

# Henry A. Bruns

## FAILED FRONTIER ENTREPRENEUR



In 1889 a weighty compendium of biographies of the Red River Valley's movers and shakers had nothing but praise for town-builder Henry A. Bruns: "He has taken a leading part in every move or enterprise ever inaugurated to build up the city or develop the surrounding country. . . . He has done more toward making Moorhead what it is today than any other resident." Two decades later a Minneapolis newspaper headline summarized Bruns's changed circumstances: "Once Rich, Now a Cheese Clerk. Man Who Built \$150,000 Hotel in Moorhead Earns \$10 a Week."<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, being a frontier businessman during the turbulent economic era of the late-nineteenth century offered both promise and peril. While some young capitalists were fortunate to invest at the right place and right time, others, like Bruns, learned that unguarded optimism could bring down even the most successful businessman.

Twentieth-century historians of the West from Frederick Jackson Turner to William Cronon have observed that Americans viewed the frontier as a land of unprecedented economic opportunity. Although Cronon much revised Turner's interpretations, he agreed that "unexploited natural abundance" and "free land" offered the potential for vast financial

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*Previous pages: Detail of a Moorhead panorama, 1882, showing many of Bruns's businesses. Seen here are the Grand Pacific Hotel (1), and the Merchants Bank and Opera House block (4). Facing: Bruns in 1889*

rewards. But Cronon and other recent historians have also pointed out that the high risks of town building and other enterprises often thwarted dreams of opportunity and success. Frontier entrepreneurs were heavily dependent upon ready credit, subject to competition from newly emerging national and international markets, and exposed to frequent boom-and-bust business cycles.<sup>2</sup>

Henry A. Bruns shared the American dream and willingly accepted the risks. Born April 9, 1847, to German immigrant farmers in Dubuque County, Iowa, Bruns graduated from “commercial college” at 16. After working on his father’s farm and for Dubuque stores as a clerk, bookkeeper, and traveling salesman, he struck out on his own in early 1871, “looking for chances and opportunities” across the Upper Midwest. In Brainerd he learned that Jay Cooke’s Northern Pacific Railroad would soon be laying track west to Minnesota’s border with Dakota Territory. Bruns returned to St. Paul, bought a wagon-load of provisions and clothing, and took them in June to Oakport, a makeshift Minnesota tent settlement rumored to be the Northern Pacific’s Red River crossing point into Dakota. Where railroads forded rivers, he and others reasoned, great cities might arise. Bruns borrowed \$100 to pay his costs from Henry G. Finkle, who was already bidding his time at Oakport, and the two opened a tent store. When Moorhead, three miles to the south, was designated the crossing, Bruns and Finkle relocated there. Two months after the first train arrived on January 4, 1872, they removed the canvas from the frame sides of their structure, added a second story, roofed it, and opened for business. Some people predicted they would be “busted” by such a major investment.<sup>3</sup>

Bruns and Finkle advertised a “mammoth stock” of general merchandise, “almost everything but liquor.”

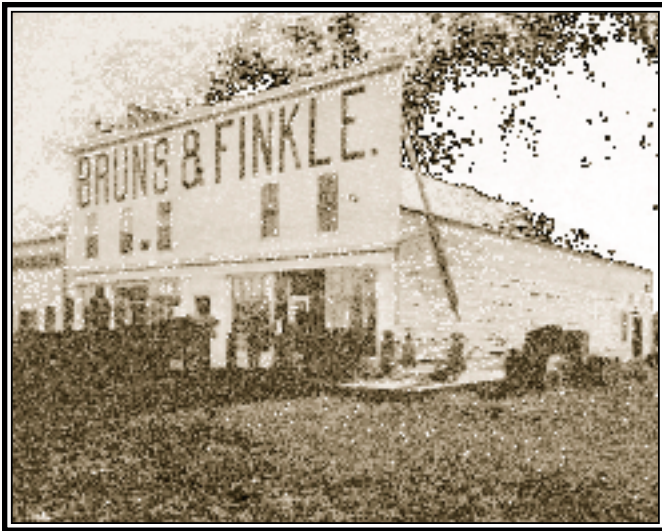
They ordered from Chicago and Philadelphia and shipped by steamboat down the Red River to Canada. Claiming to have sold \$140,000 in goods in 1876, they constructed a two-story brick building for their growing retail and wholesale trade. Bruns and Finkle enjoyed favorable ratings from R. G. Dun, which reported that Bruns had particularly good business ability and that the partnership was “the heaviest and soundest business concern in this region.”<sup>4</sup>

Bruns’s career followed that of many frontier merchants. He practiced an earlier, undifferentiated way of doing business in a period that was slowly evolving toward business specialization and concentration. On the often cash-starved frontier it was natural that he become a produce merchant in order to acquire the cash and credit he needed to purchase merchandise for his retail business and to extend credit to his customers. He perceived that city and country formed a single commercial system, that his business expansion promoted Moorhead and the countryside, and that their growth fostered his own continued business success.<sup>5</sup>

