



*James*

*Majestic entry to the James J. Hill Reference Library, clad in pink Tennessee marble.  
The building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975.*



# *J. Hill's Library*

## THE FIRST 75 YEARS


■ The James J. Hill Reference Library, the most significant civic legacy of its legendary founder, has served residents of St. Paul and more distant places for three-quarters of a century. Although the Empire Builder, as Hill was known, did not live to see the institution open to the public, his heirs worked hard to ensure that his dream was fulfilled. In December 1921, at the dawn of the city's and the nation's modern era, the Hill library opened its doors. Since that time, it has played an important role in St. Paul's cultural and economic development.

The library and Hill's many other philanthropic interests flowed directly from his genuine interest in the improvement of society. These activities were

W. THOMAS WHITE

*W. Thomas White, who holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington, has served as curator of the James J. Hill Papers since they were first opened in 1982. His work on the history of business, labor, and politics in Minnesota and the West has appeared in a wide variety of journals.*





made possible by the large personal fortune he derived from railroading and other business enterprises. In a literal sense, Hill grew up with St. Paul and the Northwest. Like Andrew Carnegie and a few other entrepreneurs during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, he became a pivotal figure in the nation's era of industrialization and the rise of big business. In his adopted state the Great Northern Railway president played a central role in making the Twin Cities a transportation hub, developing Minnesota's mining industry, and stimulating many other vital aspects of the state's and the Northwest's economy.<sup>1</sup>

Hill's long career truly was a rags-to-riches story. He was born September 16, 1838, in Erasmosa Township, a near-frontier setting in Ontario. When he was 14 his father died, and his formal education ended. He already had become an omnivorous reader, however, a habit he retained for the rest of his life.<sup>2</sup>

Working as a clerk in nearby Guelph, Hill managed to save several hundred dollars. When the sharp economic depression of the 1850s struck, he decided to seek opportunities to the south. The teenager briefly explored the docks of New York and other United States cities but in 1856 "took a notion to go and see St. Paul," as Hill wrote to his family.<sup>3</sup>

At Pigs Eye, as the raw, new town had been dubbed, he immediately began work as a book-keeper in the booming freight-transportation and warehousing business. He actively involved himself in the steamboat trade on the Mississippi and Red Rivers as well as the fuel-supply trade, working, as biographer Albro Martin argued, an "energy revolution" in the region, which switched from wood to coal during this

---

<sup>1</sup> On Hill's life and career, see Michael P. Malone, *James J. Hill, Empire Builder of the Northwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996); Albro Martin, *James J. Hill and the Opening of the Northwest* (1976; reprint ed., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991). For more on Hill's life in St. Paul, see Jane H. Hancock, Sheila ffolliott, and Thomas O'Sullivan, *Homecoming: The Art Collection of James J. Hill* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1991), 21–61; Robert M. Frame III, *James J. Hill's Saint Paul: A Guide to Historic Sites* (St. Paul: James Jerome Hill Reference Library, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Martin, *James J. Hill*, 7–18; Joseph Gilpin Pyle, *The Life of James J. Hill* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1917), 1: 5–18.

<sup>3</sup> Hill to Grandmother, Aug. 1, 1856, General Correspondence, James J. Hill Papers, James J. Hill Reference Library, St. Paul.





*St. Paul in 1862, growing but still rough around the edges. Board sidewalks line unpaved Third Street between Minnesota and Robert.*

period. In his personal life, Hill decided to settle down, marrying 21-year-old Mary Theresa Mehegan in 1867.<sup>4</sup>

As he approached middle age, Hill turned to railroading, commencing the second career for which he is so well known. Joining with Norman W. Kittson, John S. Kennedy, George Stephen, and Donald A. Smith in 1877, he completed construction of the bankrupt St. Paul and Pacific Railway through the Red River Valley to Canada. Renaming the road the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba, Hill extended the line to western Montana Territory, shattering the artificially inflated rate pool of

his rivals, the Northern Pacific and the Union Pacific, to tap the region's rich mines.<sup>5</sup>

■ The idea to construct a library probably had germinated 20 years earlier, in the 1860s. Hill's formal education, though adequate for that era, was rudimentary. Essentially, he was self-taught, devouring books on a wide range of subjects from an early age. The ambitious and intellectually curious young man found it difficult to obtain books in the raw village of St. Paul. By midcentury the river town had enjoyed meteoric growth but retained its frontier flavor and offered few amenities to new arrivals.

