HISTORY

OF THE

NORTHERN PACIFIC RAILROAD

BY

EUGENE V. SMALLEY

NEW YORK
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
27 AND 29 WEST 23d ST.
1883

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER IX.

THE GOVERNMENT SURVEYS.

Condition of Public Sentiment—Sectional Jealousy—Effect of the California Gold Discoveries—General Agreement that a Railway to the Pacific Coast Must Be Built—The Question of Routes—Five Lines Surveyed—Jefferson Davis Favors the Most Southern—Governor Stevens' Survey of the Northern Route—Thoroughness of his Work—Advantages of the Northern Route Fully Demonstrated—Stevens' Report—His Writings and Public Addresses in Favor of the Northern Pacific Railroad Project—His Death on the Battle-field.

ONCE launched in Congress the Pacific Railway movement had inherent vitality enough to keep alive. The peace with Mexico soon afterward added to the domain of the United States the vast area now comprised in the States of California and Nevada and the Territories of New Mexico, Arizona and Utah. The gold discoveries followed, and thousands of eager treasure seekers, hardy pioneers and restless adventurers, crossed the plains and mountains of the interior or sailed into the Bay of San Francisco in search of the new El Dorado. Hitherto the only route spoken of in connection with the project for a railroad across the continent was that followed by Lewis and Clarke. Now the scheme widened. The South, which controlled the government, had before taken little interest in the plans of Whitney, but the conquest of territory from Mexico opened the possibility of a line which should be of advantage to the Southern States and should have its western terminus in the new gold region. Thus the situation changed. That a transcontinental road must soon be built and that the government would have to aid its construction became the general sentiment.

Digitized by Google

If there was any dissent from this proposition, it was from its last clause, and it came from the strict constructionists of the Constitution, who held that the Federal government had very little power beyond carrying the mails, fighting Indians and coining money. But even the State rights men of the South, always eager to curb the national power unless they could make it work for the advantage of their own political schemes, were ready to advocate a railroad provided its eastern terminus was at some point in their section. Asa Whitney and his magnificent project for a railroad to the mouth of the Columbia were almost forgotten for a time in the excitement over the slavery question which prevailed after the close of the Mexican War, and was heightened rather than allayed by the compromise measures of 1850; but the general idea of a Pacific Railway was not allowed to drop out of sight. Indeed, the sectional jealousies which raged worked in some measure to its advantage. The North wanted a line connecting with roads reaching the seaboard at New York, Philadelphia, and Boston; the South insisted that the proper eastern termini were New Orleans and Memphis, and that the traffic to be opened should flow to the ports of the Gulf of Mexico and the South Atlantic ports.

It would not have been possible in 1853 to secure any action from Congress looking to the opening of any particular route, or even to its preliminary survey, but it was feasible to throw together all the suggested routes and obtain an appropriation of money to survey them all. This was actually done. In a section of the Regular Army Appropriation Bill, approved March 1st, 1853, provision was made for such explorations as the War Department might deem advisable in order to ascertain the most practicable and economical route for a railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. The

Digitized by Google

law did not specify the number or latitude of the routes to be explored, but it was the general understanding in Congress that no one which had been advocated as feasible and desirable should be neglected. Jefferson Davis was Secretary of War at the time, and the whole matter of organizing the expeditions and selecting the routes they were to follow was in his hands. He put five separate expeditions in the field early the same spring, to explore as many different belts of country, the first near the 32d parallel, the second near the 35th parallel, the third near the 38th and 39th parallels, the fourth near the 41st and 42d parallels, and the fifth near the 47th and 49th parallels.

The reports of these surveys filled thirteen huge quarto volumes, which were printed by order of Congress, with a profusion of lithographs and woodcuts of scenery and Indian groups and numerous maps. In submitting the reports to Congress, in 1855, Mr. Davis summed up the information obtained very clearly and forcibly, and concluded by a recommendation of the 32d parallel route, the most southernmost of all, characterizing it as the shortest line from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean and to San Francisco, the greatest commercial city on that coast; the easiest to build, and the only route, save that of the 38th parallel, free from the danger of obstruction by snow. Being a Mississippian his predilection was strongly in favor of a line that should leave the Mississippi River at a point no further north than Vicksburg. He was not only a Southerner, but an extreme Southerner, who wanted to see the seat of empire of the American continent established in the Gulf States.

