

# WORKING FOR THE RAILROAD

## Life in the General Offices of the Great Northern and Northern Pacific, 1915-21

Bruce M. White

THE HISTORY of an institution, whether it is a corporation, a college, or a church, is more than the changes in its administrative structure, the lives of its presidents and its chairmen of the board, the amounts of its capitalization, or the construction of its physical plant. What should not be ignored is the human history of the institution — the interaction of its members or employees with each other and with their superiors and the day-to-day story of all their lives together.

With some picturesque industries, we know a great deal about this aspect of their history. We know more about the business lives and the work traditions and folklore of voyageurs and lumberjacks than we do about the structure of the companies that employed them. On the other hand, much of what has been written about modern white-collar businesses deals only with the highest level of company management and the broadest and sometimes driest aspects of company history. We learn a great deal of the famous men who run industries, but little about the work lives of the clerks, secretaries, office boys, bookkeepers, and office managers who make up the bulk of company employees.

What was it (or is it) like to be an office worker in a white-collar business? Historians have not yet begun to tell us. Even novelists and movie directors often view the eight or more hours that an office worker spends on the job not as a crucial part of his or her life, but as something to be passed over in chronicling family life or home amusements.

This may be related to the abhorrence that many people have for bureaucracy and for what is often viewed as the tediousness and sterility of office work. But even so confirmed a formulator of this last idea as C. Wright Mills concedes that there might be a human side to life in an office when he remarks condescendingly that "For the man or woman lonely in the city, the mere fact of

meeting people at the place of work may be a positive thing."<sup>1</sup>

Just as there was more to the work life of the voyageur than the action of plunging a paddle into the water, there is more to the work lives of office workers than the repeated nudging of the fingers against the keys of a typewriter. Office workers are not faceless and mindless spare parts in what C. Wright Mills calls "a great salesroom, an enormous file, an incorporated brain." They are human beings who in the course of working together on common work projects under the same management, eating lunch together, going on coffee breaks together, and taking part in office picnics and other work amusements not only manage to preserve their humanity but participate in a separate work culture as tangible as those of the lumberjack and the voyageur.<sup>2</sup>

There are many possible sources for information on the work lives of office workers. Oral interviews such as those that Studs Terkel made for his book *Working* (1974) may help us to think of office workers as more than automatons. Diaries, letters, newspapers, photographs, and office newsletters might also be useful. Furthermore, the business records of a company can often prove to be a rich source.

SUCH IS the case with the records of the Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads preserved in the Minnesota Historical Society's division of archives and

<sup>1</sup>C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*, 231 (Paperback edition, London, Oxford, New York, 1975).

<sup>2</sup>Mills, *White Collar*, xv.

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manuscripts. Contained there among the balance sheets, the company correspondence, and the reports of the meetings of the boards of directors is material with which a historian of human institutions could someday write of the two railroads not merely as business organizations but as social entities.<sup>3</sup>

It must be pointed out that railroad companies have always been as dependent on the clerks, bookkeepers, secretaries, and many other workers they employ in their main offices as on the more visible stationmasters, train engineers, porters, and conductors. In fact, without office workers to co-ordinate them, the vast networks of railroad lines would not hang together no matter how firmly each rail might be nailed to the ground.

Information about these office workers and the offices in which they worked is readily available in the records of the Northern Pacific and Great Northern. Consider, for example, the records of the two companies relating to the construction and use of the structure built during 1914 and 1915 to house the main offices of the two lines. Located on three-quarters of a block bounded by Jackson, Sibley, Fourth, and Fifth streets in downtown St. Paul, the massive fourteen-story structure which now houses the Burlington Northern was built largely at the instigation of James J. Hill, founder of the Great Northern. As the *St. Paul Daily News* reported on August 29, 1915, the building, although it was designed by Chicago

architect Charles S. Frost (also known for the union depots in St. Paul and Minneapolis), was in fact "the latest product of the creative genius of Mr. Hill. He built a Northwest empire and set it going. Then he decided to outshine all other constructionists and erect the largest and best railroad office building in the United States." The structure was so closely associated in many people's minds with Hill that it was sometimes referred to as the "Hill Building" even after Hill let it be known that he did not care for the honor.<sup>4</sup>