<sup>4</sup> Martin, *James J. Hill*, 18–28, 31–57, 80, 88–91.

<sup>5</sup> Martin, *James J. Hill*, 121–40, 146–236; W. Thomas White, “The War of the Railroad Kings: Great Northern—Northern Pacific Rivalry in Montana, 1881–1896,” in *Montana and the West: Essays in Honor of K. Ross Toole*, ed. Rex C. Myers and Harry W. Fritz (Boulder, Colo.: Pruett, 1984), 37–54.

Early evidence is sparse, but Hill clearly began to consider building his own library to meet the glaring need for a comprehensive collection. Like other civic leaders, he was conscious of being a member of the pioneer generation that had carved out the new state (Minnesota entered the union in 1858, only two years after his arrival). Consequently, he felt responsible for helping to build the city's and state's cultural life. The same concern had motivated that generation to establish Minnesota's state historical society, a university, and other institutions almost from the outset of settlement.<sup>6</sup>

In late 1887 Edward D. Neill, head librarian and professor of history, English literature, and political science, proposed building a Hill Library at the young Macalester College. It was to be a "Reference Library of Science, the Useful Arts, and General Literature." Hill pledged \$5,000, provided Macalester's trustees agreed to "erect a fire-proof building, to cost not less than \$20,000."<sup>7</sup>

The project was not completed as anticipated, however, and other concerns soon captured the Empire Builder's full attention. Foremost among them was the completion of his railroad from the mining regions of western Montana Territory to Seattle on Puget Sound. At the same time, he continued to tilt with rival railroads—principally, the Northern Pacific and Union Pacific lines, and to the north, the Canadian Pacific—for access to the entire Northwest. Personally, Hill immersed himself in all aspects of the construction of his magnificent Summit Avenue home in St. Paul, which he, Mary, and their children occupied in 1891.<sup>8</sup>

With the 1893 completion of his Great Northern transcontinental line, Hill once again turned to the idea of building a library. When civic leaders proposed to hold a lavish, citywide event commemorating Hill's achievement and St. Paul's status as headquarters of the rail line, the Empire Builder promptly demurred. Instead, he urged the city to dedicate its resources toward a new public library. "I will add twice as



*James J. Hill, in Swiss artist Adolf Muller-Ury's etching and drypoint, 1889*

much more, and a good library building can be put up at once," he declared. Unfortunately, as the economic Panic of 1893 deepened—it became probably the worst depression the nation had experienced to that time—St. Paul could not raise enough money to match his offer.<sup>9</sup>

For his part Hill turned to the wide array of enterprises for which he is so well known. By the turn of the century, with the backing of J. P. Morgan, he had obtained de facto control of his old rival, the Northern Pacific. Pioneering in the rise of big business in America, Hill and Edward H. Harriman formed the nation's largest railroad company in 1901. In the Northern Securities holding company, the two rival rail magnates combined the Great Northern, Northern Pacific, and Chicago, Burlington and

<sup>6</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, June 11, 1922, p. 4; Joseph Gilpin Pyle, "The James Jerome Hill Reference Library," *Library Journal* 47 (Nov. 15, 1922): 965–67.

<sup>7</sup> Edward D. Neill to James J. Hill, Oct. 22, 1887, July 10, 30, 1888, General Correspondence, James J. Hill Papers.

<sup>8</sup> For Hill's railroad career, see Malone, *James J. Hill*, 31–262; Martin, *James J. Hill*, 114–578; Ralph W. Hidy, Muriel E. Hidy, Roy V. Scott, and Don L. Hofsommer, *The Great Northern Railway: A History* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1988), 2–145.

<sup>9</sup> Pyle, *James J. Hill*, 2: 301; Mrs. J. G. Pyle, "The James Jerome Hill Reference Library," unpublished essay, James J. Hill Library Archives.



