

## Interesting Story of the Herndon House, Omaha's First Palace Hotel

Important Chapter of Local Lore Made Timely by the Impending Construction of New Headquarters for the Union Pacific Railway Company

WHEN in 1856 Dr. George L. Miller laid the cornerstone of the Herndon house at Ninth and Farnam streets, he virtually fixed the foundation of Omaha. It was not long after the erection of this, Omaha's first private building of modern size and equipment, until others sprang into existence. This old landmark, first a hotel and second the Union Pacific headquarters, has survived to witness the rising of a whole metropolitan city full of big buildings in emulation of itself, scores whose size and architectural dignity make it, as a building, almost forgotten. And it is soon to be pushed still further into the background of oblivion, for the Union Pacific is preparing to erect a new, uptown headquarters, incomparably greater in size, equipment and appearance.

The Herndon house was not only to be the first building of then modern design and proportions in the quaint little frontier village; not only the finest and most pretentious hotel in this section of the uncultured west; not only the birthplace of a millionaire, the residence of national leaders, one statesman of immortal fame; the nursery in which a cabinet officer was snatched from death's door; the stopping place of heroes in peace and war; the headquarters of the greatest of all transcontinental railways—it not only was to fill these important and famous functions—it was destined to become the loadstone of enterprise around which the energy of those early pioneers, in their patient struggle for the founding of a great industrial center, was to gravitate; it was destined to become the focal point from which the lines of industry, running in all directions, were to lead to the establishment of a modern, metropolitan city. It was the cornerstone of Omaha.

### Primeval Days of Omaha's Existence

Forty-eight years ago, when the Herndon house was completed, Omaha was in the primeval days of its existence. Its buildings of any description were scarce. It had none approaching the dignity of a modern structure, even for those pristine days, save only the capitol. Scattered frame houses, with here and there one a little more commanding in appearance, a little more imposing in architecture, composed this dot of population on the vast map of the west, then condemned as a hopeless wild, now praised as the prime province of possible development. A building five stories high, with basement, erected, not of wood, but of brick, equipped without the sordid sign of undue economy as a hotel, fit for the best and biggest men of the land in such a place as the Omaha of the '50's, had a right to arouse all the latent pride and ambition in the souls of those sturdy knights of the frontier. It had a right to stimulate hopes and encourage ambition, to enkindle zeal and embolden faith, for with the single exception of the state capitol building, which stood on what was then the outskirts of the town, the Herndon was the solitary building which gave substance to the present or promise to the

building the hotel. He met their advances with aversion at first, but finally yielded to their plausible arguments and, joined by Lyman Richardson, submitted a bid. Their bid was accepted and they built the hotel.

Dr. Miller had several thousand dollars and his partner had some, but both together did not have enough to complete their enterprise. The venerable doctor said the other day they might have come out better had they really built a hotel commensurate with the needs of the town and country and stopped at that.

"But we didn't do that," said he; "we built a hotel far in advance of the town and its tributary country, on what was then a very elaborate scale. We were looking to the future and time has proven the wisdom of our course."

The panic of '57 swept over the country. Its pressure fell, with crushing force, upon Omaha's vigilant patriots. They borrowed money from the east to stem the tide until the east had no money to lend, even at the usury, much less interest, the Herndon house founders were compelled to pay. Things looked bad. Dark clouds of adversity cast their somber pall over Omaha and its great enterprise.

The prosperity of the venture was regarded as the prosperity of the city and the city made a noble effort to rescue the prize.



IN THE GENERAL PASSENGER DEPARTMENT.

very near taking the life of his elder brother, Paul.

