



NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Empire Builder Documentary Completed

SEATTLE, Washington - "If Gatsby had lived, he'd of been a great man. A man like James J. Hill. He'd of helped build up the country," *F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby*..

While the portrayal of Jay Gatsby is widely known throughout the United States, the real-life individual Fitzgerald compared him to has nearly vanished from the pages of history.

After 21 years in production, Great Northern Filmworks is trying to change all of that with the release of its 4-episode documentary series, ***The Empire Builder: James J. Hill and The Great Northern Railway***. Produced and directed by Northwest filmmakers Stephen Sadis and Kyle Kegley, the documentary captures the epic life of one of America's greatest entrepreneurs. As transportation historian Carlos Schwantes states in the film's opening, "I think what he did could only be described in one word: audacious."

When the railroad ushered in one of the most transformative eras in American history, James J. Hill emerged as its unrivaled leader. Building a transportation empire that stretched across North America and to the Orient, he was a catalyst for the agriculture, timber and mining industries of the West. "He not only changed trade;" said U.S. Economics Professor, Burton Folsom, "he changed the way the world worked."

Hill was unlike any other railroad owner of his day. He was deeply interested in the development of the United States and surprisingly, was an early advocate for the sustainable use of our nation's resources, even mentioning "climate change" in a speech in 1909.

In 1878, Hill organized a syndicate to purchase a local Minnesota railroad that had gone bankrupt three times. Over the span of 15 years, he blanketed the Midwest's Red River Valley with lines, then pointed his rails west, crossing the Rockies and Cascades to reach Seattle. What was once derided as "two streaks of rust and a right of way," Hill built into an expansive transportation network that continues today as the BNSF Railway.

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Without the benefit of federal land grants, Hill had to build his transcontinental differently than the other railroad barons. Seeking advantages from efficiencies, he demanded “the lowest grade, least curvature and shortest distance possible.” He also had to create the market to feed his railroad, dispersing agents around the country and throughout Europe to attract tens of thousands of immigrants and settlers to the West. Hill considered farmers to be the “backbone of prosperity,” and used his influence and personal wealth to teach them the latest practices, incentivize better crops as well as supplying farmers with critical short-term loans.

As the pendulum swung from the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era, Hill was a lightning rod for the most impactful issues of the day: immigration, government regulations, market manipulation, trust-busting, Native American displacement, environmental stewardship as well as financing America’s allies during The Great War.

To bring this production to life, Sadis first wrote a 1-hour script in 2001 but was unable to raise production funds through grants. In 2008, he began to underwrite the film himself, and with the help of Kegley, a 2-hour script was written and nine interviews with scholars and historians were filmed. The project was shelved again until 2017, when they established Great Northern Filmworks, a non-profit organization. Over the next five years, a shoestring budget was raised, the script evolved into a 4-hour series and another 17 interviews were filmed. Thousands of hours of editing later, the documentary is now finished and is set for release on September 30th.

Information on how to stream or purchase the DVD of the documentary can be found at: www.greatnorthernfilmworks.com.

Link to trailer: <https://vimeo.com/747823748>

Items of interest in the documentary related to Minnesota:

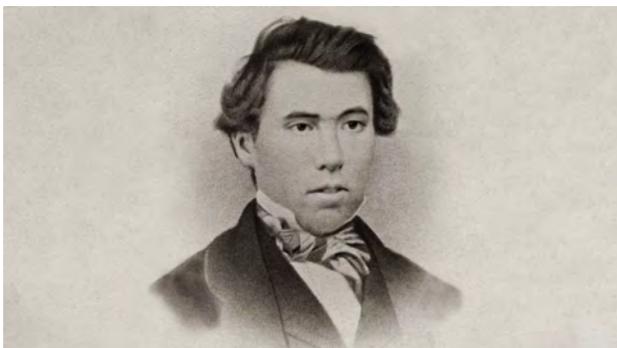
- Hill arrives in St. Paul in 1856 at the age of 17 and quickly finds work as a bookkeeper for J.W. Bass & Co. The town is still referred to by many as “Pig’s Eye” after a local tavern.
- Ten years later, Hill establishes the James J. Hill Co. with a warehouse on the levee that can lift cargo from steamboats and load onto rail cars in one step rather than two like all the other waterfront operations. Hill offers the lowest rates ever quoted and captures significant market share.



