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Article Summary: James Hervey Pratt (1825-1910) was a rancher, farmer, land speculator, and freighter significant in the development of the Great Plains region, serving as an excellent example of a frontier entrepreneur of the post-Civil era.

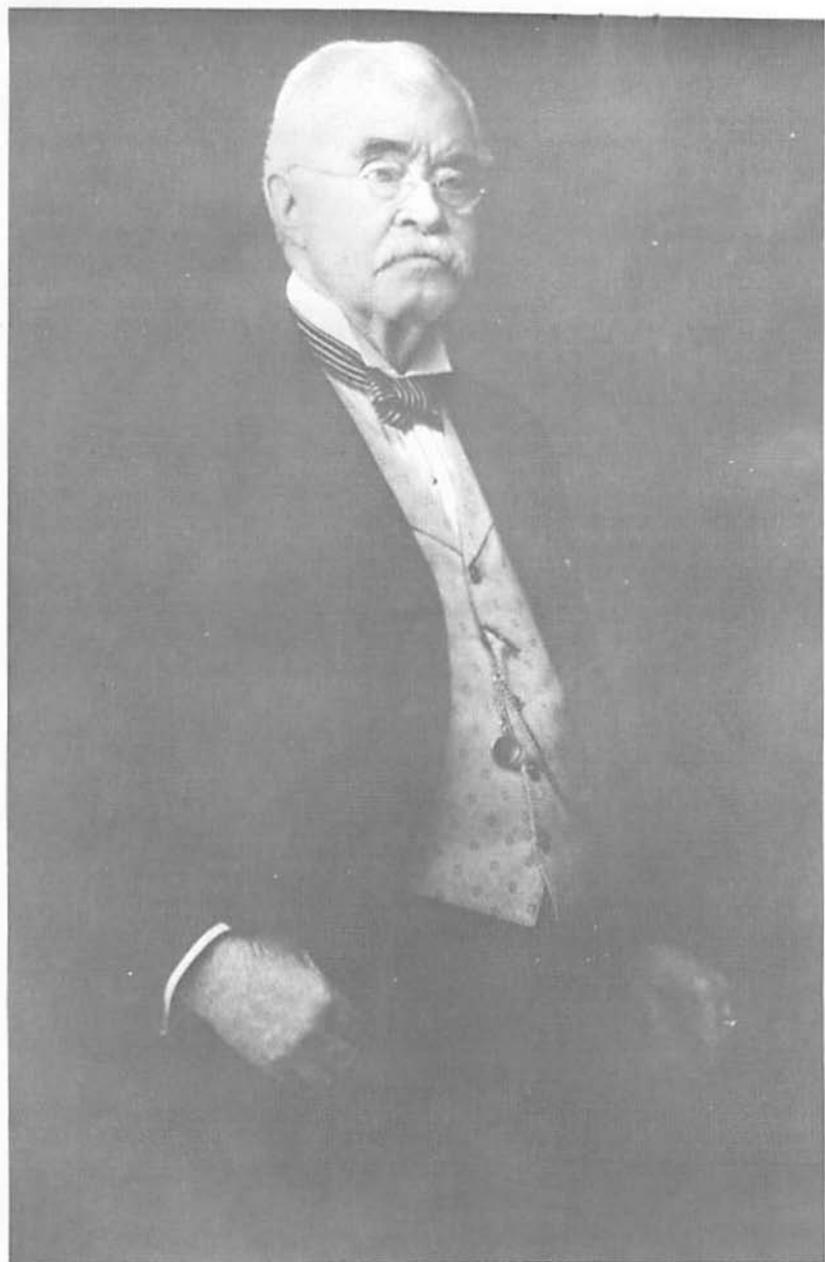
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Photographs / Images: James H Pratt (1825-1910), Nebraska rancher and freighter; Map of The Sidney-Black Hills Trail, from William E Lass'; a Pratt and Ferris warehouse in Sidney, 1876; U Cross Ranch, 1898, near Clearmont, Wyoming



James H. Pratt (1825-1910), Nebraska rancher and freighter.

JAMES HERVEY PRATT: FRONTIER ENTREPRENEUR

By Thomas W. Dunlay

The 19th century, the great age of frontier expansion, was also the age of great American economic expansion when the United States went from a nation of farmers to an urbanized, industrialized society in which the businessman was in many ways the representative figure. The two processes were intimately related. The West furnished many of the raw materials and the markets that made the expansion of the economy possible; Eastern and European business furnished the tools, transportation, and capital that expedited the "winning of the West."

When Horace Greeley said, or rather repeated, his famous advice to young men, his contemporaries knew what he meant. The West was wide open to the enterprising man who had an eye for opportunities, was prepared to try something new, and could tap a source of capital. Very early, the "wheeler-dealer" became one of the standard American stereotypes, while the West became the symbol of the opportunity that was waiting for the enterprising and lucky American.

One Westerner representative of the time and place was James Hervey Pratt, rancher, farmer, land speculator, and freighter significant in the development of the Great Plains area. His significance lies more in his being so thoroughly representative than in his individual importance, for he was an excellent example of a frontier entrepreneur of the post-Civil War era.

Pratt's life resembled that of many a Western American of the 19th century: born in the East, he moved to the Midwest and started working in business in his youth; he went through the Civil War, then went West to do business with the Army and the Bureau of Indian Affairs; he freighted goods into the mining camps of the Black Hills; when the opportunity arose, he entered the cattle industry; surviving the disasters that overtook that industry in the 1880's, he became a large-scale dealer in Western land in several states; and, like so many American businessmen,

he stayed in harness till he died, as if there was a joy in the getting that the spending could not provide.

