

Three Jewish Writers

STEVE TRIMBLE AND PAUL NELSON, PAGE 1

By the Numbers . . .

The brainchild of James J. Hill, the Minnesota Transfer in St. Paul proved to be an achievement in logistics and collaboration between multiple railroads, beginning in the late 1800s:

Number of cattle transported through the Minnesota Transfer yard in 1884.
218,000

Number of cars serviced at the Transfer in 1910 and 1916, respectively.
566,745 & 700,000

Number of employees at the Transfer at its peak.
1,000

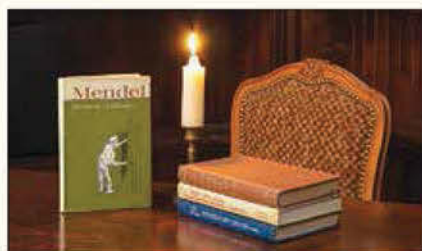
Number of member railroads that collectively operated 55,000 miles of trackage, assuring nearly complete coverage around the country for shippers.
9

Number of cars passing through the Transfer daily in the early 1950s.
2,500 to 3,500

Number of industries in and around the Transfer in the 1950s.
400

SOURCES: See Brian McMahon's article "Creating Communities of Interest: James J. Hill and the Minnesota Transfer," beginning on page 19. This is the story of the phenomenal collaboration and coordination between railroads in St. Paul's Midway.

ON THE COVER



Write what you know. That's what Max Shulman, Norman Katkov, and William Hoffman, did. These writers from St. Paul's West Side Flats infused memories, anecdotes, names, and places into their literary works, giving readers delightful glimpses of the city's old Jewish neighborhoods. *Photograph and design courtesy of Summit Images, LLC—Robert Muschewski and Leaetta Hough.*

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Message from the Editorial Board

History often memorializes transitions. Here, Steve Trimble and Paul Nelson share the stories of three Jewish writers from St. Paul: Max Shulman, Norman Katkov, and William Hoffman. Their families all immigrated to the city, and their St. Paul neighborhoods—Selby-Dale and the West Side—provided fertile ground for their remembrances, novels, and plays, as they moved on as writers after studying journalism at the University of Minnesota. The third article details a much more literal transition story: Brian McMahon's recounting of the Minnesota Transfer project in the Midway area. The railroad's role in commerce may seem less obvious today, but this project, initiated by James J. Hill, moved hundreds of boxcars and sorted tons of cargo on its way to and from destinations around the world. It also spawned the growth of nearby businesses, which took advantage of the convenient shipping facilities. Finally, enjoy the varied book reviews, which should encourage you to dip into three good reads: Melvin Carter Jr.'s memoir; the history of the East Side Freedom Library; and the biography of St. Paul native son, Sandy Boyd.

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

The Ramsey County Historical Society thanks Board Member James A. Stolpestad and affiliate AHS Legacy Fund for supporting the updated design of this magazine. Publication of Ramsey County History is also supported in part by a gift from Clara M. Claussen and Frieda H. Claussen in memory of Henry H. Cowie Jr., and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon.

Reflections of Three Jewish Writers

WILLIAM HOFFMAN, NORMAN KATKOV, AND MAX SHULMAN

Usually, the “Growing Up” memoirs featured in Ramsey County History are penned specifically for our publication, and we work directly with the writers to shape content. However, the St. Paul memories shared here were written between 1930 and 1955 by William Hoffman, Norman Katkov, and Max Shulman for different publications and audiences. Still, when RCH authors Steve Trimble and Paul Nelson uncovered these long-forgotten writings during their research for their article, “Three Jewish Writers” (see page 1), it was like discovering treasure. We are pleased to present these reflections here.

William Hoffman—“My Street”¹

322 Texas Street, West Side Flats

William Hoffman shares his love for his old neighborhood in this piece, which was published when he was sixteen. He moved from 322 Texas Street to

nearby paved State Street as a young child. Then, as a high schooler, his family moved from the West Side Flats to what was considered a “respectable” neighborhood in the West Side Hills.²

Texas Street is just a plain, unpaved city street like hundreds of others, but to me it once had a personality which made living there a glorious experience. I should know, for I was born there.

