



© PACH BROS 1902

John J. Kelly

JAMES J. HILL¹

With unaffected diffidence I appear before you to-night in response to your invitation to deliver for the historical society an address in memory of James J. Hill. The compliment is deeply appreciated by me, however sincerely I may doubt my ability to rise to this high occasion, and to the level of that unique greatness which is its subject. Mr. Hill's extraordinary qualities and the diversity and excellence of his work must create in any one who attempts to appreciate them in words a deep humility. It is, none the less, our fitting part to pay such tribute as we may; to retrace, admire, and, in so far as we can, appropriate a life that is literally part of the world's history. We are especially proud because that life is written for all time in the annals of the Northwest and of Minnesota. By his connection with all the history of this state, by his just title of "empire builder" of the Northwest, by his long association with this society and his interest in it, as by the closer tie to those who were privileged to call him friend, he belongs to Minnesota, to the Minnesota Historical Society, to us. It is, therefore, most natural that the society should consecrate formally a session to his memory; and that at least an outline sketch should be placed in its record of a life so full, so varied, so preëminent by its characteristics and accomplishments that the most deliberate and exhaustive treatment must still be incomplete. To me personally it comes as a highly appreciated honor to speak to you to-night of Mr. Hill. Inadequate as I am to such a task, I feel that the subject itself and your interest in it will supplement many deficiencies, and also that something will be pardoned to an admiration so great and an affection so deep and sincere as my own.

¹ A memorial address read at the annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, January 15, 1917.

The important facts of the life of Mr. Hill are already almost as familiar to the public as his face. James Jerome Hill was born near Guelph, in the county of Wellington, Ontario, of mixed Irish and Scotch lineage, September 16, 1838. He was the third of four children. From both sides of his ancestry he inherited salient characteristics, though there was nothing on either to prophesy the distinction that he was to attain. A studious boy, as fond of books and reading as of play, he grew up in an environment that contributed to sturdiness of mind and body. He was educated first in the district school; then went to an academy at Rockwood, where a Quaker instructor, William Wetherald, seems to have done him valuable service in directing his reading and the course of his thought. When he was fourteen years old his father died and his formal education was broken off in order that, to help the family through, he might work in a village store. By the time that his assistance was no longer indispensable, he was eager to start in pursuit of a project as wild as any dream of romance. He had set his thought on the creation of new systems of transportation on the rivers of the Orient, to which his reading, especially Plutarch's *Lives* that he devoured, had led and his fancy beckoned him. He could reach those fabled shores by going as a sailor from some Pacific American port. The homes of schoolmates from the western wilds of Canada, as they were then considered and really were, would be his half-way house. But to reach these he must come to St. Paul, take the Red River trail north to Fort Garry, and thence strike west across the plains with one of the Hudson's Bay Company expeditions. He had to work his passage; and he reached St. Paul, by way of Chicago and the Mississippi River, July 21, 1856, only to find that the last Red River brigade had left a short time before. He was marooned here until the first one should go out in the following spring.

St. Paul had then between four and five thousand people. The "Northwest," as the term is understood now, did not exist. All communication with the outside world was by river

steamboats; but there was a flourishing trade, and people kept coming in fast. Business of considerable volume was carried on with the settlers in the river valleys and with the people about Fort Garry, now Winnipeg. The levee was the community center of life and activity, and there young Hill found employment. He became shipping clerk for J. W. Bass and Company, agents for the Dubuque and St. Paul Packet Company; for their successors, Brunson, Lewis, and White; and after three years went to Temple and Beaupre, and later engaged with Borup and Champlin, agents for the Galena Packet Company and the Davidson line of steamboats. These were years full of growth. The wine of life was red; the frontier is a stern but effective teacher; and James J. Hill mastered the conditions about him and the details of the transportation business as it was then carried on. He read and studied constantly. He assimilated every fact of the day's experience. He had his office on the levee, and he saw the first wheat shipped out of Minnesota and cut the stencil to mark the first barrels of flour that went out of Minneapolis. Many details of this early time, interesting in their connection with the city, the state, and the man, were given by him in an address delivered before this society in 1897 and printed in its *Collections*.² He shared in all the early life of St. Paul, and before many years became, by provident industry and economy, one of its well-established and promising citizens. An accident in youth which deprived him of the sight of one eye prevented him from serving in the Civil War. He had studied Minnesota traffic with the thoroughness that he brought to every subject worthy of his attention, and by the spring of 1865 he was ready to go into business on his own account as agent of the Northwestern Packet Company, then a big river concern.

In 1867 came the marriage to Miss Mary Theresa Mehegan, a St. Paul girl, from which dated his lifelong happiness and a great part of his ability to face with confident strength

² *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8: 275-290.

the world and the problems it brought. No man has paid a more delicate and convincing tribute than he did on many occasions to the domestic life that freed him and nerved him for the struggle. In all these years over which we must pass so rapidly, the chroniclers show him a busy, public-spirited, prosperous citizen of St. Paul. He was interested in everything, from trotting horses to local politics. He believed in the country. He was loyal to the town. If the word "booster" had been in the vocabulary of those days, it would have been applied first of all to Mr. Hill. He was now growing to be one of the solid citizens of St. Paul. He engaged in a general commission and forwarding business. He put up his big warehouse on the old levee. In 1866 he took a contract to handle freight for the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad. And thus he entered a new field which was to influence powerfully his future. A great share of the business of St. Paul was carried on with the settlements in Canada near old Fort Garry. The Hudson's Bay Company, and the free traders in spite of it, engaged in this profitable commerce. In 1863 Mr. Hill had begun to handle a part of it for Norman W. Kittson, and became more and more interested. He was by this time a wonderfully well-informed man. His constant reading, his really marvelous memory, and his habit of minutely accurate observation were making him an authority. His indefatigable industry had given him business repute and laid the foundation of a modest fortune. He was an expert on fuel, and knew the coal measures of the Northwest as perhaps no other man has. He entered into one partnership after another, as his developing interests and his grasp of the local situation seemed to advise. The gross earnings of his firm, Hill, Griggs and Company, about 1869, were running from forty to sixty-five thousand dollars a year, a big sum for those days in St. Paul. The Northwestern Fuel Company of St. Paul is the direct successor to his fuel interest and his old firm.

