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Photographs / Images: Omaha's Herndon House; location of the office of the Overland Stage and Express Company; 12th and Farnam streets, 1867, looking northwest toward the territorial capitol

TERRITORIAL OMAHA AS A STAGING AND FREIGHTING CENTER

By CAROL GENDLER

THE area designated by Congress in 1854 as the Nebraska Territory was organized in part to clear the way for the eventual passage of a transcontinental railroad through the Platte Valley.¹ Beginning in the early 1840's, scores of immigrants headed for Oregon and California had crossed this virgin territory. The majority of them passed through Missouri and Kansas, then followed the south bank of the Platte River over what became known as the Oregon Trail. The Mormons, after wintering near Omaha, blazed a trail westward in 1847 along the north bank of the Platte.²

Hopeful of reducing the mileage to frontier outposts as well as the expense of supplying them, Congress in 1855 appropriated fifty thousand dollars for the construction of a wagon road over the Mormon Trail in Nebraska Territory, "connecting New Fort Kearney and a point of the Missouri river, opposite Council Bluffs, Iowa," a distance of some 180

1. James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), p. 107.

2. W. Turrentine Jackson, *Wagon Roads West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), p. 121.

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miles.³ Captain John H. Dickerson was appointed supervisor. With the improvement of this route, known as the military road, settlement was encouraged and way stations began to develop.

Steamboats were the earliest means of commercial transportation available to Nebraska settlers. As carriers of newspapers, mail, passengers and freight, the river boats provided the best method of communication with the states from spring until winter prior to the establishment of stage lines and the telegraph. The fact that Omaha, founded in 1854, was located 150 miles north of the western-most railroad connections at St. Joseph precluded its extensive use by the largest freighting company, Russell, Majors & Waddell, which headquartered at Nebraska City.⁴ Omaha City did begin to grow, nonetheless, as mail, passenger and express service became established, and it emerged eventually as an important outfitting, trading and transportation center.⁵ The discovery of gold in Colorado and Montana created a demand for goods and provided the impetus for developing Omaha and other Missouri River towns into outfitting points and freighting terminals.⁶

The route west from Omaha, the most heavily traveled of all the trails radiating from the town, passed through Papillion, Elkhorn, Fremont and North Bend, then crossed the Loup Fork River at Columbus. Travelers reached Prairie Creek, Lone Tree, Grand Island and Mendota, finally nearing Fort Kearny where they forded the Platte River.⁷

Omaha advertised extensively in its efforts to impress immigrants and freighters with the advantages of the North Platte route over the southern trail. Newspapers boasted of

3. Captain John H. Dickerson to Colonel J.J. Abert, December 15, 1856, in U.S. Congress, *House Executive Documents* 2, 35 Cong., 1 sess., 1857-1858, p. 525; U.S. *Statutes at Large*, X, 608; William H. Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West, 1803-1863* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 368.

4. Lyle E. Mantor, "Stage Coach and Freighter Days at Fort Kearny," *Nebraska History*, XXIX (December, 1948), 335.

5. Oscar Osburn Winther, *The Transportation Frontier: Trans-Mississippi West, 1865-1890* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, [c. 1864]), p. 10.

6. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, p. 109.

7. *Omaha Times*, February 17, 1859.

shorter mileage and better roads between Omaha and Fort Kearny and were loath to acknowledge the difficulties of fording the Loup Fork and Platte rivers, which remained unbridged throughout the heyday of overland travel.⁸ Travelers were told of abundant wood and water along the route and a plentiful supply of grass for their stock.⁹

The first mail and coach service at Omaha was established in September of 1854 by M. W. Robinson, who offered "a pleasant and speedy conveyance" between Council Bluffs and Omaha in a four-horse coach. This service was hailed as a "new and important arrangement," and it was hoped that visitors would avail themselves of the chance to inspect the attributes of Omaha City.¹⁰

Several stage companies connected Omaha with neighboring communities, but they have left little evidence of their activities. In 1856 the Ohio Stage Company operated a bi-weekly mail route from Omaha northwest to Fontanelle.¹¹ H. D. Harl and G. W. Pierce ran Harl's Omnibus Line intermittently between Council Bluffs and Omaha, and connected twice weekly with Pierce's stage line from Nebraska City to Fort Calhoun.¹² Frost's line of stages provided service on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays from St. Joseph, through Sidney, Iowa, to Nebraska City and Omaha. Such coaches could travel 150 miles in thirty-six hours.¹³

In 1857 Hadley D. Johnson contracted to carry the United States mail and passengers from the Platte River near LaPlatte to Dakota. His route served the communities of Bellevue, Florence, Fort Calhoun, DeSoto, Cuming City, Tekamah, Decatur, Blackbird and Omadi. A local reporter noted that this proprietor kept "good Hacks and steady drivers, and whoever...[wished] to travel on this route...

