

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

**Spring, 1990**  
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*James J. Hill's yacht, the Wacouta of St. Paul. See Page 4.*

## RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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**On the cover:** The *Wacouta*, James J. Hill's yacht, passing through the locks at the Sault Ste. Marie, seen in the background.

**Acknowledgements:** Except for Page 9, photographs with the articles on James J. Hill and the yacht *Wacouta* are from the James J. Hill Papers in the James J. Hill Reference Library, St. Paul, and used with the library's permission. Photographs on Pages 9, 12, 13 and 27 are from the Minnesota Historical Society's audio-visual collection. The photograph on Page 22 is from the Ramsey County Historical Society's photo collection. The photograph on Page 10 is from the Debs Foundation, Terre Haute, Indiana.

# RAMSEY COUNTY History

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## A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Welcome to the "new" *Ramsey County History*. In 1987 the Society's Board of Directors established a task force to develop a strategic plan. One of the principal recommendations of that task force was to publish our magazine on a quarterly basis. For that purpose an Editorial Board was established and as a result of their efforts over a two-year planning period, we are proud and happy to present to you, our members and our readers, this new, enlivened format. You will note the additional new features, such as "A Matter of Time," Letters to the Editor, book reviews, descriptions of St. Paul's historic sites and other features.

We hope you will enjoy this new format, and request your comments and reactions to it. We also would like to remind you that we always are looking for manuscripts, for writers and particularly for reminiscences, those colorful and personal accounts of your experiences and memories of St. Paul and Ramsey County. If you would like to contribute to our new magazine, just call the editor.

—William S. Fallon

# Eugene V. Debs, James J. Hill and the Great Northern Railway's Strike of 1894

*Tamara C. Truer*

When James J. Hill completed the Great Northern Railway line in 1893, it stretched across the vast American Northwest from St. Paul to Seattle, Washington. It employed thousands of men and earned Hill the title of Empire Builder. But not everyone shared in the vision nor in the profits, and in the spring of 1894 a crisis was coming to a head. The spokesman for the dissatisfied railway workers of the Great Northern was a gentle, eloquent man named Eugene Victor Debs.

Born in Terre Haute, Indiana, on November 5, 1855, Debs had begun his working life at the age of 14 in the railroad shops in Terre Haute, eventually becoming a locomotive fireman. He joined the local lodge of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in 1875, though at that time he was no longer a railway worker.

Debs had become increasingly aware of injustices inherent in the capitalist system of the 19th century. He would dedicate his life to political and social changes he felt were of crucial importance to the common working person. His involvement and accomplishments cannot be fully examined in a short article, but the following is a sample of his active and controversial lifestyle.

He founded the American Railway Union in 1893, and served a prison term for his refusal to surrender names of strikers in the Pullman Strike of 1894 (names that would have been used to blacklist or imprison railway workers in his union).

In 1901 he helped found the American Socialist Party and was five times its candidate for the presidency of the United States. During his last campaign in 1920, he campaigned from the Atlanta Penitentiary where he had been imprisoned after his 1918 conviction, under the Espionage Act, for a speech he delivered in Canton, Ohio, protesting America's involvement in World War I.

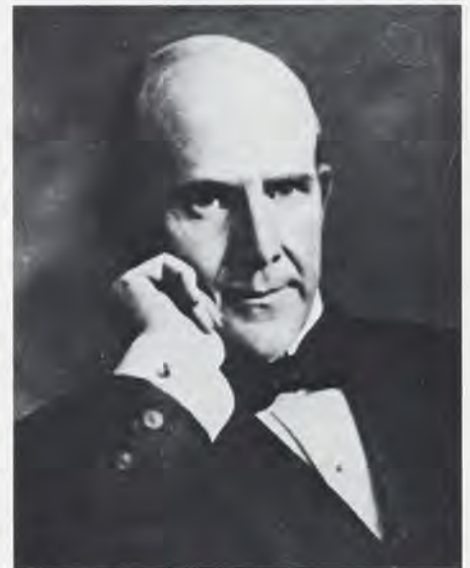
President Warren G. Harding commuted his sentence in 1921 after massive public protests. Debs died on October 20, 1926, and is buried in Terre Haute. His home and his writings, as well as his legacy of supporting social change, are preserved by the Eugene V. Debs Foundation there.

