

Excerpts from *The Goldfinch's "Railroads....,"* November 1983

Chugging into Cherokee

The people of Cherokee waited in 1869. They waited for the railroad to come. There were only thirty-nine families on the lonely northwestern Iowa prairie at Cherokee. Sioux City was the nearest place, sixty miles and an eight day round-trip away. There would never be very many people at Cherokee without a railroad — but the railroad was coming!

A man bought twenty acres of land in the little settlement and marked it off for town lots. He opened a general store and planned to have his town ready when the railroad came. Soon there was a newspaper, livery stable, and blacksmith. An attorney and physician set up practice. Cherokee was ready. Finally the railroad owners decided exactly where the railroad route would go. The track curved in and out of the beautiful Little Sioux Valley, making a horseshoe bend. When the rails were laid they were one mile south-west of the town! The business people decided it was better to be as close as possible to the railroad depot, so they moved their businesses over one mile to be nearer to it.

The town of Cherokee grew rapidly after the railroad arrived. More homes and businesses sprang up, built with lumber brought in on railroad cars. In just one year over two thousand people arrived to live in Cherokee County. Farm people settled on the surrounding prairie and began shipping their produce to market on the railroad. The first people of Cherokee had been right. The railroad had helped their town to grow.

Workin' On the Railroad

It took many people to keep the railroads running smoothly. Railroad workers lived in towns along the railroad lines in Iowa. Locomotive engineers and firemen, passenger and freight conductors, porters and brakemen worked on the moving trains. Many more people worked in railroad shops, roundhouses, or depots. Mechanics, carpenters, blacksmiths, painters, and machinists worked in shops keeping cars and locomotives in good repair. To keep things on the tracks and in the railyard running safely, there were watchmen, section hands, switchmen, and gatekeepers. Agents, clerks, and telegraph operators worked at the busy railway depot selling tickets, keeping records, and sending messages.

Iowa Towns Containing More than 100 Railroad Workers, 1895

Belle Plaine, Eagle Grove, Boone, Fort Dodge, Burlington, Fort Madison, Cedar Rapids, Keokuk, Charles City, Lake City, Clinton, Marion, Creston, Marshalltown, Council Bluffs, Mason City, Davenport, Missouri Valley, Des Moines, Ottumwa, Dubuque, Perry, Sioux City, Waterloo