It was the transportation business, in new forms and with new possibilities, that claimed him now. It had created and sustained the life of early days on the levee. The coming of

the railroad inspired him first with a true sense of the ultimate value and supremacy of the land carrier. But up in the North, where as yet there was no prospect of rail carriage, the Red River trade absorbed his present attention. Familiar with the volume and profits of this Red River business, he now went into it on a more generous scale. By 1870 he was immersed in that interest, and by 1871 had a through freight and passenger line so well established that Mr. Kittson was glad to join forces with him. The frequent trips that he made in these days over the trails and outside the trails, often through dangers and with adventures that he loved to recall, gave him something worth more than his profits: that knowledge of the value of the north-western country for settlement and cultivation, that vision of its near future, on which afterward he staked everything, and which kept him sanguine always because he had founded his faith on a certainty. It was on one of these trips by dog sled between St. Paul and Fort Garry that he met, in 1870, on the snow-covered prairie, Donald A. Smith, whose fortunes were to be associated so intimately with his own.

It is impossible to rehearse here the long and unhappy history of early railroad projects in Minnesota. The St. Paul and Pacific was a successor of the Minnesota and Pacific, with both of which were connected many of the names still best known as contributing to the early history of St. Paul. Mr. Hill knew well this property, which went into bankruptcy in the general crash of 1873. Besides its valuable terminals and partly finished lines, it was heir to the Red River Valley country. During the next five years he became obsessed with the idea of obtaining control of it. In the old St. Paul Club House, as a friend of both of them said, he "bored it into Kittson with a threatening forefinger"; and P. H. Kelly complained one languid morning because "that Hill had kept him up all night talking railroads." He talked of it to any one who would listen, and all thought him mad. But Mr. Smith, deep in Canadian political life, felt it imperative to get a rail outlet from Winnipeg to the East. The future of the Dominion Confederation, as

well as his own, hung upon it. Until the far-future day of a Canadian Pacific through line, it could be had only by building from Winnipeg to the boundary, and then rounding out the projected St. Paul and Pacific system on this side of the line. Finally, after plans, advances, reverses, and labors, whose history constitutes in itself a thrilling romance, Mr. Hill, in connection with Mr. Kittson, Mr. Smith, and Mr. George Stephen of the Bank of Montreal, came into possession of the long-desired property. They secured it by buying its defaulted bonds from the Dutch committee which represented the majority of them, held in Holland, putting up everything they had in the world to bind the bargain, and agreeing to make future payments and to perform miracles in the way of construction which would have daunted any spirit less sure of itself or less confident than that of Mr. Hill. When General Sibley afterward asked Mr. Kittson, his close friend, why he had kept all this from his knowledge, he said, "I did not dare to tell you because you would have thought that I was mad." In 1878 the agreement with the bondholders was signed; and in 1879 the impossible conditions had been performed, and the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway Company was organized.

It is from this time that the real man becomes fully visible. For the complete display of his powers an adequate field was needed. He had never had it before. As general manager and, from 1882 onward, as president, he showed what he could do. Here began the series of financial plans and methods which started with putting the new company on a basis that made its securities acceptable in the most conservative markets by paying sure dividends, and ended with Mr. Hill as a trusted counselor of the great nations of the world. Even to those who thought they knew him best one surprise after another came as they saw him prove himself a master in railroad construction, in traffic getting, in operation, in financing. It was universal genius in action. But it was also, as he himself said in later years, "work, work, work, and then some more work." Nothing escaped his eye, nothing was forgotten, and nothing neglected. Even those

who felt the dynamic energy of Mr. Hill in his great enterprises of a later day find it difficult to realize how he was able at this time to carry so many burdens, to master so many different kinds of activity, to unite unremitting labor every day and nearly every night in the year with a level judgment and prescience, constantly occupied with the future, which were both among the most distinguished features of his wonderful natural endowment.

His dream realized by the completion of the railroad system, now firmly under his control to the coveted Winnipeg connection at the international boundary, by the occupation of the Red River Valley and the finishing of the Alexandria line, with settlers pouring in and business surpassing all expectations, he seemed inspired to more furious energy rather than to the relaxation which is generally held to be one of the rewards and privileges of success. His own work only fairly begun, he entered a syndicate, in 1880, with Mr. Smith, Mr. Stephen, and Mr. Angus to build the Canadian Pacific. His part in this was far from the perfunctory one frequently imagined. The fact was that he was already more familiar with the western country than any other man connected with transportation. He traveled incessantly, by buckboard, on horseback, on foot. He had men out in the field and others gathering information and sending him reports. For, of course, from the first moment that he felt secure of the St. Paul and Pacific, he intended to realize in fact the pretentious dream embodied in its name. He would build in his own time and his own way, but his railroad was to become transcontinental. Meantime, friendship, his appreciation of his associates, and his fitness for the part took him into the heart of the Canadian Pacific project. It is little known that to him was committed the location of its western line and a large part of the control of actual construction. He purchased an interest in the old St. Paul and Duluth Railroad, giving a lake outlet for his system. At the same time arrangements were made for a future independent line into Duluth-Superior, with great terminals there, and a direct line also from the head of the

lakes to the west. He had already started his system on that western flight which was to know no rest until it should reach Puget Sound. Construction records were broken in the great advance that pushed it through to Helena in 1887, and to Everett in 1893. By this time the Great Northern, organized in 1890, had become the parent company. The St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba had, as Mr. Hill said, "outgrown its clothes." Its successor became the depository of the immense and varied interests that his intelligence, energy, and will gathered together in the vast territory which he now made supremely his own. The financing of such a railroad system as this had come to be, and of the contemplated additions, could be carried successfully with this broadened base.

