



## Lines West!—The Story of George W Holdrege (Part 3)

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Article Summary: Both the general strike of 1888 and the depression of 1892 curtailed the new construction that had been Holdrege’s main concern. In the later years of his work for the Burlington, he sought solutions to basic agricultural problems that confronted the region served by the railroad.

See the earlier sections of this article: [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

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Photographs / Images: George W Holdrege; Box Butte Avenue, Alliance, c. 1890

# LINES WEST!—THE STORY OF GEORGE W. HOLDREGE

BY THOMAS M. DAVIS

## III

**O**N February 27, 1888, at four A. M., began one of the most costly and damaging episodes in the entire history of the Burlington Railroad, the great strike of 1888. At that unusual hour, when the fewest trains were moving, some 1600 engineers and firemen, acting in obedience to orders from their respective organizations, left their positions and abandoned the engines at the nearest terminals. From then until midsummer the strike was a seriously disturbing factor in Burlington transportation and a problem of great importance to the public. Injurious consequences did not wholly cease until final settlement was effected January 4, 1889.

As General Manager of Lines West, George W. Holdrege played a vital role in combatting the effects of this strike on his lines. However, his struggles to keep Lines West clear and his trains moving in the face of violent labor opposition and adverse public opinion are better suited for a separate article than to be included here, for the results of the Burlington strike are a significant landmark in the history of railroad labor relations.

Several excellent monographs have appeared which cover various aspects of this strike. For a general picture of the day to day events of the strike, C. H. Salmon's *The Burlington Strike* (Aurora, Illinois, 1889), is especially recommended.

One of the more pronounced effects of the general strike of 1888 upon the B. & M. was the curtailment of new construction. Whereas in 1887 approximately 700 miles of new

track had been laid, this total dropped to 150 miles in the following year.<sup>1</sup> In explaining this decline to the Directors in his General Manager's report for 1888, Holdrege reported that while company officials had been able to find enough engineers and firemen to keep the road's main lines operating, there were not enough crews available to operate supply trains for construction gangs.<sup>2</sup> In spite of this handicap he succeeded in completing a seventy mile addition on his northwest line, a forty mile extension to Colorado Springs on the Kansas line, and twenty miles of new construction from Greeley to Ericson in Union Pacific territory.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of 1888, the B. & M. had successfully outmaneuvered the Union Pacific forces in the Northwest and had pushed the rails from Whitman to Alliance, described thus:

At Alliance, Nebraska, the townspeople, when the town had been started less than a month, attempted to organize for town government, for a population of not less than 55 had settled there. They discovered, however, that not a single individual had been a citizen long enough to hold office under the statutes which require a month's residence in the town. On the fifth week, they held an old settler's picnic. Alliance was typical of most of the towns that sprang up along the Billings line of the Burlington.<sup>4</sup>

From Alliance, Holdrege planned to point his rails northwest, penetrating the Black Hills mining regions to the north and the ranching centers of Wyoming to the west. Three engineering-scouting parties were sent out in 1889, each one headed by a trusted engineer whom Holdrege had used on other extensions in the past. Edward Gillette was sent to the Black Hills to report on the resources of the region and to plan a route through that area. M. W. Ensign was sent to Wyoming to lay out the main route through that territory and M. J. Miller was to scout for branch lines in Wyoming. Each of these men was free to choose his

<sup>1</sup> B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1887, 1888.

<sup>2</sup> George W. Holdrege, "General Manager's Report," 1888 (Holdrege Mss.).

<sup>3</sup> B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1888.

<sup>4</sup> T. E. Calvert to C. F. Manderson, 1898. (Unless otherwise indicated, all letters cited are from the Holdrege Mss., in possession of the author.)

own party and to purchase all the supplies he thought necessary. If more money was needed, they were free to draw on the railroad's account. Holdrege asked only that at the conclusion of their activities they send him a detailed report of their findings including their opinions regarding the routes the road should follow. They were given a year to complete their work.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, construction continued in territory north of Alliance, already surveyed.<sup>7</sup>

Working in coordination with the construction crews, and also under Holdrege's authority, was the Burlington Land Department, whose duty it was to induce settlement in the new regions being opened by the Burlington. As soon as the route of a proposed line was established Holdrege would notify the Burlington land office which would immediately release information to the public about the resources of the area.<sup>8</sup>

To handle this publicity and the settlement of Burlington lands, a separate and complete organization was created. Agents were sent into new areas to bring back reports about the topography of the region, the condition of the soil, the industries that might be developed, and the desirability of the region for settlement. With the help of these reports the land commissioner and immigration commissioner possessed complete data on a territory, for virtually every square foot of ground was covered by the agents. The problem, then, was one of condensing and editing reports, obtaining information from the operations department regarding location of townsites and division points, and the release of this information in the form of a circular for general distribution in the East. Translations were made in several languages and several thousand copies were sent abroad. The whole land colonization organization functioned entirely independently of the forces engaged in new construction, yet was coordinated with them through the General

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<sup>5</sup> B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1888.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Gillette, *Trail of the Iron Horse* (Boston, 1910), p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1888.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with A. D. McLane, Assistant Secretary of the Burlington Railroad, March 8, 1941.