In many ways the Great Northern Railway strike of 1894 set the tone for much of Debs' later work. The strike demonstrated both the power (as well as the limits) of a unified labor force and of Debs' oratory. One of the major dilemmas that had faced the railway workers, not only on the Great Northern but on all railroads, was the diverse number of job classifications, not all treated or paid equally, and all represented, if at all, by separate craft unions or brotherhoods, such as the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen.

Recognizing this as a basic problem, Debs founded the American Railway Union in 1893. The union was intended to replace the brotherhoods and abolish craft divisions in order to unify all railroad workers within a larger, more powerful and potent organization. He desired cooperation among the Brotherhoods and invited the chiefs of all the Brotherhoods to participate. He didn't always receive it.

A major test for both the new union and Debs' philosophy came from Hill's Great Northern. Deteriorating working conditions and an imminent wage cut, the third in less than eight months, were creating tremendous dissatisfaction among the workers. The pending cut threatened to reduce the average worker's monthly pay to \$40 at a time when the cheapest lodging in Butte, Montana, (a major layover station for workers) was \$26 a month.

Some of the workers contacted the American Railway Union about the conditions. In response, the union sent James Hogan to Minnesota to investigate the complaints and "to take such action as in



*Eugene V. Debs*

his judgement was to the best interests of the men and the order." Managers of the Great Northern knew of the dissatisfaction and wanted to avoid union involvement.

Secret plans were made to fire all the dissatisfied workers, replace them with workers from the East, and send a telegram to this effect. However, the person receiving the telegram was a union sympathizer and he turned it over to the union. Hill later denied knowledge of the telegram and it is unknown whether such an order would have been made without his approval.

On April 13, 1894, C. W. Case, general manager of the Great Northern, was informed that unless wages were returned to the level prior to the first cut and creation of uniform schedules and job classifications were created, a strike would begin the next day. When no response came from Hill, the men walked out. At this point Hill acted, offering a reward for men who remained on the job.

This standard technique of undermining the effectiveness of a strike right from

the beginning failed to work. Much to Hill's surprise, though the Brotherhoods complied with Hill and made a plea for their men to return to work, it was the new union that held the greater interest of the workers. Meetings held all along the line were successfully attracting new members.

When Debs arrived in St. Paul on April 18, 1894, he found a successful strike spreading to new areas every hour and a remarkably united coalition of workers representing all classifications of railway workers. That unity remains the strikers' greatest achievement.

On April 25, Hill met with Debs in Room No. 27 of the Great Northern Building in St. Paul. Still convinced that he could undermine the union's united front, Hill expended a good deal of time seeking clarification from Debs as to the exact nature of his union's constituency.

Debs responded that he knew the brotherhoods were not all behind the union but he believed that the majority of the railway workers "desire no longer to be heard through these organizations, but to be heard through the American Railway Union, and I submit that the majority, not the minority, should prevail."

The conversation turned eventually to the matter of the telegram reportedly ordering the firing of all union men. Hill demanded that the telegram be produced. Debs acknowledged that he did not have it at hand, but that he would attempt to secure it. Hill then returned to the topic of whether or not Debs not only represented the majority but whether he could control the men. Exasperated, Debs replied:

"I submit that the physical condition of the road, and the condition of things in general should convince you that this Committee represents the employees, and let me here state, that if a satisfactory settlement is made with this Committee here present, the road will resume operations; the business of the public will no longer be interfered with, or delayed; that the wheels will be set in motion; all the men will return to their work, and no further trouble will be had with the men."

Hill still denied the union's authority and offered a proposition for arbitration on

an individual basis or through separate representative organizations. This arbitration council, "composed of three disinterested men, who have knowledge of Railway service, one to be chosen by the men or their representatives, one by the Company, and the third by the two chosen," would hear grievances and make individual decisions.

