



Lines West!—The Story of George W Holdrege (Part 1)

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See also the continuation of the article: [Part 2](#) and [Part 3](#).

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LINES WEST!--THE STORY OF GEORGE W. HOLDREGE

BY THOMAS M. DAVIS

I

THE time was 8 P. M., on January 4, 1921. The occasion was the Burlington Railroad Employees' banquet of affection for their retiring General Manager. The banquet hall of the Fontenelle Hotel in Omaha was filled. Five hundred people had turned out to pay homage to the honored guest of the evening. Burlington Vice-President, W. W. Baldwin, was there. So was John L. Kennedy, president of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, and one of Nebraska's most distinguished citizens. Two hundred local dignitaries and business men had paid five dollars a plate for the privilege of attending this function. Three hundred Burlington employees and their friends were there. Several prominent faculty members of the University of Nebraska had journeyed from Lincoln in order to be present. Every division superintendent of Burlington Lines West had come.¹

There was a sharp rap on a glass. Toastmaster Kennedy was calling for attention. The guest hall was still as Vice-President Baldwin was introduced. His remarks were few. "I wish to read a telegram of regret from President Hale Holden that he is unable to be with us tonight. In his absence the privilege falls to me to express our deep appreciation and gratitude to George Holdrege for the fifty-one years of continuous service that he has given our road." The Vice-President paused, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you Mr. Holdrege."²

A deafening roar broke from the assembled guests. For ten minutes cheers echoed and re-echoed throughout the

¹ Omaha Bee, January 5, 1921.

² Omaha World-Herald, January 5, 1921.

dining hall. A figure rose from the right of Chairman Kennedy. "Ladies and Gentlemen, friends, I want to thank you for this testimonial in my honor. I regret that I cannot say more, but emotion overcomes me," and Holdrege sat down. Thus did the Burlington Railroad honor the man who had served it faithfully throughout his life.³

However, this testimonial by the employees of the Burlington was but the first of a series of honors paid to the man who had been so active in the territories his railroad served. Two months later Holdrege was honored at a similar banquet by the Omaha Chamber of Commerce.⁴ Denver repeated the performance.⁵ So did Lincoln, Cheyenne, Alliance, Hastings, Holdrege, McCook, and Sheridan, Wyoming. One newspaper remarked, "the success of a banquet in these times is marked by the size of the crowd that will gather to pay tribute to George Holdrege, and I can think of no more fitting honoree than this courageous and able gentleman."⁶ He was honored by chambers of commerce, by agricultural associations, by railroad employees, by churches, by colleges, and by friends in every walk of life. Holdrege became the good-will ambassador of the Burlington Railroad. He entertained statesmen, politicians, congressmen, scientists and diplomats in the name of both the Burlington and the state of Nebraska.

On April 14, 1922, he was honored by the Agricultural College in Lincoln and presented with a certificate indicating his distinguished service to the development of agriculture,⁷ and on October 30, 1925, he was selected by the Lincoln Kiwanis Club as Nebraska's outstanding citizen and was presented the club's "Distinguished Service Medal" for his part in building 4900 miles of railroad west of the Missouri

³ "I hate to make speeches, anyway," Holdrege later told a friend, Will Maupin, of Omaha.

⁴ *Omaha World-Herald*, January 20, 1921.

⁵ *Denver Post*, January 27, 1921.

⁶ *Omaha Bee*, March 9, 1921.

⁷ *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), April 15, 1922, and from letters in the author's possession. Others honored on this occasion were F. W. Chase, of Pawnee City, and C. H. Morrill, of Stromsburg.

River.⁸ On September 16, 1926, George Ward Holdrege died, ending the career of one of the West's most illustrious sons.

Who can comprehend what this man's role was in the formation of the West? As the West's leading railroad builder, he opened up more territory than any other single individual. Should he have anticipated that 300 miles of the 3,000 he constructed would have to be abandoned because of competition afforded in a later era by trucks? Would it be surprising if he opened up some regions that have since proved unproductive? Can he be held to blame for creating an artificial boom in land prices in many areas, and for encouraging settlers to come there who later failed? Can the failure of many of his experiments to create a more productive economy in Burlington territory be minimized?

The biography of George Holdrege typifies the growth of the region in which he lived and served.

George Ward Holdrege was born in New York City on March 26, 1847, the second son and child of Henry, Jr., and Mary Grinnell Holdrege.⁹ Henry Holdrege, Jr., was at that time employed by the New York Commission Mercantile Firm of Grinnell, Minturn & Company of which Moses Grinnell, uncle of Mary Holdrege and president of the New York Chamber of Commerce, was principal owner.¹⁰ The Holdrege family had considerable money, not only through young Henry's position with this company but also through a substantial legacy that Henry Holdrege, Sr., a wealthy New England ship captain, had left to his only son.¹¹

Through his mother's family, George Holdrege had a heritage that connected him with some of the oldest and

⁸ *Nebraska State Journal*, October 30, 1925; J. S. Welch, President of Lincoln Kiwanis Club, to Holdrege, October 15, 1925. (Unless otherwise indicated all letters are in the author's possession.)

⁹ William Emery, *The Howland Heirs* (Boston, 1921), p. 252.