Manager's office.

An insight into the workings of this department is revealed in the memoirs of C. J. Ernst:

I entered the service of the General Land Office at Lincoln February 1, 1876, and being able to speak, read and write two languages and in a limited degree to understand and make myself fairly understood by two or three other nationalities, I was soon given much special work in connection with foreign immigration as well as foreign land buyers from other states. As early as the fall of 1873 the first large number of German colonists from southern Russia began to arrive in the United States. . . . Every western land grant railroad had sent secret agents to Russia to induce these splendid and often wealthy farmers, Mennonites, Lutherans and German Reformed, to come to this country to settle on the lands in Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas. The rivalry between these states and the various land grant railroads was keen. During the next ten years these German Russians came over here in very large numbers.

I met them . . . several times by the trainload and on one occasion swiped a whole trainload from two Kansas roads, each of which had a special train waiting their arrival in Atchison, but I stole the whole bunch, except less than a dozen married men, and carried them all by special train, free, to Lincoln, Nebraska. Those were certainly strenuous days for settling our prairie states.<sup>9</sup>

Another example of the work of this department comes to light in the following newspaper review:

An exceedingly attractive pamphlet has just been issued by the C. B. & Q. railroad on "Nebraska, Its Achievements and Capabilities." There are thirty pages of closely printed matter giving the homeseeker all the information he may desire about this rich and prosperous region, together with a sectional map of the whole state. The B & M still has about 90,000 acres of land in Nebraska and the object of this publication is to bring in settlers to purchase and improve it. The certain result of this advertising will be to bring in a large number of desirable immigrants.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to supervising the work of the land department, it befell Holdrege to serve as intermediary of the western management and the Board of Directors. When his engineers reported to him regarding possible extensions into new regions, Holdrege would make the decision as to whether he would undertake their construction. Having

<sup>9</sup> C. J. Ernst, "Early Railroad Development of Nebraska," *Nebraska History*, VII (January-March, 1924), 20.

<sup>10</sup> *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), May 8, 1890.

made his decision, he would report his findings to Perkins who would submit them to the Board of Directors for approval. Usually, Perkins requested that Holdrege appear before the Board personally, and during the year from 1888 to 1900 Holdrege attended every meeting of the Directors of the C. B. and Q.<sup>11</sup>

Holdrege also accompanied the President and the other Chicago officials on semi-annual tours of inspection of their western properties. These trips, while strenuous, were made as pleasant as possible. Holdrege possessed the finest private car of any official of the line, and his chef, Henry, was renowned as the best cook in the company. Because there were inadequate hotel accommodations in the area, Holdrege used these trips and their attendant necessity for hospitality to indulge in his favorite pastime of hunting, and the evenings were usually spent in playing poker aboard his car, and President Perkins was considered one of the best poker players that had ever come west. One entertaining story about Perkins' poker playing is related by a witness.

Charles Perkins dearly loved to indulge in the American indoor sport. While out on the line he always arranged to have enough friends along with him to make up a game after the day's work was finished. Perkins county, Nebraska was named after him and the town of Elsie was named after his daughter. Many years ago Perkins was making a tour of the Highline out of Holdrege and found himself in Elsie late in the afternoon. A committee of citizens met the distinguished visitors and showed them, among other sites, a new church. But upon entering the church the visitors were surprised to note that it was furnished with rough benches and crippled chairs. The committee informed the visitors that crops had been bad and money scarce so the congregation was unable to buy pews.

"But we hope for a good crop this year," said the spokesman, "and we hope to be able to raise the money in the fall to put in real pews."

No further hint that a donation would be acceptable was given, and the official party returned to the car. It was decided to remain in Elsie until the following morning and immediately after dinner the table had been set with accoutrements for the pastime.

Promptly at twelve the game closed and as usual all prepared to pay Mr. Perkins. His winnings amounted to

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<sup>11</sup> J. R. Hickox, *Memorandum of Holdrege's Life* (1938).



GEORGE W. HOLDREGE

\$300 and he had a lot of fun rumpling the bills and kidding the losers. After the others had left he put the bills in an envelope and marked it "for the pews".

