James J. Hill

James J. Hill and his son Louis W. at the Omaha Land Show, 1911

EMPIRE BUILDER
AS FARMER
James Jerome Hill achieved international fame in the second half of the nineteenth century as the builder and founder of the Great Northern Railway, one of the most successful and long-lasting of the nation’s transcontinental railroads. A man of seemingly limitless energy and drive, Hill involved himself in many other projects. He invested money and time in the shipping business, from his early years as wharfmaster on the Mississippi River in St. Paul to his grandiose experiments in trading with the Orient. He owned coal mines in Iowa, collected internationally acclaimed works of art, and entertained presidents at his fishing lodge on the St. John River in Canada. He also remained an extremely active railroad president, working with other businessmen, such as Frederick E. Weyerhaeuser, to increase traffic on the rails and with promoters in Europe to bring immigrants to settle the land touched by his route. In addition, Hill exerted considerable effort to promote and develop agriculture in the mid- and northwestern states.¹

Hill understood, as did many of his contemporaries, the vital importance of agriculture to railroads. Their interdependence was self-evident: railroads opened up land for agricultural settlement and then took the produce to market. This agrarian haulage was so large that even after World War II, one-third of railroad freight revenue in the United States was agricultural.²

To maximize his profits, Hill invested much energy and capital in trying to increase agricultural production throughout the demesne of his railroads. He did this in a number of ways, through a number of different organizations. Hill believed in “wise use” conservation or the “proper utilization of the soil” and found a forum for his views when he

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CLAIRE STROM

Claire Strom, after working as an interpreter at the James J. Hill House, St. Paul, for three years, is now pursuing a Ph.D. in agricultural history at Iowa State University.

SUMMER 1995 243
served on President Theodore Roosevelt’s conservation commission in 1908.3

Working with a variety of agencies, the railroad baron promoted the idea of agricultural education. Through the Great Northern, he donated the land for the Crookston Experiment Station to the University of Minnesota. He ran informational trains into rural areas along his railroads, and he lectured at county and state fairs on issues such as diversification, irrigation, and settlement. Hill also believed in education through demonstration. To that end, he rented a series of plots from farmers along the lines of the Great Northern, to be farmed according to instructions from Hill’s experts based in St. Paul. By 1915, almost one thousand five-acre plots were involved in this demonstration program.4

Hill and the Great Northern organization invested substantial capital into promoting agriculture from Minnesota to the Pacific Northwest. In the Red River Valley they financed drainage schemes, in Montana, dry-farming techniques, and in Washington, irrigation. The railroad magnate himself launched an extensive program to encourage agricultural diversification. Like an increasing number of farmers and other experts, Hill believed that the Midwest’s dependence on wheat would ruin the farm economy, depleting the soil without putting anything back. The solution was diversification and crop rotation. Raising animals would not only use crop waste and give the farmer an income when the wheat was dormant, but the animals would also produce valuable manure. Growing root and forage crops would give the earth a much-needed rest and yield food for the animals. Raising legumes would restore nitrogen to the soil. Hill’s push for diversification included a program in which he gave away nearly 250 purebred bulls and large quantities of Berkshire pigs throughout the counties along his railroad lines.5

Involvement in diversification led Hill to agricultural experimentation. He hired experts to determine the best breeds of animals and corn for Minnesota’s climate and the best feed combination and fertilizer to maximize productivity.

Hill’s interest in agriculture extended beyond lectures and experts to personal involvement. He was born in 1838 on a small farm in Ontario and was buried in 1916 on his family farm, North Oaks. In between, he bought, sold, or rented four

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4 Willet Hays, “Early History of Northwest Agricultural School and Experiment Station at Crookston, Minnesota,” n.d., 10–11, Agricultural Experiment Station—Early Papers and Correspondence, Agricultural Experiment Station Papers, University of Minnesota Archives, Minneapolis; Dickman, “James Jerome Hill,” 91–92; Roy V. Scott, Railroad Development Programs in the 20th Century (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1985), 34, 46.

others. These properties helped the Hill family achieve basic self-sufficiency in an upper-class, urban lifestyle and, as country estates, enhanced the “gentlemanly” role he coveted. In addition, Hill’s farms served as demonstration sites where his experts performed feed, breeding, and fertilizer experiments.6