Quincy lines to consolidate rail transportation throughout much of the Upper Midwest and Pacific Northwest. (One of the most spectacular trust-busting cases of the Progressive Era was the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to uphold Theodore Roosevelt's order that the company be broken up.)<sup>10</sup>

Among his other activities Hill invested heavily in Minnesota's iron ranges, while playing an important role in the development of the mining industries of Iowa, Montana, and Washington state. He launched and built his own ships on the Great Lakes and the north Pacific coast to link water-transportation systems with his railroads. After the turn of the century, Hill also lectured audiences throughout the northern-tier states and ran model experimental farms in Minnesota to develop superior livestock and crops for the settlers locating near his railroads. His philanthropic interests, dating from the early 1880s until his death, included generous support for the St. Paul Theological Seminary, Macalester College, Hamline University, College of St. Thomas, Carleton College, and many other educational, religious, and charitable organizations throughout Minnesota, the Northwest, and the nation. To encourage formal study of the transportation industry, Hill established the first endowed chair at the Harvard University Business School, an important step in building what was then a struggling new venture at that venerable institution.<sup>11</sup>

Even near the end of his life, Hill refused to rest. After formally leaving the Great Northern in 1912, he forged the institutional roots of what is now the First Bank System by merging several St. Paul banking institutions. Subsequently, Hill played what biographer Martin called his "last and greatest role." After the first punishing year of World War I, the Allied Powers desperately needed financial support. Hill was a major figure in J. P. Morgan's Anglo-French bond drive of 1915, which allowed the Allies to purchase much-needed foodstuffs and other supplies.<sup>12</sup>

Suddenly, after a brief illness, on May 29, 1916, James J. Hill died at his St. Paul home. Countless memorial tributes from business, religious, and political leaders across the United States testified to the powerful influence the indefatigable Hill wielded during his 60-year career. Curiously, despite his meticulous attention to the smallest detail in his far-flung enterprises, the Empire Builder left no will. His extensive personal papers contain no clue to his neglect, and his final, uncharacteristic inaction remains a mystery.<sup>13</sup>

■ Fortunately, as he neared retirement from the Great Northern Railway in 1912, Hill had decided to try again to erect a grand reference library in the heart of the city that he had helped build. St. Paul had had a free public library since 1882, which continued to grow and need more shelf space. According to Joseph Gilpin Pyle, who wrote Hill's authorized biography, the magnate believed that "in the average public library the average reader is well taken care of. The advanced student, the original thinker, the man engaged in investigation and research,

*Joseph Gilpin Pyle, newspaper editor, biographer, and Hill's first head librarian*



<sup>10</sup> For an overview, see Malone, *James J. Hill*, 175–84, 203–25.

<sup>11</sup> Claire Strom, "James J. Hill: Empire Builder as Farmer," *Minnesota History* 54 (Summer 1995): 242–53. For more on Hill's multifaceted activities, consult Malone's and Martin's biographies.

<sup>12</sup> Malone, *James J. Hill*, 265–67; Martin, *James J. Hill*, 604–74.

<sup>13</sup> Martin, *James J. Hill*, 608–15; Malone, *James J. Hill*, 273–74.



*Hill library exterior (far left), January 1915, completed well before the St. Paul Public Library. The two institutions under one roof were built by different contractors.*

the serious author, were relatively unprovided with proper tools.” To fill this void, Hill initially offered to contribute \$250,000 and was joined by long-time business associate David C. Shepard, who pledged another \$100,000. When that project came to naught, Hill quickly agreed to purchase land for a new library adjacent to a site the city agreed to make available for an expanded public library. Hill would then make

his reference library a part of the general architectural scheme—two institutions, one public and one private—under one roof.<sup>14</sup>

The drive to build the libraries, as well as the grand scale of their architecture, quickly escalated and became front-page news. Other city movers and shakers—including Homer P. Clarke, Lucius P. Ordway, Theodore Griggs, H. S. Sommers, Webster Wheelock, A. W. Lindeke—pledged financial support. Hill’s personal vision also grew, and he increased his gift for the library that was to bear his name to “a minimum of \$750,000.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1912 he approached New York architect Electus D. Litchfield, whose father had been president of one of the predecessor companies of the Great Northern, to draft formal plans. “My idea is to have good material and plain design avoiding all useless ornamentation,” the practical-minded Hill insisted. At the same time he sought out ideas from his long-time financial ally, J. P. Morgan. “I am getting ready to build a reference library in St. Paul,” Hill wrote the nation’s foremost investment banker, “and to help me in the matter of architecture I would be greatly obliged if you would send me a photograph showing the general outside appearance of your library [in Manhattan].” Morgan did so, and Hill promptly instructed Litchfield to use it as a model for his own project. “You have set us a high standard in taking this building for comparison,” the architect responded, “but I shall do my durndest.”<sup>16</sup>