Now that glamour is missing—not because of the houses; they’re still standing; nor is it the street itself, still muddy and overgrown with weeds. It is the people who have changed or scattered. Strangers now are neighbors. A stiff reserve has replaced its once old-world friendliness.

In the old days all the grown-ups had come from the same village in Russia. They were closer than friends, for they were “Landsleut.”³ As human beings they all had their faults and good points, and everyone on Texas Street knew



William Hoffman in the 1931 Humboldt High School yearbook. In the notes next to his picture, Hoffman proclaims that he’ll someday write a book, and “he knows you better than you know yourself”—prophetic words for someone who would eventually become a local social worker and write about the daily minutiae of the city’s Jewish neighborhoods. Courtesy of Humboldt High School and Saint Paul Public Schools.



This undated photo is identified as either Fillmore Avenue and State Street or Texas and State. This is the neighborhood of William Hoffman’s cherished childhood. Courtesy of Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

these qualities. There were not many secrets on my street. As children we had our fights and troubles, but no protecting parents ever interfered; they were busy having their own friendly dissensions.

The whole street was blended into one solid block—one nationality, one race—set off from the rest of the city. These characters which helped mould [sic] my life, those with whom I played and fought, will always live with me, though I may never see some of them again. Each one brings up a different picture to describe—words are inadequate.

In one house, for instance, sitting on the steps peeling onions and humming “Bei dem Pripetskel Brent ein Fierel”⁴ is Mrs. Macrousky. Her husband has a little store on a nearby street, and she is preparing supper. With a white cloth draped around her head and her wrinkled face half hidden in the shade of an old knife-scarred box elder, she seems at peace. I know though that she lost her only son in the Great War—God bless her.

Then I see Mrs. Milkes who, after a conflict with the law, ran and hid under a huge pile of hay. She was forced into the open air only by energetic thrusts with a pointed pitchfork.

Little Phifke is my next picture. He hides under the porch in order to smoke a big cigar—and has a very hard time. Whenever he sees me, he cries, “Gimme a horsey back, will you, Velvel?”⁵ I can’t refuse that bundle of cheer and trudge the length of the street until some kind neighbor relieves me. Fate is funny. Little Phifke was taken away one morning. I hope the angels give him “horsey back rides and lots of crackerjacks.”

And there comes Daniel with his horse and wagon just home from peddling. “Giddy up, Prince,” and Prince moves slowly into the barn. Time has no reality for either of them. Daniel is a fat, jolly old man. I earn many a penny through watering Prince, who has a camel’s stomach.

And still further on I see my girl—that is, my girl until Harry captures her fickle fancies and thus blasts a thousand of my air castles.

Neighborhood children gather around a 1925 two-door Ford on State Street. Lafayette School is seen between the two buildings. Courtesy of Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.



The Old West Side Flats: Another Perspective

PAUL NELSON

William Hoffman's memories of the old West Side Flats are honey-colored. He paints an enviable childhood lived vigorously on the streets and in the shops, the synagogues, and the schools of his 320-acre neighborhood,^a where the bumps and conflicts were cushioned by family and fellow-feeling. The neighborhood of his memory is shabby and a little worn, safe and quirky, a glorious ethnic village whose disappearance is cause for lament. Does he remember correctly?

We can't test emotions against evidence, but a few sources make it possible to compare some physical realities of the Flats with the tales of Hoffman. In 1916, the year Hoffman was two, the St. Paul Association of Commerce undertook a survey of conditions in the area. The committee of six concerned and respectable citizens recommended "strict emergency measures to improve sanitary conditions."^b It had been a flood year:

This year conditions are even worse than usual because of the exceptionally high water. Wells in the district are contaminated; filth from the privy vaults has been spread about; streets and yards are full of every sort of rubbish; and, finally, stagnant water covered with a heavy green scum. . . . That an epidemic of typhoid fever or other infectious or contagious disease has not ravaged these districts is really a miracle.^c

Many houses were not hooked up to city water or sewage, and people were drinking and cooking from contaminated wells.



