RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

MISSISSIPPI RIVER

LAKE MILLE LAC

ORIGINAL RAMSEY COUNTY (1849)

PRESENT RAMSEY COUNTY

ST. PAUL

MINNESOTA RIVER

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Contents

James J. Hill:

A Search for the man behind the legend

James Hill at ease.

BY VIRGINIA BRAINARD KUNZ

James J. Hill's name is a household word. Yet, save the legends which surround him, very little seems to be known about this fascinating and complicated man.

Hill's career had enormous impact on the northern sector of the United States stretching from Chicago to Puget Sound. Furthermore, he knew this. Some years before his death in 1915, he said:

"I've made my mark on the surface of the earth and they can't wipe it out." "They" was the Supreme Court of the United States which had just ordered dissolution of a holding company which Hill owned with J. P. Morgan and E. H. Harriman.

These are among the men who have been described as the robber barons of the 19th Century. But it is important that we not judge James J. Hill or Morgan or Harriman, or any of the other colorful men in American history by today's standards of morality and conduct. Hill built his empire during an era of almost no social, economic or governmental controls.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Virginia Brainard Kunz is executive director of the Ramsey County and St. Paul Historical Society, editor of Ramsey County History, *and the author of three published books on Minnesota and American history. This article is based on a lecture she gave for The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.*

LIKE MOST of his contemporaries, James Jerome Hill came from simple, humble origins. He was born near Rockwood, outside of Toronto, Canada, in 1838. His father's family had emigrated from Ireland and his mother's family from Scotland early in the 19th century. Hill grew up on his parent's 50-acre farm, in a log cabin his father had built. His father has been described as an industrious man and his mother as having been of "markedly strong character." She lived all of her life on the farm. The family was deeply religious; his father was a Baptist and his mother Methodist.

As a boy, Hill was "desperately fond of reading." Books were rare, but his family had a dictionary, a bible and several volumes of Shakespeare and Burns.

He started school when he was five. The district rural school offered a sternly practical education, but his father wanted more for him — and so, when he was 11, Hill was enrolled in Rockwood Academy, a private high school.

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The Academy had been founded by William Wetherald, a college-educated Quaker, and his influence on Hill seems to have been life-long. Years later, when inviting Wetherald to St. Paul, Hill addressed him as "my dear old master." Dr. Walter Ramsey, founder of the St. Paul Children's Hospital and cousin of Jim Hill's, once commented that Hill had "had a wonderful English professor who saw that he was brilliant and allowed him to continue his schooling..." apparently beyond what the family could afford. During his four years at the Academy, Hill was exposed to Latin, Greek, algebra and geometry, in addition to reading, writing, geography and grammar.

HILL LEFT SCHOOL at 14 and, for the next four years, clerked in a grocery store in Guelph, near Rockwood. He was 18 when he left Canada. Intending to visit friends in Winnipeg, he decided to make the trip by way of St. Paul — then a trading station of about 5,000 at the head of navigation on the upper Mississippi. Overland travel north of the town was at that time by caravan . . . and when Hill arrived on July 12, 1856, the last caravan of the season had already left. Hill was stranded in St. Paul until the following spring.

Resigned to the fact that the settlement was to be his home, at least for a while, Hill set out to find a job. It was only natural that he turned to the young town's business cen-

Hill as a boy.

ter — the steamboat landing. The landing — the lower levee at the foot of Jackson Street — was a far cry from what it is today. At some points rugged bluffs rose from the river banks. At other spots the ground was marshy and laced with sluggish streams. Parts of the landing could be reached only by rough plank-ways stretched across the sloughs at the edge of the river. Neverthe-

The lower levee — around 1850.

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less, the area was the major reason for the town's existence, and, although he couldn't know it, the place was to be the physical locus of Hill's life's work. The center of his empire was to be erected just a few hundred feet away.

HILL'S FIRST JOB was as clerk for J. W. Bass and Company, agent for the Dubuque and St. Paul Packet Company, a line of Mississippi river steamboats. Later, he became clerk of The Northwestern Packet Company. In those days, a clerk looked after the warehouse, received incoming freight, discharged outgoing freight, and scrounged for new business. This, basically, is what he did for the rest of his life.

It is unfortunate that so much of the real James J. Hill has been obscured by the legendary "empire builder." He has been described, for instance, as a taciturn Scotsman, but the record indicates otherwise. The few letters existing from his early years in St. Paul reveal a Celtic sense of humor, and a flair for descriptive narrative. Later in his life, he would write several books.