In 1871 James, his wife, Mary T., and their two young children, Mary F. and James N., moved from their first house on Canada and Pearl Streets in St. Paul’s Lowertown to a cottage at Ninth and Canada Streets (just southeast of the present junction of I-94 and Highway 3). In 1876 the family, with two more children, Louis W. and Clara A., vacated the property for two years while a new house of white brick was built. During this time the Hills rented the Yandis family’s seven-acre farm on Dayton’s Bluff. The stone house there served as their main residence during these years and saw the birth of their sixth child, Charlotte. (Their fifth, Katherine, died in 1876.) The house was, according to Clara Hill, fairly primitive. “It was such a home as one could have found two hundred years ago. It stood on a street and had near neighbors, but water was supplied by a well, and there was no plumbing or furnace or lighting system.” The farm supplied the family with fruits and vegetables, as well as dairy products, although none of the Hills actually worked the land. Mary traveled in the East after Katherine’s death and James went to work as usual. Clara recalled “the wagon departing for town in the morning with my father and the two elder children, often followed by a goat.”7

In 1880, two years after the completion of his new house in St. Paul, Hill purchased 160 acres west of Minneapolis on Lake Minnetonka’s Crystal Bay for a farm he named “Hillier.” This site, like the one on Dayton’s Bluff, was important for raising food. In 1882 Samuel J. Wetherald, a railroad employee and son of Hill’s old teacher, William Wetherald, wrote to Alfred R. Spencer of Fonthill, Ontario, to see if he was interested in running Hillier. (Spencer was probably an old acquaintance of Wetherald, who had just moved from Canada late in 1881.) Describing the property in his letter as “a farm and market garden,” Wetherald also implied that it would not only produce food for the family but supply the new Lafayette Hotel as well: “Mr. Hill . . . is now building a large hotel out at Lake Minnetonka . . . and he wants some competent person near by to take charge of a 160 acre farm half in wood and raise the early vegetables, small fruits, keep a dairy.”8

This farm was the first that Hill used for breeding stock to increase and improve cattle along his railroad lines—and thereby bolster the Great Northern’s revenues. In 1882 Hill recorded the purchase of two carloads of “fancy breeding cattle and sheep” from Scotland with “5 of the Prize animals of last year in Scotland including Lord Chancellor,” a Shorthorn bull. He also began experimenting with crossbreeding Angus cows with his new Shorthorn bulls, hoping to demonstrate the importance of quality stock and prove the value of the dual-purpose cow. Hill, like many others, thought that dairy cows were too vulnerable to the Minnesota climate and beef stock too expensive for the average farmer. He was trying to breed stock with bulls that would provide good beef and cows abundant, high-quality milk. Increased and improved production would then make diversification more profitable and attractive to farmers. (This breeding program would come to dominate much of the work done at Hill’s later farms, North Oaks and Northcote.) Hillier also had an estimated flock of 40 sheep by the summer of 1883. In June Hill sold their fleece to North Star Woolen Mills.9

As Wetherald’s letters to Spencer make clear, Hillier also functioned as a country estate: “He [Hill] would want to send his children out there in summer . . . would probably want pet animals, garden plants and flowerbeds, and such things as children usually take a liking to.”10

Hill’s purchase of North Oaks in 1883 dramatically halted plans for developing the Hillier farm. The stock was moved to North Oaks in September of that year, and Hillier was rented out (and sold in 1903 to lumber baron Thomas Shevlin). It is unclear why Hill chose to move his

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6 Martin, James J. Hill, 14, 614.
8 Dickman, “James Jerome Hill,” 310–11; Samuel J. Wetherald to Hill, Sept. 24, 1882, General Correspondence, and Wetherald to Alfred Spencer, Jan. 12, 1882, Letterbooks—both Hill Papers.
farming schemes to North Oaks. Perhaps he was realizing that 160 acres were not enough for the scope of his agricultural interests. His letters of the time certainly stressed the “commodious” nature of his new farm. It is also possible that the abandonment of Hillian was connected to the fate of the Lafayette Hotel, in which the railroader seems to have lost interest, renting it to Eugene Mehl the year he purchased North Oaks.11