- Working an “energy revolution” from wood to coal, Hill starts the North Western Fuel Co. and grows his business by 500% in its first years, turning the Twin Cities into one of the most important fuel distribution centers in the country.
- Hill organizes The Associates to purchase the St. Paul and Pacific Railway in 1878
- Hill blankets the Red River Valley with spur lines connecting dozens of towns, enabling farmers to get their crops to market.
- Great Northern agents are dispatched to Germany and Scandinavian countries brought a wave of immigrants to the region. By 1890, Germans and Scandinavians accounted for 44% of the Midwest population, forever altering the ethnic mix of the region.
- Hill orchestrated the construction of a multi-line Union Depot in St. Paul in 1881, donating the lands its sits upon.
- Hill builds the grand, 300-room Lafayette Hotel along the shore of Lake Minnetonka in Wayzata in 1882.
- After 22 months of intensive work, Hill finishes building the Stone Arch Bridge in 1883. Crossing the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, the bridge became an enduring icon of the city.
- Hill purchases 55,000 acres of farmland in Minnesota and uses his 5,000 acres farm called North Oaks to conduct agricultural experiments.
- Hill imports some 800 head of Europe’s finest cattle, sheep and hogs to North Oaks and then gives away 7,000 of their offspring to farmers along his line.
- In 1885, Hill incorporates the Eastern Railway of Minnesota, connecting St. Paul to Lake Superior. He builds massive grain operations in Duluth and Buffalo, naming it the Great Northern Elevator Co.
- Hill moves his railroad's headquarters to the new 5-story Manitoba Building in 1888.
- In 1888, he launches the Northern Steamship Co, building six high-capcity freighters an 2 luxury liners to carry cargo and passengers across the Great Lakes. His lower rates breaks the price-fixing agreement among the region's railroad owners.
- In 1891, Hill builds his 36,000 square foot mansion on Summit Avenue - now part of MNHS.



- St. Paul launches a city-wide celebration to honor Hill and the completion of the Great Northern Railway in 1893. With two transcontinentals (along with the Northern Pacific) at its doorstep, St. Paul declares itself "the Center of North America."
- Hill goes toe to toe with Eugene Debs, president of the American Railway Union, whose members launched a strike against the Great Northern lasting 18 days in 1894.
- In 1900, Hill sells 900,000 acres of timberland to his Summit Avenue neighbor, Frederick Weyerhaeuser, in the largest private land transaction in the nation's history.
- Teddy Roosevelt gives his "Speak softly and carry a big stick" speech at the Minnesota State Fair in 1901. He also begins to speak of corporations getting too big, which will ultimately lead to the anti-trust case against Hill's Northern Securities Co.
- Hill purchases 67,000 acres of iron ore property in the Mesabi Range and gives it to Great Northern shareholders. Great Northern Iron Ore Properties signs a long-term lease with J.P. Morgan's U. S. Steel that was one of the largest industrial contracts of its day.
- Hill purchases and merges together the First and Second National Bank of St. Paul to ensure farmers are able to get short-term loans during harvest. The bank would go to become USBank.
- Hill is struck with a severe illness in 1916. Doctors William and Charles Mayo travel from their clinic in Rochester to perform surgery at his Summit Avenue home.
- May 29th, 1916, Minnesota and the nation mourns the loss of James J. Hill. In St. Paul, flags are lowered to half staff, schools, banks and theaters are closed.
- Hill's largest donation (\$20 million today) funded the construction of the James J. Hill Reference Library which opened in 1921.



James J. Hill arrives in St. Paul on July 21, 1856



Hill starts his own business with a warehouse on the levee



Hill's North West Fuel Co. sparks an "energy revolution" from wood to coal



Hill and his associates purchase the St. Paul & Pacific in 1878 and rename it the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railway



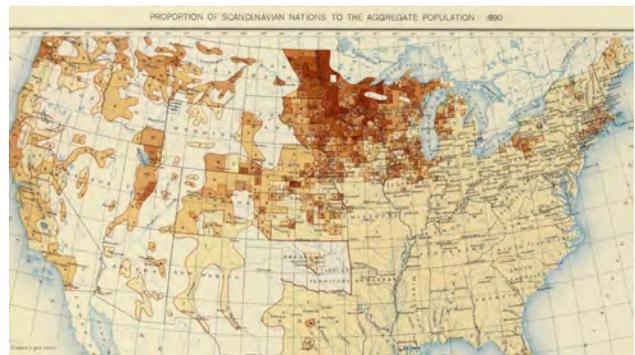
Hill's "Manitoba" blankets the Red River Valley with spur lines to dozens of towns



Pamphlets tout the Red River Valley as the "Nile of the North"



Agents sent to Europe used pamphlets like these to attract thousands of new settlers



By 1890, Germans and Scandinavians attracted to the U.S. by the Great Northern, accounted for 44% of the Midwest population, forever altering the ethnic mix of the region.