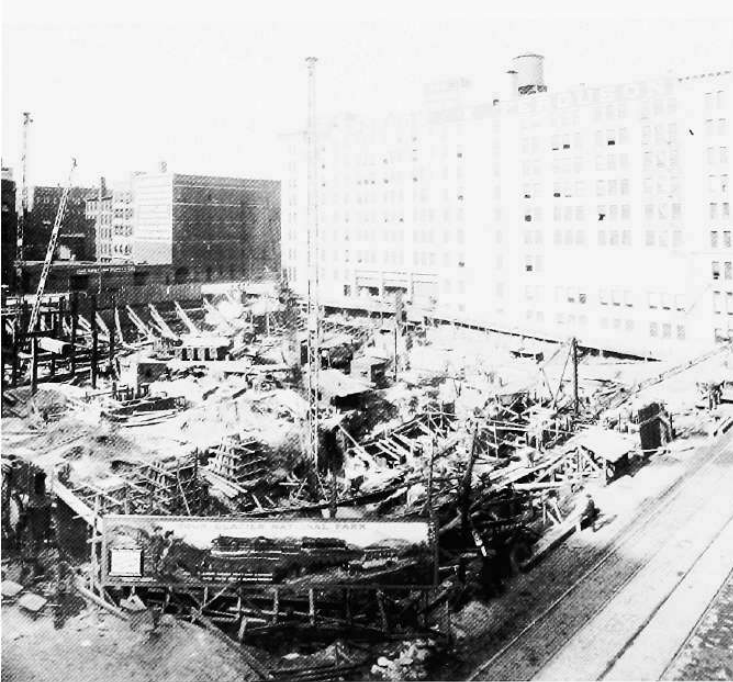
More accurately, the structure was known as the Railroad and Bank Building, a name which took into account the fact that it housed not only the main offices of Hill's own railroad, the Great Northern, but also the Northern Pacific and two other companies dominated by Hill, the First National Bank and the related Northwestern Trust Company. Hill's interest in the two financial companies had come about in 1912, but he had had de facto control over the Northern Pacific since about 1900. As early as 1895, he and New York financier J. P. Morgan had attempted to merge the two railroads. They were prevented by the United States Supreme Court. They tried again in the early 1900s through the famous Northern Securities Company, but this move was again blocked by the Supreme Court. Despite this, there is no doubt that Hill and his associates, through stock holdings, were able to wield a great deal of control over the general affairs of the Northern Pacific. But the two railroads continued to exist as separate companies directing independently their day-to-day operations, and though they were to share the same office building beginning in January, 1916, walls and a central court divided the structure neatly down the center. Each company had its own entrance (the Great Northern on Fourth, the Northern Pacific on Fifth, and the bank on Jackson) and its own set of elevators. At least at first, the only direct passageway between the two sides of the building was a doorway connecting the tenth floor presidential offices of both railroads. The door was kept locked and only a few people were allowed to have keys. Communications between the two railroads and the bank were handled by a telephone system and a six-mile network of pneumatic tubes which allowed a message or document to be sent anywhere in the building in less than ten seconds.<sup>5</sup>

SUPERVISING the construction of the structure was the work of a building committee consisting of William L. Darling, the chief engineer of the Northern Pacific, Ralph Budd, assistant to the president of the Great Northern (also former chief engineer and future president of the line), and Everett H. Bailey, president of the bank. The main work of this committee seems to have been handled through the office of the president of the Great Northern. In the records of that office may be found information relating to almost every detail of the

<sup>3</sup>For more information on the records of the railroads, see Duane P. Swanson, "Great Northern Records Readied for Researchers," in *Minnesota History*, 44:185-188 (Spring, 1975); Maureen J. Leverty, *Guide to Records of the Northern Pacific Branch Lines, Subsidiaries, and Related Companies in the Minnesota Historical Society* (St. Paul, 1977). Many unpublished inventories and box lists of railroad records are available for use in the MHS division of archives and manuscripts. Records of both railroads dating before the mid-1930s are now open for research. Restrictions on later records will expire on a graduated basis until 1997, when all materials through 1970 will be open. Information concerning conditions of access to restricted records may be secured from the division of archives and manuscripts.

<sup>4</sup>*St. Paul Daily News*, August 29, 1915, Railroad Building section, p. 2 (quote). Other published descriptions of the building are in *St. Paul Sunday Pioneer Press*, December 19, 1915, Railroad and Bank Building section, and the *Northwestern Buzzer*, April, 1916. On the building's name, see also J. M. Hanaford to W. P. Clough in Northern Pacific (NP) president's subject file 2004-21, and various letters in Great Northern (GN) president's subject file 6514. G. M. Hopkins and Company's *Plat Book of the City of St. Paul Minn. and Suburbs*, map 1 (Philadelphia, 1928), still shows the "Hill Building."

