

CGW: “A poor road that lived by its wits”

By H. Roger Grant

The “Great Weedy” competed with innovations such as internal combustion and piggyback

IT IS GREAT to be able to blend one’s avocation and vocation. Since childhood, I have loved trains, a feeling that shows no sign of ebbing. Once I became a professional historian, it is understandable that I pursued this fascination. My first book-length study of a railroad, *The Corn Belt Route: A History of the Chicago Great Western Railroad Company* (1984), covered the carrier that intrigued me the most.

Why this interest in the “Great Weedy?” Although I grew up in Albia, Iowa, a county seat served by the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy; Minneapolis & St. Louis; and Wabash, I made frequent family visits to Carroll, Iowa, on the Great Western’s “West End,” the 160-mile segment between Clarion and Council Bluffs, Iowa. Although Chicago & North Western’s “Overland Route” main line passed through Carroll, my love affair inexplicitly was with the CGW. The company’s long freights, pulled by incredibly long consists of F3 diesels with their attractive maroon-and-red paint scheme, caught my fancy.

I vividly recall dashing from my aunt’s office in the old Carroll County Courthouse to the Great Western tracks a few blocks away when the distinctive blasts of a locomotive’s air horn an-

nounced the train’s approach to downtown. I met many CGW employees over the years, and I considered them to be friendlier than those who worked for the North Western, reminding me of the understanding railroaders I knew at home. There was also something almost magical about the name, Chicago Great Western—it sounded so mighty.

There were other reasons for studying the CGW. I sensed that this carrier was a bit of an underdog, battling giants Illinois Central, North Western, Milwaukee, and Rock Island. I also learned that the company was largely the creation of A. B. Stickney (1840-1916), a maverick among his peers for suggesting that the federal government regulate railroad rates in a meaningful way.

Admittedly, all railroads have interesting pasts, but I discovered that the CGW’s was most fascinating. Stickney, who early in his adult life entered the railroad business, set to link St. Paul with Chicago. He took the legal assets of the moribund Minnesota & Northwestern Railroad, and in 1884 pushed a line under that banner south to near the Iowa state line, forging a connection with the Illinois Central. Unable to reach a deal with the IC, Stickney and his backers, who included some wealthy Englishmen, then used the Dubuque & Northwestern Railway to reach the Mississippi River at Dubuque. Another cap-

itive corporation, the Minnesota & Northwestern Railroad of Illinois, by 1888 completed a link from Forest Park, Ill., in west suburban Chicago, to Dubuque (using Illinois Central rights the last few miles). This line included the half-mile-long Winston Tunnel,

longest in Illinois. More important, it gave Stickney all the connections in America’s railroad Mecca.

Stickney realized that to survive, though, his railroad needed to enter more gateways. By 1903, through a combination of corporate acquisitions, construction, and leases, his company, more appropriately renamed Chicago, St. Paul & Kansas City Railway and later Chicago Great Western Railway, reached Des Moines, Kansas City, and Omaha. Additional feeder lines, mostly in Minnesota, produced a nearly 1500-mile property.

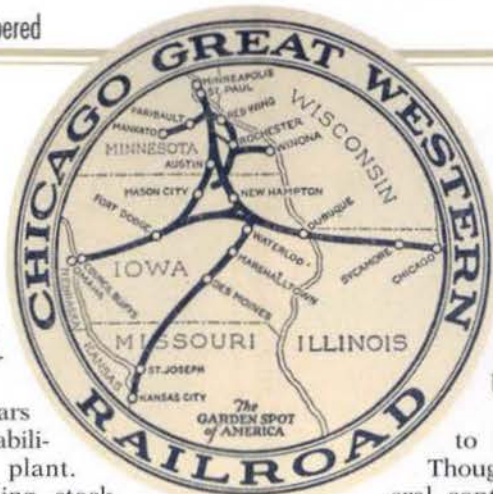
Even though Stickney had imaginatively assembled a Midwestern trunk line, he ultimately lost his railroad. The brief but severe Bankers’ Panic of 1907 threw CGW into receivership, a fate the company had avoided during the much more severe Panic of 1893. The nation’s financial wizard, J. P. Morgan, took control, and in 1909 a reorganized Chicago Great Western Railroad made its debut. Morgan wisely placed Samuel Morse Felton in charge, because the new president excelled as a railroad manager. His greatest triumph before joining the



A typical CGW consist—five F units—leads a long freight from Des Moines toward the hub of Oelwein, Iowa, on June 13, 1955. Note the piggyback flats up front—CGW’s TOFC began in 1935.



