far in advance of

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<sup>18</sup> James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, (Lincoln 1955), p. 116.

the farming community and in areas open to Indian attack. They did not have the security of numbers enjoyed by the emigrants in wagon trains or the freighters, and their living conditions left much to be desired. Road ranches were rather drab cabins of sod or logs and as one proceeded westward along the trail they took on some aspects of forts, with rifle slits and an enclosed corral.<sup>19</sup>

One traveler, Mark Twain, perhaps with a bit of literary license, gave a description of a Nebraska ranche and meal eaten there.

The station buildings were long low huts, made of sun dried, mud colored bricks laid up without mortar. . . . The roofs, which had no slant on them worth speaking of were thatched and then sodded or covered with a thick layer of earth and from this sprung a pretty rank growth of grass and weeds. . . . The buildings consisted of barns, stable room for twelve or fifteen horses, and a hut for an eating room for passengers.

By the door of the station-keepers den, outside, was a tin basin on the ground. Near it was a pail of water and a piece of yellow bar soap. . . . By the door, inside, was fastened a small old fashioned looking glass frame with two little fragments of the original mirror lodged in one corner of it. . . . From the glass frame hung half a comb on a string. . . . It had come down from Esau and Sampson and had been accumulating hair ever since—along with certain impurities. In one corner of the room stood three or four rifles and muskets. . . . The man wore a huge beard and mustachios, an old slouch hat, a blue woolen shirt, no suspenders, no vest, no coat—in a leathern sheath in his belt, a great long 'navy' revolver (slung on the right side, hammer to the front,) and projecting from his boot a horn handled bowie-knife. . . . The table was a greasy board on stilts. . . . A battered tin platter, a knife and fork, and a tin pint cup were at each man's place. . . . There was only one cruet left, and that was a stopperless, fly-specked broken necked thing, with two inches of vinegar in it and a dozen preserved flies with their heels up and looking sorry they had invested there. The station keeper upended a disk of last week's bread of the shape and size of an old time cheese and carved some slabs from it. . . . He sliced off a piece of bacon for each man, but only the experienced old hands made out to eat it for it was condemned army bacon. . . .

Then he poured for us a beverage which he called 'Slumgullion'. . . . It was really pretended to be tea, but there was too much dish-rag, and sand and old bacon rind in it to deceive the intelligent traveller. . . .

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<sup>19</sup> Everett Dick, *Sod House Frontier* (Lincoln, 1954), Chapter VII, contains descriptions of ranches.

Our breakfast was out before us but our teeth were idle.<sup>20</sup>

The *Daily Telegraph*, published at Omaha and Council Bluffs, printed a guide to the Rocky Mountain gold regions in April 1861. This guide listed and briefly described the ranches and towns along the trail between Council Bluffs and Denver and the distance between each establishment. No less than one hundred and four opportunities existed for the emigrant to purchase food for himself and his livestock. An example was the Junction Rancho located some seventy miles from Omaha, the point where the road to Shinn's Ferry Crossing of the Platte branched off from the main trail. H. Bushnell was proprietor of the rancho. The traveler could find there, "General accommodations for emigrants and stock. Here is a blacksmith shop where all kinds of wagon repairing can be done on short notice. Wood, water and grass." The notice for Barnard's Rancho which was near the Grand Island settlements illustrates the importance of the overland traffic as a market for the crops of the inland farmers. "Barnard's Rancho.—Hay and corn for sale. Here, there is a German settlement. A large crop of grain was raised the past year, and corn can be obtained at from 70 to 90 cents per bushel." In the western part of Nebraska about eight miles beyond O'Fallons Bluffs the emigrant came to Moore's Rancho. There he found the proprietor with an assorted stock of goods including three hundred tons of hay which he would sell at one dollar per hundred. At Moore's Rancho was a large "corrall" for the use of emigrants' horses and oxen and also used to house the horses that Moore was willing to sell, exchange or trade. This rancho was a regular stop for the Western Stage Company's Coach.<sup>21</sup>

Overland freighting was another Nebraska enterprise that developed because of the trails. The establishment of settlements in Colorado and Montana created the demand

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<sup>20</sup> Samuel Clemens, *Roughing It*, (New York, 1913) I, 23-27.

