
GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY Co. PAPERS and NORTHERN PACIFIC RAILWAY Co. PAPERS

W. Thomas White, Editor

The Great Northern Railway Company

The Great Northern Railway Company (GN) played a pivotal role in the conquest and development of the northwestern frontier, a territory that included Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. Both nationally and regionally, the GN was a latecomer among transcontinental railroads—while the Union Pacific was completed in 1869 and the Northern Pacific traversed the northern tier of states in 1883, the GN did not reach the Northwest Coast until a decade later. Yet the Great Northern, too, opened vast new lands in the Northwest; indeed, it quickly surpassed other carriers in the region, despite the fact that it did not enjoy a federal land grant. Later, it served as a base for its president, James J. Hill, to ally with J.P. Morgan and construct the Northern Securities Company, a predecessor of Burlington Northern, Inc., which controlled the GN, Northern Pacific, and Chicago, Burlington & Quincy railroads, and which was the largest corporation of its day.

The Great Northern, then, was an important member of the industry that spawned America's first big business. As such, it was a pioneer in its own right as it developed new techniques of management, finance, and labor relations, while at the same time it sponsored major campaigns for settlement and economic development along its lines.

The Northern Pacific Railway Company

The Northern Pacific Railway Company (NP) was the first transcontinental railroad to traverse the northern tier of states. Chartered in 1864 by the United States Congress to construct a line from Lake Superior to Puget Sound, the NP in return received title to an estimated forty-seven to sixty million acres in alternating sections along its line—the largest land grant ever awarded by the federal government. Because of the vast lands that the NP controlled or claimed under its land grant and because of its fundamentally important role as a carrier and as a pioneer in finance, management, labor relations, and other matters, the Northern Pacific exercised a pivotal influence in the settlement and development of the Northwest. Viewed another way, the NP, as an important organization within the railroad industry, was among the very first big businesses in the United States. Consequently, the Northern Pacific, like its counterparts elsewhere, served as a model for corporate enterprise in the industrializing nation.

THE PAPERS

Our collections of Great Northern and Northern Pacific records have been edited from the voluminous original documents held by the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota. The holdings are so large—over 6,000 linear feet of material to 1970 for the GN, and over 12,000 linear feet of material to 1970 for the NP—that by necessity we have focused our collections on major files (a total of over 50,000 pages) from just a few broad topical areas: corporate policies, labor relations, and settlement and development activities. Chronologically, our published collections cover the early 1860s through the early 1920s, with occasional files extending into the 1930s. Subsequent collections covering the mid 1920s through the mid 1940s are now being planned.

Board of Directors' Minutes and Corporate Histories

The files that include board of directors' minutes and corporate histories provide unparalleled documentation of the highest levels of corporate policymaking. Because the GN and the NP were among the nation's leading railways at a time when railways formed the nation's largest industry, these documents from inside the corporate boardroom are a valuable resource for the study of business history. In thousands of pages of largely untapped files, researchers can discover a comprehensive record of not only *what* happened but also *why*. It is possible to trace—as never before—key developments relating to corporate structure, management, and finances. Such detailed files of corporate planning and operations have never been published until now for companies as large and as influential as the GN and the NP.

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Labor

Both in their construction phases and later, the GN and the NP opened vast new areas and served as employers of first resort for thousands of laborers. The labor files of both railways provide a wide range of documentation on the experiences of workers from the early 1880s to the period of company unionism that followed in the wake of the 1922 Shopmen's Strike. Topics included in the collection are wages and working conditions; labor organizations; strikes; the impact of race, ethnicity, and gender in the work force; federal intervention and legislation affecting the railways; and other related matters. Ranking among the major employers of the period, the GN and the NP played a key role in the frequently troubled development of management-labor relations in the U.S. during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus the correspondence, reports, and special subject files that are reproduced for the first time in this collection will provide labor historians with a new, important, and convenient resource.

Settlement and Development

The welfare of both the GN and the NP were closely intertwined with general economic vitality and growth along their lines. Consequently, both railways paid close attention to—and actively promoted—agriculture and other industries within the territories they serviced. Similarly, the GN and the NP launched vigorous campaigns to recruit farmers and others to settle the newly opened lands. In this connection, the GN and the NP were instrumental in various irrigation and reclamation projects, primarily on the Great Plains and, west of the Rocky Mountains, on the Great Columbia Plain. Also noteworthy is the early role of both railways in the development of Glacier National Park, Yellowstone National Park, and the tourist industry. Because of the importance of all of these topics—settlement, agriculture, land development, natural resources, tourism, conservation, and others—to the study of the American West, the extensive documentation available in the GN and the NP records is certain to be widely used by scholars.

The Editor

W. Thomas White (Ph.D., University of Washington) is Curator, James J. Hill Papers, James Jerome Hill Reference Library, and has written extensively on railroads and railroad workers.

These microfilm editions of the board of directors' minutes and related papers offer unique opportunities to study the varied activities of two of America's premier railroads, the Great Northern and the Northern Pacific. Those interested in corporate strategies, labor relations, and land disposal and settlement patterns will find these materials of enormous value. I highly recommend these documents.

—Dr. H. Roger Grant
Professor of History
University of Akron

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