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Railroad Promotion of the Iowa Great Lakes Area

Donovan L. Hofsommer

ACCORDING TO RESPECTABLE AUTHORITY, Louis Jolliet and Jacques Marquette were the first men of European descent to cast their eyes upon the land which eventually became the state of Iowa. This noteworthy event occurred during the early summer of 1673. White invasion of the region followed, but only haltingly. It was nearly three-quarters of a century after the War for Independence—in 1846—that it gained statehood. Even then the north-western quarter of Iowa was sparsely settled; the Spirit Lake Massacre took place as late as 1857. After the Civil War, however, prospects for the area brightened. This resulted primarily from congressional grants of land to the McGregor & Western Rail Road—building westward from the Mississippi River across the top of the state—and the Sioux City & St. Paul Rail Road—designed to link the cities of its corporate namesake. Together these enterprises offered the promise of a strong rail grid for the area and they simultaneously served to draw a wave of settlers to it. Even before the SC&StP was completed in 1872 and before the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul (successor to the McGregor company) reached as far west as Spencer in 1878, people from the surrounding counties used the lakes of Dickinson County for fishing purposes and they freely predicted that Spirit Lake country eventually would become famous as a summer resort.¹

¹Leland L. Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974) pp. 27-33, 80-115; R. A. Smith, *A History of Dickinson County, Iowa* (Des Moines: The Kenyon Printing & Manufacturing Co., 1902) pp. 350, 516-517; *History of Emmet County and Dickinson County, Iowa*. Two Volumes (Chicago: The Pioneer Publishing Co., 1917) I, p. 388.

Yet that development was incumbent upon the arrival of the steamcar civilization—directly in the lakes area itself. After a number of false starts, the railroad era in Dickinson County finally began with the arrival there of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railway (BCR&N or Cedar Rapids Road) on July 11, 1882. Ultimately that road offered direct passage from Sioux Falls, Dakota Territory, through the lakes area to Cedar Rapids, West Liberty, and Burlington—making connections at these and other railroad junction points with the rest of the country. Another carrier, the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad (CM&StP or St. Paul Road) also constructed a road into the Iowa Great Lakes area. Service on this route, a branch built northward from Spencer to Spirit Lake, began on September 18, 1883. Thereafter the BCR&N and the CM&StP both energetically labored to promote the vacation potential of the Dickinson County lakes. They were joined in this advertising campaign by yet other carriers which connected with them at various points. It was this dedicated effort by the railroads which drew the initial regional and even national attention to the natural assets of the lakes themselves and to the fine resorts which were being built up around them.²

These several railroads ordinarily promoted the entirety of the lakes area as a rule. Naturally, however, each of the carriers which served the area stressed the relative advantages of the individual lakes closest to its own stations. Thus the BCR&N's promotional energies were addressed toward Spirit Lake, particularly during the salad days of that company's famous resort—the Hotel Orleans. The St. Paul Road, on the other hand, favored West Okoboji; its stations (Okoboji and Arnold's Park) were, as might be expected, near that lake.

Representative titles of the many advertising tracts which the BCR&N issued over the years to promote the area were: "Guide to the Summer Resorts," "Spirit Lake and its Attractions," and the road's classic—"A Breezy Beach; Or Spirit Lake in the Dog Days." In this last mentioned pamphlet a BCR&N writer contended that of the several regional lakes

the great center of attraction, the incomparably beautiful Spirit Lake possesses such marked individuality that it has impressed its name not only upon the township in which it is situated and a little town in an ad-

²*Spirit Lake* [Iowa] *Beacon*. July 14, 1882, September 21, 1883.



Courtesy of the Spirit Lake Beacon

Thousands of visitors arrived in Arnold's Park aboard the cars of the CM&StP. Its station is shown here; in the background is the Okoboji Hotel which burned in 1911.

joining township, but upon the entire district, although it has twenty sister lakes and lakelets within a radius of ten miles.