"The little fellows were mere tots. They had observed me giving medicine as I went about doctoring, and Joy, a most observing child, thought he would play doctor. He fixed on Paul as his patient and gave him some medicine. The first thing I knew of it was when I heard Mr. and Mrs. Morton and others in the hotel crying in distress over what they feared was the death of the child. I hastened to the scene and found Sterling Morton pulling Paul around by the arm in an effort to revive him, for he had every appearance of being dead. I finally had to take the boy away from his father by sheer force. I applied various remedies, but could produce no apparent effect, but I could detect the heart still beating. The child's lips and face were discolored. He certainly was very near death. Finally I said 'It's life or death,' and got a pitcher of ice water, which I began emptying on the lad's face. I gradually raised the pitcher higher from the little fellow's deathlike countenance, but for some time without effect. I was getting discouraged myself and at length lifted the pitcher to my full height and let the water fall. The boy cried out. It was the most welcome cry a child ever uttered. Everybody shouted and Paul Morton lived to become one of the heads of a great railway system, secretary of the navy in the president's cabinet and president of one of the biggest life insurance companies in the world."

Dr. Miller recalls many other noteworthy incidents which serve to make the history of the Union Pacific headquarters immortal to Omaha. One of these in which he now finds special pride is his first meeting with General Joseph E. Johnston, of confederate army fame, then a colonel in the union army, who had been sent out into the western territory on military business. In his recollections of the old building Dr. Miller cannot resist the temptation to associate with its establishment the names of three men, General Grenville M. Dodge, Henry Farnam and Thomas C. Durant, indissolubly linked with the history of Omaha and Nebraska and the west. Of these heroes of the frontier only General Dodge survives.

### George Francis Train's Wrath

Any attempt at a history of this notable structure would be incomplete without mention of what long years ago came to be known in Omaha as the "Train incident," and which was the inspiration for the building of the Cozzena house in 1867 by George Francis Train and but recently swept from existence by the inevitable march of progress.

Train, one of the most eccentric of men, was a boarder at the Herndon. One day at dinner he and Mrs. Train had special guests. Mrs. Train was not feeling well and they were all annoyed at a draft which came in at a broken window pane. Train asked a colored waiter to stand between the window and the table to shut off the draft. He also asked the manager of the house to remedy the defect. Neither request was satisfactorily complied with.

Indignant at what he regarded as mistreatment Train spontaneously declared he would build him a hotel of his own where he could get what he wanted and would have it put up in sixty days. He did. He built the Cozzena house at Ninth and Harney streets, a block away, and furnished it on an elaborate scale. Dr. Miller admits it became an effective competitor of the Herndon.

But the Herndon house of those old days, though it is a distinct component part of the Union Pacific headquarters, is not the Herndon house which once thrilled pioneer Omahans with delight as the finest hotel of this part of the west. Duplicated in point of size, the structure has been modernized and in many ways made a more valuable building. Within the last few years, since the Iroquois disaster in fact, upwards of \$35,000 have been expended upon it. President Burt began these expenditures. Conceiving the necessity, after the awful catastrophe in Chicago, of making the building safer and more modern, Mr. Burt turned it over to Chief Engineer Berry with instructions to do all he could toward putting it in the best condition. A system of fire escapes, regarded as the most effective and costly in Omaha, was installed, rooms were remodeled, partitions removed, old wooden doors torn out and supplanted by asbestos doors, asbestos protectors put in wherever possible and everything done which it seems could be done to a building of the character to make it what was needful and desirable.

Still, as a home for the great Overland, this old structure is soon to go. It has been doomed. E. H. Harriman, head of the system, has given his word for a new building and now plans are maturing for a magnificent new headquarters "uptown."

For years Omaha has been anticipating the pleasant hope of the "new Union Pacific headquarters." So indefinite and uncertain has it seemed from time to time that some had come to regard it as an "iridescent dream," but E. H. Harriman, the man with authority to speak, says the building is to be erected.

It cannot be gainsaid that the coming of A. L. Mohler from the presidency of the Oregon Railway and Navigation company to the general management of the Union Pacific has quickened this movement for a new headquarters. Mr. Mohler at once conceived the necessity for such a building, and then addressed himself to the task of getting it. He first of all sought to convince higher powers of its need. He secured the passage through the Omaha city council of an ordinance giving trackage rights along Ninth street, in front of the building, to the Union Pacific. He then laid his tracks, and then he was able to convince those above him and in the east that a new headquarters was positively necessary, for the new tracks which are to create a new and bigger jobbing district for Omaha rendered the old headquarters unfit longer for an official home for the great Overland Route.