The next week the Elsie paper came out with a beautiful story about the generosity of this great man. It told how his heart was touched by the struggles of a pioneer people to worship and how in the generosity of men big enough to become railroad presidents he had donated the money that would make possible the fulfillment of the dream of the people.<sup>12</sup>

The year 1889 progressed swiftly in terms of Burlington construction. At the beginning of the year the B. & M. operated 2,782 miles. At the end of the year it had increased to 2,999 miles, yet only 83 miles of this increase had been built in Nebraska. Holdrege had continued the line northwest from Alliance to the South Dakota border. From there he had headed forty-eight miles due west to the eastern border of Wyoming. From the east line, he had penetrated that territory twenty-eight miles to the town of Cambria, passing through the rapidly growing town of Newcastle. From Denver, Holdrege had carried his line thirty-five miles northwest to the town of Lyons, penetrating fertile valleys along the foothills of the Rockies, while, from the south, he had carried his line eleven miles to Burns Junction. With this increase, Holdrege had expanded his Lines West until they operated in seven states, Wyoming and South Dakota having been entered for the first time in 1889.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile he had received his reports from his engineers. Gillette reported:

The Black Hills abound in game. At the time we were here the battle of Wounded Knee occurred and the settlers were much alarmed, fearing a raid by the Sioux Indians. Ranches were deserted and many settlers got together at Custer for mutual protection. We came to a number of farms where the chickens and pigs were left to take care of themselves. Learning that a party of surveyors were abroad in the land, the settlers began drifting home.

The southern part of the Hills was much elated at this time because of the great discoveries of tin ore. We were now in competition with the Northwestern Railway for the business of the Black Hills and our men were cautioned not to give any information to strangers as no doubt we were being spied upon by the enemy.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Omaha Bee*, July 20, 1926.

<sup>13</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, May 25, 1890.

<sup>14</sup> Gillette, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

Ensign's report on Wyoming was more detailed. To quote his conclusion:

To reach the country explored would require two main lines from Alliance: One running northwest via Crawford to Warbonnet Creek, Cheyenne River, and up the Cheyenne River, Beaver Creek, Wind River, Donkey Creek, Big Horn River by some route to the Musselshell River near the point where it turns north.

The other main line would be west from Alliance up the North Platte and Laramie Rivers to the Laramie Plains, then via Sage Creek to Sweetwater and up that to the Sweetwater Pass and south to Agate Pass.

As it is possible through business would be the most important for this line, distance and grades will be important considerations. The importance of reaching the chief centers of trade with the main line might overbalance those items.<sup>15</sup>

Still undecided as to the ultimate destination of his railroad, Perkins wrote to Holdrege in September, 1889, advising that they, along with Forbes and some of the other eastern directors of the road, make a tour of the western states to plan where the road would lead. It took a year to complete final arrangements for the trip, but on September 1, 1890, this group left Omaha, heading west for Denver. At Denver, they were the guests of the Denver and Rio Grande Company who took them to Salt Lake City. The trip lasted three months, and after his return, Holdrege wrote to Calvert that, in his opinion, the best route for the Burlington was to build to Billings, Montana, and connect there with the Great Northern or Northern Pacific, thereby making contact with the Pacific northwest. "While California would undoubtedly afford us a valuable outlet to the Coast, I feel that the future of that part of the country lies to the North, and the roads that connect with it," he concluded.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, Holdrege had not abandoned his plan of tapping as many of the resources as possible in the intervening territory. In 1890, he started his line into the Black Hills, completing it as far as Hill City, a distance of sixty miles. At the same time he was extending his line in Wyoming from Newcastle to Merino, through the north-

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<sup>15</sup> M. W. Ensign to Holdrege, August 8, 1889.

<sup>16</sup> Holdrege to Calvert, January 7, 1890.

eastern corner of the state, heading toward the Montana line. This line was aimed at extending through Sheridan, Wyoming, with a branch to Douglas, and continuing to Billings, Montana. On May 24th of that year, Holdrege received the following letter from Ensign:

I understand from business men here that the Union Pacific folks had one of their commercial agents here trying to arrange through rates to this point via the Cheyenne Northern from eastern points. This is competition with the Northern Pacific. The people here seem anxious to get connection with the B & M as soon as the road gets as near as the Northern Pacific. I believe even if you could give them assurance that the road would reach up twenty miles on Donkey Creek this fall, you could get the greater part of their trade. They are agitating laying out and building a county road to the east line from Sheridan county where Wild Horse crosses the line. As soon as the hundred mile contract on the B. & M. is finished there is no doubt that the B. & M. can have the entire business of this section. While not very great it would help some. I believe it is to the company's interest to send some man who has authority to act in the matter to arrange for their traffic as soon as possible. I understand that arrangements are already made for the Buffalo business. That of this basin is nearly as valuable.<sup>17</sup>

Work on the Wyoming and the South Dakota extension progressed slowly. A conservative estimate of the cost of the road was \$25,000 per mile.<sup>18</sup> The general prosperity of the West at this time and the desire for a coastal connection of some kind were back of the decision to continue expansion. In 1891, Holdrege pushed his South Dakota line to Deadwood from Hill City and extended the Wyoming Central line to Hot Springs. In Wyoming he continued for fifty miles beyond Merino to the new town of Gillette, named after the engineer who had first explored that territory for the railroad.<sup>19</sup>

The following year Holdrege pushed his Wyoming line 100 miles to Sheridan, following the advice of Ensign of two years before. By this maneuver, Holdrege established another "Burlington town," for Sheridan became as closely allied with the Burlington railroad in Wyoming through the ensuing years as Lincoln had been in Nebraska. Continuing

<sup>17</sup> Ensign to Holdrege, May 26, 1890.