The same writer glowingly pictured Spirit Lake as a large body of water with a shore line of fourteen miles, uniform in shape, surrounded by heavily timbered forests, free from weeds, and full of fish. Specifically, Spirit Lake was praised for its "picturesque shores, glistening beaches, luxuriant woodlands, and inexhaustible store of fish and game."³

On the other hand the CM&StP and the Central Iowa Railway—which made connections with the St. Paul Road at Mason City and which competed with the BCR&N for St. Louis traffic—favored West Okoboji. "Without wishing to disparage the many attractions of Spirit Lake, the unanimous verdict," according to a scribe in the employ of the Central Iowa Railway, was that West Okoboji was queen of the lakes. This writer further claimed that "traveled people" labeled West Okoboji as "the most beautiful

³"A Breezy Beach; Or Spirit Lake in the Dog Days." Chicago: Poole Bros., 1886, for the BCR&N. Referred to hereafter as "A Breezy Beach."



Courtesy of the Spirit Lake Beacon

Steamboats such as the Okoboji and Iowa, shown here, transported patrons from the various railroad stations to the several resorts around the lakes area.

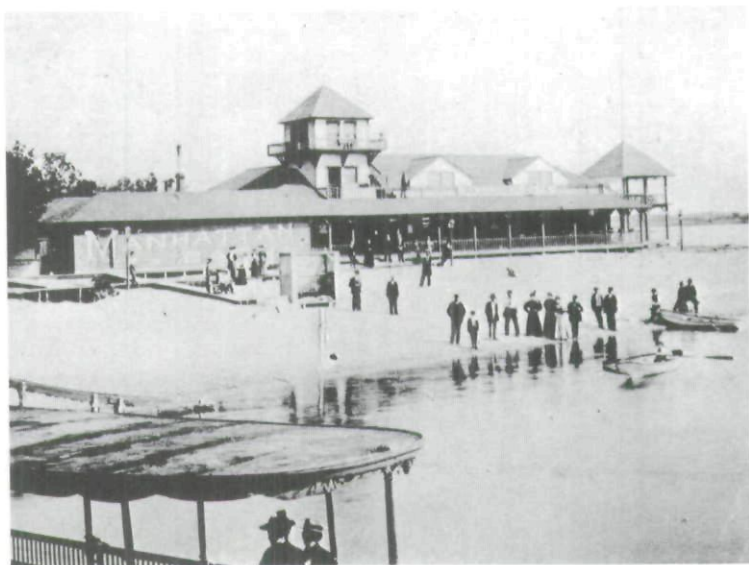
body of water in the United States." Her

thirty-seven miles of wooded shore line, picturesque banks; clear, cold pure deep water; her rocky shores, broken at intervals by long stretches of broad sandy beach, her delightful climate and pure air combine to make her peer of any body of water of like size in America.

However, in the end he did, indeed, disparage Spirit Lake. He pictured it as "simply a big round pond without a break in the monotonous regularity of its shores."⁴

Nevertheless, such critical comment was extremely rare. The railroads which served the area, directly or indirectly, realized that the adjoining states of Wisconsin and Minnesota boasted innumerable lakes and resort areas. They knew that Iowa, on the other hand, contained few and they, for the most part, were of inferior quality. The principal exceptions were Spirit Lake and Okoboji. As a result, these railroads bent every effort to advertise Spirit Lake country.

⁴"The Great Northwest." Chicago: J. M. W. Jones Stationery and Printing Co., 1887, for the General Passenger & Ticket Department, Central Iowa Railway, pp. 12, 18.



Courtesy of the Spirit Lake Public Library

The management of the Manhattan Hotel contended that the best fishing on West Okoboji was in the vicinity of its resort.

