

The Fifteen Mile Marker on the Transcontinental Railroad in Sarpy County

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The building of the transcontinental railroad was one of the 19th century's most important events in our country. The Union Pacific Railroad (**UPRR**) built the westward route of the railroad with construction beginning in Omaha on July 10, 1865. The Central Pacific Railroad started in California and built eastward. The two railroads met in Promontory Summit, Utah Territory on May 10, 1869. Both ventures were financially supported by the federal government.

The original main line of the UPRR was constructed in the Papillion Creek Valley through Sarpy County when Nebraska was still a territory. The Sarpy County route continued as the main line until 1908 when the Lane Cut-off was completed. Construction of the UPRR went along Mud Creek south of Omaha to Papillion Creek and then northwesterly along West Papillion Creek through what is now Papillion and on to where Millard is now located in Douglas County. Mud Creek is a tributary of Papillion Creek that runs generally north-south. The original UPRR main line followed Mud Creek to a point near its junction with the Papillion Creek and then went up the west branch of Papillion Creek. The main line curved to the west to go up the Papillion Creek Valley near present day Highway 75 just east of the intersection of 25th Street and Gilmore Road.

There was controversy over the selection of this route instead of a more direct route west from Omaha since it added nine miles of construction to the line which meant more government subsidies. The selection was defended on the basis that the grades were gentler than the direct route. The more direct route (Lane Cut-off) opened in 1908 and the old main line took on a back-up role. Between 1988 and 1994, 7.3 miles of track on the original mainline between Gilmore and Millard were removed.¹

The first ten miles of track from Omaha were opened on September 22, 1865. Sorenson's *The History of Omaha*² describes the celebration of the completion of the first fifteen miles of UPRR track at "Sahling's Grove" in Sarpy County on October 12, 1865.³ General Sherman of Civil War fame, Nebraska Territorial Governor Saunders and Thomas Durant of the UPRR, among others, attended this celebration. This event caught my interest because the Salings were my relatives and I remembered seeing the small 15 mile marker when I walked along the former UPRR main line before the tracks were removed. In addition, my great-great grandparents Amos and Samantha Gates were living in a log cabin along the UPRR right of way in 1865 and witnessed the construction. The Gates cabin was just west of 36th Street near current day Brook Drive. Sorenson describes the 15 mile event as follows:

¹ Historical Marker 499, 222 N Jefferson, Papillion (Sump Library)

² Sorenson, *The History of Omaha*, 1923, page 291.

³ Sorenson doesn't provide a date but the *Nebraska Republican*, October 12, 1865 reports the excursion occurred that day. General Sherman arrived in Omaha on October 10, 1865 and left on October 13, 1865. Both the Omaha Public Library and Nebraska State Historical Society were helpful in finding newspaper articles about the excursion.

“The completion of the first fifteen miles of track was celebrated by an excursion from Omaha. Thomas C. Durant, who arranged the excursion, took a locomotive and a flat car and invited about twenty prominent men to go with him on the trip to the end of the track at Sahling’s Grove. Among the excursionists was General Sherman. It was an enthusiastic party, and, as the commissary department was well supplied, the excursionists enjoyed themselves. General Sherman, who was called upon for a speech, related his experience in sinking several thousand dollars, years before, in California, in an effort to start the Pacific railroad. He reviewed the dream of other days, and expressed the hope that he might live to see the time—but could scarcely expect it at his age—when the two oceans would be united by a complete Pacific railroad. General Sherman, contrary to his expectations, lived to see that day, and traveled over the complete railroad uniting the two oceans. He went over the road in less than seven years from the day he took the trip to Sahling’s Grove.”

Salings Grove was a small group of farm houses in the vicinity of present day 54th Street and the old Rock Island Railroad abandoned right-of-way. ⁴ Later, there was a railroad stop at Rumsey (named after Rumsey Saling), a farmers shipping point with a grain elevator and stock pens at the north end of 54th Street.⁵ The houses are gone and the area east of 54th Street has been cleared for farm land but there is still a large forested area west of 54th Street, north of Highway 370. ⁶ The May 1975 photo below looks southwest with 54th street going north toward the Rock Island tracks in the right center.



The current West Papio Trail on the north side of the creek generally follows the road bed of the original main line of the UPRR between 48th and 66th Streets. There were old railroad

⁴ It may have been an assembly point for wagon trains going west in the 1850s. See page 61 of Thomas Tibbles, *Hidden Power: A Secret History of the Indian Ring, Its Operations, Intrigues and Machinations*, Carleton Publishers, 1881. One of the newspaper articles about the excursion spells “Saling” as “Sailing”.

⁵ Rumsey still shows on the Geological Survey Omaha South topographical map.

⁶ The large grove of trees from 54th Street to 66th Street can be seen on Google Earth.



ties and other railroad debris along the former UPRR road bed for several years until it was obliterated by flood control work in the late 1990s. The 15 mile marker of the UPRR was east of 66th Street and just west of where 60th Street would be located along the trail, about opposite the last power line pole on the south side of the creek. The 14 mile marker was just west of 48th Street and the 16 mile marker was near Papillion.

As the main line went west over what is now 36th Street, the passengers on the 1865 excursion would have seen the Amos Gates log cabin and a large hill to the north of the present day Twin Creek Cinema. The hill and area west of the hill as far as Salings Grove was the site of the last village of the Omaha Indians called Pahu'thoⁿ dathoⁿ (the hill rising in the middle of a plain) before being moved to a reservation about 1855. The site is sometimes referred to as the Kurz Omaha Indian village because of a visit there in May, 1851 by explorer Rudolph Kurz.⁷ The Omaha Indian village site was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. The village site in this area has been destroyed. Much of the "hill rising in the middle of a plain" was used for fill for construction in the area.⁸ In photos taken in May, 1975, Pahu'thoⁿ dathoⁿ is shown to the right in the photo above looking northwest and left center in the photo below looking northeast. The tracks of the original main line are shown going west in the photo above and from Gilmore west below. The original main line is crossing 36th street below.



Today, the former UPRR main line tracks end at Gilmore near 25th Street and Gilmore Road. Google Earth Historical Imagery from 1993 and later shows the road bed of the original main line from Gilmore westward. Gilmore once had a train station and post office and was a

⁷ *Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz: An Account of His Experiences Among Fur Traders and American Indians on the Mississippi and the Upper Missouri Rivers During the Years 1846 to 1852*, U of Nebraska Press, 1937.

⁸ Google Earth historical imagery shows the hill before its destruction.

shipping point for grain and other agricultural commodities. I recall it as a place where freight cars were cleaned out in later years. Passengers on the UPRR main line around 1900 would have seen numerous feed yards for cattle at Gilmore and the Guy Barton estate buildings which were north across Gilmore Road from the train station. West of Gilmore the passengers would have seen the Amos Gates stone house which was built in 1869 on the “hill rising in the middle of a plain”. The house was a landmark for passengers along the old main line of the UPRR and is in the center of the early 1900s photo below. The original main line goes across the bottom of the photo. The stone house was gutted by fire in 1968 and its walls bulldozed in 1971.



Early 1900s Looking North



Amos Gates House c1905 (NSHS photo)

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