8. *Ibid.*, November 28, 1858.

9. *Ibid.*, September 23, 1858 and January 13, 1859.

10. *Omaha Arrow*, September 29, 1854.

11. *Omaha Nebraskian*, June 11, 1856.

12. *Ibid.*, January 2, 1856.

13. Albert Watkins (ed.), "Iowa's Loss, Nebraska's Gain," *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, XX (1922), 287.

[would] do well to take a seat in friend Johnson's Hack." 14

The efforts of these small companies to provide mail and passenger service for Omaha met with many difficulties, including an irregular volume of business. As the town grew, however, and as gold discoveries at Cherry Creek seemed to ensure increasing business opportunities, the Western Stage Company, the largest of its kind in Iowa, extended its operations into Nebraska. E. S. Alvord, a founder of the company, had begun business in Indianapolis about 1840 with a few two-horse carriages.¹⁵ Eventually employing as many as fifteen hundred men, three thousand horses and more than six hundred coaches, the success of the venture was such that stock appreciated from one hundred dollars to two thousand dollars per share, though it was never put on the market at that price.¹⁶

The Western Stage Company used a Concord coach, manufactured by the Abbot-Downing Company of Concord, New Hampshire, which supplied nearly all the important stage lines in the West. Most coaches accommodated nine to fourteen passengers and were pulled by four or six horses or mules for an average of 115 miles per day.¹⁷ A box under the driver's seat held treasure and express; baggage and mail were stored in the boot "except when there was an overflow, and then they were thrown upon the floor of the coach to slide about, much to the discomfiture of the passengers." Travelers were allotted twenty-five pounds of baggage, and were charged one dollar for every pound in excess of the limit.¹⁸

As of July 1, 1858, Postmaster General Aaron V. Brown contracted with the Western Stage Company for thrice-weekly mail service between Omaha and Columbus.

14. *Omaha Times*, June 18, 1857.

15. Louis Pelzer, "Pioneer Stage-Coach Travel," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXIII (June, 1936), 7.

16. William J. Petersen, *The Story of Iowa* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, [c. 1952]), I, 540, 543.

17. J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Jacob North & Co., 1907), I, 94, n.2.

18. J.V. Frederick, *Ben Holladay: The Stagecoach King* (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1940), pp. 81-83.

Similar service was also instituted between Omaha and Dakota, as well as a daily line between Omaha and Council Bluffs.¹⁹ The routes were stocked with provisions and teams, and stations were established every eight to twenty miles.²⁰

Three months later need arose for the extension of regular weekly service from Columbus to Fort Kearny.²¹ It was possible for passengers to buy a through ticket from Chicago to Fort Kearny via the Chicago and Rock Island Railway and the Western Stage Company. Such a trip took five or six days. First class passage cost \$50.25 and included one hundred pounds of baggage on the railroad and fifty pounds on the stage. A second class ticket sold for \$46.50.²² The opening of the route to Fort Kearny was hailed as "an enterprise well calculated to advance and develop the resources and interests of...the great Valley of the Platte—and the forerunner of that much needed and admirable road, entitled the Great Pacific Rail Road."²³

Complaints of poor service were common since mail frequently arrived "in a wet and pulp-like state."²⁴ Roads in the spring were said by one correspondent to have been "under the special direction of the Devil, assisted by the Western Stage Company." The same writer continued to remark that "the arrangements of this company are villainously poor. Crows look with secret satisfaction upon its horses. The coaches are poor; the drivers swear like the Devil; while the sleeping and eating along the route is neither more nor less than nasty."²⁵

By spring of 1859, the Western Stage Company was running a tri-weekly line to Sioux City as well as to

19. U.S. Congress, *House Executive Documents*, 37 Cong., 2 sess., 1861-1862, p. 198.

20. A.T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), p. 1110.

21. *Omaha Times*, October 7, 1858.

22. *Ibid.*, March 3, 1859.

23. *Ibid.*, September 23, 1858.

24. *The Bugle* (Council Bluffs, Iowa), July 21, 1858.

