Nothing Like It In the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad 1863-1869

Stephen E. Ambrose
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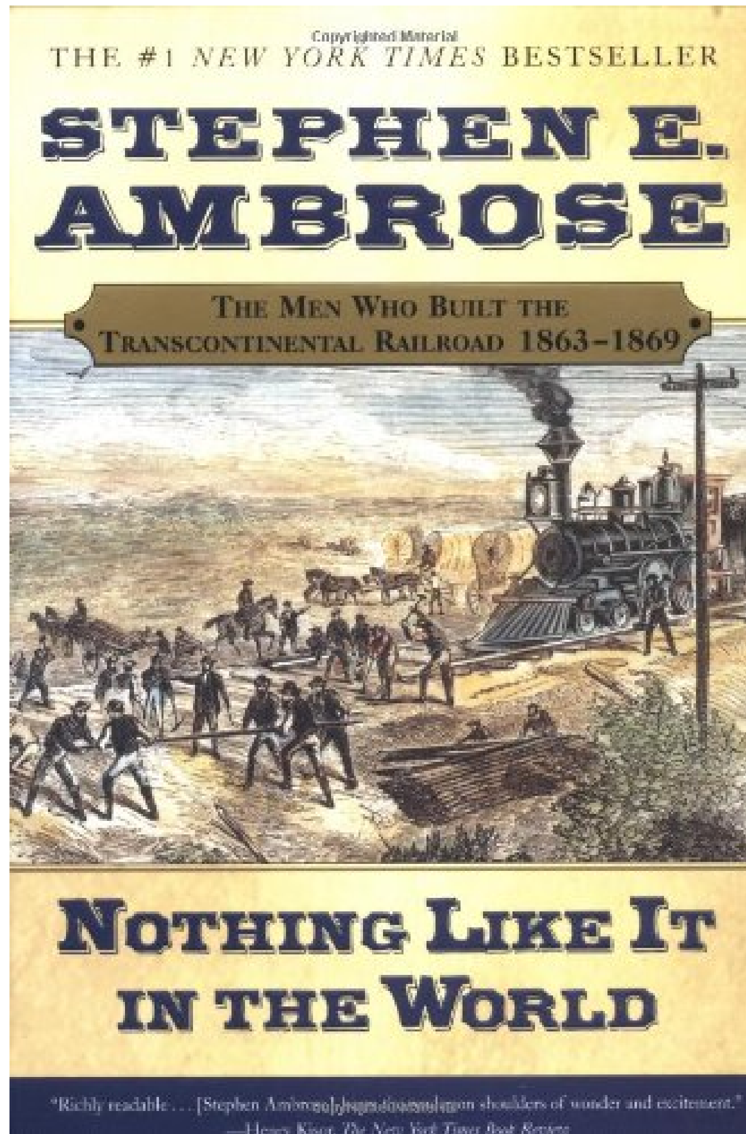

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Stephen E. Ambrose : Nothing Like It In the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad 1863-1869 before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Nothing Like It In the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad 1863-1869:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. The story of a near miracleBy CharlesThis is a superb book by the

consummate historian storyteller Stephen Ambrose. It is easy to forget now what a monumental task it was to build a railroad from the midwest to California during 1860's. It was almost like trying to put a man on the moon was a century later. The book is very easy to read, and will fill you with awe, particularly if you ever get a chance to ride the California Zephyr through the Sierra Nevada mountains, across the desert and over the hundreds of miles of mixed terrain that had to be crossed. The feat and the book are absolutely first rate.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. and I did enjoy Ambrose's consistently engaging storytellingBy DaleSFive stars says I "loved" it, and that's largely true. Frankly, I'm a train-lover who's even visited the fabled Promontory site, and I did enjoy Ambrose's consistently engaging storytelling. This wasn't an easy project for any writer, but Ambrose skillfully tells the story of a railroad being built literally from both ends toward the middle, without the reader losing a sense of time and place.He describes more than building a railroad; he peels back the layers of social, corporate and political intrigue that shaped a project as big as the Trans-Continental Railroad. Which exposed some of our nation's often inspiring but also ugly history: the greed and manipulation, the no-holds-barred competition, the smoke-filled room deals and steals, and the ugly racism that used Chinese (and other) workers as near-disposable parts of a building machine and shamelessly pushed native peoples out of the way. That's part of our un-sanitized history as a nation, and it deserves to be exposed to the light of day.Still, it's a great read. I never got bored. And I still love trains.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Excellent book. Thoroughly enjoyed reading itBy Captain KirkExcellent book. Thoroughly enjoyed reading it. Cast of many characters, sometimes hard to keep straight, but very informative. Disheartening to learn that politics played such a role in our country's early history, but eventually the job was done. Learned a lot and was entertained at the same time.

Nothing Like It in the World gives the account of an unprecedented feat of engineering, vision, and courage. It is the story of the men who built the transcontinental railroadthe investors who risked their businesses and money; the enlightened politicians who understood its importance; the engineers and surveyors who risked, and sometimes lost, their lives; and the Irish and Chinese immigrants, the defeated Confederate soldiers, and the other laborers who did the backbreaking and dangerous work on the tracks.The U.S. government pitted two companiesthe Union Pacific and the Central Pacific Railroadsagainst each other in a race for funding, encouraging speed over caution. Locomotives, rails, and spikes were shipped from the East through Panama or around South America to the West or lugged across the country to the Plains. In Ambrose's hands, this enterprise, with its huge expenditure of brainpower, muscle, and sweat, comes vibrantly to life.