Of the five explorations we need concern ourselves only with that of the northernmost route. This was placed in charge of Isaac I. Stevens, an experienced army

Digitized by Google

officer who had served in the Mexican War, and had held a position in the Coast Survey Office until appointed Governor of Washington Territory, in March, 1853. Stevens was a man of broad views, liberal education and strong character. He did his work so thoroughly that there was little necessity for further preliminary surveys to ascertain the practicability of the Northern route to the Pacific when, ten years later, the project for a railroad assumed a business-like shape. His instructions were to operate from St. Paul, or some eligible point on the Upper Mississippi, toward the great bend of the Missouri River, and thence on the tableland between the tributaries of the Missouri and those of the Saskatchewan to some eligible pass in the Rocky Mountains.

Governor Stevens determined that the exploration should be conducted in two divisions, operating respectively from the Mississippi River and Puget Sound; and that a depot of provisions should be established by a third party at the St. Mary's village, at the western base of the Rocky Mountains, to facilitate the winter operations of the exploration, and enable the exploring parties to continue in the field the longest practicable period; and that all the parties should be organized in a military manner for self-protection, and to force their way through whatever difficulties might be encountered.

The western division was charged with the duty of exploring the passes of the Cascade Mountains, from the Columbia River to the British boundary, and of pushing eastward to meet the eastern division between the Cascade and Rocky Mountains. Captain George B. McClellan, of the Corps of Engineers, was assigned to the charge of this division. Lieutenant Rufus Saxton, Jr., in addition to establishing the depot at the western base of the Rocky Mountains, was directed to make a careful

Digitized by Google

survey of the country passed over by him, with a view of combining the operations of the eastern and western divisions.

The eastern division, starting from St. Paul, was under the personal direction of Governor Stevens. With him were many persons who afterward obtained fame as officers or men of science. F. W. Lander, afterward a brigadier general; Lieutenant John Mullan, who later built the wagon road from Fort Benton to Walla Walla, and Cuvier Grover, then a lieutenant and afterward a major general of volunteers and a colonel in the regular army, were among the officers. Captain McClellan, who commanded the division of the party operating from the Pacific coast, was afterward the Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the Potomac, and later the Democratic candidate for President. Lieutenant Saxton, who explored the Rocky Mountain regions, became in the civil war a brigadier general. Probably there was never a railroad surveying party put in the field which contained so many future great men.

Governor Stevens left St. Paul with the eastern division of the expedition on May 24th, and traveling northwestwardly arrived at the Sheyenne River July 4th, and at Fort Union, at the mouth of the Yellowstone River, August 1st. A wide belt of country was explored by throwing out small parties on either side of the main body, with instructions to rendezvous at a given point ahead. At Fort Union, Lieutenant Mullan was detailed with a party to survey the Valley of the Yellowstone. He ascended the river to a point not far from the present town of Billings, and then turning northward through the Musselshell country and Judith Basin rejoined the main party at Fort Benton, near the Falls of the Missouri, which point it reached on September 1st. Here another division of the force was made. Lieutenant Mullan went back to the

Digitized by Google

Musselshell and, taking guides from a camp of Flathead Indians, crossed the Belt Mountains to the junction of the three rivers forming the Missouri, and thence pushed westward over the main range of the Rocky Mountains to Fort Owen, on the Bitter Root River; Lieutenant Grover reconnoitred Cadotte's Pass; Mr. Lander examined the Marias Pass and the country to the Kootenai post; and Governor Stevens explored the country north of Fort Benton, including the Sun and Marias valleys and the base of the mountains. Before leaving Fort Benton the explorers had the satisfaction of being joined by Lieutenant Saxton's party from the Pacific coast. Saxton, who had ascended the Columbia River, and crossed the plains at the Jesuit mission on Lake Cœur d'Alène and the Bitter Root Range at the pass near the lake, met Lieutenant Grover in command of Stevens' advance party on the summit of the Rocky Mountains in Cadotte's Pass.

