

A Mis-Applied Response to Opportunity: The Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway and The Great Dakota Boom 1879-1886

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During the period of rapid industrialization in the United States after 1865, the Great Dakota Boom occurred. During the 1880s, what is today North and South Dakota witnessed an immigration, manufacturing, and urbanization expansion that far eclipsed anything the nation had previously experienced. The Great Dakota Boom has been attributed to several events, but the most important are improvements in flour milling and the construction of railroads. New milling processes made the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul the flour milling center of the United States, while railroads gave farmers in this fabulously rich, grain growing country their only market outlets, the flour mills of Minneapolis and the grain port of Duluth [4, 17].

Caught in the early stages of the boom was James J. Hill and his fledgling St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railroad. Not surprisingly, Hill's hegemony over railroad transportation in the Red River Valley is a topic that has attracted students of his influence in the industrialization of the region [14, 15].

Since James J. Hill's St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railroad (or the Manitoba) was the only railroad in the Red River Valley at the beginning of the boom, besides the Northern Pacific line to Duluth, Hill assumed the entire region from Lake Traverse on the south to the Canadian border for his Manitoba road. This study examines the efforts of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul to overcome Hill's apparent monopoly in the Valley by cashing in on the Great Dakota Boom through construction of its railroad lines into the region.

After reaching the Twin Cities in 1879, the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul, or the Milwaukee Road, by 1881 had extended its lines into southern and central Dakota in fierce competition with the Chicago and North Western and two other rival Chicago-based roads [3].

Since Hill and, to a much lesser extent, the various managements of the Northern Pacific, saw northern Dakota Territory and the Red River Valley as their exclusive preserves in which to build and operate their railroads, they viewed eastern railroads that included the Red River Valley towns of Fargo, Dakota Territory and Moorhead, Minnesota in their building plans as adversaries to be treated as hostile enemies.

The industrialization of northern Dakota Territory during the Great Dakota Boom also had an internal motion, not the least of which was the formation of self-help railroads in established urban areas in Dakota Territory. Proposed as solutions to farmer and small shipper Populist complaints of eastern railroad exploitation, in the 1880s these locally owned and promoted railroads promised lower rates to distant markets than eastern-owned trunk lines. As a secondary rationale for their construction, it was argued that they would provide relief from rebating and short-weighting, through railroad ownership of elevators and local control of operations not obtainable from Twin Cities or other eastern-controlled trunk lines [11, 12, 10, 2].

One such local road was the Fargo and Southern Railway, established by a group of speculators, real estate hucksters, bankers, and capitalists in the growing urban center of Fargo. The promoters of the road appealed to the Fargo business community's perception of Twin Cities' exploitation and offered a 200-mile "People's Line," plus townsites and railroad-owned elevators.

For Hill, the Valley assumed a special, critical importance. While in the freight consignment business in 1869 on the St. Paul riverfront, Hill had sensed the importance of Twin City control over transportation in the Valley to the long-term economic growth of St. Paul-Minneapolis. Hill feared a Chicago controlled railroad would build into the region and manipulate freight rates between Winnipeg and St. Paul and Chicago, thereby making Chicago more favorable to Winnipeg and Red River Valley shippers, in much the same way he made the Twin Cities more favorable to Fargo and the Valley than Duluth or Chicago. This consideration made his Manitoba road a central force for protecting the Twin Cities during its commercial infancy [14].

After the demise of steamboating on the Red River, the Manitoba had no other railroad competition between the Valley and St. Paul. This feature, however, had a negative aspect, because it made the Manitoba vulnerable to Populist demands for relief from abuses, real or imagined, by Twin City merchants, the milling bosses, and Hill's Manitoba. With the Northern Pacific in firm control of grain moving from the Valley to the

burgeoning port of Duluth, and the Manitoba holding forth between the upper Red River Valley and the milling center of Minneapolis, local road promoters found a wide base of support among those caught in this hammerlock [1, 8].