ALL PHOTOS: H. ROGER GRANT COLLECTION



Great Western had been to turn the Chicago & Alton into a profitable property.

The Felton years resulted in a rehabilitated physical plant. Changes in rolling stock caught the attention of thousands of on-line residents. In 1910, for example, CGW purchased 10 Baldwin 2-6-6-2 Mallets ("Snakes," as employees called them), and the road's own shop forces at Oelwein, Iowa (northeast of Waterloo), rebuilt three F-3 class 2-6-2's (CGW had 95 total Prairie types) into three more 2-6-6-2's. Unfortunately, these giants did not work out, and in 1916 the Baldwins were sold to the Clinchfield and the homebuilds rebuilt into 4-6-2's. In the Mallets' place appeared reliable yet powerful 2-8-2's, of which CGW boasted 35.

The railroad became a leader in the use of gasoline and later diesel motive power. Before World War I CGW assembled a small fleet of McKeen motor cars, knife-nosed "wind-splitters" that replaced steam-powered branchline and local trains. Its 1924 gas-electric car M-300 was the first unit of any type built by the Electro-Motive Co., and it helped replace steam on trains 3 and 4 on the 509-mile Chicago-Omaha run. In 1929 CGW remodeled three McKeens to make up a deluxe gas-electric train, the Minneapolis-Rochester (Minn.) *Blue*

In 1910, CGW employees at the East Stockton (Ill.) shop posed on big H-1 Baldwin Mallet 608.

Bird. CGW was mostly satisfied with its pioneering internal-combustion equipment. CGW did its best

to serve the public.

Though battered by federal control during World

War I and by the deepening agricultural depression of the 1920's, the company remained solvent. Unfortunately, the speculative mania of that decade led to a Chicago-based investment clique, the Bremo Corporation, seizing control. The Felton forces were then out, and railroad-car manufacturer Patrick "Pat" Joyce and his associates were in. Even though these antics, coupled to the devastating Great Depression, led in 1935 to CGW's second bankruptcy, its well-established innovative spirit did not die. Notable betterments were the purchase of three dozen Texas-type locomotives, magnificent T-class 2-10-4's that easily wheeled big freights over the road's sawtooth profile.

More significant, however, was the introduction in 1936 of regularly scheduled trailer-on-flatcar service, making the Great Western a pioneering steam road in what we now call intermodal service. Commented an official who made the first trip with a piggyback train between the St. Paul and Chicago terminals, "When you're a poor road, you have to live by your wits." Of course, the CGW remained surrounded by tough competitors, and it would never possess a stellar physical plant. Its





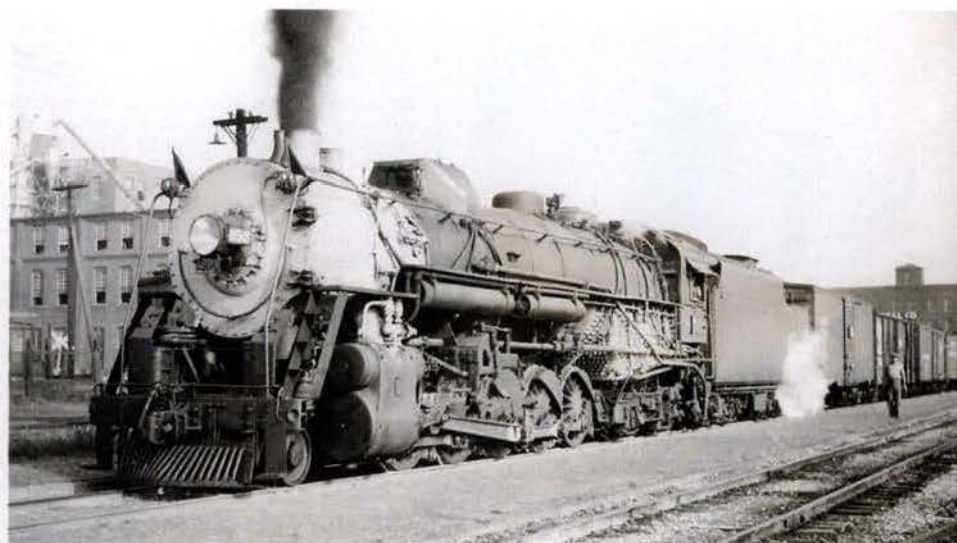
The time is late 1949, but CGW 1003, a pre-World War I McKeen motor car, is still at work, ambling through a cut near Hampton, Iowa.

spunky spirit endeared the Great Western to the public, though.

