

The Many Worlds of District 1, Part X: Mr. Choo-choo (a)

In 1869, on an iron track through the ancient valley that marks the western edge of District 1, a strange creature invaded McLean Township. It made an awful din well before it first chugged past the marshes at Pig's Eye, as speculators bought up land, organizers set up companies and lobbied politicians, lawyers drafted proposals, surveyors plotted the course, federal grants bestowed right of way, work crews flattened and graded the roadbed and dynamite shattered obstructions to its path.

Highway 61 wasn't a highway then. It was a narrow dirt road lined by log cabins and barns. Cottonwoods and other trees conversant with water dotted the grassy fields that flooded each year with the Mississippi's overflow. The river known as Messipi (Big River) to the Ojibway would now lie in the shadow of this white man's creation, this black alien of giant wheels and vapor that huffed its way to a nexus where the city of St. Paul and the riverboat traffic met.

[photo of train]

"The chariot wheels of time piloted by the scions of the Iron Horse, traversing through the primitive wilderness of the Northwest, making the solitary places glad and blossoming as a rose..."

~ Mark Fitzpatrick, *The St. Paul Shopping News*,
Reporting on a speech by rail developer, Joseph L. Shiely

Birth of the beast

There were numerous midwives to the delivery of a viable railroad system in Minnesota and much struggle before the completion of a line that originated in Milwaukee, worked its way across Wisconsin toward La Crosse, slipped across the river, then followed the Minnesota side of the Mississippi past Hastings and through McLean Township, ending in a steamy sweat at the Lower Landing of St. Paul.

Railroads are an expensive business, and their coming into existence requires capital of a magnitude that private investors are often loath or unable to produce. The promoters who conceived Minnesota's first projects were enthusiastic about the prosperity such a modern form of transportation could bring to the region, but they thought that government should provide the land as well as much of the money necessary for construction.

In the years between the country's founding and the Civil War, many states experimented with public financing of large enterprises, particularly those concerning canals and railroads. Such experiments frequently failed as business ventures, and a bias developed against them in the North. But farmers needed the railroad more with every harvest. They heard and read about it and waited for it with increasing impatience as the lonely, prairie years went by.

Breadbasket land had opened to settlement after the 1851 Treaty of Traverse des Sioux. Fertile soil that had never known the violation of a plow began to produce bounteous crops that required a reliable, inexpensive way to the markets of the world. Rivers had long been America's fastest and cheapest network for moving things, but not everyone could live near a river. The farming families, the townspeople who sold goods to the farmers, the bankers and other moneymen who profited from the farmers, the newspaper editors, the manufacturers of tools, the horse and cattle traders, the would-be railroad workers and bridge builders, all clamored for the Railroad.

It seems axiomatic in a democracy that what the majority of the people desire will come to pass, if possible. For many years, the railroad did not seem possible. Settlers in Minnesota Territory watched one chartered company after another sign contracts to build this branch or that line or meet this or that railroad coming from the south or east, only to see their efforts fail, the taxpayer investment squandered and the government forced to foreclose on what assets remained. Throughout the decade of the 1850s, not a single train moved one inch on a single line of track in Minnesota. But it wasn't for lack of trying.

Secret alterations

In 1853, attorneys in New York drafted a railroad bill for consideration by Minnesota Territory on behalf of the Iowa Central Railroad Company and its Wall Street investors. A company formed, the Minnesota & Northwestern Railroad Company, with directors Edmund Rice, Lyman Dayton and Alexander Ramsey. In the bill, Minnesota called on Congress to donate approximately one million acres of land to Minnesota Territory so that the territory could negotiate with railroad companies to finance the extension of the Iowa line. Governor Willis Gorman signed the bill, Congress accepted the proposal, and it became law on June 29, 1854.

However, several seemingly tiny changes had been secretly made between the time the bill was in committee and its passage. Clandestine revisions awarded the land not to the territory but directly to the railroads. The legislation was then rushed through, with many members of Congress unable to reread it. Soon after the bill became law, officers of the rail companies sent in men to cut down valuable timber along the right of way. Governor Gorman and Henry Sibley, among many voices, cried *foul* !