Pratt was born in Plainfield, Massachusetts, on December 27, 1825, the son of William and Lavinia Coulson Pratt. The family moved to Ohio in 1830, settling on a farm twenty miles from Cleveland. He is supposed to have received an "academic education" at Chester, Ohio. Since he was the sixth of no less than 14 children, it is not too surprising that that education ended when he was 13, when he started as a clerk in a general store.¹

Pratt is somewhat elusive for the historian. He moved to Michigan at some point and began operating a store in the town of Hillsdale.² In 1855 he married Louise Field, also a native of Massachusetts.³ When the Civil War came, Pratt was a family man in his mid-'30s, not the type, it might be imagined, to rush off to war. But the Civil War deflected the course of most Americans' lives, and it did Pratt's. In August, 1862, he was commissioned first lieutenant and quartermaster of the 18th Michigan Infantry; the following February he was promoted to captain in the Quartermaster Corps.⁴

Many years later Pratt would be referred to as "Colonel" Pratt, with the implication that he earned the rank in the war, after serving in "many of the most severe battles."⁵ Available records suggest that he served quite prosaically as a quartermaster officer, much of the time at Little Rock, Arkansas.⁶ There is no indication that he held a colonelcy in the state militia or any similar organization. Prominent men were often "awarded" military titles by popular acclaim in the 19th century; if Pratt did not protest too much, it would be easy for people to assume that he had earned the rank in the Civil War. Given the need or the opportunity, Pratt might have been an effective combat leader; his record before and after the war suggests that he was an effective quartermaster—he had "a head for business" beyond any question.

Mustered out in January, 1866, Pratt returned to Hillsdale and began operating a flour mill.⁷ He was in his 40s now, and he might easily have settled down to modest success and local prominence—a "big frog in a small pond." In fact, his career only now began to "take off." The opportunities of the opening of the West were to draw him, as they did many younger men, to a success they had never known before.

The break came in 1870, when he secured the appointment as post trader at Fort Randall, Dakota Territory. The post trader at that period operated a "post exchange" under license from the War Department. At many Army posts he had a virtual monopoly as a convenient source of consumer goods for the troops and their families. It was often a lucrative situation, and traderships were contended for in Washington. In fact, the then secretary of war, William W. Belknap, left office in disgrace in 1876 under accusation of selling such appointments to eager candidates. There is no evidence that Pratt secured his appointment through such means; as a locally prominent businessman and a veteran, he would have had the political "connections" necessary to obtain an appointment by what were then considered perfectly legitimate methods.⁸

The tradership drew Pratt into the Great Plains region at a time when it was opening up to many kinds of exploitation. Pratt was one of the men who would perceive the varied opportunities and seize them. The post at Fort Randall was a good spot from which to observe that the Plains Indians were being forced onto reservations. They could no longer support themselves by hunting; hence, they must be supported by the government until, as was earnestly hoped, they could become self-supporting farmers. In the meantime, the business of providing food could be very profitable to some whites. Pratt became associated with Cornelius Ferris during the Fort Randall years, forming the Pratt and Ferris Cattle Company to furnish beef to both the fort and the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail Indian agencies.⁹

In 1875 a special commission acting on complaints of Chief Red Cloud of the Oglalas, investigated the food supplies being issued at Indian agencies. They found the chief's complaints exaggerated, but nonetheless judged the rations, cattle included, to be inferior and recommended that contract procedures be tightened.¹⁰ It is hard to determine the exact extent to which Pratt was culpable in this state of affairs. It was notorious that agency Indians were regarded as legitimate prey by many contractors and Bureau of Indian Affairs officials, who sought their fortunes at the expense of the government and its wards. Yet, the fact that Pratt worked in a milieu that often corrupted does not prove that he was corrupt.

When the Sioux agencies were relocated in northwestern Nebraska, Pratt and Ferris sought a convenient location for

moving their supplies to the agencies. They decided to form a freighting company and to locate their headquarters at Sidney, Nebraska. Goods could be shipped to Sidney by Union Pacific, unloaded, and carried north to the agencies.¹¹

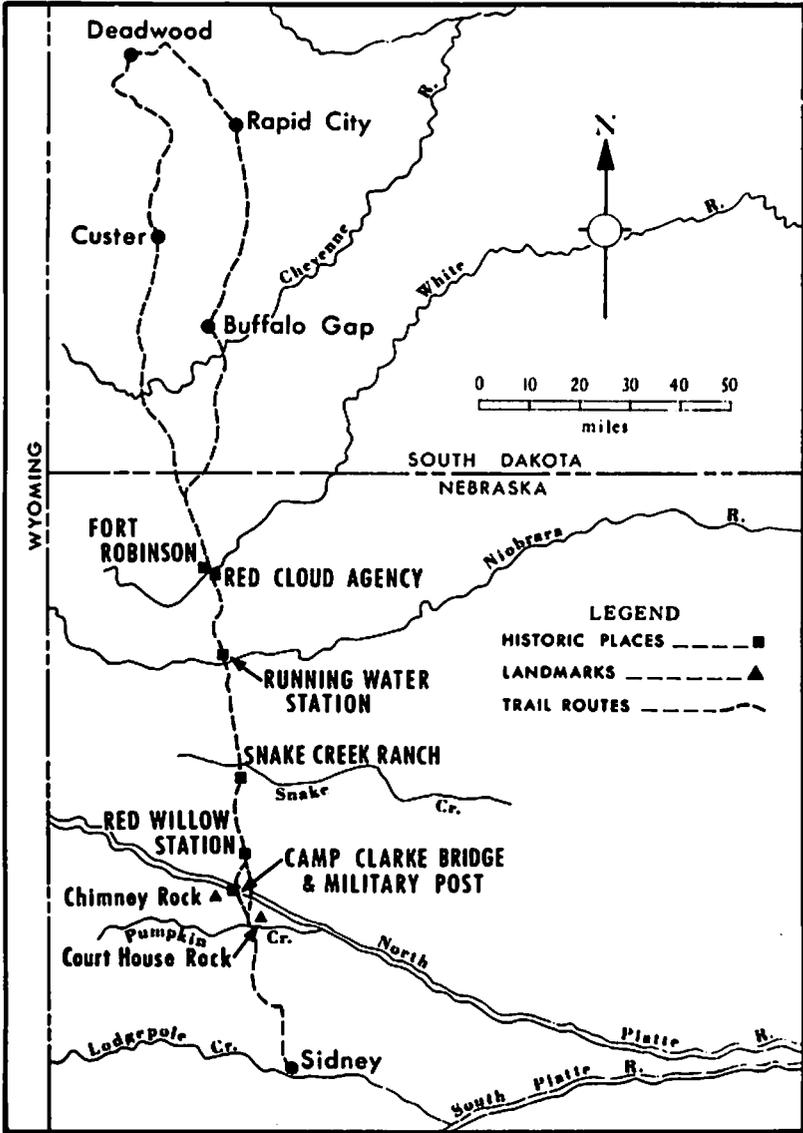
The Sidney location was chosen in 1875, precisely the right time to take up a new opportunity; one cannot help believing that the partners saw it coming and made their preparations accordingly. In 1874 the discovery of gold in the Black Hills by Lieutenant Colonel George Custer's expedition was proclaimed to the world. In spite of the fact that the region was set aside for the Sioux by the treaty of 1868, miners flocked to the hills and settlements soon began to form.¹²