¹⁰ Mrs. Nathalie Bontecu, Kansas City, sister of Holdrege, to author, April, 1941. Moses Grinnell also served on the original commission which laid out Central Park, and served as a Whig Congressman from New York, 1849-51.

¹¹ George Holdrege Watson, Milton, Massachusetts, nephew of Holdrege, to author, February 8, 1939. Henry Holdrege, Jr., was educated at the Sorbonne in France.

most illustrious New England families—Grinnell, Russell and Howland—all prominent in the development of New England fishing and commerce.¹² From his mother George also took his religion, the Quaker church, and he inherited her physical characteristics—a slight build, and an extremely dark complexion which led one contemporary to call him, “the blackest white man that ever lived.”¹³

In 1850, with the arrival of another child in their household, Henry and Mary Holdrege decided to move from the crowded New York metropolitan area, where they had been living, to one of the more fashionable suburbs, and were prevailed upon by Moses Grinnell to build their home in Irvington, a new village in Westchester County, situated on the banks of the Hudson, twenty-three miles north of New York City.¹⁴ Most of Irvington’s inhabitants were prominent men of affairs in New York—merchants and bankers, a few writers, and a number of insurance executives who commuted daily to the city on the old New York Central and Hudson River Railroad.

The life that young George Holdrege led in Irvington did not vary greatly from that of the children of the Holdrege’s neighbors. His early education was entrusted to an English governess who lived in the Holdrege home.¹⁵ Early in his life he became interested in aquatic sports and by the time he was twelve he boasted that he could swim the three mile expanse of the Hudson river at Irvington.¹⁶ In the winter he skated and became proficient enough to win the local boys’ tournament twice.¹⁷ His greatest hobby, however, was rowing and it is significant that Holdrege belonged to that generation which made rowing the prin-

¹² Emery, *op. cit.*, pp. 1 ff., 40 ff.

¹³ G. H. Watson, to author, February 8, 1939, quoting his father, Clifford Watson, Holdrege’s college roommate.

¹⁴ Emery, *op. cit.*, p. 142. Moses Grinnell was a close friend of Washington Irving. These two men founded Irvington. Grinnell also aided Irving in getting the appointment as ambassador to Spain through his friendship with Daniel Webster.

¹⁵ Interview with Henry Holdrege, son of George Holdrege, June 6, 1941.

¹⁶ From a clipping (date and publication unidentifiable) in an old scrapbook in Holdrege papers in author’s possession.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

cial major sport of the East.

While he was still very young, George's mother instilled in him the necessity for continuous physical fitness. Consequently, Holdrege's early life was one of perpetual physical training. Despite this, he developed very slowly through childhood and adolescence. He was always small for his age; at seventeen, he measured a scant five foot four and weighed 128 pounds. He had a long thin face with a very high forehead topped with black curly hair. Piercing brown eyes peered out from under heavy, bushy eyebrows. Among his friends, he was known as "Nigger" Holdrege.¹⁸

During the summer months Mary Holdrege used to take her family, which in time numbered six children, away from the heat of New York for extended visits with her New Bedford relatives. In this way, Boston and its surrounding territory became as familiar to young George as the New York region, and he found the homes of Charles Sumner, "Governor" Swain, and John Murray Forbes as open to him as those of his New York relatives. In later years Holdrege used to emphasize that he felt greater compatibility and companionship with his New England relatives than with any of his New York friends and he would explain that the conservative New England farmers or seamen, with their attendant simplicity, remained with him much longer than the impelling forces that were making New York the capital of American finance.¹⁹

When he was twelve years old, Holdrege's parents decided to send him to a private school to complete his secondary education. George favored one of the small New England preparatory schools that were becoming the vogue in Boston. His parents, however, decided on Suffield Academy in Irvington where he could continue to live at home. He attended Suffield for the next four years and hoped eventually to enter Harvard, although realizing Suffield offered poor preparation.²⁰

¹⁸ Interview with Mrs. E. A. Holyoke, Omaha, daughter of Holdrege, May 8, 1940.

¹⁹ Holdrege to Registrar of Harvard University, January 9, 1921.

²⁰ G. H. Watson, to author, February 8, 1939.

In 1863, when he was sixteen, Holdrege persuaded his parents to send him to a private school away from home. Some time before this Henry Holdrege had left Grinnell, Minturn & Co., and, spurning an offer of a position in Moses Grinnell's Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York, had joined a friend in forming the brokerage firm of Holdrege and Macy Company.²¹ Business had prospered and Henry Holdrege found himself a truly rich man. In searching for a school suitable for his son, Henry Holdrege consulted Emerson, Lowell, Parkman, and Holmes, all of whom he knew personally, and finally decided upon a small day school in Boston operated by William P. Atkinson, a close family friend.²² This school was limited to twenty day students but provision was made for young George Holdrege to live in the Atkinson home.²³ Atkinson was a graduate of Harvard, an outstanding mathematician, and later was one of the original faculty members of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.²⁴

For two years Holdrege remained at Atkinson's school, going to classes in one wing of the house during the day and sharing the social life of the family in the residential wing during the evening.²⁵ Atkinson's circle of friends included his brother-in-law, Francis Parkman, Dr. Holmes, and the aging Emerson, with all of whom George Holdrege became intimately acquainted.²⁶ In June of 1865 he was graduated from the school and spent the summer preparing for his entrance into Harvard.