An indignant Congress repealed the law by August 4. But the Supreme Court overturned the repeal. One federal prosecutor, John E. Warren, sued the railroad in Goodhue County, charging that its principals had “felled, cut down, prostrated and killed” 500 oak trees and 500 other trees on a parcel of land equivalent in value to the sum of \$10,010.” However, the U.S. Attorney General conveyed the president’s displeasure about such nitpicking in a letter firing Warren, and the lawsuit died.

The people of Minnesota Territory were less than indignant. After the devious lawmaking was thoroughly exposed in newspaper articles and speeches, the citizens made clear that they didn't much care what it took: they wanted the railroad, *now*, period. “Many voters,” wrote Minnesota historian William Watts Folwell,¹ “were willing to condone any irregularities of procedure, so eager they were for communication with the states.”

[Let us] “show the contrast between having five thousand men at work on the [rail]road, and ten thousand dollars paid out daily, or having no public works going on---in the former case farmers could get cash and a high price for all their products, mechanics, merchants and laborers would find money abundant, land now worth 5 [cent]s per acre would go up to 25\$...the people with one voice [will] sustain those who are willing to fight...[for the railroad].”

~ Letter, rail promoter Edmund Rice to Alexander Ramsey, August 7, 1854

A U.S. Congressional Committee investigation reported that the railroad subsequently did nothing toward construction, that the most prominent member of the corporation was a fugitive from the law, and that it had not been able to discover the names of anyone currently on the board of directors. On January 29, 1855, a Joint Congressional Resolution ignored the committee’s report and refused to annul

the original charter. When news of the revived chance for a railroad reached St. Paul on March 24, “there was a general illumination through the village.”²

The \$5 Million Dollar Loan

In the latter half of the 1850s, “railroad fever” took hold throughout the nation. As immigrants poured into Minnesota Territory, speculative land purchases, ubiquitous paper money, and dubious construction schemes created a financial bubble that finally burst in 1857, leaving the territory in a depression that hit full force in August. Overnight, hard specie was the only acceptable way to pay a debt, and credit disappeared.

Despite enabling legislation, railroad construction came to a halt between the uproar in late summer 1854 and the spring of 1857. Starting from scratch, in March of 1857, the federal government authorized the transfer of 4,500,000 acres to Minnesota Territory to pay for the construction costs of six railroad lines and indicated in general where the lines would go.

On April 27, 1857, Governor Gorman called a special session of the Legislature to deal with formation of the state government, should Minnesota’s petition for statehood be granted. Within an hour of the first gavel, railroad questions took precedence. Lobbyists for this town and that jostled for inclusion along the line. Future customers specified the need to link up with eastern cities like Milwaukee and Chicago as a first priority. The St. Paul newspapers warned of “moneyed vultures” who did not have the interests of the people at heart. In the end, an Omnibus Bill passed, handing over congressional lands to four corporations, all lands to be exempt from taxes as long as the railroads owned them.

The four companies were chartered on May 22, 1857. On May 23, the territory awarded 27 more charters. It was difficult to tell which of them might succeed as sporadic grading took place in the easiest locales during the late spring and early summer of 1857. Then the financial crisis began in earnest and, suddenly, the railroads could not pay workers or buy construction materials. Rail men working on the roadbed refused to continue for the sake of worthless paper script. Suppliers demanded gold for iron, implements, wagons, and wood. New investors could not be found as their predecessors filed for bankruptcy. No buyers bid for the congressional land, even at \$1/acre. Railroad construction again came to a halt.

The depression dragged on through 1858, well after Minnesota attained statehood on May 11, and it became clear to rail promoters that nothing would happen without financial aid from the state, specifically a \$5 million loan. The first state governor, Henry Sibley---a Jeffersonian Democrat who opposed government interference in business---refused to consider the idea, which in any case was unconstitutional. Minnesota had copied word for word a section of the Wisconsin constitution, stipulating “The credit of the State shall never be given or loaned in aid of any individual, association or corporation.”

A non-loan loan

Not to worry, politicians and promoters assured the people. The Minnesota State Constitution could be amended to allow the loan, which would be written such that there would be absolutely no possibility of the citizens of the state ever having to provide one penny of actual money to the railroad.

