RAMSEY COUNTY
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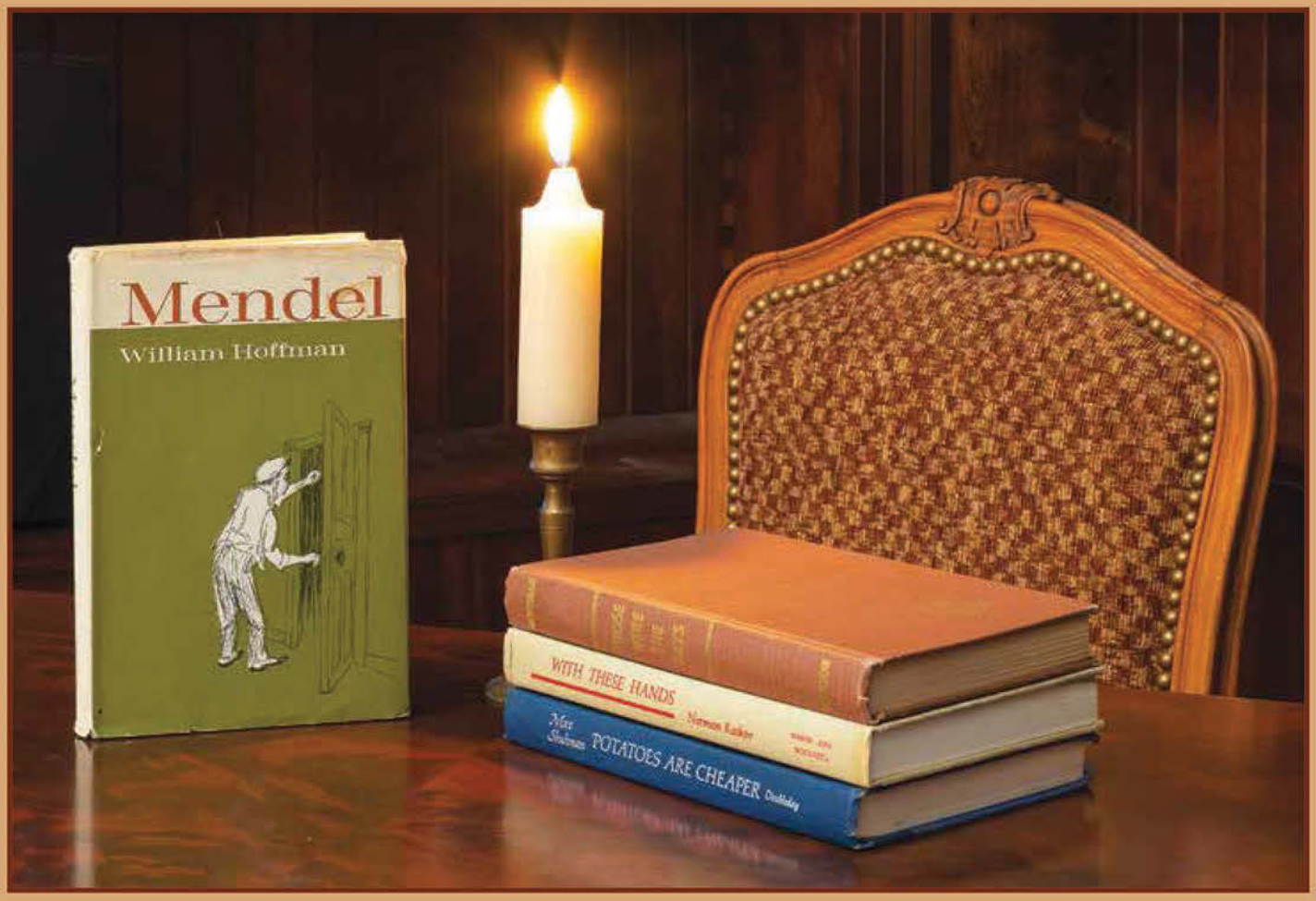
Creating Communities of Interest

James J. Hill and the Minnesota Transfer

BRIAN MCMAHON, PAGE 19



Three Jewish Writers

STEVE TRIMBLE AND PAUL NELSON, PAGE 1

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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 Muschewske 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.*

Creating Communities of Interest

James J. Hill and the Minnesota Transfer

BRIAN McMAHON

In 1883, the restless mind of James J. Hill conceived, and then brought into being, a powerful venture. It was a business, yes, but a cooperative one in a hypercompetitive age. What's more, it was not based on the Minnesota staples of farming or logging, but on a specific concept: efficient coordination. The bold transportation and freight logistics plan also reduced congestion on city streets, spawned new businesses, built an industrial district, and generated fortunes: genius obscured by its slightly opaque name—the Minnesota Transfer Railway.

A Need for Cooperation and Coordination

It was incredibly expensive and difficult to build a railroad in the late nineteenth century. Companies not only had to supply the vehicles, they had to provide the roads on which they traveled. These often went through dangerous territories and rugged terrain—crossing mountains, deserts, and rivers. Because of this expense, it was virtually impossible for one man or company to build a transcontinental system. And even if it could be built, a single line could not meet the varied needs of passengers and freight traveling to countless destinations. It was almost impossible for a stand-alone line to be financially successful. A comprehensive network had to be stitched together from numerous separately owned lines, which paradoxically meant that the rugged individualists in the industry had to work with their bitter rivals. They had little choice but to create agreements to standardize tracks and equipment; share lines, bridges, and terminals; and undertake a variety of other collaborations.