Richly readable...[Stephen Ambrose] bears the reader on shoulders of wonder and excitement. (Henry Kisor The New York Times Book)This magnificent tale of high finance, low finagling, and workers hacking through 2,000 miles is magnificently told. (Time, naming Nothing Like It in the World as the #1 Nonfiction Book of the Year)Climb aboard...this lively tale, a colorful, edifying story of U.S. history....Ambrose is the bard of American accomplishment. (Conn Nugent New York Post)Stephen Ambrose has done it again....Ambrose should be read as much for his muscular prose and talent to get at the heart of the matter as for his research. (Bob Minzesheimer, USA Today Historian)About the AuthorStephen E. Ambrose was a renowned historian and acclaimed author of more thanthirty books. Among his New York Times bestsellers are Nothing Like It in the World, Citizen Soldiers, Band of Brothers, D-Day - June 6, 1944, and Undaunted Courage. Dr. Ambrose was a retired Boyd Professor of History at the University of New Orleans and a contributing editor for the Quarterly Journal of Military History.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.Chapter One: Picking the Route 1830-1860August 13, 1859, was a hot day in Council Bluffs, Iowa. The settlement was on the western boundary of the state, just across the Missouri River from the Nebraska village of Omaha. A politician from the neighboring state of Illinois, Abraham Lincoln, went to Concert Hall to make a speech. It attracted a big crowd because of Lincoln's prominence after the previous year's Lincoln-Douglas debates and the keen interest in the following year's presidential election. Lincoln was a full-time politician and a candidate for the Republican nomination for president. The local editor called Lincoln's speech -- never recorded -- one that "set forth the true principles of the Republican party."In the audience was Grenville Mellen Dodge, a twenty-eight-year-old railroad engineer. The next day he joined a group of citizens who had gathered on the big porch of the Pacific House, a hotel, to hear Lincoln answer questions. When Lincoln had finished and the crowd dispersed, W.H.M. Pusey, with whom the speaker was staying, recognized young Dodge. He pointed out Dodge to Lincoln and said that the young engineer knew more about railroads than any "two men in the country."That snapped Lincoln's head around. He studied Dodge intently for a moment and then said, "Let's go meet." He and Pusey strolled across the porch to a bench where Dodge was sitting. Pusey introduced them. Lincoln sat down beside Dodge, crossed his long legs, swung his foot for a moment, put his big hand on Dodge's forearm, and went straight to the point: "Dodge, what's the best route for a Pacific railroad to the West?"Dodge instantly replied, "From this town out the Platte Valley."Lincoln thought that over for a moment or two, then asked, "Why do you think so?"Dodge replied that the route of the forty-second parallel was the "most practical and economic" for building the railroad, which made Council Bluffs the "logical point of beginning."Why? Lincoln wanted to know."Because of the railroads building from Chicago to this point," Dodge

answered, and because of the uniform grade along the Platte Valley all the way to the Rocky Mountains.Lincoln went on with his questions, until he had gathered from Dodge all the information Dodge had reaped privately doing surveys for the Rock Island Railroad Company on the best route to the West. Or, as Dodge later put it, "He shelled my woods completely and got all the information I'd collected."The transcontinental railroad had been talked about, promoted, encouraged, desired for three decades. This was true even though the railroads in their first decades of existence were rickety, ran on poorly laid tracks that gave a bone-crushing bump-bump-bump to the cars as they chugged along, and could only be stopped by a series of brakemen, one on top of each car. They had to turn a wheel connected to a device that put pressure on the wheels to slow and finally to stop. The cars were too hot in the summer, much too cold in the winter (unless one was at the end nearest the stove, which meant one was too hot). The seats were wooden benches set at ninety-degree angles that pained the back, the buttocks, and the knees. There was no food until the train stopped at a station, when one had fifteen or fewer minutes to buy something from a vendor. The boiler in the engine was fired by wood, which led to sparks, which sometimes -- often -- flew back into a car and set the whole thing on fire. Bridges could catch fire and burn. Accidents were common; sometimes they killed or wounded virtually all passengers. The locomotives put forth so much smoke that the downwind side of the tracks on the cars was less desirable and it generally was on the poorer side of town, thus the phrase "the wrong side of the tracks."Nevertheless, people wanted a transcontinental railroad. This was because it was absolutely necessary to bind the country together. Further, it was possible, because train technology was improving daily. The locomotives were getting faster, safer, more powerful, as the cars became more comfortable. More than the steamboat, more than anything else, the railroads were the harbinger of the future, and the future was the Industrial Revolution.In 1889, Thomas Curtis Clarke opened his essay on "The Building of a Railway" with these words: "The world of to-day differs from that of Napoleon more than his world differed from that of Julius Caesar; and this change has chiefly been made by railways."That was true, and it had happened because of the American engineers, one of whom said, "Where a mule can go, I can make a locomotive go." The poetry of engineering, which required both imagination to conceive and skill to execute, was nowhere more in evidence than in America, where it was the most needed. In England and Europe, after George Stephenson launched the first locomotive in 1829, little of significance in design change took place for the next thirty years. In America nearly everything did, because of the contempt for authority among American engineers, who invented new ways to deal with old problems regardless of precedent.America was riper than anywhere else for the railroad. It gave Americans "the confidence to expand and take in land far in excess of what any European nation or ancient civilization had been able successfully to control," as