The Honorable Thomas Hill was at this time president of Harvard. The undergraduate enrollment numbered 413 students, of whom 126 were freshmen.²⁷

Holdrege spent the summer of 1865 in Cambridge reviewing for the entrance examinations which were to be

²¹ Interview with Mrs. R. R. Hollister, Omaha, daughter of Holdrege, June, 1941.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Henry Holdrege interview.

²⁴ *Boston Herald*, June 5, 1857.

²⁵ Hollister interview.

²⁶ G. H. Watson, to author, February 8, 1939.

²⁷ *Harper's Monthly*, June, 1866.

held on the first two days of the new term. On September 13 and 14 he took eight hours of comprehensive examinations to qualify in Latin, Greek, mathematics, and history. He passed all of these satisfactorily, though not brilliantly.²⁸ He then settled down in one of the University's dormitories, where, for the first year, he planned to room with his older brother, Sidney, who was enrolled at the Lawrence Scientific School. Holdrege lived alone his first week as an undergraduate.²⁹ Typical of the multiple problems facing a Harvard freshman in 1865 are those expressed in the following letter from Holdrege to his mother.

I wrote you a few lines as soon as I got here informing you of my safe arrival. I intended to write you before this but have not been able. During the day I have had to study most of the time, and in the evening I have been obliged to retire early, or else to have callers from the Sophomore class.

I feel very blue. All things conspire to make me miserable; and I wish I could be with you and the rest of the family this gloomy evening. In the first place it rains and has been raining about a week and looks as though it would rain about a week longer. Cambridge is muddy, dismal and surrounded by soap factories and cattle markets. My room is on the ground floor and is cold and damp; and I can't have a fire for my coal has not come and will not till the first of November. My chum is sick and has not come yet; and to crown all my misfortunes, I missed two questions in recitation the other day, which spoils my prospects of standing at the head of my class, and I broke one of the laws of the College by going into Boston without permission, for which, they tell me, I probably shall be suspended. I am all out of money too, and I wish you would send me twenty-five dollars.

My furniture cost me much more than father estimated, though I got it at the lowest figure as Mr. Kernan assured me. He is the man who supplies the whole college with furniture at less than cost. I want a new umbrella, as my silk one was taken by mistake at prayers; and my door mat, which I put out last night was gone this morning. I saw a suspicious looking old man about and have no doubt that he took it.

Some of my things, I got very cheap. I paid the former occupant of the room only fifty cents for a fender and blower for the fireplace, a dollar for the gas fixtures, and two dollars apiece for the window seats. I bought a good many textbooks of him very cheap; but I fear that all the freshman books are to be changed, and I fear I have made a mistake. I have given five dollars as subscription to the Boat Club Fund as that is the amount the collector said would be expected from each man in our class; and two dollars for the Freshman nine.

²⁸ Holdrege to his mother, n. d.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Lawrence opened one week later than Harvard College.

I have also subscribed and paid for three copies of the *Advocate*, a college paper, published once in two weeks.

I received the box of good things that you sent me; but the Sophs found out in some way that I had it and about a dozen of them visited me that evening just after I opened it. I am sorry to say that all that large boxful disappeared that evening.

We have an excellent gymnasium here and for two or three days I went every night and tried to get up some muscle. But I am very stiff and sore now and have not been there for about a week. The sophomores were our instructors in some of the exercises. They made us all dance the clog dance; and one young man, who is an experienced dancer, they made perform for our instruction. They tossed me in the blanket, and I certainly thought my last hour had come, and mentally said goodbye to you all at home. I have not been a victim of any of the fabulous hazing that we heard about at home. A bucket of cold water I shared, however, with four or five classmates as we were talking under a sophomore's window; and I have on my mantel piece numerous specimens of coal and stones which flew in through the window.

But I have some good news to tell you. I was visited last evening by several of the young men who came in the name of the Harvard Glee Club to try my voice as a first tenor. They were very critical in their examination and required me to sing several pieces, but they pronounced themselves highly pleased with my voice.

We have "proctors", as they call them, to keep order in the entries, report all offenses, and give instructions to newcomers. We have two in our entry. One of them came to my room the other evening and gave me some instructions relative to the conduct of Freshmen. We are obliged to be in our rooms in the evening after nine o'clock, must put out our lights at eleven o'clock, and can make no calls in the evening. I wish he would keep a little better order in the entry, for everybody who comes down stairs takes a kick at my door which is very annoying.

I have been studying my Greek and Latin for day after tomorrow. I have a good many things to tell you about our tutors, prayers, singing in the choir, etc., and a good many wants to make known, but it is nearly eleven o'clock and I must retire.³⁰

Having no specific goal in view at the time he entered Harvard, Holdrege pursued the regular course in the humanities. He registered for beginning French, continued his Latin with the reading of Livy, studied Homer's *Odyssey* in Greek, began advanced algebra and analytic geometry, and attended daily lectures in integral education.³¹ These

³⁰ Holdrege to his mother, September, 1865.