25. *New York Daily Tribune*, March 3, 1857, as quoted in Petersen, *Story of Iowa*, I, 544-545.

Columbus and continued the weekly route to Fort Kearny. The lines connected at Council Bluffs with other routes to the south and east.²⁶ As business increased and more successful strikes were reported from the Colorado gold fields, Omaha citizens began to agitate for direct service from Omaha to Cherry Creek.

Until 1860 there was no official mail service to Denver from the east, even though the mail was reaching large proportions. The Central Overland California & Pike's Peak Express Company ("C. O. C. & P. P. Exp. Co."), controlled by Alexander Majors, William H. Russell and William Waddell, had been running passenger coaches to Denver, but no mail contract had been awarded by the Government.²⁷

In August of 1860, the Western Stage Company contracted with the Post Office Department to provide weekly mail service, with Monday departures, between Fort Kearny and Denver. This service, which guaranteed fifteen thousand dollars yearly, was to continue until June 30, 1861. The company ran a through-line from Omaha to Denver.²⁸ The first mail from Denver reached Omaha on September 17, 1860, though not without difficulty; it had been necessary for the vigilance committee to remove a would-be thief from the stage.²⁹

The arrival on the scene of the Western Stage Company with its United States mail bags offered serious competition for the C. O. C. & P. P. Exp. Co., which had previously held a virtual monopoly.³⁰ To complicate matters and intensify competition, the Hinckley Express Company, which ran a

26. *Omaha Times*, March 17, 1859.

27. LeRoy R. Hafen, *The Overland Mail, 1849-1869* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1926), p. 159.

28. U.S. Congress, *House Executive Documents*, 37 Cong., 2 sess., 1861-1862, p. 198.

29. *Daily Missouri Republican* (St. Louis), September 18, 1860, cited by Watkins, *Publications* XX (1922), 344.

30. The first line from the Missouri River to Colorado was run by the Leavenworth and Pike's Peak Express Company, owned by John S. Jones and William H. Russell. In the fall of 1859, this company was re-organized as the C.O.C. & P.P. Exp. Co.

stage and mail line from Denver to the mountains, secured rights to establish a special express messenger service on Western's coaches to Omaha. By late 1860 Hinckley's messengers were carrying to Omaha up to one hundred thousand dollars worth of gold dust per month.³¹

To meet this competition, the C. O. C. & P. P. Exp. Co. reduced charges from twenty-five cents to ten cents per letter, and from ten cents to five cents per newspaper. They also cut their passenger fare from St. Joseph to Denver.³² Rivalry continued until March 16, 1861, when William Russell signed a contract with the Western Stage Company providing for the latter's cessation of all service west of Fort Kearny. The Western was paid twenty thousand dollars yearly as compensation.³³ Thus competition ended, and the two companies maintained a monopoly of the passenger, mail and express business from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains.

The Western Stage Company continued to do a "thriving and prosperous business" on numerous other routes. Daily stages connected with the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad at St. Joseph and with other rail lines in various Iowa towns.³⁴ Service between Omaha and Council Bluffs was increased, and a local newspaper reported that the company's coaches were "crowded with passengers, every day, to their utmost capacity."³⁵ In 1865 a line was added between Omaha and St. Joseph on the west side of the Missouri, but shortly thereafter the service was withdrawn, leaving the route to the Nebraska Stage Company.³⁶

In 1862 Ben Holladay's Overland Stage Company assumed

31. Raymond W. Settle and Mary Lund Settle, *Empire on Wheels* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [c. 1949]), p. 93; Hafen, *Overland Mail*, p. 160; Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Waybills: The Romance of the Express Companies* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934), pp. 212-214.

32. Hafen, *Overland Mail*, p. 160; Harlow, *Old Waybills*, p. 215.

33. Settle, *Empire on Wheels*, pp. 123-124.

34. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, September 16, 1863; February 26, June 17, 1864; *Omaha Weekly Herald*, August 24, 1866.

35. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, October 20, November 24, 1865.