The different parties reached Fort Owen in good time. There Mr. Tinkham, a resolute young civil engineer, was sent back to examine the western approaches to the Marias Pass, Mr. Lander was directed to explore the St. Mary's (now Bitter Root) Valley, Lieutenant Donelson was sent down the Clarke's Fork, and Governor Stevens crossed the mountains to Lake Cœur d'Alène. Stevens reached the Mission on October 12th, and proceeding down the Cœur d'Alène River next day met a Spokane Indian, who told him of a party of thirty men that had reached the Columbia, opposite Colville, the day before. Stevens knew that this must be McClellan's party, which had come from the Cascade Mountains and Puget Sound. By pushing on all night he met McClellan next morning. The two had not heard from each other since they separated in May, when talking about their probable place of meeting they had spoken of Colville. The united force proceeded to Walla Walla and the Dalles, reaching the latter place on

Digitized by Google

November 12th. Early in December Stevens arrived at Olympia, on Puget Sound. He returned to the Rocky Mountains next year for further explorations, and to gather up the results of the work of his detached parties which rendezvoused at Walla Walla.

Captain McClellan surveyed the country between Seattle and the Columbia Valley by way of the Valley of the Cowlitz, and thence followed the Columbia up to the mouth of the Yakima. Then going up the Yakima to its head-waters in the Cascade Range he examined the Snoqualmie Pass as far as a point three miles west of the dividing ridge. He reported to Governor Stevens that the Yakima Pass was barely practicable, and that only at a high cost of time, labor and money, while the Columbia River Pass was not only practicable, but remarkably favorable, being by far the best between latitude 45° 30′ and latitude 49°. "The question," McClellan wrote, "is, after all, reduced to a choice between the shorter line, high grades, a very long tunnel, and almost certain difficulty from the snow, in one case; and the longer line, low grades, little or no tunneling and no trouble from the snow, in the other. I prefer the latter." Governor Stevens sent A. L. Tinkham, who had done winter service in the passes of the Rocky Mountains, up to the Snoqualmie Pass in the winter of 1854, to measure the depth of snow. Tinkham found seven feet in the pass on the 21st of January. McClellan in his report, written in February, 1854, threw doubts on the value of Tinkham's measurement and said that he was still of the opinion that in ordinary winters not less than from twenty to twenty-five feet of snow would be found in the passes during the most unfavorable months of the year. A personal difference between Stevens and McClellan grew out of this matter of the snow in the Cascade Passes, Stevens preferring to indorse the view of Tink-

Digitized by Google

ham rather than that of McClellan, and friendly relations were severed until the two met in Washington during the war, when a reconciliation took place.

The general results of Gov. Stevens' explorations were to show that there was an easy route for a railroad from St. Paul to the Rocky Mountains, either by the Valley of the Missouri or that of the Yellowstone; that the main range of the Rockies offered no obstacles that could not be overcome by a tunnel and ordinary mountain grades; that the Bitter Root Spur was more formidable, but could be turned by way of Lake Pend d'Oreille; that there were several practicable passes in the Cascade Range, and that the Valley of the Columbia offered a favorable though expensive route. In a word, Stevens showed that the Northern route to the Pacific was not only a practicable but a very favorable one, following valleys or traversing plains for nearly its whole length, and crossing the mountain backbone of the continent at comparatively low elevations. His report served afterward as the solid foundation upon which the Northern Pacific Railroad enterprise as a business project rested. He became an ardent advocate of this route, and by his writings and public utterances did much to make its merits known.

Governor Stevens's advocacy of the Northern route, beginning immediately after the completion of his survey, continued until his death. He was of an active, ardent turn of mind, and combined in his disposition the accurate, practical habits of the trained engineer with the boldness and imagination of a projector of great enterprises. He could estimate with remarkable correctness the cost of constructing railroads through a wilderness, and speak with authority on gradients, tunnels, and excavations, and at the same time he could make figures eloquent, and illumine dry pages of statistics by the faculty of graphic presentation with tongue or

Digitized by Google

pen. When he came East to attend the sessions of Congress, he wrote pamphlets and delivered addresses on the resources of the Pacific Northwest, and the advantages for a railroad of the route he had surveyed. His graphic addresses were illustrated by a map upon which he showed how the isothermal lines make a great sweep to the northward beyond the Mississippi Valley, causing the climate of Oregon and the Puget Sound region to be milder in winter than that of Virginia.