³¹ *Harvard Advocate*, September, 1865.

courses he studied and passed, but to Holdrege at eighteen the center of his collegiate interest was athletics, particularly rowing.

Harvard College pursued a policy of athletics for all with the result that interclass competition frequently held more interest than an intercollegiate schedule. Of all the sports participated in by Harvard undergraduates, only two could be classified as major—baseball and rowing. Training for the Crew and the Nine were year around activities. To make the university team in either sport was the height of athletic accomplishment.³² A contemporary account relates the role that the University Boat Club played in campus activities:

Four minutes walk from the college grounds brings you to the boat houses, which, rising on piles from the mud of the river look like so many huge and unshapely animals. They are devoid of any architectural beauty which is of no importance as they are there only for the treasures they contain. Inside are the beautiful shells, resting one above another on brackets on either wall. These shells cost nearly four hundred dollars apiece and here you see eight of them, and in the next boat house two more, besides three or four 'laps'.

"Yes Sir," remarks one who knows, we have a fine stock of boats on hand. That boat is the *Harvard* of last year; 57 feet long and 19 inches wide

Here comes the crew. Now you can see them start. We frequently have half the college on the raft to see the *Harvard* come in or go out

In addition to the University crew, which is picked from the whole college, there are four class crews and a crew from the Scientific School. The class boats pull every year in June for the championship of the Charles River and also pull the class boats of Yale.

There must be some kind of organization to have so extensive an interest carried on successfully. The entire boating interest of the College assembles in September and chooses a man to be President of the Harvard Boat Club, of which all undergraduates are members. He has charge of the property and the finances of the club. He calls meetings when anything of importance is to come before the club and superintends the raising of funds by means of subscription lists. A second choice is made for the office of Captain—a position of more immediate importance than the first inasmuch as the Captain has entrusted to him the entire supervision and selection of the crew. He has to be a man who thoroughly understands his business and devotes practically all of his

³² *Ibid.*

time to it. If he does not have a good crew, it is entirely his own fault. If he succeeds he is a bigger man than any in college. The class crews are organized on exactly the same basis as the University crew.³³

Holdrege immediately joined the University Boat Club. Although small in stature, he possessed, said one of his friends, "the ability of expressing a great deal through science," and he became very popular in the collegiate boating circle.³⁴ He became a member of the two most prominent clubs, the Hasty Pudding and the Institute of 1770.³⁵ He also was elected captain of the freshman crew.³⁶

The climax to his first year of college athletics came on June 19, 1866, the date of the annual Harvard regatta held on the Charles River just after the closing of the university for the summer. The weekend concerned itself with various interclass competitions for the championship of the school. Holdrege's freshmen were in top physical condition, and so well had he trained his crew that once the race was underway all opposition was swept aside in a burst of enthusiasm and vigor that carried the freshmen to a five-length victory over the nearest competitors, the juniors.³⁷

During his first year at Harvard, Holdrege had met, and taken an immediate liking to, a classmate named Clifford Watson who shared his enthusiasm for rowing. Watson and Holdrege were actually distant cousins through the Russell family but they didn't discover this fact until several years later.³⁸ Watson was a nephew of the great industrialist and early railroad pioneer, John Murray Forbes, and his family's home adjoined the Forbes estate in Milton, Massachusetts. Holdrege spent the summer of 1866 visiting in the Watson home and the two boys decided to room together their sophomore year.³⁹ In general, the college rooming houses were the cheapest of any in Cambridge, averaging \$28.00 a

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ G. H. Watson, to author, February 8, 1939.

³⁵ Holdrege's college scrapbook.

³⁶ *New York Tribune*, September 20, 1865.

³⁷ *Boston Transcript*, June 20, 1866.

³⁸ G. H. Watson, to author, February 8, 1939.

³⁹ Holdrege papers.

year, but Holdrege and Watson considered them too small, too noisy, and not as comfortable as the more spacious rooms in local residences. Consequently, these two young men decided to room off campus their sophomore year and selected a room at Mr. H. G. Hyde's, four blocks from the campus.⁴⁰ As required by college authorities they duly registered in July for the standard sophomore curriculum which consisted of advanced mathematics, advanced Latin and Greek, Stockhardt's *Elements of Chemistry*, beginning German, and elocution.⁴¹

College opened on September 14, 1866.⁴² One week later the University Boat Club held its annual fall meeting for the election of officers. Gloomy prospects faced the club members. Every member of the successful crew of the previous year had been graduated. In their search for a promising director, the Harvard undergraduates selected George Holdrege, the young captain of the successful freshman crew of the previous year, as president of the University Boat Club. Never before had a sophomore been elected to this position.⁴³

Holdrege wasted no time in starting preparation for the summer challenge of Yale which would take place the following June on Lake Quinsigamund near Worcester.⁴⁴ On October 1, he invited those men who were desirous of pulling in the *Harvard* to present themselves as candidates and to enter on a course of work which he had laid out. This consisted largely of gymnasium work for which he had contrived an apparatus called a "rowing weight." A handle like an oar was attached at the middle to a strap which passed over a pulley. At the other end of the strap was a weight which moved up and down in a groove. The gymnast sat on a stool about four inches high, grasped the wooden handle in both hands, placed his feet against the stretcher and went through the motions of rowing. Eight