Early on, Bruns applied his entrepreneurial spirit to boost Moorhead and the Red River Valley. In 1872 he purchased 500 bushels of seed wheat and distributed it on credit to farmers in Minnesota’s Clay and Norman Counties and North Dakota’s Cass and Trail Counties. (Unfortunately, grasshoppers consumed the crop.) In February 1874, he led an association of eight Moorhead men in organizing the Moorhead Manufacturing Company, which established a sawmill and flour mill. Bruns and Finkle were the primary stockholders in the firm, capitalized at \$25,000. Bruns immediately requested land from Moorhead’s town-site developer, the Lake Superior and Puget Sound Company, which was a subsidiary of the Northern Pacific Railroad. President Thomas H. Canfield responded affirmatively, adding that with businessmen like Bruns going forward, “Moorhead will be the Chief City on Red River.” Construction commenced on the mills in late May 1874. By mid-October, according to the *Red River Star*, the mill was running night and day and grinding good-quality flour. The following year, the sawmill cut timber for two steamboats—the *Minnesota* and *Manitoba*—built in Moorhead by the Merchants’ Transportation Company, in which Bruns had also invested.<sup>6</sup>

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*Bruns and Finkle's first general store, built in 1872, and the handsome two-story brick building that replaced it in 1877*

An R. G. Dun report dated November 1875 noted that the mill did good business under Bruns's energetic and efficient management. The local newspaper confirmed this perception, reporting flour shipments to Bismarck, Fort Garry, Mennonites in Canada, and gold miners in the Black Hills. Many Northern Pacific and Canadian Pacific Railroad construction workers also dined on food made with Belle of Moorhead flour. Unable to keep up with orders, Bruns modernized in October 1880, replacing six grist stones with rollers. During the 1880s, he shipped flour to destinations as diverse as Fort Benton, Helena, and Cottonwood, Montana; Buffalo, Washington Territory; Chicago; Boston; and Amsterdam, Holland. When Bruns increased output from 175 to 300 barrels daily in 1886, running at full capacity day and night, he employed 15 men. To sell this increased production, Bruns traveled west in search of







*Farmers unloading wheat at Bruns and Finkle's busy elevator, built in 1878*

flour markets and attempted to organize local millers to find eastern buyers.<sup>7</sup>

Although Northern Pacific General Manager George Stark had counseled delay in order to construct a single large elevator on the Red River, Bruns and Finkle constructed a steam elevator with capacity for 100,000 bushels in June 1878. After the next year's harvest, the *Fargo Times* reported that the Moorhead elevator had received almost 250,000 bushels of wheat delivered in

more than 5,000 wagonloads hauled up to 40 miles from either side of the Red River. That same year, the modernizing entrepreneurs installed a telephone line, connecting their elevator, store, and mill.<sup>8</sup>

In 1879 Bruns—in partnership with Moorhead businessman Thomas C. Kurtz—secured the contract to supply workers laying track for the Northern Pacific extension west from Bismarck. The following year, the *Fargo Weekly Argus* reported that Bruns's sales to the North-

ern Pacific would amount to \$300,000, while his store in Moorhead would gross \$70,000. During the four-year contract (1879–82), Bruns reportedly sold \$2 million in goods to the railroad, thereby making his fortune, according to Moorhead's leading citizen, businessman, and politician Solomon G. Comstock.<sup>9</sup>

Despite his intense business activity, Bruns found time for a romance that probably blossomed on one of his frequent business trips to Canada. In 1877 he married Matilda Sharpe, an attractive Winnipeg native 10 years his junior, whose father, Edward, had emigrated from England in the 1840s at the request of the Hudson's Bay Company. Through the Red River-based Canadian trade, Bruns also became acquainted with James J. Hill, who was then engaged in creating a steamboat monopoly in advance of his later railroad expansion into the Red River Valley. Indeed, storekeepers Bruns and Finkle furthered Hill's knowledge of the region's rich agricultural potential in 1874 by sending him samples of Peerless potatoes that had yielded a bountiful 300 bushels to the acre.<sup>10</sup>

Through his imaginative, efficient, and energetic enterprise, Bruns had achieved considerable wealth at what seemed an opportune time. The great Dakota land boom had begun in 1878, fueled by dreams of King Wheat and the announced arrival of Hill's St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railroad in Fargo-Moorhead in 1880. Attracted by the railroad's publicity about "the Nile of the North," 42,000 immigrants arrived in the valley in 1882 at the boom's crest. This enabled the Manitoba road to sell more than 200,000 acres of its land grant in Minnesota within one short year. Caught up in the boom's speculative fever, Bruns moved quickly to take advantage of the possibilities. He dissolved his mercantile partnership with Finkle, became a dealer in real estate and city property in Moorhead, Williston, and Billings, and invested heavily in a bank, hotel, and foundry. Having become wealthy



*The first locomotive of the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway (later the Great Northern) to arrive in Moorhead, 1881*

from railroad expansion and settlement in the 1870s, Bruns now expected that the continued growth of Moorhead and the region would ensure him an even larger fortune.<sup>11</sup>