historian Sarah Gordon points out. The railroad promised Americans "that towns, cities, and industries could be put down anywhere as long as they were tied to the rest of the Union by rail."Between 1830 and 1850, American engineers invented the swiveling truck. With it placed under the front end of a locomotive, the engine could run around curves of almost any radius. It was in use in 1831 on the Mohawk and Hudson Railroad. There was nothing like it in England. So too equalizing beams or levers, by means of which the weight of the engine was borne by three of the four driving-wheels, which kept the train on rough tracks. Or the four-wheeled swiveling trucks, one under each end of a car, which let the freight or passenger cars follow the locomotives around the sharpest curves. Another American invention was the switchback, making it possible for the locomotives to chug their way up steep inclines.Something else distinguished the American railway from its English parent. In America it was common practice to get the road open for traffic in the cheapest manner possible, and in the least possible time. The attitude was, It can be fixed up and improved later, and paid for with the earnings.The wooden bridge and wooden trestle were invented by Leonardo da Vinci in the sixteenth century and put to use for railways by American engineers beginning in 1840. The Howe truss, invented by an American, used bolts, washers, nuts, and rods so that the shrinkage of new timber could be taken up. It had its parts connected in such a way that they were able to bear the heavy, concentrated weight of locomotives without crushing. Had the Howe truss bridges not tended to decay or burn up, they would still be in use today.The railways made America. Everyone knew that. But there was much left to do. Henry V. Poor, editor of the American Railroad Journal, wrote a year before the Lincoln-Dodge meeting, "In a railroad to the Pacific we have a great national work, transcending, in its magnitude, and in its results, anything yet attempted by man. By its execution, we are to accomplish our appropriate mission, and a greater one than any yet fulfilled by any nation." The mission was, he summed up, to establish "our empire on the Pacific, where our civilization can take possession of the New Continent and confront the Old."Obviously Dodge wasn't the only engineer who did surveying on the west side of the Missouri River. But he envisioned and convinced Lincoln that the transcontinental railroad should be on a road running almost straight out the forty-second parallel from Omaha, alongside the Platte Valley until it reached the Rocky Mountains and then over the mountains to meet the railroad coming east from California. With help from many others, Dodge and Lincoln inaugurated the greatest building project of the nineteenth century.Lincoln's first query to Dodge -- the best route for a Pacific railroad -- was, next to slavery, the foremost question in his mind. He was one of the great railroad lawyers in the West. Born on February 12, 1809, to frontier parents, Lincoln had grown up poor. He educated himself and became a lawyer -- a "self-made man," in the words of his political hero, Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky. At age twenty-three, he had entered politics as a candidate for the Illinois state legislature over an issue that would remain with him for the rest of his life, railroads.

There was a plan in the legislature to build a railroad from the Illinois River to Springfield. In a campaign speech Lincoln declared that "no other improvement...can equal in utility the rail road." It was a "never failing source of communication" that was not interrupted by freezing weather, or high or low water. He admitted that there was a "heart-stopping cost" to building a railroad, however.Lincoln lost the election, running eighth in a field of thirteen candidates. But his campaign speech was remarkable. The Rocket, built in Britain by George Stephenson, had undergone its first successful trial at Rainhill in 1829, only two years earlier. The first American train, The Best Friend of Charleston, made its initial run in 1830, the second, The Mohawk Hudson, in 1831. But that year the twenty-two-year-old Lincoln, with less than a year of formal education, was contemplating a railroad in Illinois and was right on the mark about the advantages and disadvantages it would bring, even though, like most Americans and all those living west of the Appalachian Mountains, he had never seen one. He had read about trains in the Eastern newspapers, but his travels had been limited to horseback or buggy, raft or boat.The American future was hitched to this new thing, to conquer the distance across the continent which was so vast. There were bountiful farm lands that were waiting for immigrants to turn the soil. But without railroads or rivers there was no way to move products of any size from the territories in the West to markets on the East Coast or in Europe. As early as 1830, William Redfield (eighteen years later elected the first president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science), who maintained a lifelong interest in railroads, published a pamphlet in New York City proposing a railroad to cross the country to the Mississippi, with extensions going on to the Pacific.In 1832, the Ann Arbor Emigrant in Michigan called for a railroad from New York City to the Great Lakes, then over the Mississippi River and on to the Missouri River, then up the Platte, over the mountains, and on to Oregon. Lincoln and nearly every person in the United States wanted it done. The agitation grew over the nearly three decades between 1830 and Lincoln's meeting with Dodge in Council Bluffs. The 1830 population was 12.8 million. By 1840, it was up to seventeen million. By 1850, it had grown to twenty-three million, putting the United States ahead of Great Britain. Then it jumped up to thirty-one million by 1860.Lincoln was a gifted pilot on Western rivers and eager to build canals -- in 1836, when he was in the legislature, he cast the deciding vote for a bill to authorize the state to loan $500,000 to support the bonds of the Illinois and Michigan Canal. But even more, he wanted those railroads, which had so many advantages over canals, and he wanted the federal government to let the state use the sale of public lands to raise the money to promote railroads.Lincoln was ahead of but still in touch with his