At the same time that Hill was developing the farm on Crystal Bay and establishing his first purebred herd, he was also busy in the far northwestern part of the state, acquiring land in the Red River Valley near Hallock. The Humboldt farm, eventually totaling 45,000 acres and named for nineteenth-century scientist Alexander von Humboldt, was bought from lands granted to the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railroad, one of Hill’s lines, beginning in December 1881. Hill paid $2.75 per acre. Building on the property commenced in July 1882. Managers ran Humboldt using techniques common on the area’s huge bonanza farms, although cultivating only about 3,000 acres. Much of the remaining land was drained and sold in small farm lots of 80 to 160 acres for $5.00 to $6.00 per acre. In some cases, Hill had basic farm buildings constructed on the land before sale.12

Humboldt was the only one of Hill’s farms that seems to have had no familial purpose. The main aim in purchasing it was financial, and it is clear that Hill did make money. The land sales continued at least until 1890 and were highly profitable. The basic bonanza-farm operation was also successful. In 1909, for example, expenses were $24,074.35, while the income totaled $40,033.31, of which $37,019.26 came from grain sales, yielding a profit of $15,958.96. In 1910, when 3,000 acres were split off from Humboldt to make the Northcote division, requiring considerable start-up funds, the profit dipped to about $7,600. By 1911 it rebounded to nearly $12,000.13

Hill also intended Humboldt to be a demonstration farm, a vehicle for conveying his ideas about the importance of diversification to valley farmers. Superintendent H. W. Donaldson, who began managing the farm in 1887, referred in his letters to barley, hay, oats, pigs, blooded stock, and purebred stallions. Donaldson clearly stated his mission in an April 1889 letter to Hill: “I am fully convinced in my own mind that I can demonstrate to the satisfaction of the farmers in this county that there is lots of money to be made in raising stock in connection with their grain, and I never miss an opportunity to point out to many of them that they are buying meat and paying therefore 10 cts per pound that they could raise on the farm for 3 cts.”14

It is not clear if Humboldt had any influence on the opinions of the farmers in the Red River Valley. While wheat was king, they were making enough money that, in all probability, they did not need to worry about buying meat. When wheat slumped, they needed to look at alternate sources of income anyway, so Hill’s farm may or may not have been influential. Nevertheless, improving and selling land was an intrinsic part of populating the area, thus providing more customers for the Great Northern. Humboldt, therefore, was a valuable asset to Hill, promoting diversified agriculture through demonstration and education, populating the desmesne of the railway on well-drained, good land, and bringing in a profit. None of his other farms proved such an economic success.

In September 1910 the Northcote division became a separate entity managed by Hill’s youngest son, Walter J. Hill, 25 years old, who having trouble turning his mind to anything. When he told his father that he would like to try farming, Hill gave him the project of developing the 3,000 acres into a huge cattle station.15

The elder Hill’s plan was to experiment with different kinds of cattle feeds and then inform farmers of the most profitable combinations. In addition, Northcote was to act as a stock farm, breeding quality cattle. Sales of the improved stock and a stud service would help to promote diversification in the area.16

15 John Toomey to D. McCleary, Sept. 14, 1910, Humboldt Farm Papers.
Northcote consistently lost money: $12,497.61 in 1911; $12,030.65 in 1912; and $22,781.78 in 1913. The next year’s red ink totaled $58,968.38. It is unlikely that Hill intended Northcote to make a profit, and the substantial losses should not automatically be blamed on Walter’s management. Stock breeding was expensive because of the high price of establishing a herd. In 1914 the farm’s main expense was livestock purchases of $73,093.05.17

Separate from these costs were those of the building program James Hill launched in 1912 to equip Northcote as a modern feed-experiment station. By August 1914 a cattle barn, silos, root cellar, boardinghouse, power plant, dam, water system, 12 cottages, and a hog house had been erected at a cost of $214,567.67. All told, the construction amounted to more than $600,000.18

Hill never saw his plans for Northcote reach fruition. When he died in 1916, Humboldt was sold off in sections. John Lohr, who had been the financial agent for the two farms since 1911, paid

17 Unbound, unpaged, typed financial records, Humboldt Farm Papers.
18 Unbound, unpaged, typed financial records, Humboldt Farm Papers; Dickman, “James Jerome Hill,” 314.
$208,918 for 4,000 acres, including Northcote, and $75,000 for animals, machinery, and other sundries.19

Despite its final disposition, Northcote, too, played an important role in fulfilling Hill’s agricultural agenda. Intended to introduce quality stock to midwestern farms, it also served a personal function in providing an occupation for the Hills’ troublesome child. The railroad baron must have thought that the farm succeeded in one or both of these areas, as he retained it despite the continuing financial losses.