In 1880 Bruns had taken the first step in creating his new Moorhead business empire when he and Kurtz—his partner in supplying the Northern Pacific—built the two-story, brick Merchants Bank block, which housed a bank, three stores, an opera house, and offices. By 1889 the Merchants Bank of Moorhead claimed \$125,000 in capital and listed the First National Bank of St. Paul, Security Bank of Minneapolis, Continental National Bank of Chicago, and Chase National Bank of New York City as financial correspondents. At the same time, Bruns's Opera House contributed significantly to the social life of Moorhead. During the next decade, the Annual Fireman's Ball as well as Swedish Nightingale Jenny Lind and popular preachers Henry Ward Beecher and DeWitt Talmage appeared there.<sup>12</sup>

To promote growth of the town and region, Bruns worked closely with state legislator Solomon Comstock



in attempting to persuade James J. Hill to route the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba through Moorhead. Bruns deeded land to the railroad and helped create the Manvel and Hill Additions, hoping that Hill would make the city its “division point” by establishing machine shops, a roundhouse, and headquarters there. Bruns and other leading Moorhead businessmen invested with Comstock and Hill in the Minnesota and Dakota Northern Railroad Company, incorporated in 1879, and in 1883 they built a branch line of the Manitoba north from Moorhead to Halstad, Minnesota, on a right-of-way secured by Bruns, Comstock, and A. A. White. Bruns was also an investor from 1883 to 1886 with Comstock, Hill, and others in the Northwestern Land Company, which developed 45 town sites in the Red River Valley for the Manitoba road. Although these activities reveal how Hill worked fruitfully with local residents to achieve his larger aims, they suggest, too, that local investors often did not have all their expectations met. The Manitoba road encouraged Bruns’s business expansion by promising him coal cars and a warehouse to store coal for the foundry he would build, but the company ultimately disappointed Bruns in 1882 by

selecting Barnesville as its division point. Regarding the Moorhead railroad facilities as essential to their plans for business and town expansion, Bruns and Comstock presented their case to Hill in 1884 and 1888, but neither meeting led Hill to change his mind. For a time, however, Bruns moved ahead as though Hill’s decision was not a crucial blow. Later, he asserted that his economic failure could be traced to this decision.<sup>13</sup>

While owning a bank provided Bruns with ready credit and cash, which were often short in Moorhead’s frontier economy, this convenience contributed to his undoing. During the 1880s he may have borrowed as much as \$175,000 from his bank to finance and organize more dubious enterprises that proved overly ambitious for the small city that Moorhead would become. In November 1880 Comstock presented Hill with Bruns’s proposal for erecting a first-class hotel in Moorhead. The railroad, Bruns urged, could use the hotel as a ticket office and station if the company would make Moorhead an eating stop for passenger trains. Comstock assured Hill that Bruns would “put up and maintain a house that will be a credit

to your road as well as a vast improvement to our town.” Hill consented and later recommended John Baugh, whom Bruns hired to manage the luxurious Grand Pacific, which opened on November 24, 1881. Built and furnished at the cost of \$165,000, the three-story, brick-veneered hotel had every modern convenience—steam heat, gaslight in every room, 20 rooms with baths, a passenger elevator, and electric bells. The almost block-long structure featured 140 rooms with capacity for 200 guests and a dining room seating 140. Located west of the Manitoba road’s freight depot, the hotel contained the line’s offices, two large waiting rooms, and a ticket office. For a decade or so, the Grand Pacific was Moorhead’s

*Bruns’s lavish Grand Pacific Hotel, Moorhead’s pride, about 1884*



pride, hosting many large social events. Some 300 guests attended the charity dinner-dance given by the Ladies General Benevolent Society in 1881. Senator Comstock, who in 1887 cemented the deal making Moorhead the site of a state normal school, was honored with an eight-course dinner for 175 guests.<sup>14</sup>

Inside the hotel Brunns established an elegant, carpeted private office. He and Matilda made the Grand Pacific their residence, enjoying what were probably the most opulent accommodations on the frontier. The couple lived well and entertained lavishly, commemorating their tenth wedding anniversary by serving 104 guests a dinner of oysters, ham, turkey, and ice cream. They celebrated the birth of a son with another party at which 100 bottles of champagne were consumed. Matilda wore diamond earrings that, according to one observer, “knocked your eyes out.” Anticipating a lasting place in history, Henry had a \$500 portrait painted by Antrobus, an artist who had traveled to Minnesota to paint Governor John Pillsbury.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately for the couple’s grandiose lifestyle and Brunns’s expansive business vision, there were never enough events or guests in Moorhead to make the Grand Pacific profitable. The Dakota boom crested in 1882, economic slowdown turned into recession, immigration slowed, and heavy rail traffic north to Manitoba declined. Moorhead’s population, optimistically estimated in 1883 at 4,200, was only 2,088 by 1890. Consequently, Brunns reported losses of \$5,000 in operating the Grand Pacific between December 1888 and April 1889. By strict economy and superintending the hotel themselves, he and his wife reduced their losses to \$2,000 the following winter.<sup>16</sup>