fellow citizens. By 1835, "railroad fever" had swept America. It was inevitable in a country that was so big, with so many immigrants coming in, creating a desperate need for transportation. Despite the limitations of the first trains -- their cost, their unproved capabilities, their dangers -- everyone wanted one. Railroads were planned, financed, laid throughout the East and over the mountains. Even though the Panic of 1837 slowed building considerably, by 1840 nearly three thousand miles of track had been laid in the United States, already more than in all of Europe.So many people and so much land. And the locomotive was improving year by year, along with the track and passenger and freight cars -- trains were getting faster, safer, easier to build. By 1850, the lantern, cowcatcher, T-rail, brakes, skill of the engineers, and more improvements made a transcontinental railroad feasible. Pennsylvania, with enormous deposits of both coal and iron, had more rail manufactures than all of England.As one observer noted, "The key to the evolution of the American railway is the contempt for authority displayed by our engineers." The engineers were there to build a transcontinental railroad, as they had built so many tracks, curves, and bridges by the beginning of 1850. The country owned so much land that paying for a railroad was no problem -- just create a corporation and give it so much land for every mile of track it laid. Lincoln was a strong proponent; in 1847, just before beginning his only term in Congress, he wrote a letter to the IL Journal that supported the Alton and Sangamon Railroad and called it "a link in a great chain of rail road communication which shall unite Boston and New York with the Mississippi." He also strongly urged the United States to give 2,595,000 acres of land adjacent to the proposed road to Illinois, to enable the state to grant that land to the IC.In a complicated case for the Alton and Sangamon, Lincoln won a decision before the Illinois Supreme Court that was later cited as precedent in twenty-five other cases throughout the United States. With seven hundred miles north and south through the state, with a branch to Chicago, the IC was the longest line in the world. The following year, 1852, he defended the yet-unfinished Illinois Central in a case involving the right of the state legislature to exempt the railroad company from county taxes. Not until January 1856 (the year the IC was completed) did the Illinois Supreme Court deliver a decision that accepted Lincoln's argument that the railroad was exempt. Lincoln handed the IC a bill for $2,000. The railroad rejected it, claiming, "This is as much as Daniel Webster himself would have charged." Lincoln submitted a revised bill for $5,000. When the corporation refused to pay, he brought suit and won.Lincoln was at the forefront of the burst of energy created by the combination of free lands, European immigration, capitalists ready to risk all, and the growth of railroads. As a lawyer who had to ride the circuit on horseback or in a buggy, he knew how great was the demand for passenger trains. This was true everywhere, as the nation created railroads east of the Mississippi River at a tremendous pace, with Illinois one of the leaders. In the 1850s, Illinois constructed 2,867 miles of track, more than any other state except Ohio. This transformed the state's economic and social order and presented new challenges for the Illinois legal system.Lincoln was a leader in the fray over how to establish the first state railroad regulations: What was the responsibility of a railroad to occupants of lands adjoining the track? What was a railroad's relationship with

passengers and shippers? Who should regulate the affairs between stockholders and directors? These and many other questions kept Lincoln involved as he became what an eminent scholar has called "one of the foremost railroad lawyers in the West." He was the main lawyer for the IC in tax cases, in what has been characterized as "Lincoln's greatest legal achievement,...the most important of Lincoln's legal services." His cases have been pronounced by scholar Charles Leroy Brown "of extreme delicacy," which Lincoln worked on "quietly, following a program of strategy, maneuver and conciliation," saving the IC millions of dollars in taxes.In 1857, he was thus the natural choice to argue one of the most important cases about railroads. The Rock Island Bridge Company had built the first bridge across the Mississippi River for the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad. This was an innovation of immeasurable proportions, for it meant the country would be able to cross its north-south rivers with railroad tracks, the essential step to building the first transcontinental railroad. But when a steamboat ran into one of the Rock Island's piers, the boat was set on fire and burned up. The owner sued the bridge company. The city of St. Louis and other river interests supported the principle of free navigation for boats, whereas Chicago and the railroad interests stood by the right of railway users to build a bridge.Lincoln represented the Rock Island Bridge Company in the landmark case. He went to the river and examined the rebuilt bridge, measured the currents in the river, and interviewed river men, all based on his experience as a pilot. At the trial he argued that the steamboat had crashed into the bridge because of pilot error, but he also put the case into a broader context, nothing less than national economic development. He pointed out that there was a need for "travel from East to West, whose demands are not less important than that of the river." He said the east-west railroad connection was responsible for "the astonishing growth of Illinois," which had developed within his lifetime to a population of a million and a half, along with Iowa and the other "young and rising communities of the Northwest."The jury deadlocked, and the court dismissed the case. It was thus a victory for the railroad. When an Iowa court later found against the builders and ordered the bridge removed, the Supreme Court overruled and declared that railroads could bridge rivers. Had Lincoln never done another thing for the railroads, he had earned their gratitude on this one.When Lincoln met Dodge in Council Bluffs in 1859, the IC was the largest rail system in the world. The Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad was running trains to the Missouri River and laying tracks on the other side. In January 1860, it ran a small engine on tracks spiked to telegraph poles and laid on the ice over the Missouri. Thus the train came to Kansas and the Great Plains. This was not unexpected. With the improvement of train technology plus the discovery of gold in California, and because of the extreme difficulty of getting to California, there was an overwhelming demand for a transcontinental railroad.In 1853, Congress had called for a survey of possible routes. