

Opportunities for Research in the James J. Hill Papers

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James J. Hill Library

"Most men who have really lived have had, in some shape, their great adventure. This railway is mine," James Jerome Hill (1838-1916) informed the Great Northern stockholders on the occasion of his retirement as Chairman of the Board in 1912.¹ Fortunately, the "Empire Builder" kept a meticulous record of his great adventure, which has been preserved in the Hill Reference Library. Now, 66 years after his death, this truly rich collection may be explored by academic adventurers interested in various aspects of James J. Hill's career, as well as in those of the scores of other prominent personages with whom he came into contact during his long experience in the greater Northwest.

Albro Martin's lively and absorbing biography, James J. Hill and the Opening of the Northwest, emphasizes Hill's important role in the development of the Upper Midwest, the Pacific Northwest, and Western Canada as those regions rapidly emerged from their frontier condition. The Hill Papers, which formed the archival bedrock of that study, reveal even more about the world of a major nineteenth century entrepreneur whose life's work involved him in a multitude of related activities and interests that made his own life such a truly rich experience.

Now that the collection is open to the scholarly community, it promises to enrich the work of current and future generations of researchers interested in the history of transportation, economic development, politics, the use of natural resources, agronomy, colonization and settlement, immigration, philanthropy, Indian-White relations, and a host of other topics. Since he was involved in so many aspects of American life, Hill's papers hold considerable potential for those anxious to integrate business history with other areas of the historical experience. In short, James J. Hill was a man

intensely concerned with the great events of his time, and that fact is reflected amply by the 470 linear feet of correspondence and documents that he and his heirs have bequeathed to the library that he and they founded in St. Paul.

Hill's correspondence with major business leaders was both rich and voluminous. Albro Martin pays particular attention to his relationships with John S. Kennedy, John Murray Forbes, Henry L. Higginson, D. Willis James, George F. Baker, James Stillman, Edward Tuck, Jacob Schiff, and Gaspard Farrer. Railroad leaders such as Edward H. Harriman and Charles E. Perkins also are represented, as are their Canadian counterparts, Donald A. Smith (Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal), George B. Stephen (Lord Mount Stephen), and William C. Van Horne.

There were others, of course, including Philip D. Armour and Marshall Field. Mark A. Hanna first encountered Hill in connection with the coal traffic on the Great Lakes in the 1870s. Later, when Hanna's attention turned to national political matters, Hill congratulated him in the wake of William McKinley's 1896 victory for having "got the situation in the Western States so well in hand." Anticipating the decline in party loyalties, a development with which we have all become familiar, Hill warned his longtime acquaintance on Christmas Eve that "the independent vote of the country, call it by whatever name you may, seems to be increasing in numbers, and I think this vote will control National elections in the future more than in the past." Worried by the prospect of a resurgence of the Populist Revolt, he remained "very anxious...that we have no more political landslides in off years."²

At the same time, Hill played a central role in the settlement and development of the still "virgin lands" of the American Northwest, as well as those of the Canadian West. His encouragement of settlement and colonization from the early days of the St. Paul and Pacific road in the Red River Valley to his more extensive activities on the American Great Plains, the Columbia River Basin, and along the Canadian Pacific, all can be documented through his papers.

As part of that effort, Hill constantly urged the farmers who moved onto the new lands to diversify their crops, improve their herds, and take other measures which in the long run would benefit themselves as well as the Great Northern. To that end, he ran his own "agrarian laboratories" at North Oaks and his other Minnesota farms, and his voice became an important factor in the permanent settlement of the farmers' frontier in the expanding areas which his roads opened.³ Once the more attractive lands were settled, he joined with the other railroad

leaders to support efforts, such as the 1902 Reclamation Act, to conquer the Progressive Era's irrigation frontier [1].

Equally important was his role on the moving industrial frontier. In Minnesota, Hill was a major figure on the Iron Range, and his meticulous records of the Red River Roller Mills (1873-1899) and the Mille Lacs Lumber Company (1881-1916) easily would support analyses as case studies of industrial development. Hill's investments in the coal mines of Iowa, the Northern Rockies, and the Cascade Mountains of Washington State are no less significant and should yield similar results for historians interested in the development of those regions.