<sup>18</sup> B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1890.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

with his plans in Nebraska, Holdrege built a thirty mile extension from Culbertson to Imperial, thus opening up a new region between the Highline and the Denver line.<sup>20</sup>

In 1892, another severe depression swept over the West. For the time being, Sheridan was to remain the terminus for the B. & M. In 1893, only forty-seven miles of new construction was undertaken, thirty of which was the extension from Englewood to Spearfish in South Dakota, and eight of which was a narrow gauge from Deadwood up to some of the mines.<sup>21</sup>

This temporary halt in the westward spread of the rails gave Holdrege opportunity to study the territory around the terminus of his new line in Wyoming. Impressed with the possibilities of the region, Holdrege purchased a ranch on Big Goose Creek, in the vicinity of Sheridan, and in 1893, in partnership with Gillette and his brother-in-law, Thomas Kimball, organized the Sheridan Land Company, pledged to aid in the development of the city of Sheridan. In 1889, three years before the road had entered Sheridan, Gillette, on the advice of Holdrege, had purchased substantial amounts of land around the city of Sheridan with the understanding that he and Holdrege would form a company to develop Sheridan. When the rails reached Sheridan three years later, this community, the only town of any size to be contacted by the railroad in that part of the territory, underwent a tremendous boom, with the resulting consequence that Holdrege, Gillette and Kimball prospered proportionately.<sup>22</sup>

By this time it had been decided by the Board of Directors that the ultimate goal of the B. & M. in this direction would be Huntley, Montana, just east of Billings, where it could make contact with the Northern Pacific, giving it a connection with the Pacific coast. The Wyoming-Montana boundary line was crossed on June 25, 1894, and connection

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1891.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1893.

<sup>22</sup> Articles of Incorporation of the company are in the author's possession.

at Huntley was established on October 3, 1894.<sup>23</sup> To undertake this latter piece of construction, covering a distance of 100 miles, the Big Horn Southern Railroad Company was organized, with Holdrege, Perkins, Calvert and Gillette as directors. At the same time, the B. & M. was working out a transaction whereby it would lease from the Northern Pacific, for 999 years, the twelve miles of track from Huntley to Billings. With the completion of this construction, Lines West was extended over 3,427 miles.<sup>24</sup>

This construction virtually marked the completion of Burlington Lines West. In twenty-five years, the B. & M. had constructed over 3,000 miles of track. In 1869, there had been a plan for a short line of 172 miles, most of it on paper, through unbroken prairie in the state of Nebraska as an outlet for Union Pacific transcontinental wares. Given that as a starting point, with the visionary ambition of a young Harvard graduate, the company had expanded to include 2,252 miles of Nebraska track and 259 miles in Kansas, which stood as a testimonial to the faith of the railroad in the West. Colorado had been covered with 368 miles of rails. The B. & M. had become the first railroad to give Denver a through connection with the East. This had been followed by a north and south connection to Cheyenne and another east and west route from Sterling, Colorado, to Holdrege, Nebraska. Two hundred sixty five miles had been laid in Wyoming in the space of four years.

It was the depression that had put an end to the plans Holdrege entertained for continuing his line on to the Pacific Coast. During the decade of the Nineties, much of Holdrege's time was consumed in defending the railroad from the Populists, a potent political party and a product of the depression. Among other things aimed at the roads, was more rigid government control. Holdrege became so actively engaged in the politics of Nebraska that, by the end of the era, he was recognized as the leading political figure in the state.

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<sup>23</sup> B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1894.

<sup>24</sup> Holdrege, "General Manager's Report," 1894.

Meanwhile he turned his attention to the improvement of conditions in Burlington territory. The depression of 1893 was followed by three years of severe drouth in the central and southern parts of Nebraska. Traffic declined, the returns to the investors fell off, and the whole territory of the B. & M. was in a deplorable condition.<sup>25</sup>

Reporting to Perkins, Holdrege stated that he believed the best way of ending the great political strength in the West that threatened the existence of the private railroad companies, was to find some solution to the basic agricultural problem which confronted the region. As there was little chance that the farmers in Nebraska had either the money or the time to invest in the pursuit of agricultural experimentation, he advanced the plan that this task be taken over by the Burlington in the hope that some discovery could be made that would point the way to prosperity for the region. In 1894 he was given Perkins' approval to take any steps in this line that he considered advisable.<sup>26</sup>

With this official sanction, Holdrege actively started out to find some means of increasing the productivity of the territory of his railroad. This quest ultimately led to Hardy W. Campbell and the subsequent employment of this man by the Burlington Railroad as an agricultural agent, pledged to educate the western farmers in the planting and treatment of their soil. Thus was marked another unorthodox and far-sighted method of building a railroad, for the C. B. & Q. was the first railroad to engage in the promotion of industry along its routes.<sup>27</sup>

Hardy Campbell was a farmer in the arid region of South Dakota who had consistently produced good crops in the face of the crop-withering years that the area was undergoing. In communicating with Campbell, Holdrege was informed of the secret of his success.

