

James J. Hill wasn't always admired by Wayzata

In late nineteenth century, Hill and town sparred over location of tracks

By Jason McGrew-King
Editor

James J. Hill is entwined in Wayzata's history — so much so that Wayzata's largest annual community celebration commemorates the man.

Conventional wisdom would suggest that if a city thinks enough of someone to name a festival after him, he must have had a beloved place in the town's history.

But with Hill, it wasn't always so. Consider a saying supposedly popular in Wayzata in the 1890s:

Twixt Hill and hell there's just one letter;

Were Hill in hell, we'd feel much better.

Who was Hill, and why did he inspire such passionate feelings among Wayzatans past and present?

According to "A Popular History of Minnesota," by Norman K. Risjord and published this year by the Minnesota Historical Society Press, the Canadian-born Hill came to St. Paul in 1856 when he was 17.

He worked as an apprentice at a business selling food and coal, then, in 1866, started working as a shipping agent for railroad freight.

In 1878, Hill and a group of investors bought the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, which owned tracks in Minnesota.

Hill eventually built his railroad into the Great Northern, which operated freight and passenger service from St. Paul to the Pacific Northwest.

The first mention of Hill and

Wayzata is a reference to 1883.

Wayzata historian Charles J. Schoen wrote in his book "History of Wayzata: 1854-2004" [Wayzata Historical Society] that Wayzata's first Village Council enacted laws restricting railroad activities in 1883.

But it appears Wayzata provided little interference with Hill's railroad until 1889. That year, according to Schoen, the Village Council filed a lawsuit seeking to have the railroad yard along Lake Minnetonka cleaned up.

Hill complied, but Wayzata filed another lawsuit. This one demanded that the railroad tracks be moved 300 feet away from the water's edge.

That infuriated Hill, according to Schoen and others. Schoen wrote, "Hill responded that if the town forced him into the courtroom, they will walk a mile for 20 years."

Hill had a small railroad station built east of Wayzata, near where Bushaway Road is today, Schoen wrote. The new station was located about a mile east of town, and was named Holdridge.

In "Once Upon a Lake" Thelma Jones (published in 1969 by Ross and Haines Inc.) wrote that Wayzata's doctor at the time, Dr.

Tibbetts, protested the two outdoor toilets set on land that drained to the water. Tibbetts worried that the toilets could cause a typhoid epidemic.

Ellen Wilson Meyer wrote in "Happenings Around Wayzata" (Tonka Printing Co. 1980) that the name Holdridge was chosen in honor of Florence Holdridge Babcock,

was called Ferndale.

Schoen wrote that Hill's actions impacted Wayzata economically. While Wayzata had prospered following the arrival of the railroad, the town exhibited little growth while the Holdridge station operated.

"Hill literally took Wayzata off the map and the town barely grew," Schoen wrote. "The 1900 census shows a net

growth of three people from the 1890 census."

The station wasn't the only infamous example of Hill's wrath directed at Wayzata.

In another legendary example, described by Jones, Hill had a railroad siding built along Lake Minnetonka. Long lines of boxcars were kept on the track, and many of the cars were filled with garbage.

According to the Lake Minnetonka historians, Wayzata wasn't the only city to elicit a tempestuous response from Hill.

Jones wrote that in Excelsior, Hill built a railroad track right up to Excelsior Bay. When the city of Excelsior protested,

Jones wrote that Hill supposedly said, "I'll see that grass grows in your streets."

Hill also purchased land on Lake Minnetonka's Crystal Bay. He

had a farmhouse and barn built, and stocked the barn with cattle. Hill was said to be considering building a large country estate on Crystal Bay if he could acquire more land.

When Hill found out he'd be charged what Jones wrote was "a good price" for more land, stories say Hill angrily removed his cattle from the land. For awhile, the nearby train stop was closed, as well.

And Meyer wrote that Hill detested Minnetonka Beach's "provincial attitude" toward alcohol. It was prohibited in the city, which meant that all the cases of wine Hill had ordered for the opening of the Hotel Lafayette had to be returned to Chicago.

The feud between Hill and Wayzata, which had lasted through the 1890s into the new century, ended in 1905. Schoen wrote that that year, the Village Council approved a "reconciliation ordinance," and Hill promised Wayzata the finest station on his railroad line.

The new station was built in 1906, and Hill attended the opening. That station — the Wayzata Depot — still exists.

Decades after Hill's death in 1916, Wayzata and the railroad were still wrangling over the tracks near the lake.

Meyer wrote that in June of 1946, the issue was settled when the Great Northern Railroad approved plans to move the tracks to accommodate the widening of Lake Street.

But while Wayzatans living 110 years ago may have hated the railroad tracks next to the lake, the tracks turned out to have been beneficial. Without the tracks next to the lake, it's doubtful downtown Wayzata's panoramic view of Lake Minnetonka would have been preserved.



who married Hill's friend C.H. Babcock.

C.H. Babcock also was the railroad's land commissioner.

Eventually, Hill also had a small platform built west of Wayzata for the residents who lived there. It