

Wildly colorful Train helped city, railroad

An eager crowd of a thousand people gathered on Omaha's riverfront 145 years ago to witness one of the most significant events in the town's early history: the groundbreaking for America's transcontinental railroad.

Ceremonial shovels pierced the dirt on a spot that is now just west of Rick's Café Boatyard, and a man dressed in a dapper suit and lavender gloves stepped forward to inspire the crowd with visions of future greatness.



David Harding
Everyday History

Lavender gloves? That's right. This was no ordinary politician or business mogul. He was one of the Union Pacific Railroad's first public relations experts, an enormously talented and wildly eccentric character fortuitously named George Francis Train.

Train grew up in Boston and got his start in the family mercantile and shipping businesses, which took him to Europe and Australia and made him wealthy. Everywhere he went, Train socialized with royalty and pushed whatever futuristic idea happened to occupy his erratic attention at the moment. He was responsible for the first streetcars in England, and he persuaded the queen of Spain to invest in American railroads.

An ardent supporter of independence for Ireland and a close ally of Susan B. Anthony of the women's suffrage movement, Train could excite any crowd with his oratorical brilliance. That's what he did on the banks of the Missouri River that day in December 1863. J. Sterling



George Francis Train wowed crowds with his oratory, promoted Union Pacific and speculated in Omaha land during a flashy career in the 19th century.

Morton attended, and he called it "the finest address I have ever heard on such an occasion."

Train was a promoter and a deal-maker. He had no time for the daily detail work of managing a company. So while he lobbied for railway legislation and arranged the charter for the company that handled construction of the railroad, his influence with Union Pacific faded once the crews were laying track.

Train had other ideas that kept him in Omaha for a few years. He bought 500 acres that encompassed what is now the Little Italy neighborhood and tracts to the south and west. He financed a housing development in the area and built a home overlooking the river valley at Seventh and Pine Streets, the current location of Dahlman Park.

Train imagined "a highway of cities" along the new transconti-

mental rail line, and he formed a corporation to finance this venture. He built the Cozzens Hotel when he got mad at the manager of the Herndon House, the town's principal lodging and headquarters for the railroad.

Train's skill as a public speaker got him into plenty of trouble when combined with his outspoken politics. He landed in jail during a visit to Dublin because of his vocal support for Irish independence. He refused to pay the fine that would have secured his release, so he sat in prison for nearly a year, writing anti-British jingles and corresponding with newspapers.

Train eventually squandered his fortune and lost all his real estate in Omaha. He tried to fight the foreclosure on his properties, but the effort was made difficult by his incarceration in New York City, where he had been charged with publishing obscene literature in a newspaper he owned. The charges were later dropped.

Train's crowning achievement had nothing to do with shipping or railroads, but everything to do with transportation and his love of world travel. In 1870, he sought to set a speed record for circling the globe. In typical Train fashion, he couldn't resist stopping along the way to meddle in French politics for a month. Subtracting that period from his elapsed time, Train was able to claim that he had circled the world in only 80 days, a new record.

Two years later, Jules Verne published his novel, "Around the World in Eighty Days." Was George Francis Train the inspiration for the novel's protagonist, Phileas Fogg? You can be sure that Train thought so.

Thanks to Lawson McDowell of Union Pacific Railroad for research assistance.

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Let the Memories Begin!