James J. Hill built a transcontinental railway based in St. Paul by doing just that, creating, as he explained, communities of interest, not just with competing railroads but with virtually all parties and constituents with whom he dealt. He did so at a time of widespread public hostility toward railroads at the onset of the trust-busting era. Hill unabashedly defended his approach:

> The tendency toward combination of interests is simply a part of that cooperation in the production, the distribution and the exchange of wealth with which everybody has been familiar for centuries. When the pioneers in this country united to help build one another's houses, when they had a barn "raising," it was combination.[1]

Hill and other rail executives collaborated when it was in their best interest but were bitter

Hundreds of employees, working as clerks, engineers, veterinarians, agents, mechanics, and in many other roles, helped the Minnesota Transfer Railway run smoothly (March 12, 1893). *Back row (L-R):* 2. Jack Gallagher, customs collector; 3. Mr. Ackerman, clerk; 4. Mr. Sanders, cashier and later, agent; 6. M. J. Dooley, chief clerk and later, superintendent; 10. Mr. Briggs, cashier; 11. Phil Donnelly, clerk. *Fourth row (L-R):* 2. M. A. Gilman, clerk and later, agent and local art, Detroit Lakes; 4. Mr. Chapman, cashier; 5. Dan Hanrahan, clerk; 8. Mike Fanghnan, clerk. *Third row (L-R):* 1. B. E. Graves, foreman; 3. H. L. Burrill, agent; 4. Joe N. Deller, clerk and later, traffic manager for U.S. Steel, Duluth. *Second row (L-R):* 1. Roger Reilly, cashier (Northern Pacific and Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway; 2. L. A. Baker, clerk and later, agent with Northern Pacific, Aitkin; 3. Mr. Quigley, clerk and later, chief clerk; 6. Dave Mulreim, clerk and later, agent at Grand Forks, St. Paul, and Minneapolis; 8. Mike Readon, clerk; 10. Chas Segerstrow, messenger law at Los Angeles; 11. J. F. (Doc) Jones, inspector. *Front row (L-R):* 3. Harry Donnelly, telegraph operator; 5. Mr. S. Schneider, clerk and later, chief clerk; 7. Jack Stark, cashier. *Courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.*

adversaries otherwise, a relationship best described as "antagonistic cooperation."[2] He was also incredibly strategic in creating his collaborations. Biographer Albro Martin explains, "Before rushing to battle . . . Hill knew that the first order of business was to lay the firmest possible foundation for the railroad in Minneapolis and St. Paul."[3] Hill employed his persuasive powers to create several remarkable projects in Minnesota.

St. Paul Union Depot: Passenger Transport

Working with leaders of multiple railroads, Hill helped organize the St. Paul Union Depot in 1879 to consolidate passenger service downtown. Not only did Hill sell the consortium the idea for the project, he sold them the land to make it happen—a parcel on Sibley Street adjacent to his storage and freight transfer terminal that connected steamships to railroads.[4] When the depot opened in 1881, it was enormously successful. Within two years, it handled nearly 14,000 riders daily.[5] This early project helped lay the foundation for a thriving rail hub in St. Paul.

The first St. Paul Union Depot, pictured here, was completed in 1881 but was damaged in a fire three years later. The second depot was rebuilt on the same site using some of the original superstructure and walls, although it was enlarged, and the roof and spire were taller. A fire destroyed that depot in 1913. *Courtesy of Union Depot and the Minnesota Historical Society.*

The Union Stockyards—Minnesota Transfer: Livestock Transport

After consolidating local passenger service, Hill looked for efficiencies in transporting livestock, a far more lucrative source of revenue. In 1881, he worked with D. M. Robbins to plan and construct the "Union Stockyards—Minnesota Transfer," a term used to describe an unincorporated association of railroads that would jointly build a livestock facility in the Midway area of the Twin Cities.[6]

Transporting livestock generated significant revenues, but living cargo required expensive infrastructure. Hill convinced his rail colleagues to join him in building jointly owned stockyards on a site bounded by his St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railway (Manitoba) on the north and the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway (Milwaukee Road) on the south. This location lacked basic municipal services, including water, police, and fire protection, but its unincorporated status gave the railroads more latitude to develop the project as a business enterprise free from land use restrictions and political interference.[7] The stockyards succeeded, in part, because federal animal protection laws required that livestock on long trips be given breaks for food, water, and grazing.[8] The location was ideal for layovers as it was situated between the pasture lands of the west and the slaughterhouses in Chicago and other points east.

By the end of 1881, substantial development had taken place at the Union Stockyards—Minnesota Transfer:

> The stock yard is located on the east of the tracks and contains a tract of 500 by 1,500 feet, enclosed with high, substantial fences and laid off into 150 yards, with sheds 60 x 240 feet, stretching east and west, and so connected with the yards that 5,000 head of cattle can be sheltered. The large yards on the east side, with sheds the entire length, will accommodate ten to fifteen car loads. The yards are so arranged, with alleys and gates that cattle can be transferred to any part of them with great ease. One of the large sheds is fitted up for sheep; another for hogs. The shutes, thirty-two in number, from the yards to the cars are so arranged that in case it is needed sixty-four cars can be loaded in a very short time by the adjusting of the gates.
>
> On the south side of the yards are four large barns or stables, where about 200 horses can be stabled. On the track in the south-west part of the yard are large corn cribs, which will hold several thousand bushels of corn. The soil being sandy, the

yards are always dry. The planning and construction of the yards was under the charge of D. M. Robbins of St. Paul, and for convenience for handling large numbers of cattle they cannot be excelled in this country.[9]