In the meantime every connection and every territory had been looked after with all the old thoroughness. The Duluth-Superior line and terminals became reality; the company ran its own steamships on the Great Lakes and smashed elevator monopolies at Buffalo. Wherever, along the two thousand miles of track, population grew, more railroads sprouted. Wherever a railroad stuck out a stub, there population appeared. This reciprocating action assured prosperity for both the company and the country. The Northwest became a name of power to conjure with, largely because the Great Northern was what it was, and because it followed the policy of encouragement to internal growth that expressed a fundamental thought of Mr. Hill.

During this period, which was contemporary with another disaster to the Northern Pacific, the control of the latter had been more than once within his reach. Lord Strathcona said many years afterward to Archbishop Ireland that if Mr. Hill had determined to take over the Northern Pacific, all that he needed was to send a cable to London stating the fact and the amount of money required. "No matter what the sum," he added emphatically, "so great was our confidence in Mr. Hill that it would have been forthcoming." But he went his own way, following his own sure plan. Mr. J. P. Morgan took in

hand the reorganization of the Northern Pacific, and a plan was agreed upon between him, Mr. Hill and the Deutsche Bank of Berlin, by which the Great Northern should hold half the stock of the new company and guarantee, up to a certain amount, the principal and interest of its bonds. This having been forbidden by the courts, the reorganization went forward as a matter of individual interest and agreement, and cemented a relation of confidence and understanding between Mr. Hill and Mr. Morgan which was never to be broken. At the same time questions of supremacy had arisen in the debatable land of the Pacific Northwest, where a Union Pacific possession, the Oregon Short Line and its accessories, impinged upon the territory of the northern transcontinentals. Mr. Hill did not seek war, but he did not undervalue the seriousness of the situation. He took up the matter with Mr. Harriman directly, and it is not difficult to read between the lines of their correspondence the note of irrepressible conflict. To the struggle for territory was added the ambition to control Oriental trade, whose growth was a direct creation of the brain and railroad policy of Mr. Hill. Finding westbound freight over his new line far in excess of eastbound, he made a very low rate on Pacific Coast lumber to fill his empty cars. The business growing so rapidly as to swing the balance too far in the other direction, he ransacked the Orient through his agents and representatives to discover what it could buy from this country. He planned a great trade revolution, which should not only gather up commerce everywhere west of the Alleghanies and transport it to Japan, China, India, but actually revolutionize the ocean carrying trade of the world by swinging it westward around the globe instead of eastward through the Suez Canal. He built for this Pacific route the biggest freight ships ever launched. Few conceptions of world trade and world interest have been so grand and just as this, so founded on fact instead of fancy, so possible of realization.

That this development of American interest was to be shackled and prevented later by the action of the federal power upon the export rates did not affect either its present promise or

the hostility naturally awakened in a competitor. Mr. Hill and Mr. Morgan understood each other; and the two railroads which they represented bought jointly the Burlington system, to make their traffic machine equal to the purpose present to their minds. Mr. Harriman held this an invasion and a menace, demanded a share in control of the new property, and, when this was refused, answered the challenge by attempting to buy a majority of the shares of the Northern Pacific itself. It was the darkest and most dangerous day in Mr. Hill's business life. The plan was practically executed before it was discovered. Mr. Hill said openly, then and afterward, that if the Union Pacific controlled the Northern Pacific, he should advise his friends to sell their holdings of Great Northern for what they could get. The Harriman party had secured a majority of the total capital stock of the Northern Pacific. Mr. Hill and Mr. Morgan, who was abroad at the time, had to buy fifteen million dollars of common stock, in an excited market, to give them control of that class of stock, and they did. It was the famous ninth of May, 1901. Not only did Mr. Hill and Mr. Morgan stand loyally together against the temptation of offered millions, but the former had the satisfaction of finding behind him, to their last share and their last dollar, the capitalists and stockholders who had been associated with him from the beginning. He had won their supreme confidence, and now it stood him in good stead. The holders of the common stock having a right to retire the preferred on any first of January, the victory remained with Mr. Hill and Mr. Morgan. An understanding was reached which left the Northern Pacific in Mr. Morgan's hands, with representatives of each of the big rival interests in the directories of the others, on a "community of interest" basis. Then, at the end of 1901, Mr. Hill formed the Northern Securities Company, whose purpose was to prevent raids such as this and assure future harmony of interest and action. After years of litigation it was finally declared illegal by a majority of one vote in the Supreme Court of the United States. Mr. Hill was not taken by surprise here or

anywhere. Mr. Harriman, in an attempt to resume the struggle for control by demanding back his original shares of stock, was defeated. The Great Northern pursued its triumphant way and, in 1907, consolidated all its proprietary companies under that name. In the same year Mr. Hill, having served for twenty-five years as its president, for which he never consented to receive any compensation, resigned the office to his second son, L. W. Hill, who was prepared by great native qualities, by fourteen years of understanding service under his father, and by a rare sense of filial affection and devotion to fill the position worthily, and himself became chairman of the board of directors.

During this later years occurred a development most characteristic of Mr. Hill. The discovery of iron ore in northern Minnesota had put a new face on property and progress there. To aid in the construction of the direct line of the Great Northern from Duluth northwest it was desirable to buy a small logging road that was in the way. Timber lands, some of which were known, and others supposed, to carry ore deposits, went with it. Mr. Hill bought the whole property personally, paying for it a little over four million dollars of his own money. He turned the railroad over to the Great Northern at cost. The ore properties were investigated, developed, constituted a trust, and the whole value—nobody knows how many millions it will amount to before it is exhausted—represented by one million five hundred thousand shares, was distributed, share for share, without charge to the holders of Great Northern stock. It was a magnificent gift of property belonging by every title of law and custom to Mr. Hill, but which the peculiar relation of trust that he had always felt to exist between him and his stockholders would not permit him to retain.

