

Collector-Historian

History collecting and history writing require a background of experience. Mr. Leonard had that qualification in a full measure. In 1918 he was appointed historian of the Union Pacific system. He was to compile a history of the organization and construction of the first transcontinental railroad. It was thought by those in authority that the assignment would take five or six months. As the work progressed, however, it became apparent that the story covered a much wider scope than was suspected even by the promoters of that gigantic enterprise. Its construction had revolutionized the commerce of the world. Its completion was the greatest triumph of an expansionist movement. The dream of Columbus, the vision of a northwest passage, had become a reality. For magnitude of achievement it has no parallel in man's mastery of nature.

Such a drama could not be written in a few months. The story of the building of the steel bridge across the continent would not be a mere chronicling of events. The bypaths of life would have to be related. This was a job for a collector-historian.

Mr. Leonard's researches brought to light forgotten documents and moldering records. Every detail was pursued, every human element classified. Slowly the scenario of the railroad drama began to unfold. But as is often true in thorough work, the more minute the search the more elusive the materials. One man's testimony threw doubt upon the accuracy of another's. Many were interviewed — the petty mechanic and the great financier alike. ♦ History is not made in a day, nor written in an hour.

An assistant engineer (F. S. Hodges), engaged upon the first line to span the continent, became a valuable source of information. His memory traced the construction of the Union Pacific from 1866 to its completion on May 10, 1869. Mr. Leonard cross-examined him many times. He found that his own notebooks, his newspaper clippings, and his vivid experiences were most valuable to a collector in search of the truth. The human side of the building of the road became alive. Hodge's narrative emphasized the fact that it is men who build.

An assistant engineer's account is apt to be incomplete: it would tell only one phase. Members of the construction parties should have some interesting sidelights upon the building of the line. One day while in Chicago, Mr. Leonard had the

good fortune to meet W. J. Gooding — one of the members of a locating party of the western portion of the road. He had worked in Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada; and his remembrances supplied a valuable description of the work in which he had been engaged. ♦ To plan a railroad is one thing; to locate it is another; to build it is still more. A complete history must include every aspect.

Collecting is not only instinct and perseverance: it results from a wide acquaintance. While engaged in the freight office at Ogden, Mr. Leonard met W. B. Doddridge, the superintendent of the western division of the Union Pacific and later general superintendent of the system. From their meeting in 1882 until Doddridge's death a close friendship existed between them, which was very useful to the collector. From him Mr. Leonard obtained the story of the first nineteen years of the Union Pacific, its construction and its birth pangs as a going concern. He also learned that railroads do not exist in isolation: they are interrelated. The men who constructed one road constructed others. Mr. Doddridge was later vice president of the Missouri Pacific Railroad.

Sometimes chance smiles upon those who search for the sources of history. While visiting relatives in Joliet, Illinois, a cousin said to Mr. Leonard: "There is a woman living here whose father was

an important man in the construction of the Union Pacific. If you wish, I'll introduce you to her." Acting upon this advice he was taken to the home of Mrs. Fred Bennitt, who was the eldest daughter of Samuel B. Reed. Reed had been the chief engineer of construction during the location and laying of track between Omaha and Promontory Point. His papers proved to be the most important discovery up to that time.

Reed had kept a record of locations, orders, and letters. He contrasted the problems of a builder with the problems of those who dreamed in New York. He noted the inconsistencies of those who wanted to do, and those who did. His files dated from the days of the enlargement of the Erie Canal to the completion of the Union Pacific. ♦ A collector has to be able to fit every piece of a puzzle into the whole picture. Oftentimes the most unobtrusive part is the most valuable.

Piece by piece the epoch of railroad building became etched in Mr. Leonard's mind. The inter-relationship of American railroads brought him into contact with the early history of the Rock Island Lines, and in 1923 he was appointed research historian of the Rock Island Railroad. He already knew many of the builders of the Rock Island for they were also builders of the Union Pacific. ♦ Railroad construction was an adven-

ture: those who dared, refused to rest on past triumphs.

Mr. Leonard traced the lives of the men who enlarged the Erie Canal until he found that some of the same men drove the golden spike that completed the Union Pacific. The materials of his collection date back to the time when the public had little or no confidence in railroads. A hundred years ago seven companies had to be organized to build a line between Albany and Buffalo in New York — a distance of 296 miles. At that time passengers had to get off the train and buy new tickets six times and re-check their baggage at the end of each line. "The published time between the two points was advertised this way", says Mr. Leonard: "Passengers can breakfast in Albany and *sup* with friends at Buffalo, on Lake Erie, the same evening." ♦ How true it is that nothing is so permanent as change.

Leonard's researches and his extensive collection of railroad materials show that the few men who had the courage to start the first railroads saw those enterprises through to their completion. John B. Jervis, who assisted in bringing the Croton Aqueduct into New York City, besides being one of America's greatest engineers, was connected with the organization of the first railroad in 1829. He was one of the instigators in the construction

of a fourteen-mile railroad between Albany and Schenectady. His principal assistant was Horatio Allen. Allen had been sent to England to interview George Stephenson. Convinced of the success of Stephenson's experiment he purchased the "Stourbridge Lion" and brought it to America as the first steam locomotive.