His plans completed, Litchfield signed contracts with Hill and the St. Paul public-library board, and construction commenced for the two adjoining institutions at 80–90 West Fourth Street, facing Rice Park. To head his library, Hill named his speech writer, first biographer, and former *St. Paul Globe* editor, Joseph Pyle. The Empire Builder did not live to see his library open to the public. Although the exterior was completed before his death in 1916, much work remained. Mary Hill, his widow, and their children saw the project through to completion. Incorporating the library, Mary and four of her children, Louis W. Hill, Clara A. Lindley, Charlotte E. Slade, and Rachel Boeckman, formed

<sup>14</sup> *St. Paul Dispatch*, Mar. 5, 1912, p. 1, 2; Russell F. Barnes, “A First Draft of an Outline for a History of the James Jerome Hill Reference Library,” unpublished manuscript, Hill Library Archives; Pyle, *James J. Hill*, 2: 302–303; Gary Phelps, “The St. Paul Public Library and Its First 100 Years,” *Ramsey County History* 18 (1982): 6, 9, 12–13.

<sup>15</sup> *St. Paul Dispatch*, Mar. 13, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> *St. Paul Dispatch*, Jan. 16, 1913, p. 1; Hill to J. P. Morgan, Oct. 12, 1912, and Litchfield to Hill, Oct. 8, 1912, both in General Correspondence, James J. Hill Papers.



the first board of trustees, determined to open and maintain in perpetuity this privately supported “free public library in St. Paul.”<sup>17</sup>

A number of factors delayed its opening, however. Among them, the United States’ entry into the First World War undoubtedly slowed completion of the interior and significantly hindered purchases for the book collection. After Hill’s death, Pyle carried on the acquisition program intended to round out the initial collection, but the world conflict disrupted the normal channels for obtaining specialized publications. Hill had left lists of books for Pyle to amass, excluding the fields of law and medicine already represented in professional libraries, as well as juvenile books and fiction unless “illustrative of permanent literature and literary history.” Instead, the librarian had been charged with collecting “every work in other departments that had contributed something material and enduring to human thought, human knowledge, or human progress.” Philosophy and religion were to be balanced with the latest works on “modern scientific accomplishment.”<sup>18</sup>

More pressing for the long run was the need to provide for the library’s continuing operation. Because Hill had died intestate, his heirs

in 1920 contributed a permanent endowment of \$1 million, the proceeds of which would be used to meet the library’s operating expenses. It thus became the most heavily endowed private library west of the Mississippi River—twice as large as its nearest peer, the Rosenberg Library in Galveston, Texas. Nationally, only a handful of institutions enjoyed a greater financial base—the John Crerar (Chicago), Newberry (Chicago), and Enoch Pratt Free (Baltimore), and the New York, Providence, and Boston public libraries.<sup>19</sup>

The James J. Hill Reference Library was dedicated formally in 1921 “in the interest of higher education and science . . . to maintain, free of charge, for the use of students, scholars and all members of the public engaged in the work of original investigation, a research library containing the most complete and authoritative works on the arts, sciences, literature, history, philosophy, religion, and other subjects.” The magnificent structure finally opened its doors to the public on December 20 with great fanfare. Sadly, Mary Hill did not live to see the grand-opening event, dying only a month before. Yet the library’s goals were set. Sponsors and staff alike were committed firmly to the ultimate, albeit distant aim, as Pyle articulated it, “to build up in St. Paul, a book collection resembling that of the Reading-room of the British Museum . . . [where] 60,000 books of reference and standard works have been placed.”<sup>20</sup>

*Mary T. Hill, late 1890s*



■ Despite its grand opening and publicly stated goals, much still remained to be done. Throughout the Jazz Age of the 1920s, Pyle worked to build the collection, which contained only 10,000 volumes in 1921, and to put the finishing touches on the interior. In 1930 he died and was succeeded by assistant librarian Helen K. Starr, whom Pyle had recruited from

<sup>17</sup> See Pyle to Louis Hill, June 9, 1916, General Correspondence, James J. Hill Library Archives; James Jerome Hill Reference Library subgroup, Louis Warren Hill Papers, James J. Hill Library.