In most gold rushes those who supplied the miners were more likely to strike it rich than the miners themselves. Sidney was in a particularly favorable position to supply the new gold region, although it would meet competition from Cheyenne, Bismarck, and Fort Pierre. Sidney had the advantage as the terminus of a well-known trail, which already existed as far as the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies.¹³

Nonetheless, various contemporaries believed that the route from Cheyenne was better. Robert Strahorn, a Union Pacific publicist and frontier booster, estimated the distance from Cheyenne to Deadwood at 250 miles, while from Sidney to Deadwood it was 290 miles.¹⁴ This estimate was questioned by Colonel Richard Dodge, but he noted how sandy the Sidney route was and how difficult the bad crossing of the North Platte River, about 40 miles north of the town.¹⁵

The latter difficulty was remedied in the summer of 1876 when veteran freighter and bridge-builder Henry T. Clarke built the 2,000-foot Camp Clarke Bridge over the river at the crossing site. Pratt and Ferris arranged to carry Clarke's building materials in return for free passage across the bridge when it was completed.¹⁶ Sidney acquired major importance as a Black Hills shipping point in the next five years, an importance measured by the efforts that Cheyenne made to take her business away. Strahorn estimated that about four million pounds of freight were shipped in 1877.¹⁷

In the spring of 1876 flour was selling at \$60 per hundredweight in Deadwood; by fall, when the freighting outfits had organized the business, it dropped to \$9. The following spring, when the wet roads were impassable, it rose again to \$35;



The Sidney-Black Hills Trail. From William E. Lass' From the Missouri to the Great Salt Lake (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1972), 202 ff.

these figures illustrate the need and the effect of well-organized freighting in areas away from the railroad.¹⁸ Pratt and Ferris, believed to have freighted the largest share of Indian annuity goods to the agencies in northwest Nebraska, now became the biggest outfit in the Sidney-Black Hills trade. The firm carried several stamp mills which weighed up to 400,000 pounds each, and charged the Homestake Company \$33,000 for one.¹⁹

Freighting was a sufficiently picturesque business; the great wagons that could carry 7,500 to 8,000 pounds had front wheels 3 feet in diameter and 5-foot rear wheels. They were pulled by seven or eight yoke of oxen under normal conditions; a 21-yoke hitch was seen on one wagon fording the quicksand bottom of the North Platte before Clarke's bridge was completed.²⁰ Years later freighter Porter Maddox reminisced: "Methinks I can see the lusty, lousy, dirt-begrimed bull-whacker with from ten to fourteen feet of whiplash attached to eighteen or twenty inches of polished hickory." They dined, he remembered, on "sowbelly, beans, sugar, coffee, and tough bread or flap-jacks."²¹

In 1876 and 1877 the trail was also rendered dangerous by hostile Indians, "who took advantage of every opportunity to shoot the drivers from ambush and kill or stampede the stock."²² Red Canyon, south of Custer, South Dakota, was described as "a veritable valley of death. Train after train was captured, the freighters slaughtered and their goods carried away or burned."²³ It was suspected that the Indians were associated in some way with white men who could dispose of the stolen goods or stock.²⁴

What was Pratt's personal part in all these colorful doings? He must surely have accompanied his trains on some occasions, if only for business reasons. There is no reason to suppose that he actually cracked a bullwhip or vented his profanity on the oxen. His obituary says: "He had many thrilling and unique experiences during those wild days on the plains, which he loved to recount to his friends."²⁵ His friends, having no consideration for historians, apparently failed to record any of those experiences.

Sidney's freighting boom was of short duration; in 1879 business was already down from previous years. The railroad reached Fort Pierre in 1880, giving it a distinct advantage in the Black Hills trade. By 1882 the Sidney route was dead, and the freighters dispersed.²⁶ This probably did not distress Pratt and

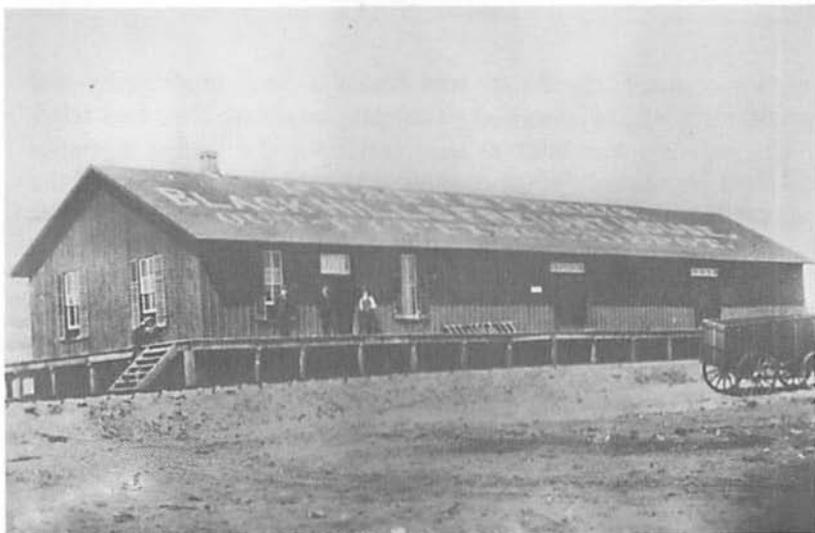
Ferris too much, since they had found a new opportunity just opening up, which promised to surpass anything they had tried.

The partners had been raising cattle for the Indian agencies and Fort Randall for several years (although Pratt got out of the post tradership in 1878), and they were undoubtedly well aware that it was possible to raise large numbers of animals on the Plains. A later biographical article indicates that they ran cattle on Nebraska ranges for only one year, 1875, before shifting to Wyoming.²⁷ By the late 1870's the cattle industry on the northern Great Plains was poised for a boom if the capital could be found. The Indians were largely confined to reservations, the buffalo were being killed off rapidly, and the vast grasslands lay open to exploitation.

