

Wells County Writers Traced Building of the Railroads by Bob Cory – May 5, 1984 – Minot Daily News

The Soo Line was built in Manfred in 1892-1893, and this railway was critical to the building of the Great Northern rails much later as the following account by Bob Cory indicates.

The Great Northern – 1910-1912

I am indebted to back issues of the Wells County History for the story of how the towns of Wellsburg, Heimdal, Hamberg and Bremen had to wait two years for the Surrey cutoff of the GN (now Burlington Northern) to be completed.

The line was opened in early fall of 1912 as a new main route from Fargo to Minot

First grain was shipped from elevators on this line in October of that year.

Correspondents for the Wells County Free Press at Fessenden were able to report that the first carload of wheat from Bremen consigned to Minneapolis by William R. Hartl was shipped early that month and a carload of barley consigned by Mrs. August Piper. At Heimdal the Farmers Elevator managed by A. N. Greenfield received 78 wagon loads of grain in one day. That was October 4 and the grain kept coming.

Initial construction activity for the new line started in July 1910. The main contract for grading and structures on the entire line had been let to A. Guthrie and Co. of St. Paul in April. Sale of first lots in the new town sites was starting in June. Businesses began to be organized in each town at that time.

Expectations ran high. A news correspondent at Bremen said there was talk that “the road will be completed before the snow flies.” The editor of the Free Press, however, felt obligated to write: “Nothing definite can be learned of the Great Northern’s intentions until the work begins to show for itself”.

The real show developed in 1912 when as the late E. S. Killie, Wells County historian would say years later, “Every day was circus day.”

As correspondents of the Fessenden paper recorded bits of the story week by week, a searcher of the files found it fascinating to follow developments through the eyes of local writers. What they wrote revealed their hope and their curiosity. All they knew was what they could see for themselves. They just had to wait for two years and watch.

After all, the rail line for which the contract was awarded in 1910 was 225 miles long. It presented some engineering problems. Among them was the long high bridge across the Sheyenne River east of Hannaford known as the Luverne Bridge, and the lesser yet difficult structure for crossing the upper Sheyenne near Heimdal in Wells County.

It was the 500 foot wooden trestle near Heimdal, 63 feet high at the river crossing, about which the residents of northern Wells County were most concerned. It was not finished until June of 1912, when the big steam shovel completed its job and track layers arrived.

When the contract to the Guthrie Company was awarded the Wells County hopefuls included people who could remember how fast the **Soo Line** had accomplished its track laying job in 1892-1893. In one year the Soo Line constructed 153.8 miles of main line from Cathay in Wells County all the way to Portal on the Canadian border.

It was, you see, nothing new for Wells County to witness railroad construction projects. As of 1910 Wells County already had upward of 75 miles of rail line within its borders, including the Soo Line and the Carrington-Turtle Lake branch of the Northern Pacific.

Noteworthy is the fact that when the Guthrie firm, began work on the Wells County segment of the Surrey cutoff, it shipped in men, materials and power equipment over the Soo Line to **Manfred** in order to get a head start on the upper Sheyenne crossing west of Heimdal. Everything essential was moved overland from **Manfred** about eight miles to the site where the trestle would be erected.

How this was done is worth a note. The contractors unloaded at Manfred one big steam shovel, built to be moved over rails, plus railroad dump cars, plus a whole trainload of bridge timbers and lesser items. The Manfred dray line and a number of farmers were hired to haul what they could. But to move the shovel, dump cars and heavier timbers they used a sort of Caterpillar system. Short stretches of temporary track were laid. The shovel was unloaded on these rails and moved as far as it could go – under its own power. Then the temporary track behind it was taken up and re-laid forward. This method was used for the string of dump cars also. They were drawn along the trackage, little by little by Andrew Erickson's thresher engine.

Earth moving for the river crossing began immediately for the contractors knew better than the Heimdal rubbernecks that this project would take a long time. Meanwhile grading was started at Bremen also. In July it was reported that "men and teams are arriving daily."

The base camp for this 1910 activity was set up at **Manfred**, where camp operators would have access to rail supply. Crews were living there in large tents, and the Manfred correspondent of the Free Press described this camp as "a white city."

A little later that year tracks for the new line were laid from the east as far as New Rockford. But the need for a supply base at **Manfred** on the Soo continued through 1911.

Grading work west from New Rockford was halted for the season in August of 1910. The men and equipment were moved elsewhere. Work did continue, however, with shovel and scrapers at the upper Sheyenne bridge site near Heimdal until February 1911, when there was a shutdown for the rest of the winter.

In the spring of 1911 work was not resumed at Heimdal until June. The big shovel was active again. A large amount of filling was done on both sides of the river, and crews of men were shaping the banks that would be needed at the ends of the trestle. Two weeks later basic grading was being done "all along the line". Cutting and filling operations for the Wells County segment continued into autumn.

It was October before actual work on the wooden trestle that would bridge the river was commenced. Meanwhile in September, electric lights had been installed on the steam shovel so that it could operate longer hours. By this time it was evident that men and machines would have to remain on the job as long as possible during the winter to build foundations for the trestle and to excavate a large cut that was required between the river and the town of Wellsburg to the west. For this cut a large amount of blasting with dynamite was done in February 1912.

The winter campaign for cut and fill and grading between Heimdal and Wellsburg meant that when the time came for laying track, the rails and machines would be moved into Wells County from Minot, not from the east via New Rockford.

With arrival of work trains from the west expected in the spring of 1912, the contractor's base camp now was set up near the trestle site. Seven or eight "tar-papers" bunk houses were placed there. A dining hall was built large enough to accommodate more than a hundred workers.

Along with the work trains, a large pile driver was brought to the scene in April. It had been used on bridges that were built east of new Rockford.

By that time, according to historian Kellie's account –

"Across the level prairie crews were at work building grade with four-house fresnos and two-horse scrapers. Across low places where more dirt was needed, it was hauled in horse-drawn dump wagons loaded from elevator graders drawn by eight or 12 horses. Crews of men with picks and shovels put in the final touches of leveling the grade to the height indicated by the surveyor's stakes.

"At Heimdal most of the activity was still centered on the bridge across the Sheyenne, where a quarter mile long structure for the trestle, which reached a height of 65 feet was being erected and filled in."

The Heimdal correspondent for the Free Press reported in early June that the steam shovel had about finished its work at this site; that yes, the steel would be laid into Heimdal from the west. The steel gang had arrived at last, and at first was "occupied in Laying track and sidetrack for the gravel pit west of town."

When July came, the correspondent at Bremen wrote: "The greatest event in the town of Bremen was the laying of steel by the great Northern. There was a large gathering of people

welcoming the long looked for rails.” Then the big steam shovel was brought to Bremen and used to make a cut for a large gravel pit.

After continuous track was in place all along the line, the final job to be done was to spread and pack the last coat of ballast around the ties, to hold them there. For this work, gravel from the large pits at Heimdal and Bremen was used. This gravel provided ballast all the way east to Hannaford.

As a last note: In 1923 the wooden trestle was replaced by a series of four concrete box culverts.