In 1858, writing to a boyhood friend in Rockwood, he gently needles him:

"My surprise at receiving your letter was only surpassed by my surprise at not receiving one from you after you left St. Paul . . ." Then he describes an adventure:

"ON THE TENTH of November last, I was returning from the Winslow House with Charley Coffin, clerk of the 'War Eagle,' about eleven o'clock, and when we were coming down Fourth Street passing one of those rum holes, two Irishmen, red mouths, came out and, following us, asked us if we would not go back and take a drink. Charley said 'No' and we were passing on when two more met us who, along with the other two, insisted that they meant no harm and that we should go in and drink. I told them that I did not drink and that, generally speaking, I knew what I was about.

"We attempted to go on, but they tried to have us go back, so I hauled off and planted one, two in Paddie's grub grinder, and knocked him off the sidewalk about eight feet. The remainder pitched in and Charley got his arm cut open and I got a button hole cut through my left side right below the ribs. The city police came to the noise and arrested three of them on the spot and the other the next day and they turned out to be Chicago Star Cleaners, a name

NORTH WESTERN PACKET COMPANY

RAILROAD LINE OF STEAMERS,
RUNNING IN CONNECTION WITH THE

Milwaukee and Prairie du Chien,
AND

ILLINOIS CENTRAL RAILWAYS.
This Company run the Largest, Best Equipped and Most Comfortable
PASSENGER STEAMERS ON THE UPPER MISSISSIPPI

CLOSE CONNECTIONS MADE WITH

EXPRESS TRAINS
AT

Prairie du Chien and Dunleith for Chicago
AND ALL POINTS EAST AND SOUTH

SHIPPERS CAN DEPEND ON BETTER TIME BY THIS LINE
THAN ANY OTHER. NO CHARGES FOR HANDLING FREIGHT
AT PRAIRIE DU CHIEN OR DUNLEITH.

JNO. LAWLER, Pres., Prairie du Chien
GEO. A. BLANCHARD, Secretary and Treasurer, Dubuque
WM. E. WELLINGTON, Supt., Dubuque

JAMES J. HILL, Agent, St. Paul.

Advertisement for the North-Western Packet Company bears Hill's name.

given to midnight ruffians. I was not compelled to keep to my bed, but it was some two months before I was quite recovered from the effects of the cut."

He adds that later his assailant, "who gave me his mark, escaped from the penitentiary at Stillwater, along with all the rest of the prisoners confined at the time."

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FROM HIS CLERK'S POST on the lower landing, Hill was witness to and had a part in much of the region's early history. In fact, the first shipment east of Minnesota white flour passed through his hands. From oil paper in his manifold book he cut the stencil for branding the flour.

Of more significance, however, was Hill's presence at the coming of the railroad. For nearly four decades, the steam engine had been changing the face of the settled United States, hastening the country's westward expansion and pushing back the frontiers. On Sept. 9, 1861, the industry came to St. Paul in the form of the "William Crooks," a high-stacked wood-burning locomotive of the Minnesota and Pacific Railroad Company. The engine arrived by way of steamboat and
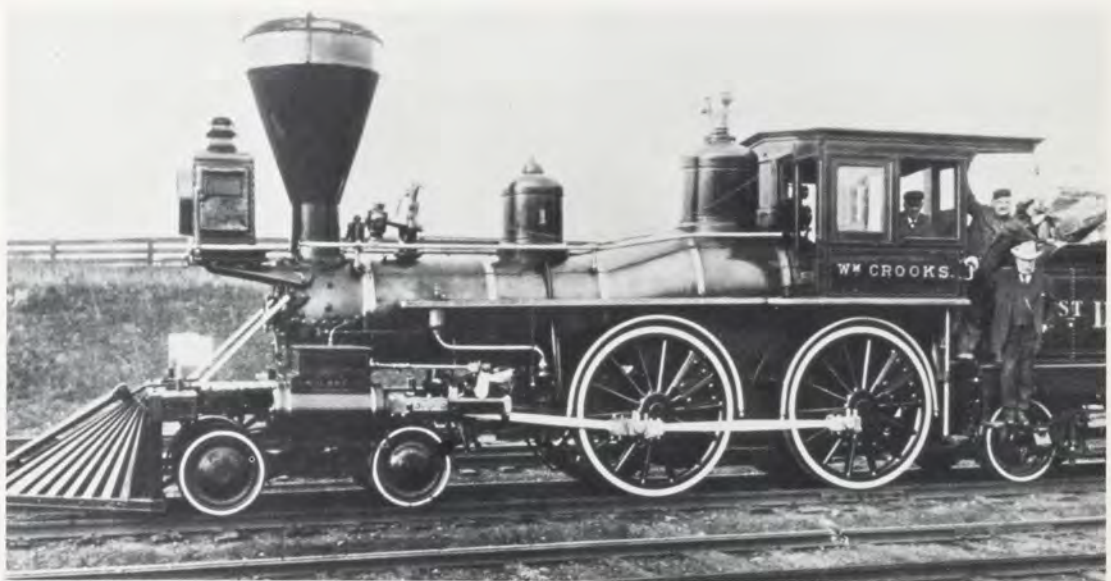
The "William Crooks" was named for a founder
of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad.

