



William Crooks, 1928, its nameboard, and controls (MHS COLLECTIONS)

IN ADDITION TO THE SESQUICENTENNIAL of the Civil War, this year marks the 150th “birthday” of one of the Minnesota Historical Society’s most significant objects: the *William Crooks*, the first locomotive to operate in the state.

Smith & Jackson, one of several locomotive builders located in Paterson, New Jersey, assembled the *Crooks* in 1861 and shipped it by rail to La Crosse, Wisconsin. There the engine was loaded onto a barge and towed up the Mississippi River to St. Paul, where it arrived to great fanfare on September 9. The locomotive spent that first winter in a makeshift shed. Once track and cars were in place the next summer, the *William Crooks* pulled Minnesota’s first train on a ten-mile trip from St. Paul to St. Anthony on June 28, 1862. Among the passengers were Governor Alexander Ramsey, former Governor Henry Sibley, and William Crooks, the nascent railroad’s chief engineer for whom the locomotive was named.

The *William Crooks* operated without incident until 1868, when a roundhouse fire nearly destroyed it. Rebuilt, the locomotive spent the next three decades in active ser-

vice. Around 1900, with trains growing longer and cargos heavier, the *Crooks* was sidelined for scrapping. Legend has it that James J. Hill himself rescued the locomotive from the cutting torch in 1908, when he had it refurbished to pull an excursion train for his seventieth birthday. The engine began a glamorous second career as an ambassador for Hill’s Great Northern Railway, traveling the system to attend special events and generate publicity. It even made appearances alongside other historic locomotives at railroad exhibitions in Baltimore, New York, and Chicago.

Retirement finally came in 1954, when the Great Northern placed the venerable engine on exhibit in the lobby of St. Paul’s Union Depot. On June 28, 1962, the railroad gifted the *William Crooks* to the Minnesota Historical Society, 100 years to the day after its historic first run. In 1975, after Amtrak trains stopped calling at the depot, the *Crooks* was moved by truck to the Lake Superior Railroad Museum in Duluth, where it remains on loan—and on view—today.

—Matt Anderson, objects curator



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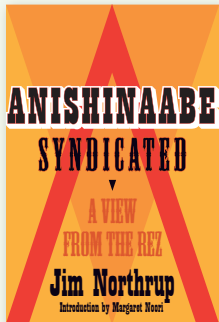
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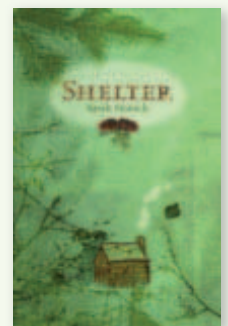
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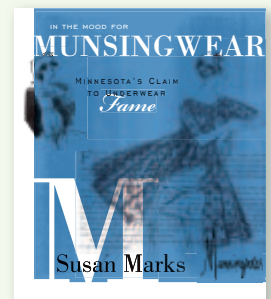
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