THE OLD HERNDON HOUSE—NOW THE UNION PACIFIC HEADQUARTERS.

the frame building on the southeast corner of Ninth and Farnam streets, immediately opposite the present home, the former Herndon. This frame building was erected in 1857 by Dr. Isaac Edwards and called the Edwards house, for it, too, was a hotel. It later became the property of United States Senator Paddock. Its cost of building was \$21,000. In 1869 its name was changed to the Casement, in honor of Colonel Jack Casement, the contractor who built the Union Pacific. Then in 1870 it came to be known as the Wyoming and then the Canfield and Hotel Farris. Today it is the Hotel Elsassner. It went back to the function of a hotel after the Union Pacific deserted it.

It was never the intention of the Union Pacific to occupy this building longer than was necessary to get hold of and adequately prepare the Herndon. But it was the earnest desire of S. H. H. Clark, later president of the Union Pacific, to raze this structure and on its site establish the great passenger depot of the city. Mr. Clark urged and exhorted, pleaded and persuaded the owners of the road to adopt his views, buy this property and build a union depot, but in vain. He proposed connecting up with the Belt line, Jay Gould's creation, and entering the city from that route and maintaining lower Farnam street; where steamboats for years had anchored, as the terminal point for converging railways. But Gould and his associates took a different view. Mr. Clark then bought the property himself and when he died it fell to his estate.

### Headquarters for Noted Men

Men who have made their impress upon railroad affairs of the United States have occupied quarters in this building since it became the home of the Union Pacific. Dr. Durant, the prime promoter of the Overland, passed off the scene of action too early, but there were President Clark, President Sidney Dillon, both of whose names have their own place in the archives of railway management; S. R. Calloway, now president of the American Locomotive works and with the Nickel Plate, Lake Shore and New York Central, successively, after leaving the Union Pacific; Charles Francis Adams, T. J. Potter, W. H. Holcomb, T. L. Kimball, C. S. Mellon, later president of the Northern Pacific and now of the New York, New Haven & Hartford; Horace G. Burt and Edward Dickinson, now vice president and general manager of the Orient.

The new half of this building was constructed in 1886, the old part having been remodeled for a railroad headquarters in 1877.

T. M. Orr recalls the interesting fact that the Union Pacific headquarters came near standing at Tenth and Mason streets, opposite the Burlington passenger depot, on the southwest corner where a saloon now stands.

"The foundation was laid there for the headquarters," said Mr. Orr, "early in the '70s, but it never got beyond the foundation, and in the '90s other parties got the property and built the present structure."

Mr. Orr has spent twenty-eight years of his life with the Union Pacific, having gone into the present headquarters with the company. As assistant to the executive head of the company "Tom" Orr has earned the reputation of being almost an indispensable official and of knowing more of the road and its history than any other man connected with it, though Mr. Orr would stoutly protest against such credit being given him. He is the acme of modesty when it comes to himself.

### Episode in Paul Morton's Life

Since its erection and during its occupancy as a hotel or railroad headquarters this building never has been on fire, never that Dr. Miller is able to recall, and it has never been the scene of a single tragedy, though it came very near being back in the early days of Mr. Paul Morton, president of the Equitable Life Assurance society. The story of this event is thus related by Dr. Miller:

"When J. Sterling Morton was secretary of the territory of Nebraska he and his family boarded at my hotel. There his son, Mark, now a millionaire, was born. There Joy Morton came



CORNER IN THE GENERAL FREIGHT OFFICE AT UNION PACIFIC HEADQUARTERS.

future. The capitol building, as is well known, still stands and is a part of the Omaha High school, being overshadowed by the magnificent new structure with which it has been united.