He had, from time to time, consented to make public addresses on topics in which he felt a lively interest, if the occasion seemed to promise practical results. In 1906 he delivered before the Minnesota Agricultural Society, to an audience of many thousands gathered to hear him on the State Fair

grounds in St. Paul, the address on "The Nation's Future," which attracted attention all over the world. It was a protest against waste of natural resources, and marked the beginning of the conservation movement in the United States. As one result of it President Roosevelt called a conference of the governors of the several states to meet at the White House in May, 1908, and there Mr. Hill repeated and emphasized his views. To the end of his life he was greatly interested in the theme, especially as applied to agricultural means and processes, and in its development in the direction of a proper conservation of capital and credit, to which he gave much thought and devoted several of his most studied public utterances.

Between 1905 and 1908 the Spokane, Portland, and Seattle line was built, following the north bank of the Columbia and freeing Mr. Hill's system from dependence on any one for its entrance to Portland. The property was constructed by, and belongs to, the Great Northern and the Northern Pacific jointly. He was urgent that the public authorities and the audiences that he addressed on special occasions should understand the country's need of more railroad facilities; more lines of track, more equipment, larger and better terminals. He objected to the progressive increase of expenses and decrease of rates imposed by law, less because such regulation curtailed the profit of railroad stockholders than because it discouraged the investment of new capital, by which alone railroad service could be made equal to growing public demands. He was never insensible to the influence of a proper and legitimate self-interest; but far above that, and more imperative in its claim upon his allegiance, was his conception of public duty, and of the effect of a given act upon public prosperity and the general good. He fought early and late for reciprocity between the United States and Canada. It would undoubtedly have added to the business of the Great Northern. But he believed with all his heart that it would also add to the prosperity of the people of the United States. And if he had not been convinced of this last, he would not have raised his voice in favor of the policy. His most

strongly held views, on the subjects that he deemed of paramount importance, were expressed in a series of essays on economic theory and fact published by him in book form in 1910 under the title *Highways of Progress*. It was Mr. Hill's only contribution to the library of printed books; but his speeches, addresses, interviews, newspaper and magazine articles were legion. He was keenly interested in every topic relating to the public interest, expressed his opinion freely, and took a point of view which later events always showed to be both public-spirited and economically sound.

Mr. Hill now finished his financial shaping of the Great Northern by approving such additions to its capital stock as its new acquisitions by purchase or construction required, and perfected the plan for the big blanket six hundred million dollar bond issue which was to put its finances beyond the reach of serious disturbance for fifty years to come. Finally, in 1912, he severed formally his official connection with the railway system by resigning his chairmanship. He accompanied this with a review of the rise and growth of the property, which is an epitome of his active life as a railroad builder and manager, prepared by his own hand. The remaining years were as busy as their predecessors had been. In 1912 he made public his plan to endow St. Paul with a public library for research. It was to be for the service of authors and investigators on special lines. He wished it to become the last word in both information and authority. The concrete embodiment of his thought stands in this city to-day, one of the most unique and perfect specimens of architectural beauty in the United States. This and all other uncompleted designs of Mr. Hill are being carried out with pious regard and care by the members of Mr. Hill's family.

He had long felt the difficulty, the danger, and frequently the injustice of a financial dependence upon eastern resources of money and credit by the farmers, merchants, and manufacturers of the Northwest. More than once he himself had had to stand between them and ruin. The cash and the influence that

he could command built a dike which alone stood firm against the waves of panic. For the convenience of his own great interests, as well as to put an end to this situation, he determined to create the financial independence of the Northwest, whose material prosperity he had been building for so many years. He bought the First National Bank and the Second National Bank of St. Paul, which were merged under the name of the First National Bank of St. Paul on the first of January, 1913. The growth of this financial institution since that time has had few parallels in any country. It has found opportunity and profit in supporting and promoting legitimate industry of every kind throughout the whole Northwest. Especially has it contributed to the welfare of the farm and to enhancing the value of its products. In 1915 was completed also the great office building in St. Paul that houses the bank, the Northwestern Trust Company, also purchased by Mr. Hill, and the general offices of the Great Northern, the Northern Pacific, and the Burlington railroad systems. These were fixed for the future by him in the city of his home through the erection of this thoroughly modern structure, every detail of which had to pass a preliminary examination under his inquiring and critical eye.

He was immensely interested in the European war, with an intense sympathy for the Allies. He was high in the councils of the financial leaders of this country and Europe, amongst whom the question of protecting exchange and regulating international credit was debated and settled; and common consent assigns to him the most influential voice in determining the acceptance of the first foreign war loan proposed, and thus fixing the future policy of the country. He took this position not because of his sympathy with any other people, but because he believed it absolutely essential to the interests of the farmers and other producers of the United States. He was at this time, as always, busy with thoughts of the future, scanning the horizon for signals of hope or dread for this country after the war should close. His last words and thoughts were devoted

to this theme. In the midst of such activity, such usefulness, and such promise of busy and beneficent years to come, Mr. Hill died, after a brief illness, which was not even alarming until it neared its final stage, May 29, 1916, at his home in St. Paul. He was buried, amidst expressions of sorrow literally world-wide, in a spot that he loved much in life, on the shore of the lake at his country home at North Oaks.