"Plowing in the fall of 1882 was bone dry and made a coarse, loose seed bed," Campbell informed him. "In the

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<sup>25</sup> B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1894.

<sup>26</sup> Perkins to Holdrege, February 9, 1894.

<sup>27</sup> Hickox, *op. cit.*

spring of 1883 the soil was moist, consequently plowed fine and followed closely with harrow and drill, made a better seed bed, but the reasons had not yet been grasped by myself."<sup>28</sup>

In the fall of 1885 Campbell had reached some conclusions of his own. Why on a specially packed strip had he had wonderful yields? Was it a direct result of the firm soil below? He was so positive of the importance of this condition that he devised and patented the sub-surface packer, an implement that would duplicate what a few trips of the mules across the field would do, making the bottom of the furrow firm and leaving the top loose. The packer had a large sale for a few years.<sup>29</sup>

Campbell's next discovery came by mere accident. In the spring of 1887, one of his men, drilling wheat, through sheer carelessness drilled in about thirty acres with only forty pounds of seed per acre, when ninety pounds or a bushel and a half was common practice and supposed to be necessary for a good crop. As it was late in the season he had let this thin drilling go. To his surprise he found that it delivered more bushels per acre than any other part of the same field farmed in the same manner, but with the then usual ninety pounds of seed per acre. Could it be that half or less than half the seed generally believed necessary would bring a better crop? Campbell believed that it would.

Campbell continued to experiment for a number of years in an effort to solve the problem of farming under conditions of drouth. The year 1892 came in with ample early rain but ended hot and dry. Consequently crops again were light. The year 1893 was quite unfavorable in the spring. Campbell had then arranged with the Department of Agriculture to assist him in determining the soil moisture conditions under varied tillage methods. They sent soil tubes to be driven into the soil twelve inches, and returned to Washington by mail. With these tubes and by practical

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<sup>28</sup> Memorandum, Hardy W. Campbell to Holdrege, 1893.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

field work he obtained "positive evidence" of the influence of timely surface cultivation in the utilization of a small quantity of moisture.<sup>30</sup>

The year 1894 proved to be the most severe of all. Land prices were very low and business conditions were resultingly bad. By the spring of 1894 Campbell had reached some interesting conclusions as a result of his efforts to master the problem of defeating the ill effects of unfavorable weather conditions. He came to the conclusion that by bringing about certain spring soil conditions which would utilize more of the natural elements more favorable results could be achieved. Lending support to his views was the fact that he grew on his farm, at Putney, South Dakota, thirty-two acres of potatoes that averaged 142 bushels per acre of high quality when many fields in the entire valley were total failures. This marked result brought a request from J. N. Kendrick, General Manager of the Northern Pacific, for Campbell to come to his office at St. Paul for an interview. This interview was followed by similar requests from other railroads, among them that of Holdrege, which resulted in arrangements for work during 1895 studying conditions along the line of the Burlington Railroad.<sup>31</sup>

Campbell agreed to devote himself for the next three years exclusively to conducting experiments on farms in Burlington territory, to travel throughout the entire area served by the company, to lecture to the farmers on his discoveries, and to ask for their cooperation. He was to be placed on the Burlington payroll as Assistant to the General Manager. Campbell remained with the Burlington railroad intermittently for the next twenty years and became intimately connected with agricultural development in the West. He found farmers everywhere willing to cooperate with him in conducting his experiments. His principal effort along the Burlington line was with corn and wheat. Among the many ideas he advanced to the western farmer was that of dry-farming. It was Campbell who devised

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<sup>30</sup> Holdrege to Perkins, December 8, 1894.

<sup>31</sup> Perkins to Holdrege, December 13, 1894.



BOX BUTTE AVENUE, ALLIANCE, ABOUT 1890

various methods of maintaining the moisture in the ground, of utilizing what rainfall the country had in drouth years to the best advantage, of planting crops in rows for easier cultivation.