The proposed amendment would add the following words to Article 9, Section 10 quoted above:

“...except that to aid the four companies in the construction of their roads, special bonds bearing seven percent interest, payable semiannually, should be issued and delivered to an amount not exceeding five millions of dollars as a ‘loan of public credit.’”

The amendment passed on May 6, 1858, yeas 25,023 to nays 6,733. It had been enthusiastically endorsed by St. Paul’s *Pioneer & Democrat* in a series of editorial articles reprinted into a pamphlet.

“The campaign was short, and the amendment carried by an immense majority...There was no Australian ballot law then, and one could ‘vote early and often’ without fear of molestation.”
~ Benjamin Backnumber, *St. Paul Before This*

But Governor Sibley did not believe the debt assurances accepted by the voters, and he agreed to issue \$5 million in state bonds as collateral to about \$20 million in loans floated by the railroads **only** if the state bonds had first priority over all other creditors. He refused to issue state bonds if they were not so protected. Railroad promoters, their lawyers and political friends appealed to the Minnesota Supreme Court, which issued a “Writ of Mandamus” requiring the governor to issue the bonds without priority status. Sibley protested---but acquiesced. He could not, he said, undermine the rule of law in Minnesota.

The railroad companies sold their bonds, guaranteed by the state bonds which were issued from mid-1858 through year end 1859 in amounts totaling \$2,275,000, roughly half the \$5 million. Then, unable to find new buyers for further bonds, the companies defaulted. Creditors immediately demanded payment from the state bonds, something politicians had promised would not happen. According to the original plan, the state was supposed to confiscate whatever assets belonged to the companies if they failed to pay off any bonding debts. But there were no assets. Everything had been sold, traded, given over for debt, plundered, or already used up. The state was on the hook.

[cartoon of gopher train]

Cutline: *This widely-circulated cartoon is the source of Minnesota’s nickname, “The Gopher State.” It depicts politicians on a “special session” wagon---not a railroad---pulled by gophers (promoters), with the track resting on the backs of those who mined railroad construction for gold. At the time of statehood, the gopher was considered, with the blackbird, a pest loathed by farmers and fit only for eradication.*

The voters felt tricked. Many suspected that the railroad companies never intended to build usable track in the first place. Rumors spread that land preparation was spotty, with big gaps where the going was hard, that the grading was often too steep for a train to carry a heavy load, that the route was set down along a crooked line where it was easier to do so, and that, in places, it ran under the high-water level. The state now owned a paltry 240 miles of unconnected trackless paths.

Governor Sibley advised payment of the debt. He was now widely criticized for issuing the bonds, since he apparently had seen the danger others missed. The legislature appointed numerous investigative committees, resulting in six reports and much disagreement. Two new amendments were made to the state constitution, one forbidding any tax be levied to pay off the bonds unless approved by a majority of the voters; another expunged the amendment to Section 10, Article 9 that made the bonds possible in the first place. The amendments were approved by the citizens on November 6, 1860, less than a year before the start of the Civil War. Under no circumstances would the people pay the price of this scam.

As a result, the fledgling state of Minnesota spent over twenty years surrounded by the odor of a bad credit rating and the high interest rates that accompany it. Finally, in 1881, the legislature authorized payment of the debt at half its face value---without the constitutionally required referendum. The state Supreme Court acquiesced.

Meanwhile, the idea of the railroad continued to enthrall the populace. By 1858, the track that eventually would run through District 1 had reached La Crosse from Milwaukee. It was not part of the six railroad lines in Minnesota envisioned by the \$5 million loan project, but it would connect in St. Paul with whatever Minnesotans could finally manage to build.

The Many Worlds of District 1, Part X: Mr. Choo-choo (b)

(Railroad schemes in the 1850s led to naught in Minnesota. Charter companies formed and folded in quick succession, leaving a legacy of debt, dashed hope, and bitter disappointment. Just as the state emerged from a financial crisis that began in 1857, the Civil War intruded upon a frustrated populace, exacting a tremendous toll on the new state's resources. Nevertheless, the dream of a viable railroad system in Minnesota would not die.)