Among the preconditions of a cattle boom were the penetration of the West by the railroads and the burgeoning urban population of the East. Not only could cattle be shipped rapidly to market by rail, but it became possible to shift them readily to the Midwest to be fattened on corn. As immigrants and rural Americans seeking opportunity flocked to the cities, there could be no doubt that a market for food products existed. It was only necessary—or so it seemed—to attract capital.

Another condition that underlay all the hopes of easy profit at relatively little outlay was that one did not have to purchase land; the vast grazing lands were in the public domain and free to all. It was easy enough to take up a homestead claim to include the ranch headquarters. As herds began to press against each other in the 1880's, cattle rustling became a problem, and the intrusion of homesteading farmers loomed on the eastern horizon, forcing ranchers to secure actual ownership of grazing land and water. Various federal land laws, like the Preemption, Desert Land and Timber Culture Acts could be used—and abused—to secure acreage. Pratt-Ferris cowboys were encouraged to take up government land by homesteading, with the understanding that the company would buy the land when they had secured title. This was a fairly common and quite legal stratagem.²⁸ Some westerners and W. A. J. Sparks, commissioner of the General Land office under Grover Cleveland, became disturbed that the lands of the West would come into the hands of a few large companies, many of them foreign-owned.²⁹

The possibilities of cattle raising were proclaimed to the world by a number of enthusiastic publicists even before the boom was



A Pratt and Ferris warehouse in Sidney, 1876. Lettering on the roof reads: "Pratt & Ferris, Black Hills Freight House and Out-fitting Depot." Courtesy of Cheyenne County Historical Society.

well under way. Their purpose was to raise capital. Robert Strahorn gave his opinion in 1878 that "golden opportunities were everywhere open for the investment of small or large capital."³⁰ Walter, Baron von Richthofen, one of a number of European noblemen attracted to the plains, proclaimed in 1885: "This former Great American Desert is the largest and richest grass and pasture region of the world, and . . . it will probably soon become the most important beef-producing country on the globe." In the baron's opinion, the business was "not only safe as any other branch of industry, but perhaps more so. There are no risks beyond losses arising from natural causes, which can be calculated to a percentage per annum."³¹ The baron's enthusiasm had already been surpassed by General James S. Brisbin in his *The Beef Bonanza; or, How to Get Rich on the Plains*, published in 1881. Brisbin promised investors dividends of 25 percent a year.³² His chapter titles included "Great Lands and Great Owners," "Estimated Fortunes," "The Money to be Made," "Millions in Beef," and "Great Opportunities."

In 1877 there were 88,610 cattle on the ranges of Wyoming; by 1880 there were 267,497. Yet a federal official estimated that the western part of the territory could support fifty times the number

already there.³³ In 1883 J. Berger Spencer and Company of London and Manchester noted that "the formation in England and Scotland of large companies for the purchase of ranches in Western America is reported steadily on the increase." Many Scottish companies were reporting dividends as high as 30 percent.³⁴

If Europeans were plunging into the cattle industry, so were American capitalists. A number of bankers, merchants, and industrialists were prepared to risk their loose capital for the grandiose profits that were promised by writers and entrepreneurs. Pratt and Ferris were able to attract one of the biggest fish of all, the Chicago department-store tycoon Marshall Field, in addition to his partner R. M. Fair, and Levi Leiter, a power in Chicago real-estate operations. Pratt's wife Louise was a Field, and this undoubtedly established contact with a major source of capital. In 1880 the Pratt-Ferris Cattle Company, already in existence on the plains since 1878, was incorporated in Cook County, Illinois, with a new and impressive roster of shareholders.³⁵ The importance of their investment is suggested by the company's account book: in 1887 Leiter had over \$133,000 in capital stock, while Field held \$108,000; of the partners whose names represented the company, Pratt held \$102,000, while Ferris was in for \$41,000. (Fair held only \$5,400.) This was out of a capital stock of \$400,000; obviously the Easterners were vital to the company.³⁶

The original base of the Pratt-Ferris Company lay in eastern Wyoming along the North Platte River. Eventually the company controlled two sets of ranches in widely separated parts of Wyoming, using two brands and divided into seven separate ranches, six of them known by name.³⁷ Just west of the Nebraska state line on the north side of the Platte between Rawhide and Sheep Creeks, near the present town of Henry,³⁸ lay what was known as the Old P-F Ranch, which included a "school section" in Nebraska; the ranch house site was purchased from Nicholas Janis, an Indian trader. The company picked this site, earlier the first site of the Red Cloud agency, in 1878 and built a sod headquarters building, soon replaced by a large concrete house.³⁹ This was the first of the ranches; Pratt's grandson, Wayland Magee, speculated that Pratt and Ferris learned of the possibilities of the area while freighting goods to Fort Laramie. Twenty-five miles upstream from the Old P-F lay

the Upper P-F, called the Stone House Ranch from the ranch house made of local sandstone; nearby lay the prosaically named Section 19. All these used the P-F brand.⁴⁰

In Johnson and Sheridan counties in northern Wyoming, along the Clear Fork of the Powder River and Crazy Woman Creek and between the mouth of Crazy Woman and the mouth of Clear Fork on the Powder,⁴¹ lay the Big Red, Number 2, and Big Corrals ranches, using the U-Cross brand.⁴² The small town of Ucross, in Sheridan County, Wyoming, obviously takes its name from this source.

In 1904 the company owned 15,115 acres in the northern location and 2,540 in the southern. Some 16,000 acres were also leased.⁴³ Originally the company controlled undeeded public lands by the common practice of filing claims on various water holes. Later they dug their own irrigation canals.⁴⁴

In the 1890's cowhands working for the U-Cross were paid no more than \$40 a month; some made less. Each man had to furnish his own saddle and bedroll.⁴⁵ Ranch managers were paid \$90 a month and expected to abstain from "libationous spirits." (Even so, one foreman, Charles Smith, was called "Extract" Smith because he would drink vanilla extract if nothing else was to be had.)⁴⁶ John Clay, a fellow rancher, judged that Pratt's labor relations damaged the company's profits: "He was unpopular on the range and the boys had it in for him. I made an appeal personally to the above gentleman [Pratt], but he was like a dog to his vomit."⁴⁷ Ed C. Brown, who worked on the U-Cross Ranch, noted that Pratt-Ferris put up a four-wire fence around one of their pastures. "This did not meet with the approval of the smaller cattlemen in the area and at one time, apparently with long-handled bolt clippers, they rode around the pasture and clipped all four wires between the posts. This made no small job of splicing wire."⁴⁸ The incident was illustrative of the conflict between big ranchers and their less affluent neighbors that developed in Wyoming as the open range fell into the hands of private owners.

