

LINCOLN LORE

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THE RAILSPLITTER AND THE RAILROADS

The induction into service of modern streamline trains between New York and Chicago, by two of the nation's outstanding transportation companies, has called to mind the evolution of the railroad during the life time of the Railsplitter and the part which he played in its progress.

Early Railroad Spokesman

During the first recorded public address by Abraham Lincoln, delivered when he was but twenty-three years of age, this statement was made with reference to the value of railroads:

"A meeting has been held of the citizens of Jacksonville and the adjacent country, for the purpose of deliberating and inquiring into the expediency of constructing a railroad from some eligible point on the Illinois River, through the town of Jacksonville, in Morgan County, to the town of Springfield, in Sangamon County. This is, indeed, a very desirable object. No other improvement that reason will justify us in hoping for can equal in utility the railroad. It is a never-failing source of communication between places of business remotely situated from each other. Upon the railroad the regular progress of commercial intercourse is not interrupted by either high or low water, or freezing weather, which are the principal difficulties that render our future hopes of water communication precarious and uncertain."

The Long Nine Railroad Advocate

Lincoln's political career had advanced to such an extent by 1836 that he had become the leader of the Sangamon delegation in the Illinois Legislature. These representatives associated with Lincoln consisted of nine tall men of which Lincoln was the tallest. As spokesman for the group he had gone on record "for distributing the proceeds of the sales of public lands to the several states, to enable our state in common with others, to dig canals and construct railroads without borrowing money and paying the interest on it."

A Railroad Congressman

Lincoln's first political speech had touched upon the utility of the railroad. As a member of the Illinois Legislature, he voted for laws favorable to the building of railroads and his last speech as a congressman was delivered "on the bill granting lands to the states to make railroads and canals."

His argument was mainly for the purpose of meeting some objections to the bill. If he understood those objections the first was that "if the bill were to become a law it would be used to lock larger portions of the public lands from sale without at least effecting the ostensible object of the bill—the constructing of railroads in the new states."

A Railroad Attorney

As an attorney for the Illinois Central Railroad, Lincoln was paid his largest single fee, although he was obliged to sue to collect the amount he felt was due him. Many other roads retained Lincoln to represent them in litigation and he had an annual pass over the Chicago and Mississippi Railroad.

His most significant service rendered to the advancement of rail transportation interests during the Illinois days was the winning, assisted by his associates, of the famous Bridge Case for the Rock Island Railroad. This case eventually opened the way for the building of railroad bridges across navigable streams and it made pos-

sible the remarkable extension of the coast to coast railroads in which Lincoln was to have a unique part.

A Pioneer Railroad Builder

While Abraham Lincoln was President, many appeals were made to the government for assistance in the construction of railroads. In January, 1863, a letter urging the completion of a line to Springfield, Missouri, was received, to which Lincoln replied he had considered it and then concluded, "the military necessity for it is not so patent but that Congress would try to restrain in some way were I to attempt it."

Lincoln did see, however, the military necessity of a road to the Pacific coast and it was an epoch making decision when he came to the conclusion that the road must be built as indicated by this memorandum:

"Executive Mansion, Washington, October 5, 1863.

"Whom it may concern: Unless something now unknown and unexpected shall come to my knowledge, tending to change my purpose, I shall, at the proper time, appoint Timothy J. Carter one of the two directors to be appointed by the President, according to a provision in the first section of the act of Congress, entitled 'An act to aid in the construction of a railroad and telegraph line from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean, and to secure to the government the use of the same for postal, military, and other purposes, approved July 1, 1862.'

"Abraham Lincoln."

How far this project had progressed is revealed in Lincoln's annual message to Congress presented on December 6, 1864, in which this statement appeared:

"The great enterprise of connecting the Atlantic with the Pacific States by railways and telegraph lines has been entered upon with a vigor that gives assurance of success, notwithstanding the embarrassments arising from the prevailing high prices of materials and labor. The route of the main line of the road has been definitely located for one hundred miles westward from the initial point at Omaha City, Nebraska, and a preliminary location of the Pacific Railroad of California has been made from Sacramento, eastward, to the great bend of Truckee River, in Nevada."

A Railroad Superintendent

During the early days in the legislature, the session in Congress, or in his active legal practice as a railroad attorney, "the railsplitter" could never have anticipated that some day he would take over the superintendency, so to speak, of all the railroads in America. An order issued by the Secretary of War on May 25, 1862, virtually gave him supreme authority over the transportation schedule of all lines. The order follows:

"War Department, May 25, 1862.

"Ordered: By virtue of the authority vested by act of Congress, the President takes military possession of all the railroads in the United States, from and after this date until further order, and directs that the respective railroad companies, their officers and servants, shall hold themselves in readiness for the transportation of such troops and munitions of war as may be ordered by the military authorities, to the exclusion of all other business.

"By order of the Secretary of War:

"M. C. Meigs, Quartermaster-General."