<sup>5</sup>Joseph G. Pyle, *The Life of James J. Hill*, 2:3-29, 309; Albro Martin, *James J. Hill and the Opening of the Northwest*, 463 (New York, 1976); Walter Rosenberry, "The Political and Economic Significance of the Northern Securities Company," B.A. thesis, Harvard College, March, 1953. On the tenth floor doorway, see NP president's subject file 2004-52. On the pneumatic tube system, see *St. Paul Daily News*, August 29, 1915, Railroad Building section, p. [22], and GN president's subject file 6845.



*"CONSTRUCTION of \$4,000,000 Building Shown in 'Movie' Fashion." So read the headline in the December 19, 1915, St. Paul Pioneer Press when the newspaper reproduced on a full page a series of sixteen photographs taken during the construction of the Railroad and Bank Building. These photographs, four of which are shown here, were taken by the St. Paul photographic firm of Juul and Ingersoll. All were taken from the roof of a building on the opposite corner of Jackson and Fourth streets. The photograph at top left, taken February 27,*

*1914, shows the demolition of the site's previous residents, including the Davidson Block (where the Northern Pacific had its offices in 1882). Top right (June 15, 1914), bottom left (September 15, 1914), and bottom right (October 1, 1914) show later stages of construction. (For another view, see the cover photo.) In the background right of all photos is the building of the Gordon and Ferguson Company (now the Nalpak Building). At left in all four pictures is the Merchants National Bank (now the McColl Building).*

construction, including separate subject files on such details as floor surfaces, drains and plumbing, office fixtures, heating and ventilating, buzzers and telephones, the pneumatic tube system, and many other subjects. Also included in these records are files which tell us of the human history of the office building. One file, for example, deals with the construction and management of the office cafeteria built on the thirteenth floor of the Great Northern side of the building. It was operated by a rotating group of employees known as the Great Northern Employees Cafeteria Association. Since the railroad had not previously had a cafeteria in its main offices, the chief task of the association when the cafeteria opened in early March, 1916, was to get the employees (who were in the habit of bringing lunches or eating either at home or in private restaurants) to eat there. The association began by sending out notices advertising the food offered in the cafeteria and listing the prices charged for it. As another encouragement, the notices sometimes contained poems written by John Thorpe, "Poet Laureate of the Passenger Traffic Dept.," which reported on the great advantages of eating in the cafeteria:<sup>6</sup>

"Here grab a tray  
and fall in line  
The bill-of-fare  
is on the sign  
The sauer kraut  
looks good to me  
The 'franks' cost eight  
The kraut is free  
Great stuff say I  
I'm glad we came  
This place is bound  
to grow in fame."

In another effort to draw customers, the cafeteria association arranged for talented employees on the staff of the Great Northern to entertain during the lunch hour. Included were such entertainers as the "Traffic Department Trio," Jack Cyrus, "The Black Caruso," (an employee in the Dining and Sleeping Car Department), and the two "brightest Stars" in the Passenger Department, "Big Bill" Moore (on the piano) and "Hook em

<sup>6</sup>Louis W. Hill to Ralph Budd, February 16, 1914, in GN president's subject file 6512. Files relating to the numerous aspects of the construction of the building are scattered through subject files 6208-7622, GN president's office. Records relating to the cafeteria are in subject file 6952 of the same series, as well as the separate records of the Great Northern Employees Cafeteria Association. For the poem, see the bill of fare for April 8, 1916, file 6952. References to other entertainers listed below are in other bills of fare for April-June, 1916.

<sup>7</sup>Unsigned letter to Louis W. Hill, March 15, 1916 (first quote), and G. W. Dunlap to Ralph Budd, March 11, 1915 (second quote), both in GN president's subject file 6952.

***"As I began to work [photographing the Prudential Building in Buffalo, New York] I found, to my own surprise, that I was seeing this building not with the decorous disinterest with which a photographer is supposed to approach a work of formal architecture, but as a real building, which people had worked in and maimed and ignored and perhaps loved, and which I felt was deeply important. I found myself concerned not only with the building's art-facts but with its life-facts."***

—John Szarkowski, *The Idea of Louis Sullivan*, (Minneapolis, 1956).

Cow" Mitchell (on the violin). Another featured entertainer was Jack McGilp, "the Great Northern Scotch Comedian and his Harry Lauder songs" including "Roamin' In The Gloamin'" and "It's Nice To Get Up In The Mornin'."