Worse things were in store for the cattle industry than poor labor relations. The boom was a magnificent thing in its day; 16th Street in Cheyenne was described as "a young Wall Street" where millions were talked of "as lightly as nickels."⁴⁹ The luxurious Cheyenne Club was frequented by the sons of Eastern financiers and European noblemen.⁵⁰ Pratt is credited with

naming the dress suits of club members "Herefords" because their gleaming white shirt-fronts recalled the white faces of the breed that was replacing the Texas longhorns.⁵¹ Richthofen estimated that at a meeting of stockgrowers in Cheyenne in November, 1883, "\$100,000,000 of property were represented."⁵²

These gaudy days did not last long, however—less than a decade. Prices were falling through the 1880s and the increase in numbers to compensate for this meant that some parts of the range were overstocked. This led to the sale of excess stock, which could only drive prices lower. Inexperienced investors were buying herds on the basis of the "book count," without bothering to count the actual herd. Some owners were spending money on "castles on the prairies," although none of the Pratt-Ferris buildings seem to meet that description.⁵³

The optimistic Baron von Richthofen had proclaimed that there could be no losses other than those from natural causes, "which can be calculated down to a percentage per annum." Some deaths were caused by "ice-storms," but the baron assured his readers that "such storms are not frequent in this climate." The baron's experience on the high plains was apparently more limited than he indicated.⁵⁴

The few old-timers could probably have predicted what happened; the winter of 1886-1887 brought a series of savage blizzards. Even in late November, snow was so deep in places that cattle could not reach the grass. Warm "chinook" winds in January raised hopes, but late in the month the worst blizzard yet swept the northern plains. While cowhands were confined to their bunkhouses, the stock froze to death or starved. Wyoming tax assessments indicated that there were 900,000 head in the territory in 1886, but only 750,000 in 1887. When spring came, the air was full of the stench.⁵⁵

That spring "virtually every cattleman on the northern plains was facing bankruptcy. . . . Prices were low and were destined to be much lower." Even the winter losses did not drive prices up again. Many companies were selling everything; moreover, a bad corn crop in the Midwest meant that feeders were not eager to buy. Bankruptcy did indeed overtake many cattle companies, as it did the largest banking house in Cheyenne.⁵⁶

Pratt-Ferris did not go under. In February, 1887, they were still optimistic enough to increase capital stock from \$300,000 to



U Cross Ranch, 1898, about eight miles south of Clearmont, Wyoming. Courtesy of Western History Research Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

\$400,000.⁵⁷ In 1888 they declared a dividend of 5 percent; this was a considerable drop from the 10 percent dividend of 1884, but at the same time many other cattle companies were bankrupt.⁵⁸ It would be hard to say whether the company's survival was due to good management or to the staying power and large resources of Field and Leiter.

It would be a mistake to assert that Pratt and Ferris were reckless with their investors' money. In 1893, when Pratt was urged by his associate J. S. Collins to buy cattle immediately, he replied: "We could not justify an expenditure of this amount at this time, no matter how good it looks."⁵⁹ The year 1893 was the beginning of a depression period, but it was also the year Pratt-Ferris declared a dividend for the first time in five years.⁶⁰

The company continued its existence into the 20th century, until most of the original principals were dead. It continued, as we have seen, in possession of substantial holdings in land and cattle in Wyoming. Pratt himself drew \$111,391 in dividends from it from 1881 to 1898.⁶¹ Yet the enterprise is judged to have been much less successful for Marshall Field. George Weare, associated with Field in another cattle operation, commented sardonically, "Perhaps the Fields have been plundered so much by those associated with them in similar deals, that a fair deal makes them lonesome."⁶² Gene Gressley has echoed this

judgement by commenting that Field's persistence in cattle investments "indicated either a remarkable endurance or a resignation to futility."⁶³ But, as Gressley himself notes, the company paid Field and Leiter dividends averaging 11 percent over a ten-year period ending in 1898. The sums involved may have been "small potatoes" by Field's standards, but the investment would not seem to have been mere "futility." Relatively few investors received so much return from the cattle industry.⁶⁴

For Pratt, in any case, cattle dividends were a springboard to further sources of wealth. Land was the basis of prosperity in the West, and Pratt began, no later than the late 1870s, to buy land in various parts of the West, particularly in Texas, Wyoming, and Nebraska.⁶⁵ He established his headquarters in Omaha and in 1879 purchased a quarter section in Douglas County, Nebraska, 16 miles northwest of the city. By the time of his death it had grown to a farm of 1,800 acres.⁶⁶ He also bought land in Washington County; in 1905 he paid the county \$19,334 in taxes on 1,010 acres of land. This land included Sunnyhill Farm near Bennington, which was to serve increasingly as his country retreat.⁶⁷

The letters to be found in Pratt's personal papers sometimes deal with personal matters, but they almost invariably mention his business dealings, especially his land deals. Many of them were addressed to John S. Collins, who was often associated with him in these deals. The two seem to have been engaged constantly in buying and selling tracts of land in scattered locations. It is interesting to note that Collins, who was of Pratt's own generation, always addressed him as "Colonel."