36. *Ibid.*, November 30, December 21, 1866.

control of the C. O. C. & P. P. Exp. Co. At Fort Kearny, where the service of the Western Stage Company terminated, passengers had to transfer to Holladay's line to continue their trip west. Since Holladay's through passengers were given priority, other travelers were often forced to wait several days for a seat in a westbound stage. The Western apparently contemplated extending its line to Denver in competition with Holladay, which "would have resulted, for a time, in the liveliest staging ever known in the country."³⁷ But Holladay, whose valuable government mail contracts ensured financial independence, did not fear rivalry, and in 1865 Holladay purchased from the Western Stage Company its routes terminating at Fort Kearny.³⁸

Tri-weekly service was provided until September 2, 1865, when the Holladay company received a government contract to carry the United States mail six times weekly from Council Bluffs, via Omaha, to Fort Kearny. Forty-eight hour delivery was to be provided at \$14,968 a year.³⁹ The firm maintained an office at the Herndon House in Omaha and soon reduced the stage fare for the Omaha-Denver trip from \$150 to \$125. The trip was completed in five days, and the company advertised that passengers could "depend upon a comfortable and safe transit over the Plains."⁴⁰

At this point the route west from Omaha became the main line of the Overland Stage Company, a position for which the town had been negotiating since 1861 when Civil War hostilities caused the re-routing of mail through Omaha on several occasions. At that time, however, the government had posted troops along the central route to guarantee the

37. Frank A. Root and William E. Connelley, *The Overland Stage to California* (Topeka: 1901; reprinted at Columbus, Ohio: Long's College Book Co., 1950), pp. 204-206.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 206; Frederick, *Ben Holladay*, p. 140. According to Andreas in *History of Nebraska*, p. 799, James Stephenson in 1865 purchased from Captain William Marsh all the horses and routes of the Western Stage Company in Nebraska. Presumably Holladay dealt with Stephenson in purchasing the Omaha-Fort Kearny and Nebraska City-Fort Kearny Lines. Stephenson apparently maintained numerous shorter lines for several years.

39. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, July 14, 1865; U.S. Congress, *Senate Executive Documents*, 46 Cong., 2 sess., Vol. V, No. 211, pp. 13-14.

40. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, September 29, 1865 and April 6, 1866.



Omaha's Herndon House, location of the office of the Overland Stage and Express Company.



Twelfth and Farnam streets in Omaha, August, 1867, looking northwest toward the territorial capitol.

protection of the overland mail, and the Omaha route had remained a seldom used alternative.⁴¹

As the Union Pacific Railroad advanced, Holladay's lines gradually became shorter. By June 6, 1866, mail and passengers traveled on the railroad as far as Columbus, Nebraska, and then continued on Holladay's lines to the west.⁴² Late in 1866 the Holladay Overland Mail and Express Company and Wells, Fargo and Company consolidated under the latter name. This company also took over the Pioneer Stage Line of California. Thus, all major stage lines west of the Missouri merged.⁴³

Stage schedules and terminals were constantly shifted to keep pace with the progress of the railroads. Though the stagecoach business at Omaha was at its height during the middle 1860's, the end was already in sight. By the end of 1866, the railroad had reached the present Kearney, and the demise of the stage business was assured.⁴⁴ The Western Stage Company, once the giant of overland transportation at Omaha, was gradually reduced by increasingly shorter lines and was finally forced to dissolve on July 1, 1870. Some of their coaches which had originally cost one thousand dollars each were sold for junk at ten dollars apiece.⁴⁵

The development of staging was accompanied by the growth of wagon freighting. As the demand for goods increased, river ports such as Omaha saw the increased transfer of supplies from barges to wagon trains for the long haul to remote frontier settlements and military outposts. In contrast to passenger traffic, which operated in all directions, the overland freighting business was characterized by its one-way movement to the west,⁴⁶ with the exception of some loads of buffalo hides hauled from the Plains into Omaha for

41. *Ibid.*, May 8, September 26, 1861; Root and Connelley, *Overland Stage*, p. 244; Morton and Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, I, 97.

42. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, July 6, 1866.

43. *Ibid.*, November 16, 1866; *Omaha Weekly Herald*, November 16, 1866.

44. Frederick, *Ben Holladay*, p. 111.

45. Petersen, *Story of Iowa*, I, 546.

46. Winther, *Transportation Frontier*, pp. 25-28.

shipment by steamboat to St. Louis. An eyewitness described the trade with the Indians in buffalo hides as "simply enormous," and a newspaper noted the arrival of a train with six hundred buffalo robes, antelope, deer, coon and mink skins.⁴⁷

Most of the freight wagons used on the Plains were of the four-wheeled variety similar to the earlier Conestoga wagons. Various manufacturers produced Chattanooga, Carson, J. Murphy, Espensheid and Studebaker wagons.⁴⁸ Omaha outfitters featured Michigan wagons as "one of the fastest and best trains on the route."⁴⁹ Such wagons were from fifteen to twenty-four feet long and four and one-half feet wide. Schooner-shaped boxes of varying heights covered with tarpaulins contained the freight. The average wagon cost between five hundred and one thousand dollars, and a capital investment of several times that amount was represented by each wagon with its mule team or yokes of oxen.⁵⁰