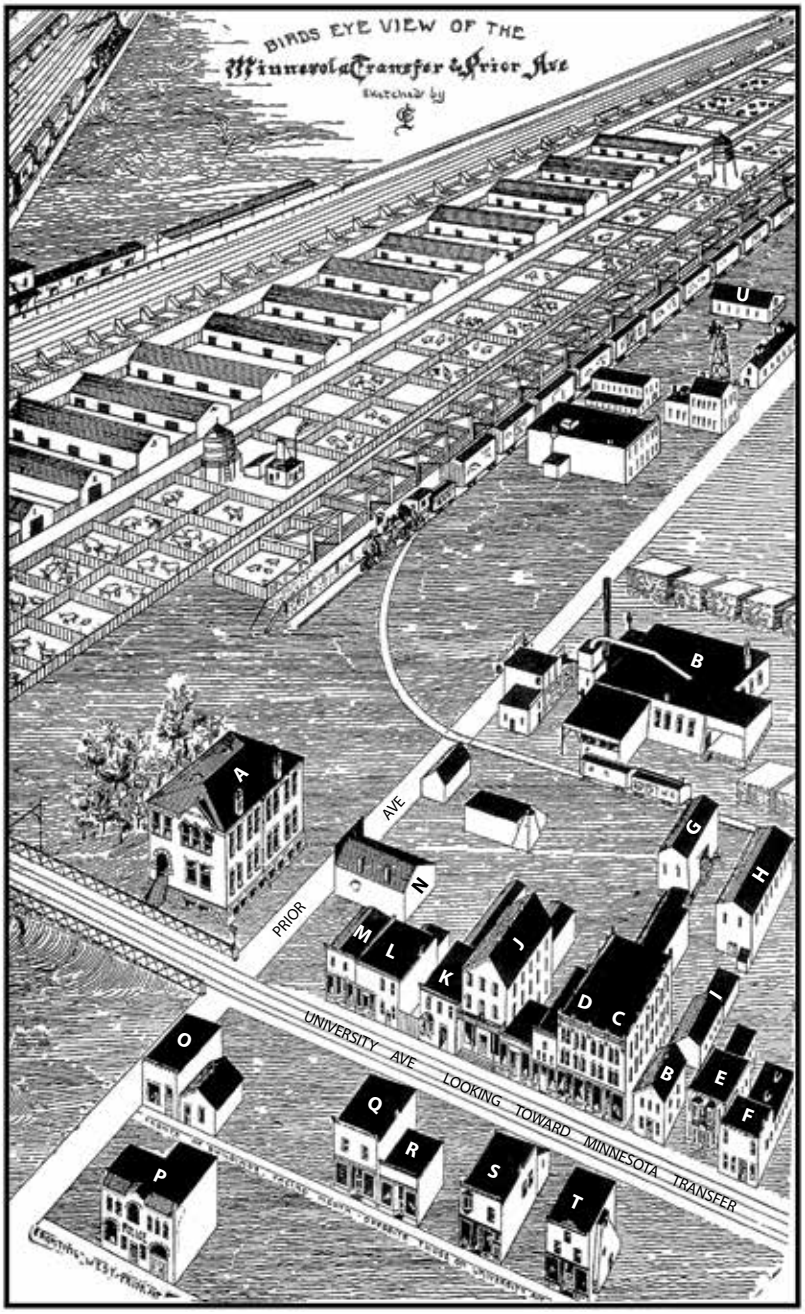
In 1883, the Union Stockyards handled over 30,000 head of Montana cattle. The following year, about 218,000 cattle moved through the facility,[10] and new businesses set up shop in the area, including Hill's associate Robbins. He, his brother A. B. Robbins, and brother-in-law and lumber baron T. B. Walker built one of their eighteen Northwest Elevators there.

The Minnesota Transfer Railway Company: A Cooperative Freight Yard

Hill was full of ideas that he brought to fruition,[11] but perhaps one of his most important grew out of the Union Stockyards project and his frustration with rail congestion on tracks and city streets. He devised a plan to relieve rail congestion by creating a consolidated freight transfer yard shared by all lines, midway between Minneapolis and St. Paul.[12] Gathering multiple rail lines in one location would make it easier for railroads to connect to markets around the globe.

A transfer yard on the scale Hill proposed had never been done. It would not be easy to assemble a two-hundred-acre flat site that was centrally located and easily accessed by the Twin Cities' railroads, and it would be challenging to convince the railroads to work together at a time of intense competition.

Hill quietly acquired property around the Union Stockyards—Minnesota Transfer for the freight yard, buying it for $175 to $250 per acre.[13] He carried it for about a year while he formed a non-profit business entity, the Minnesota Transfer Railway Company, which was incorporated on March 10, 1883. After overcoming some initial skepticism, five railroads joined the venture as charter members, including Hill's Manitoba; the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha Railway (Omaha Road); the Northern Pacific Railway (NP), the Milwaukee Road; and the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railroad (M&StL). Within a year, the new consortium had acquired the rail lines of the original Union



This illustration from the *Minnesota Transfer Reporter* (April 14, 1894) shows some of the businesses around the Minnesota Transfer:

A) Stock Exchange
B) Brooks Brothers Office, Dash and Door Factory
C) Fred Lindstrom Cigars & Confectionery
D) Cunningham Brothers Groceries & Provisions
E) Residence of P. J. Clancey
F) Horse Market & Stable
G) Brooks Brothers Door Warehouse
H) Brooks Brothers Sash Warehouse
I) Unidentified Building
J) Union Park Hotel
K) Midway Horse Market
L) Mrs. J. Kirby Midway Restaurant
M) C. A. Monchow Cigars & Tobacco
N) John Arend Blacksmith
O) Cunningham & Haas Live Stock Commission
P) Police Station, William Budy, Lieutenant
Q) George A. Gross Meat Market
R) William Defranchy Confectionery & Fruits
S) Wallace & Allard Wood, Coal & Feed
T) B. Jacobson Boots, Shoes & Gents Furnishings
U) Winston Brothers, A. B. Baker, Superintendent

Graphic restored by Steve and Nancy Bailey in 2010 and used here with their permission.

The Minnesota Transfer Railway Company yards in 1917. Today, the location of the Transfer's original boundaries includes the BNSF rail tracks adjacent to the Pierce Butler Route on the north; Fairview Avenue on the east; St. Anthony Avenue on the south; and Cleveland-Vandalia Avenues on the west. *Photo originally from Midway Chamber of Commerce. Courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.*

Stockyards—Minnesota Transfer and sections of track from the Manitoba railroad and other parcels previously assembled by Hill, paying him his original purchase price plus six percent interest.[14]

The primary function of the Minnesota Transfer was to exchange freight and boxcars between railroads. Typically, a freight train hauled dozens of boxcars bound for different destinations. The freight often had to be transferred to different railroads for through shipments, and that required complex legal and financial agreements. Given the large number of trains traveling throughout the vast territory and the constantly changing composition of those trains, it was no small matter to keep track of the boxcars. Occasionally, some would be connected inadvertently to the wrong train and disappear for periods of time. In other cases, expensive railcars from one company would be "borrowed" by another, ending up thousands of miles away. The Minnesota Transfer provided a more efficient, cost-effective, and safe way to transfer and track freight. In addition to shuttling boxcars between lines, the Minnesota Transfer could "break bulk" by unpacking and rerouting cargo, often from trains that carried less than full carloads or less-than-container loads (LCLs), as they were known.[15] Railroads also transported cars that were owned by others, including manufacturers, distributors, or even private individuals.