There were still opportunities other than land deals that attracted the Colonel; in 1898 he bought into the Omaha Anchor Fence Company and became its president. The company produced woven-wire fence, and its existence was another indication of the changes overtaking the open frontier of Pratt's earlier years. The wide-open West was becoming a set of parcels of fenced-off land, and the production methods of the industrial revolution facilitated the process.⁶⁸

Pratt was in his 70s when he bought into Anchor Fence. If it occurred to him to think about retirement and the peaceful enjoyment of his wealth, it is not indicated in his correspondence. He did take time to travel, both to keep track of his land

investments and for pleasure. He visited Cuba in March, 1898, shortly after the sinking of the *Maine*, and expressed his personal opinion that the battleship had been blown up from the outside—that is, by the Spanish or some other deliberate agency—without explaining his reasons. He found the starvation resulting from the rebellion against Spain more than he could stand and left. His opinion of the difficulties between the United States and Spain was that the American government should do “something,” but should not apologize to Spain. These were also the opinions of many Americans who had not traveled to Cuba.⁶⁹

With both his daughters long married and his wife dead, the colonel embarked on another venture. In 1903 he married Mrs. Julia Montgomery, a widow. Pratt was “many years her senior”—she was apparently in her 30s—and the marriage was a bitter disappointment to both parties.⁷⁰ Apparently Pratt had had reservations about the marriage from the start, for the couple had signed an agreement before the wedding by which Mrs. Pratt was to receive \$50,000 on Pratt’s death and would have no further claim to his estate. Pratt made the agreement public when he filed for divorce late in 1907, accusing his wife of extravagance and asserting that she had expected him to last only two or three years.⁷¹ Mrs. Pratt’s lawyer, learning that Pratt had transferred an Omaha city lot to J. S. Collins, accused him of trying to get his property “out of reach.”⁷²

Bitter Pratt might be, but he could see the ludicrous side of the matter. At any rate, he waxed philosophical for a reporter:

When a man gets to be a great-grandfather, it is wonderful what else will happen to him. Just think—first we get rich, then we get married. Then, maybe, we get married again, depending on how rich we are.

Ah, me! It is all in a lifetime. Our fame rests on such flimsy things, when we would prefer that our noble mind and sterling qualities should entitle us to the rewards of our patient striving.

Now if I had my way, I would be famous, because of real worth. But as it is, I am known as a would-be divorcee. Suppose a member of the United States cabinet should die and President Taft would make me secretary of the bureau of delectable husbandry! What an honor that would be to take with me into eternity. My mausoleum, carved in marble, would bear the legend.

To the victor belongs the spoil. To the grass widow the alimony. In the words of the ancient philosopher Democritus, let us laugh until the laugh is on us, and keep on smiling then.⁷³

In fact, Pratt would be a “would-be divorcee” for the rest of his life; the divorce dragged on in the courts until his death and

for months thereafter. Eventually Mrs. Pratt accepted \$1,750 to drop further claims against the estate.⁷⁴

Pratt, then in his 80s, knew his time was short. In February, 1907, he commented that "the Madam" (Mrs. Pratt) need only have waited a little, since he "had for the first time in my life a very severe case of la Grippe."⁷⁵ Yet he continued his business dealings and continued traveling about to see his land parcels and sell them. In 1906 he went to Mexico, on the way selling a Texas ranch to the Southern Pacific Railroad.⁷⁶ In April, 1907, in spite of his recent illness, he was riding in an automobile west of San Antonio, Texas, and was thrown from the car at "about forty miles an hour." "It left me with a bad case of nervous prostration, and as I am close to eighty-two years old, . . . I do not recuperate as readily as I did forty years ago. Still, I get about and do some business."⁷⁷

As long as he could "get about and do some business," Pratt was not ready to call it quits. He had been at work since he was 13 and his business had been the theme of his life. Perhaps the pleasure of the game, consciously or not, meant more than the money. He spoke of the rewards of his "patient striving," but was the reward in profits and respect or in the striving itself? Perhaps it was only that closing down his business was too much like closing down his life.

His old associate J. S. Collins was of another temperament. Collins was apparently a more systematic or less adventurous sort, and something of a worrier. Earlier, as we have seen, it was Pratt who subdued Collins' desire to purchase cattle. In their last years, however, it was Collins who preached caution. It bothered him that Pratt wandered about and that he (Collins) was not always sure where Pratt was. Sometimes his letters had a scolding tone, advising Pratt to take care of land taxes.⁷⁸ "I do not find a success—waiting until the last moment paying taxes," he admonished his long-time associate.⁷⁹ He urged Pratt to get started writing his "Life Experiences" soon; Pratt never seems to have begun this project.⁸⁰

In 1909 Collins began urging Pratt to settle up their common affairs while they were still alive:

Don't you think you and I ought to get together and *finish up* our business matters? We are getting older every day and a day must come that it must *all be settled*. . . . "Tempus fugit." . . . I have carried your note for several years and it has *always been amply secured* and has *never given me a moments thought*. What is the use of letting these matters go on any longer? . . . I must close up everything I can before I go to the "great beyond."⁸¹

A month later Collins wrote again in the same vein, but if Pratt shared his friend's consciousness of mortality, he would not accept it so readily.⁸² A little earlier he wrote to another friend: "I am pretty badly broken down, but I have lots of grit and vigor yet."⁸³ He was probably lonely for all that; in 1908 he was trying to persuade his daughter, Mrs. Margerite Olson, who was married to a Swedish citizen, to return to the United States with her husband and son "and take up her life with me during the coming summer."⁸⁴

Collins' fears were fulfilled; Pratt died on his farm near Bennington on November 12, 1910. Collins died a little later and the two estates were entangled in legal disputes for years to come. Immediately after his death his estate was estimated at about \$300,000, but much more was believed to have been deeded to his daughters and grandchildren.⁸⁵ The next year his son-in-law, Henry W. Magee, wrote to Collins' executors: "The estate of Pratt has been embarrassed from the first in that it has been unable to determine what claims will be filed against the estate."⁸⁶ As late as 1915 Pratt's daughter, Mrs. Olson, was engaged in litigation with her nephew, Jerome Pratt Magee, over the division of the estate.⁸⁷

Pratt's career was not remarkable or glamorous. He was part of an era of great territorial and economic expansion. In his nearly 85 years of life the United States expanded from a rural nation with nearly all its population east of the Mississippi to a transcontinental nation which was also the greatest industrial power in the world. In the enormous changes he witnessed in that lifetime, one thing stayed much the same: Americans admired and wished to imitate the man who saw and seized the opportunities opened by this tremendous growth. Pratt was one of these men.

Pratt could easily be called a "self-made" man as his contemporaries defined one. It is important to note, however, that his career was not wholly of his own making. It was a government appointment that put him in the West at a strategic moment, and government contracts helped found his fortunes. Connections with much richer Eastern capitalists were the foundations of his cattle "empire." His success conformed to Horatio Alger's formula: "Pluck and luck."

Much the same could be said of his most successful contemporaries. If he was in the right place at the right time, he had the judgement and daring to take advantage of the situation.