For the men who undertook the enlargement of the Erie Canal, it was but a step to running the first railroad into Chicago. John E. Henry, Samuel B. Reed, Peter A. Dey, and D. H. Ainsworth came west with the Michigan Southern & Northern Indiana Railroad. All of these men were intimately connected with railroad building until the Atlantic was connected with the Pacific by rail. The time check of Reed on the Erie Canal dates 1841. It rests in the Leonard collection along with a letter from Reed to his wife on January 31, 1870. In speaking of the completion of the first transcontinental railroad he wrote: "Tomorrow I close my accounts and the Auditor of the company will be here to take all construction accounts off my hands. We get great credit for the good shape all our papers and books are returned in. There are no company books and vouchers in New York or Boston that are in as good shape as the construction accounts I returned from the west." ♦
Destiny is not so kind to all men. Few, indeed,

are they who may pursue their dreams until they become realities.

One of the strongest personality links in Leonard's chain of railroad builders is Thomas Clarke Durant — one of the most important figures in the history of railroad transportation in America. He was a man of impatience and of ambition. As evidence of his ability, he graduated from a course in medicine at Albany College when he was not yet twenty-one. There he heard Amos Dean (who was later Chancellor of the University of Iowa) lecture on medical jurisprudence. The life of a doctor was too sedentary for Durant; so he joined his uncle's firm of Durant, Lathrop & Company, shippers of grain and flour in New York City. Grain came too slowly: he wanted more. The enlargement of the Erie Canal was a possibility. When "the doctor" got to Buffalo he found that the Michigan Southern & Northern Indiana Railroad was projected. The completion of the road would mean more grain, and as a consequence he turned all his energies into the achievement of that result. And railroading took all of his attention until his death. The story of this railroad builder is like a tale from the Arabian Nights.

For many years Mr. Leonard had sought the whereabouts of William West Durant, the son of Thomas Clarke Durant the railroad builder. He

was sure that William Durant had his father's papers — papers and documents which contained the inside history of the Union Pacific. For a long time the search seemed hopeless. The Durant family had dropped from sight: no one seemed to know where they were. But Mr. Leonard kept on searching because he had faith in his vision of a great railroad history and because he never lost his enthusiasm for collecting.

Then one day an unknown person living in South Carolina informed Mr. Leonard of the address of Thomas C. Durant's son: he was living in a modest apartment house in New York City. Mr. Leonard hastened to make his acquaintance. The interview which followed convinced William Durant of Mr. Leonard's profound knowledge of railroad construction and railroad history. He also sensed Mr. Leonard's understanding of men and his sympathy for those who had been great but whom history had forgotten or belittled. William Durant was enough like his father to see and appreciate the truth that important accomplishments develop from the cultivation of every detail. At the close of the day's talk he said: "Many people have been seeking my father's papers. But since you seem to know more railroad history than any man I have ever met, I will give you all of my father's papers." And he did.

The recent economic depression caused many people to lose their perspective. History belongs to the arts, and in economic crises the arts are forgotten by all but the few. Mr. Leonard wanted, in the serenity of his autumnal years, to write his story of the Union Pacific. For fifty years he had searched and collected, and now he wanted to write. Where should he go to seek the fulfillment of his hope, the realization of his life's dream?

Railroads were being reorganized; capital was frightened. But the State Historical Society of Iowa had lost none of its zeal for making history accessible to those who want to know. It was the Society's Superintendent who caught the spirit of Mr. Leonard's adventure and understood the value of his collection: he made it possible for the collector-historian to come to Iowa City to complete his lifelong task.

And so in 1933 Levi O. Leonard came home — came back to Iowa City, the scene of his boyhood days. And with him came the collection of one who had pursued a vision for a lifetime.

While arranging documentary materials for systematic filing in the steel cases, Mr. Leonard became aware of a gap in his collection: certain important papers pertaining to the Credit Mobilier were lacking. The missing material included the records which Congress wanted but could not find

during the investigation of the Credit Mobilier in 1873. To be sure these papers had been used in a trial at Providence, Rhode Island, in 1879; but no one knew what had become of them after the close of that trial.

It was in January, 1937, that the widow of William Durant informed Mr. Leonard that she had come into the possession of a box of Union Pacific papers which for some sixty years had lain unnoticed in the vaults of a bank in New York City. Would he come to New York and advise her what to do with this box of papers? Mr. Leonard conferred with the Superintendent of the State Historical Society and the Superintendent conferred with the Dean of the Graduate College of the State University.

"Do you think he will be able to get the papers?" asked the Dean.

"I am sure he will", replied the Superintendent. "He always gets what he goes after."

The next morning Mr. Leonard was off for New York City. Five days later he returned to Iowa City with the box of Credit Mobilier papers under his arm.

In the atmosphere of a great university, surrounded by thousands of documents, stimulated by the counsels of an historical society, and aided by a sympathetic collaborator, Mr. Leonard works

with the enthusiasm of youth on a history of the first continental railroad which includes the story of the Credit Mobilier. The history of the Union Pacific — its planning, its construction, its financing, and its many human sidelights — makes a mighty sweep in the drama of American history.

To-day, in the Indian summer of a life of adventure, Mr. Leonard is putting together the last pieces of his railroad puzzle. And while doing this he recalls the days of "the golden west", with its colorful cowboys and still more colorful Indians. He witnessed the passing of the frontier and the forging of a united nation by the construction of a wide-spread net of railroads. He gathered the documentary threads that are to be woven into the romance of a nation in the making.

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