In many respects the most important of all the Hill family’s farms was the 5,000 acres that made up North Oaks. In 1883, shortly after completing the purchase of Humboldt and three years after buying Hillier, Hill purchased 3,000 acres in Ramsey County from Charles D. Gilfillan for $50,000. Over the next few years he bought 2,000 more acres in small sections. North Oaks remained in the family after Hill’s death, and a part of the original estate is still owned by his descendants.20

North Oaks served as a country estate as well as a farm. The Hills played there, fishing in Pleasant Lake, boating, riding, shooting, and going for country drives. It was common for the entire family to live a large part of the summer at North Oaks, spending enough time there that it should be considered one of their residences. Mary Hill wrote in her diary on April 28, 1899, for example, “I spent most of the day at North Oaks and found considerable to look about after the winter's occupation by Walter and Mr. Bridge- man.” Mary and her daughters established a social network in the area and attended the Catholic church in White Bear Lake.21

21 Here and below, see Mary T. Hill, Diaries, July 13, 1885, Apr. 28, May 3, June 7, July 4, 16, and Oct. 21, 1899, Hill Papers; Hill family photographs, Minnesota Historical Society.
The Hills frequently entertained guests at North Oaks and regularly spent Independence Day there. On July 4, 1899, Mary recorded, "A beautiful morning—The Flag was run up early—Mr. F. B. Clarke, Theodore Schurmeier and Louis went fishing. In the afternoon Papa, Mr. C. and Theodore went for a drive about the fields and pastures—A circus performance was improvised for James [her grandson]—He the clown. In the evening we had fireworks, later singing etc."

Besides recreation, North Oaks provided the family mansion at 240 Summit Avenue in St. Paul with vegetables, eggs, milk, fruit, and fresh flowers, transported daily by cart. The land was decorated with flowers and shrubs for pleasurable visits. In 1888 the flower order included cumbine, auricula, candytuft, sweet peas, poppies, morning glories, cosmos, emilias, feverfew, forget-me-nots, gladiolus, French honeysuckle, lavender, nasturtiums, carnations, calendula, marigolds, sweet alyssum, asters, dianthus, hydrangeas, and sunflowers.22

It seems that Mary Hill had charge of the vegetables and flowers grown at the farm. A 1914 letter from the gardener to John J. Toomey, Hill's private secretary, detailed the seeds to be ordered, adding, "Kindly forward same to Mrs. J. J. Hill for any changes or corrections thereto." James Hill, however, managed the landscaping, spending $2,556.50 in 1914 to ornament the new house and greenhouses.23

North Oaks was also an important part of Hill's agricultural agenda. From 1883 to 1893 it operated as a stock farm and a base for his efforts to breed the ideal dual-purpose cow. This concept was very popular at the time, both among breeders such as Hill and university experts. Andrew Boss and Thomas Shaw of the University of Minnesota school of animal husbandry and Agricultural Experiment Station were strong proponents of this breeding plan, which remained popular well into the twentieth century.24

In the early years of North Oaks, Hill tried to develop a dual-purpose cow by breeding beef cattle with good dairy qualities. In 1885 he wrote to a fellow farmer, C. L. Van Fleet of Marshall, Minnesota, "As to milk, I have Polled Angus cows that have given me from 26 to 28 quarts a day from grass for six months at a time, and I have one family of Shorthorns—Georgiana—that give from 20 to 25 quarts a day."25

To start a herd with the best bloodlines available, Hill imported purebred cattle from Great Britain at tremendous cost. In 1886, for example, he imported six Shorthorns and 35 Polled Angus from Liverpool. The cattle had to spend the winter in quarantine in Quebec and did not reach the farm until May 1887. The total cost was $15,667.80.26