Hill orchestrates the construction of a multi-line Union Depot in St. Paul in 1881, donating the land that it sits upon



Hill builds the grand 300-room Lafayette Hotel along the shore of Lake Minnetonka in Wayzata in 1882



Smoke and noise from the railroad become an issue off contention between the leadership of Wayzata and Hill



Construction of the Great Northern's Stone Arch Bridge in Minneapolis crosses the Mississippi River in 1883



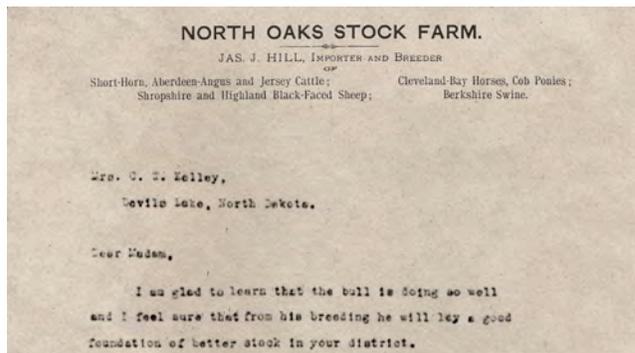
Completed in 1883, the Stone Arch Bridge has been an enduring icon of Minneapolis



Hill purchases 55,000 acres of farmland in Minnesota and uses his 5,000 acre North Oaks Farm to conduct agricultural experiments



Hill imports 800 head of Europe's finest cattle to North Oaks with the goal of improving the bloodlines throughout the Midwest



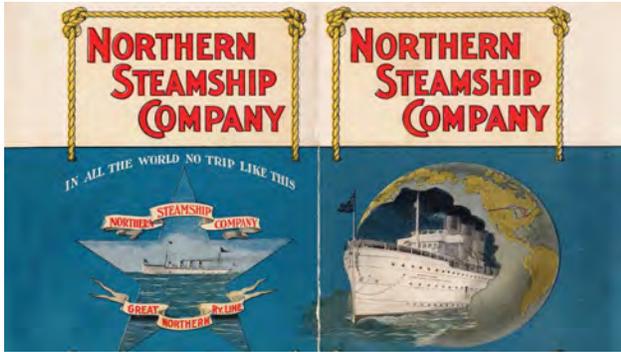
A letter from Hill acknowledging one of the 7,000 head of cattle he gave to farmers along his line



Hill establishes the Eastern Railway of Minnesota and builds a line from St. Paul to Duluth in 1885.



Hill builds massive grains operations in Duluth and Buffalo in 1886, calling it the Great Northern Elevator Co.



In 1888, Hill launches the Northern Steamship Co, with 6 freighters and 2 luxury liners operating on the Great Lakes. His lower rates break the price-fixing agreement among the region's railroad owners.



In 1891, Hill and his family move into their new 36,000 square foot mansion on Summit Avenue - now owned by MNHS.



Construction of the Great Northern,,from St. Paul to Seattle, is completed in January, 1893



St. Paul launches a city-wide celebration to honor Hill and the completion of the Great Northern Railway.



With two transcontinentals at its doorstep, St. Paul declares itself "the Center of North America."



An early map of the Great Northern Railway



Hill goes toe to toe with Eugene Debs, president of the American Railway Union, whose members launched the Great Northern strike, lasting 18 days in 1894.



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V.P. Teddy Roosevelt gives his "Speak softly and carry a big stick" speech at the Minnesota State Fair in 1901. He also speaks of corporations getting too big.



Hill's Northern Securities holding company is broken up in a precedent-setting anti-trust Supreme Court case in 1904



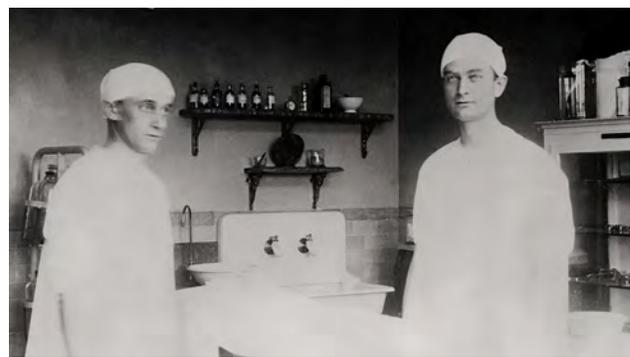
Hill purchases 67,000 acres of iron ore property in the Mesabi Range and gives it to Great Northern shareholders



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INTERVIEWEES FROM MINNESOTA



Earl Currie (deceased)
had a 46-year career in the railroad industry and is the author of *James J. Hill's Legacy to Railway Operations*



Larry Haeg
is the author of several books, including *Harriman vs. Hill: Wall Street's Great Railroad War*



Don Hofsommer
Professor of history and director of department at St. Cloud State University, and is the author of *Minneapolis and the Age of Railways* and *The Great Northern Railway: A History*



Eileen McCormack
Hill Family historian and researcher at the James J. Hill Reference Library for 14 years. She has published and lectured extensively on James J. and Mary Hill and their family as well as the early history of Saint Paul



W. Thomas White
James J. Hill scholar and former curator at the James J. Hill Reference Library in St. Paul, Minnesota. Author of *A Gilded Age Businessman in Politics: James J. Hill*