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Harvard Advocate*, September 24, 1866.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Boston Transcript*, October 8, 1866.

hundred strokes on the weight were equivalent to three miles of rowing, and each crew member was expected to perform a thousand strokes a day. This proved excellent training for arm and leg muscles.⁴⁵

Another training innovation of Holdrege's was to marshal his men three nights a week and take them for a run of from two to six miles. In following this rugged routine, plus the establishment of a training table, Holdrege found that by May his crew was well seasoned and ready to settle down to intensive drills.⁴⁶ About three weeks before the race he put his crew through a more rugged training period, where they pulled four or five times a day. Their diet was restricted to rare beef or mutton, potatoes, lettuce, bread and butter, and milk. The effectiveness of this training is evidenced by the fact that a Holdrege-trained crew never lost a collegiate race.⁴⁷ His string of victories was inaugurated in the annual regatta at Worcester, July 19, 1867, in which Holdrege and his team-mates badly outdistanced a Yale crew, to the accompaniment of, "such cheering [as] was never heard in Middle Massachusetts."⁴⁸

Holdrege was rewarded by grateful Harvard undergraduates in the fall of 1867 when he was elected to the dual position of president of the University Boat Club and captain of the crew. Holdrege rejected the former position, to which his roommate, Watson, was then elected, so that he could devote more time to training and less to management. Watson proved his ability in managing the business affairs of the crew when he conceived the idea of challenging the winner of the Oxford-Cambridge race the following year.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, Holdrege continued a rigorous training schedule. The editor of the *New York World* gives us a good picture of Holdrege at this time:

⁴⁵ *Harvard Advocate*, October 8, 1866.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, May 6, 1867.

⁴⁷ His total record: eleven wins, no losses.

⁴⁸ Clipping from *Boston Transcript* on Holdrege papers.

⁴⁹ G. H. Watson, to author, February 8, 1939.

George Ward Holdrege is one of the darkest skinned of white men and so perfectly rounded and moulded as to at once elicit admiration from everyone who sees him stripped for his work. No particular muscle or set of muscles stands out more prominently than the rest, but all are clearly and distinctly defined, and all look as if they could stand indefinite use. Though only five feet eight inches tall he "sits high" in the boat and his action in a race is a marvel of skill, beauty and power most superbly blended. His shooting of the Harvard inside the Wards at the race here Wednesday, when the latter thought they had their own way, and his success of turning completely inside of them, at once exhibit the cool judgment and splendid pluck so characteristic of this man.⁵⁰

The New York *Herald* had this to say about him:

George Ward Holdrege is five feet eight and three-quarter inches tall, his upper arm measures 14 inches, and his chest inflated, forty and a half inches. He has rowed in five races. He is a model of tawny toughness, and as regards perfection of form, he has seldom been surpassed at Harvard. His shape is superb, no part of his body is overdeveloped, no muscle small from disuse. Three years ago he was called little Holdrege but it would be difficult to find anything insignificant about him now, and he will never merit that appellation again. He is a capital illustration of what perseverance under difficulties in a physical way will accomplish. Concerning his capacity as a steersman, no better evidence of his efficiency is required than the fact that he has continually, for three years, taken his crew successfully over the six bridges in a perfect sluice of a tide.⁵¹

While Holdrege was gaining considerable renown through his athletic accomplishments, he found that the time which this demanded forced him to sacrifice any scholastic honors which he might have coveted. His curriculum included rhetoric, philosophy, physics, natural history, German and chemistry. His scholastic record in these subjects was mediocre at best.⁵²

Meanwhile, his dream of a boat race between Harvard and the champion English university crew was assuming reality through efforts of Watson. Following the overwhelming defeat of Yale in 1867, Watson had written a letter, in the form of a challenge, and signed by all the crew members, to the members of the Oxford Boat Club.⁵³ Though

⁵⁰ New York *World*, May 15, 1867.

⁵¹ New York *Herald*, May 15, 1867.

⁵² Harvard *Advocate*, September 25, 1867.

⁵³ Holdrege Scrapbook.

a disagreement over which style of rowing should be used, and the fact that the Harvard club had no funds for a trans-Atlantic journey slowed negotiations,⁵⁴ Harvard's second overwhelming defeat of Yale at Worcester in 1868⁵⁵ considerably brightened prospects for the international match.

With the realization of the highest goal he had set for himself in his college career almost within his grasp, and with praise for his splendid achievement in the Worcester regatta still ringing in his ears, George Holdrege received news that Holdrege and Macy had failed.⁵⁶ Henry Holdrege's fortune was gone. It was important that George come home at once. Without hesitation, perhaps even with some relief—he was having scholastic difficulties in optics and astronomy in the summer session—George Holdrege “took up his connections”, which meant voluntarily resigning from college, and hurried home.⁵⁷

When Holdrege arrived in Irvington he found his father in a state of complete nervous collapse, the result of months of anxiety and worry over the affairs of Holdrege and Macy Company. Young George devoted himself to saving as much as he could of the family's funds from the firm's wreckage and by June of 1869 found himself looking around for employment. He had definitely abandoned all thoughts of completing his college education.

