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A Town That Moved

Sheldahl, Iowa, is located eighteen miles north of Des Moines on a branch line of the Chicago and North Western Railroad. Surveyed and settled early in 1874, in anticipation of the building of a narrow-gauge railroad connecting the capital city with Ames, the little community enjoyed the prospect of becoming a thriving town. The railroad, built by the Polk and Hubbell interests of Des Moines, reached Sheldahl during August of 1874 and was completed to Ames by the fall of that same year.

Sheldahl gave promise of being a prosperous agricultural center. It was surrounded by vast tracts of fertile land, tilled by sturdy pioneers, many of whom had only recently migrated from Norway, Switzerland, and Germany. To be sure there were nearby rival communities, but some were handicapped by lack of railroad facilities. Cambridge, to the east, was a mere center of population. Swede's Point (now Madrid), to the west, was an inland town that did not threaten Sheldahl's potential supremacy. Fifteen miles to the north the growing college town of Ames, by virtue of its distance from the Sheldahl com-

munity, did not loom as a formidable competitor. In fact, about the only rival deserving much consideration was the town of Polk City, located some seven miles south.

From 1874 to 1879 Sheldahl grew and prospered. During this time the North Western company was planning a branch line to Des Moines. When the opportunity of purchasing the Ames-Des Moines narrow-gauge road was presented in 1879 the company welcomed the offer as a comparatively inexpensive method of joining Iowa's capital city with the main line of the North Western between Chicago and Omaha. As soon as possible the newly acquired branch was rebuilt on standard gauge.

With improved railroad facilities, and the growing possibility that Polk City, its principal competitor, might be denied easy access to rail services, the prospects for Sheldahl's future looked bright indeed. Polk City had early agreed to give financial support to the original narrow gauge. As a result of this action, the Polk-Hubbell organization had bound itself by franchise to serve the community for a fifty year period. When the North Western took over the line, the company attempted to avoid the assumed obligations by straightening the line and leaving Polk City several miles from the railroad. A

successful appeal to the courts by the residents of Polk City, however, compelled the railroad company to continue to serve the Polk City area. Although the litigation had not eliminated Sheldahl's nearest competitor from the railroad map, the delays and uncertainties caused by the trial served unquestionably to weaken materially the commercial position previously held by Polk City.

It was not many months later that Sheldahl business men and shippers began having their own difficulties with the new railroad proprietors. The cause of most of the trouble was traceable to alleged discriminations between Sheldahl and other towns. A few of the more prominent residents objected to the rate schedules proposed by the North Western officials.

The possibility of new rail connections in the form of another interstate line served only to increase the demands upon the North Western Company for more favorable treatment. The Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul company had long considered the possibility of a line joining Chicago and Omaha, but it was not until 1880 that final surveys through central Iowa were completed. Originally the plan of the Milwaukee called for crossing the North Western at a point about 80 rods north of the central part of the town of Sheldahl. When the news reached the com-

munity it caused no end of speculation. Perhaps, thought some of the town's leading promoters, this was the "break" that would transform the little town into a center of commercial activity.

Disappointment followed closely in the wake of these optimistic prophecies. Later surveys convinced the Milwaukee officials that it would be highly impracticable to include Sheldahl in its central Iowa itinerary. Unfavorable features of topography along the original route, coupled with the fact that the first survey made it necessary to cross both the Skunk and the Des Moines rivers at disadvantageous points, caused the abandonment of the route in favor of locating the junction at a point a mile and a half north of Sheldahl.

Although most of the prominent men of the community had taken an active part in the agitation to secure better rail services for the Sheldahl area, it became principally the task of one man to attempt to obtain a reversal of the final decision of the Milwaukee company. Oley Nelson was well qualified for the job. Not only was he one of the town's leading citizens, but he was without doubt its most prominent merchant. Consequently it was only natural that he was delegated to solicit the chief officials of the railroad in an attempt to secure more advantageous consideration.