Debs specifically wanted to avoid this kind of arbitration, fearing that it would result in an unfair advantage for the company by allowing it to cut whatever deal it wished with each separate group and ultimately avoiding a universally just resolution.

Debs fired back to Hill that, "we may as well come to the point; there is no use to beat around the bush; my idea is that you propose to hang on the question of organization, and the right of representation, and avoid the real issue . . . and we believe [this is] an attempt on your part to divide these men into factions and make them present their claims as individuals . . . ."

"We take the position that these men's wages were arbitrarily reduced, without warrant or justification, and we insist upon their wages being restored, and unless they are so restored, you can no longer command the services of these men. This is an out and out proposition."

The meeting ended with Hill's denial that he was attempting to create factions, that he was only trying to be fair to those who did not want to be represented by Debs. Promising to meet again, both parties left. The battle lines were drawn and each knew that they were facing a formidable adversary.

Convinced that Debs would not yield on the representation question, and thus deprived of one of his major tactics, Hill next used the newspapers sympathetic to his viewpoint to spread the rumor that Debs was going to call off the strike.

Effective as this method might have been in the past, it, too, failed. Debs quickly denied the rumor. The fact was that public sentiment was with the strikers. Newspapers praised Debs' oratory and businesses along the Great Northern lines rallied to the aid of the strikers.

For example, the owners of the O'Brian Hotel in Moorhead, Minnesota, changed the name of the hotel to The Debs House in

a show of support. Crews still working, called scabs, were often refused groceries and accommodations in many towns, while in others switchmen refused to turn Great Northern trains around. Arrests occurred, especially in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and Barnesville, Minnesota, but local judges consistently dismissed charges.

Hill, who had heavily supported Grover Cleveland's presidential campaign, begged the president for federal troops to crush the strike, but Cleveland refused. The General Managers Association, an organization representing a coalition of railway owners and managers, also refused to help. Hill had been approached in 1893 to join and create a uniform wage reduction plan. He had declined to cooperate. Now when he asked J. W. Kendrick of the Northern Pacific for assistance, it was Kendrick's turn to decline.

Encouraged by Minnesota's Republican governor, Knute Nelson, to quickly settle the strike, and recognizing both the failure of his strike breaking tactics and his relative isolation, Hill invited Debs to the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce to argue his case. Fully expecting this group of fellow business men to support him, Hill was astounded when Debs' presentation brought back a demand by the Chamber that Hill and Debs come to arbitration before a select committee headed by Charles Pillsbury of Minneapolis.

Hill was even more astounded when the committee, persuaded both by Debs' eloquence and the desire to get the trains moving again, decided in favor of the union's demands and granted them nearly all of their wage demands. However, the question of creating uniform schedules and job classifications was deferred to a later date and ultimately the committee did not deal with it.

The victory was swift and dramatic. The strike had lasted only eighteen days. Debs had made the point that he represented a new kind of labor leader and a new kind of Union. Although the victory was not as complete as Debs desired, he'd proved that faced with a unified front, corporations could be forced to negotiate. This remains the greatest legacy of the Great Northern strike, which also was a

*Debs to page 23*

hind those advertisements in his book on the Hamm family of St. Paul.

The author brings a wonderful combination of talents to his book. First, he is a family descendant—the sole surviving grandson of Theodore Hamm—so his writing is filled with many personal recollections and family photographs. Second, he is a legitimate historian—a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois in history—so the book avoids the ancestor worship so common to this genre.

The Hamm family story encompasses many parts—the tale of an immigrant family making good, the development of the city of St. Paul in the late 19th century, and a business history of an important company. Flanagan gives special attention to the dramatic events of 1933 when William Hamm, Jr., became a national celebrity following his kidnapping by the Barker-Karpis gang for which a \$100,000 ransom was paid.

Flanagan closes the book with a look at the decline of the brewery, ranked fifth in the nation in 1957, to its sale out of the family in the 1960s. And of course, he gives a chapter to a look at Hamm's Beer advertising through the years, including several pictures of that old friend, the Bear.

This is a good book—a fine example of local family history.