[photo of the "William Crooks," Minnesota's first locomotive]

Try, try again

Like railroads in much of the rest of the country, the rails in Minnesota came into existence piecemeal. Politicians, investors, bankers, and engineers surveyed terrain in all directions, planning routes from Stillwater to St. Paul and on to St. Anthony, from St. Anthony to St. Cloud to Crow Wing, from St. Paul and St. Anthony across the state to Big Stone Lake, from St. Paul to Winona. These frontier routes would become part of a much larger structure, interwoven with established railroads to the east and south like the nervous system of a living organism. In the ten years before Minnesota became a state, its population grew by 3000%. With so many depending on the promise of the railroad, it was unthinkable to abandon the quest. If anything, the pressure to build was more intense. During the winter of 1861, the state legislature agreed to give promoters additional time to accomplish what they had pledged and failed to deliver under the provisions of the \$5 million loan. One of the defaulting companies, the Minnesota & Pacific Railroad, reorganized as the St. Paul & Pacific. Edmund Rice, the most influential of the Minnesota rail organizers, continued as president of the new company and used his considerable talent to attract investors in Ohio, New York, and London---at a time when bad news from Civil War battlefields made it next to impossible to find financial resources for any new enterprise. Rice hired a nationally respected engineer to analyze the track already laid and the feasibility of finishing the 10-mile route between St. Paul and St. Anthony. The company issued \$120,000 in new first mortgage bonds to Ohio bankers at 8% interest and handed over 76,800 acres of land in Hennepin County and St. Paul---a lucrative deal for investors. Work resumed, ending in late June. On July 2, 1862, three trains a day (2 trains on Sunday) began running between the two towns, leaving St. Paul at 5:30 a.m., 9 a.m., and 6 p.m. Tickets were 60 cents one way, and the railroad enjoyed a monopoly on the route. A Burbank stagecoach was put out of business, as was the daily mail wagon.

Wood, smoke, and wonder

The locomotive *William Crooks*, on its first railroad journey from St. Paul to St. Anthony, incited amazement at a distance and dismay at close range. The line rolled past farmland along the ten miles between the two stations, and farm buildings were close to the tracks. The metal grinding of the wheels was deafening, especially when accompanied by a screeching whistle designed to warn anyone in the way. Livestock panicked and ran in all directions, often colliding with fences and barns. Women complained of sullied laundry on backyard lines. The smelly soot of burning wood was disgusting; its copious ash left a black film on vegetables in the garden. Many complainers felt the railroad “ought to be packed up and sent back down the river at the earliest opportunity.”³

*“With engineer Webster Gardner at the throttle, the No 1 chuffed away from the [St. Paul] depot amid a swirl of wood smoke and noisily ascended the long grade up out of the river basin to the prairie beyond.”*²

~ Richard S. Prosser, *Rails to the North Star*

But naysayers were a minority. By 1862, St. Paul and St. Anthony had more than 20,000 people each, and the railroad allowed easy travel and communication. Local commerce improved. Investments in land near the stations paid off. It was even said that husbands out for a night of carousing would take the train to the opposite town to escape recognition in their home environs.

By 1863, an economic rivalry flared between St. Paul and the yet unincorporated town of Minneapolis, located just west of the village of St. Anthony, each vying to be the terminus of major routes. Railroad construction money was hard to find, due to the cost of the war, and not much happened after peace was signed at Appomattox. Then bankers made money available again, and the largely Irish “iron gangs” crews returned to work. On September 4, 1865, the Minnesota Central Railroad linked Minneapolis to Northfield. The route extended to Faribault later in 1865 and then on toward Owatonna. The first all-rail line connecting Minneapolis and Chicago opened in 1867. The St. Paul-Chicago connection took much longer. On December 13, 1869, the first train ran from St. Paul to Hastings, passing through Pig’s Eye.