<sup>21</sup> For discussions of the stage companies, see Captain William Banning and George Hugh Banning, *Six Horses*, (New York, 1928) and LeRoy Hafen, *The Overland Mail* (Cleveland, 1926).

for the freighting business. These communities had to import almost everything that was consumed. This fact, coupled with the ready money available to pay high prices for the imports, made overland freighting profitable. The freighters also found a market for goods at the United States army posts on the plains. Freighting was an economic boon to Nebraska Territory, hard hit by the depression of the late fifties and by the Civil War conditions. It was carried on by large firms, such as Russell, Majors and Waddell, by independent operators, or by farmers seeking to dispose of their produce.

Nebraska freighting received an impetus when the United States government sent an army to Utah to hold the Mormons in check. The freighting firm of Alexander Majors and William H. Russell at Leavenworth, Kansas, was engaged to supply the Utah expedition under command of General Harney (later replaced by Albert S. Johnston.) The freighting firm's contract with the government for 1858-1859 called for the establishment of a starting point on the Missouri River above Fort Leavenworth. Nebraska City was chosen, and it became the freighting center of Nebraska Territory. The authors of *Empire on Wheels*, a history of the firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell, state that the choice transformed "Nebraska City, a scrawny little river town" into a "hustling river port of importance."<sup>22</sup>

Nebraska City hailed the choice with joy, welcomed Alexander Majors and his family, and even gave lip service to a plan designed to close the saloons in accordance with Majors' temperance views. The *News* observed that Nebraska City could now afford to allow the capital removal question to go to the "dogs" because the new honor bestowed upon the town was of much more importance than

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<sup>22</sup> Raymond W. Settle and Mary Lund Settle, *Empire on Wheels*, (Stanford, California, 1949), p. 25.

the location of the capital.<sup>23</sup> The freighting firm constructed warehouses, boarding houses, wagon shops and other buildings. It spent over \$300,000 on facilities in the town,<sup>24</sup> bought oxen, corn and hay, and hired men at an average wage of one dollar a day and expenses.<sup>25</sup>

Russell, Majors and Waddell was the largest single freighting firm in Nebraska, and Nebraska City remained the most important Nebraska freighting terminus. However, a listing of freighting firms and individuals in the territory contained eighty-eight separate names. Twenty-four of these operated from Omaha and sixty-four from Nebraska City.<sup>26</sup>

The wagons were constructed especially for crossing the plains. One freighter recalled that the Murphy and Espensheid wagons made in St. Louis and the Studebaker wagons made in South Bend, Indiana, were the most widely used. They were constructed of the best timber, wide tracked, heavy tired, and with a high double box. Five or six yoke of oxen could draw a load of seven thousand pounds. A train usually consisted of twenty-six wagons. Twenty-five were used for freight and one for a mess wagon. A train would travel seventeen or eighteen miles a day.<sup>27</sup>

The big freighting firms depended largely upon the carrying trade, but the independent operators were often the owners of their cargoes and in a sense, were specu-

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<sup>23</sup> The *Nebraska News*, Nebraska City, February 25, March 13, 1858. The neighboring *Wyoming Post* took a rather unneighborly view of Nebraska City's good fortune in an article describing Russell, Majors and Waddell as "pious, gentlemanly psalm singing old bricks" who forbade swearing and drinking and furnished their men with Bibles and hymn books. It stated that the leaders of Nebraska City were "fawning" over the freighting officials. *Wyoming Post*, May 1, 1858.

<sup>24</sup> Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>25</sup> Floyd Edgar Bresee, "Overland Freighting in the Platte Valley 1850-1870," M. A. thesis (University of Nebraska, 1937), p. 89.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>27</sup> D. P. Rolfe, "Overland Freighting from Nebraska City," Nebraska State Historical Society, *Proceedings and Collections*, Second Series, V, 281-282.

lators. The freight loads ranged from corn to cats, with staples such as flour, sugar, salt, bacon, coffee, tea and whiskey comprising the common loads.<sup>28</sup> A formula for manufacturing various liquors has been preserved in the papers of one freighter, and it perhaps indicates something of the potent nature of some of the cargoes. The recipe ran as follows:

28 gallons of whiskey  
1 pound of unslacked lime  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  pound of alum  
1 pint of spirits of nitro  
Stand 24 hours and draw it off.