After 1860 the typical wagon train was comprised of twenty-two to twenty-six units. Each unit was drawn by five yokes of cattle and was made up of two wagons connected by a short pole. This pair of wagons carried a total of seven thousand pounds. A wagon master or manager, who was paid from \$75 to \$150 a month, was in charge of each train. A muleskinner or bullwhacker drove each wagon unit at a salary of up to sixty dollars a month.⁵¹ Often a "swamper" cleared the road and controlled spare animals, and a "cavvyard" served as night herder and stock tender.⁵²

A train usually traveled fifteen to eighteen miles a day, starting out each spring as soon as sufficient grass was available for feed. With luck, two round trips to Denver could be made in a season. When in camp, the teams formed an oval

47. Root and Connelly, *Overland Stage*, pp. 32, 35; *Daily Telegraph* (Council Bluffs, Iowa), May 1, 1861.

48. Winther, *Transportation Frontier*, p. 32.

49. *Daily Telegraph*, April 3, June 13, 1861.

50. Winther, *Transportation Frontier*, pp. 32-33.

51. H. T. Clarke, "Freighting—Denver and Black Hills," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, Second Series, Vol. V (1902), p. 300.

52. Winther, *Transportation Frontier*, p. 33.

corral, leaving only room enough at each end for the cattle to pass through. When the cattle were in, the wagon wheels were chained together, an arrangement which contained the wild cattle and protected the men from Indian attacks.⁵³

Most of the freight trains which traveled west from Omaha were operated by local merchants. More than twenty firms shipped freight out of Omaha, most of them necessarily large because of the tremendous investment required. Government contracts proved the most reliable source of income for the freighters, but whatever could be sold at a profit was hauled across the Plains, including clothing, food, grain, whiskey, ammunition and lumber.⁵⁴ In 1860 at the very inception of the overland freighting business, seven hundred and thirteen thousand pounds of freight were shipped from Omaha.⁵⁵

The United States Express Company established the first freight office in Omaha in August of 1857.⁵⁶ Within a year other freighters were hauling goods to Cherry Creek.⁵⁷ There were apparently several local subsidiaries of the United States Express Company, including J. A. Horbach's Merchants Dispatch Fast Freight and John R. Porter's Valentine's Freight Express and Great Western Dispatch Fast Freight Line.⁵⁸ Marshall and Shepherd of Council Bluffs, owners of "the fastest and best trains on the route," were also agents of United States Express.⁵⁹ The company later named Samuel D. Barkalow as its Omaha agent and had offices between 14th and 15th streets on Farham.⁶⁰ Other local firms, such as Peck & Wood, ran regular wagon trains between Chicago, Council Bluffs, Omaha and Denver and eventually to St. Joseph.⁶¹ Frank Coffman began freighting in 1860, and a

53. Clarke, *Proceedings and Collections*, Second Series, Vol. V, p. 300.

54. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, p. 110.

55. Mantor, *Nebraska History*, XXIX, 335-336.

56. *Omaha Nebraskian*, December 8, 1858; James Woodruff Savage and John T. Bell, *History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska*, (New York: Munsell & Co., 1894), p. 447.

57. *Omaha Times*, September 23, 1858.

58. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, April 11, 1862.

59. *Daily Telegraph*, April 3 and June 13, 1861.

60. *Collins' Omaha Directory* (Omaha, 1866), p. 186.

61. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, November 9, 1863; *Omaha Weekly Herald*, January 5, 1866.

local newspaper noted that his operations extended "in all directions."⁶²

The Omaha freighting volume increased tremendously after 1863 as a result of the gold discoveries at Alder Gulch, Virginia City, Montana.⁶³ The shipment of government troops and supplies during the Indian War of 1864-1865 also provided a boon for business. Freighters were paid the usual rate of ten cents per pound for hauling government goods.⁶⁴ The government was forced to provide protection for both stagecoaches and wagon trains between Omaha and Fort Kearny, and at the same time they installed pontoon bridges across the Loup Fork at Columbus and the Platte River at Fort Kearny. With the establishment of these bridges, Omaha became the main military shipping point for the West, an eventuality which coincided with the use of the Omaha route as the main overland stage line.⁶⁵