In the years when the Grand Pacific was still profitable, Brunns had invested heavily in another enterprise much too large for a city that was not growing as anticipated. By 1883 the Moorhead Foundry, Car and Agricultural Works, capitalized at \$250,000 with Brunns as president and, eventually, general manager, operated in an impressive building east of the most densely settled area of town. Brunns spent an additional \$4,200 erecting six cottages east of the plant for workers and employees at the railroad shops he still expected to be located nearby. His acquisition of extensive land holdings there demonstrates that he anticipated rapid urban growth spurred by industrial development. The foundry only

employed 100 men at most, far short of the projected 300 to 400. Brunns’s hopes that the company would manufacture car wheels and other iron goods for the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba as well as Moorhead Chief threshing machines were not fulfilled. Most of the firm’s business consisted of casting iron for bobsleds, elevator machinery, and new construction in town. By early 1885, amid rumors of financial failure, Brunns had negotiated sale of the foundry to a wagon factory, A. Anderson and Sons of St. Cloud. Although he unloaded a bad investment, he had lost heavily. According to his Presbyterian minister O. H. Elmer, Brunns received only \$10,000 for the \$60,000 of stock he had held in the company.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to being an ambitious booster and entrepreneur, Brunns served his community in other ways. On February 24, 1881, when Moorhead incorporated as a city, Brunns was elected mayor. He had earlier served as county coroner, treasurer, and commissioner, as well as chair of the board of trustees when Moorhead had incorporated as a village in 1875.<sup>18</sup>

During Brunns’s three terms as mayor, Moorhead’s city government operated on a booster model, building a city hall, water works, extensive sidewalks, sewer improvements, and two iron bridges across the Red River to Fargo. By actively promoting growth through urban improvements, the city also fostered the fortunes of businessmen like Brunns who had staked their future on Moorhead’s expansion. Brunns facilitated construction by deeding land without cost for the approach to the southern bridge, provided the approach to the northern bridge was obtained on the same terms. Despite his successes as mayor, Brunns resigned on January 2, 1884. By this time he was surely worried about the fate of his fledgling businesses.<sup>19</sup>

By April 1887 the *Moorhead Weekly News* reported that Brunns, who had lost heavily during the recession, was again predicting improved business prospects in the city. For the first time in six years, hotel registrations had increased, and he had tenants for all of his properties. Despite his professed optimism, however, in July 1888 Brunns was compelled by the pressing financial obligations of the Merchants Bank to borrow \$13,000 from the Manitoba railroad and more than \$57,000 from





*Still in good standing with his fellow Moorhead leaders but starting to slip, Bruns (seated, with long beard) joined Solomon Comstock (at Bruns's left) and Henry Finkel (standing, second from left) for this group portrait in 1889.*

James J. Hill. Terms were 7 percent interest payable in two years with the Grand Pacific and additional Moorhead real estate as collateral. Although it is impossible to know for certain why Hill made this large loan to Bruns, it is probable that he appreciated Bruns's extensive efforts on behalf of the Manitoba and believed that the survival of Bruns's bank served the road's interests. The loan was certainly consistent with many other investments Hill made in agriculture and in other businesses whose economic success aided the Manitoba. Moreover, Bruns and Hill shared a common economic vision; both were entrepreneurs who had invested their fortunes in the future growth of the Red River Valley.<sup>20</sup>

When Bruns's notes came due in 1890, however, all was not well. An investigator reported Bruns's difficulties in a financial memorandum prepared for Hill, noting that Bruns had no credit and was paying cash-on-delivery for everything needed to run the hotel and restaurant, which had deteriorated. In addition, Matilda Bruns, who now managed the hotel, loudly abused her husband in public, making it disagreeable for the hotel patrons.<sup>21</sup>

Compounding Bruns's financial woes, Merchants Bank closed in February 1892. The *Moorhead Weekly News* reported that many citizens blamed Bruns, and their suspicions seemed confirmed when the former

cashier accused Bruns of embezzling more than \$80,000. Although embezzlement charges by the cashier and, later, by the state were dismissed, Bruns's inability to raise additional capital from the First National Bank of Saint Paul further damaged his credibility. At an initial meeting of creditors, Merchants Bank's liabilities were reported as \$208,000 and its assets as \$310,000. Unfortunately, Bruns's individual notes formed a large portion of the bank's nominal assets. Bruns reported personal liabilities of \$122,000 and assets of \$264,000, including the flour mill (\$25,000), bills receivable (\$27,000), and the Grand Pacific Hotel (\$134,905). The remainder included more than 2,000 undeveloped Moorhead lots, mostly around the failed foundry. Creditors waited impatiently as weeks, months, and years passed while Bruns's complicated financial affairs were untangled. Not until 1896 did creditors receive a 10 percent dividend on \$17,000 received for the sale of the Merchants Bank block to the Moorhead National Bank.<sup>22</sup>