With this basic preparation the enterprising freighter could make Madeira wine, domestic rum, or domestic brandy. To make the Madeira wine the recipe called for five gallons of the prepared whiskey base to which was added twenty-eight gallons of cider, one pound of cream of tartar, and one quart of milk to settle it. This mixture was to stand for twenty-four hours, and then it could be "drawed off."<sup>29</sup>

Freighting boomed with the close of the Civil War. The *Nebraska City News* could report in July 1865 that there were 2,000 wagons owned in Nebraska City that were continually employed in freighting. An average of one hundred freight loads left the town each day, and on July 12, 1865, the editor counted two hundred and fifty. The Nebraska City Board of Trade issued a report giving statistics on the freighting for 1865. The board announced, "We are able from the books of the forwarding houses, transportation bills and other records within reach, to present a succinct table of the carrying trade for the past year as follows:"

<sup>28</sup> Bresee, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Benjamin Cleghorn Collection, Ms., Nebraska State Historical Society.

Nebraska City Carrying Trade for 1865.<sup>30</sup>

	Wagons	Men	Mules	Oxen	Weight
Received and forwarded by Hawley and White, agents for the H and St. Joe R.R. Packets...	2863	3293	3013	23267	20125869
Received and forwarded by Ashton and Tait, Agents for through lines of Missouri Packets.	2047	2297	1808	13208	8951033
By Government contractors: freighters receiving direct from the river, and Iowa and Missouri trains passing through ...	2455	2795	2510	18238	10481806
By merchants of goods sold here, by contractors of grains raised in the neighborhood, and all transient lading...	2946	3354	2892	21884	12578170
Total	10311	11739	10123	76596	44023598
Outfit actually employed	4081		3040	35850	
For 1864 the freight movement was (lbs.)	.....23,000,000				
For 1865 the freight movement was (lbs.)	.....44,000,000				
Increase 91 per centum.....	21,000,000				

<sup>30</sup> *Nebraska City News*, March 31, 1866.



Building the Union Pacific Railroad in Nebraska. (A. R. Waud, From A. D. Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi*, 1867.)



Steamboats at the Omaha river front.



The Stage Coach carried No Diner. (Courtesy University of California Extension Division.)



Union Pacific Railroad Station, Omaha, 1877.

In 1865 the confident editor of the *Nebraska City News* wrote happily that the "ancient glory" that was Omaha's had departed now that Nebraska City was the freighting capital. The Omaha citizens were hoping that the completion of the Union Pacific Railroad would revive their prosperity, but the editor expressed the belief that "the event is in the so very dim and distant future."<sup>31</sup> The next year, however, the editor admitted that Nebraska City men were "frightened out their boots" because none of the freighters received government contracts let at Fort Leavenworth. Nevertheless the *News* predicted a big freighting year. Many of the freighters in the summer of 1866 were compelled to drive to Columbus in order to pick up freight loads. The goods had been hauled over the long awaited railroad which had been finished to that point.<sup>32</sup>

In 1867 the event that two years before had seemed a thing of the "dim and distant future" had taken place. The transcontinental railroad was completed. The *News* editor visited Omaha and conceded that the railroad had transformed the town. He wrote what must have been the bitter truth for Nebraska City and its freighters. "We met a number of our old Ranche friends who have heretofore done their trading at Nebraska City—Gallaher of Cottonwood, Dan Smith of Smith's ranche, who speak in high terms of the facility of transporting goods to their ranches. . . . A walk around the Capital City . . . convinced us that Omaha is the city in Nebraska."<sup>33</sup> The slow moving wagons could not compete with the railroad, and large scale over-

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<sup>31</sup> *News*, May 29, 1865.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, February 10, June 30, 1866.