The work at North Oaks involved a huge financial turnover. In 1888 Hill's income from the farm was $30,673.66: of this, $25,040.99 came from the sale of livestock; $640.65 from meat, hides, and tallow; $2,395.08 from dairy products; $1,407.03 from fruit, vegetables, eggs, and grain; $267.48 from firewood; and $922.43 from sundries. This income was offset by expenses totaling $32,614.78. By 1914 the income had increased to $35,047.53, but expenses were $45,483.46, and, taking into account the stock that Hill gave away and the depreciation of his machinery, the farm lost a total of $28,119.47. This cash flow was small compared to the operation at Humboldt, which in 1915 brought in $112,206.07 against expenses of $108,335.28.27

Hill's cash outlay succeeded in gaining his farm a reputation for quality stock. His large annual sales were featured in all the major stock magazines. For the 1887 sale, which Hill held jointly with lumber baron N. P. Clarke of St. Cloud, catalogs were sent to 182 people in Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, the Dakotas, Kansas, Montana, and Indiana. Every year Hill also entered a number of animals in the prestigious Fat Stock Show in Chicago, and every year he walked away with a number of prizes. In 1889

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25 Hill to C. L. Van Fleet, Jan. 27, 1885, Letterbooks, Hill Papers.
26 Chas. Maitland to Hill, Feb. 10, 1887, Quarantine for stock—Port of Quebec, Feb. 17, 1887, and North Oaks receipts, 1886—87—all North Oaks Papers.
Although the detailed account of Hill's breeding interests at this time were not limited to cattle. He raised purebred pigs, buying Pilot, a prize-winning Berkshire, from a farmer in Edmonton, Alberta, in December 1887 and selling many purebred Berkshires throughout this period at $10 per pair. In 1888 his interest turned to poultry, and he acquired some Mammoth Bronze turkeys and Black Cochin and Plymouth Rock cockerels. He also kept various breeds of sheep and horses.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Hill's involvement with large-scale farming at North Oaks was more limited, being mostly directed toward pigs and corn. By 1895 his letterhead stationery indicated that he no longer raised cattle, and his livestock registers show that he had disposed of all of his Aberdeen Angus by 1893. It is possible that the concerns of his new house on Summit Avenue, completed in 1891, of the Great Northern Railway, completed in 1893, and of the only major strike against his railroad, in 1894, kept him otherwise occupied. He might also have been disillusioned by the failure of his plan to improve diversification along his railroad. The thoroughbred bulls that he gave away were not used for breeding, as he had intended. Hill was distressed at "the ingratitude shown by the farmers generally, in disposing of these bulls for beef and other purposes."

In an 1896 article for the St. Paul Pioneer Press, Thomas Shaw painted a scene of great variety, if not intensive husbandry: "At North Oaks to-

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28 Catalog mailing list, 1887, and North Oaks receipts, 1889—all North Oaks Papers.
30 Aberdeen Angus Livestock Register, North Oaks Papers; Martin, James J. Hill, 355, 396, 415–16; Hill to Anton Ziekl, Feb. 15, 1899, General Correspondence.
day carriage horses are bred, dairy cows are kept, sheep feed upon the pastures, swine fatten on the mast of oaken forests, elk and deer browse upon the growth of a woodland enclosure, and a herd of buffalo roams through a large range.” The cattle were probably for family use only.31

Hill’s interest in livestock did not regain momentum until 1905, when he hired Shaw, born in Ontario and, like Hill, of Scottish descent. His career had focused on breeding purebred stock, and in 1893 he had been named chief of animal husbandry at the university. In 1902 he left that position to edit The Farmer, a local magazine that Hill sponsored.32

Shaw, who later worked for the Great Northern as an agricultural expert, was “conspicuous,” according to his biographer, “as a life-long advocate of the dual-purpose cow,” and Hill authorized Shaw “to make an importation of Milking Shorthorns and Ayrshires.” Shaw probably advised Hill to invest in these breeds, which, according to Hill’s secretary, John J. Toomey, were dairy cattle with “good beef points.” (This strategy reversed the earlier one of breeding Shorthorn stock—beef cattle with good dairy qualities.) Shaw was sent to England to buy cattle in 1913 and again in 1914, when he purchased 50 Shorthorn bulls for $17,345. Only five of these were kept at North Oaks; most were given to farmers along the lines of the Great Northern and Northern Pacific, with much more success than Hill’s earlier distribution attempts.33