Hill thus had to protect the Manitoba territory on two fronts: against invasion from without by eastern trunks such as the Milwaukee Road, Rock Island, North Western, or Illinois Central and from within, by local self-help roads, such as the Fargo and Southern. Not only could a powerful eastern railroad such as the Milwaukee Road build into the Valley and help itself to the 31 million bushel wheat crop, but there was always the possibility that a Chicago road would buy up the Manitoba and collapse forever the Twin City hold on the Red River Valley. After 1879, Hill concluded that one way to maintain his grip was to strengthen the Manitoba by expanding its territory westward into northern Dakota Territory, lessening its dependence on the Valley for its freight revenues. Since the only way to finance this expansion was with revenues from through freight traffic on the Winnipeg-St. Paul axis, as well as from originating traffic in the Valley, Hill protected the Red River Valley as though he were being attacked in the jugular [14].

The Fargo and Southern promoters began building their "People's Railroad" south from Fargo to its intended objective of Lake Kameska (near Watertown, Dakota) in the summer of 1881, following the west bank of the Red River through Wahpeton, Dakota Territory. By the end of 1882, at the height of the Great Dakota Boom, they had only graded about 20 miles and surveyed some townsites. Enthusiasm for the "People Line" had flagged, due to the general prosperity and rate reductions by the Manitoba and Northern Pacific.²

The Milwaukee Road, meanwhile, was consolidating itself against the rival Chicago and North Western in southern Dakota, but nevertheless³ found the time to make two forays towards northern Dakota. In 1881 it built north towards the Northern Pacific main line from its terminal at Aberdeen, Dakota Territory and after extending northwest out of Milbank, Dakota Territory, built everywhere in southern Dakota Territory that the Chicago and North Western had not reached first [5].

By 1883, the Milwaukee Road had built as much railroad mileage in southern Dakota Territory as the traffic would bear. It still desired a Red River Valley connection though, and its managers, Alexander Mitchell and Sherberne S. Merrill, struggled to concoct a sure fire way of getting the Milwaukee into Fargo, ever mindful of James J. Hill's well-known and highly respected suzerainty over the Valley.

Hill had a record of rather bellicose behavior when dealing

with rivals of the Manitoba. When the Minneapolis & St. Louis was building tracks in the elevator district of the Mill City, Hill knocked heads with the M&StL's president, William H. Truesdale, over that road's use of certain Manitoba tracks and the delays incurred by M&StL trains when Hill's trains were given precedence over those of the "Louie." Complaining that Hill treated the M&StL "As a charity child," Truesdale sarcastically remarked, "There is an element in this city which on all occasions is seized with a violent fit of sneezing whenever snuff is taken by a certain St. Paul gentlemen," apparently referring to those who caved in easily to Hill's heavy handed manner [6].

Hill also tangled with William D. Washburn's Minneapolis and Pacific over that line's relations with the Manitoba, first at Elbow Lake, Minnesota and then at Hankinson, Dakota Territory, in what one editor called the "Fort Hankinson Imbroglia." [9]

The foundering Fargo and Southern soon caught the eye of the anxious Milwaukee Road. Corresponding with William A. Kindred, the Fargo and Southern's largest stockholder, Milwaukee executives, first Merrill, then John W. Cary, offered to take the property off Kindred's hands. Knowing the leverage he had, because of Merrill's ill-concealed desire to get into the Valley any way he could, Kindred rejected Cary's offers until his greed was sated. Cary and Merrill finally agreed to assume all the Fargo and Southern bonded debt, bankroll the remaining construction of the 200-mile pike, throw in some cash and make it all worth Kindred's trouble by giving the Fargo and Southern equity holders a favorable exchange of their stock for some valuable common and preferred in the St. Paul and Duluth, which the Milwaukee held in its treasury.⁴

Kindred quietly placed four Milwaukee officials on his seven man board in early 1883. Once in control of the Fargo and Southern, Cary and Merrill thought to connect it to the Milwaukee's Hastings and Dakota main line to St. Paul and Chicago at Wilmot, Dakota Territory, following the road's original route down the Dakota side of the Valley. When it was discovered that a 117-mile route down the Minnesota side offered a better grade and passed through a more established farming territory, they opted for a connection with the Milwaukee main line at Ortonville, Minnesota.⁵