Competition, Collaboration, and Logistical Hurdles

The Minnesota Transfer cooperative venture was not intended to reduce the rivalry between the lines—and did not! Hill's chief rival in the quest to build a transcontinental line, Northern Pacific, was also quietly assembling property near the Transfer yard. By December 1882, it had assembled 220 acres adjoining Hill's Manitoba line, several miles to the east of the Union Stockyards and its Northwestern Elevator. When the land acquisition was announced, the *Minneapolis Tribune* wrote, "The purpose of this large purchase is to provide adequate terminal facilities—those possessed by the company heretofore being altogether too limited for the business reasonably to be expected when the Road shall be opened to the Pacific ocean." The property had "ample room for packing houses, elevators and all other industries," and its close proximity to Lake Como ensured it would have "an abundant water supply . . . at moderate expense."[16] Ironically, Hill helped facilitate this transaction by leasing tracks and right-of-way, allowing the Northern Pacific to access its new site.[17]

The two railroads jockeyed for advantage, but Hill bided his time, recognizing that competition would be good for all companies at the Minnesota Transfer. The battle between the two companies reached its climax in 1901 when Hill ultimately took control of Northern Pacific.

Notwithstanding this and other battles, partners of the Minnesota Transfer managed to create a workable collaboration. The member railroads contributed capital to build tracks and freight houses and acquire needed locomotives and other equipment to transfer freight. The railroads were equal owners and had equal votes on the Board of Directors. Officers served two-year terms and were selected on a rotating basis. Because the members of the Minnesota Transfer and the St. Paul Union Depot overlapped, representatives served on both boards. The two projects also shared equipment on occasion.[18] By 1893, the Minnesota Transfer had installed about eight miles of track and a number of switches to transfer freight.[19]

The Minnesota Transfer was unique, which meant its members had no organizational blueprint to follow. Staff from the member lines

collectively pooled their knowledge to design the physical infrastructure of the rail yard, although some outside engineers and track layout experts consulted to efficiently design the large turning radii that consumed so much land. Loading platforms and freight sorting terminals were carefully located within the yard, separating incoming from outgoing freight. Some tracks were placed on higher ground so that cars could be rolled to lower levels by gravity. This reduced the demand on the Transfer's fleet of nineteen locomotives, which were busy delivering full boxcars or partial loads to member railroads.[20] Some railroads located their own terminals near the Transfer. On a typical day, hundreds of cars were sorted. Before the introduction of advanced forklifts, cranes, and containerized shipping, breaking bulk shipments was very labor intensive. The Transfer at its peak had a workforce of over one thousand.[21]

The early success of the Minnesota Transfer prompted other railroads serving the Twin Cities to join. The number of members fluctuated over the years but generally consisted of nine or ten railroads for the next century. The board not only had to figure out how to efficiently transfer freight, it also had to devise a system that fairly apportioned operating expenses. This proved challenging, given the different physical requirements, schedules, and financial circumstances of the lines and the variability of demand and expectations of the multiple jurisdictions served. Operating budgets had to be adjusted as actual costs gave a more accurate picture of expenses. The Board also had to levy special assessments on occasion to cover deficits or for capital improvements such as grade crossings, the purchase of a new locomotive, or construction of a freight house. The occasional disputes between members over charges were addressed by provisions in the bylaws, which were flexible and could be amended. In 1886, the Transfer secured a bank mortgage on its property, which helped even out some of the cash flow issues.[22]

One early concern for the Board was to resolve a very basic question—was the Minnesota Transfer Railway a common carrier under the jurisdiction of the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), a federal regulatory agency, or just a service provider?[23] The Minnesota Transfer argued that it was not a separate and independent railroad but rather a freight transfer service for railroads that were already under the jurisdiction of the ICC. However, the Commission ruled otherwise, and the Transfer had to comply with all applicable regulations. While cumbersome, this allowed the Transfer to condemn property needed to assemble land for additional trackage or for business development, which it did on several occasions.[24] The Transfer also fell under the jurisdiction of the Railroad and Warehouse Commission of Minnesota, which had oversight over safety standards and fees charged for their services. The Commission could adjudicate disputes between impacted parties; in 1907, for example, it found the Minnesota Transfer improperly raised charges on the Central Warehouse Company.[25]

In this 1907 image, north-facing box cars are tightly packed between two covered loading platforms. They were sometimes lined up to serve as a bridge, allowing workers to walk across them to the platform on the other side. The factory complex in the top right corner was the American Can Company, home today of Can Can Wonderland, an arts-based entertainment venue that includes mini golf and an arcade. *Courtesy of Hennepin County Library.*

What Works? What Doesn't? What More Can Be Done?

By any measure, the Minnesota Transfer project was wildly successful. A rail official characterized its facilities as the "most commodious and convenient and economical plant and system for transfer that there is in any large city . . . in the world."[26] A 1908 advertisement claimed it was, "The only district in the world where car load shipments to and from ten separate systems of railways are made without switching charges to shipper, and where ten roads receive and deliver freight from one depot."[27]

In 1910, over 566,745 cars passed through the Transfer.[28] Historian Henry Castle wrote, "Every freight train that rolls into either city, unless its consignment is for local consumption, no

matter on what road, whence it came or whither it is bound, must go into this terminal, be examined, broken up if necessary and have the contents of its different cars reloaded, before it can proceed to its destination."[29] About two hundred cars a day were unloaded, their contents sorted, repacked, and redistributed. By then, the Transfer had eighty-two miles of trackage and four hundred switches and operated nineteen locomotives. Nine member railroads collectively operated on 55,000 miles of trackage around the country.[30] In 1916, over 700,000 railcars were handled.[31] Approximately twenty percent of the freight was generated by local businesses.

Most rail executives who were busy running their own railroads still took an active interest in Board matters, particularly Hill. After reviewing a proposal for track layout changes, he summoned one of the rail executives with his customary bluntness, "Before the matter of tracks is definitely settled I would like to see you. I am sure the present yard . . . appears about as incomplete and crude as it is possible to get it . . . I would like to see a system of tracks introduced that would allow the business to be done as it should be with less than half the trouble and expense that now exists."[32] Some years later, the Board created "a committee of three to investigate the handling of [LCL] freight at Minnesota transfer [sic] for the purpose of suggesting improvements or changes in the methods now in use as may result in greater efficiency and consequent economy."[33]

The design of railcars and handling equipment evolved. More powerful locomotives could haul as many as seventy cars. Car size also increased. Some were designed for specialized cargo, including refrigerated cars. These changes required modifications of the tracks and location of freight houses.[34] Facilities, equipment, and management practices were constantly upgraded to ensure the best service at the lowest cost. Night lights were installed in the yard to enable around-the-clock operations. Most freight was transferred and rerouted to its destination within a half day.