Holdrege himself was not entirely convinced of the soundness of Campbell's ideas, for he believed that the drouth of the Nineties was a temporary and unusual one, and that it created conditions not common to the territory as a whole. Future events proved him in error on these conclusions, but Holdrege remained a staunch supporter of methods for increasing the productivity of his western territory.<sup>32</sup>

The work that the Burlington undertook under the leadership of Holdrege and the guidance of Campbell during the drouth years of the Nineties contributed a great deal in alleviating some of the distress of the farmers, and both men were lauded by the *Farmer's Alliance*, the Populist paper, for their work in rehabilitating the country.<sup>33</sup>

By 1899, the worst of the drouth was over, and Holdrege again turned to his plans for expansion. He wrote Perkins that he believed it was time the Burlington penetrated the North Platte region in western Nebraska and Wyoming, where, he believed, there was a great future assured for his railroad and the whole area by means of irrigation. Perkins gave his consent to this new construction, and in 1900 Holdrege built 130 miles of new road from Alliance south to Bridgeport and west to the Wyoming state line, and from the state line to Guernsey. At the same time he opened up the Middle Loup Valley by building twenty miles of track from Arcadia to Sargent. Simultaneously he supervised the construction of fifteen miles of new track leading out of Deadwood, South Dakota, to the various mining districts surrounding it.<sup>34</sup>

This was followed the next year by building south from Bridgeport, Nebraska, for twenty miles, and building from

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<sup>32</sup> Holdrege, "General Manager's Report," 1897.

<sup>33</sup> *Farmers Alliance* (Lincoln), November 16, 1897.

<sup>34</sup> B. & M., *Annual Report*, 1900.

Brush to the edge of the South Platte River.<sup>35</sup> In 1901 Holdrege built the line from Bridgeport south to the Colorado state line. In 1903, he sponsored another line across Nebraska from Stromsburg to Alma, in the Republican Valley. This line opened up four new counties.

In 1898, the city of Omaha, in an effort to push its industries, and as an advertising scheme to help restore the city's morale which had been badly shattered by the trying conditions of the Nineties, decided to hold an Exposition on the grand scale of the Cleveland Exposition of 1876. Finding itself almost financially destitute, funds for the project were not forthcoming from the surrounding territory fast enough to guarantee its success. Finally, the promoters of the Exposition appealed to Holdrege, as an important citizen of the city and the most public spirited of the railroad managers, to induce the railroads to contribute toward the fund.<sup>36</sup> Taking counsel with Perkins, Holdrege announced that in the name of the Burlington Railroad he was willing to donate \$10,000, and that he was confident that the other lines would do the same.<sup>37</sup> With the five major railroads then in Omaha each willing to contribute a similar amount, the Trans-Mississippi Exposition was made possible.

In 1899, Perkins called Holdrege to Burlington, Iowa, to inform him that he was going to retire from active railroad management and that he was going to sell the Burlington. Holdrege opposed the move. He feared what might become of the road were it to fall into other hands. This road represented his life work. He, therefore, asked that he be given the opportunity to form a corporation to buy it.

Going to Boston in the summer of 1899 Holdrege tried to influence a number of his friends to put up the necessary money, and, at the last moment, the eleven most prominent, declined, so he was forced to go to Philadelphia, where he netted the same result. Discouraged, Holdrege returned to Omaha, and informed Perkins that he had been unable to

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 1901.

<sup>36</sup> *Omaha Bee*, April 6, 1908.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, April 18, 1898.

make the necessary arrangements and that if Perkins had another buyer in mind, he had better open negotiations with him.<sup>38</sup>

Perkins did have another buyer in mind—James J. Hill. Hill had been the man who, in the interests of the House of Morgan, had taken over the Northern Pacific, which had fallen into bankruptcy, and restored it to the position of one of the major railroads of the country.

Hill's railroads had outlets on the west coast, but their eastern termini afforded them very little through traffic except what was produced in their own area. Hill was looking for another outlet. Eventually he saw what he wanted in the Burlington. This line covered approximately 9,000 miles. It extended over the rich agricultural areas of Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, and Minnesota. The products raised along its lines would afford a supplement for the goods from the Northwest. Hill visualized a great Pacific Northwest-to-Gulf of Mexico route. Caring little for an outlet on the Atlantic seaboard, he was more vitally interested in the Gulf, which was nearer the products Europe wanted.

Negotiations were opened by Hill and Perkins as early as the fall of 1899 for the purchase of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy by the Northern Pacific and the Great Northern. After two years of sparring, these two men finally got together in the fall of 1901 and worked out an arrangement whereby the Hill interests were to take over the C. B. & Q. Releasing this information to the public, Perkins stated:

The C B & Q will continue to do business as heretofore, with Mr. Harris as President and the organization unchanged. But it will be assured of what it does not now possess, a permanent connection by the shortest line with the great northwest, rich in minerals and lumber with its markets for agricultural produce, and with the commerce of the Pacific Ocean by way of Puget Sound and the Columbia River. On the other hand, the northern roads will be assured of a permanent connection by the shortest route with the agricultural and manufacturing centers of the middle west, and the markets to be found there for the products of the north

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<sup>38</sup> Holdrege to his wife, March 8, April 6, 1899.

and the commerce of the Pacific. No argument is necessary to show that this assured permanency is of the greatest importance to all of the interests concerned, the people as well as the railroads.<sup>39</sup>

There was a great deal of speculation in railroad circles as to how Holdrege would accept this new management of his railroad. Rumors floated around Nebraska for months after this transaction that he had left the Burlington. (Some of these were certainly with foundation, and it is reliably documented that Holdrege tried to formulate other plans at this time, but that is a story for a more detailed article.)