In this the BCR&N always was particularly energetic. It was especially interested in attracting patronage from among those "unfortunate souls" who lived in far off Illinois, Missouri, Indiana, "and in fact throughout the entire Mississippi Valley." In comparison to the "grim" living conditions of those areas the lake-lands of northwest Iowa offered by contrast "delightful summer days which might be passed," according to one BCR&N promotional flyer, "in a play-ground and sanitarium for the votary of country pleasures and the overworked denizens of this great valley." While it was simply a "burden even to exist" during the summer in other areas of the country, "the surroundings and all the conditions" were at the same time in the lakes area sufficient to "make life a perpetual delight." To be sure,

it is just when men are suffering most from the intense heat which at times sweeps across the North American continent like an Arabian simon, that Spirit Lake is at its best; just when, according to the old Greek superstition, the malign influence of the dog star is at its height and the direst forms of disease are most rife, that the pure and bracing atmosphere, the catarrh-expelling, anti-malarial and generally invigorating



Courtesy of the author

One of the major hotels on West Okoboji was The Inn. Both the CM&StP and the BCR&N lauded its facilities.

breezes of this region may be had recourse to with the greatest satisfaction and most positive advantage.⁵

The Central Iowa Railway similarly joined in praise of the area. Its writers asserted that as a health resort, the Spirit Lake region was not excelled. Additionally, a CI propagandist enthused, the area was completely free from malaria. In a promotional booklet distributed by the road's General Passenger and Ticket Department, the good but "overworked and nervous people" of its trade area were counseled to purchase tickets for stations in the lakes area since it was there that they would "find rest and comfort" and where, incidentally, "sufferers from hay-fever" would find "immediately relief."⁶

A writer for the BCR&N went even further: in the whole region from the Missouri River to the Atlantic Ocean, only northwest Iowa, he contended, was "perfectly free from enteric, cerebro-spinal and typhus fevers." Dickinson County, said he, possessed "a climate distinguished not merely for the negative qual-

⁵"A Breezy Beach."

⁶"The Great Northwest," p. 14.

ity of freedom from malarial and endemic diseases, but for the positive virtues that spring from a pure atmosphere and from health-giving and invigorating breezes." However, the salubrity of its climate was hardly the area's sole natural asset. "The place is not more peculiarly adapted to the wants of the valetudinarian," argued the BCR&N's General Passenger Agent "than to the requirements of the angler, the oarsman, the artist, the botanist, the archaeologist, or those who merely seek a change of scene and a general good time."⁷

Of these several groups the angler—the fisherman—received the greatest attention. That fishing was good in those days can not be doubted. One writer even has claimed "that the ease and readiness with which fish were taken in the early days robbed the sport of its greatest charm." A BCR&N spokesman echoed him: "Local anglers declare that in these lakes fish are really too plentiful for fishing to be thoroughly enjoyable. . . ." In spite of such formidable obstacles to piscatorial pleasure this railroader was, nevertheless, forced to concede that there still were a few fool-hardy types in the lakes area who periodically faced "that most terrible of perils, the swamping of their boat by the immensity of their catch." So it went with fish stories. Yet catches were impressive. The *Des Moines Tribune* for May 18, 1911 reported, for example, that a party from that city had shipped home "as the result of the first day's catch 47 pike, 110 perch, 5 pickerel, and 4 silver bass."⁸

In a fishing booklet issued jointly with the Rock Island Railroad, the BCR&N predictably urged its passengers to choose Spirit Lake. It similarly counseled its patrons to stay at the Hotel Orleans; rates, "about \$3.00 per day." The BCR&N promised that the Orleans offered the best "boats and bait" at "the lowest prices." It likewise noted that a Mr. A. Stillwell was available there to serve as a guide on Spirit Lake. The railroad asserted that pike, bass, and pickerel were more numerous in Spirit Lake than in other nearby waters; June, July, and August were erroneously advocated as the best months for the taking of fish from that lake. After the tourist season (and thus after the Hotel Orleans presumably had closed) the BCR&N counseled fishermen to visit Silver

⁷"A Breezy Beach."

⁸Smith, p. 518; "A Breezy Beach"; *Des Moines Tribune*. May 18, 1911.