### Great Event in Omaha History

And this old monument of fame, landmark, buttress of by-gone days, is the official home of the Union Pacific, and has been for twenty-seven years. With even greater ado, because of the natural growth of surroundings, the Union Pacific celebrated its removal into this old building in 1878, than did its builders their occupancy of it in 1857. Both events are memorable ones in Omaha's history. On both occasions men of affairs, from here and elsewhere, were present and participated in big public demonstrations. It is true what was the Herndon house is now duplicated in the Union Pacific headquarters. The old building was left standing and an addition built just doubling the size. But the architectural contour of the original structure has been preserved. Dr. Miller says it looks very natural, indeed.

The Herndon house was not the first hotel built in Omaha; not by several, but it was by all odds the finest up to that time. Its construction was begun in 1856 and completed in 1857. Dr. George L. Miller and Lyman Richardson had it built. The first landlord was M. W. Keith. He was succeeded by two or three others until James T. Allan acquired possession of it. Mr. Allan first conducted it as a high-toned boarding house, then as a hotel. Meanwhile it became the property of Dr. G. C. Monell, father-in-law of the late Senator P. W. Hitchcock, into whose hands the building later fell and who sold it to the Union Pacific.

But the story of its building and its successive ownerships involves a note of genuine pathos. It is not a new story, but one as old as time; the story of a man wrecked (financially) upon the shoals of might-have-been.

### Building of the Big Hotel

The site of this historic edifice in 1856 was a park, maintained by the young municipality of Omaha. The people and the city felt the need of a good hotel. Consequently the city authorities had this park cut up into lots and offered some of these lots as a bonus to the man or men who would erect there a hostelry, commensurate with the needs of the town. Bids were asked. At that time Dr. Miller, who had been out here about two years, was almost ready to return to his old home in Syracuse, N. Y., to settle down for life at the practice of his profession. Friends approached him with the proposition of

It issued script and this fragile security was used by the builders of the hotel as long as it could be. Time went on, but the panic stayed. The hotel was finally finished at the sacrifice of personal fortune; its builders were, to use the expressive vernacular of this twentieth century day, broke. They bore their dead load as long as they could. They trudged on with their tired backs bent under a burden they were unable to support, hoping against hope, at length to reach refuge. But they had to give up. They had to surrender to Wall street. Into the hands of their creditors, represented by Dr. Monell, they consigned the dearest treasure of their lives—ownership of the Herndon house.

### Dr. Miller's Personal Interest

But Dr. Miller continued to hold a proprietary interest in the hotel and he made it his home. He had, with his own hands, laid the cornerstone at the southwest corner of the structure, had spent his last dollar and accumulated thousands of others in debt, trying to rescue himself and he could not easily give it up. Now, after forty-eight years, during the course of which he has seen the struggling speck of a village he had helped to plant, nourished and aided to develop, grow to a big city of untold possibilities, he still sits and longingly looks back to the time of the Herndon house, basking in the delight of reminiscence with its tinge of bitter and its taste of sweet.

Nothing has been said of the architect who designed this splendid old building.

"Who was the architect? Let me see," said the doctor, as he reflected upon the query. "Why, bless you, we didn't have one. I guess I had something to do with the fixin' and maybe Richardson did and one or two others. But we didn't have any architect that I remember. We had two young men to do the carpenter work and a couple to do the brick work and some others and they all worked as if their lives depended on the stability and beauty of that building. I guess that is why it stands today, strong enough to hold the great Union Pacific offices. Oh, of course, it has been kept in good repair and improved from time to time, but the old building is still there."

The hotel was named after Captain W. H. Herndon, the South American explorer, who, after saving the passengers on board his ship, went down with the "Central American" off Cape Hatteras, wrapped in the American flag.

### Union Pacific's Headquarters

The Union Pacific had two headquarter buildings before it secured the Herndon house. It was first located in an old church building in that part of the town and then moved into