An undated photo identifies the property at State Street and Kentucky as the residence of the "Widow Schwartz." Rubbish-filled yards and streets were common in the Flats in the early twentieth century. *Courtesy of Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.*



The State Street dump was one area of the Flats that concerned the St. Paul Association of Commerce, but some of the children saw it as a playground—a great place for scavenger hunts. William Katkov recalls playing in the dump and searching for "treasure" as a child. *Courtesy of Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.*

The streets were a mess:

Piles of rock, broken bricks, asphalt, tin cans and all kinds of rubbish are heaped up everywhere. . . . We have seen upon [the streets] rotten fish, melon rinds, decayed apples, besides the paper, manure, and rubbish which had fallen from wagons hauling litter to the city dump.^d

The dump at State and Morrison, at the southern extreme of the Flats, brought an astonishing amount of traffic through the neighborhood—as many as 300 wagons a day—"loaded to double capacity, with their contents spilling out at every bump. . . ."^e

Such was the neighborhood that greeted William Hoffman and Max Shulman at birth and Norman Katkov upon arrival. And, what was there for kids?

There are 1,200 children under sixteen years of age in this little district. . . . We found them in dirty back yards, amidst rubbish heaps, stables and stagnant pools of water; in the city dump, prying around for salvage out of the rubbish heaps; and in the mud holes of the streets.^f

There were no playgrounds.^g

Unsafe and unsanitary, yes, but there was another side to it, at least from a kid's point of view. Maps and photos, both aerial and street level, show a neighborhood of enormous variety—heavy industry, rail yards, workshops, the river, open country (especially where Holman Field^h is today), and vacant lots. The lots and yards would have been chockablock with building materials, livestock, fruit trees, stables, and other outbuildings, industrial junk, tools, wagons, and hand machinery of all kinds. For an adventurous kid with no screens to stare at, it must have been a paradise. In addition to the safe and familiar homes, schools, and businesses, there were places to roam, places to hide, and places to discover.

So each picture comes in turn and fades away, and with them goes, I sometimes think, the best part of my life.

*Though nothing can bring back [the] hour.
Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the
flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind.*⁶

I like Wordsworth, but did he have a Texas Street?

Norman Katkov—“Who Influenced Me Most?”⁷

130 E. Colorado, West Side Flats

Norman Katkov wrote the memory of his early years in St. Paul on October 15, 1955, and may have mailed it to Mr. Burt MacBride at Reader's Digest. He was thirty-seven years old. It is unclear if this piece actually ran in the magazine. The fire station Katkov describes was located at 126 E. Delos,⁸ not far from his childhood home. Katkov and his family later moved to the Selby-Dale neighborhood.

When I was a boy of 12 in St. Paul, Minnesota, the capitol [sic]⁹ of the universe was the firebarn

a block away, the throne room was the wall of the building used for handball, and the uncrowned head of all he surveyed was Captain Herbert Schoonover, commanding Hook and Ladder 6.¹⁰

“Schoony” ruled without ruling. His pockets always held reserves of candy. His Model T could always be counted upon for transport to baseball games on his days off. His wallet was always fat enough for a half dozen bleacher seats. Schoony was a bachelor in his early forties who lived with his mother on Cherokee Heights, an eminence high above the Mississippi. Beyond lay open country, unknown and mysterious, the scene of many all day hikes which Schoony led as guide, cook, and teacher.