As did other railroads, CGW rebounded from the Great Depression. In 1941 the company got a new lease on life, and the end of bankruptcy resulted in creation of the Chicago Great Western Railway Co. The future looked bright, especially with wartime traffic. Even after V-J Day, the Great Western felt optimistic. Unlike some carriers of roughly the same size, CGW was not burdened with money-losing commuter service, too many low-density branch lines, or hostile local taxing bodies.

Just as the Bremo Corporation earlier seized power, the "Kansas City Group," investors from that city loosely associated with the Kansas City Southern Railway, took charge in 1948. The administrative shakeup soon led to William N. Deramus III becoming president. He was young and inexperienced, yet willing to think creatively. The Deramus era resulted in a generally better property, including major improvements in the sprawling facilities at Oelwein, center of the road's operating and maintenance activities. Surely the hallmark of "the Great Western" (the name Deramus preferred) was the unusually long freight trains powered by eight or more F units. Although designed to maximize tonnage, this operating procedure led to slower service, in part because the road trains were also expected to perform local work.

CGW's passenger service was locally oriented, and the road had few deluxe



CGW's best-known steam engines were 2-10-4's —21 Baldwins and 15 Limas from 1930-31—that virtually duplicated namesake Texas & Pacific's. Lima 853 rolls into Dubuque, Iowa, in 1945.

trains, but among its stars in the 1920's were the Minneapolis-Kansas City *Tri-State Limited* and *Mill Cities Limited*; the Chicago-Rochester *Bob-O-Link*; and the four-car, Pacific-powered Minneapolis-Rochester *Red Bird* of 1923. By CGW's last decade, only two trains remained—overnight, Post Office-driven, head-end-and-one-coach schedules linking Minneapolis with Omaha and K.C. The last one expired in 1965.

Wearing the second version of CGW's "Lucky Strike" emblem (the road's fifth logo), 28-year-old maroon EMC SC No. 6 totes two cars down the 7-mile Cedar Falls spur to Waterloo in 1964.

Being a small road in an era when competitors were expanding through merger led to the corporate demise of the CGW. Saying that shareholders "must be protected," the board sought a partner. Although the expectation was union with KCS or perhaps the Soo Line, the aggressive Chicago & North Western, headed by resourceful Ben W. Heineman, made an acceptable proposal, and in 1968 Chicago Great Western became another "fallen flag." C&NW operated some CGW switchers and remaining F units for a short time, and assimilated Great Western's only second-generation diesels—eight GP30's and nine SD40's [pages 73-75], all painted in the final solid "Deramus red" seen also on KCS and Katy—into the yellow fleet.

There is considerable truth to the assertion made in the late 1960's that



Heineman's North Western wanted "to junk its competition." Although for a short time much of the former Great Western maintained its identity as the Missouri Division, that operating organization ended and its lines started to disappear. By the 1980's much of the trackage had been retired, and at the start of the 21st century only about 145 miles remained. Survivors include portions of the main lines in Iowa (Mason City to the Fort Dodge area; Oelwein-Waterloo; and a leg into Council Bluffs); the Cannon Falls (Minn.) branch; and terminal trackage around South St. Paul, Minn., and just west of Chicago.

In 2000, I returned to Carroll, a community I had not visited since the early 1970's. I knew the former Great Western's West End had been abandoned, a process that had taken place in bits and pieces, the customary North Western approach to "line rationalization." Yet I was shocked. The huge, long fills and bridges over U.S. 30 on the east side of town and UP's ex-C&NW main line on the west side had been obliterated, and the right of way immediately west of downtown sported a host of new businesses, including a Wal-Mart superstore. One would need a good set of maps to trace the "Great Weedy" today, including its historic path through the Carroll County seat. A. B. Stickney once said that "his" railway was "like a babbling brook, it runs forever." Of course, no one, including Stickney, possesses the power of clairvoyance. ■

CGW fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1967)

Route-miles: 1495; 1411

Locomotives: 237; 139

Freight cars: 8009; 3540

Passenger cars: 185; 0

Headquarters city: Chicago, Ill., then Kansas City, Mo.

Special interest group: Chicago & North Western Historical Society, P.O. Box 1270, Sheboygan, WI 53082-1230; www.cnwhs.org

Recommended reading: *The Corn Belt Route*, by H. Roger Grant (Northern Illinois University Press, 1984)

Source: *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999).