In this undated photograph, J. A. Wickoren *(third from left)*, a car inspector for the Minnesota Transfer Railway, stands with coworkers in front of the freight yard shanty. *Courtesy of the Ramsey County Historical Society.*

The main cargo handled at the Minnesota Transfer initially was livestock, building upon the existing Union Stockyards project. Eventually, other products transferred through the yard, including iron ore and steel products, coal, lumber, pulp and finished wood products, raw and finished cotton, beer for Manila, candles for Canada and Alaska, farm machinery, and teas and exotic spices from Asia.[35]

The Minnesota Transfer offered other important services in addition to transferring freight. Staff veterinarians tended to livestock, and inspectors examined and reported on the status of fresh produce being transported. The Transfer also operated an ice house so refrigerator cars could be replenished. Additionally, workers regularly checked safety systems on cars and inspected for mechanical problems. "Altogether eighteen men have had a direct hand in this movement and possibly another half-dozen in the office will handle its waybills, bill of lading, 'passing' and other reports."[36] If passing trains needed repairs, these could also be done on site.[37] Merchandise intended for the local market was delivered by four-door 'jumbo' cars to downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul. Independently operated weigh stations located within the yard determined shipping fees, monitored the carrying capacity of locomotives, and helped ensure compliance with the load limits of different track systems used around the country.[38]

Given the constant changes in the railroad industry, membership at the Transfer fluctuated. Rail lines merged, changed owners, or went bankrupt, making it difficult to collect fees and assessments. In 1893, one company fell behind in payments, forcing the Board to cut off its service and banning it from using the tracks.[39] There were times when just getting a quorum at Board meetings was challenging, and a system of alternate representatives had to be instituted.

The turnover in membership required ongoing efforts to maintain the founding vision and consensus on policies adopted earlier. Despite the challenges, the Minnesota Transfer established the Twin Cities as a one of the largest and most important shipping hubs in the country.

Not Just Freight Trains: Adding Passenger Trains at the Transfer

The Minnesota Transfer was designed to handle freight, but Hill and others recognized that passenger traffic would help promote settlement along their lines and bring in more business. Both the Manitoba and Northern Pacific lines sent agents overseas to encourage immigration with enticing pictures of Western farm life. In May 1882, the Northern Pacific line reported that there were about five hundred passengers a day settling "in the country along the line of the road."[40] Thousands of people from mostly northern European countries passed through the Minnesota Transfer on immigrant trains. Minnesota was the preferred destination of the majority of immigrants, followed by North Dakota, Montana, and Canada.[41] The settlement campaign was extremely successful.

Hill promoted sound agricultural techniques with the immigrants after they settled. He distributed about 7,000 cattle free of charge to farmers along his line to build up the quality of livestock. These came from his own breeding farm which featured about 800 of the best cattle imported from Great Britain. In 1906, he sent out an experimental train "fully equipped and accompanied by lecturers and demonstrators to give practical instruction to farmers along the line in such subjects as crop culture, soil tillage, animal husbandry, disease prevention, and improved farming methods."[42] Hill explained his motivation succinctly, "Land without population is a wilderness. Population without land is a mob."[43] But Hill also acknowledged his self-interest:

This 1910 train carried settlers from Holland. Most of the immigrant cars running through the Minnesota Transfer were more primitive and basic in construction. *Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

The University Avenue Viaduct

The Minnesota Transfer was created, in part, to relieve rail congestion on city streets at a time when there were few grade-separated intersections. Concentrating rail lines in one district did relieve city traffic, but it intensified congestion around the Transfer yard. The two hundred acres needed for the project broke up the traditional urban street grid, reducing mobility options. University Avenue had to be moved one half mile south from its original location at what is now Minnehaha Avenue, where it continued at grade level as the major east-west commercial corridor. Stopgap measures to allow wagons to cross the tracks around the yard were inadequate, so the Minnesota Transfer Board concluded it was necessary to build a viaduct, lifting University Avenue over the trains. The city engineer prepared preliminary plans for a bridge, which he circulated to the Common Council and the engineering departments of the various rail lines.[a]

The city was eager to support the project, noting in its bridge report of 1889, "University avenue [sic] is one of our principal thoroughfares having a width of 120 feet, and the removal of the danger of a grade crossing is of the utmost importance, both to the railway company and the city interests."[b]

The viaduct was built as a public-private partnership, with the city paying for 244 feet of its total 1,462 length and Minnesota Transfer paying for the balance with funds raised by special assessments on its members.[c] The viaduct commenced at Prior Avenue and extended to Cleveland Avenue on the west. It had a long, gradual incline along University Avenue to accommodate horse-drawn vehicles and street cars passing over the rail yard. Extensive berms on both ends shortened the span directly over the tracks, which created a barrier between the north and south yards.[d] Trains crossing under the bridge had little overhead clearance, which proved to be a problem, as sparks spewing from the steam locomotives would sometimes ignite the bridge's wooden support structure.

The University Avenue Bridge was constructed in 1888 to allow local traffic to pass over the train yard. The building on the left is the Minnesota Transfer headquarters, built as its Stock Exchange. It later served as the first Midway YMCA. *Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

While the city and Minnesota Transfer agreed to share bridge construction costs, it was unclear who would pay for maintenance and repair. This led to considerable conflict and lawsuits, with the city eventually prevailing. In 1935, two smaller concrete bridges carrying trains over automobile and truck traffic on University Avenue replaced the viaduct. As rail traffic declined, one of the bridges was removed.[e]

> I know that in the first instance my great interest in the agricultural growth of the Northwest was purely selfish. If the farmer was not prosperous, we were poor, and I know what it is to be poor. I always want to see the most made of our opportunities, because it will bring more grist to our mill.[44]

Industrial Legacy

The most significant and long-lasting effect of the Minnesota Transfer was not planned—the consolidated rail yard proved to be a remarkable attraction for businesses, creating an industrial development boom. A 1903 article in *The Commercial West* magazine described the development:

> Many new factories are enabled and induced to build up business in St. Paul owing to the facilities offered by the Minnesota Transfer. This wonderful 'clearinghouse' of traffic, situated as it is midway between the East and the West in the direct line of the Northern trans-continental railways, forms the greatest shipping yard in the United States, and offers unrivaled inducements to the growth of factories.