It has been possible to trace here the life of Mr. Hill only in its barest and baldest outlines. Spots where the high light falls, acts greatly significant in themselves or much bruited among the public, pivotal points of his career have been selected to make an intelligible sketch. So many-sided, so brilliantly marked by episode and achievement along scores of divergent ways was the life of this extraordinary man that no one can hope to do it justice. And within the limits to which even your courtesy and the circumstances of this occasion must yield, I have not found it possible to introduce any of a multitude of incidents which are properly within the purview of this society, because they are part of the development of this north-western country and its historic past. I can only hope that the more extended treatment of every fact of Mr. Hill's life which has been given in volumes presently to appear may supplement satisfactorily to you, his townsmen, his friends, and his coadjutors of Minnesota and the Northwest, this catalogue of subject headings to which practically our consideration must be confined to-night.

But to the chronologically arranged list of events which I have presented thus far must be added a number of others that loom large, some of them very large, in the life of the man in whose honor we are met. These are connected rather with his mentality, his sympathy, his spiritual force and insight, with the whole trend of his work and purpose than with any one epoch or accomplishment. He was consistently and immensely generous. No one can ever take accurate measure of this, for his right hand held no communication with his left. His private charities were numerous and unceasing. His gifts to edu-

cation were constant and large. He loved especially to help small denominational colleges, believing in the necessity of a religious environment for the best development of youthful character. St. Paul Seminary is one of his royal foundations. Hamline University owes him much. So do a dozen other institutions that it would be easy to name in the Twin Cities, and scores of them in other parts of the Northwest. Besides this, he always contributed liberally toward big public enterprises; the erection of important new buildings; the location in St. Paul of new institutions like the packing plant of South St. Paul, where his powerful personal influence was even more effective than his contribution; charitable or public movements for a worthy purpose and on a big scale; the needs of those whom he knew and of many whom he never knew, when the tale of their genuine distress reached him. He had a very tender heart for all misfortune and suffering. It never left him unmoved. In times of financial panic he was the very bulwark of the Northwest. Again and again he placed the resources of the railroad, his personal fortune, and his commanding personal power behind the business interests of this section when a failure of confidence was driving everything upon the rocks. Dozens of prosperous concerns in these two cities to-day owe it to his quiet help, when no one else could or would come to the rescue, that they did not disappear in the gulf of bankruptcy in some of the many dark days that overhung the country during the more than thirty years that Mr. Hill made the Northwest the particular beneficiary of his provident care. The farmers of the country traversed by his railroad owe it to him that their products found a market and retained a value. He carried the industrial Northwest, as well as so many individuals and firms, on his own shoulders through many a flood that engulfed lesser men. Nothing that affected its fortunes found him indifferent. From Minnesota to Washington and Oregon every commonwealth became the object of his peculiar care. His influence, his purse, his individual effort were at the service of their people when he saw an opportunity

to advance their development or a need to save them from the menace of any form of industrial misfortune. To him, indeed, the Northwest was a sort of big family, whose affairs called out from him a kindly and paternal oversight.

He had this feeling in intenser degree for the men who had worked with and for him. There was rare confidence between him and the old employees of the Great Northern. He knew them by sight, called them by their first names, would gossip with them about early days, saw that in their age they did not come to want. He trusted them absolutely. When labor troubles were abroad and people advised him not to go about the yards freely, he asked indignantly where he would be safe if it were not among Great Northern men. And his faith was justified. His men not only admired, but loved him. The Great Northern Veterans' Association, which always held its reunions on Mr. Hill's birthday, with him as guest whenever it was possible for him to be present, gave proof of that. Among the mourners at his grave were his own employees. The Great Northern Employees' Investment Company, founded in 1900 by Mr. Hill, was an early and sane example of profit-sharing that has been very successful.

Innumerable honors and titles of distinction sought him, and were met with the simple sincerity that he showed in everything. If they were empty gauds, no matter how highly esteemed or greatly coveted by others, he would have none of them. He refused each year scores of invitations to be guest and speaker at meetings of eminent people on occasions of consequence. None the less did he appreciate recognition of what he had done and was trying to do. It was his work, and not himself, for which he welcomed appreciation; and this distinction was made apparent in acts and words. So he was not indifferent when he was asked to open the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in 1909; when Yale University gave him, in 1910, the degree of LL.D., to be followed afterward by other institutions of learning; when seventy-four of his friends from all parts of the country raised, without his knowledge, a fund

of \$125,000 to establish a professorship of transportation at Harvard, to be named for him. These were real monuments to the achievements of his life; and he warmed, as we all of us do, to the word of appreciation while living, which is worth so many eloquent testimonials after we are gone.

Mr. Hill was always intensely interested in public affairs. He watched them with the eye of a business man, an economist, a patriot. He was always a democrat, whether you spelled it with a capital or without. He felt that results of infinite importance were bound up with the success or failure of this country's experiment in democracy. Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall were types that he admired. To the latter he would, perhaps, have given the palm as the greatest of Americans. Often when people believed that he was advocating or opposing with tremendous earnestness some proposed measure because of its expected effect upon his own interests, he had scarcely given that aspect of it a thought. Every party and every innovation in government were measured by him first, and accepted or rejected, according to what he believed would be their permanent effect upon the institutions of the country. He affiliated naturally, by economic predilection, with the old school Democratic Party. Grover Cleveland approached his political ideal, besides being one of his close personal friends. Like him, he would not follow the party if he believed it false to the public interest and to its own traditions. So he opposed the free silver heresy earnestly and vigorously. It was to prevent the *St. Paul Daily Globe* from passing into the control of the free silver element that Mr. Hill bought it. The people of this section and this city ought to know what use he made of his ownership. As its editor and manager during the first two and the last two years of its history as the property of Mr. Hill, I can attest personally that at no time did there ever once come from him, directly or indirectly, a hint or suggestion as to its editorial conduct or policy. On the only occasion when I asked him for direction, in a matter where my own opinion was still undetermined and where I knew that he had a very large

financial interest without knowing on which side it lay, he refused to say a word. His only instruction, then or ever, was to make the *Globe* a good newspaper, a credit to St. Paul, and to follow my own judgment and conscience in doing so. He had the *Globe* discontinued because, after ten years' experience, with a satisfactory and rapidly growing circulation, the advertising receipts showed a continuous decline. He had said from the first that, if the paper succeeded, he would not accept a dollar of the profits. Convinced that it could not become a financial success, he wound it up just as he would any other business in similar circumstances. There was no feeling about it and no occult reason for it. He did not believe that a newspaper ought to live unless its opinion was honest and untrammelled. Nor did he believe that it ought to live unless it could make an honest living in the world. These two principles he held with reference to all other newspapers as well as the single one he owned, and for which he long cherished great hopes as an instrument in the upbuilding of St. Paul.