<sup>33</sup> *News*, January 9, 1867.

land freighting in Nebraska ended in the final year of Nebraska Territory.<sup>34</sup>

The territorial communities recognized the need for wagon roads to connect them with the two main arteries of communication, the Missouri River and the Platte Valley trails, and with each other. Natural routes marked by the use of Indians and animals were used and improved and new routes were marked out. The federal government built roads which it felt would strengthen the national interest, especially in the facilitation of the movement of troops and supplies. Two such roads were authorized for that portion of the territory which comprises the present state of Nebraska. They were the so-called Military Road from Omaha to Fort Kearny and a wagon road from the Platte River, south of Omaha, to the mouth of the Niobrara River.<sup>35</sup>

The story of the Military Road to Fort Kearny gives some indication of the road building activity of the time. The road had its beginnings in a law passed by Congress and approved on February 17, 1855. Fifty thousand dollars were appropriated for the purpose of "constructing a territorial road on the Missouri river, opposite Council Bluffs, in the Territory of Nebraska, to New Fort Kearny in said Territory."<sup>36</sup> Captain John Dickerson of the United States Army Topographical Engineers arrived in Omaha on June 26, 1856, to commence a survey of the road. He remained four days during which time he hired a guide, collected

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<sup>34</sup> Reverend R. Foster wrote the following from Nebraska City early in 1868: "It is now eleven weeks since I commenced labor with the First Congregational church of Nebraska City. I found the church very much depressed. Business in the city had been very dull for several months, since the opening of the Union Pacific Railway from Omaha. This city had been the point of departure for freighting westward, and was the first in population and wealth, until that enterprise (the R. R.) gave a wonderful impulse to the more northern city, and proportionally held back this more southern. The business men of my church and congregation felt the depressing influence of this change." *The Home Missionary*, XL (March 1868), p. 257.

<sup>35</sup> J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, (Lincoln 1913), I, pp. 112-116.

<sup>36</sup> *United States Statutes at Large*, 1855, p. 608.

information in regard to the route, and had some leveling rods made. The party left Omaha on July 1, 1856, and commenced a preliminary survey. They crossed the Big and Little Papillion Creeks on the route followed by the Mormons and surveyed a route that ran along the Platte Valley north of the river to a point opposite Fort Kearny.<sup>37</sup> The Pawnee Indians promised not to molest the surveyors yet at the same time objected to the road, observing that roads always brought white men who chased away the game.<sup>38</sup>

Dickerson completed the survey on August 14, 1856, and entered into a contract with one Matthew Ragan for bridging Omaha Creek, the Big and Little Papillion Creeks, Rawhide Creek, Shell Creek, and for grading the approaches for a bridge on the Elkhorn River. Dickerson warned of the danger of prairie fires and stated that deep trenches had been dug and embankments thrown up around the abutments. Some of the bridges were of corduroy construction, flush with the stream bed and secured so the logs would not wash away.<sup>39</sup>

Acting-Governor Thomas Cuming stated in his message to the legislature in December 1857 that the Military Road was nearly finished, including bridges built after the most improved plans. The Elkhorn River bridge was two hundred feet in length.<sup>40</sup>

The road was a heavily travelled highway. A soldier who passed over it in 1863 described it as a "well beaten track, four or five hundred feet wide, on which an enormous traffic for years had been operating. . . . The road was hard and smooth as a floor, for the dust and gravel had been blown off from it by the wind."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Report of the Secretary of War 1857-1858*, pp. 525-532.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 531.

<sup>39</sup> *Idem.* See W. Turrentine Jackson, *Wagon Roads West*, (Los Angeles, 1952) Chap. VIII for a discussion of the federal roads across Nebraska Territory.

<sup>40</sup> *Nebraska Advertiser*, Brownville, December 24, 1857.

<sup>41</sup> Eugene Ware, *The Indian War of 1864* (Topeka 1911), p. 18.