As business increased, more Omaha firms such as Porter & Deuel and Megeath & Barlow entered the freighting field.⁶⁶ Collins' Lightning Express "lived up to its name by taking forty days to travel by mule wagon" between Helena and Omaha.⁶⁷ The firm of Willis and Andresen carried liquor, tobacco and cigars to Denver.⁶⁸ The *Weekly Republican* noted in September of 1865 that 150 locally stocked teams had departed Omaha in a single week. These included trains owned by Turner, Rowman & Company; Ritchie, Paddock & Brown and Reuben Wood.⁶⁹

Probably the two largest Omaha freighters were William Paxton and Edward Creighton. Paxton began freighting to

62. Andreas, *History of Nebraska*, p. 701; *Omaha Nebraskian*, October 9, 1863.

63. Alfred Sorenson, *The Story of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time* (Omaha: National Printing Company, 1923), p. 184.

64. William Fulton, "Freighting and Staging in Early Days," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, Second Series, Vol. V (1902), pp. 260-263.

65. Report of Major General Grenville M. Dodge, July 18, 1865, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. XLVIII, Pt. I, pp. 332-333.

66. *Omaha Daily Republican*, October 10 and 12, 1865.

67. Harlow, *Old Waybills*, p. 284.

68. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, February 2, 1866.

69. *Ibid.*, September 1, 1865.

Denver in 1860, and in 1864 he assumed control of the teams of John McCormick which operated between Omaha, Denver and Fort Laramie. In 1867 Paxton moved six thousand men and fifteen hundred teams for the Union Pacific Railroad from Rock Creek to Green River,⁷⁰ both in present Wyoming, for use in railroad construction.

Edward Creighton, transcontinental telegraph builder, used hundreds of wagons to carry his telegraphic equipment and provisions west from the Missouri River. Originally loaded at St. Joseph, Creighton's wagons, which averaged fifty-six hundred pounds of freight, began in 1861 to outfit at Omaha.⁷¹ After the Montana gold discoveries, Creighton loaded wagons with supplies for Virginia City. His trains followed the route from Omaha through Forts Kearny and Laramie and over the Bozeman Trail to Virginia City and Bannack. Assisted by his cousin James Creighton and brother John A. Creighton, Edward Creighton's trains reportedly netted huge profits.⁷² It was said that the profits on the Bannack trains in one season amounted to sixty thousand dollars. James Creighton once brought gold dust worth thirty-two thousand dollars to Omaha from the Bannack mines.⁷³ In 1864 the Creightons started a train of forty-six wagons, each drawn by six mules and carrying four thousand pounds of freight. This outfit was said to have cost one hundred and fifty thousand dollars.⁷⁴

In response to agitation aided by the local press for a freight line connection with the railroad,⁷⁵ Edward Creighton in 1866 organized the Western Transportation Company. This company was to "supply the demands of shippers by having trains constantly moving from the Western terminus of the Union Pacific over the different routes to Denver, and ultimately to Salt Lake, Montana, and other

70. Alfred Sorenson, *The History of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time* (Omaha: Gibson, Miller & Richardson, 1889), p. 322; Savage and Bell, *History of Omaha*, p. 568.

71. *Daily Telegraph*, June 2, 1861.

72. Sorenson, *Story of Omaha*, p. 184; *Omaha Nebraskian*, November 20, 1863.

73. *Omaha Nebraskian*, December 18, 1863.

74. *Ibid.*, April 1, 1864.

75. *Omaha Weekly Herald*, January 5, 1866.

gold territories.”⁷⁶ The Western Transportation Company also hauled freight from the terminus of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad to Omaha, Denver, Central City and Salt Lake.⁷⁷

Other freight companies were soon organized to haul goods deposited by the railroads. John A. Horbach represented the Merchant’s Union Express, a company “ready to receipt for anything, from a gold pen to a steam boiler.”⁷⁸ Woolworth & Barton’s Overland Transportation Line and the Star Union Freight Line also shared in the business.⁷⁹ In 1867 Wells, Fargo and Company with Edgar M. Morsman as local agent combined the assets of the Merchant’s Dispatch, United States Express and American Express lines.⁸⁰ Wells, Fargo and Company retired from the freighting service in 1869 when the Union Pacific Railroad Express began operations in the area.⁸¹