All his life bore the stamp of his love of the Northwest. Besides the imperial monument of his railway system, every state in it has lesser memorials in such number that they could not even be listed here. He was at home anywhere, in acquaintance, in reminiscence, in anecdote, in intimate topographical knowledge and familiarity with business conditions, in any one of those seven states that he named collectively "the zone of plenty." Most particularly did he cherish Minnesota, the scene of his earliest struggles and successes. He knew it as a boy might know his native village. He had in mind every watercourse, every coulee, every elevation, all the old trails and stopping-places and landmarks. He was encyclopedic in his information, and could correct offhand any error made in book or article that laid profane hands upon the past. He never forgot those early courses to Fort Garry, those voyages up and down the Red River Valley. He gloried in the growth of the state, and fretted because it did not make greater progress. He was always generous with his time and his means to any plan

which promised advantage to Minnesota. He created at Duluth-Superior the most efficient terminal arrangements in the world. He was a loyal friend to St. Paul and Minneapolis. Both cities were always ready to do him honor. The tie with each ran back to the earliest times, and to a feeling which was as ready to give a stone-arch bridge over the Mississippi to one as a railroad terminal building to the other. His gifts to Minneapolis institutions were manifold. He enriched her art treasures by contributions from his own. St. Paul was his home. Here he had lived as a bachelor. Here he chose the first home for his young wife, a small but comfortable house on Canada Street near Pearl, now called Grove Street. When it became too small, he removed temporarily to Dayton's Bluff, while he built at Ninth and Canada Streets the house that he occupied until his residence on Summit Avenue was ready for occupancy in 1891. In St. Paul were born his three sons and seven daughters, all of whom except one daughter, who died in infancy, survive him. He resisted considerations of convenience that sometimes tempted him to remove to New York. He kept the Great Northern headquarters here, though many overtures were made to him by other cities. Wherever his voice had weight with other railroads and other interests than his own, it spoke for St. Paul. He placed here his great banking institution. He built here his big office building. Here he erected his wonderful library. And whenever personal interest or money consideration was required to bring some enterprise to St. Paul or to enlarge the scope and usefulness of a local institution already existing, Mr. Hill's hand was always active and his purse open. Such misunderstandings as at times arose look insignificant in perspective. He loved St. Paul, and St. Paul loved him, with a deep and enduring affection.

He was interested in the work and progress of this society. Its archeologist, Mr. Warren Upham, has placed at my disposal the results of his researches in its archives. At its meeting on March 9, 1868, five new members were elected: Dr. J. H. Stewart, Dr. D. W. Hand, James J. Hill, J. W. Cunning-

ham, and C. M. Boyle. On December 14, 1868, Mr. Hill was chosen a member of the executive council of the society, and remained such for the forty-seven and a half years between that date and his death. No other member in all its history served for so long a term. In 1869 Mr. Hill was one of a committee to secure suitable addresses for the society's meetings. In 1872 he was made first vice-president. In 1897 he delivered before it an address dealing largely with his early experiences in this state, which remains to-day the fullest source of information about that period of his life. He was always interested in the society's proceedings, and urged it years ago to secure from all the old pioneers a stenographic report of their early recollections, to be used as a basis for historical treatment. His gifts to it were many and valuable. As early as 1869 he contributed twenty-five newspapers, then much needed, to its embryo library. Later on he gave *Travels in the Interior of North America*, by Maximilian, Prince of Wied. This is a work issued from 1832 to 1834, with an atlas of eighty plates, showing views of Indians, buffalo, and other primitive sights on the Missouri River. It is probably the most expensive work in the society's collection. The painting in the reading room, by Alexis Fournier, named "The Chapel of St. Paul," is a gift from Mr. Hill, dating more than twenty years ago. His interest in the society and its work was deepened by his feeling for the old times and his wonderful memory. He cared to have things preserved as he remembered them. His passion for accuracy made a treasury of things of the actual past seem to him a precious thing. His feeling for that past was also an essential part of him. He loved the memory of long days and nights, of conflict with the elements, of escape from the violence of nature and of treacherous man, on the northern trail and out through the western wilderness. Most of all he loved the Mississippi River. He felt a personal relation to it. Up it he had come to fortune and fame. On its shores and through its agency he had learned the elementary lore of transportation. In a certain intimate sense it was "his river." He knew the

name of every spot along its upper reaches, and all their changes. He loved to sweep along the familiar banks in his car. The fresh-water pearls, choice specimens of which he collected, had an added charm for him if they came from the shallows of the Mississippi. There was a mystic bond between the father of the Northwest of to-day and its ancient Father of Waters.