In 1870, work began on a railroad bridge that crossed the Mississippi at Hastings, and the line continued downriver on the Minnesota side, through a lowland swamp between Hastings and Red Wing, then along the base of the bluffs toward Winona and La Crescent. Passenger service to Red Wing began on October 1, 1870, but beyond that point, the route to Milwaukee was stymied by another rivalry. Which town would host the border crossing, Winona or La Crescent? The politics of that question impeded progress on the link between St. Paul and Milwaukee for another six years. The Milwaukee Road had reached La Crosse in 1858. Winona already had a railroad bridge across the Mississippi, strong enough for passengers but not freight cars. So a new one had to be built, and La Crescent won the privilege. The connection opened on November 26, 1876. The railroad that ran along Pig’s Eye now joined St. Paul with Milwaukee, and from there to Chicago and the rest of the country. Dubbed “The Route of the Hiawathas,” it was more prosaically known as The Milwaukee Road.

The Idea of the Railroad

At a time when the individual “motor car” was yet undreamed of, the swift and dependable, relentlessly charging black stallion known as the “train” represented the ultimate form of freedom in the American imagination. Anyone, man, woman, or child, could travel on it across vast terrain. A person besieged

by troubles or pursued by the law could escape in a puff of smoke. A wife who could endure no more might return to Eastern relatives. An indebted man could hide in a freight car until he reached a place unknown to his creditors. A fledgling business could deliver merchandise to far-off markets. A farmer could transport his crop immediately to the highest bidder. The railroad became a link not only of place to place but of desire to fulfillment. It was liberty incarnate.

Exact Time

But liberty has its price. Sometimes, new liberty means the loss of an old one, like freedom from the tyranny of time. For most of the world's history, time measured itself by nature's clock. The sun or its absence dictated rising (and shining), daylight work, the noonday meal, quittin' time, supper and back-to-bed. On a broad canvas, time outlined the movement of the seasons by the movement of the stars and planets in a night sky that was truly, gloriously dark. The rest was guesswork. A few people carried pocket watches, but the face of a watch indicated how much time had passed since the owner last looked at the dial, not what the owner of another watch would see when he checked the time. Women baked pies and cakes by experiment. Children went to school and congregations gathered to worship by the sound of a bell. There was no such thing as exact time.

“Although there are many fine watches and clocks in Minnesota, the owners of them have heretofore been contented to run them on uncertainty, because there was no way to determine the exact time nearer than a noon mark, which may be some seven or ten minutes from the exact time.”

~ The Pioneer and Democrat, August 16, 1861

“Exact time” arrived in St. Paul on the day of the above pronouncement via the purchase of a precision instrument by one D. C. Greenleaf. Anyone could stop by Greenleaf's shop to correct the reading of his watch. But exact time in St. Paul might differ significantly from exact time in Milwaukee or Chicago. During the 1860s and 70s, the railroads used a new invention, the telegraph, to determine the time in various places; stations mounted a confusing array of clocks for the benefit of passengers who were anxious to make connections. But ticket holders expected trains to be “on time” according to the same schedule everywhere and complained when they were not. Finally, on November 18, 1883, the nation adopted synchronized time according to one-hour zones, in the 15 degree increments of longitude, measured for the 24-hour day from zero longitude in Greenwich, England. American train stations could reduce clock inventory to four, from Atlantic to Pacific; noon in New York equalled 11 a.m. in St. Paul, 10 a.m. in Denver, and 9 a.m. in San Francisco.

“The sun is no longer boss of the job. People, 55 million of them, must eat, sleep and work as well as travel by railroad time.”

~ The Minneapolis Sentinel

Transmitted “by lightning”

In 1860, electrical messages first flew from St. Paul via the telegraph shop owned by a Mr. Winslow. This magical method of communication did not require good weather. It operated on the principle of electromagnetism, according to a system patented independently by a British inventor and the American Samuel Morse in 1837. Morse also invented an encryption code adopted worldwide. Most people did not understand electromagnetism, but they were happy to see the retirement of smoke and mirrors,

swinging lanterns, and fire beacons in favor of a swift “telegram.” In this modern age, the twin inventions of telegraph and train defeated time and distance.