Following the Merchants Bank failure, Hill foreclosed on Bruns's Grand Pacific Hotel after the Clay County district court ruled in Hill's favor against Bruns. Bruns and his wife were permitted to occupy the building until July 1893, when they were ordered to vacate it. A letter to one of Hill's agents from Bruns contained his assessment of the attitude toward him in Moorhead: "There is a good deal of dissatisfaction all around the city. . . . They are all interested in the Bank but not in my private matters—and most of them [would] sooner see me kicked out of town, hoping thereby to get Mr. Hill to take matters in hand and boom Moorhead to get his money out again."<sup>23</sup>

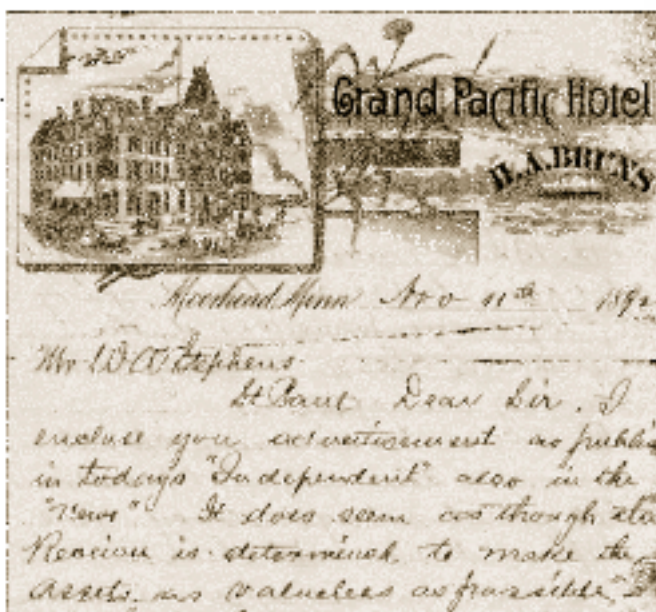
Although Hill took control of the Grand Pacific, he did not, as residents hoped, "boom" Moorhead. His agents reported that the hotel roof, plumbing, and heating plant were damaged and that the rooms required painting. Hill then offered the hotel for sale or rent with incentives to repair the building. In 1893 it was leased for two years to John A. Baker, who also failed to meet his expenses. The hotel closed after the city shut off the water in September 1895 because of an unpaid bill.<sup>24</sup>

Solomon Comstock, the city of Moorhead, and others did what they could to save the building. Comstock tactfully informed Hill that public opinion opposed demoli-

tion. In April 1896 the city council "resolved that destruction would be a public calamity, that James J. Hill shall refrain for two years and that assessment shall be fixed at \$3000." The council apparently hoped its action would attract potential purchasers. Meanwhile, Comstock informed Hill about the credit worthiness of prospective buyers. Unfortunately for Moorhead, an offer of \$15,000 without substantial cash payment or security did not move Hill, who was anxious to cut his losses.<sup>25</sup>

Lacking an acceptable offer and thinking it pointless to delay any longer, Hill reluctantly ordered the auction of hotel furniture and destruction of the building for salvage. By May 21, 1896, the Grand Pacific was "fast becoming a mass of ruins." Local opinion did not approve. "Mr. Hill is sharply criticized by all," the *Moorhead Weekly News* reported, adding that Hill was "displaying the spirit of an autocrat" and acting in a "petulant and spiteful mood" toward the city because "citizens who have in years past been the recipients of his favor ought to have taken the building off his hands." Moreover, it concluded, if Hill had fulfilled his promises of railroad shops and other improvements in Moorhead, the Grand Pacific might have been a paying investment instead of a heavy financial loss to Bruns.<sup>26</sup>

*A letter to Hill's agent written on Grand Pacific Hotel letterhead with Bruns's "proprietor" title stricken through*







Newspaper advertisement for auction of the Grand Pacific Hotel's furnishings, including a Steinway grand piano, Brussels carpets, and black walnut furniture (St. Paul Pioneer Press, Oct. 29, 1895).

Meanwhile, Henry Bruns—a pariah, a poor man, and an economic failure—had slipped away to Minneapolis in 1893. From a fortune earlier estimated at \$400,000, an estate of only \$700 remained. Until rumors had circulated about his impending financial collapse, Bruns had enjoyed a sterling reputation as a successful, public-spirited entrepreneur. Locals recognized that he had lost heavily after the boom collapsed, but they admired him for not complaining and seeming confident in Moorhead's future. Admiration quickly faded with failure of the Merchants Bank in 1892, however. Shortly thereafter, the *Weekly News* admitted publicly that Bruns's schemes had been ill conceived. He had tried to create a large city before conditions were ripe. He had set up a manufacturing operation without ready

access to raw materials and skilled labor. He had built a hotel too large and expensive for the town's small size.<sup>27</sup>