<sup>18</sup> Pyle, *James J. Hill*, 2:304; Clara Hill Lindley to Louis W. Hill et al., Sept. 23, 1918, Hill Library Archives.

<sup>19</sup> *St. Paul Dispatch*, May 19, 1920, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> James Jerome Hill Reference Library Articles of Incorporation, Hill Library Archives; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Dec. 17, 1916, p. 6; Steve Gannaway, “The James Jerome Hill Reference Library, 1921–1971: Fifty Years of Service,” unpublished paper, Hill Library Archives; Pyle, “Hill Reference Library,” 965–67.





*Finally opened in 1921, the Hill library (entrance at far left), adjoining the city's public library*

the Library of Congress. During her two decades of stewardship Starr guided the institution through the troubled years of the Great Depression and the Second World War.<sup>21</sup>

As the hard economic times of the 1930s beset the nation and St. Paul, the Hill library's commitment to public service deepened. Large numbers of newly unemployed men and women flocked to the building to gain some understanding of the economic debacle that had

afflicted them and, by utilizing the library's collection, to retrain themselves for new jobs. Students discovered scores of otherwise unavailable works at the Hill library, which supplemented the strained resources of colleges and universities throughout the Twin Cities.<sup>22</sup>

To accommodate this increased usage, the board of trustees instituted a number of innovations. It extended the library's hours to include Sundays. Additional purchases of custom-made

---

<sup>21</sup> James Jerome Hill Reference Library Annual Report, 1921, Hill Library Archives (hereafter, Annual Report); *St. Paul Dispatch*, Oct. 14, 1930, 2d sec., 1; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 7, 1930, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Annual Reports, 1930–39.



lamps and the elegant long tables and chairs that still grace the Great Reading Room increased seating capacity by 40 percent. To improve the environment, an air-conditioning system was installed in 1935. Workmen drilled a 220-foot-deep artesian well, and the library was cooled by recirculating air over coils through which the well water flowed at a temperature of 52°F. Considered the most important improve-

ment since the building's opening, the air-conditioning system, observers claimed, "modernizes [the] Library . . . promotes efficiency [and] protects books."<sup>23</sup>

James and Mary Hill's children continued their strong support of the library, both financially and in other important ways, throughout those troubled years. In 1934, for example, daughter Mary Frances Hill donated a number of significant family artifacts, which were placed in a newly fashioned Hill Memorial Room. Among them were the robes James J. Hill wore in 1910 when receiving his honorary degree from Yale University, portraits of James and Mary by artist Paul Raymond Audibert, and other mementoes awarded to Hill during his long career.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of the decade, the Hill library was firmly ensconced as a major St. Paul institution. It boasted serving more than 61,000 patrons in 1940 alone. Similarly, its resources had grown dramatically in the course of its first 20 years. With a collection of more than 142,000 books and 960 periodicals and having weathered the hard times of the Great Depression, the library stood poised to grow in new directions.<sup>25</sup>

■ During the 1940s, head librarian Starr began casting about for new ways to contribute to St. Paul's community life. Amid blackouts and air-raid drills, the Hill library launched an outreach campaign, sponsoring a series of public exhibitions that utilized rarities from its own collections. In late 1940, for example, it sponsored an exhibition of noted photographer Edwin S. Curtis's extensive North American Indian plates from his portfolio edition, followed by a showing of its collection of illustrated works on Chinese art. In the spring of 1942, while war raged throughout Europe and the Pacific, a new series of exhibitions included a public display of James Audubon's famous *Birds of America*, a rare, limited, elephant-folio edition (pages 3 feet, 3 inches by 2 feet, 5 inches). That event was followed by what the *St. Paul Dispatch* dubbed "an elaborate show" of more than 1,200 examples of the development of the art of engraving and etching from "the earliest examples of religious art and following down through

<sup>23</sup> Annual Reports, 1932, 1934–1935; Ford J. Cumming, "Air Conditioning Modernizes Library: Promotes Efficiency, Protects Books," *Heating, Piping & Air Conditioning* 7 (Dec. 1935): 565–67.

