

Chicago: Meat, Trains and the Interstates

At the southwestern edge of Lake Michigan, the small but shallow harbor at the mouth of the Chicago River and the nearby, short, if swampy portage to the Des Plaines River and the Mississippi River basin in all likelihood would have insured by themselves that a city of some size would grow at the site, but there was no guarantee that Chicago was to become that great city that it became. Chicago, or what was to become Chicago, grew slowly until the completion of the Illinois & Michigan Canal and the arrival of the railroad spurred its growth. Within a generation, the town of just a few thousand souls grew into a city with a population approaching one million people. The city had grown large but it was more of a rugged boomtown with one hell of a lot of people than a city. It was the Chicago Fire, as tragic as the fire was, that probably had as much to do with how the city was to define itself as a city. Following the fire, brick and mortar rapidly replaced the wood frame buildings. Once more, the city took the opportunity to straighten its streets, create parks and establish its lake front. The city rapidly established itself as the commercial center of the Midwest, as well as a city in which people chose to live rather than simply to work.

Not that Chicago at least did not flirt with industry. The fire, though destroying much of the city's downtown left both its stockyards and the city's railroad tracks intact. Soon after the fire, several of the city's meat packers agreed to expand the stockyards and their operations in the city. After all, Chicago not only lay near the center of the rapidly expanding nation but its port offered ready access to the eastern seaboard and Europe's rapidly expanding markets. It was no accident of geography, however that led these business leaders to select Chicago as the center of the meat packing industry, rather than Cincinnati or St. Louis, which had the advantage of a more temperate climate. Like Chicago, St. Louis was not only close to the western grasslands upon which the cattle but that city was also conveniently located to the vast fields of corn that the cattle fattened up upon once they had arrived in the stockyards. Then, why did the packers select Chicago?

Years prior to the fire, the expectation had been that what would become known as the Illinois & Michigan Canal would insure the state's prosperity. It did, though it proved far more costly to finance and took far longer to build than had been anticipated. Begun in 1836, the canal was not opened for traffic until 1847. Despite the long delay, the canal was one of only two canals built during that era—the other being the Erie—that actually paid for itself. The canal's success had much to do with its location but it was the simultaneous arrival of the railroad that insured that the canal would be profitable. Elsewhere, the railroad forced canals to operate at a loss, but somehow railroads complimented the Illinois canal. Rail lines could be laid profitably across land where the cost of building a canal was prohibitive in comparison, effectively discouraging canal construction except for relatively short distances between navigable waterways. Railroads could built directly between towns and cities, opening vast tracks of fertile land that had previously been too far from navigable waterways to get produce to the market profitably. Effectively, the railroad isolated most canals, but not the I & M.

Railroads not only came to Chicago but terminated there, insuring that the city would rapidly become the nation's primary transportation center. Geographically, Chicago was roughly located towards the center of the growing nation but no more so than St. Louis and Chicago was inconveniently located too far north on the western side of Lake Michigan, forcing lines to make a costly detour around the lake. It was due to the efforts of Illinois's Senator Stephen Douglas that Chicago came to be the transportation center that it was to become. Soon after the canal was opened Douglas engineered legislation through the U. S. Senate that not only declared Chicago to be the eastern terminus of the projected transcontinental railroad but that all lines running east and west must terminate in Chicago. In one fell swoop, Douglas made certain that freight originating west or east of Chicago must unload in the city only to be reloaded if it was to be shipped further in any direction. The result of Douglas's manipulations was Chicago's commercial success while its canal was in the position to prosper alongside the railroads.

It was thanks to that legislation, which, incidentally, made the senator wealthy since he had had the foresight to buy considerable land in Chicago, that the packers found Chicago as attractive as they did. Chicago's access to the Great Lakes and New York via the Erie Canal, and the Midwest and the Western markets via the I & M Canal and the expanding railroad network made Chicago their favored choice, not its geography alone. Within a generation, Chicago had become the meat processing center of the world, lending Chicago a seemingly promising industrial future. Chicago did, in fact, become an industrial center, though not to the degree that did Detroit or Cleveland. In addition to meat packing, the city became a center for the manufacture of agricultural products, distilleries, the Pullman Car and even automobiles, but its future lay with Marshall Fields Sears & Roebuck and wholesalers, with commercial and retail development, not industrial.

It may have been just as well. The packing industry continued to prosper through the Twenties. It survived the 1930s and boomed during World War II. Industry generally thrived over these years, but industry's place in nation's urban centers was coming to an end. Rising urban costs that discouraged expansion and the promise of evading unions may have encouraged industries to consider re-locating factories in rural areas, particularly in the South and Southwest, a trend that began in earnest following World War II. It was the development of better highways and the building the interstates, however, that made the shift possible. By the 1960s, the auto industry had abandoned Detroit, leaving factories empty and neighborhoods decaying. The packers left Chicago as well, but Chicago, far less dependent upon industry than Detroit, continued to thrive.

It would hardly be an exaggeration to claim that transportation, with a timely nudge by a Senator Douglas, made Chicago, but its future rested only partly upon developments in transportation technology. The city's decision as early as the months following the Chicago fire to define itself as a retail and commercial center also did much to determine the city's future character. The roads and highways that allowed industry to abandon other urban centers continued to bring commerce and buyers to Chicago. Though geography certainly loomed heavily in determining Chicago's development as a city, the

city's leaders and advances in transportation did much to define its special character, making it more than just another large city.

Chjones: January 21, 2008