In 1910 the *Minneapolis Journal* published a curious, lengthy profile of Bruns. Then 63 years old, he was living in a rooming house and had spent 16 years as a cheese and butter clerk at Yerxa Brothers grocery in downtown Minneapolis. Looking forward to a long vacation, the first in several years, Bruns seemed to take his loss philosophically. "Some men must fail, since all cannot succeed financially," he reflected. He explained that his business failure had been a consequence of investing heavily in the expectation that Moorhead would become a great railroad center. He also failed to foresee that neighboring Fargo would surpass Moorhead and that other market towns would develop in the Red River Valley. Like countless others, he was victimized by the boom-and-bust cycles of the American economy. Having exhausted his credit at a crucial time, he lost heavily when Moorhead's boom collapsed in the early 1880s, and over-expansion made it difficult to repay loans. Bruns was also hurt by the decisions of rail-

**What happened** to the high-living Henry and Matilda Bruns? Minneapolis City Directories at the MHS Library record that Henry lived at several downtown Minneapolis addresses between 1895 and 1912, when he disappeared from the listings. A Matilda Bruns worked as a clerk with Henry at Yerxa Brothers grocery in 1900 and as a stenographer at Northwestern National Bank in 1905. Was this Mrs. Bruns or their daughter, also named Matilda?

A *Minneapolis Journal* index entry in the MHS Library leads to a small announcement that daughter Matilda married George R. Baston in 1905 "at her parents' home." Directories suggest the couple settled in the same building at 612 South 8<sup>th</sup> Street, if not the same flat, as her parents and her brother Henry E.

Online Minnesota Death Certificates (1908–55), accessed at MHS's website ([www.mnhs.org](http://www.mnhs.org)), record Matilda Bruns's death in 1909 of "myocarditis." The microfilmed record in the MHS Library identifies her as a married housewife living on 8<sup>th</sup> Street. What about the once-leading citizen of Moorhead? In January 1911 the *Moorhead Weekly News* reported a rumor that Henry A. Bruns had died. No confirmation or death record has yet been found.

road executives like Hill and the national market their companies had created. True, Bruns had capitalized upon the opportunities railroad corporations offered. On the other hand, high transportation costs for raw materials made it difficult for his foundry to compete with finished goods delivered from the East. Finally, anticipated railroad contracts for goods did not materialize, and the rise of large Minneapolis flour mills in the 1880s offered increasingly stiff competition for Bruns's Belle of Moorhead flour.<sup>28</sup>

Despite his bankruptcy, Bruns in 1910 claimed to consider himself a success because he had "done a service for his country in his work as a pioneer." George Lamphere, booster and editor of the *Moorhead Weekly*

*News*, had argued similarly to his skeptical readers in 1894 when Bruns left town in disgrace. Although Bruns had engaged in dubious practices as he failed financially, Lamphere wrote, the people of Moorhead should throw "a mantle of charity" over Bruns's faults and shortcomings because without him there would be no Moorhead.<sup>29</sup>

Lamphere and Bruns were correct. Bruns's initial success had enabled him to boost Moorhead's early growth. But as historians of the West have pointed out, the high risks of town building and mercantile enterprise often thwarted dreams of opportunity and success.<sup>30</sup> Although Bruns failed, his short-lived enterprises contributed to the solid settlement of Moorhead and the Red River Valley. 🌻

## Notes

The author thanks David Danbom, Mark Peihl, and W. Thomas White for their constructive criticism and other assistance in the preparation of this article.

1. *Illustrated Album of Biography of the Famous Valley of the Red River of the North and Park Regions* (Chicago: Alden, Ogle & Co., 1889), 703; *Minneapolis Journal*, June 19, 1910.

2. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 38, 268; William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), 150; Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": *A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1991), 285; Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987), 124–25.

3. *Illustrated Album*, 703–04; Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, comps., *Minnesota Biographies, 1655–1912*, Minnesota Historical Society Collections (St. Paul, 1912), 14: 86; *Moorhead Weekly News*, Mar. 11, 1886, Oct. 25, 1894. Also see Roy Johnson's *Red River Valley*, ed. Clarence A. Glasrud (Moorhead: Red River Valley Historical Society, 1982), 287, 329–30; *A Century Together: A History of Fargo, North Dakota and Moorhead, Minnesota* (Fargo-Moorhead Centennial Corporation, 1975), 138–39.

4. *Illustrated Album*, 704; *A Century Together*, 140; *Red River Star*, July 6, 1872;

*Red River Gazette*, Mar. 27, 1873; *Moorhead Advocate*, June 9, Sept. 15, 1877, Mar. 9, 1878; *Clay County Advocate*, June 1, 29, 1878; *Fargo Times*, Mar. 29, 1879; R. G. Dun Company collection, Minnesota, vol. 2, Clay County, 3, Baker Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

5. Rodman W. Paul, *The Far West and the Great West and the Great Plains in Transition, 1859–1900* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 60–61; Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 34–35, 47, 319, 321–23, 326; Lewis Atherton, *The Frontier Merchant in Mid-America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1971), 9, 163–64; Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Chicago: Quadrangle Paperbacks, 1966), 54; Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, 62–63, 67, 76–77; White, *American West*, 417.