<sup>24</sup> Annual Report, 1934; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Feb. 3, 1935, p. 3A.

<sup>25</sup> Annual Report, 1940.





*Helen K. Starr, innovative head librarian from 1930 to 1949*

the exuberant expressiveness of the Nineteenth century.”<sup>26</sup>

Increasingly, the Hill library actively encouraged original research by making study rooms available to a wide range of Minnesotans. Meridel LeSueur, G. Theodore Mitau, James P. Shannon, and a succession of research assistants working for state governors Luther W. Youngdahl and Harold E. Stassen, among many others, all toiled in the Hill library vineyard.<sup>27</sup>

At the close of the decade, Helen Starr announced her retirement, signaling the end of first-generation leadership. In the fall of 1949 Russell F. Barnes, formerly of the Minnesota Historical Society, agreed to become head librarian and guide the institution into the postwar world. For the next 22 years, Barnes worked to strengthen the library’s collections and to improve its service to the community.<sup>28</sup>

One of his principal goals was to focus specifically upon service to college and university students, whose numbers were soaring after World War II. The Hill library soon commenced a number of cooperative projects with Twin Cities institutions of higher learning. Most notable was the establishment of the Area Studies Program, part of the broader Inter-college Hill Reference Library Project. From 1953 until 1961 the Hill library joined with Macalester, Hamline, St. Catherine, and St. Thomas colleges to serve as headquarters for intensive classes and research opportunities on

international topics, focused on fast-changing areas of the globe. Important to the program were the nationally recognized experts who regularly delivered public lectures. Among them, for example, were the distinguished University of Chicago professor Hans J. Morgenthau and Professor Waldemar Gurian of Notre Dame University, who participated in an institute on American-Soviet relations in 1954.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout this period, the Hill library also continued to mount exhibits of its holdings and those of other institutions. In 1954 it joined with the Great Northern Railway to sponsor a showing of noted artist Winold Reiss’s color portraits of the Blackfeet Indians of Montana. The library loaned works by Audubon, George Catlin, Albert Bierstadt, Seth Eastman, George Caleb Bingham, and Carl Bodmer to Minneapolis’s Walker Art Center for its celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase. On a different tack, the Hill library regularly hosted afternoon concerts by the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, events that included head librarian Barnes’s display of musical prowess on the French horn! Anticipating its later, more specialized focus, the institution began cosponsoring various seminars by leading spokespersons in the business community on the development, design, and marketing of new products in the 1960s.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, near the close of that decade, the library played a pivotal role in the creation of a new resources-sharing venture, pioneering a movement just beginning in the library community, both nationally and locally. Building on their experience in the Area Studies Program, Macalester, Hamline, St. Catherine, St. Thomas, and the Hill library joined with Augsburg, Bethel, and Concordia—the Twin Cities’ other private colleges—to incorporate the Cooperating Libraries in Consortium (CLIC). With Stephen W. Plumb as the first coordinator and the Hill library as primary sponsor, CLIC made available to its members and their students a much wider variety of books, periodicals, and

<sup>26</sup> Memoranda, Oct. 15, 18, 1940, *St. Paul Gallery and School of Art Bulletins*, Feb.–Mar., 1941, and Annual Reports, 1942, 1944—all Hill Library Archives; *St. Paul Dispatch*, Feb. 24, 1941, p. 6, Mar. 23, 1942, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Annual Report, 1946.

<sup>28</sup> Annual Report, 1949; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 2, 1949, and *St. Paul Dispatch*, June 18, 1951, both in clipping file, Hill Library Archives; *St. Paul Dispatch*, Aug. 11, 1971, p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> Annual Reports, 1953–61. The entire project was made possible by generous support from the Louis W. and Maude Hill Foundation, now the Northwest Area Foundation.