> The immense net-work of railways which feed their traffic to this transfer, bring[s] their loads of the raw material from every quarter of the globe, which after being converted into the finished article by the manufacturers are easily shipped forth again by the same net-work of railways to a world market.[45]

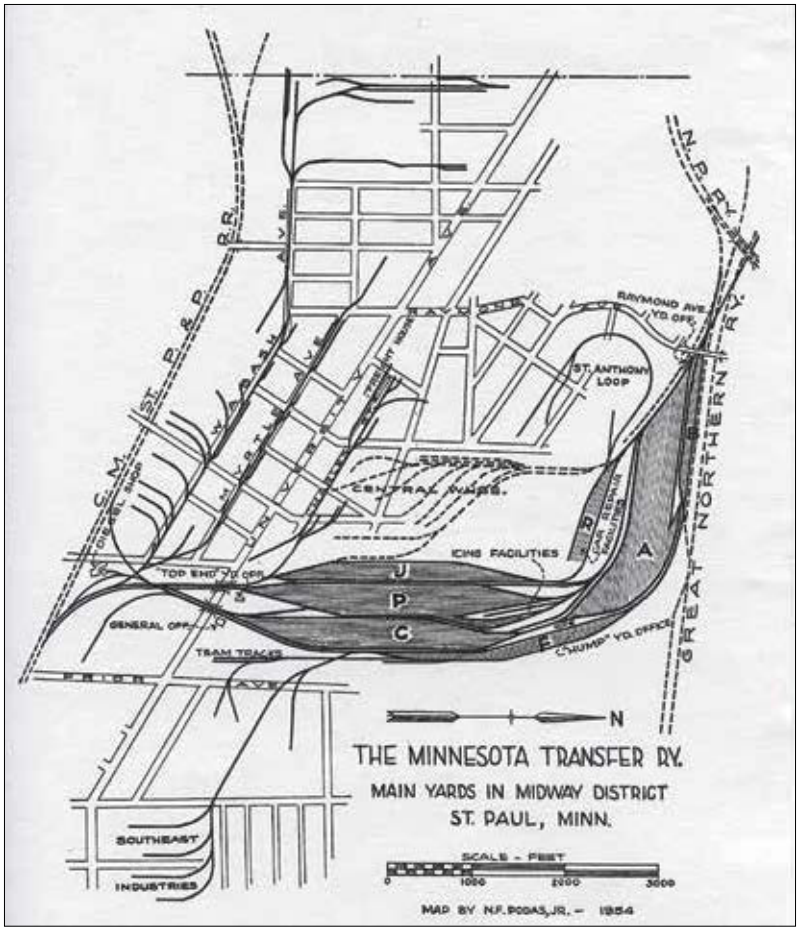
Ironically, some rail executives were not initially enthusiastic about operating a shuttle service for the new businesses, preferring to focus on transferring freight between lines. Eventually members grew more accepting as they saw that the additional freight generated by the new businesses helped even the balance between incoming and outgoing freight.[46]

The owners and investors in the new businesses surrounding the Minnesota Transfer read like a Who's Who of Minnesota, including D. M. Robbins (grain elevators), T. B. Walker (lumber), the Weyerhaeuser family (lumber), Brooks Brothers (grain, then lumber and wood products), and such important firms as Archer Daniels Midland Company (agribusiness), Griggs Cooper & Company (wholesale groceries and food manufacturing), H. B. Fuller (adhesives), and Toro Motor Company (tractor engines). A number of large national companies also had branches at the Transfer, including International Harvester (agricultural machinery), American Can Company (can manufacturing), American Radiator (radiators), Peter Cooper Glue (adhesives), and Dupont (chemicals).

During the war years, businesses around the Minnesota Transfer shifted priorities, manufacturing products necessary for the US military. As a result, security was stepped up in the train yard, which was busier than ever. During the war and post-war boom of the early 1950s, the transportation hub handled between 2,500 and 3,500 cars daily. This required forty-seven engines to service the 400 industries clustered around the Transfer yard.[47]

After more than a half century, life and business around the Minnesota Transfer began to change. By 1953, all steam engines were replaced by diesel locomotives, requiring modifications to the old twelve-track roundhouse. Freight transfer activities declined in the late 1960s as a result of railroad mergers and consolidations and the rise of interstate trucking. The Minnesota Transfer sold fifty acres of underutilized rail yard to the Saint Paul Port Authority for redevelopment along University Avenue near today's Westgate Metro Transit Station. In 1978, Amtrak located its passenger depot "right in the middle of the old 'P' yard," where it remained until it moved to the Union Depot in 2014.[48]

In 1982, the bulk of the company's business was providing cars to and from the 150 industries still active on its industrial rail spurs. The Minnesota Transfer Railway ceased to operate as a cooperative entity in 1987. Members sold it to a private company, the Minnesota Commercial Railway (MNNR), which currently owns 128 miles of track, including a line that extends to Hugo, Minnesota. It continues to operate as a switching railroad, servicing five national Class 1 railroads: Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF, the ultimate successor to Hill's Manitoba line), Union Pacific (UP), Canadian Pacific Railway (CP), Canadian National Railway (CN), and Twin Cities and Western Railroad (TCWR).



This 1954 map shows the complexity and efficiency needed for the delivery and departure of six lines in the Minnesota Transfer main yard. M&StL used the "A" Yard; "C" Yard was used by the Milwaukee Road and Rock Island lines. Great Northern delivered in "P" but picked up in "A." Great Western delivered to "C" and picked up in "B," and Omaha Road dropped shipments in "C" but picked up in "B" for the East and "A" for the West. *Map and caption information by N. F. Podas Jr. for the Minnesota Transfer Railway Company. Courtesy of the Minnesota Commercial Railway.*

This image of James J. Hill from the September 17, 1908, *Minneapolis Tribune* made mention of Hill's seventieth birthday celebration, which was held at the Lafayette Club (formerly his Hotel Lafayette before it burned in 1897) at Lake Minnetonka. Of course, Hill rode one of his trains to the party.