was deposited near the lower landing. There
it remained until the following year when it
was joined by the rest of the line's rolling
stock and the "first insignificant ten miles
of track" were completed between St. Paul
and St. Anthony. Hill couldn't know it then,
but the line was to become the Great North-
ern lynchpin of the Hill empire.

IN 1865 HILL formed his own forwarding
and transportation business. Competition
was ferocious, with endless rate wars. News-
paper accounts of that time reflected this:

"James J. Hill has secured the contract
for furnishing the Government with 15,000
bushels of oats at fifty-eight cents a bushel..."

"J. J. Hill is now prepared to give shippers
the lowest rates ever quoted from here to
Eastern points. . ."

Hill saw that warehousing — the temporary
storage of goods in transit — was a vital link
in transportation. He became a partner in a
general transportation, commission and stor-
age business. He conducted the business
with considerable ingenuity as the following
news account indicates:

"NAVIGATION having closed and the
steamboat business being thus wound up,
J. J. Hill has, with a spirit of enterprise
which is commendable, converted his im-
mense warehouse into a mammoth hay press-
ing establishment. If he cannot handle freight
he can press hay . . . he says that all hay
offered will be taken and if his present ware-
house is not large enough there is plenty of

lumber to build others, and plenty of vacant
land to erect them upon. . ."

A large slice of his business was made up
of the Red River trade. St. Paul businessmen
looked more toward the west than the east
for markets. The Hudson Bay Company at
Winnipeg, the new settlements along the
Red River, and the caravans of immigrants
heading out to settle the West all depended
upon St. Paul merchants for supplies, as well
as a market for their produce.
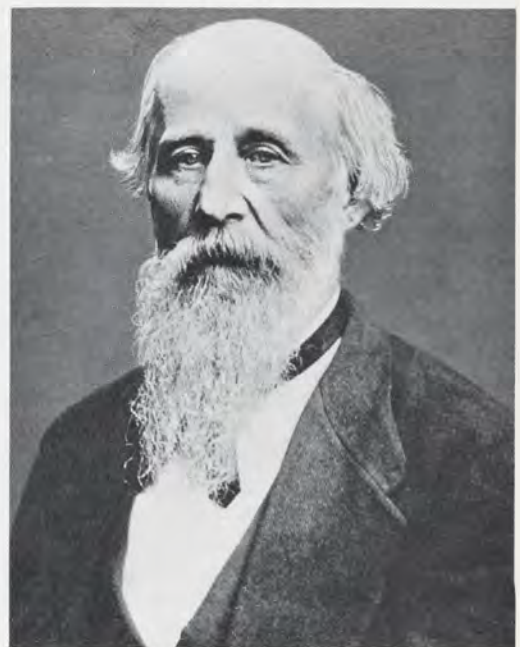
Norman W. Kittson

Mary Mehegan Hill

Norman W. Kittson, a colorful former fur trader, was the agent for the Hudson Bay Company, and controlled the Red River trade. With Hill, Kittson formed the Red River Transportation Company. They consolidated transportation north and west by linking the overland caravans to Red River steamboat shipping.

In 1867 James J. Hill married Mary Theresa Mehegan — an Irish lass from St. Paul whom he had known for some years. During the next 10 years he quietly built his business, expanding and diversifying. Foreseeing the need the region would have for resources to power its machines and heat its homes, Hill made himself an expert on fuel. He quickly became the area's major supplier of hardwood. Eventually, Hill turned to coal and was first to bring mineral coal into the region.