One rumor, originating with the *Omaha Bee*, was that Holdrege was going to retire from the Burlington and go into the employ of the Union Pacific.<sup>40</sup> Another, printed in the *State Journal*, asserted that Holdrege was going to retire from railroading permanently and devote his time to managing his vast agricultural holdings in Nebraska.<sup>41</sup>

All of these rumors were without foundation. Holdrege never seriously considered leaving the line he had built.<sup>42</sup> Another element influencing his decision was the fact that at this time he was so heavily involved in the political struggle against the Populists that it was impossible for him to leave the service of the road without serious damage to the company. Hill needed Holdrege's influence and experience to help him carry through his program successfully.

Under the Hill management, George B. Harris became the new President of the Burlington. Harris and Holdrege were old friends, for it had been Harris' father who had been the original Land Commissioner for the B. & M. when Holdrege had first come west.

Realizing that Holdrege was a power in the region of Lines West, and also realizing that certain changes which were planned might prove distasteful to him, Hill offered Holdrege the Presidency of the Colorado-Southern, a subsidiary of the Burlington. This he declined.

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<sup>39</sup> Holdrege, "The Making of the Burlington," January 4, 1921.

<sup>40</sup> *Omaha Bee*, December 9, 1901.

<sup>41</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, January 3, 1902.

<sup>42</sup> Memorandum, Henry Holdrege, Jr., to the author, June, 1940.

Mistaking his intentions for a reluctance to leave the Burlington, Hill offered Holdrege the vice-presidency of the Burlington with offices in Chicago. Holdrege also declined this offer, stating that if he had wanted that position, he could have had it ten years before under Perkins.<sup>43</sup>

With one policy of Holdrege's, the new management was in complete accord: that as much territory as possible should be opened by new railroads as sources for new traffic. To all proposals for expansion that Holdrege submitted, the Chicago headquarters gave their approval. In 1902, accompanied by Willard, Holdrege toured Wyoming territory that had not yet been penetrated by the railroad. This included the vast Big Horn Basin through which no railroad lines ran, and through which it was considered impractical, by engineers, to build a line. Leaving from Billings in the fall of that year, Holdrege and Willard, in the company of Calvert and Gillette, journeyed over the Burlington line to Cody. From there they toured on horseback through the entire length of the Big Horn Basin, extending from Thermopolis to Casper to Douglas and Guernsey. In this region, it was rumored, were great quantities of gold; and oil had already been discovered in the vicinity of Casper. Here, then, was a profitable source of transportation to be contacted by the Burlington. Such a route had the added advantage of reducing traffic over the main Billings line, which had become overcrowded, by detouring part of it through the Big Horn Basin.<sup>44</sup> With the full approval of the Chicago office, Holdrege proceeded to build a line through the Big Horns from 1902 to 1910. The full extent of this line was not realized until five years later.<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, other developments had transpired to influence the policies of the Burlington. Among these was the completion of the long discussed Panama Canal which afforded a direct connection by water for the East coast with the Orient. With the completion of this project, the whole

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<sup>43</sup> Dan Willard to the author, June, 1939.

<sup>44</sup> Information from letters, Holdrege to his wife, 1902.

<sup>45</sup> *Omaha Bee*, January 5, 1921.

philosophy back of the Hill administration was altered, for the railroads could not hope to compete in this transcontinental competition with the shipping interests who now had the canal at their disposal.

With the collapse of the transcontinental vision, the Hill railroads once again resorted to the old policy that had guided the destinies of the B. & M. in the early days. Holdrege once again became an important leader in the councils of the railroad. In 1910, his salary was raised to \$25,000, establishing him as the highest paid General Manager in the country.<sup>46</sup>

During the period from 1908 to 1916, Holdrege encouraged the sponsorship of experimental farms, travelling agricultural fairs, and general farm exhibits as a policy for the road. He spent freely of his own and his company's money in building up the Burlington territory.<sup>47</sup>

In 1917 Holdrege saw his railroad taken over by the government as a necessary war measure. He continued in the employ of his railroad in the capacity of Assistant General Manager, where he directed the movement of supplies over the western lines of the company. In 1920, with the passage of the Esch-Cummins Bill, and the restoration of the roads to their private owners, Holdrege received the following letter:

I am glad to advise you, as you will of course hear from other sources, of your re-appointment, effective at the end of the Federal control, as General Manager, Lines West, and to feel that we will continue to have the benefit of your counsel and experience in the resumption of corporate operation if the property.