His varied enterprises were typical of the era; most of the founders of great fortunes of the time were men who tried many enterprises and had varied investments. Elting B. Morison, writing of the men who founded the American steel industry in the same period, noted the variety of their interests; one simply did not know which of the many opportunities that appeared would be the one to bring the big payoff.⁸⁸ The statement can as easily apply to the frontier.

If Pratt had never gone West, his place would have been filled. The United States was engaged in the exploitation of a continent, and men like Pratt were the instruments, if not of Manifest Destiny, then of an economy and a view of the world. Alexis de Toqueville, observing the Jacksonian America in which Pratt grew up, noted "the avidity with which the American rushes forward to secure this immense booty that fortune offers. . . . Before him lies a boundless continent, and he urges forward as if time pressed and he was afraid of finding no room for his exertions. . . . Death at length overtakes him, but it is before he is weary of his bootless chase of that complete felicity that forever escapes him."⁸⁹ Incurable optimism, exaltation of hard work and "patient striving," an eye for the main chance, and a conviction that the resources of the continent were for the man who got there first characterized this view.

If such views have been questioned in later times, and a philosophy has evolved that makes a life such as Pratt's seem limited or even futile, Pratt and most of his contemporaries cannot be expected to have judged themselves in such a light. They found such diligence, financial daring, and versatility admirable and valuable to the community. If James Hervey Pratt was not the typical American of his time, he was still very much a part of what was happening in 19th century America.

NOTES

1. J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, eds., *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Jacob North & Co., Western Publishing & Engraving Co., 1905-1913), 2, 752. *Omaha World-Herald*, November 13, 1910.

2. *Omaha World-Herald*, November 13, 1910, says Pratt was operating a general store at Hillsdale at the age of 20. *Chicago Tribune*, November 13, 1910, says he went to Michigan in the late 1850s. All newspaper clippings, J. H. Pratt Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

3. *Omaha World-Herald*, November 13, 1910.

4. F. B. Heitman, *Historical Register of the United States Army* (Washington: National Tribune, 1890), 531.

5. Morton and Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, 752. *Omaha World-Herald*, November 13, 1910.
6. Heitman, *Historical Register*, 531. *War of the Rebellion: Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1903), series I, Vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 200; vol. 48, pt. 4, p. 396.
7. Heitman, *Historical Register*, 531. *Omaha World-Herald*, November 13, 1910.
8. *Ibid.* Morton and Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, 752. Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1973), 31, 43.
9. Morton and Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, 752.
10. James C. Olson, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 192-195. The flour and pork contractors, the committee recommended, were to lose their contracts. Apparently the beef contractor was regarded as less culpable.
11. William E. Lass, *From the Missouri to the Great Salt Lake: An Account of Overland Freighting* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1972), 203.
12. *Ibid.*, 190-193.
13. Norbert R. Mahnken, "The Sidney-Black Hills Trail," *Nebraska History*, vol. 30, no. 3 (September, 1949), 208.
14. Robert E. S. Strahorn (Alter Ego), *The Handbook of Wyoming and Guide to the Black Hills and Big Horn Region for Citizen, Emigrant and Tourist* (Cheyenne: n.p., 1877), 242. Estimates of distances varied considerably; see Lass, *From the Missouri*, 207.
15. Richard I. Dodge, *The Black Hills: A Minute Description of the Routes, Scenery, Soil, Climate, Timber, Gold, Geology, Zoology, Etc.* (New York: James Miller, Publisher, 1876), 143-144.
16. Blanch Nichols Russell, *Memoirs of a Pioneer Schoolma'am* (Gering, Nebraska: Courier Press, 1948), 35.
17. Henry Pickering Walker, *The Wagonmasters* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 288. Mahnken, "The Sidney-Black Hills Trail," 211. Robert E. S. Strahorn, *To the Rockies and Beyond*. (Omaha: Republican Printing, 1878), 13. In this work, published in Omaha, Strahorn is considerably more favorable to the Sidney trail than in the previous *Handbook of Wyoming*, published in Cheyenne. H. T. Clarke describes his bridge in *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, Second Series, Vol. 5, 307-309.
18. Jesse Brown and A. M. Willard, *The Black Hills Trails*, ed. by John T. Milek, (Rapid City: Rapid City Journal Co., 1924), 69.
19. Mahnken, "The Sidney-Black Hills Trail," 209, 224. Lass, *From the Missouri*, 201-205.
20. Mahnken, "The Sidney-Black Hills Trail," 219. Richard B. Hughes, *Pioneer Years in the Black Hills*, ed. by Agnes Wright Spring, (Glendale: Arthur H. Clarke Co., 1957), 38.
21. Porter Maddox, in *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, Second Series, Vol 5, 296.
22. Brown and Willard, *Black Hills Trails*, 68.
23. James E. Smith, *A Famous Battery and Its Campaigns, 1861-64* (Washington: W. H. Loudermilk and Co., 1892), 218.
24. Watson Parker, *Gold in the Black Hills* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 136. It may be questioned whether the Indians needed any other incentive than the invasion of the Hills to attack the whites, whom they regarded as intruders.
25. *Omaha World-Herald*, November 13, 1910.
26. Lass, *From the Missouri*, 201-202, 212-213.
27. Morton and Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, 752. James S. Brisbin, *The Beef Bonanza; or, How to Get Rich on the Plains* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1881. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), II, 20, says that Pratt and Ferris were running 2,500 head near Ogallala, Nebraska, at the time of his writing.
28. Russell, *Schoolma'am*, 35.

29. Ernest Staples Osgood, *The Day of the Cattleman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 176-215. The discussion of the cattle boom here owes much to Osgood and to Edward Everett Dale, *The Range Cattle Industry: Ranching on the Great Plains from 1865 to 1925* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960); Gene M. Gressley, *Bankers and Cattlemen* (New York: Alfred Knopf, Inc. 1966); and Lewis Atherton, *The Cattle Kings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967).

30. Strahorn, *To the Rockies*, 13.

31. Walter Baron von Richthofen, *Cattle-Raising on the Plains of North America* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1885), 11, 31.