MNNR owns twenty-seven locomotives and about forty railcars and has about 120 employees. Approximately eighty percent of rail activity is from incoming trips, and only twenty percent is outbound, reflecting the sharp reduction of manufacturing activity and the increased use of trucks.[49]

James J. Hill: The Will to Win

James J. Hill created the Great Northern Railway in 1890, consolidating all the railroad companies he controlled, including the Manitoba line. He finally achieved his lifetime ambition of extending this line to the Pacific port city of Seattle in 1893. His major competitor, Northern Pacific Railway, beat him to the West Coast, but Hill ultimately prevailed by taking control of that railroad in 1901. Hill's biographer explains how Hill's Empire Builder line succeeded: "Railroading was war, and there were no real rules in railroading. The outcome of confrontations could not be predicted from relative strengths. If there was any necessary ingredient of success, it was, as Tolstoy remarked, the will to win."[50]

Of all Hill's remarkable accomplishments, the Minnesota Transfer is one of the most important. Not only did it provide the foundation needed to build his transcontinental railroad, but the ingenious coordinating network ensured that his hometown of St. Paul would hold a prominent place in the modern industrial economy.

***Brian McMahon**, a trained architect, has written widely on industry, architecture, and urban history, including articles for* Ramsey County History. *His book,* The Ford Century in Minnesota, *was published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2016. He is currently working on a book on the architecture and building projects of Henry Ford.*

NOTES

1. James J. Hill, *Highways of Progress* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1910), 114.

2. Albro Martin, *James J. Hill & The Opening of the Northwest* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1976), 250.

3. Martin, *James J. Hill*, 221-222.

4. Martin, *James J. Hill,* 222.

5. Ralph W. Hidy, Muriel E. Hidy, Roy V. Scott, and Don L. Hofsommer, *The Great Northern Railway: A History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 45; Martin, *James J. Hill*, 221-222; *Historic Structure Report for Union Depot*, a report published in October 2010 as part of the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority rehabilitation program, 9.

6. This project was likely inspired by the Union Stock Yard & Transit Co., in Chicago, where railroads worked together to develop a 375-acre district in 1865. The unincorporated stockyards project in the Midway was also on occasion referred to as "The Minnesota Transfer and Stock Yard," or "Minnesota Transfer—Union Stockyard Association," or "The Minnesota Transfer Station." Also, in some cases, including on maps, it was referred to as "Minnesota Stockyard." Note: James J. Hill's Union Stockyards—Minnesota Transfer is unrelated to the Saint Paul Union Stockyards Company, which was established in 1886 in South St. Paul by other local businessmen.

7. The railroads intentionally chose a large site in an unincorporated area of the Midway to avoid the restrictive oversight of either Minneapolis or St. Paul and selected the state name for its location, suggesting a larger, regional presence. The term Minnesota Transfer was applied not only to the stockyards project but also to the later freight transfer project and, indeed, the entire area, as many businesses adopted it as their address. The area was eventually annexed by St. Paul over strong objections by railroads and businesses, many of which were based in Minneapolis. "That Extension: A Full and Unbiased Statement," *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 10, 1885, 3.

8. The federal government passed the "28 Hour Law" in 1873. National Agriculture Library, "Twenty-Eight Hour Law," U.S. Department of Agriculture, accessed October 18, 2019, https://www.govinfo.gov/

content/pkg/USCODE-2011-title49/pdf/USCODE-2011-title49-subtitleX-chap805-sec80502.pdf.

9. George E. Warner and J. Fletcher Williams, *History of Ramsey County and the City of St. Paul* (Minneapolis: North Star Publishing Company, 1881), 266.

10. Hidy, Hidy, Scott, and Hofsommer, *The Great Northern Railway*, 45.

11. James J. Hill understood the enormous benefits new ventures could bring. He continued building his presence in Minnesota with a dizzying array of projects. He acquired control of the St. Anthony Water Power Company in Minneapolis in 1882. That same year, he built the Hotel Lafayette on Lake Minnetonka as a passenger destination. In 1883, he constructed the Stone Arch Bridge across the Mississippi River, and the following year organized the shared passenger terminal in Minneapolis.

12. John Lauber, *A Trail of Two Cities: The Impact of Transportation on the Development of the Midway Area, 1847–1960* (Minneapolis: Hess, Roise and Company, 1995), 7.

13. Today's approximate boundaries of the original Minnesota Transfer would be the BNSF rail tracks adjacent to the Pierce Butler Route on the north; Fairview Avenue on the east (with some rail spurs extending to businesses farther east); St. Anthony Avenue on the south; and Cleveland-Vandalia Avenues on the west.

14. Joseph Gilpin Pyle, *The Life of James J. Hill, Volume I* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1917), 393.

15. Several private companies were established at the Minnesota Transfer to accommodate LCL shipments; the largest being the Central Warehouse Company.

16. "A Great Purchase: The Northern Pacific's Latest Acquisition," *Minneapolis Tribune,* December 22, 1882, 4;

17. "A Great Purchase," 4. Most of the original complex remains and is now the Bandana Square commercial development.

18. Frank P. Donovan, Jr., *Gateway to the Northwest: The Story of the Minnesota Transfer Railway* (St. Paul: Minnesota Transfer Railway Company, 1954), 13, 22-23.

19. Isaac Atwater, *History of the City of Minneapolis, Part 2* (New York: Munsell & Company, 1892), 331.

20. A variety of mechanical rollers and gravity slides were developed locally by companies such as Mathews Gravity Carrier Company and the Standard Conveyor Company to facilitate materials handling.

21. "The Midway District, St. Paul," *The Commercial West*, January 18, 1908, 36.

22. Minnesota Transfer Railway Company, directors minutes, 4 February 1907 and 7 April 1910, Minnesota Historical Society.

23. Minnesota Transfer Railway Company, directors minutes, 31 January 1888, Minnesota Historical Society.

24. Minnesota Transfer Railway Company, directors minutes, 5 August 1907, Minnesota Historical Society.

25. *Annual Report of the Railroad and Warehouse Commission of Minnesota*, a report published in 1907, Minnesota Historical Society, 113-117.

26. Hidy, Hidy, Scott, and Hofsommer, *The Great Northern Railway*, 45.

27. *St. Paul City Directory 1908*, "Minnesota Transfer," (St. Paul: R. L. Polk & Co., 1908), 105.

28. Henry A. Castle, *History of St. Paul and Vicinity Volume II* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1912), 621.