There have been few officers on the Burlington I think who have been held in greater affection than yourself and, in view of your advancing years, I want to convey the suggestion to you that you do not allow the pressure of your daily work, which in view of new and untried conditions confronting us, promises to be complicated and onerous, to lead you to overtax your strength or to continue in active service longer than your own welfare will fairly justify. I do not think the company should ask any of its older officers to do this. At the same time, however, these very conditions in time suggest the wisdom of transferring the burden to younger shoulders. I should like to have your views when-

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<sup>46</sup> Hickox, *op. cit.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

ever convenient and in considering the best course which you should follow, I am of course glad to say that in the event of your retirement some months hence, I think that the company will be prepared to make a definite provision for your future comfort which will be as liberal as conditions will permit.<sup>48</sup>

Holdrege took the hint. The new management had problems that didn't include him in their settlement. After considerable correspondence with Hale Holden, the president of the Burlington, Holdrege decided to retire. He received the following letter from Mr. Holden:

I am glad to be able to advise you that in connection with your retirement on January 1 next, the directors of this company have voted the payment of an allowance to you in the nature of a pension at the rate of \$600 a month.

While the directors have not limited themselves as to future reconsideration of the matter or change in action taken, in the event of the adoption of a pension system at a later date by the company, I have no doubt but that you may continue to rely upon the appreciation of the Board for your noteworthy and valuable years of service.

As suggested in our last conversation, you may now feel free to adopt your own time and method of announcing your retirement; I assume you will prefer to do this yourself but would be glad to know of your plans in that regard and to contribute any statement in addition from my office which may be appropriate or desirable.

Holdrege replied to this by saying:

I want to assure you that your kind letter is much appreciated, and I thank you most sincerely. It is my intention to continue my residence in some part of the country, where I feel at home, between the Missouri River on the east and the Rocky Mountains on the West. The fifty-one years I have spent in this part of the country, and my long association with T. E. Calvert and other engineers, and many acquaintances, interested in the development of the Trans-Missouri Country, may make it possible for me to furnish some information that may be of use to you and other officers of the Burlington company.

I only want to assure you that it will be a pleasure for me to be of service in any questions where I can be of use.

On November 28th, Holdrege released the following statement to the press:

For 51 years, since September 1869, it has been my duty to aid in the mutual development of the Burlington System West of the Missouri River and the Country it has the good fortune to serve.

I shall retire from active service December 31, 1920, and want to most sincerely thank the people living in this vast

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<sup>48</sup> Hale Holden to Holdrege, February 21, 1920.

area for their kindly cooperation in this work, which has been an inspiration and a pleasure, and to add that it is my intention to continue to make my home in this territory.

I intend also in the future, as in the past, to be of assistance as far as possible in the mutual interests of the Burlington Railroad and the people it serves.

On December 31, 1920, Holdrege ended his railroad career.

Once Holdrege retired, he found more time to devote to his many hobbies, particularly his ranch, his agricultural experiments, and Harvard University. His faithful porter, Henry, who had been with him for forty years, refused all offers to serve on other railroad cars, and stayed on the Holdrege private car. Congressmen, who desired information on pending agricultural legislation, felt free to write to him for his opinion, knowing that they would get an accurate and carefully considered opinion.

Although quite able to afford one, Holdrege never owned an automobile. Even during his period of retirement, he walked from his home to the Burlington offices every morning he was in Omaha—a distance of three miles. He was never convinced of the possibility that the auto might replace the railroad as the country's major means of transportation.

His emphasis on exercise carried over to the end. On the morning of September 16, 1926, Holdrege arose as usual and prepared to walk to the office. Complaining of a little dizziness, he refused to take his wife's advice by hiring a taxi, and claimed that exercise would probably make his dizziness disappear. As he opened the front door to leave, he staggered and fell. A few hours later he died. Thus ended the career of one of the West's most illustrious sons, and the man who supervised more miles of railroad construction than any other individual in American history.

A worthy summary of his achievements was announced in a resolution adopted by the directors of the Burlington at the time of his passing:

In the death of Mr. Holdrege the directors feel that they have lost a valuable associate, the company has lost a devoted and capable official, and the state of Nebraska has lost a

citizen who was conspicuous in rendering public service. Mr. Holdrege entered the employment of this company in Nebraska in 1869 as a youth fresh from Harvard College and thereafter for more than fifty years devoted his talents extensively to its service, rising by successive promotions to the position of General Manager. He was a man of great energy, vision, and of unswerving integrity, fair and just in discipline and generous to a fault. As an officer he had the confidence and esteem of the employees and the public, modest and unpretentious in nature, untiring in devotion to the company and to the country. Perhaps the most outstanding feature of his character and career was his optimistic enthusiasm for the Trans-Missouri Country, and his faith in its future. Probably more lines of new railroad and more new projects in irrigation and mining, more agricultural development and other forms of useful enterprise developed out of his foresight and initiative than from that of any other man who lived in that great region between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains during the period of great development beginning in 1870. Hailed and honored repeatedly as the first citizen of Nebraska, Mr. Holdrege was entitled to that distinction by reason of his life-long service in constructive industry, in State development in reclaiming the prairie wilderness and making possible great farming communities and prosperous cities and towns in a region that before his day was described as the Great American Desert.