He was offered a position with Moses Grinnell's Insurance Company which he politely refused. Holdrege did not want to live in New York. He went to Boston in the hope that some of his friends there might have an opening in an enterprise more to his liking. While visiting his former roommate, Watson, he chanced to gain an interview with John Murray Forbes, the western railroad builder.

“I have a job for a promising young man and a hard worker on my new railroad in Nebraska,” Forbes told him. “The job is yours if you want it.”

⁵⁴ Oxford Club to Clifford Watson, May, 1868; *London Telegraph*, June 3, 1868; *Harvard Advocate*, May 9, 1868.

⁵⁵ *New York Tribune*, June 11, 1868.

⁵⁶ Mrs. F. P. Craig, Short Hills, New Jersey, first cousin of Holdrege, to author, April 10, 1941.

⁵⁷ *Harvard Advocate*, July 11, 1868.

"I'll take it," said Holdrege. "How soon do I leave?"

"Would thirty days be too soon?"

"No sir, and I'll be ready," Holdrege answered.⁵⁸

Hence, in 1869 we have—in view of later developments—the rather dramatic picture of a young man whose father had just taken bankruptcy as a result of a severe economic depression in the East, going West to begin his business career with an infant railroad, also near bankruptcy. Both railroad and man had their origins and background deeply rooted in New England. Both eventually developed into dominant figures on the western scene. Their careers became inextricably combined and the biography of the man became indistinguishable from the story of the railroad.

The organization that Holdrege was joining had had, like himself, a brief but glorious career. In 1852, James W. Grimes, a young Iowa lawyer and a director of a little railroad, (The Aurora Branch) that had been projected but not built, had gone to Boston where he and directors of other western railroads held a conference to discuss raising funds for constructing their lines.⁵⁹ They interested John Murray Forbes, whose financial genius had brought the Michigan Central into Chicago, in merging the Aurora Branch with several other independent railroad companies under the name of Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad Company.⁶⁰

In 1857 Grimes and his associates, backed by Forbes' capital, began construction of another line, the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad in Iowa. Construction progressed slowly and by 1859 only seventy-five miles of track had been laid, the road ending at Ottumwa.⁶¹ With the outbreak of the Civil War the federal government evinced considerable interest in a transcontinental railroad with the result that on July 1, 1862, the first Union Pacific Act was passed which provided for such a road and for land grants

⁵⁸ G. W. Holdrege, in a speech delivered at Omaha, January 18, 1921.

⁵⁹ W. W. Baldwin, *Corporate History of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad Company* (Chicago, 1920), p. 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

and subsidies to induce private capital to build it. Provision was also made for several branches and eastern outlets for the main line.⁶¹

Two years later, on July 3, 1864, an amending act was passed, providing for extension of the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad in Iowa through the territory of Nebraska so as to connect with the main trunk of the Union Pacific, and for a land grant to aid such an extension. The land grant, as defined by this act, amounted to 2,300,000 acres. By the terms of the act the company had a year to decide whether or not to take this proposition, and as the year drew to a close and no action was taken, the offer was allowed to lie dormant indefinitely.⁶²

In 1869, Charles E. Perkins, vice-president of the B. & M. in Iowa, convinced the directors of the soundness of constructing a line in Nebraska from Plattsmouth, on the Missouri River, to Lincoln, the new state capital, with the possibility of later extending it to Fort Kearny, 172 miles away.⁶³ The necessary steps were taken by forming a new company, the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad in Nebraska, under Nebraska state charter. On April 10, 1869, Congress, by joint resolution, approved transfer by the B. & M. in Iowa of all its rights under the second Pacific Railroad Act to the Nebraska company.⁶⁴

It was not until September 1, 1869, that Holdrege reached the state of Nebraska. To reach his destination he had ridden on the Hannibal and St. Joe from Chicago to St. Joseph, Mo., then had come north from St. Joseph on the Council Bluffs and Kansas City Railway to Pacific Junction, Iowa, which was to be the western terminus of the B. & M. in Iowa and which was directly across the river from Plattsmouth.⁶⁵ From Chicago west he had ridden on

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶² Thomas M. Davis, "Building the Burlington Through Nebraska—A Summary View," *Nebraska History*, XXX (December, 1949), 317-347.

⁶³ Letters in headquarters building, C. B. & Q. Railroad, Chicago.

⁶⁴ C. E. Perkins to Pacific Railway Commission, June, 1876.

⁶⁵ G. W. Holdrege, *The Making of the Burlington* (pamphlet, 1921).

Forbes' trains, but when he reached Pacific Junction he found that not one rail had been laid south of the Platte River or west of the Missouri. Across the Missouri, on the opposite shore to the west, nestling among the bluffs that lead down to the water's edge, was Plattsmouth, headquarters for the new B. & M. Railroad in Nebraska. Plattsmouth had been chosen as the eastern terminus of the railroad, over the bids of other Missouri River towns, primarily because Cass County, of which Plattsmouth was the county seat, had voted to give \$150,000 to the company.⁶⁶ In addition, Plattsmouth was nearer to Lincoln than most of the other towns under consideration.