These entertainers apparently did increase patronage of the cafeteria. In fact the ploy worked too well. On one occasion when an orchestra was playing, a number of the employees who had finished eating began dancing to the music. This was not appreciated by the railroad's management, which prohibited the practice. One of the supervisors felt that the dancing would cause his employees to become much too restless and unsettled and "it would require quite a while for his girls and boys to settle down after dancing at noon." Others in the company's management had no objection to dancing in general. They only felt that if the employees wanted to dance "it should be arranged to make a business of it; that is they could come down here in the evening and start their dancing, say at eight o'clock, and continue until half past eleven, but they would not be permitted to dance during the noon hour."<sup>7</sup>

In another effort to increase the business in the cafeteria, the association attempted to obtain permission from the management of the Great Northern and Northern Pacific to allow employees of the Northern Pacific (which did not have its own cafeteria) to eat in the cafeteria. The management of the Great Northern apparently had no objection to this, but did object to the fact that large numbers of Northern Pacific employees, entering through the Fourth Street entrance, might clog the elevators in going up to the thirteenth floor. The cafeteria association then proposed that an opening be cut through on the thirteenth floor so that Northern Pacific employees could enter without riding the

*A VIEW of an unidentified office in the Northern Pacific side of the Railroad and Bank Building, probably taken during the 1920s*



elevators. The management of the Northern Pacific apparently objected to that idea since employees might “run back and forth between the two buildings,” and furthermore if the employees ate lunch together, they “would be comparing notes as to salaries, conditions under which they worked, etc.” Due to these difficulties, the cafeteria association, at least as late as the 1920s, was not able to obtain a thirteenth-floor opening between the two sides of the building.<sup>8</sup>

Although the employees of the Northern Pacific did not have their own cafeteria and were thus deprived of the pleasure of dancing (or not dancing) to musical groups during their lunch hours, they did have other less formal pleasures which they were in “the practise of,” to the consternation of the railroad management. Glimpses of these pleasures and of other aspects of the work culture may be obtained from a series of circulars written mostly by Claud C. Kyle, building manager of the Northern Pacific’s offices during the 1915–21 period. These memos, a series of which we reprint below, were written to help preserve the condition of the new building and to request the good behavior of the employees. How typical these memos are, either of the railroads or of business offices in general, is hard to tell. Probably they raise more questions about employees and management than they answer. It is for this very reason that they are important.<sup>9</sup>

To All Concerned: February 28, 1916

I have established in my office, room 802, a Lost and Found Department, in order that articles lost and found within the General Offices may be returned to the proper owners.

It is requested that all employees finding articles deliver them to this office, and they in turn may report to this office lost articles, and an endeavor will be made to return them to the proper owner.

We have at this time several keys and one pocket jack

knife, which we will be glad to return to the owners on proper identification.

To All Officers: February 29, 1916

The second and thirteenth floors of our side of this building are unoccupied and the Superintendent calls attention to the fact that employees of some departments are in the habit of going onto those floors, also on the roof, playing tag, etc., during part of their noon hour.

Will you please have it understood by the employees of your department that they are not to use the second or thirteenth floors, or the roof, unless sent there for business reasons.

More or less damage has been done to the walls and equipment and the Superintendent has been instructed to take the names of and report to you any employees found not obeying these instructions.

This bulletin need not be posted, but each employee should be required to note the same.

To All Concerned: March 14, 1916

It is the practice in many of the departments to leave the windows open when quitting for the night, and, as we are rapidly approaching that season of the year when we may expect rain and wind storms, employes should be instructed to invariably close the windows when leaving the office at night, in order to avoid damage resulting from water.

Kindly acknowledge receipt.

<sup>8</sup> Unsigned letter to Ralph Budd, June 15, 1916, in GN cafeteria association records (quote); G. W. Dunlap to Ralph Budd, March 23, 1916, GN president’s subject file 6952.

<sup>9</sup> All of these circulars are in NP assistant secretary’s subject file 1195. The circular of February 29, 1916, was written by Jule M. Hannaford, president of the NP. All others were written by Claud C. Kyle. Peculiarities in the spelling of words in the text are exactly as given in the originals. Variations in the capitalization, spelling, and style of the salutation and date of each circular have been standardized.

To All Concerned: March 29, 1916

The practice of employes throwing waste paper, orange peels, apple cores, remnants of lunch, etc., from the windows, must be discontinued at once.

This refers to all windows, but more particularly those on the court and alley.

To All Concerned: October 26, 1916

Recently one of our night cleaners sustained a very painful injury on account of having cut his hand on a broken drinking glass, which had been thrown into the waste paper basket.

Will you please have all employes instructed to discontinue the practice of placing broken bottles, drinking glasses, etc., in the waste paper baskets, in order that we may protect our cleaners from future accidents.