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, of Mississippi, sent out four teams of surveyors to explore alternatives from the north, near the Canadian border, to the south, near the Mexican, from the forty-ninth parallel on the north to the thirty-second on the south. They did path-breaking work, and eventually a railroad would be built over each route. Their work was published in eleven large volumes by the government, with stunning drawings and maps. They did not explore the forty-second parallel.The Pacific railroad surveys did the opposite of what Congress said it wanted. They presented a much more favorable picture of Western climate and resources than had previously been assumed. What was thought of as "The Great American Desert," they reported, turned out to be ready for settlement, or at least much of it, with fine agricultural lands and a wealth of minerals. Further, the surveys showed that not one but several practical routes for railroads existed.The explorers could not settle the question of where to build. Slavery made it impossible. Davis wanted the thirty-second-parallel line. He maintained that a route from New Orleans through southern Texas, across the southern parts of the New Mexico and Arizona Territories, and on to San Diego was the obvious one, because it would cross the fewest mountains and encounter the least snow. That was true. But no free-state politician was ready to provide a charter or funds for a railroad that would help extend slavery. The Free-Soilers wanted Chicago or St. Louis or Minneapolis as the eastern terminus, but no slave-state politician was willing to give it to them.That is why Lincoln's question to Dodge was inevitably an integral part of the question of slavery's future in the American Republic, an economic question that was also the burning political and overwhelmingly moral question of the day. Lincoln, meanwhile, was about to accept seventeen lots in Council Bluffs as collateral for a loan he was considering making to fellow attorney Norman Judd. So he was in Iowa, among other reasons, to see for himself if the lots were worthwhile as collateral. The answer to that question was the railroad potential of the Great Plains.The day he met Lincoln, Grenville Dodge was twenty-eight years old. Born April 12, 1831, in Massachusetts, the son of a common laborer, he had worked on his first railroad at age fourteen, as a surveyor for Frederick Lander, who became one of the ablest surveyors in the exploration of the West. Lander was impressed by Dodge and told him to go to Norwich University in Vermont to become an engineer. He also gave Dodge his first vision of a Pacific railroad.In 1848, Dodge entered Norwich, where the enthusiasm for railroad expansion was at a fever pitch. He found a faculty in Norwich who were, in his words, "filled with enthusiasm for expansion of railroads from the Atlantic to the Pacific." Like them, Dodge was also strong for steam power. In his diary in the fall of 1850, he wrote: "Forty-three years ago to-day, on October 12, 1807, Fulton made his first steamboat trip up the Hudson River. How wonderful has been the effect of his discovery. In the short space of forty-three years steam power has revolutionized the world." Two months later, Dodge moved to Illinois, where the Rock Island was just getting ready to grade for the track. He worked for the Rock Island and other railroads. All travel to the West was still over the Indian trails and the plank

roads and down the canal. There was much to do.In January 1852, Dodge went to work for the IC. The railroad drove up the price of lands per acre from $1.25 to $6 in 1853, and to $25 by 1856, the year it was completed. But the twenty-one-year-old Dodge was more interested in the Rock Island's construction to the west than in the IC headed south. He quit the IC in 1853 and went back to work with the Rock Island, writing his father, "It is the true Pacific road and will be built to Council Bluffs and then on to San Francisco -- this being the shortest and most feasible route."He was right about part of this. The Chicago, Rock Island was the first railroad to cross Illinois from Chicago to the Mississippi River. Henry Farnam, who had railroad experience in Connecticut, and Chicago resident Joseph Sheffield had done a survey westward from Rock Island. In 1852, they made another survey across Iowa, this time for the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad, organized by the Rock Island with Peter A. Dey as engineer.In the autumn of 1852, Dodge made an application to Dey. Dey later said that he took Dodge on that fall and "very soon I discovered that there was a good deal in him. I discovered a wonderful energy. If I told him to do anything he did [it] under any and all circumstances. That feature was particularly marked. He so enhanced my opinion of him that in May, 1853, when I came out to Iowa City to make surveys from Davenport west, I took him with me." Since Dey was one of the best railroad engineers in the country, if not the best, that was gratifying. Dodge called Dey "the most eminent engineer of the country, [a man] of great ability, [known for] his uprightness and the square deal he gave everyone." Dey put the youngster to work on a construction party, then as a surveyor across Iowa for the MM.Iowa was a natural link between the roads being pushed west from Chicago and any road crossing the Missouri River. When Chicago became a railroad center, Iowa became the necessary bridge between the Midwest and the Far West. The MM had made a bargain with the Davenport and Iowa City Railroad by promising to complete the main line from Davenport to Iowa City in two years. Two weeks after this agreement, Dey went to work, with Dodge helping. Then Dodge went surveying on his own, west of Iowa City, with the Missouri River as his destination.It was 1853. Dodge led a party of fourteen men, including a cook and a hunter. He hoped to make the