Upon reaching the office of the superintendent

of the road, Nelson stated his case. Wouldn't it be possible, he inquired, to build the line in accordance with the original plans. After hearing Nelson's proposition the superintendent called in the engineer in charge of the surveys. Only one important question was put to this gentleman — "Which route is the shorter?" Upon receiving the answer that the final survey had been made, not only to avoid topographical difficulties, but also to reduce the mileage, the superintendent assured Nelson that he could not recommend a change of present plans. After receiving a pass for the homeward trip, Mr. Nelson returned to Sheldahl. The experience had convinced him that if the town was to benefit by both rail connections, a radical plan of action was necessary.

After the final decision had been made, the Milwaukee lost no time in beginning actual construction. In the summer of 1881 the road was graded. By the following January much of the steel was in place on the section north of Sheldahl. The work continued throughout 1882 and 1883. It was not until 1884, however, that the depot and interlocking plant were finally completed. By that time the name of the junction, Sheldahl Crossing, had become a regular station.

Meanwhile the difficulties between the North Western and the shippers in and around Sheldahl

had not materially changed. A few individuals had rather early sensed the import of the appearance of the new rail competitor. Many had appealed to the Milwaukee for decreased rates, particularly on grain and livestock. The new road seemed willing to oblige. As a result, much produce was hauled over the treacherous mud roads to Sheldahl Crossing, there to be shipped to various marketing centers.

Increased rail business at Sheldahl Crossing gave rise to a few commercial enterprises designed to aid the farmers in their search for more favorable markets. A grain elevator was built in 1885 by J. H. Miller and M. Fread. Not long after, a little grocery store was opened by Knute Cleveland. These two places of business served the needs of the new community admirably. Not only could the farmer find a market for his produce and purchase supplies for the family larder, but he was also able to meet and chat with friends and neighbors. Often the conversation at these informal gatherings turned to a consideration of the possibilities of growth and expansion facing the new community.

An interested spectator, if not a vociferous participant at these meetings, was a Mr. Jenks. His position as owner of most of the land adjacent to the railroad junction caused him to manifest

real concern for the future plans for the young settlement. Mounting interest in a new town led Jenks to divide a part of his farm into city blocks, preparing for the expansion that "cracker-box philosophers" thought was inevitable. A part of his holdings, Jenks segregated to serve as a main street for the future municipality. Apparently the only elements lacking to complete the "town" were dwellings, business houses, and people.

These necessary ingredients were not long in coming. Although the early friction between the residents of Sheldahl and the North Western had been lessened considerably, the wound was not completely healed. Many of the members of the community had become convinced that the present location of the town could not offer nearly the advantages that might be had at the railroad junction. The fact that a good share of the shipping business was going to the Milwaukee seemed to guarantee the eventual superiority of the new location. Many of the Sheldahl progressives were convinced that if they were to retain their position as leaders in the commercial field they could do so more securely by locating at Sheldahl Crossing. To remain in Sheldahl might mean extinction.

In order to present the matter specifically and officially a general meeting was called early in 1887. Here again Oley Nelson assumed a promi-

ment rôle. The general argument in favor of deserting the old town site in favor of the new was presented. Many seconding speeches were heard and much enthusiasm for the change was evidenced. As an added inducement to those less favorably inclined to the proposition, Jenks offered to give a free lot to each resident that would move his house to Sheldahl Crossing. Everything seemed to be going well until some one struck upon the old idea of county patriotism. Sheldahl was located in the joining corners of three counties — Polk, Boone, and Story. The new site was in Story. That very fact proved argument enough for some of the residents of Boone and Polk to veto the proposed move.

The idea gained momentum in spite of the dissension that was early apparent. A few daring souls had already made plans to move soon after the general meeting. Apparently Jenks was not satisfied with the growth of his town for he subsequently offered additional inducements. He agreed to give two lots for churches, an acre for a park, and another acre for a schoolhouse site.

