

The James J. Hill Papers

An Untapped Source for the Study of Iowa History

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The James Jerome Hill Reference Library has been available to scholars since its construction in the early 1920s. Housed in the east wing of the main St. Paul Public Library, its extensive collections focus on the areas of business and economics. Recently, however, the library has opened a new, rich resource for the study of Iowa history—the James J. Hill Papers.

FEBRUARY 1982 marked the formal opening of the voluminous papers of James Jerome Hill (1838-1916), America's foremost railroad builder. Best remembered for turning the woebegone St. Paul & Pacific Railroad into the giant, efficient, and enormously profitable Great Northern system, Hill's principal efforts centered in the Northwest. Yet, the "Empire Builder," as he was so often called, also entered Iowa. A Great Northern affiliate, the Sioux City & Northern, crossed seventy-three miles of the state between its namesake community and the Minnesota border near Lester. Hill likewise controlled another rail property, albeit detached from his other lines, the Mason City & Fort Dodge Railroad. Known as the Mason City road, this ninety-two mile pike opened for traffic between the two cities of its corporate name on November 1, 1886, and

subsequently operated two short branches that served the Des Moines River Valley towns of Coalville and Lehigh.

The reason for James J. Hill's interest in the Mason City road lay exclusively with his involvement in the extensive soft-coal deposits of Webster and Boone counties. More than a decade before the shortline started, Hill, who then reigned as the Twin Cities fuel czar, had invested heavily in these fields. They offered him the closest source of usable coal and they later gained even greater significance when his own locomotives demanded enormous quantities of the black combustibles. Hill remained tied to both the railroad and the coal until 1901. By then he had access to better and cheaper fuel supplies, so he sold the so-called "Iowa Properties" to his long-time friend and colleague. A. B. Stickney, head of the Chicago Great Western Railway.

While Iowa-related materials appear throughout this mammoth collection, twenty-six archival boxes, labeled appropriately the "Iowa Properties Papers," contain the bulk of them. Twelve deal with the Mason City & Fort Dodge and cover primarily the years 1885 to 1901. Another twelve encompass a variety of specific mining operations, including the activities of the Boone Valley Coal and Railway Company, Climax Coal Company, Clyde Coal Company, Frazer Mining Company, Lehigh Supply Company, Lower Vein Coal and Railway Company, Webster County Coal and Land Company, and the Webster County Mining and Railway Company. Like the railroad correspondence they span the same general time period. And two boxes house many of the writings of Hamilton Browne, Hill's principal Hawkeye state associate and adviser. Browne dutifully kept his colleague posted on a plethora of matters: coal surveys, labor relations, railroad operations, and the like. As with the entire collection, the Iowa group includes a rich assortment of newspaper clippings, broadsides, pamphlets, maps, and some photographs.

The "Iowa Properties Papers" might be considered as two distinct units. For the business and labor specialist there are the coal-related materials. Hamilton Browne generated some of them, and there are the plentiful supply of letters that belonged to Hill's personal secretaries, M. C. Healion, W. C. Toomey,

and J. J. Toomey. These men served at various times as officers of the satellite firms. From them comes a detailed view of the daily operations of the diggings—sinking shafts, technology (adoption, for example, of diamond drills), strikes, recruitment of blacks, accidents, fires, prices, and so forth. Indeed, considerable material is present that spotlights coal mining statewide. For instance, the activities of the powerful Iowa Coal Operators' Association are chronicled.

Typical of the valuable information found in the coal section are the papers of the Lehigh Supply Company. This Hill-controlled firm emerged as a device for evading an Iowa law that prohibited company stores being owned directly by coal firms. In a letter to his St. Paul partner, dated May 16, 1895, Hamilton Browne explained how this occurred. "We organized the Frazer Supply Co. & its members are stockholders of the [Frazer] mining Company." So while the supply enterprise was legally detached from the mining operation, they were in reality one in the same. The Lehigh Supply Company sold general provisions, operated boarding houses, and built homes. Its records afford considerable data on miners' income and expenditures that range from food purchases to property rentals.

The portion of the "Iowa Properties" collection that provides the most diverse assortment of information for the general student of Iowa history relates to the Mason City & Fort Dodge Railroad. Naturally, a substantial amount focuses directly on the daily functions of the carrier itself, whether it be freight-tonnage figures or locomotive-breakdown reports. Yet, since the road's over-all financial health depended so heavily on the territory it served, a vast quantity of information is available on widely diverse topics: matters of agriculture, climate, crops, and town development. Various industries, including of course coal but also gypsum (the "plaster business") are covered, some extensively. A letter from the railroad's general manager C. C. Burdick to its president in St. Paul and Hill underling, William A. Stephens, written September 25, 1890, represents nicely this type of document. Burdick reports in part:

The road runs through a very fine Agricultural Country from Mason City to Fort Dodge, which is as yet but partially developed, there being a large amount of wild land still in the hands of

speculators and non-residents; they are gradually being thinned out and actual settlers are taking their places.

. . . The past year has been one of extremely low prices, while the yield of small grain was exceptionally good, the prices were such as to allow the farmers but little above the cost of production; large quantities of hay, cut with a view of shipment, have been left in the stack owing to the low price. Oats and Flax were generally well shipped out, the latter being a profitable crop.

The papers of James J. Hill themselves possess a long history. After his estate was settled in the early 1920s, the present collection went to Louis W. Hill, a son who headed the Great Northern. He kept the materials in the railroad's general office building in St. Paul. Then, after his death in 1948, the holdings, which had become mixed between those of father and son, were professionally processed. By the 1960s the James J. Hill portion found its way into a specially constructed storage vault in the basement of St. Paul's James Jerome Hill Reference Library where they reside today.

The collection is available to the public Monday through Friday from 9:00 to 5:00. A microfilmed index may be obtained through interlibrary loan. The curator, W. Thomas White, may be reached at the Hill Library, 80 West 4th Street, St. Paul, Minnesota 55102.

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