Missouri before the snow fell. His expenses ran to $1,000 per month. He was pleased by the opportunity and overjoyed at the wilderness he was entering. He wrote his father, "Oh, that you could come out and overtake me on the prairies of Iowa, look at the country and see how we live." He was also ready to seize the main chance: he told his father, "We shall make an examination of the great Platte as far into Nebraska as we think fit."Dodge loved the flaming sumac, the gold tinge of the willows, the turning leaves on the cottonwood beside the rivers, and on the elms, black oak, and hard maple, the silvered wild grass, the variety and numbers of animals. All were fascinating to the young engineer from New England. He saw his first Western Indians, a group of Otoes, who fled. On a late afternoon in November, Dodge, on a solitary horseback reconnaissance in advance of his party, drew up at the edge of a great crescent of cliffs and beheld the river that thereafter always held him in thrall.The Missouri was sprawled out on the floodplain that twisted and turned, gnawing at the sandbars in its sweep between the villages of Omaha and Council Bluffs. The Mormons had arrived at the latter in their wanderings in 1846 and left in 1852, en route to Salt Lake City. This reduced the population of Council Bluffs from six thousand to fewer than twenty-five hundred (Omaha had about five hundred residents). But Dodge knew, at his first glance, that here was the site for the eastern terminus for the first transcontinental. On November 22, 1853, his party caught up with him, the first surveying party to traverse Iowa from east to west. There would be others, and a race was on, but it would be fourteen years before a train crept into Council Bluffs, even as the Union Pacific reached out from Omaha into the mountains.Dodge crossed the Missouri on a flatboat. On the western side, he had the party continue to scout while he went on ahead to examine the country to the Platte Valley, some twenty-five miles farther west. Dodge went up the Platte, looked around and studied its bank, and liked what he saw.Dodge asked every immigrant he ran into, plus the voyagers and Indians, for all the information they could furnish on the country farther west. On the way home he took out a claim on the Elkhorn River. It was the first major tributary of the Platte, only twenty or so miles west of Omaha.Having completed the location of the MM, Dodge took a leave and went back to Illinois to marry Anne Brown on May 28, 1854. The couple then returned to his claim on the Elkhorn, where he built a cabin and took out claims for his father and his brother, who joined him in March 1855. Together they plowed the virgin prairie and began to farm. Emigrants crossing Nebraska in 1855 never saw a white man's house between the Dodge cabin on the Elkhorn and Denver.In July 1855, two exhausted and seriously ill men rode up to Dodge's cabin on spent horses. Dodge was amazed; one of them was Frederick Lander, the man who had influenced him to go to Norwich University. He welcomed Lander and his companion, helped them off their horses and into the cabin, nursed them, and got their story. Lander said he had been surveying for the government from Puget Sound, in the Washington Territory, to the Missouri River, that he had started with six men but only he and the man with him had survived. Still, he had completed his survey.That evening, Dodge and Lander sat on the banks of the Elkhorn, watching the fireflies and talking railroads. "Dodge," Lander said, "the Pacific railroad is bound to be built through this valley and if it doesn't run through your claim, I'll be badly mistaken.""I've already figured that it will," Dodge replied. "How else could it go from the Missouri River if built this far north?"Lander reported that Jefferson Davis, the secretary of war, didn't want the railroad to be so far north. "He wants the Pacific railroad to be to the south. I'm going to oppose his views as soon as I get to Washington."And he did. Davis had reports that stressed the thirty-second parallel as quicker, cheaper, and more dependable than any of the others. Lander, in his report, made a frank comparison of the route from the thirty-second and the one from the forty-

second (which would make Omaha or its vicinity the eastern terminus). "The northern route is longer than the southern," he confessed, "but of central position, it can be more readily defended in time of war; it can be more cheaply constructed; and, when built, will command and unite important and conflicting public and private interests." He also pointed to a further and enormous advantage -- the railroad would stay on flat ground, near water, by following the valley of the Platte.Dodge agreed. He sought the route using the private funds of Farnam and railroad promoter Dr. Thomas Durant, who had interests in the Rock Island. In 1856, Dodge had made a private survey up the Platte Valley to and beyond the Rocky Mountains, and reported to his financiers. Farnam and Durant set out to induce Eastern capital to help complete the road across Iowa, then across the Missouri River into Nebraska and farther west. On the basis of Dodge's reports, they selected Council Bluffs as the place for the Rock Island to end and the Pacific railroad, when the government decided to build it, to begin. This was an adroit and far-seeing move in 1857, and it induced Dodge to make a claim across the Missouri River and near the town of Council Bluffs. Railroad activity was down, however, because of the Panic of 1857.But this economic downturn must be kept in perspective. In the 1850s, an average of 2,160 miles of new track was laid every year. More miles of track were laid in the United States, mainly in the north, than in all the rest of the world, and by 1859 just under half of the world's railroad tracks would be in the various states of the Union. The brand-new rail network would carry some 60 percent of all domestic freight.The growth of railroads in the United States had been astonishing. The tracks more than doubled in each decade. In 1834, there were but 762 miles. In 1844, it was up to 4,311 miles. By 1854, the trackage numbered 15,675 miles. On January 1, 1864, the amount of completed railway had grown to 33,860 miles, with sixteen thousand more miles under construction, most of it in the Northern states.In 1858, Farnam and Durant -- who had a medical degree but never practiced and instead operated on