

Getting the Franchise

The Story of a Street-Railroad President

From the Philadelphia Saturday Evening Post

I was born to my business. The very blood of railroading run in my veins. My father and my grandfather were in the business. My grandfather was a mason on the first railroad tunnel that was ever pierced through the rocky backbone of Manhattan Island, and for many years my father was a conductor on the Avenue Horse Railroad in New York. When I was a boy I could keep in touch with the handwork of each. We lived only a little way from Park Avenue and I had more than a passing interest in the Avenue Horse Railroad.

I was also born to poverty—not the squalid sort, but the kind that the college-settlement workers persist in calling middle-class; for my father had a decent, old-fashioned pride in keeping his family in a decent way. Not that his was an easy job or a well-paid one. For many years he was paid from a dollar and a quarter to a dollar and a half a day and his day's work was sixteen hours long. For fourteen years his work began at one minute after four o'clock in the morning, and for those fourteen years he made a record of always being on time. He never missed a day, even Sundays—save for a week or so when he was laid up with a sprained wrist; and in that week the horse-car company docked his pay. When he worked late at night my mother used to sit up so that she might awaken him and he would have plenty of time to trudge a dozen blocks down to Eighty-sixth Street and start with his car from the barns at sixty seconds after the stroke of four. Remember, that was a day in which there were no alarm clocks. I can see her now—God keep her honest, patient soul!—sitting there by the dying glow of the fire, her shawl tightly drawn round her thin shoulders, reading. She was a great reader, and while all of us slept she read—that my dad might not break his record at the barn.

Out of his pay—mind you, he was on the cash end of the car—the old gentleman financed his living; and by-and-by he bought a little piece of land up in Yorkville, near where his car ran. That piece of land is today the prize asset of my family fortunes. It is in a fashionable part of New York and the desk upon which these lines are being written stands upon that land. So much for my father's forethought—and not one whit less for my mother's. I can remember seeing her go over to Third Avenue-day after day, so that she might intercept the truck-wagons that were toiling down toward Washington Market from Westchester way and buy potatoes at twenty-five cents a bushel. Last week my wife was paying a dollar and a quarter for the same amount of the same farm fruit.

If I have lingered on my mother and my father it has been because I wanted you to understand how they were the making of me. It was their force, their love—even their poverty—that hardened me. Work! It was the very grindstone upon which I was sharpened for contact with the world. When I was eighteen my father said he would speak to the starter down at the barn about getting a job for me. I shook my head slowly, at the suggestion, however. I could see a suspicion come into his eyes that he might have spent his time bringing up a loafer. I contradicted that.

"I'm not going on a car platform," I told him. "I'm willing to work as hard as any man, but I'm not going to follow your example and be a slave! I'm going to keep my boots blacked and my collar clean and sit at a desk."

At that the old gentleman fell to cursing, as was his prerogative—a right that had not been hindered by a proficiency attained in bringing his car through the crowded streets of downtown New York. I listened to him a while, then went downtown and got a desk job for myself with the Avenue Horse-Railroad Company.

I was born to my business. If I had not been I could not have stolen into the private office of James Daggett, the old president of that company, and forced

a job out of him. How I did that I do not now recall. I remember there was some profanity on his part, of course—some determination on my part, and finally orders to report to the horse-car line's attorney. When I told my old gentleman of my interview with his railroad's president, and its result, he threatened to give me a licking for lying to him.

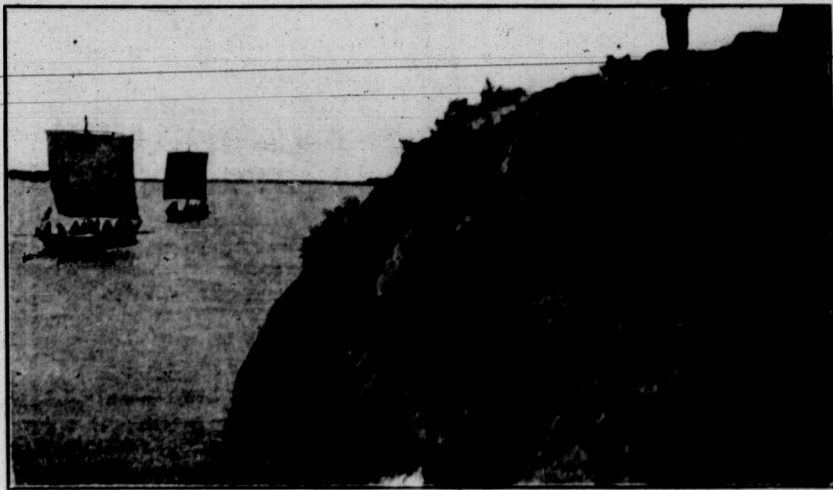
I was in a new school and it was a hard school. I went to work in the crooked claim end of the crooked legal department of a crooked horse-car line. You cannot run a railroad through the crowded streets of a metropolitan city without piling up a great product of accident claims. We were no exception to that rule. We met with fakers ourselves, but we could point no finger of honest-scorn at them, for we committed about everything short of grand larceny, arson and murder to avoid paying accident claims—and were rather successful after a fashion. We had internes in the hospitals on our lists, for they rode free on our cars, and we did not issue pass-cards just for fun. We had many policemen too. They drew nice fees and dined on the company at the old Astor House. We knew our friends—and we made few mistakes in choosing them.