No sooner had the B. & M. made its plans public than line crews, engineers and every unemployed man for a radius of one hundred miles descended upon Plattsmouth, some with their work already laid out for them, others begging positions from local foremen. The population of the little town trebled, totalling more than 4,000. Half of this number were obliged to live in tents or hastily constructed shanties.⁶⁷

This, then, was the condition in September when Holdrege arrived on the Nebraska scene. Not one mile of track actually laid, not one railroad coach or locomotive purchased. B. & M. officials still talked of moving their headquarters north, to Bellevue, and still roundly cursed the Union Pacific officials for not agreeing to build a bridge, at joint expense, across the Missouri River at that point. The actual construction of the road was placed in the hands of Thomas C. Doane, the chief engineer, and Cyrus Woodman, vice-president and managing director.⁶⁸

Holdrege reported to Woodman on his arrival and was informed that he was to be the chief clerk in the paymaster's office. His wages were to be a dollar a day, with a raise promised if he showed improvement.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Rudolph A. Knudsen, "Regulation of Railroad Rates in Nebraska," (Ms. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1937), p. 38.

⁶⁷ T. E. Calvert to Gen. C. F. Manderson, August 4, 1898.

⁶⁸ Holdrege, *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ J. R. Hickox, Burlington headquarters, Chicago, to author, February 8, 1941.

Holdrege's office was on the ground floor of a small two-story frame building directly across the street from the main headquarters of the company. His chief responsibility was to receive all the equipment that came across the river for the B. & M., list it, and send it out to the proper crews or store it in the back of the building for future use. His office became the general supply store for the whole line. Holdrege also was responsible for seeing that every employee in the Plattsmouth area received his pay every week, and he frequently had to go out along the line and locate certain parties to pay them off.⁷⁰

Many discouraging factors faced the company at this time. Supplies were slow in arriving from the East. Costs mounted beyond all expectations. It was not unusual that entire line crews would remain idle for days because of delayed shipments. The natural gravitating point for these men became the paymaster's office.⁷¹ Because of this, Holdrege came to know almost every B. & M. employee personally, and, generally speaking, he was popular. He also was in a favorable position to gain a lot of information about the railroad business.

During these early days in Plattsmouth, Holdrege found his lodging in a small room directly above the store. The entire second floor of the company building was divided into small individual rooms—paper-thin partitions between them—for some of the young bachelor employees.⁷² Here Holdrege retired in the evenings to study engineering and a good part of his first salary checks went toward the purchase of books. A few weeks after he arrived in Plattsmouth, it was common knowledge, said a contemporary, "that that there young Holdrege was seen poring over his books until two or three A. M. tryin' to learn to be an engineer."⁷³ Since recreational facilities were limited, Holdrege found his principal relaxation in taking long walks

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Calvert to Manderson, August 4, 1898.

⁷² G. W. Loomis to author, May 9, 1941. For forty years Loomis was Holdrege's chief clerk.

⁷³ *Omaha World-Herald*, April 8, 1941.

over the Nebraska countryside. A frequent companion on these hikes was a young company engineer, T. E. Calvert, and these two men became fast friends.

Calvert had been graduated in 1869 from the Scientific School at Yale, and had come west to gain experience with the B. & M. He also lived in a room above the paymaster's store and undertook to teach Holdrege the principles of engineering. The latter reciprocated by tutoring in classical studies. So passed Holdrege's first winter in Nebraska.⁷⁴

It was in the early spring of 1870 that Holdrege saw the first rails brought across the Missouri River. Starting at Plattsmouth, the crews laid track over the route previously surveyed and graded. In April he received a promotion from chief clerk to assistant paymaster. His new duties consisted of distributing the weekly wages to the employees working along the line from Plattsmouth to Lincoln. He was expected to complete the circuit of 110 miles once a week.⁷⁵

His first assignment was to go to Lincoln to pay the civil engineers employed on the grading between Lincoln and Ashland. He took the money and boarded a train at Plattsmouth for Louisville, eighteen miles west, and the terminus of the westward rails. From Louisville he staged to Ashland, twenty-four miles from his destination. After spending the night there, he walked the rest of the way to Lincoln. Covering the distance in record time, he delivered the company checks to the engineers, and, in spite of their pleadings to remain overnight, started back for Ashland late in the afternoon. Approximately half way between the two towns he encountered a vicious snow storm, accompanied by heavy winds and low temperature. Forced to plow through drifts up to his waist on the last lap of the trip, he stumbled into Ashland suffering from cold and exposure.⁷⁶

In spite of this beginning, Holdrege liked his new job.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, March 15, 1925.

⁷⁵ J. R. Hickox, *Memorandum of Holdrege's Life* (Chicago, 1938).

⁷⁶ Interview with Mrs. T. E. Calvert, Lincoln, June, 1939.

He presented an interesting figure on those long 24-mile hikes, knapsack on back, slightly bent as if facing a strong wind, stepping off miles with long rapid strides. He was never known to accept a lift from a passing wagon. Perhaps the memory of his first and only acceptance clung to him too vividly.⁷⁷

On the third time he was making his trip, a man in a wagon asked Holdrege if he wouldn't like to ride the rest of the way.

"Yes, thank you," replied Holdrege and climbed up on the seat beside his benefactor. They rode in silence for some distance, then started a lively discussion on hunting and guns.

