

## SIBLEY DAYBOOK, June 8, 1838

## NICOLLET EXPL[ORING] EXPEDITION

- To [1 Hair Trunk (no key)]<sup>1</sup>  
 " 8 lbs Tobacco à 20 cts  
 " 14 lbs N.O. Sugar 20 cts  
 " 3 prs 3 pt Blkts à \$10:  
 " 1 " 2 p " " 9.  
 " 12 Bushels Corn à 1.50  
 " 6 Bags to contain à 2/.  
 " 4 Bbls Flour à \$11  
 " 3 Pork à \$22.  
 " 1 Large Kettle for men \$3  
 " 6 3 feet Goo[d]s \$9.75  
 " 1 Crow Bar  
 " 3 Drills & 1 Hammer \$3  
 " 1 Axe, 1 yd Cotton  
 1 Hatchet  
 " 1 Paid for making musquito Bar 12/.  
 Empty Bags, 12. ruled Foolscap paper  
 1 Patent Gimlet 1/6

## THE "JOHN B. ALLEY," A PIONEER LOCOMOTIVE\*

A sheaf of old letters on deposit in the Baker Library of Harvard University gives a glimpse of an early type of locomotive which in a real sense epitomizes the pioneer stage of both American locomotive engineering and American business. The time was 1868. The railroad concerned was the Hastings and Dakota, a short road reaching westward from the Mississippi in Minnesota. The correspondence was between William Le Duc, a local promoter who was president of the road, Oakes Ames, shovel manufacturer, capitalist, and Congressman of Boston, and John B. Alley,

<sup>1</sup> The item enclosed in brackets is crossed out in the original.

\*Reprinted from the *Bulletin* of the Business Historical Society, 10: 78-80 (November, 1936). Photostatic copies of the letters from which Dr. Larson quotes are now available in the manuscript division of the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*

attorney and Congressman of Boston. The Bostonians were financing the road, very likely supplying it goods and services, and serving as its agents in the East. The story those letters tell is about the groping of nonspecialists, the methods of small-scale business, and, in general, the experimental condition of mechanics and business at the time.

When the Hastings and Dakota had been built some thirty miles, it was time to secure a locomotive. President Le Duc, accordingly, wrote to John B. Alley about securing an engine — “A substantial thoroughly well built plain engine about 20 tons five feet drivers” — such were his specifications.

Alley made the following reply to Le Duc’s request :

Mr. Ames and myself have made considerable enquiry, and find that an engine can be bought of about 20 tons for something less than 12000 dols — Cash. Mr. McKay will give you one for 11,500 dols of 22 Tons weight. They are getting out 3 for a friend of Mr. Ames & myself for 11,250 dols, and we think they can get another put in for the same price. All the locomotive works are very busy . . . and unable to furnish one under 2 Mo<sup>s</sup> or so. We heard of one of 20 Tons — in Providence at 10,500 dols. We think it is all ready now to deliver. They ask 11,500 but we think it may be bought at the above figure Cash. I shall go to Providence tomorrow and shall telegraph you if I can get it. Mr. Ames will buy it if I say so, and let it to you, at same rate as he has the others, if you desire — or sell it to you . . . He says if this is not bought, you had better buy or hire an old and second-hand engine to build road with, rather than to wait for a new one to be built.

On the following day Alley went to Providence to inspect the engine about which he had heard. He reported to Le Duc as follows :

I found a nice one 21 Tons wght — about done — Can be finished in ten days — 5 foot drivers. They asked 12000 dols. for it — but were very anxious to sell it. They had an order for 5 of this exact pattern & weight — and they built 6 — consequently had one over which is too light for their trade. I finally offered them, at Mr. Ames request 10,500 dols. and telegraphed you to know if you would take it. I bought it subject to telegraphic reply. We all regard it a great Bargain, and quite a favor to get one so nearly done. . . . If you

telegraph me that you want it—I wish you would also inform me whether you will burn wood or coal—This is intended for coal—but if you want to burn wood, the stack must be changed.

The bargain was clinched on word from Minnesota. And we may assume that the stack was properly fixed for burning wood. Then came the problem of getting the engine to its destination, not an easy matter in the day when the railway gauge had not yet been standardized and when the Mississippi was the only carrier from La Crosse, Wisconsin, to the riverhead of the new road up the Mississippi. Alley contracted to have the new locomotive delivered at La Crosse for \$625.00 with a competent man to accompany the engine to its destination. For an additional \$250.00, carriage on the river could also be arranged, but Alley recommended that Le Duc try to get better terms from Captain Davidson, the dictator of the upper Mississippi packets. Everything was promptly arranged, and on October 3 the "John B. Alley" set off on its long journey.

The next reference to the locomotive comes from Oakes Ames. He shows the capitalist's concern for his investment, a sort of forerunner of J. P. Morgan's later attention to railroad affairs. On October 25, 1868, Ames wrote the president of the Hastings and Dakota:

Mr. W. B. Healey, Superintendent of the R. Island Locomotive Works says he will if you wish furnish you a good engineer to run the engine. Sent you from their works. I suppose you have got it on the ground by this time and hope it is working to your satisfaction. It is important to have a good man to run the machine and keep it in order and you will have to be very careful and have a warm house that you can keep the pipes from freezing in your cold winters. We had several engines disabled on our Iowa roads by the frost the Pipes were broken and two of them were injured very materially And in your case with but one engine to loose [*sic*] the use of that would stop your road.

On November 10 Ames again wrote President Le Duc: "You must be very careful & not have your Engine freeze as you have but one and if you lose that you are used up."

Nothing further is said about the engine in the correspondence of the years that follow. Presumably, the "John B. Alley" worked to the satisfaction of Le Duc. Presumably, also, it spent many years carrying Minnesota wheat to be transferred to the Mississippi packets or, very soon, to be transshipped via the newly completed St. Paul and Chicago Railroad. Locomotives and business were, however, changing rapidly in those days. Railroad consolidation had for some time been bringing changes in railroad management, and locomotive engineers had been experimenting with engines to carry heavier loads long distances. The "John B. Alley" had not long worked for the Hastings and Dakota when that road became a part of the young Milwaukee system, and the engine may still have been in its prime when, in 1875, the "John C. Davis," the pioneer mogul, appeared on the Baltimore and Ohio. A new day had come for both the locomotive and business in America.

HENRIETTA M. LARSON

HARVARD UNIVERSITY



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