<sup>30</sup> For more on these varied activities, see the Hill library’s annual reports and ephemera, *St. Paul Dispatch*, Oct. 19, 1960, and *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 9, 1960, Mar. 11, Nov. 5, 1961, clippings file—all in Hill Library Archives.

other materials than any single institution could provide.<sup>31</sup>

■ The 1970s brought new directions, as the Hill library decided to narrow its focus. Concerns had grown over its duplication of services with other institutions. The information explosion, the soaring costs and numbers of publications, and the need to house these books and periodicals also forced the library to reexamine its mission. Increasingly, it became apparent to members of the board and to its new executive director, Virgil F. Massman, that the institution's historical role as a general reference library was untenable.<sup>32</sup>

Consequently, in mid-1976 the Hill library began to focus its attention upon "the growth and development of business in the North Central and Northwestern United States." From that time to the present, it has specialized in providing information services to support the business community. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, under the leadership of Massman and Sheila A. Meyer, the reference library disposed of parts of its book collection that did not directly conform with its applied business and economic orientation and, on two occasions, sold the majority of its fine-art materials. Building upon its revised mission, in 1993 the library launched HillSearch, a fee-based research service, as an added dimension to its print and electronic resources. The following year *Twin Cities Business Monthly* named the refocused institution the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan region's "best business reference library." In 1995 the library augmented its holdings by purchasing the assets of Business Information Center, Inc., including the Pillsbury company's former market-research and reference collections. These greatly improved its depth of hold-



*Researchers at work in the Hill library's spacious Great Reading Room*

ings on the food, restaurant, and consumer-products industries.<sup>33</sup>

In January 1982 the Hill library had obtained formal title to the voluminous personal papers of its founder and Minnesota's preeminent entrepreneur. Because of Hill's long, diverse, and distinguished career, this nationally significant manuscript collection is an invaluable resource. The Hill papers are among the most extensive of any individual's collection in the nation for the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries; only those of United States presidents serving before the First World War—and not all of those—are of comparable volume. Running more than 450 linear feet, the James J. Hill Papers include the Empire Builder's correspondence and other documents

<sup>31</sup> Annual Report, 1969; *St. Paul Dispatch*, May 15, 1969, p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> For more on Massman, see *St. Paul Dispatch*, Aug. 11, 1971, p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> Hill library, "Announcement," Sept. 1976, Hill Library Archives; *Twin Cities Business Monthly* 2 (Sept. 1994): 45; Annual Report, 1995.



related to his wide-ranging activities in transportation, finance, politics, philanthropy, agronomy, and a host of other topics.<sup>34</sup>

Four years later the Northwest Area Foundation generously donated the papers of his son, Louis Warren Hill, to the library. Roughly twice the size of his father's collection, these papers carry the story of the family's central involvement in economic development and related activities forward to Louis Hill's death in 1948, documenting his wide range of activities, including transportation and the Great Northern Railway; banking, primarily the activities of the First Bank of St. Paul; tourism, notably Glacier National Park; copper mining in Arizona; investments in Oregon timberlands; Minnesota iron-ore properties; agriculture; philanthropy; and other subjects. Louis Hill also played a pivotal role, described in his papers, in the revival of the St. Paul Winter Carnival, beginning in 1916. The James J. Hill and Louis W. Hill Papers are nationally and regionally rich resources for any serious assessment of the nation's economic development during its industrializing era.<sup>35</sup>

From the vantage point of what many observers have dubbed the postindustrial era, the James J. Hill Reference Library remains the Victorian entrepreneur's most visible civic legacy. Its goals and much of its character have changed during the course of the last three-quarters of a century. The Empire Builder could not have foreseen the computer revolution or many of the other cultural and technological changes that have altered St. Paul and the library that he founded. Some things he would find familiar, however. He would certainly



*James J. Hill, about 1910*

ly have recognized the building he had modeled after Morgan's own library and, of course, his extensive personal papers and business records. Above all, one suspects, Hill easily would have grasped the importance of research and dissemination of information, pursuits that he contemplated fostering in the village of St. Paul more than a century ago.

---

<sup>34</sup> "The James J. Hill Papers, 1838–1913," brochure, Hill Library Archives.

<sup>35</sup> "The Louis W. Hill Papers, 1875–1948," brochure, Hill Library Archives.

*The pictures on p. 118, 123, 126–27, 128, and 129 are from the Hill Library Archives, and p. 125 is from the Louis W. Hill Papers, both at the James J. Hill Reference Library. All other images are in the Minnesota Historical Society collections.*



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](#).