In an address on "The Northwest," delivered in New York, in December, 1858, before the American Geographical and Statistical Society, Governor Stevens gave an admirable, thorough description of the entire line surveyed by him from the Red River of the North to Puget Sound, the soil, scenery, climate, capacity of supporting population, facilities for railway building, etc. He showed that there was a difference in distance in favor of the Northern over the other routes surveyed, and also an advantage in the sum of ascents and descents. In short, he presented the whole argument in behalf of the Northern Pacific Road as it was afterward repeated in support of the bill chartering the company, and in the subsequent appeals to the public for subscriptions to its stock and bonds. Some of his statements were received with a great deal of skepticism, but time has shown that they were strictly and conscientiously accurate.

Among the effective work done by Governor Stevens in behalf of the Northern Pacific Railroad project, mention should be made of a letter he addressed from Washington City to a railroad convention which assembled at Vancouver, Washington Territory, May 20, 1860, to consider means for building a road from the Valley of the Columbia to Puget Sound. In this letter he gave so clear and condensed an account of the Northern route, its distances and grades, as compared with the line then pro-

Digitized by Google

jected to Benicia, California; its advantageous situation in relation to the China and Japan trade, and the adaptability of the country it would traverse for continuous settlement, that the document, printed in pamphlet form, became a cyclopedia in miniature, from which facts and arguments have ever since been drawn by the friends of that route.

A single paragraph may be quoted here, to show that there was no lack of accurate knowledge concerning the habitable character of the Northern belt nearly a quarter of a century ago, had the public been willing to be disabused of the current notion that the region was a hyperborean desert—a notion, by the way, which lingers in some minds even to this day, although there is now an unbroken line of settlements from St. Paul to Puget Sound:

"Nearly the whole of the country on the Northern route," wrote Governor Stevens, "is susceptible of continuous occupancy by our people. There is no such thing as a desert, properly so speaking, on the entire route. There are gaps or intervals where it is only a grazing country; there are portions of the country occupied by mountain ranges which would not admit of profitable cultivation; but, as a whole, the country is fitted for settlement and cultivation, and must be settled and occupied at an early day. Or, to go more into details, from Breckenridge, on the Red River of the North, to the Divide of the Rocky Mountains, the route passes through a strictly cultivable country, capable of continuous settlement, except for about one hundred and fifty miles, in three sections of about equal lengths. On this portion you can plant agricultural settlements at points suitable for railroad or mail stations. From near the Divide of the Rocky Mountains the country is capable of continuous settlement to within twenty miles of the Di-

Digitized by Google

vide of the Bitter Root Mountains. The eastern half of the Great Plain of the Columbia, the northern and the southern portions, consists of rich river valleys and fertile tablelands. A portion of the western half will not furnish arable land for continuous settlements. Between the Columbia and the Cascade Mountains, the line is flanked on the south by a large body of fertile land, and passes immediately through a fine grass country, and for at least half the distance through an excellent cultivable country. From the Cascade Mountains to the Sound, the line passes through a continuously cultivable country. The whole intermediate country between the head-waters of the Missouri and the Great Plain of the Columbia admits of continuous settlement, except about forty miles on the highest part of the Rocky Mountains, and thirty miles on the highest part of the Bitter Root Mountains."

In this letter Governor Stevens gave a table of distances from the principal cities of the East to Seattle, on Puget Sound, and Benicia, on the Bay of San Francisco, showing that the difference in favor of the Northern route to the Pacific was as follows: from Chicago, 317 miles; from Portland, Maine, 582 miles; from Boston, 344 miles; from New York, 420 miles; from Philadelphia, 466 miles; from Baltimore, 389 miles; from Washington, Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, and New Orleans, 117 miles. These figures were afterward employed with great effect in enlisting support in Congress and in the country for the Northern Pacific enterprise.

Going to Congress in 1857 as Delegate from Washington Territory, Governor Stevens served in that capacity until the rebellion broke out in 1861. He then obtained the colonelcy of a New York regiment, was promoted to be brigadier general, and was killed, while gallantly leading his troops, at the battle of Chantilly, in Virginia September 1st, 1862.

Digitized by Google