29. Castle, *History of St. Paul*, 621.

30. Castle, *History of St. Paul*, 621.

31. Pyle, *Life of James J. Hill*, 393.

32. James J. Hill, letter to J. T. Odell, President of Minnesota Transfer, letter book 9/12/85 to 3/22/86, Minnesota Historical Society, 820.

33. Minnesota Transfer Railway Company, directors minutes, 13 June 1923, Minnesota Historical Society.

34. Minnesota Transfer Railway Company, records, 20 June 1900, Minnesota Historical Society.

35. "The Midway District, St. Paul," January 18, 1908, 35.

36. Donovan, Jr., *Gateway to the Northwest*, 18.

37. Donovan, Jr., *Gateway to the Northwest*, 18.

38. Donovan, Jr., *Gateway to the Northwest*, 22.

39. Minnesota Transfer Railway Company, directors minutes, 20 November 1893, Minnesota Historical Society, 173.

40. "The Northern Pacific," *Minneapolis Tribune,* May 23, 1882, 1.

41. George William Anderson, "Steady Influx of Settlers into Minnesota," *The Harvester World*, International Harvester Companies, November 1915, 24.

42. Hill, *Highways of Progress*, 45.

43. Hill, *Highways of Progress*, 45.

44. Martin, *James J. Hill*, 301.

45. "Business Growth and Tendencies of St. Paul," *The Commercial West*, September 5, 1903, 42.

46. For additional information on the history of industry in the Midway, see Brian McMahon, "Midway area has a rich history of industrial clusters," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, December 6, 2015.

47. Stottlemyer, *The First 100 Years,* 7.

48. Stottlemyer, *The First 100 Years,* 9; "Amtrak begins service at St. Paul's Union Station," *MPR News*, original: May 7, 2014; updated: March 8, 2018, accessed October 18, 2019, https://bringmethenews.com/news/amtrak-begins-service-at-st-pauls-union-depot.

49. John Gohmann, president & chairman MNNR, email correspondence with author, July 3, 2019.

50. Martin, *James J. Hill*, 284.

Notes to Sidebar on p. 26

a. L. W. Rundlett, letter, to members of the Common Council, April 20, 1886, St. Paul Department of Public Works.

b. Annual Reports of the City Officers and City Boards of the City of Saint Paul for fiscal year ending December 31, 1888 (St. Paul: Globe Job Office, 1889), 554.

c. Annual Reports, 1889, 554.

d. Rundlett, letter, April 20, 1886.

e. George Herrold, manuscript, *The Story of Planning St. Paul from the Beginnings to 1953*, 1958, Minnesota Historical Society.

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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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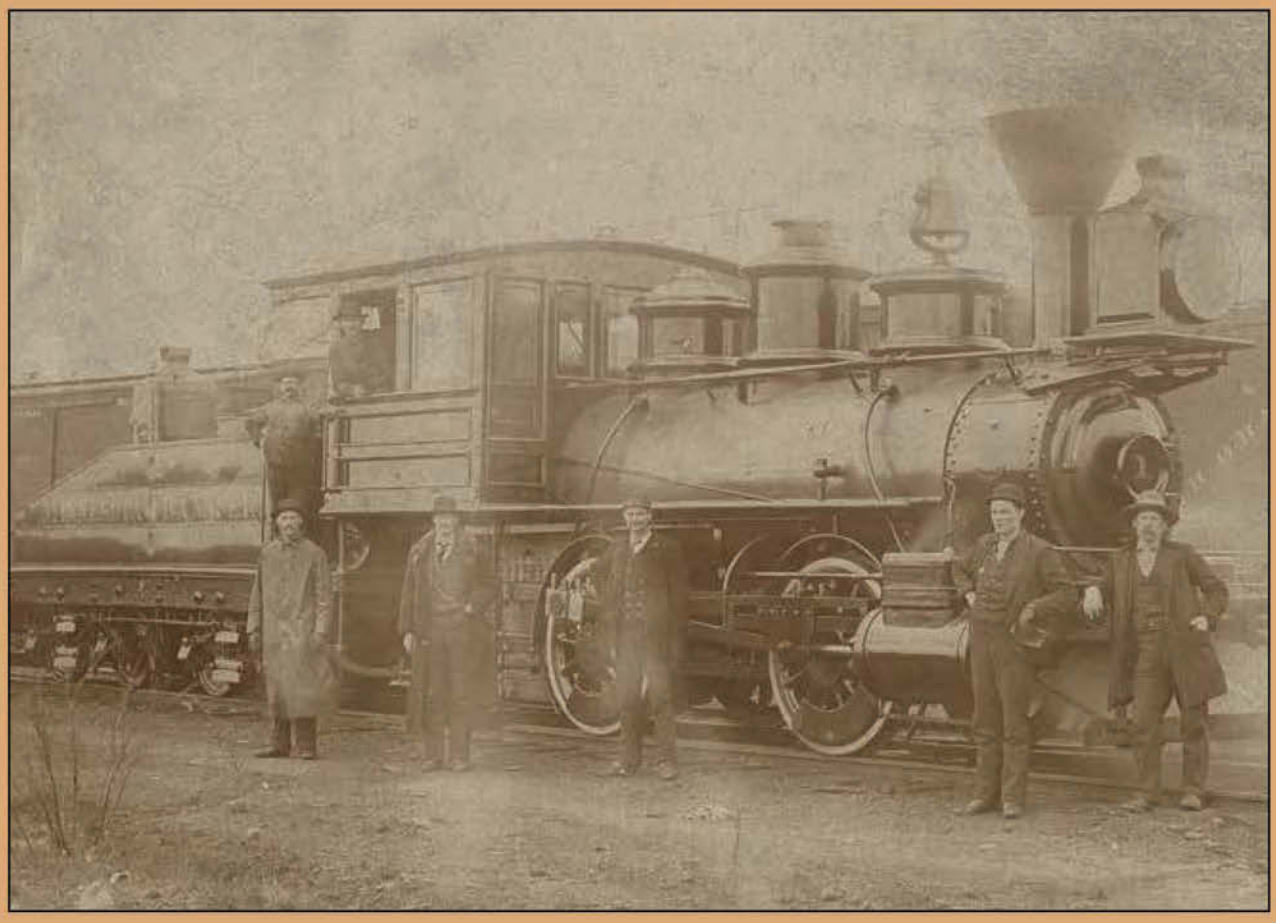

Minnesota Transfer Railway Company engine and crew (1885). *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*