About this time, North Oaks began keeping new, more detailed livestock registers, recording the purchase, breeding record, and death or sale of various breeds of pigs, sheep, and horses. The years 1911 to 1916 saw registers for Suffolk Punch horses; in 1912 workers kept one for Oxford Down sheep, and in 1913 one for Duroc Jersey pigs. By the time of Hill’s death in 1916, North Oaks was once more a thriving stock farm working toward fulfilling his dream of diversifying farming in the American West by importing, breeding, and distributing high-quality stock.34

An inherent part of any stock farm is experimentation. Crossbreeding experiments had begun at Hillier in about 1882. By 1886 Hill was exhibiting heifers that “attracted wide attention” at the Minnesota State Fair, according to Breeder’s Gazette. These were the product of Hill’s prize Shorthorn bull, Berkeley, Duke of Oxford II, being bred “upon his grand broad-backed, deep ribbed Scotch show-cows.35

Besides breeding cows perfect for the climate and conditions in the Upper Midwest, Hill wanted to determine the optimum feed for maximizing production. To that end, experiments began in the early years at North Oaks. In 1886 Hill told the editor of the Advocate and Stockman that a combination of turnips, beets, cabbages, and some hay and oilcake provided better winter feed for the animals than corn.36

In 1905 Hill launched his first major experiment unconnected to stock rearing. His friend Frank Sturgis of Round Hill Farm in Fairfield, Connecticut, wrote to him about his “flint corn,”

Thomas Shaw, one of Hill’s agricultural experts

32 Breeder’s Gazette, July 11, 1918, p. 53, clipping in Shaw biography files; Martin, James J. Hill, 310.
34 All registers in North Oaks Papers.
36 Hill to Editor, Advocate and Stockman [?], May 17, 1886, Letterbooks, Hill Papers.
which he claimed matured in nine weeks and yielded 40 to 50 bushels per acre, 50 percent more than the average for Iowa farmers at the time. Hill acquired some seed for North Oaks and Humboldt, and, following a speech about the corn at the North Dakota State Fair in 1905, he received requests for seed from various educational institutions.

Hill distributed the corn in both Minnesota and North Dakota and also started an agricultural education train, “The Good Seed Special,” on the Great Northern line in 1906. Thomas Shaw presided over the enterprise, carrying the corn, now called “Jim Hill Corn,” and growing information to the farmers. A letter from Andrew Boss, Shaw’s old colleague from the Agricultural Experiment Station, shows great willingness to help with the project. The university offered to distribute 10 bushels to farmers for experimentation but would also keep enough at the station to maintain a pure line. A note on the letter listed the people and places to receive the corn: Dean Liggett at the university would get 10 bushels; J. H. Worst at the North Dakota Experiment College, 1 bushel; Shaw for the “Good Seed Special,” 1 bushel; North Oaks, 12 bushels; and Humboldt, 1/2 bushel.

The corn was a disaster. Letters from the farmers who tried it reveal that it matured late, if at all—some crops were ruined by frost. It was too hard for cattle or horses to eat. An exasperated correspondent from the North Dakota Agricultural College complained that “six varieties of corn . . . were planted. . . . When the first freezing weather came in the fall from 90 to 95 percent of all the corn had fully ripened with the exception of the Hill corn.”

One of Hill’s more successful experiments concerned keeping records on his new Ayrshire herd at North Oaks. Apart from herd books, few stock records had been maintained there with any regularity. In 1904 Hill received two awards from the Ayrshire Breeders Association for home dairy experimentation, both for personal benefit and for agricultural promotion. It also served as a base for some of his purposes. As a residence and country estate, it was a favored site for family recreation. It provided food and flowers to the Hills at their mansion on Summit Avenue. A well-known stock farm, it promulgated Hill’s interests in diversifying agriculture. It also served as a base for some of his experimentation, both for personal benefit and for that of the Great Northern.

To qualify for this competition, Hill had to keep information on weight of milk, calving, food, and care. Each month he sent milk to the state experiment station, which calculated the butterfat content. The tests not only pleased Ayrshire owners but also, according to a breeders’ association pamphlet, “will be of inestimable value to all breeders of Ayrshires because, covering a long period of time and being official, they will show to the public the value of the Ayrshire cow, for a year, in quantity of milk and butter and percent of fat and total solids.”

Toward the end of Hill’s life, the experimental work at North Oaks had become even more systematic, and the record keeping had improved. In early 1914, for example, dairy workers started to keep weekly accounts of pounds of milk and its average test, pounds and average test of cream, pounds of butterfat from the cream, and pounds of butter made. In April they began maintaining the same records on the lower-grade cattle as well as the thoroughbred cows.