At twelve I was thin, stoop-shouldered, and bespectacled.¹¹ As an athlete I was something less than successful, but as a handball player I was without peer. Except for two or three firemen, I could not be beat. I welcomed challengers. I successfully defended my championship against any and all comers provided the games were played when Schoony was on duty and could referee. I was a devoted champion. I practiced every morning before school and every afternoon after school. With Schoony watching I



Norman Katkov, not as a twelve-year-old, but as a senior at Humboldt High School, still “thin, stoop-shouldered, and bespectacled.” His 1935 yearbook comments are also telling, given this memory: Katkov writes, “Even though vanquished, he could argue still,” a quote likely borrowed from Oliver Goldsmith’s eighteenth-century poem, “The Deserted Village.” Courtesy of Humboldt High School and Saint Paul Public Schools.



The fire station Norman Katkov remembers is Engine 6/Hook and Ladder 5 at the corner of Delos and Clinton. It was built in 1887 and used until 1930. Katkov’s story takes place in 1928. This image was likely taken at the turn-of-the-century, as horse-powered engines are visible. The Saint Paul Fire Department first began using motorized engines in 1909. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

hit the ball against the building every night until darkness fell.

One summer Sunday afternoon Herman Shelberg, a blonde superman my age appeared at the firebarn while I practiced under Schoony's watchful eyes. Herman could shoot, fish, throw a rock further, train a dog better, spin tops longer, and talk to girls easier than anyone in the 7th grade at Roosevelt Jr. H. S. Handball was no more important to him than any other activity. He neither liked it nor disliked it. At my urging he agreed to challenge me, best two out of three games.

He won the first game 21 to 10. I was stunned. Leaving my ball behind I walked past Schoony and held back tears until I was out of sight.

For days I avoided the firebarn and Schoony. Then, late one afternoon, I sidled up to the crowd around him. When he saw me, he was as friendly as always.

Thereafter I came back every day. I would not play handball. I waited for him to say something about the debacle. Then days stretched into weeks until at last alone with him one day I cried, "I can't beat him. He's better than me."

"How do you know?" Schoony asked.

That night I found Herman Shelberg and arranged a match. The following Saturday before a gallery of half a hundred, Herman beat me two straight games, 21-19; 21-20.

I could see the pride in Schoony's eyes, I could feel it in his arms as he congratulated me. And I knew it was so for years later, because I was always the first kid asked into the Model T.

Because of Schoony I've never quit again.

Max Shulman—"The Little White Way"¹²

701 Selby Avenue, Selby-Dale Neighborhood

While Max Shulman was born in the West Side Flats, his family moved when he was a toddler. He spent most of his youth in the Selby-Dale neighborhood. This piece, which Shulman wrote as a high schooler, highlights life along Selby Avenue in the 1930s.

I live in a neighborhood of taverns and Kosher butcher shops. The street is constantly alive—during the day with the haggling of the old world Jewish women over meat prices

and during the night with the carousing of the drunken revelers.

Perhaps I can best convey the spirit of our corner by describing a typical day there.

It is four A.M. The street is bare except for one confirmed dipsomaniac who walks along tipsy alternately singing and muttering to himself. A white squad car cruises by, and then a truck stops, throws off a few bundles of morning papers, and moves on. A streetcar whizzes past at full speed in the absence of traffic.

One by one the yawning, sleepy-eyed newsboys come, get their papers, and depart to make their routes. The squad car rides by again in the opposite direction.

At seven o'clock as if by some prearranged plan stores open—the delicatessens, the barber shops, the meat markets, the groceries, and the restaurants all prepare for the brisk early morning trade. Housewives wearing mules and wage earners rushing to work are the chief patrons.

A few hours later the shops hum with activity as more properly clad housewives, their children safely off to school, come in to buy groceries for the day's meal and perhaps to step into the beauty parlor. Trucks from the wholesale houses stop in front of the stores blocking the street for a while and then driving away.