A DESCRIPTION has been left of him during these years. He would spend some time inspecting his warehouse on the Lower Landing in St. Paul. He would be out on the prairie with his caravans in summer and with his dog teams in the winter. Winter trips were made through deep snow, with camping supplies packed on sleds drawn by the dogs. With a guide, he camped out in small groves of trees, melted snow to make tea, and ate pemmican. On the Red River, he often could be found in the engine room of a steamboat, repairing a pipe or a leaky valve.

The financial panic of 1873, a disaster for many, proved fortuitous for Hill and changed his career. Minnesota's two railroads, the Northern Pacific and the St. Paul and Pacific, were thrown into bankruptcy. Hill held St. Paul and Pacific contracts for handling wood and freight. It was a line with stretches of rails which seemed to begin and end nowhere. Only two lines were complete — St. Paul to Sauk Rapids and St. Paul to Breckenridge.

By 1877, Hill, Kittson, and two titled British financiers had acquired the St. Paul and Pacific and they renamed it the St. Paul, Manitoba and Pacific. In the process of revitalizing the line, Hill was helped considerably by his friend, John Ireland, the colorful Roman Catholic bishop of St. Paul. Bishop Ireland was influential in persuading Catholics, chiefly from Germany, to settle in central Minnesota. The immigrants provided labor for the railroad and supplied the line with considerable business — shipping their produce out by rail and receiving goods shipped in to them on the line.

Competition among the railroads was fierce; an 1882 Northern Pacific Advertisement for settler/workers.

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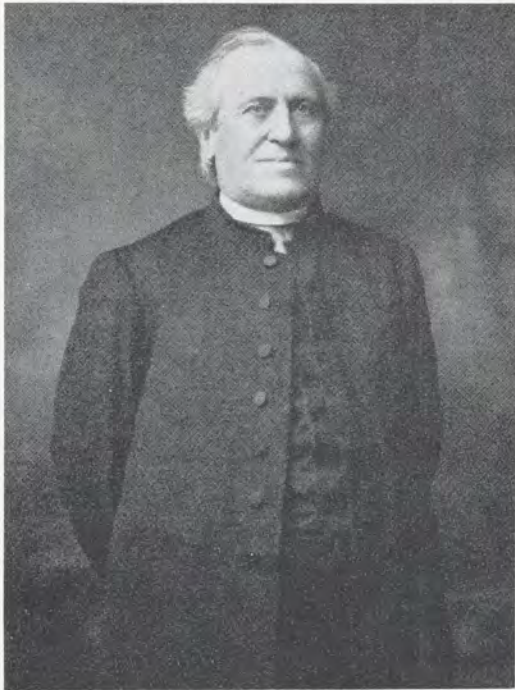
Bishop John Ireland.

IN A SERIES of complicated negotiations, between 1881 and 1889, Hill and his associates acquired and reorganized the St. Paul, Manitoba and Pacific Railroad into the Great Northern. When in 1895 he acquired operating control (financial control was mostly in the hands of Hill's good friend, financier J. P. Morgan) of the bankrupt Northern Pacific, he became the head of a railroad empire stretching across the Northwest from St. Paul to the Pacific.

By this time Hill was in his 50's. His interests were wide and varied. He was a member of the state agricultural committee. He loved fine horses and he was a leader in agriculture and in experimental farming.

One of the stormiest episodes in his life began about 1902 and developed into the now legendary collision between Hill, backed by New York financier J. P. Morgan, and E. H. Harriman of the Union Pacific. Neither man's line had a Chicago outlet, but the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy did. Both Hill and Harriman set out to capture it.

HILL GOT THERE first. Harriman, who saw the move as a direct threat to his Union Pacific, went for a seat on the Burlington's board of directors. He decided to do this by trying to buy control of the Northern Pacific — the company through which Hill and

Immigrant settlers homesteading along the line supplied the railroad with manpower and business.

Laying track across the western prairie.

Morgan had bought the line. Harriman's subsequent raid on Northern Pacific stock ruined thousands of small speculators.

At first Harriman's surreptitious buying of stock from under the noses of Hill and Morgan went unnoticed. Morgan was in Europe; Hill was in Seattle. But Hill read the newspapers and he noticed that something strange was happening to Northern Pacific stock. Clearly, he decided, New York was the place to be, and he moved fast. He ordered up his private car. The superintendent of the western division told the engineer, "The road is yours to St. Paul." The tracks were cleared ahead and Hill streaked across the continent in record time.