6. Roy Johnson's *Red River Valley*, 424; *Red River Star*, Feb. 14, May 23, Oct. 3, 17, 1874; Thomas H. Canfield to H. A. Bruns, Mar. 4, 1874, v. 72, letter book no. 5, Subsidiaries—Lake Superior and Puget Sound Co., Northern Pacific Railway Co. papers (NPR), Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul; *Illustrated Album*, 704–76.

7. R. G. Dun and Company collection, Minnesota, vol. 2, Clay County, 9; *Red River Star*, Dec. 5, 1874, Sept. 18, 1875; *Moorhead Advocate*, Aug. 18, Nov. 10, 1877; *Clay County Advocate*, Oct. 14, 1880; *Moorhead Weekly News*, June 21, Sept. 13, 1883, Apr. 10, May 22, 1884, Jan. 22, 1885, Apr. 29, 1886, Mar. 24, May 19, Aug. 11, 1887; Roy Johnson's *Red River Valley*, 424.

8. John Turner and C. R. Semling,

*History of Clay and Norman Counties* (Indianapolis: B. F. Brown, 1918), 264; George Stark to Bruns and Finkle, Dec. 12, 1877, v. 74, letter book no. 7, Subsidiaries—Lake Superior and Puget Sound Co., 101–02, NPR; *Clay County Advocate*, June 29, 1878, Aug. 9, 1879; *Fargo Times*, Nov. 15, 1879.

9. *Clay County Advocate*, Mar. 22, 1879; *Fargo Times*, Mar. 29, 1879; *Fargo Weekly Argus*, Feb. 18, 1880; *Moorhead Weekly News*, Mar. 11, 1886; Solomon Gilman Comstock, "Memoir," *Red River Valley Historian*, Winter 1974–75, p. 4. A surviving fragment of a Bruns letter book, Feb.–Apr. 1882, Clay County Historical Society, Moorhead, documents the large scale of the supply business in terms of goods, dollars, and retailers.

10. *Illustrated Album*, 706; Michael P. Malone, *James J. Hill: Empire Builder of the Northwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 28–29; Bruns and Finkle to Hill, Nov. 21, 1874, James J. Hill Correspondence, Great Northern Railway Company Records (GNR), MHS.

11. Robert P. Wilkins and Wynona H. Wilkins, *North Dakota: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), 52; *Moorhead Weekly Argonaut*, Jan. 13, 1881; *Moorhead City Directory*, 1883; *Moorhead Weekly News*, July 19, 1888. On Hill's role in the Red River Valley and Dakota land boom, see Albino Martin, *James J. Hill and the Opening of the Northwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 209, 230–31; Malone, *James J. Hill*, 88–90, 112–13, and Ralph W.



Hidy, et al., *The Great Northern Railway: A History* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1988), 40, 61–62.

12. *A Century Together*, 142–43, 200; *Moorhead Advocate*, Dec. 16, 1880; *Moorhead Weekly News*, Apr. 11, 1889, Oct. 25, 1894. On frontier banking, see Keith Bryant, Jr., “Entering the Global Economy,” *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 229.

13. Comstock to Hill, Oct. 23, 1880, and A. J. Harwood to Hill, Jan. 9, Feb. 21, 1882, Hill Correspondence, GNR; A. B. Stickney to Comstock, June 15, 1880, Hill to Comstock, Aug. 30, 1881, A. Manvel to Comstock, June 24, Aug. 10, 1882, D. A. McKinley to Comstock, Dec. 5, 1883, Correspondence, and “Minutes of Meetings of Board of Directors of Minnesota and Dakota Northern Railroad Company,” vol. 48, Solomon G. Comstock Papers, Northwest Minnesota Historical Center (NMHC), Minnesota State University, Moorhead. See also, *Roy Johnson’s Red River Valley*, 284; Gregory C. Harness, “Solomon Gilman Comstock: Prairie Lawyer, Legislator and Businessman” (M.A. thesis, Moorhead State College, 1976), 101, 103–04, 129–30; *Minneapolis Journal*, June 10, 1910; *Clay County Advocate*, Feb. 8, 1879; *Moorhead Weekly News*, Oct. 25, 1883, Nov. 29, 1888; Diary of Rev. O. E. Elmer, Aug. 22, 1884, p. 559–60, typescript, Clay County Historical Society, Moorhead.

14. Merchants Bank loans to Bruns were reported in the *Moorhead Weekly News*, Feb. 18, 1892; Comstock to Hill, Nov. 27, 1880, and H. A. Bruns to Hill, July 18, 1881, Hill Correspondence, GNR; *Moorhead Advocate*, Dec. 23, 1880; *Moorhead: The Key City of the Red River Valley, Its Commerce and Manufactures* (St. Paul: Northwestern Publishing Company, 1882), 6, 12–13, 90–93; Moorhead Board of Trade, *The Valley of the Red River of the North and the City of Moorhead, Minnesota* (Cleveland: J. Savage, 1883), 34–35;

*Moorhead Weekly News*, May 7, 1885; *A Century Together*, 156–57, 201.