To direct the completion of the line south from Fargo and north from Ortonville, Milwaukee officials in Chicago assigned Homer E. Sargent, Northern Pacific general manager from 1877 to 1881 and semi-retired in 1883. When he arrived in Fargo, Sargent harbored several secrets. First, he had to maintain the illusion that Kindred and his pals in Fargo still controlled the

"People's Line." He did this by letting the word out that he "kept track of construction materials." If it had gotten out that an eastern trunk line was masquerading in the Red River Valley as the Fargo and Southern, the future effects on its traffic could have been appalling. Sargent's second problem was Hill. From his years on the Northern Pacific, Sargent was all too familiar with Hill's territorial hegemony. Perhaps realizing that a chance to even the score with Hill was presenting itself, Sargent worked out a traffic arrangement with the Northern Pacific and Fargo and Southern that cut into the Manitoba's grain traffic in the Valley. Finally, mindful of the tremendous amount of grain traffic that slipped away every day the Fargo and Southern was not completed between Fargo and Ortonville, Sargent's pervading objective was completing the line as fast as possible.

Cary and Merrill's Red River Valley conquest during the Great Dakota Boom probably would have come off without a hitch, if the Fargo and Southern had not had to cross Hill's Manitoba at Wahpeton, on its way southward to Ortonville. When Sargent asked Hill for permission to establish a grade crossing with the Manitoba, Hill adamantly refused. Between September 1883 and January 1884, the two roads fought a bitter "crossing war" that saw property destruction by both roads, extensive, unproductive legal action, and violence that recalled a thirteenth-century medieval siege, in which William A. Kindred threatened to blow up a train Hill had ordered parked in the path of the Fargo and Southern's construction crew if the train were not moved to allow construction [15].

The Wahpeton crossing war threw Sargent's construction plans into disarray and the Fargo and Southern missed out hauling the fall 1883 harvest. The crossing war, however, served Hill's purpose well, because it bought him time to consolidate his position in the Valley, once he came to the realization that the Fargo and Southern was backed by a Chicago trunk line, the rich and powerful Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul.

Hill wavered in his reaction to the Milwaukee's rude incursion into his Red River Valley fief. After completion of the "People's Line" in July 1884, he raised the Manitoba's rates on Fargo-Minneapolis wheat, then lowered them, raised them again, and finally set them equal to the Fargo and Southern rate. His final action, however, foretold his future responses to threats on his territory elsewhere. In September 1884, Hill began construction of the Moorhead and Southeastern Railway, down the east side of the Red River from Fargo's sister city to Wahpeton and within view of the Fargo and Southern on the west bank. This attempt to divert traffic from the Fargo and

Southern territory failed, because there was only one road bridge between Moorhead and Wahpeton over which farmers in Fargo and Southern territory could cross the river to the Minnesota side. To forsake the Fargo and Southern on the west side and cross the river to ship over Hill's Manitoba would have been economic suicide, even if Hill had offered to ship their grain for free.

Homer Sargent worked to establish the Fargo and Southern as a profitable road as soon as it was completed, mainly to appease Alexander Mitchell and possibly to accelerate the Milwaukee's planned take over. Cognizant of market conditions and using changes in wheat prices to his advantage, Sargent applied his good offices with the Northern Pacific to establish a Fargo and Southern-Wahpeton-Northern-Pacific-Duluth wheat rate. When the price of wheat through the grain port of Duluth rose late in 1884, the Fargo and Southern Northern Pacific combination worked as though started on cue. Between November 1884 and January 1885, the arrangement moved 281 cars of grain from Fargo and Southern stations to Duluth, 75 percent through Wahpeton. Even though the Milwaukee had hoped to get this traffic, it certainly did not stop Sargent from carrying out his deal with the Northern Pacific. Because its line to St. Paul and Chicago connected with the Fargo and Southern at Ortonville, Minnesota, the Milwaukee used the Fargo and Southern to bring the rest of the world to the Red River Valley, mostly in the form of merchandise.