To All Concerned: January 8, 1917

Recently we have had considerable annoyance on account of petty theft.

May I ask that you instruct all employes not to leave money, cigars, confectionery, etc., in unlocked drawers. I should be glad to have a prompt report of any theft occurring in your office.

To All Concerned: February 5, 1917

Some of our employes are making a practice of drawing fancy pictures and also writing on the outside of our pneumatic tube carriers.

Will you kindly see that instructions are given immediately to discontinue this practice.



*CLAUD C. KYLE,  
Northern Pacific  
general office  
building man-  
ager, 1915-21*



*THE BURLINGTON NORTHERN BUILDING, and its neighbor the Nalpak Building, as they looked on a snowy afternoon in January, 1978*

To The Heads Of All Departments: August 31, 1917

It has been the practise of some of our younger employes to play base ball in the alley between the Railroad Building and the Gordon & Ferguson Building. This has become undesirable and we now wish to discontinue the practise.

Will you kindly advise all concerned.

To The Heads Of All Departments: November 9, 1917

It has become the practise of some of our younger employes to run through the halls and in stopping, slide across the terrazzo floors.

This is injurious to the floors and in addition, gives the floors a very poor appearance.

Will you please see that your employes are instructed to discontinue this practise.

Heads Of Departments: January 25, 1918

I beg to advise that the Treasurer has complained to me that on account of the noise and boisterous conduct of the employes during the time they are receiving their pay at his office on our regular pay-days, that it is almost impossible for his office to do any work.

Will you please instruct your employes in order that no further complaints may be necessary.

To All Concerned: February 24, 1919

Much carelessness is being displayed by employes of the Building in raising and lowering windows. During the past week we have had seven windows broken, all through carelessness, and the employes should be thoroughly instructed that when raising or lowering the upper sash, the window stick should be inserted in the

iron socket on top member of the upper frame, instead of merely pushing on the glass and under side of top frame.

Will you kindly give me your assistance in this matter?

To All Concerned: July 2, 1919

The practice of many of our employes of throwing various articles out of the windows, must be stopped at once. This refers to waste paper, orange peels, apple cores, remnants of lunches, cigar and cigarette stubs and ashes, paper fasteners, rubber bands, or any other articles.

Will you please see that these instructions are impressed upon each employe in your department?

To All Concerned: August 19, 1919

We are having considerable trouble in the loss of towels, and as a result we are called upon to pay these claims. This is due entirely to the individual not taking proper care of his or her towels. Many of the female employes are in the habit of leaving the soiled towels in the dressing rooms, and it has now become necessary to instruct the towel man to issue to the various departments clean linen only to the number of soiled pieces returned.

Will you please have the various employes properly instructed.

To All Concerned August 19, 1919

We are required to make repairs very frequently to the swinging doors in the Ladies' Toilets, and we are now satisfied that this is due to the rough usage on the part of some of our younger employes, either slamming the doors or swinging on them.

Will you kindly assist me in this matter by having the younger girls properly instructed in the use of these facilities.

Dear Sir:

December 13, 1919

During the past two weeks, we have had no end of trouble on account of insufficient heating and after an inspection this morning, occupying the time of five different men, we have found that there are a great many of the employes in the building who are attempting to regulate the heat by tampering with the various bolts, nuts and valves connected with the radiators.

Instructions were issued some time ago stating the danger of doing this and asking all employes to refrain from attempting to regulate the heat, but instead to notify this office. In many cases, parts of the thermofiers have been mutilated by improper tools and ignorance on the part of some employes, and this violation of the instructions must be overcome at once if we expect to have 100% efficiency from our heating plant.

Will you please give your employes necessary instructions and kindly acknowledge receipt of this letter.

To All Concerned: July 6, 1921

Some of our male employes have recently formed the habit of throwing lighted cigarettes out of the windows. This, of course, is against our rules and should be discontinued at once.

Recently the top of an automobile was burnt on account of one of these cigarettes and we also had a case where a person on the sidewalk was painfully burnt while passing on Fifth Street.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS of the construction of the Railroad and Bank Building on the cover and on page 26 are from a collection of Great Northern glass plate negatives in the MHS division of archives and manuscripts. For an identification of Juul and Ingersoll as the photographic firm which took these building photographs, see Ralph Budd to Juul and Ingersoll, December 18, 1916, in GN president's subject file 6514. The photographs of the NP office and of Claud C. Kyle are from the MHS audio-visual library. The modern view of the building (page 29) was taken by Bruce M. White.



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