—Daniel J. Hoisington

#### *Debs from page 13*

personal victory for Eugene Debs. He had this to say on leaving the city:

In all my life I have never felt so highly honored as I did when leaving St. Paul on my way home. As our train pulled out of the yards the token of esteem, which I prize far more highly than all others, was in seeing the old trackmen, men whose frames were bent with years of grinding toil, who received the pittance of from 80 cents to \$1 a day, leaning on their shovels and lifting their hats to me in appreciation of my humble assistance in a cause which they believed had resulted in a betterment of their miserable existence.

From another quarter altogether came this unexpected token of esteem. According to one source, James J. Hill later said of Debs: "Gene Debs is the squarest labor leader I have ever known. He cannot be bought, bribed or intimidated. He never deals under the table, and his spoken word is as good as his bond or signed contract. I know. I have dealt with him and been well spanked."

*Tamara C. Truer is manager of the Ramsey County Historical Society's Gibbs Farm Museum. She has a masters degree in history from Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana, where she was a curator and guide at the Eugene V. Debs Foundation.*

#### *Letters from page 3*

**'Off the bench he is a beast...**

### **Cooper & Goodrich And the Famous Duel**

I was particularly interested in Ronald Hubbs' reference to Judge Aaron Goodrich in his fine article on "A Pioneer Writes Home: Alexander Wilkin and 1850s St. Paul." Goodrich was the first chief justice of the territorial court. He was from Tennessee and had been appointed by President Taylor in 1849. However, as Hubbs' article reflects, he was not well received as a member of the court and in 1851 he was removed. Goodrich, nonetheless, went on to build a respectable legal practice in St. Paul and was much involved in state politics. Less fortunate was David Cooper, one of Goodrich's fellow justices on the three-member territorial court. Cooper was a gifted orator and at a very young age had been a great campaigner for the Whig party in Pennsylvania. He was awarded by an appointment to the territorial court when he was only 28 years old.

Unfortunately, Cooper was a better speaker than a judge. While he was on the court, Cooper was ridiculed by members of the public and the bar alike. At the time, the editor of the *Minnesota Pioneer* wrote the following: "He is lost to all sense of decency and self-respect. Off the bench he is a beast and on the bench he is an ass, stuffed with arrogance, self-

conceited, and a ridiculous affectation of dignity." This particular criticism infuriated Justice Cooper's brother, James, who swore revenge. The *Pioneer's* editor, James Madison Goodhue, heard rumors of a threatened assault by Cooper and armed himself with a revolver and a small derringer. The following is a description of their "showdown," referred to in history as a duel:

It was about 12 o'clock on Wednesday, January 15 [1851], the Legislature having adjourned for dinner, that the two combatants, in the presence of nearly 150 witnesses, met on St. Anthony Street in front of the lot where now stands the Metropolitan Hotel.\* The attack commenced by desultory pistol shooting, which was of more danger to the lifes [sic] of the spectators congregated than to the participants. The principals were thereupon quickly disarmed by C.P.V. Lull, the Sheriff of Ramsey County. At this time, one of the crowd of spectators stole up behind Mr. Goodhue and threw his arms around him. Cooper then rushed forward and with a dark knife inflicted two wounds upon Mr. Goodhue, one in the abdomen and one in the side. The latter, jerking himself free from the party holding him, drew from his pants pocket his Derringer pistol and fired, Cooper receiving the ball in his groin. The wounds inflicted were of a dangerous character. Cooper died some two or three months after the affray in Michigan, his death being hastened by the pistol wound he had received. Goodhue was confined to his bed for several weeks.

Like Goodrich, David Cooper was eventually removed from the court. Although he was an intelligent man with great natural talent, he was also a person of "somewhat eccentric disposition, infirmities of temper, and unfortunate habits." He died 15 years later as a patient in an inebriate asylum at Salt Lake City. Goodhue died suddenly a few months after the duel.

—Thomas H. Boyd

\* *St. Anthony became Third Street, then Kellogg Boulevard. The Metropolitan Hotel was on the present site of the Minnesota Club.*



*Henry H. Sibley's house at 417 Woodward, St. Paul, from the 1874 Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota, published by A. M. Andreas.*

**R.C.H.S.**  
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