"By the way," remarked his new found friend, "I've been doing a little hunting myself today. Rattlesnakes. Sure are a lot of them around here."

"Have you been cutting off their heads and saving their rattles?" Holdrege queried.

"No. I haven't had time. I've just been throwing them in the back of the wagon there."

No sooner were these words uttered than from the rear of the wagon came the whir of a rattler about to strike. Both men jumped to the ground immediately.

"Look! In the wagon," cried Holdrege to his astonished companion. There, on the seat where the two men had been sitting a moment before, lay coiled a dazed and injured rattler. The horses, finding their reins free and scared by the movements of the men, broke away in a dead run. It took the two men an hour to recapture the horses, dispose of the rattlesnakes, and start on their way again. "Right then and there," Holdrege remarked later to a friend, "I decided that if those engineers wanted to be sure of getting their pay checks every week, I'd better walk that twenty-four miles and be sure of getting there."⁷⁸

In July, 1870, Holdrege was invited by Doane to accompany him and several other engineers on a journey

⁷⁷ *Omaha Bee*, December 20, 1925.

⁷⁸ *Lincoln Daily Star*, April 8, 1941.

across southern Nebraska to survey a route for their road west from Lincoln. The scouting party came back from this trip on September 8 with the definite conclusion that the B. & M. should strive for a connection with the Union Pacific at Fort Kearny.⁷⁹

Shortly after his return, Holdrege learned that his role in this new enterprise would probably be a minor one as a notice from Perkins was awaiting him at Plattsmouth. The Vice-President stated that he was being transferred immediately across the Missouri River into Iowa where traffic was heavier and where through traffic across the state had been in operation since the completion of construction in November of 1869.

"Our purpose is," said Perkins, "to acquaint you with the actual operations of a railroad."⁸⁰ Thus Holdrege gave up his job with the Nebraska company, where new construction had temporarily reached a standstill, and became a brakeman on a local train out of Burlington, Iowa.⁸¹

Some intimate glimpses of Holdrege's life in Burlington are afforded in the Autobiography of Charles Fessenden Morse, another New Englander, ten years Holdrege's senior, who was General Supply Agent of the Iowa company:

My life in Burlington was a pleasant one and I made many new friends. I rented a rather attractive little house near the residence of Mr. Perkins and other railroad officers, and, with the help of Mrs. Perkins, secured an old German woman for housekeeper and cook. I then invited George Holdrege and another friend, Thomas C. Edwards, to live with me and share operating expenses. We had very good times at Burlington as there was fine shooting in the vicinity, ducks, quail, snipe and prairie chickens. Through the entire shooting season we usually went somewhere Sunday and rarely returned without a good supply of game for ourselves and friends.⁸²

Holdrege advanced several notches in his career while in Iowa. Starting 1870 as a brakeman on a local, he ended

⁷⁹ Calvert interview.

⁸⁰ Holdrege, *op. cit.*

⁸¹ Interview with A. D. McLane, Assistant Secretary of the Burlington Railroad, March 8, 1941.

⁸² C. F. Morse, *Autobiography For His Children* (privately printed).

the year as conductor of a through train across the state.⁸³ As one of his friends later recorded, "Through passenger service was some pumpkins in those days and Conductor Holdrege took great pride in making schedule time on its runs. It soon became known that George Holdrege's train was on time always."⁸⁴

In 1871 Holdrege was promoted to the position of trainmaster. This position was largely clerical and consisted of assigning cars, keeping records of all the trains and being in charge of all demurrage—in brief, organizing and coordinating freight and passenger service.⁸⁵

With this promotion, Holdrege felt he was making enough money to contemplate matrimony and early in 1872 he returned east for an extended visit with relatives and friends before marrying his childhood sweetheart, Emily Atkinson, the daughter of his schoolmaster.⁸⁶

On February 19, 1872, George Holdrege was married and the story is told that a few hours after the ceremony, Holdrege encountered Forbes on the streets of Boston. "What are you doing here?" Forbes asked him. "I've just come from being married," Holdrege replied. "To hell with matrimony, young man, get back out west and build me more railroads."⁸⁷

After his return to Iowa, Holdrege learned that the company was planning a small extension on the Chariton Branch, totalling a distance of thirty-six miles, and that he was to be the general agent in charge. "Experience for the future," Perkins informed him.⁸⁸ Holdrege completed this assignment by August 31, 1872, and returned to Burlington as trainmaster.

In the summer of 1873 Perkins offered the job of general superintendent of the B. & M. in Nebraska to C. F.

⁸³ McLane interview.

⁸⁴ Morse, *op. cit.*

⁸⁵ McLane interview.

⁸⁶ Morse, *op. cit.*

⁸⁷ G. H. Watson, to author, February 8, 1939.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Morse who accepted on the condition that he could take Holdrege with him as his assistant.⁸⁹ Mrs. Holdrege decided not to accompany her husband but to return to Boston to await the arrival of their expected baby.

Holdrege rented a house in Plattsmouth and his mother and two younger sisters came west to live with him temporarily. On November 12, 1873, Holdrege's first child, a son, was born. The next day Holdrege learned that his wife had died.⁹⁰

[To be continued]

⁹⁰ Henry Holdrege interview.