As the transportation business reached its peak in 1865, an Omaha newspaper reported plans for a “Novel But Important Enterprise” —that of establishing an “Overland Camel Line” between the Missouri River and California, with Omaha as its probable eastern terminus. It was thought that a caravan of camels, each capable of carrying up to one thousand pounds, could “supply the chief desideratum for facilitating intercourse with our new and distant territories.”⁸² Actually, camels had been used with minimal success in the Southwest prior to the Civil War.⁸³ A few camels carried freight between Austin, Nevada, and Virginia City, Montana, in 1864, but they could not stand the weather, “frightened horses wherever they went and were finally forbidden use of

76. *Ibid.*, November 30, 1866. Other officers of this company were John McCormick, Augustus Kountze and J. W. Paddock. George Marshall was superintendent.

77. *Omaha Weekly Herald*, February 1, 1867.

78. Savage and Bell, *History of Omaha*, p. 448.

79. *Omaha Weekly Herald*, May 10 and 31, 1867.

80. *Ibid.*, March 29, 1867.

81. Savage and Bell, *History of Omaha*, p. 448.

82. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, March 10, 1865.

83. W. Eugene Hollon, *The Southwest: Old and New* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), pp. 215-217.

the roads.”⁸⁴ The plan to use camels on the Omaha route apparently came to nought.

As in the case of the staging business, the arrival of railroads pushed the wagon freighters out of the Platte Valley. The demise was gradual, however, since wagon trains were needed for many years to haul freight from railroad termini to communities not yet served by railroads, but by the winter of 1867-1868 the wagon freighting business at Omaha had practically ended.⁸⁵

Overland travel through the Omaha vicinity probably surpassed in volume both staging and freighting. As years passed, the annual Mormon pilgrimage was supplemented by increasingly large numbers of settlers, many of whom outfitted at the stores of Omaha merchants. Others were bound for the gold fields of Colorado and Montana. Many sought government homesteads and railroad lands as these became available. Westbound wagons often bore such slogans as “Pike’s Peak or Bust,” although these signs were sometimes altered to read “Busted, by G-d” as the same wagons returned east.⁸⁶ As early as 1854, the *Omaha Arrow* noted the passage through Omaha of a fifty-two wagon emigrant train carrying ninety-five men and fourteen families. These probably typical emigrants were accompanied by fifty-four mules, four ponies, forty horses and over one thousand cattle,⁸⁷ an example of the numerous possessions pioneers carried with them to the West.

A traveler in 1862 counted 872 emigrant wagons on the road between Omaha and Fort Kearny.⁸⁸ In May of 1864, the *Nebraskian* noted that

up to 2 o’clock today, 150 wagons—horses, mules and loose cattle almost beyond comprehension passed up Farnham street, on their way to the camping ground near the military bridge, whence they return to the city to lay in their outfits for the mountains. The streets are jammed with emigrant wagons and the stores with eager buyers. It

84. Harlow, *Old Waybills*, pp. 252-253.

85. Fulton, *Proceedings and Collections*, Second Series, V, 263.

86. *Daily Missouri Republican*, August 15, 1860. Cited by Watkins, *Publications*, XX, 341.

87. *Omaha Arrow*, September 1, 1854.

88. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, May 21, 1862.

seems as if all the world knew that Omaha was on the Great Central North Platte Route and the best outfitting locality on the river. ⁸⁹

Along with immigrant wagon trains, two-wheeled hand carts such as those tried by the Mormons were occasionally seen on the Omaha route. In 1859 a company of one hundred men was formed for a trip to the Colorado mines. Each hand cart was manned by three or four men and carried one hundred pounds per man. It was thought that the entire cost of an outfit, including cart, clothing and provisions, would be twenty dollars per man. ⁹⁰ Most travelers, however, preferred more conventional means of transportation.

Immigrant traffic survived the railroads' approach longer than staging or wagon freighting. Most immigrant farm families could ill afford the passenger fare and freight charges assessed by the railroads, and, thus, until the late 1880's when the low-fare "immigrant car" was instituted, a decreasing number of immigrant wagons were still seen west of the Missouri River. ⁹¹

The various methods of overland travel were, at best, costly and dangerous. The hazards involved added to the financial dangers, resulting in bankruptcy for many of the firms involved. Stagecoaches afforded inadequate protection against the elements, and many a passenger arrived at his destination suffering from frostbite. Livestock was similarly affected, and at times, "the horses were so near to perishing that they were unable to haul the stage to the station, and ox teams had to be sent out to bring it in." ⁹² Coaches crossed streams on ice in winter, often resulting in an icy bath for both the vehicle and its passengers. ⁹³ Edward Creighton once lost an entire team of mules when they fell through the ice with a wagon load of lumber. Often teams were caught in a sudden snow storm, and cattle perished or became lost. ⁹⁴

Rains also caused problems resulting in poor road conditions and irregular mail deliveries. Swollen streams were responsible for lost mail bags. A correspondent reported that

89. *Omaha Nebraskian*, May 6, 1864.