Wall Street, where he was called "Doc" -- asked Dodge to visit them in New York City, at the office of the Rock Island Railroad, located over the Corn Exchange Bank. Dodge thus was present at a meeting of the board of directors, where a secretary read his report on the Platte route. "Before he was half through," Dodge reported, "nearly every person had left the room, and when he had finished only Mr. Farnam, Doc Durant, the reader and myself were present." Dodge had heard one of the directors say "he did not see why they should be asked to hear such nonsense." But Dodge told the two remaining directors: "I believe your road will draw the bulk of emigration crossing the Missouri. From Council Bluffs it will then go up the north side of the Platte River along the Mormon trail. The Pacific railroad is bound to be built along this trail."Farnam and Durant believed him. And they acted on that belief, saying they felt "that if they could stimulate interest in the Pacific road it would enable them to raise funds to complete their line across the State." Dodge went to work making a grade east from Council Bluffs.By no means was anything, much less everything, settled, even though in 1856 both political parties had advocated the transcontinental railroad in resolutions. But whether there would be a Pacific railroad as long as the United States remained half slave, half free, was a long way from being decided. "Can we, as a nation, continue together permanently -- forever -- half slave, and half free?" Lincoln had written to a Kentucky correspondent in 1855. If the country did not change, no one could tell where or if the Pacific railroad would run.But if the railroad was to be built beside the Platte River, it was the buffalo and the Indians who first picked it out. Then it was used by the mountain men and the fur traders, then by the travelers on the Oregon Trail, then it became the route for the Mormon emigrant trains and their handcarts. It was called the Great Platte Valley Route. Lander and Dodge had seen immediately that this was the route for the Pacific railroad. Dodge once remarked that any engineer who overlooked the Platte Valley route as a natural highway to the mountains was not fit to follow the profession.Peter Dey almost agreed. "Dodge and I read up everything on this subject," he declared. "We read all the government reports of everything that had been discovered regarding the routes across the continent. Dodge was deeply interested in them and I was to a considerable extent....He made his claim on the Elkhorn river...[because] it was his belief that the Platte valley would be the line." But Dey wasn't ready to go as far as Dodge. He said that Dodge had "taken a great fancy to the Missouri River" and that the sprawling, muddy stream held a fascination for him: "He always felt at home along its shores."Dodge, meanwhile, was collecting oral and written information about the country west of his farm and studying the routes from the Missouri River to the Pacific Coast. He drew up his own map of the country, "giving the fords and where water and wood could be found, etc." He called it "the first map of the country giving such information."The old MM had new directors in 1856. They got started by telling the citizens of Pottawattamie County (where Council Bluffs is located) that if the citizens would vote for a $300,000 bond issue for the railroad, they would begin to grade for track eastward across Iowa. Then they crossed the river to Omaha to tell the citizens that, for a $200,000 bond issue from them for the MM, work would start in Council Bluffs during the year. The Council Bluffs bonds were voted June 13, 1857, but in October the road went into the hands of receivers because the Panic of 1857 caused everything to fall through. Western Iowa and eastern Nebraska saw land that had boomed to $7 an acre fall to $1.In 1858, Dodge decided to move across the river and make his permanent home in Council Bluffs, where he went into banking, milling, merchandising, contracting, freighting, and real estate -- a good indication of how varied were the interests of businessmen in the Missouri River towns in the late fifties. He bought lots in the "Riddle Tract," down on the Missouri River floodplain, the same location as the lots Lincoln was willing to assume in 1859 as collateral.The Council Bluffs Bugle was very suspicious. "It has been rumored that G. M. Dodge, in consequence of being so largely interested in

the Riddle Tract, was bound to make his surveys in such manner as would insure his own investments." Dodge was buying for the MM, which wanted to retain a portion of the land for the road's shops and yards and to subdivide the remainder and place them on the market. Norman Judd, attorney for the MM and a legal and political associate of Lincoln, borrowed the money from Lincoln to buy seventeen lots for $3,500, using the lots as collateral.In the spring of 1859, Dodge went up the valley of the Platte on a third survey for Henry Farnam of the Rock Island. He got back to Council Bluffs on August 11, the day before Lincoln arrived in town. Lincoln had been making some political speeches in Iowa and Nebraska. When he reached St. Joseph, Missouri, he could have taken the only line of railroad across the state to return to Illinois, but instead he had gone aboard a stern-wheel steamboat that toiled up the Missouri River for nearly two hundred miles to Council Bluffs. Lincoln wanted to check out what the situation was with regard to the Pacific railroad, because of -- as J. R. Perkins, Dodge's first biographer, noted -- "his far-seeing plans to identify himself with the building of the great transcontinental railroad."The Republican paper in town, the Nonpareil, gave Lincoln a warm welcome, saying that "the distinguished 'Sucker' [Iowa slang for someone from Illinois] has yielded to the solicitations of our citizens and will speak on the political issues of the day at Concert Hall. The celebrity of the speaker will most certainly insure him a full house. Go and hear old Abe."The next morning, Lincoln, his friends the Puseys, and other citizens of the town strolled up a ravine to the top of the bluff, to view the landscape. From the point where he stood, now marked with a stone shaft and a placard, the vast floodplain of the Missouri stretched for twenty miles north and south and for four miles to the west, to Omaha. What he saw was similar to what Lewis and Clark had seen