Motivated perhaps by the fact that Nelson had begun actual operations preparatory to moving his general store and grain elevator, many others lost little time in making final preparations for departure. Shortly after the store and elevator were

on the road, the drug store, two buildings belonging to A. W. Anderson, and another owned by Mr. Mikelson, were on the way to their new locations. Later in the same year (1887) others joined the procession.

The following year found many more buildings on the road. Residences, barns, other outbuildings and many of the remaining store buildings that had been located on the north side of Main Street (in Story County) were raised, mounted, and pulled to the new town site. While most of the buildings on the Story side of Main Street were eventually relocated at Sheldahl Crossing, only a very few from the Polk section were moved to the new location.

The practical difficulties of moving were made more hazardous by the uncertainties of roads and weather. The usual procedure was to mount the building on "trucks" and pull the load with the aid of a circular horsepower. Immediately ahead of the building itself the road was planked. It was a laborious task indeed to place those heavy planks. Then, too, it was not possible to proceed far before a resetting of the power apparatus was required. The advantages gained by the device become readily apparent when it is noted that many of the larger buildings, including the grain elevator, were moved the full two miles with only

a single horse. Even with ample power and an adequate labor supply, the job was of comparatively long duration. Often a week was consumed before the task was completed and the records tell of movings that required as long as ten days.

Although a few buildings were moved by the owners themselves, most of the jobs were performed by regular moving contractors. The Meyers Movers of Des Moines and a firm headed by Ferneau of Marshalltown reaped rich financial harvests in the two-year period from 1887 to 1889. Ordinarily these firms furnished both equipment and labor, but often the owner and family were called upon to render needed assistance.

No official count of the actual number of buildings conveyed to Sheldahl Crossing is available. It seems safe to estimate, however, that fifty-two or fifty-three had been moved by the end of the high tide period in the closing months of 1888. After that there were a few buildings still in process of being moved. Most of the transition to the new community had been made by the early months of 1889.

It was an unusual sight that greeted travelers on the North Western trains as they traversed the short distance between the old town and the new location during the last years of the eighties.

Everything was bustling with activity. Men hurried to and fro, laying planks, attaching cables, resetting powers, and encouraging horses to greater efforts. The youngsters, fascinated by the strange work, hung around to see the house move. Occasionally a boy might have been seen hurrying away from the scene of activity, perhaps for a duck in old "Minnie Creek" or perhaps because of the mounting fury of parental wrath at the child's unconsciousness of danger. If the passenger happened to be aboard the "twelve o'clock" he might see a knot of men sitting comfortably in the shade of an old box-elder eating the lunch that had been packed into the old shoe box and hurriedly chucked into the buggy a few hours earlier. It was no occasional group that could be seen from the train window, but rather, during the crest of the rush, a veritable battery of clustered humanity. As many as ten or fifteen different crews were sometimes engaged simultaneously in the moving business.

After the house had been conveyed to its new site, the task of finishing the cellar and foundation was undertaken in earnest. Ordinarily the excavation had been started before the building left its original location. After the foundation was in place necessary alterations were made, fences were erected around yards, and other labor

necessary to put the new home in shape for occupancy was finished.

Expansion at the railroad junction continued throughout 1889. It was in that year that definite plans were made for incorporating the community. In May of 1890 this step was taken and by mid-summer a complete slate of town officers, with C. B. Owen as mayor, had been duly installed.

Prior to the actual incorporation the townsmen had given a great deal of time to a consideration of an appropriate name for the new settlement. Sheldahl Crossing did not seem desirable. A few individuals thought that Jenks, the former owner of the town site, should be honored by giving the place his name. Some felt that, as long as Oley Nelson had been one of the principal instigators of the "move", the town should be named Nelson, commemorating his service. On appealing to Mr. Jenks, the incorporators found him unwilling to agree to any of the pending proposals. He indicated, however, that he had had a good friend back east whose name was Slater and that he would much prefer that to any name so far suggested. As a result of this conference, the townsmen accepted the idea and the transition from Sheldahl Crossing to Slater was thereby completed.

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