32. Brisbin, *Beef Bonanza*, 48.

33. Osgood, *Day of the Cattleman*, 87.

34. Quoted in Richthofen, *Cattle-Raising*, 25.

35. Donna Heinz, "History of Old Pratt-Ferris Ranch," *Gering* (Nebraska) *Courier*, July 14, 1977.

36. Pratt and Ferris Account Book, 1888-1898. Pratt Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.

37. Wayland W. Magee, "Pratt and Ferris Cattle Company in Wyoming," file in Western History Research Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming. Page i names six ranches. In *the Supreme Court, State of Wyoming*, 1904, Marshall Field, J. H. Pratt and Hattie B. Pratt Magee, plaintiffs, against the estate of Levi Leiter, deceased, pp. 1-2 lists seven separate ranches.

38. John Hunton, *Diary* (Lingle, Wyoming: Guide-Review, 1956), 1, 78.

39. Russell, *Schoolma'am*, 35.

40. Magee, "Pratt and Ferris Cattle Company," ii, 11, 12.

41. Hunton, *Diary*, 1, 79.

42. *Ibid.* ii. The town of Leiter lies nearby.

43. *Supreme Court of Wyoming*, 2.

44. Magee, "Pratt and Ferris Cattle Company," ii, 7.

45. *Ibid.*, 1.

46. Russell, *Schoolma'am*, 36.

47. Gressley, *Bankers and Cattlemen*, 134; Clay quoted, on p. 126. One woman who met Pratt for the first time about 1890 makes it clear why some of these problems existed. She remembered the colonel as red-faced, burly and white-haired, but she was most struck by his teeth, which were "gold and a glittering success of the dentist's art." When Pratt visited the PF the best bed was set up in the parlor; Pratt ate his meals there, rather than dine with the hands, who included such colorful types as Cotton-eyed Joe, Woodbox Jim and Pizen Bill (who, of course, was the cook.) He brought his silverware along in his valise, since he did not care to use the steel utensils at the ranch. On one occasion, however, when Pratt arose late and wanted his breakfast, he was informed by Pizen Bill, "I get three meals a day. If you want to eat my cooking, be on hand. There's the coffee pot on the stove. Get your own breakfast." According to this account, Pratt acknowledged that he had met his superior. Russell, *Schoolma'am*, 37.

48. Hunton, *Diary*, 1, 72-74. However, Blanche Russell recalls that the old PF Ranch was much appreciated by the neighbors along the North Platte, because it provided them with work and an income in hard times without which some of them would have lost their own homes. Russell, *Schoolma'am*, 38.

49. Osgood, *Day of the Cattleman*, 96.

50. Gressley, *Bankers and Cattlemen*, 68-69. Atherton, *Cattle Kings*, 64-67.

51. Hunton, *Diary*, III, 176.

52. Richthofen, *Cattle-Raising*, 102.

53. Atherton, *Cattle Kings*, 277.

54. Richthofen, *Cattle-Raising*, 31, 34.

55. Osgood, *Day of the Cattleman*, 220-221. Dale, *Range Cattle Industry*, 96.

56. *Ibid.*, 96-97.

57. Pratt and Ferris Account Book, 1888-1898.

58. Pratt and Ferris ledger, statement inside front cover, dated November 30, 1898. Pratt Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.
59. Pratt to Collins, February 21, 1893. Pratt Papers, NSHS. Collins had been post trader at Fort Laramie from 1872 to 1877, and had established a harness-making company and a hotel in Cheyenne. In 1882 he incorporated the Nebraska National Bank in Omaha. It was presumably during Pratt's first years in Wyoming that they met and began to work together. Hunton, *Diary*, I, 69; IV, 90. Morton and Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, I, 540.
60. Pratt-Ferris Cattle Company Ledger, *Ibid.*, (inside front cover).
61. Pratt and Ferris Cattle Company statement, 1898, 15. Pratt Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.
62. Quoted in Gressley, *Bankers and Cattlemen*, 76-77.
63. *Ibid.*, 76.
64. Ledger, entry for November 30, 1898, Pratt Papers, NSHS. Noted by Gressley, *Bankers and Cattlemen*, 275.
65. *Omaha World-Herald*, November 13, 1910.
66. *Twentieth Century Farms* (magazine), November 30, 1912, 6-7.
67. Tax Receipt #3924, Treasurer's Office, Washington County, Nebraska, April 28, 1905. Pratt Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.
68. Morton and Watkins, *History of Nebraska*, 752. Correspondence in Pratt Papers, including 1900 letter with letterhead showing Pratt as president of Omaha Anchor Fence Co.
69. *Omaha World-Herald*, March 19, 1898, printing letter from Pratt.
70. *Omaha Evening Bee*, November 14, 1910.
71. *Omaha News*, December 2, 1907. Pratt had been informed early in the year by his wife's lawyer that "Mrs. Pratt finds her present condition intolerable. She is without money and does not know when she will receive any." It was stated then that she desired "separation." D. M. Vinsonhaler to J. H. Pratt, January 8, 1907. Pratt Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society.
72. D. M. Vinsonhaler to Pratt, November 30, 1907. Pratt Papers.
73. Unidentified newspaper clipping in Pratt Papers. Mention of President Taft dates it in 1909 or 1910.
74. *Omaha News*, August 3, 1911.
75. J. H. Pratt to D. M. Vinsonhaler, February 21, 1907, Pratt Papers.
76. J. H. Pratt to J. S. Collins, April 23, 1906. Pratt Papers.
77. J. H. Pratt to John J. O'Shea, December 14, 1907. Pratt Papers.
78. J. S. Collins to Pratt, April 2, 1906, May 2, 1907.
79. J. S. Collins to Pratt, May 2, 1907. Pratt Papers, NSHS.
80. J. S. Collins to Pratt, August 2, 1908. Pratt Papers.
81. J. S. Collins to Pratt, April 5, 1909. Pratt Papers.
82. J. S. Collins to Pratt, May 1, 1909. Pratt Papers.
83. J. H. Pratt to John J. O'Shea, February 11, 1909. Paper.
84. J. H. Pratt to J. S. Collins, January 12, 1908. Pratt Papers.
85. *Omaha Bee*, November 15, 1910.
86. Henry W. Magee to Morrison and Collins, executors of the estate of J. S. Collins, April 12, 1911. Pratt Papers.
87. *Omaha Bee*, August 10, 1915.
88. Elting E. Morison, *Men, Machines, and Modern Times* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1966), 150-151.
89. Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1945), 145.