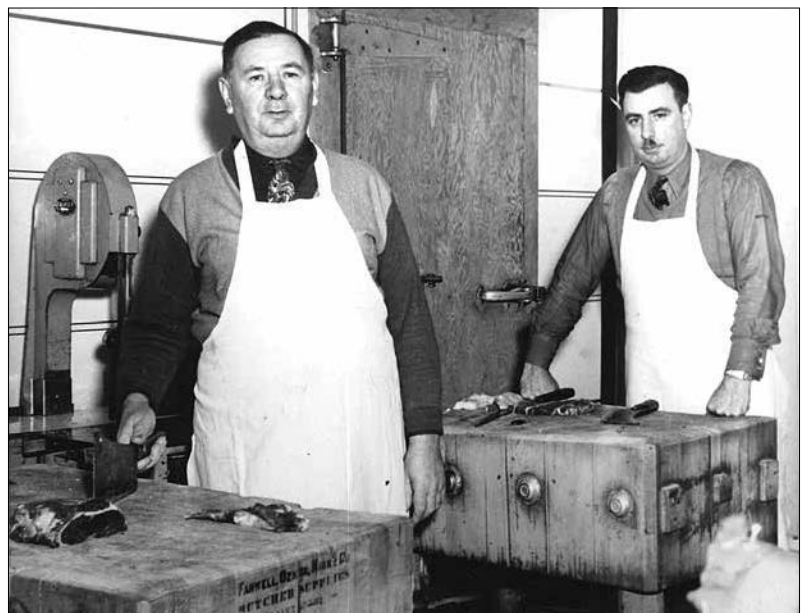
At this time the parade of the Jewish women starts to the butcher shops, and the air resounds with shrill cries of robbery.

"Mr. Fidelman, you are a crook!"



Max Shulman's stories rarely focused on the Jewish community in which he grew up, but "The Little White Way," written for his high school yearbook, was one that brought the Selby-Dale enclave to life. *Courtesy of the Paul Nelson Collection.*

While not Fidelman's, Gantman's Meat Market was located at 682 Selby Avenue, across the street and a few doors down from Max Shulman's home at 701 Selby. (L-R): David and Joe Gantman. *Courtesy of Berman Upper Midwest Jewish Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.*



“Mrs. Cohen, you are a cheapskate.”

“Mr. Fidelman, I can buy my meat across the street.”

“Mrs. Cohen, I wish you would.”

But they buy—they always do. At noon the morning’s activity reaches its peak as the restaurants are packed and the taverns are opened.

During the afternoon the entire street seethes with people buying, selling, talking, walking, running, crying, and laughing. Light delivery trucks make the street unsafe for pedestrians. Heavily laden streetcars ride back and forth.

Dusk brings no quiet. The movie house opens with a dazzling array of bright lights. The ice-cream parlor prepares for the evening

rush. The taverns are thrown wide open, and the pavement is blood red in the light of the huge neons. High school boys mix with drunkards, fops, and gamblers. Painted women roam the streets laughing coarsely and drinking with anybody who will buy.

Finally the crowds start thinning out. The theater lights blink and die. Keys turn in the delicatessen locks. Cars shift into low and glide out into the night homeward bound. A squad car sends a few stragglers on their way. The spigots cease their flow of beer.

The street is deserted except for one confirmed dipsomaniac who walks along tipsy alternately singing and muttering to himself.

NOTES

1. William Hoffman, “My Street,” *Humboldt Life* (St. Paul: Humboldt High School, December 1930), 8. This article appears courtesy of Humboldt High School and Saint Paul Public Schools.

2. William Hoffman, photograph and quote, *Humboldt Life* (St. Paul: Humboldt High School, May 1931), 26.

3. A German word meaning “fellow countrymen.”

4. Joshua S. Walden, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Music* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 62. “Bei dem Pripetskel Brent ein Fierel” appears to be written in German in William Hoffman’s story. In Yiddish, this first line of a song by Mark Warshawski (1848–1907) is “Oyfn pripetchik Brent a fayerl,” which translates to “On the hearth, burns a fire.” The song tells the story of a rabbi teaching the alphabet to young children.

5. Velvel is a Yiddish term of endearment that means “little wolf.” It also is used as a variant of William.

6. William Hoffman borrowed four lines from William Wordsworth’s poem “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” originally published in *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807). The poem focuses on childhood memories, and the four lines are thought, by some scholars, to mean that even the simplest things such as grass can stand out in the memories we hold closest to our hearts.

