

Early Days on the Union Pacific

by

John D. Cruise³

In 1885 the first Kansas legislature had followed the example set by Missouri in chartering her own railroads. Among the first dozen charters issued was one to the Leavenworth, Pawnee & Western Railroad Company, which hoped to cross the state and eventually reach the Pacific ocean. Kansans then had not the money to construct the road and the East was not yet ready to invest in Kansas railroad stocks. Hence it was not until 1857 that preliminary work began on this line at Leavenworth, and that the road was surveyed as far west as Fort Riley.

By 1862, Ross, Steele & Co., of Canada, undertook the construction of the road. Everything progressed favorably until the summer of 1863. The construction company, under the superintendence of Mr. Carter, had expended a large sum of money for material, and grading was then in full operation.

Suddenly, all work stopped. Gen. John C. Fremont, and Samuel Hallett of Steuben County, New York, had purchased the controlling stock of the road and had changed the name to the "Union Pacific Railway (Eastern Division)." The old construction contract was pronounced invalid by the new stockholders, and peremptory orders were given for the work to cease. Carter refused. Hallett declared war, and by some means, unknown to any one but himself, secured control of a company of United States dragoons and rode down the contumacious contractors, agents and men.

Ross, Steele & Co. did not resort to force, but to law, and tedious litigation ensued.

Hallett soon got out of patience with Leavenworth. It had been a military post and central depot of the West. Emigrant trains had stopped there to purchase supplies, and military expeditions equipped themselves at the Fort. The little city believed itself indispensable to Hallett, and the only possible eastern terminus of the road he was building. Therefore it demanded exorbitant prices for land and for all supplies, and although it had voted the bonds requested by the company, the mayor I believe withheld them until a certain number of miles should be completed. As the much needed money could not be had, Hallett transferred all property into the hands of the new company, left Leavenworth to its fate, and removed everything to Wyandotte, making that the initial point of the road, in accord with the terms of the charter.

The first ground was broken at Kansas City, September 7, 1863. Among those present were Samuel Hallett, A. B. Bartlett, a lawyer, Silas



Union Depot—Kansas City, Mo. Erected 1877.

Armstrong, a leader of the Wyandots, and H. H. Sawyer, a foreman. Sawyer handed an ax to both Bartlett and Armstrong, asking each to fell a tree, saying that the honor of doing the first work on the right of way would fall to him whose tree fell first. Armstrong's tree fell first, but it remained attached to the stump. Bartlett's fell a few seconds later, clean cut. At one time the contestants threatened a friendly lawsuit to decide to whom the honor belonged. Mr. Sawyer then drove a post into the ground near where they stood, and exactly on the state line just east of the present Union Pacific bridge. On the Missouri side of this post he wrote with red keel the word "Slavery," and on the Kansas side "Liberty." Capt. H. H. Sawyer died February 28, 1910, at Fifth and Minnesota avenues, Kansas City, Kansas, within a mile of where he drove the post.

The first rail of this great system was laid without pomp or ceremony April 14, 1864, in Wyandotte, at the foot of Minnesota avenue, on a spur. This spur was laid for the purpose of handling material brought by the river and landed at the levee. To get government subsidy it was incorporated into the system of which it must always remain a part.

The first locomotive was brought to Wyandotte, and also to grief, a few days later. She was an old wood burner and had been used by the government on the Orange, Alexandria & Manassas Railroad in Virginia. Matt

Cleary was transporting the rolling stock from Weston on the Missouri River, the then terminus of the Platte County Railroad, and the nearest rail point to Kansas City. He brought the engine down on a barge, and as the bank of the river was high above the barge, a cut was made, rails were laid from the water's edge to her deck, and on these the engine was slid along to *terra firma*. J. L. Hallett fired her up and used her to draw a small push car. Alas! he knew not the ways of locomotives, and ran her too near the edge of the river. In she plunged up to the headlight, the rear end fortunately remaining on the bank. With the scarcity of both knowledge and tackle, it was several days before she was pulled out.

The Leavenworth papers, smarting at the change of base, had their laugh, but "he laughs best who laughs last." Leavenworth will never regain the commercial supremacy she lost. Old Wyandotte may become a great Metropolis.