It did not take the Hill/Morgan forces long to size up the situation. Harriman had managed to acquire most of the lines preferred shares and was positioning himself to overcome Morgan's chunk of common stock — a move, which if completed, would assure him complete control. Hill and Morgan, however, proceeded to buy up every loose Northern Pacific share in sight.

During the heat of battle, Hill, at the Hotel Netherland in New York, was the model of innocence telling reporters he knew nothing about the whole affair. . .
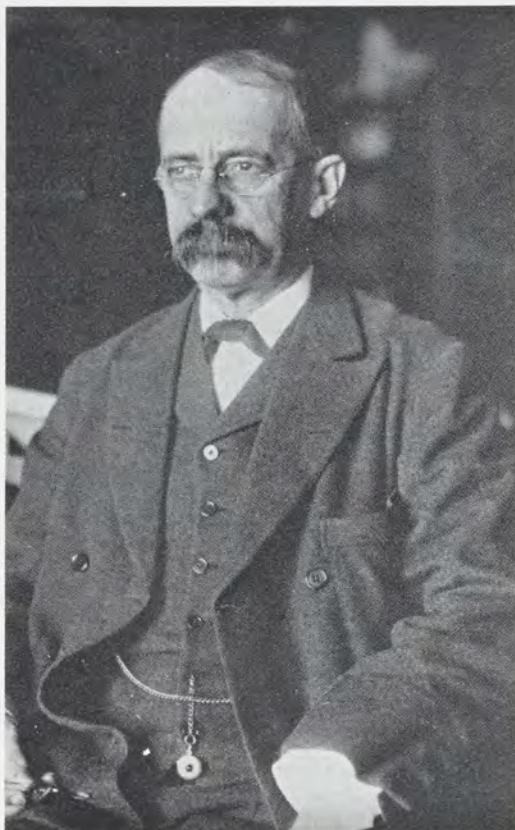
E. H. Harriman wouldn't be beaten — by anyone.

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By 1882, grading was just being completed on the Great Northern line between Minot, North Dakota and Great Falls, Montana.

"I have not bought a share of Northern Pacific in six months. I am president of the Great Northern, you know, and I'm not interested in Northern Pacific. I don't know anything about Mr. Morgan's relations to the road. We're two separate individuals." Asked if he were struggling for control of the Northern Pacific, Hill carefully explained, "My dear sir, we never had control, we don't want control, and, under the law, we could not have control . . . really, I have had no more to do with this than the man in the moon."

The struggle and its disastrous effect upon the stock market (thousands of small speculators were ruined) attracted the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt, who was taking a long look, anyway, at the concentration of control over the western railroads. It was time, Roosevelt decided, to consult the Sherman Anti-trust Law. Thus threatened, the Hill and Harriman forces worked out a solution — they set up Northern Securities, a holding company. But after two years of weary litigation, the United States Supreme Court ordered the company dissolved.

James J. Hill at about 70.

Yet, Hill was dead right when he pointed out that he had left his mark upon the land. His legacy was a transportation network that was the lifeline of the Northwest.

THE GIBBS HOUSE

at 2097 West Larpenteur Avenue, Falcon Heights, is owned and maintained by the Ramsey County and Saint Paul Historical Society as a restored farm home of the mid-nineteenth century period.

THE Ramsey County Historical Society was founded in 1949. During the following years the Society, believing that a sense of history is of great importance in giving a new, mobile generation a knowledge of its roots in the past, acquired the 100-year-old farm home which had belonged to Heman R. Gibbs. The Society restored the Gibbs House and in 1954 opened it to the public as a museum which would depict the way of life of an early Minnesota settler.

In 1958, the Society erected a barn behind the farm house which is maintained as an agricultural museum to display the tools and other implements used by the men who broke up the prairie soil and farmed with horse and oxen. In 1966, the Society moved to its museum property a one-room rural schoolhouse, dating from the 1870's. The white frame school came from near Milan, Minnesota. Now restored to the period of the late 1890's, the school actually is used for classes and meetings.

Headquarters of the Ramsey County and Saint Paul Historical Society are located in the Old Federal Courts Building in downtown St. Paul, an historic building of neo-Romanesque architecture which the Society, with other groups, fought to save from demolition. The Society also maintains a museum office in the basement of the schoolhouse on the Gibbs Farm property. The Society is active in identification of historic sites in the city and county, and conducts an educational program which includes the teaching and demonstration of old arts and crafts. It is one of the few county historical societies in the country to engage in an extensive publishing program in local history.