Mr. Hill was a man of engaging personality, and of acquirements that measured up to the level of his great qualities. He was a reader and a student all his days. He sought first the fundamental facts, all the facts, on any subject that appealed to him. Then, with amazing clearness of insight and prescience, he went to the heart of it. His prodigious memory, which relinquished nothing that ever came within its grasp, completed a mental equipment as rare as it was powerful. He found certainty while others were mastering preliminary conditions. He was as genial in his personal relations as he was vigorous and masterful in business. He knew how to command and how to win obedience. He had the will to achieve, and understood how to choose and use his instruments. Woe to the man who stood in the way of the carrying-out of his plans. But his whole disposition was kindly. Brusque at times he was and must be, but he was a man of strong attachments, of pertinacious friendships, of unceasing generosity, of unbending loyalty, of tenderness toward suffering, and of sympathy with unsuccess unless it was due to laziness or dishonesty. For either of these faults he had no tolerance and no pardon. The strongest element in all his strength was the tie that bound him to his home. There lay his happiness. There, he said often, was the key to most of his success. There his affections found security and free play. He was always simple, hating every form of ostentation, loving literature and conversation and science and art, but loving his home and his life there most of all. As a connoisseur of art he stood very high. Not the least amazing thing about this amazing man was the fact that he knew painting and pictures as few men in this country knew

them. He bought not as a mere collector, and on the advice of others, but as an expert and judge of the beautiful. He no more needed or brooked any suggestion in passing on a picture than he did in reviewing a plan of one of his engineers. Subject, feeling, atmosphere, technique, value—he understood it all as if he had been born and educated among studios. Almost the strangest of his manifold gifts was this appreciation and unerring judgment of the beautiful in all its forms: paintings, jewels, tapestries, china, whatever men have agreed to hold precious as enmeshing for one moment the evasive spirit of beauty. The artist in him contended for supremacy with the man of affairs.

Practical estimates of Mr. Hill and of the work that he accomplished in the world find three fields in which he excelled especially: as a railroad builder and manager, as a captain of finance, and as a sound economist, with particular reference to the development and improvement of agriculture. To the first his whole life bears witness, and there his works do follow him. Aside from the great accomplishments of which this Northwest is the living result, two features of his career as a railroad man stand out in strong relief. One was his command of all the elements of construction. His engineers came to him for help in solving their knotty problems. They never found him lacking in original ideas or in information or in sound judgment of the adaptation of means to ends. He was the first to lay down the general rule that railroads should be built with the lowest grades and curves compatible with the economic limits of cost of construction as related to the probable future of traffic. The ensuing lower cost of operation was equivalent to simple interest, for a time, on a larger sum, instead of compound interest, in the shape of higher costs, on a somewhat smaller sum, forever. This made him the most formidable competitor in the Northwest. It relieved him from all fear of successful rivalry and kept the operating ratio of his railroad the despair of others. By this policy he fixed and expressed a principle and established a rule which all other

railroad men in the country were to follow later. Because of low operating cost he was sure of being able not only to bankrupt any rival that should become bumptious enough to try conclusions with him, but also to pay uninterruptedly dividends that made his system a synonym for safe and profitable investment in every capital of Europe as well as all over the United States.

The law of construction just stated has its relation to financing as well as to engineering. Mr. Hill was born with a natural grasp of financial possibilities and relations. He had always made his profit; from the warehouse on the levee, from commissions and shrewd purchases of odd lots that tempted nobody else, from the contract with the St. Paul and Pacific, from the Red River business, from the fuel trade in which his exhaustive knowledge of the coal resources of the Northwest made him a master. The railroad was only a larger opportunity for the exercise of native genius. The boldness of his original plan, which bought a railroad system, consisting so largely of old junk and dishonored bonds, on a modest cash payment and a promise to exchange new securities issued against the same property for old, staggered the men of his own time. In him it was not speculation, but foreknowledge. He knew the country, its future, the present and the coming value in earning power of every battered locomotive and every foot of sagging track. He knew himself and what he could do. From the moment that he was in control, the railroad manager and the financier in him were so merged that neither could be separated from the other or arrested in its career of conquest. He could borrow money at the beginning because he could convince the lender that it would be repaid with interest and profit. It was repaid scrupulously; came back and brought friends and relatives with it. Mr. Hill, after his first year in control, never had any difficulty in getting all the money he needed for any enterprise. All the wonders of financing the transcontinental line, the Pacific extension, the innumerable branch lines and feeders, the great consolidation, the Burlington purchase, were

performed with as little friction or delay as the building of a spur track to somebody's warehouse. Years before his life ended he was consulted on financial problems from one end of the country to the other. He was always in demand at meetings of bankers. His advice was asked by those who had charge of reforming the monetary system of the United States. No big financial transaction was carried through without his participation or friendly counsel, always sought and freely given. It was a fine thing to see how, when others were distracted by all sorts of foolish arguments for or against war loans to the Allies, in times that threw men's judgment off balance because they disturbed clear and quiet thinking, he went straight to the central fact. Our own country, he said, must sell its food products and raw materials abroad, or face business collapse. It could not sell without buyers. Its only customers could not pay cash, but had sound credit to offer. Therefore we must take the loan, not for the advantage of the borrowers, but for our own commercial salvation. In the last year of his life the voice and counsel of Mr. Hill were potent in the financial deliberations of America and of the world.