The Fargo and Southern, like its neighbor railroads in the Red River Valley, was heavily dependent on outbound grain and inbound consumer goods for its freight revenues. Grain, shipped mostly from elevators at Abercrombie and Fairmount, Dakota Territory to Duluth via Sargent's Northern Pacific rate arrangement made up 42 percent of the line's freight revenues in 1884 and 1885. Seventeen percent of the "People's Line" freight revenues derived from merchandise traffic, all of it originating in the Twin Cities or Chicago and moved into Fargo via the Milwaukee to Ortonville and thence via the Fargo and Southern. For its part in Sargent's traffic arrangement, the Northern Pacific turned over cars of lumber to the Fargo and Southern at Wahpeton, and this lumber made up about 15 percent of the line's freight revenues. The Table is a distribution of cars handled by the Fargo and Southern during three months of operation from November 1884 to January 1885. Since the Fargo and Southern's actual life as an independent railroad extended from about 6 July 1884 to 30 June 1885, the Table is a representative sample of the road's performance during its entire period of operation. This table assumes a positive correlation between revenue

freight and the number of cars handled. During its 11-month existence, the Fargo and Southern achieved an operating ratio of 73 percent.

Freight Revenues, July 1884 to July 1885

<u>Sample Mean</u>	<u>Population Mean</u>	<u>Difference</u>	<u>D.F.</u>	<u>t</u>
6147	5625	522	11	6.96*

*significant at 95% confidence

The Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul took formal control of the Fargo and Southern in July 1885 through an exchange of stock and by debt assumption. Yet even as the ink was drying on the deeds and certificates, the monocrop economy of Dakota Territory began to show signs of distress. Reacting to the over production of the early 1880s, wheat prices gyrated wildly in late 1884 and early 1885 and had declined 35 percent by 1888. Driven out of Dakota by drought and falling farm land values that left them only their mortgages, farmers began moving east, adding to the economic distress. By 1885, the Great Dakota Boom was over, ending the eastern railroads' speculative interest in Fargo and the Red River Valley [7, 2].

After the June 1885 takeover of the Fargo and Southern, the Milwaukee destroyed Sargent's Northern Pacific connection with Duluth, apparently intent on diverting Fargo and Southern grain traffic to its rails at Ortonville and then hauling it to Minneapolis elevators. By late 1885, this short-sighted action had transformed the Fargo and Southern from a modestly profitable independent road that originated 41 percent more freight than it received, into a 117-mile, weed-overgrown branch line. After 1886, the Fargo Line barely held its own, except during the grain harvest season, through the transportation of Fargo bound merchandise from the East. As the boom and all that went with it fizzled and died, the Milwaukee Road found itself in Fargo and the Valley at the wrong time. It had achieved its earlier objective, but because Mitchell had been distracted by the lure of southern Dakota in the early 1880s, an area where Hill had no influence, the objective of his policy, taking part in the Great Dakota Boom in the Red River Valley, had evaporated by the time the first Milwaukee Road train appeared in Fargo in July 1885.¹⁰ Mitchell's objective might have been valid, but his timing could not have been worse.

For Hill, Alexander Mitchell's conquest of northern Dakota

and, especially, the Red River Valley probably existed as expressions of selfish motives for the aggrandizement of himself and his company, rather than as contributions to the industrialization of the region. Caught in the frenzied rush for territory, Mitchell was forced by venal local pirates to pay a high price for a furtive means of participating in the boom. After 1886, he found himself in direct competition with James J. Hill between the Red River Valley and the Twin Cities in a diminishing market, a contest Hill would eventually win. As the rapid change that characterized the boom gave way to the depression years of the 1890s, the Milwaukee eked out a small living on its three North Dakota branch lines from passenger revenues. In the 1920s the Milwaukee began its retreat from the Dakotas, a process it completed by 1982.

From the outset of his quarrel with eastern railroads over the Red River Valley, Hill perceived their ambitions for the Valley as selfish actions taken to exploit the Dakota Boom frenzy. Several questions must be asked of Hill's territorial hegemony towards Alexander Mitchell though. Why did he view him as an opponent rather than an ally in the Valley? Did Hill sense there would probably only be enough traffic for one railroad once the boom ended? Hill's territorial fight with Mitchell perhaps can be seen as an expression of conflict over power and control of a volatile economic situation and could explain why Hill was willing to resort to violence to protect the territory of the Manitoba.