The farm was also experimenting with different types of feed and fertilizer. That same spring, J. J. Finneman, North Oaks’ superintendent, proposed to feed the milkers a mixture of oats, barley, and cow peas when the grass died in the summer. For fertilizer testing, Finneman took direction from F. R. Crane, hired in 1912 from the agricultural school at Menominee, Wisconsin, to run a demonstration-plot program for the Great Northern. In April 1914, for example, Crane shipped acid phosphate and nitrate of soda to Finneman along with detailed instructions for mixing and applying.

North Oaks was Hill’s premier farm, not because it produced or absorbed the greatest amount of money, but because it suited so many of his purposes. As a residence and country estate, it was a favored site for family recreation. It provided food and flowers to the Hills at their mansion. A well-known stock farm, it promulgated Hill’s interests in diversifying agriculture. It also served as a base for some of his experimentation, both for personal benefit and for that of the Great Northern.

37 Sturgis to Hill, Apr. 13, 18, 1905, Corn Experiments file, North Oaks Papers. For more detail, peruse the file for 1905.
39 Corn Experiments file, 1905–06; for quote, see J. H. Shepperd to John Toomey, Nov. 13, 1906.
40 C. M. Winslow to N. E. McKissick, Aug. 13, 1904, and enclosed pamphlet, General Correspondence, Hill Papers.
There, through land and grain sales, Hill realized a regular and reasonable profit from his investment. All of the other farms showed annual paper losses. The canny entrepreneur retained them, however, proof that he did not consider them overall losses. Northcote and North Oaks played a crucial role in the agricultural agenda Hill felt was vital for the success of his railroad, and it is impossible to quantify their financial contribution. To maintain an estate such as North Oaks for the minimal cost of $1,941.12 in 1888 or even $28,119.47 in 1914 probably appealed to Hill’s thrifty side.  

While the busy capitalist did not seem interested in understanding the actual process of farming, hiring experts instead, he did maintain a high level of control over his agricultural enterprises, continually adapting them to suit his personal interests and business needs. He also seems to have derived pleasure from attaining the position of a country gentleman who bred prize-winning stock. This role carried the overtones of inherited rather than earned wealth, a status that Hill continually tried to attain.

The energy Hill devoted to overseeing these farms, most operating concurrently, was amazing, especially since they represented only a small part of his extensive operations. This full-steam-ahead approach to agriculture replicated the amounts of energy he put into his other businesses; in essence, it was energy invested in his overall business. Hill thought farming was vital to the continued prosperity of the country in general and the Great Northern in particular. In the short term, at least, he was right. Whatever sums he spent on agriculture, he died with assets of $63 million, leaving a railroad that was still growing at a phenomenal rate.

All of James J. Hill’s farms fulfilled a variety of functions for him and his family. Hillier and North Oaks offered the pleasures of a country estate. The Dayton’s Bluff farm and North Oaks also served as residences, and Hillier, Dayton’s Bluff, and North Oaks provided food for the family. North Oaks, Hillier, and Northcote gave Hill the opportunity to demonstrate his belief in diversified farming by breeding outstanding livestock, much of which went to improve the general stock in the area. On these farms, his agricultural experts conducted breeding experiments aimed at producing the perfect dual-purpose cow. Humboldt, operated mainly for profit, also played a role in Hill’s dream of educating the region’s farmers about the importance of crop diversification.

Only Humboldt made money in an immediate sense. There, through land and grain sales, Hill realized a regular and reasonable profit from his investment. All of the other farms showed annual paper losses. The canny entrepreneur retained them, however, proof that he did not consider them overall losses. Northcote and North Oaks played a crucial role in the agricultural agenda Hill felt was vital for the success of his railroad, and it is impossible to quantify their financial contribution. To maintain an estate such as North Oaks for the minimal cost of $1,941.12 in 1888 or even $28,119.47 in 1914 probably appealed to Hill’s thrifty side.  

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44 Martin, James J. Hill, 611.

The photo on p. 253 is courtesy of the James J. Hill Reference Library, St. Paul.
All other illustrations are in the MHS collections, including the portrait by Lee Brothers, p. 251.