His services to agriculture do not yield in magnitude or value to those he rendered elsewhere. They have a double relation to his life, because, as he saw it, the farm and the railroad were partners. It was from that conception that the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba was born. The wheels of the Red River carts and the busy gophers brought to the surface soil specimens with a promise of inexhaustible richness. This would attract people. People would need railroads. Railroads bringing people, people creating more railroads, so he visioned the everlasting cycle. Therefore he believed that he was helping the farm when he improved the railroad, and helping the railroad when he showed how to make the farm more prosperous. He always insisted that the lowest freight rates should be those on farm products. He made it relatively cheaper for the farmer of the Northwest to reach his market than for any other in the country. He said over and over to the farmers

that they and the railroad were in the same boat; that if the farm did not prosper there could be no business, and nothing for the railroad to carry. Therefore he focused his attention from a very early day on increasing the number of farmers and the net acre product of the farm. From the period of his early prosperity in St. Paul he had been interested in trotting horses, high-grade animals, and blooded stock. He had a stock farm of his own at Crystal Bay, Lake Minnetonka. A crop failure in 1881, with disaster to the farmers and bad effects to railroad traffic, made him urgent that farm industry should be diversified. He determined that, as he said, the farmer should no longer have all his eggs in one basket. So he began, in 1883, the distribution of high-grade bulls, bought abroad by himself, for free service throughout the counties of the Red River Valley. No matter whether he was understood and appreciated or not, he never relinquished his efforts to raise the quality of all kinds of live stock all over the Northwest. In the last year of his life he was importing the best strains of general purpose cattle, at his own expense, and pushing them out on the farms. As years passed, his activity broadened with his interest. He taught incessantly a better agriculture. Under his direction the Great Northern entered the agronomic field, ran demonstration trains, conducted demonstration plots on farms, analyzed soils, for which purpose Mr. Hill gave the use of the greenhouses attached to his residence, scattered all over the Northwest truths about fertilization and soil conservation and the possibilities of production. He himself kept up a personal campaign in season and out of season. He said that the gospel of better farming must be carried to the man on the land. He sent out missionaries to take it to him. He went himself. Every year he devoted time and strength, such as few men would lavish on their own most important affairs, to talk at county fairs in different parts of the Northwest, to instruct the people how to bring the farm up nearer to the level of its reasonable practical possibilities. If the building of the Great Northern added, as it did, billions of dollars to the value of

the real property in the Northwest, the labors and contributions of Mr. Hill for the improvement of agriculture have added hundreds of millions to the amount and value of the product. This is an influence going on incessantly and giving cumulative returns with each passing year. The railroad, the bank, and the farm are all monuments to this life so magnificently fertile in conception and so tirelessly successful in execution.

I have detained you far too long, and yet I feel that I have barely indicated some of the material that should be included in any formal tribute to the work and character of James J. Hill. In many respects, where his unique genius breaks through all restraints, his life defies the limitations that even a criticism of appreciation must impose; the substance of its quality can not be conveyed within material boundaries and through the incomplete interpretation of words. In a deep and true sense it may be said of him that, like Abou ben Adhem, he loved his fellow men. About him there was no sentimentality—a thing that he abhorred above all others. But he wanted to see everybody prosper legitimately. He wanted society to advance; and right ideas in business, in economic changes, in government, to prevail. He was a very patriotic American; and in nearly every instance where people declared him a pessimist, because he exposed the certain future misfortune that must follow mistakes or refusals to face the obvious truth, it was not himself, but the future of the country, of which he was thinking. He had reached the limit of personal ambition. He was destitute of personal vanity. He had, as he said, more money than he knew what to do with; and its chief value to him was the fact that it had come to him not as a direct product of striving, but as an indirect accompaniment of the pursuit of those larger aims and ideas to which the strength of his will and the soul of his purpose were ever bent. He feared nothing for the future so much as the possible failure of the crucial American experiment in democracy. In the last analysis he brought every proposed innovation in law-making, every novel economic theory, every general principle and every practice that bore upon his own

activity or his own fortune to the same test: What would be its ultimate effect upon the institutions and the political destiny of the United States? His own great enterprises were not the object of a keener or greater solicitude. If his were the powers, his also were the anxieties of the statesman. Nor do I think it partiality or exaggeration to say, after a historic survey and an analytic scrutiny of the time in which he lived, that he was its greatest, its most compelling figure. By the complex, yet singularly even, texture of his being; by the works of his hands; by his interest in, and his service to, the life of the world and its evolution; by the piercing intelligence that commanded both past and future; by mastery of men and consummate art of method; by all the gifts which we call genius because it sets its possessor apart from and above other men; and then by the sense of unity of being and purpose between him and all other men, communities, nations, and the ebb and flow of intellectual and spiritual tides past the shores of our little island in space and out, through the immensities of the universe, he won through heroic service the right to that earthly immortality which destiny herself had allotted to him when she assigned to him these qualities, as winning and as masterful as forces of nature, that accomplish one man's lordship in a world of men.

We are proud to have called our neighbor this man whom all the world honored while he passed so quietly among us with his strong soul and simple word. If his was a mystic gift of prophetic vision, that is part of the dower of the Celt, with it went also the capacity for deep feeling and the incomparable swiftness and strength in action that won for him our admiration. If he had not lived there would, of course, have still been a Minnesota and a Northwest, but as if born out of due season, and how different from what we inherit. He was of national, of international stature. This state named him its greatest living citizen for the Hall of Fame of a national exposition, just as the state of Washington keeps a bust of him on the campus of her university as one whom she delighted to honor. He was of lowly lineage, and the great of the world

felt privileged to know him. In every capital of Europe and in the thronged centers of the Orient his name was familiar. He was of the West, and the East proudly acknowledged his qualities and achievements. What more of honor could be bestowed than the consenting opinion of his own epoch laid in tribute on his grave? To us here belongs the closer and tenderer tie of common local citizenship, of daily association, of the mutual interest and the kindly word and look. This society, old as years go in the youthful genealogical record of the Northwest, is very proud to have carried for nearly half a century on its records the name of the man most distinguished in his time for his accomplishment, for power, for deep understanding and sympathy with the needs, interests, and aspirations of men. He had ideals, in which his city, his state, his country, and his kind were included, and he was faithful to them. That is the last and highest word of praise to be spoken of any man, who is son of earth and also son of heaven. With it, with our regret, our remembrance, our admiration, our wonder, and our love, we may leave to memory and to fame the man who was in himself the builder of empires, the wayfarer on highroads of genius, the tender husband and father, the devoted and unselfish citizen, and the loyal friend.

JOSEPH G. PYLE

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).