

"Railroads in Iowa" Essay from *The Goldfinch*, November 1983

There was a time, not long ago, when the sound of engine whistles wailed across the Iowa farmlands. People could tell the time of day by the trains that chugged through the countryside. Before dirt roads were paved and widened so cars and trucks could easily travel over a smooth and fast surface, railroads provided the fastest transportation for both people and goods.

Iowa's earliest settlers came before the railroads did. They traveled by horse or oxen-drawn wagons, on foot, by stagecoach, or by steamboat. Wagon and stage travelers may have traveled as many as twenty miles a day. Steamboat passengers traveled sixty to one hundred miles a day, although sandbars, low water, or snags often caused long delays.

For the first twenty years of settlement, rivers and streams were the main highways in Iowa. Farm people hauled their grain in wagons or on animals to the nearest market center along a river. Small boats then carried the grain to Mississippi or Missouri River market towns. From those points it was loaded on large boats and carried to St. Louis or New Orleans.

Farmers with hogs or cattle to sell drove their livestock to market—a trip that might take several days. After reaching the market a meat packer bought and slaughtered the animals, then packed and pickled the meat in barrels for shipment down the river.

In winter the rivers froze and the boats had to stop. To travel overland was not much easier. Snow often covered the dirt roads, making it hard for teams of horses to pull heavy loads. While this weather lasted, people, goods, and news could not easily get in or out of the state.

Most people came to Iowa to take up farming. As Iowa and other midwest areas filled with farmers, a whole new region of the United States began to produce food. About the same time industries began to grow in the East, and manufacturers in cities hired people to work in factories. Cities grew larger as people moved there to work. Most of the people in the cities did not raise their own food, so they bought food brought to the city in wagons from nearby farms. City people began to depend more and more on the food grown by farmers.

It was not long before the steam engine that powered factory machinery provided the power for railroad trains to bring food to the cities. The trains then returned to the countryside with manufactured goods for people to buy. Gradually train tracks pushed into the great farm regions of the South and Midwest.

In 1854 the first train reached the Mississippi River at Rock Island, Illinois. Soon other railroad lines from Chicago reached the great river. Ferry Boats carried the freight and passengers across the river from the railroad cars to the cities in Iowa.

On the Iowa side of the river, short railroad line construction began, and in 1855 the first engine was ferried across the Mississippi from Illinois. Just one year later a wooden bridge spanned the wide river so freight and passenger cars could travel right on across. By then one railroad line reached as far west as the state capital at Iowa City.

For a long time people had talked of a railroad to link the western and eastern states from coast to coast. This would provide a better way to transport goods between distant cities. Goods usually had to travel by ship around the tip of South America. Iowa's location in the central part of the nation meant railroads from east to west would pass through the state.

Building railroads cost a lot of money. The railroad from Davenport to Iowa City cost \$15,000 per mile. To encourage railroad companies to build, the United States Congress passed laws that gave land to companies that promised to build railroads. In 1856 the Congress gave public land in Iowa to build four east to west railroads. These railroads would eventually become part of the transcontinental railroad. Four railroad companies had just begun to build across the state when the Civil War interrupted progress.

After the war the builders raced across the state. Smaller railroad companies soon linked the towns and cities of Iowa with the main-line railroads. The parts of Iowa where only a few settlers had been living began to fill with people as the railroad arrived. Railroads became the key to the growth and success of towns and cities. The places the railroads bypassed remained small or sometimes faded away.

Railroads carried Iowa butter, meat products, and grain to cities. They hauled Iowa coal. They brought back farm implements, salt, and ready made clothes. Railroads brought settlers seeking a new home in Iowa. The railroads took people to almost any place they wanted to go.

transcontinental adj. — going across a continent.