7. Norman Katkov, letter to Mr. Burt MacBride of *Reader’s Digest*, October 15, 1955. Norman Katkov papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

8. One source lists the address as 124 E. Delos. *Proud Traditions: A History in Words and Photos of St. Paul Firefighters 1854–1997* (St. Paul: St. Paul Department of Fire and Safety Services, 1979), 75.

9. It is possible that Norman Katkov intentionally used the word “capitol,” rather than “capital,” as he appears to elevate or pedestal his neighborhood Hook and Ladder and its captain, Herbert Schoonover.

10. The Engine Company is 6. The Hook and Ladder is actually 5. Richard Heath, *St. Paul Fire: A History 1856–1996* (Minneapolis: The Extra Alarm Association of the Twin Cities, 1998), 28, 272, 274; *Proud Traditions*, 75; *History of the Police and Fire Departments of the Twin Cities* (St. Paul: American Land & Title Register Association, 1900), 208.

11. Norman Katkov, photograph and quote, *Humboldt Life* (St. Paul: Humboldt High School, 1935), 10.

12. Max Schulman, “Little White Way,” *The World* (St. Paul: Central High School, 1936), 7. This article appears here courtesy of Central High School and Saint Paul Public Schools.

Notes to Sidebar on p. 15

a. St. Paul Association of Commerce, survey to Mayor W. R. Irvin, July 28, 1916, Neighborhood House papers, Minnesota Historical Society, 1-2.

b. St. Paul Association of Commerce, 1916, 1-2.

c. St. Paul Association of Commerce, 1916, 3.

d. St. Paul Association of Commerce, 1916, 5.

e. St. Paul Association of Commerce, 1916, 6.

f. St. Paul Association of Commerce, 1916, 7.

g. St. Paul Association of Commerce, 1916, 7.

h. St. Paul Downtown Airport.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future.

*The mission statement of the Ramsey County Historical Society
adopted by the Board of Directors on January 25, 2016.*

The Ramsey County Historical Society's vision is to be widely recognized as an innovator, leader, and partner in preserving the knowledge of our community, delivering inspiring history programming, and using local history in education. Our mission of *preserving our past, informing our present, inspiring our future* guides this vision.

The Society began in 1949 when a group of citizens acquired and preserved the Jane and Heman Gibbs Farm in Falcon Heights, which the family had acquired in 1849. Following five years of restoration work, the Society opened the Gibbs Farm museum (listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974). Originally programs focused on telling the story of the pioneer life of the Gibbs family. In 2000, with the assistance of a Dakota Advisory Council, the historic site also began interpreting Dakota culture and lifeways, building additional structures, and dedicating outdoor spaces to tell these stories. The remarkable relationship of Jane Gibbs with the Dakota during her childhood in the 1830s and again as an adult encouraged RCHS to expand its interpretation of the Gibbs farm to both pioneer and Dakota life.

In 1964, the Society began publishing its award-winning magazine, *Ramsey County History*. In 1978, an expanded commitment from Ramsey County enabled the organization to move its library, archives, and administrative offices to downtown St. Paul's Landmark Center, a restored Federal Courts building on the National Register of Historic Places. An additional expansion of the Research Center was completed in 2010 to better serve the public and allow greater access to the Society's vast collection of historical archives and artifacts. In 2016, due to an endowment gift of \$1 million, the Research Center was rededicated as the Mary Livingston Griggs & Mary Griggs Burke Research Center.

RCHS offers a wide variety of public programming for youth and adults. Please see www.rchs.com for details of upcoming History Revealed programs, summer camps at Gibbs Farm, and much more. RCHS is a trusted education partner serving 15,000 students annually on field trips or through outreach programs in schools that bring to life the Gibbs Family as well as the Dakota people of Cloud Man's village. These programs are made possible by donors, members, corporations, and foundations, all of whom we appreciate deeply. If you are not yet a member of RCHS, please join today and help bring history to life for more than 50,000 people every year.