90. *Omaha Times*, February 3, 1859.

91. Winther, *Transportation Frontier*, p. 24.

92. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, February 23, 1866.

93. *Ibid.*, January 26, 1866.

94. *Ibid.*, March 2, 1866.

“to keep the mail from getting wet, the carrier put it upon the seat of the wagon from which place the jolting of the wagon in the quicksand gradually worked it off into the rapidly coursing river.”⁹⁵ The few bridges available were scanty affairs incapable of supporting the weight of wagon trains.

Despite the impressions given by frontier literature and contemporary movie and television Westerns, there were relatively few holdups on overland transportation routes and almost none in eastern Nebraska. Frank Root, an overland driver explained that

during the staging days nearly every man crossing the plains with money on his person was armed to the teeth, and a vigilant watch was constantly kept up for highwaymen and thieves and robbers, who undoubtedly realized it was a desperate undertaking to attempt to go through a stage load of fearless, determined passengers.⁹⁶

Perhaps the greatest threat to both staging and freighting was posed by Indians. There was little difficulty overland from Omaha in the early years, although in 1861 the government deemed it necessary to organize an expedition for the protection of emigrants traveling westward. Captain H. E. Maynadier gathered and equipped a command of seventy men, and the government guaranteed the safety of those accompanying the expedition.⁹⁷

Indian depredations multiplied after 1863, and losses noted by the local press were considerable. Indians once stole stock worth twenty thousand dollars from Peck & Woods's train on its return from Fort Laramie.⁹⁸ The most publicized attack came in August of 1864 near Plum Creek when about fourteen men were killed, a woman and child taken prisoners and three trains robbed and burned.⁹⁹ An Omaha editor commented that it was worth the price of a man's life to travel between Denver and Omaha, Nebraska City, Atchison or Leavenworth and suggested that travel would continue to be hazardous until government protection were furnished.¹⁰⁰

95. *Ibid.*, June 29, 1866.

96. Root and Connelly, *Overland Stage*, p. 491.

97. *Daily Telegraph*, May 1, 3 and 23, 1861.

98. *Omaha Weekly Herald*, September 7, 1866.

99. Hafen, *Overland Mail*, p. 258; *Omaha Nebraskian*, August 12, 1864.

100. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, February 3, 1865.

In 1865 government protection was offered. Ben Holladay was urged to locate his stage and mail stations at the military posts along the way and was assured of military escorts for his coaches. Each station was guarded by an eleven-man force and four mounted men accompanied each stage coach.¹⁰¹ Overland travel then resumed, although Indian attacks continued.¹⁰²

The growth of Omaha and other cities in the trans-Mississippi West was directly proportionate to the development of transportation facilities. Local merchants depended on the "overlanders" for a large portion of their business volume. Staging and freighting companies employed thousands of men and utilized a great percentage of the livestock and crops raised in the area. Along the overland trail, the rude buildings that initially served as way-stations grew into ranches and towns.

Omaha was not as important a transportation center as other Missouri River towns, such as Nebraska City and St. Joseph, until 1865 when the route through Omaha became the main line for all types of overland travel. The approach of the Union Pacific Railroad undoubtedly contributed to the increased volume of overland traffic through Omaha as passengers and freight were transferred from the new to the old to complete their westward journey.

Although the days of stage and freight companies were numbered, their services had been essential. They had connected settled areas with the frontier and carried necessary goods. They had provided the first regular mail service to remote areas and served as an inducement to increased immigration. Most important, the overland trails were the precursors of modern transportation. The trail west from Omaha, blazed by the Mormons and secured by the Western Stage Company and the overland freighters, was soon imbedded with the tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad and ultimately became part of the nationwide network of highways.

101. Jno. Pope to Ben Holladay, February 27, 1865, in *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. XLVIII, Part I, pp. 997-998; Major General Grenville M. Dodge to R. R. Livingston, May 22, 1865, in *ibid.*, Series I, Vol. XLVIII, Part II, p. 555.

102. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, p. 142.