Lake, near Lake Park, a station eleven miles west of Spirit Lake on its line. There one would find, according to the BCR&N writer, an abundance of pickerel, perch, buffalo, and bullheads. Lodging was available there, the railroad reported, at the Lake Park House for \$1.50 per day.⁹

For its part the Central Iowa Railway favored West Okoboji's fishing opportunities. It admonished the fisherman to "go there and try it himself, for no one who has not will believe such fish stories as are told by West Okobojians, even by those whose claim to citizenship is not over forty-eight hours old." Suffice it to say, a CI representative concluded, "if you want to catch fish, go to West Okoboji."¹⁰

The CM&StP and the various resorts of West Okoboji saw it similarly. Fishermen, they promised, could expect to take long strings of black bass, walleyed pike, pickerel, crappies, rock bass, perch, and other game fish from that lake. Not surprisingly, the management of the Manhattan Hotel contended that the "best fishing on the lake is in the vicinity of Manhattan, and a large portion of the fish are caught on that side of the lake." The Manhattan also advertised "good, clean, dry row boats;" a competent attendant at the bait house to furnish "bait, boat, and tackle;" and "an expert guide."¹¹

In the same years the lakes area similarly offered the sportsman the prospect of a good hunt. One railroad promotional pamphlet contained a passage in which the writer bragged that "there is scarcely any limit to the ducks, geese, and prairie chickens [in the area] . . . while quail and plover are almost equally abundant." As an attempt to lure prospective hunters to Dickinson County the BCR&N agreed to "transport dogs, guns, and other baggage free of charges when a sufficient number of tickets are purchased." The CM&StP responded in like manner: "Dogs and guns for hunters will be carried free in the baggage cars."¹²

Sailing, the royal sport, drew still other sportsmen to the lakes aboard the cars of both the BCR&N and the CM&StP. A writer

⁹"Fishing on the Lines of the Great Rock Island & Albert Lea Routes." Rand McNally & Co., (undated 1890?), pp. 12, 14.

¹⁰"The Great Northwest," p. 12.

¹¹"Announcement. Manhattan Hotel, Lake Okoboji, Iowa. Season 1905," p. 12.

¹²"A Breezy Beach"; CM&StP, Time Table, March 1904, p. 52.

for an Estherville newspaper reported that "at Regatta time there were sportsmen from many of the cities of the state and many more from out of state" registered at the leading lakes hotels. Shortly after the turn of the century sailboat races were held twice a week on West Okoboji. The Manhattan Hotel especially favored these events since the entire course was in full view from its veranda.¹³

The Passenger Department of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad (successor to the BCR&N) continued to boost the area throughout the first three decades of the 20th century. That road sent free upon request its 24-page brochure "Spirit Lake and the Okobojis" and later, in 1916, it was still mailing its "Iowa Lakes Folder" to interested parties. The Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific (successor to the CM&StP) responded in another way. Before World War II it upgraded service to Spirit Lake by assigning an "Air-conditioned Luxury Lounge Coach" to its trains.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the great days of the steamcar civilization had passed. The advent of World War II postponed the inevitable but the railroads which served Dickinson County eventually terminated their respective (full) passenger services to Spirit Lake country between 1948 and 1952. Indeed, in 1974 the CMStP&P even abandoned its road and dismantled the tracks south from Spirit Lake through Okoboji and Arnold's Park to Milford. For that matter, the contemporary strategy and financial condition of the Rock Island in that season implied the possible termination of at least a portion of its operation in the area. Yet the majority of the early resorts continued to prosper and vacationers continued to flock to the Dickinson County lakes each year. However, most of these visitors—citizens of the auto/air age—were unaware that it was the promotional activities of the railroads which had drawn the earliest regional and national attention to the vacation potential of the Iowa Great Lakes area.¹⁵

¹³"Announcement. Manhattan Hotel, Lake Okoboji, Iowa. Season 1905," pp. 9-10; *Estherville [Iowa] Enterprise*, September 3, 1953.

¹⁴CRI&P, Time Table, October, 1911, pp. 23, 32, 35; *ibid.*, May 21, 1916, pp. 23, 32; *The Official Guide of the Railways* (October 1936), p. 942; CMSTP&P, Time Table, October-December, 1937, p. 30.

¹⁵*Spencer [Iowa] Daily Reporter*, June 25, 1948; CRI&P, Cedar Rapids Division Time Table No. 6 (May 28, 1950), p. 9; *Spencer [Iowa] Daily Reporter*, April 14, 1952.

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