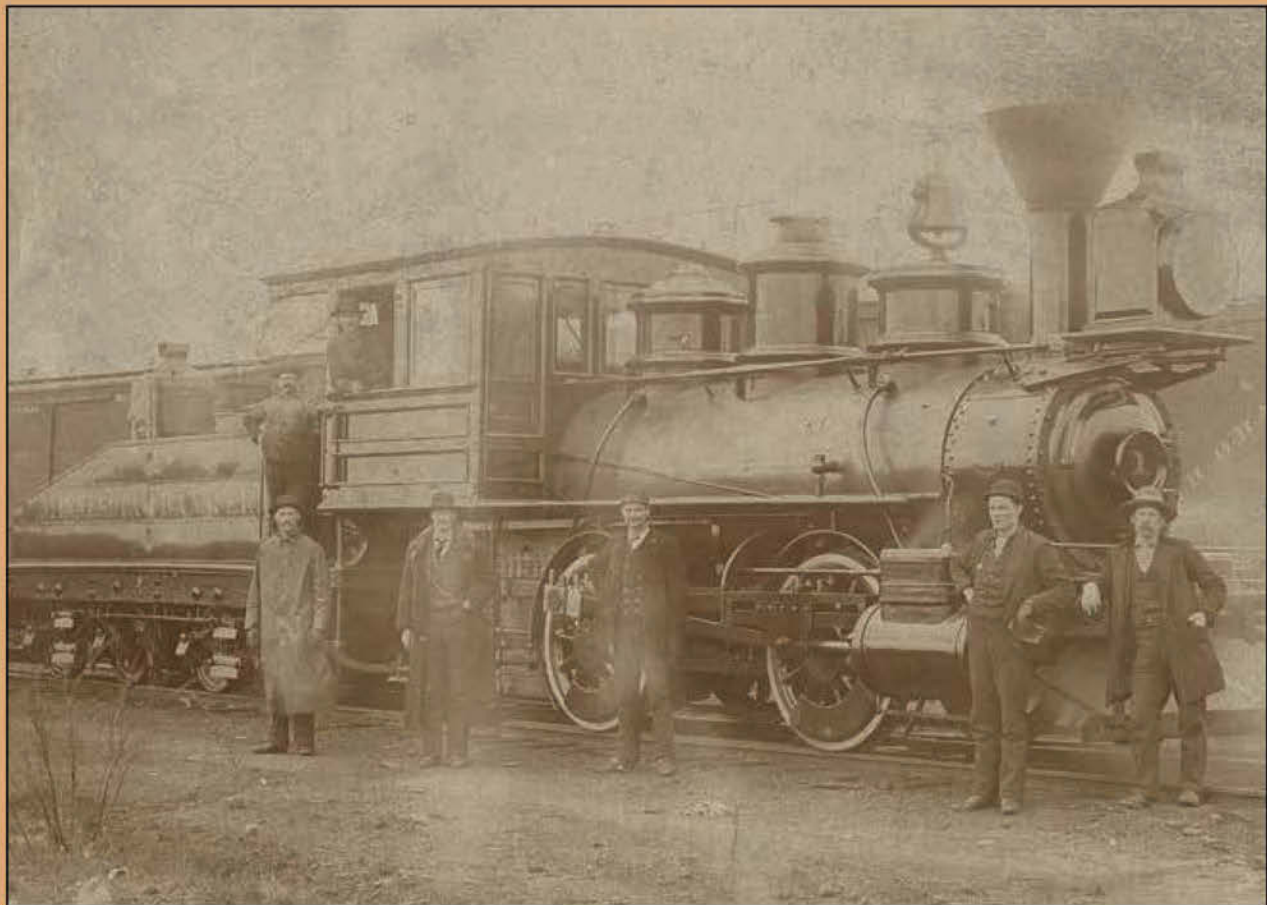
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Minnesota Transfer Railway Company engine and crew (1885). *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*