Hill's apparent monopoly could also be seen as an expression of a protective paternalism rooted in his obsession of furthering the economic growth of the territory touched by the Manitoba and protecting the railroad from outside purchase during its vulnerable first years of existence. Moreover, why did Hill see himself as being the only force in supplying railroads to northern Dakota, a perception reinforced by his ferocious attempts to keep other railroads out of the Red River Valley? How did Hill view early self-help railroads such as the Fargo and Southern? Did he see them as exasperated attempts to break the Manitoba's monopoly? Or were they undercapitalized beggars that would absorb more and more scarce local money and leave farmers only worthless stock and unfulfilled promises?

Regardless of these questions, the Milwaukee Road's participation in the industrialization of the Red River Valley must emerge as a minor contribution. Ill-conceived and poorly executed in the speculative noise of the Great Dakota Boom, the Milwaukee's expansion policies in the Red River Valley suggest more opportunism than long-term commitment. If its expansion into the Red River Valley in the 1880s is any indication of its

mindless policies in the early twentieth century, when the Milwaukee built to Puget Sound and even thought of extending the Fargo and Southern to Winnipeg, then it appears the road's management expanded the size of the railroad to benefit itself, mainly through construction-company finance and watered stock.¹² Milwaukee Road executives, filled with fatuous, cloudy visions of quick profits, wrought the demise in the railroad's fortune, a long-term process that was nearly completed by the 1980s [16, 13]. It now remains for historians to place the actions of Alexander Mitchell into perspective and context with those of William D. Washburn, Ransom Cable of the Rock Island, and other railroad presidents who sought to extend their railroads into Dakota Territory during the Great Dakota Boom.

NOTES

1. Articles of Incorporation of the Fargo and Southern Railway Company, 20 June 1881. (Records of North Dakota Corporations, Secretary of State's Office, Bismarck, North Dakota; Fargo Weekly Argus, 13 October 1880; Fargo Daily Argus, 29 July 1881; Fargo Sunday Argus, 25 December 1881.

2. Receipts of amounts paid, 1881-1882, folder "Treasurer's Receipts of Stock Installments Paid, 1881-1882" File Q Number 2, in the office of the Secretary, Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Company, Chicago, Illinois; Fargo Daily Argus, 27 May 1882.

3. No sustained treatment of the Milwaukee Road's expansion policies exists at present. In his 1948 centennial history of the Milwaukee Road, August Derleth could only remark: "From 1880 forward, the Milwaukee Road expanded and consolidated steadily." Regarding the Red River Valley, Derleth reported "For the Milwaukee Road the primary goals were Kansas City, Fargo and Omaha" and "The brief panic of 1884 halted the Dakota development only a little, and the company made up for the delay in 1885 by purchasing 117 miles of railroad...from the Fargo and Southern Railway, thus acquiring an important position in the Red River Valley, a position essential to the protection of its interests in the Dakota Territory (sic)." Derleth failed to mention Hill's views of "Chicago" railroads in the Valley [5].

4. For their \$1,250,000 in capital stock purchased at par, the Fargo and Southern stockholders received \$586,200 par value of preferred stock in the St. Paul and Duluth for \$398,411.12 and \$498,200 par value of common stock for \$220,186.81. The Milwaukee Road assumed the \$1,950,000 funded debt at par.

Valuation Docket No. 1027 Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway Company et al, 44 Val. Rep. 441, 574, 585, 680-81.

5. Testimony of Alanson W. Edwards, Edwards vs Fargo and Southern Railway (Cass County District Court, Fargo, North Dakota). Date of summons, 26 January 1886, 7-10.

6. Homer E. Sargent to David R. Taylor, 13 January 1884, The Papers of David R. Taylor, State Historical Society of North Dakota, Heritage Center, Bismarck, North Dakota.