The federal roads were heavily travelled, but they only partially met the transportation needs of the territory. Many roads were established by the communities that needed them. Some were authorized and located by acts passed by the territorial legislature and some by action on the county and local level. The county was the most important unit of government in so far as road building was concerned. The county commissioners had the jurisdiction over and control of locating, opening and keeping in repair all county roads, and they were also charged with opening, making and maintaining all roads designated by the territorial legislature. Financing of territorial roads was a county function.<sup>42</sup> When persons in a locality desired a road they petitioned the county commissioners who would make an investigation. If the commissioners decided that a road was necessary they arranged for a survey to be made and the road established. Territorial law required roads to be at least forty feet wide. They were financed by a property tax not to exceed two mills and by a poll tax of two days labor for each able bodied male citizen. The counties were divided into road districts with a supervisor in each district, responsible for road maintenance.<sup>43</sup>

The records of the county commissioners indicate that road building was one of their most important functions.<sup>44</sup> The first regular meeting of the Board of County Commissioners of Platte County on January 4, 1858, received a petition asking for a road between Washington Avenue in Columbus and Shell Creek. The petition was approved after a hearing on March 2, 1858, and work was commenced. Road building seemed to consist mostly of surveying the route and bridging the streams. The territorial legislatures depended upon the counties to carry out the building

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<sup>42</sup> *Laws of Nebraska*, Second Session, 1855, p. 217.

<sup>43</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>44</sup> Manuscript copies of the minutes of meetings of the Platte County Commissioners from December 28, 1857, until September 7, 1868, and the Otoe County Commissioners, September 4, 1858, to February 5, 1866, are on file in Nebraska State Historical Society. They were prepared as a part of the work of the Historical Records Survey for Nebraska.

of territorial roads. On October 25, 1858, an act was approved which provided for the location of a territorial road from Nebraska City to Salem in Richardson County.<sup>45</sup> In October 1859 the Otoe County Commissioners allowed warrants for \$89.60 to pay for Otoe county's share in the expenses of this road.<sup>46</sup>

One well known road was the freighting trail which ran west from Nebraska City to Fort Kearny. It was known as the Nebraska City-Fort Kearny cut off or the Great Central Route and was surveyed by Augustus Harvey, hired by Alexander Majors. It was on this well travelled route that in 1862 the unsuccessful attempt was made to pull freight wagons to Denver with a steam engine. The route is sometimes designated as the Steam Wagon Road.<sup>47</sup> Otoe County voted \$20,000 in bonds to build bridges across Salt Creek and the Blue River in order to make this road attractive to freighters.<sup>48</sup>

The long awaited transcontinental railroad fulfilled many of the expectations that so long had been held by Nebraskans. It was a potent social and economic force in the last two years of the territory. Construction of the road had progressed slowly at first. Ground had been broken at Omaha on December 2, 1863, the day the eastern terminus was selected, but by January 1, 1866, only forty miles of track had been laid.<sup>49</sup> By January 1, 1867, however, the rails extended well into Wyoming and the railroad had been issuing time tables for passenger service as far west as Kearney since August 23, 1866.<sup>50</sup> The long used and highly recommended highway that followed the Platte Valley was invaded by an army of workmen surveying, grading, and laying ties and rails. Sawmills along the Missouri River manufactured countless ties, and work-

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<sup>45</sup> *Laws of Nebraska*, 1858, p. 308.

<sup>46</sup> Otoe County Commissioners Record, October 11, 1859.

<sup>47</sup> Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>48</sup> Sheldon, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

<sup>49</sup> The western boundary of Iowa opposite Omaha was the official terminus but the practical one was Omaha.

<sup>50</sup> Morton, *op. cit.*, I, p. 123.

ers unloaded tons of equipment from steamboats at Omaha. Terminal supply bases moved west with construction. They were otherwise designated as "Hell on Wheels" and enjoyed short, rowdy lives until the rails had been pushed on, and a new "roaring town" established. There were four terminal camps in Nebraska. They were Fremont, Kearney, North Platte, and Sidney.<sup>51</sup>

The transcontinental railroad was a powerful factor in establishing permanent communities in Nebraska. During the period when the railroad was no more than a dream in men's minds that dream was strong enough to influence the establishment of towns, some of which survived although the first transcontinental railroad never touched them. The railroad gave vitality to those communities in eastern and central Nebraska that lay in its path. Chief among them were Omaha, Fremont, Columbus, and Grand Island. It was responsible for the creation of many other communities. Of forty-one Union Pacific stations that were in Nebraska in 1869 thirty-one are listed with population on the current (1963) railroad map. Nebraska communities such as Kimball, Ogallala, Gibbon, Lexington and others had their beginnings as Union Pacific stations. Following are descriptions of some of the Union Pacific stations that have become towns, as given by a railroad guide book published in 1869 and a table listing the stations and giving their present status.