Debris or desecration

The railroad abolished whatever its owners wanted abolished, and few objected. The growing population of the St. Paul area, including those who lived in McLean Township, needed many things and craved many others. Fuel for winter heat and cooking was at the top of the list. So was salt to preserve food. Cloth, nails, guns and ammunition, tools, especially plowshares, wagon wheels, saddles and harnesses, men’s boots, ladies’ finery, medications and liquors, furniture and luxuries like paintings and pianos...the size and weight of cargo multiplied as the cost of steamboat transportation grew on the busy and turbulent Mississippi River. Shipping costs often exceeded an item’s purchase price. Cheaper goods brought in by train ranked high on the public’s scale of value. The white cliffs of St. Paul, permeated by prehistoric caves, ranked pretty low.

So, railroad designers, without public protest, cut into the cliffs to make more room for trains in the rail yards just outside the borders of District 1. In particular, the explosions destroyed part of Carter’s Cave and sealed the rest with debris.

To the natives who led Johnathan Carter inside in 1767, the cave the British explorer later claimed to have “discovered” had long been a sacred site, especially in the autumn when extended families from many days’ walking gathered to bury the bones of their dead, wrapped in buffalo skins, within the mounds directly above the cave. Journeying from as far as the windy Dakota plains to the west, and the Great Lakes to the north and east, chiefs, warriors and medicine men met within the caves’ walls to speak to the Great Spirit and build their council fires. Every year, from the height of the cliffs, they surveyed the vast green bowl that held many other caves and mounds, including those in what would become McLean Township. Looking south, their gaze could follow the river from which the Dakota believed their ancestors emerged. Carter’s Cave probably took form in the last great ice age, when a glacier broke as it reached the edge of a bluff of Trenton Limestone and sent giant fragments crashing to its base of St. Peter Sandstone. A natural arched roof “cathedral”³ resulted. Its highest point penetrated by slivers of the setting sun, its floor partially submerged by a spring-fed lake, and its interior walls decorated over thousands of years with drawings of creatures strange or familiar, including buffalo, birds, and snakes.

Jonathan Carter wrote a vivid description of the cave in his diary, and reports of it spread to England and beyond. Inquisitive pioneers sometimes ventured inside, some defacing the engravings and scratching their own messages. On the first of May, 1867, members of the Minnesota Historical Society celebrated the 100 year anniversary of Carter’s discovery by entering the outer chamber with Indian guides, using boats and candles to survey a space they described as 100 feet long and 40 feet wide. They did not explore several inner chambers which reached to an estimated depth of 200 feet into the cliff.

“About 30 miles below the Falls of St. Anthony...is a remarkable cave. The Indians term it “Wakan Teebe,” that is, the Dwelling of the Great Spirit. ⁴ ...About twenty feet from the entrance begins a lake, the water of which is transparent and extends to an unsearchable distance...I found in this cave many Indian Hieroglyphics which appeared very ancient, for time had nearly covered them with moss, so that it was with difficulty I could trace them... The cave is only accessible by ascending a narrow steep passage that lies near the brink of the river.”

~ Jonathan Carter, *Travel through North America*

In 1869, the St. Paul & Chicago Railroad Company blasted part of the cliff away to make room for tracks, and in 1885 blasted again to make more room, destroying a depth of 75 feet into the bluff. The opening of Carter's Cave disappeared in the ensuing collapse of stone and accumulated rocks and debris. The entrance remained lost for the next 28 years. Then in November 1913, a group of St. Paul men interested in historical restoration financed a reopening, employing "three men, three teams of horses and 50 pounds of dynamite," with the intention of turning the cave into a "beauty spot" alluring to tourists, complete with a "large electric sign placed high on the face of the cliff."⁵ The tourist project went awry, however, and the cave remained unheralded for many decades. Eventually, rocks and dirt obliterated the opening again, and what's left of the cave remains entombed within shouting distance of the railroad tracks.

¹ *A History of Minnesota*, by William Watts Folwell, Volumes I and II; see also *Rails to the North Star* by Richard S. Prosser

² Prosser, *Rails to the North Star*, p. 9

³ Carter used the word "cathedral" to describe the cave during tours in his native England

⁴ Also called "Wakon Tipi"

⁵ Case of the Vanishing Historic Site Or What Happened to Carver's Cave? *St. Paul Dispatch*, 1913, by Charles T. Burnley, reprinted in *Ramsey County History*, Fall 1967, Vol. 4, Number 2.