



Trail of the Iron Horse
watercolor, 1924, courtesy of private collectors

THE ROLE OF THE RAILROADS

The trail of the “iron horse” first entered Montana in 1880 near the Idaho border, crossing the southern tier of Montana. Later the Northern Pacific spanned the northern part of the state. Track-layers and gandy dancers did not come to the basin until nearly 20 years later. In 1908, the Milwaukee Railroad extended a line on a northerly route through Denton. At the same time, the Great Northern Railroad came through the Judith Basin via Stanford and Hobson. The railroads were big boosters, promising cheap land and prosperity. Immigrants flooded into the towns that moved or sprang up along the tracks.

The upriver town of Philbrook, once important as a stage station, moved to this location in 1908 and was renamed Hobson after S.S. Hobson, an early settler in the region. Communities dependent upon a single resource like mining or agriculture were prosperous during the good years and faded when the rains and markets were scarce. Towns serving as local trade centers survived the lean times and grew in the good years.