Gibbon. Side-track and flag station between Wood-river and Kearney.

Ogallala. This station is 341 miles from Omaha. . . . A company of cavalry are stationed here, under command of Captain Bates.

Sidney. A regular eating station where trains stop thirty minutes. H. L. Ellsworth keeps a first-class house in the company building.

The company has a round house of ten stalls, and a machine shop at this place which add to the interest and business of the station.

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<sup>51</sup> For discussions of the building of the Union Pacific Railroad in Nebraska see Edwin L. Sabin, *Building the Pacific Railway* (Philadelphia 1919) Chap. V, VII, IX; Everett Dick, *Vanguards of the Frontier* (New York, 1941), Chap. XVI; Morton, *op. cit.*, II, Chap. III.

Antelope. (Kimball) A small unimportant station, at the lower end of the Pine Bluffs, which at this point, come near the station.<sup>52</sup>

A List of Union Pacific Railway Stations of 1869  
Indicating Those Still Existing in 1963.<sup>53</sup>

Station 1869	Listed on <i>Official Map of Nebraska,</i> 1963. Figure denotes population.	Station 1869	Listed on <i>Official Map of Nebraska,</i> 1963. Figure denotes population.
Omaha	301,598	Stevenson	
Summit Siding (Summit)	Listed without population	Elm Creek	778
Gilmore	Listed without population	Overton	523
Papillion	2,235	Plum Creek (Lexington)	5,572
Elkhorn	749	Cayote	
Valley	1,452	Willow Island	Listed without population
Fremont	19,698	Warren	
North Bend	1,174	Brady Island (Brady)	273
Schuyler	3,096	McPherson	
Shell Creek	Listed without population	North Platte	17,184
Columbus	12,476	O'Fallons	Listed without population
Jackson (Duncan)	224	Alkali (Paxton)	566
Silver Creek	431	Roscoe	163
Clarks Station (Clarks)	439	Ogallala	4,250
Lone Tree (Central City)	2,406	Big Springs	506
Chapmans Station (Chapman)	303	Lodge Pole	492
Grand Island	25,742	Sidney	8,004
Pawnee Station		Potter	554
Wood River Station (Wood River) <sup>54</sup>	828	Antelope (Kimball)	4,384
Gibbon	1,083	Bushnell	266
Kearney	14,210		

<sup>52</sup> *Great Transcontinental Railroad Guide* (Chicago, 1869), pp. 40, 45, 56, 59.

<sup>53</sup> Data for this table is compiled from the *Great Transcontinental Railroad Guide*, (Chicago, 1869) and Nebraska State Railway Commission, *Official Map of Nebraska 1963*. Population figures used on the above map were based on the 1960 United States Census for incorporated cities and villages and an estimation of the population of unincorporated places.

<sup>54</sup> The present Wood River is approximately two miles west of the original station and town.

The railroad attracted the cattle herds up from Texas in the 1870's, and it also embarked upon a program of disposing of its huge land grant that was to last for forty years.<sup>55</sup> In the territorial period the railroad's contributions to the social beginnings of Nebraska had been its promise, its invigoration of established towns, its formation of the nuclei of new communities and its provision of a revolutionary advancement of transportation facilities.

It would be difficult to over-emphasize the important effect of transportation upon Nebraska Territory. The white society of Nebraska developed and was concentrated along the overland highway and the river throughout the territorial period and beyond. Nebraska's transportation routes played a large part in the creation of the territory and in sustaining the people who occupied it. The primitive trains which steamed along the historic Platte Valley highway in 1866 and 1867 in a sense were the fruition of Nebraska Territory and the heralds of a new era. In less than half a year after the rails had crossed Nebraska the territorial period was history.

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<sup>55</sup> Morris W. Spencer, "The Union Pacific Railroad Company's Utilization of its Land Grant, with Emphasis on its Colonization Program," Abstract of a Dissertation (University of Nebraska, 1950) p. 3.