An event of considerable importance for the Manitoba road (later, the Great Northern), as well as the territories it serviced, was the construction of the line into the burgeoning silver- and copper-producing region of Western Montana. Competing with the Northern Pacific for access to the fabulously wealthy mining area at Butte, Hill promised Marcus Daly that he would shatter the Northern Pacific-Union Pacific pooling arrangement and offer miners the low rates that would enable them rapidly to expand their operations.⁴ It proved a fortuitous meeting for both. Daly's Anaconda Company already was leading the other Butte mines, including those controlled by the Lewisohn Brothers, in the production of copper. Collectively, they displaced the Michigan mines as the leading copper producers in the United States by the end of 1887 [2]. Both the newly emerging mines and the Great Northern would benefit substantially from the mutually advantageous understanding that was struck in 1886.

Martin has discussed the principal events that mark Hill's debut as an entrepreneur of the first rank on the national stage. His dispute with Harriman, the Northern Securities Case, his involvement in the 1915 campaign to provide desperately needed loans to the Allied Powers, and other developments all are covered in Martin's rich biography. Nevertheless, those interested in pursuing such matters further will find a wealth of material in the Hill Papers.

The "Empire Builder's" role on the international stage suggests even more potential research topics. His relationship with the Canadian Pacific Railroad immediately comes to mind, but there are other possibilities. After 1900 Hill's boyhood dreams of steamboating on the Ganges River translated into one of his few unsuccessful efforts, the attempt to tap the fabled Asian markets through the development of his own steamship lines. That effort failed, but his interest in Asia led him to collect materials useful to historians interested in the Pacific trade. Less well known is his brief involvement in South

America. Drawing on his experience in the development of Minnesota's Iron Range, Hill was, during 1911-1912, in close contact with Gaspard Farrer of Baring Brothers & Company regarding the formation of the Brazilian Iron Ore Company to tap that nation's rich mineral deposits.

Hill's meticulous record of his extensive philanthropic interests provides yet another area for future research. There may be no direct relationship, for example, among his contributions to the American Federation for Sex Hygiene, the construction of the St. Paul Theological Seminary, the Peary Arctic Fund, and the New York Indigent Journalists' Fund.⁶ Yet, these do suggest that Hill's philanthropic interests were wide-ranging, and this body of material certainly would support, either by itself or in conjunction with other collections, a study of philanthropy in American society during its industrializing period.

We have only scratched the surface here. Since the Hill Papers Project is still in its infancy, we continue to be amazed daily by the Papers' richness, both in terms of James J. Hill's own career and those of the extraordinary number of people with whom he dealt in the greater Northwest, Canada, the Eastern Seaboard, Western Europe, Asia, and, on occasion, South America. Ideally, we would hope to establish a program of grants and fellowships and take other measures to encourage scholarly use of the collection. That lies in the future, of course. For the present, the James Jerome Hill Papers, with the sole exception of the 300 fragile letter-press books which he authored, are open for scholarly research. This year, we hope to obtain the necessary funds to microfilm that part of the collection, and then the Hill Papers will be fully available. In the meantime, I and my associate, Robert Frame, shall look forward to hearing from you.

NOTES

1. "The Great Northern and the Northwest: James J. Hill's Letter to the Stockholders on Retiring from the Chairmanship of the Board of Directors, July 1, 1912," (St. Paul, MN: James J. Hill Papers, James Hill Reference Library).

2. Hill to M. A. Hanna, 24 December 1896, James J. Hill Letterbooks, Hill Papers.

3. See the North Oaks, Northcote, and Humboldt Farms subgroups, as well as the Hillier Farm materials in the Hill Papers.

4. Hill to Marcus Dailey [sic], 12 October 1886, Hill Letterbooks.

5. Hill to Charles R. Van Hise, 13 January 1911; to Gaspard Farrer, 4 May 1912; and passim, 1911-1912, Hill Letterbooks.

6. "Subscriptions, Donations, Etc.," Ledger, 1880-1908, 1912-1913, 1915, Hill Papers.

REFERENCES

1. James J. Hill, Highways of Progress (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1910), pp. 185-207.

2. Michael P. Malone, The Battle for Butte: Mining and Politics on the Northern Frontier, 1864-1906 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), pp. 11-56.