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Into the Deep Woods

PHILLIPS & COLBY brought the Wisconsin Central into Stevens Point with a flourish, having built a good piece of railroad, spending plenty of money in the accomplishment. There was a good reason for this: The Menasha-Stevens Point division was to be featured as the blue-ribbon exhibit of the whole show. That section of country between Menasha and Stevens Point was already settled; towns and counties along the line had been generous in voting financial aid to the road.

However, the route from Stevens Point to Ashland presented a different picture. The right-of-way northward led through an unbroken forest wilderness entirely devoid of towns, settlements, or organized society. An occasional Indian camp; the camps of timber cruisers, surveyors and prospectors comprised the total human activity in the territory about to be traversed by the road. Phillips & Colby could expect no financial aid from this unsettled country; the one big prize which held their undivided attention was the Federal Land Grant allotted to the Wisconsin Central: a million acres of the finest standing timber on good soil.

Elijah B. Phillips was a well-seasoned, successful railroad operator. His experience had been wholly in the operation of well-established lines and did not include the rough, grueling labors in building a new road through a wild, raw country, such as northern Wisconsin was in 1870.

Charles L. Colby, Phillips' partner in the Construction Company, was the son of Gardner Colby, financier of the Wisconsin Central. Young C. L. Colby received his first baptism in railroad affairs in 1871 in the building of the Wisconsin Central. Without previous railroad training or experience in the rigorous work involved in pioneering such projects, C. L. Colby was kept occupied in his position as Treasurer of Phillips & Colby Construction Company. He also held the position of secretary to his father, Gardner Colby, and spent much of his time in the east. On two occasions he took his family to Germany to sojourn while he attempted to interest the Europeans in buying stock in the Wisconsin Central. The expense accounts covering these extended jaunts were steep and heavy, yet were promptly approved by Phillips & Colby Company and generously paid out of the Wisconsin Central exchequer. On account of the outside activities of C. L. Colby, Phillips had the field to himself in the construction and management of the new railroad. However, events of the following five years show that he learned ultimately the wide difference between building a railroad, and operating one already built.