

## A. B. Stickney and James J. Hill: An Overview of a Railroad Relationship

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Alpheus Beede Stickney (1840-1916), founder-head of the Chicago Great Western Railway, and James Jerome Hill (1838-1916), builder of the Great Northern Railway, were longtime personal and professional friends. These self-made men relied repeatedly on each other's talents and business connections. Stickney, for example, gave Hill valuable access to several Midwestern gateways, and Hill sold Stickney the 92-mile Mason City & Fort Dodge Railway that he needed to reach Omaha. Yet, observers may have seen these gentlemen as the "odd couple" of American railroading. Stickney consistently and fervently backed government railroad regulation; he became what one journalist called a "unique figure among American railway presidents." Hill, typical of his railroad associates, sought an environment where he could exercise the power required to manage his affairs wisely and constructively.

James J. Hill knew why A. B. Stickney, a man so much like himself, differed so greatly on matters of supervision. Unlike the Great Northern, the Great Western was pitted against well-entrenched roads. Between Chicago and Omaha alone it was the most recently built and faced five other competitors. Other than the Twin Cities to Omaha run, its routes between principal terminals sported the longest mileage. Unquestionably, Stickney's system required rate stability in order to survive. Because it was largely a bridge carrier, prolonged slashes in through-traffic charges devastated earnings. Stickney realized that federal control might produce rates that would be ruinously low, but he was willing to take the chance. Also Washington intervention, à la Gabriel Kolko, might well guarantee protection from episodes of grassroots unrest and Populist-like talk of public ownership. This knowledge of Stickney's world explains why Hill could chide him: "If you had my railway, I would expect you to have my thoughts."

The closeness between railroad leaders is neither surprising nor singular. Unmistakably the existence of such ties illuminates corporate developments. Indeed, the map of the country's rail network reflects these personal connections. While A. B. Stickney might be called a "unique figure," being different did not prevent a productive working relationship with the region's premier transportation figure, James J. Hill.

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