15. *A Century Together*, 201; *Moorhead Weekly News*, Apr. 30, 1885; *Moorhead Daily News*, May 14, 1954; *Minneapolis Journal*, June 19, 1910.

16. Hidy, *Great Northern*, 49; Memorandum of Financial Condition of H. A. Bruns, Apr. 30, 1890, General Correspondence, James J. Hill Papers, James J. Hill Library, St. Paul. Nightly registrations at the Grand Pacific Hotel ranged from 17 to 43, according to the *Moorhead Daily News*, Feb. 8, May 9, 1892. Population figures are from *Moorhead Weekly News*, Jan. 25, 1883, and *A Century Together*, 444.

17. Harness, “Comstock,” 137–38; *Moorhead Weekly News*, Apr. 13, Aug. 10, 24, Sept. 7, Dec. 21, 1882, Oct. 25, Nov. 15, 1883, July 10, 1884, Feb. 19, May 28, 1885; O. H. Elmer, Diary, May 4, 1885, p. 600.

18. *A Century Together*, 163; Moorhead City Council Minutes, Mar. 24, 1875, Jan. 2, 1884, City Clerk’s Office, Moorhead City Hall.

19. *A Century Together*, 163, 169; *Clay County Advocate*, Jan. 18, Feb. 15, 1879; *Moorhead Weekly News*, Jan. 4, Oct. 25, Nov. 22, 1883, Jan. 3, 1884; *Illustrated Album*, 706; David R. Vik, “Early Bridges of Moorhead and Fargo, 1871–1893” (M. A. thesis, Moorhead State University, 1984), 35, 38, 64, 71.

20. *Moorhead Weekly News*, Apr. 21, 1887, Feb. 23, 1888; Henry A. Bruns and Matilda Bruns, July 12, 1888, Warranty Deed to St. Paul Trust Company, Moorhead Properties, Hill papers. On Feb. 18, 1892, the *Moorhead Weekly News* reported Bruns had earlier raised an additional \$70,000 for the Merchants Bank. See also, Malone, *James J. Hill*, 90–92.

21. Memorandum on Financial Condition of H. A. Bruns, Apr. 30, 1890, General Correspondence, Hill papers.

22. *Moorhead Weekly News*, Feb. 11, 18, Mar. 3, 10, 1892, Apr. 23, May 14, 1896; *Moorhead Daily News*, Feb. 8, 9, 11, 12, 13,

18, July 18, 1892. W. J. Hahn accused Bruns of failing to avert the Merchants Bank disaster; Hahn to Comstock, Dec. 30, 1891, Correspondence, Comstock papers.

23. “Judgment in Case of J. J. Hill Against H. A. Bruns,” May 21, 1892, District Court, Clay County, Moorhead Properties; H. A. Bruns to W. A. Stephens, Nov. 11, 1892, General Correspondence; Agreement between J. J. Hill and H. A. Bruns and Wife, Dec. 20, 1892, and Hill to Henry A. and Matilda Bruns, June 10, 1893, both Moorhead Properties—all Hill papers.

24. Examination of Grand Pacific Hotel, Mar. 9, 1893; Circular Letter, Mar. 30, 1893; Agreement with John A. Baker; Accounts of John A. Baker—all Moorhead Properties, Hill papers. Baker’s failure to pay rent is stated in W. A. Stephens to Comstock, July 21, 1894, Correspondence, Comstock papers; *Moorhead Weekly News*, Sept. 28, 1893, Sept. 19, 1895.

25. Comstock to Hill, June 8, 1893, General Correspondence, and Comstock to Hill, Apr. 30, May 2, 1896, Moorhead Properties, both Hill papers; Moorhead City Council Minutes, Apr. 16, 1896. Hill’s attitudes were expressed in telegrams to Comstock, May 1, 2, 1896, Correspondence, Comstock papers.

26. Martin, *Hill*, 397; Comstock to Hill, June 8, 1893, General Correspondence, and David McCay to M. C. Healion, July 7, 1896, Moorhead Properties, Hill papers; *Moorhead Weekly News*, June 15, 1893, Oct. 31, 1895, May 7, 21, 1896.

27. *Moorhead Weekly News*, Mar. 11, 1886, Feb. 11, 1892, Oct. 25, 1894; H. C. Eller to M. C. Healion, Sept. 18, 1896, Moorhead Properties, Hill papers.

28. *Minneapolis Journal*, June 19, 1910; James Oliver Robertson, *America’s Business* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 144–45; Malone, *James J. Hill*, 78.

29. *Minneapolis Journal*, June 19, 1910; *Moorhead Weekly News*, Oct. 25, 1894.

30. White, *American West*, 285, 417; Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*, 321–23.

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