7. Not only did the crossing war prevent the Fargo and Southern from getting a piece of the fall harvest, but Hill's intransigence moved Sargent to snort that "Eastern stockholders are indignant at the action of the Manitoba and all violations of contracts and agreements will be tested in the courts. Our people are not disturbed by the action of Hill," thus exposing to Hill the true ownership of the Fargo and Southern. Fargo Sunday Argus, 28 October 1883.

8. Fargo Daily Argus, 22 August 1884. Hill's confused reaction was probably due to the uncertainty of where the new road would interchange its grain traffic, at Ortonville with the Milwaukee Road or at Fargo or Wahpeton with the Northern Pacific.

9. Wahpeton Gazette, 10 August 1884; Great Northern Railway Company et al, Valuation Docket No. 327, 133 ICC 1. The Moorhead & Southern was incorporated on 15 September 1884 but was not built until 1888.

10. In 1883 Mitchell had exclaimed, "The rapidity of the settlement of Dakota is a marvel of the times...The lines in Dakota...will at an early day be supplied with an abundance of traffic, the product of the rich prairies, through which they run, now peopled by an energetic and thrifty race of settlers" [5, 133]

11. In 1886, the Milwaukee purchased the Dakota and Great Southern, which ran from Harlem, North Dakota to Madison, South Dakota. It began cutting back in 1923 by abandoning five miles of the Harlem line. The Edgeley line, completed in 1881, was abandoned in 1978. The Fargo and Southern lasted until 1980. Valuation Docket No. 1027 Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway Company et al, 44 Val. Rep. 441, 555.

12. Historians are unanimous that the increased debt and lack of earnings concomitant to the Puget Sound Extension resulted in the Milwaukee Road's 1925 bankruptcy and receivership. Since 1944, the Milwaukee has declared itself bankrupt twice. Since 1977, through a hard-nosed policy of line abandonments, including the Puget Sound Extension, labor appeasements, and massive debt reductions, the Milwaukee in 1982, finds itself about the same size railroad it was in 1885

when it acquired the Fargo and Southern. See Max Lowenthal [13] for a thorough, and nonbiased account of the Milwaukee's 1925 bankruptcy and subsequent reorganization. See also [15] for a discussion of the road's present precarious state of affairs.

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13. Max Lowenthal, The Investor Pays (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933).
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15. F. Stewart Mitchell, "Milwaukee II: A Transformation of Assets," Modern Railroads (August 1981), pp. 46-48.

16. "The Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway and James J. Hill in Dakota Territory, 1879-1885," North Dakota History, Vol. 47 (Fall 1980), pp. 11-19.

17. Elwyn Robinson, History of North Dakota (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 133-55.

Table

Inbound and Outbound Cars Handled in Three Classes of Freight Service November 11, 1884 to January 13, 1885

	Inbound				Outbound				Grand Total
	Local	Local Interline	Interline Through	Total	Local	Local Interline	Interline Through	Total	
Fargo	11	22	116	149	41	0	22	63	212
Saunders	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
Wild Rice	1	0	0	1	1	27	0	28	29
Hickson	0	0	0	0	0	30	0	30	30
Christine	5	5	0	10	0	27	0	27	37
Abercrombie	3	7	0	10	0	49	0	49	59
Woodhull	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wahpeton	4	6	0	10	2	2	0	4	14
Tyler	2	3	0	5	0	18	0	18	23
Fairmount	1	16	0	17	2	44	0	46	63
White Rock	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Wheaton	0	4	0	4	11	11	0	22	26
Dumont	0	17	0	17	4	35	0	39	56
Graceville	10	28	0	38	1	31	0	32	70
Clinton	1	2	0	3	3	13	0	16	19
Rupert	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Ortonville	7	5	0	12	18	0	0	18	30
Total	45	117	116	278	83	288	22	393	671
Empty Cars Handled				424					
Cars Handled but not in Revenue Service				29					
Grand Total Cars Handled During Period				1124					

Source: "Conductors Train Book, A.F. Bedall, Conductor." Lists car initials, numbers, contents and destinations of cars moved on the Fargo and Southern from November 11, 1884 to January 13, 1885. In the manuscript collection of the State Historical Society of North Dakota, Heritage Center, Bismarck, North Dakota. Data analysis by SPSS CROSSTABS