fifty-five years earlier, in 1804, when they stood on the same bluff. (Their visit is also marked by a statue and a placard.) In 1859 as in 1804, there were no railroad tracks crossing each other, no houses, only unbroken fields of wild grass and sunflowers, but there were a few streets in the rapidly growing village of Omaha running up and down the river hills.It is unknown whether Lincoln knew Lewis and Clark had been there. Certainly he knew that they were the first Americans to cross the continent, east to west, and that they had reported there was no all-water route.To his friend Pusey, Lincoln said, "Not one, but many railroads will center here." The next day, in answer to his question, he learned from Dodge how right he had been. He thus began an association with Dodge that would make the two of them the great figures of the Union Pacific Railroad.In 1859, one of the most prominent newspaper editors in America, Horace Greeley -- founder and editor of the New York Tribune -- made a famous trip west to California. He published his account of the trip in his 1860 book An Overland Journey from New York to San Francisco in the Summer of 1859. "Let us resolve to have a railroad to the Pacific -- to have it soon," he wrote. "It will add more to the strength and wealth of our country than would the acquisition of a dozen Cubas." He said he had made the long, fatiguing journey in order to "do something toward the early construction of the Pacific Rail road; and I trust that it has not been made wholly in vain." But he also said that part of the route he covered, the part over the Humboldt Valley in Nevada and in the desert beyond, was unfit for human life. "I thought I had seen barrenness before," he wrote, but in that territory "famine sits enthroned, and waves his scepter over a dominion expressly made for him."Dodge returned to Council Bluffs, but not to his businesses. He wanted to build the railroad to the Pacific; he loved doing surveys through virgin country; he loved the life of the camp. He continued to roam up the Platte. Lincoln went into the race for the Republican nomination for president. Norman Judd, who was working for him, wrote to Dodge in May 1860, "I want you to come to the Republican convention at Chicago and do what you can to help nominate Lincoln." Dodge did, along with a strong group of Iowa delegates who were connected with the Rock Island line, including H. M. Hoxie of Des Moines, who later received the contract to construct the first one hundred miles of the Union Pacific; John Kasson of Des Moines, attorney for the railroad and a prominent Republican; J. B. Grinnell, who founded the town and college of Grinnell along the route of the MM; and others.In Chicago, Dodge and most of the Iowa delegates joined with other railroad men who considered Lincoln's nomination and election as vital to their plans to build the Pacific road west from Council Bluffs along the forty-second parallel. They included John Dix, president of the Rock Island, Durant, Farnam, Judd, and others. Together, they were able to get John Kasson to write the railroad plank for the Republican platform, calling for the government to support a transcontinental railroad. Along with all the railroad men from Illinois, they worked where and how they could for Lincoln -- who was appreciative, of course, but who had bigger things on his mind than even the transcontinental railroad, starting with slavery. Dodge, Judd, and the others used every opportunity to let the Iowa and Illinois delegates know that with Lincoln the nation would have a president whose program was bound to include the building of the Pacific railroad along the line of the forty-second parallel.On issues that had nothing directly to do with the transcontinental railroad, Lincoln was elected. In all the excitement that followed, the railroad men stayed at work. Peter Reed, a friend of Dodge from Moline, went to Springfield, Illinois, and on December 14, 1860, wrote to Dodge. He said he had had a private audience with Lincoln and "I called his attention to the needs of the people of Nebraska and the western slope of Iowa. I said to him that our interest had been badly neglected. I told him that I expected to see some men from Council Bluffs in regard to this matter and that you were one of them. He said that his sympathies were with the border people, as he was a border man himself. I think that we are all right with Mr. Lincoln, especially as we have N. B. Judd with us."Dodge wanted to add his own weight. In early March 1861, just before Lincoln's inauguration, he joined Farnam and Durant to go to Washington. He wrote his wife, "I came here with Farnam, Durant [and some others] and we are busy before the railroad committees.

Compromise measures have passed the House but will be killed in the Senate."Dodge's group was in the capital on the eve of civil war, contending for a single route for the Pacific railroad, to run from Council Bluffs straight west. Judd was there and helping, although his mind was more on getting the ambassadorship to Germany (which he did). Taking into account all that was going on around Lincoln's inaugural, it seems near impossible that Dodge and the others were there arguing for their own version of the railroad -- but it was happening. Lincoln, on the train from Springfield as he headed east, had taken a turn at driving the locomotive.Dodge went to the inaugural and told his wife, "Old Abe delivered the greatest speech of the age. It is backbone all over." Then he got to the point: "It looks as though we can get all our measures through and then I'll make tracks for home."Two weeks after Lincoln's inauguration, Dodge and two office-seekers called on Lincoln to press the railroad. Dodge wrote his wife, "Politically the skies are dark. Lincoln has a hard task before him, but he says that he thinks he can bring the country out all right....I have carried all my points except one."Dodge went off to New York, where he agreed to drop his personal business in Council Bluffs and identify himself with the Rock Island railroad. Almost a month later, on April 12, 1861, the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter and the Civil War was under way. Dodge put the railroad aside and joined the army. Holding the country together north and south was more important to him than linking it together east and west. But the latter aim never left his mind, or Lincoln's.Copyright 2000 by Ambrose-Tubbs, Inc.