However, that was not railroading as I wanted to know it. So it was really a glad day for me when I found myself outside of the organization of the horse-

The elevated railroads had just been built and New York was as pleased with them as a boy with a new pair of skates. People were saying that Central Park was going to amount to something after all; and the contractor of the Sixth Avenue line built a big sort of house-hotel facing it at Fifty-ninth Street that he called apartments, never dreaming that he was giving birth to a new New York. There were five-cent hours and ten-cent hours, and an awful fight when the politicians up at Albany made the elevated roads carry folks at all hours for five cents. The elevated-railroad managers said they would be bankrupt within twelve months; but they did not know even the beginnings of the city transportation business in those days.

Within forty-eight hours I had a new job. Big Jim Relligan, of our ward, had been watching me quietly—as Tammany politicians do watch the young men coming up within their balliwicks. Relligan had almost broken on paving contracts after the Tweed smash. As a boy, he had taken the old boss's fancy. Before he was twenty-five he was a rich man. Even when the smash came and there was scarcely cellroom in the Tombs for Tweed's friends Relligan came through smiling, unscathed; but he was sick of New York. The nasty business of the new courthouse had unnerved him a bit, after all.

"You would like X—," he told me,



Party of Hudson Bay Engineers sailing up the Nelson River in York Boats

car line. There had been a shake-up, and office politics—the great weakness of almost every railroad, large or small—was dictating every step of the reorganization. There was a new general counsel above me and he was a practical man. Before he had been at his new desk three days he sent an emissary to me. "You will have to come across!" said the emissary. Translated, that meant my pay would be raised five hundred dollars a year and I would give back to the new general counsel half of that amount. Those were the terms. I could accept them or walk out of the employ of the Avenue Horse Railroad Company.

I hesitated. I was just married. My soul was slightly calloused and I was afraid to get fired just then, with that young girl hanging on my arm and looking at her husband as if he were a master of finance to make Wall Street tremble—if he really wished. But the horse-car business was rotten then in New York and my soul was not so calloused that it could not see that plainly. Then the thing was quickly settled for me. My mother died—quite unexpectedly. There was a last minute of saying goodbye to an old friend; and in that minute she was giving me one parting thought:

"Larry," said she, "you're a good boy. Stay on the level!" After that I could not stay with the old road for any consideration.

So it was that I threw up my job with the horse railroad just as it was going into the hardest times of its history.

mentioning the name of a great state, historic associations but fairly pulsing with new life and industry. "There's opportunity there. Incidentally I have a job for you in X—this very minute."

Relligan took good care of me. For more than twenty years I was his right-hand man, and I was still learning the transportation business, root and branch. It was a splendid post-graduate course and Relligan was no small shake as a faculty. We had taken over a little fly-by-night steam proposition when it was the traditional streak of rust across the face of half a dozen counties in two interior states and nearly ready for the sheriff, and we had made it pay its dividends in as pretty a fashion as any one might wish. So soon as the road was worth owning, however, the big A. & B. system came along and took it away from us by methods that are known to every railroader in the land. There was a little flurry in our securities—just as a stray bubble or two on a millpond's surface might indicate that fishes were fighting underneath, or a hungry pickerel was swallowing minnows—and we were no longer in existence. Relligan was swearing mad, with a two-million-dollar crimp in his bankroll; and we started for New York to raise ructions with Sam Kearney, the brains back of A. & B. Relligan went first into the banker's private office; but he was out after me in thirty minutes, with the old grin settled about his mouth. And Sam Kearney was saying:

"Why don't you get into this electric game before it is too late? I don't think much of the interurbans, but take any good husky city and it's worth while. See them turning the trick already in the big towns! Within ten years there won't be a city in the land without its railroads consolidated. Get into the game before it is too late!"

And that was a prelude to the fact that we went into it—Sam Kearney and Relligan and myself. Kearney put his credit back of us and we found the town—just a nice, unsuspecting American city that was going to have its first taste of big business. We took a night train out to Riverport—which will have to pass for the name.

II.

Riverport—a typical city of the Middle West—had just passed through what we used to call the fly-by-night period of trolley building. On the south side of the river—its chief civic center—had been the first horse railroads. They had already been gathered together, cheaply and poorly electrified, and they were being poorly managed—that is, they were poorly managed in the sense that they were wastefully managed. No one had ever come from the seaboard to tell the Riverport Citizens' Railroad Company that dividends rested in the folks who hung on the straps in the cars—not in those who were snugly seated for a long ride. The Citizens' Railroad was running with horse-car brains. As it united the old horse-car lines, it introduced transfers—voluntarily. That was a tremendous mistake. When I think of the way free transfers were made popular across the land in the nineties it still makes me sick at heart. Some of the towns on the Atlantic seaboard actually bragged about the number of miles they would carry a man for a nickel—a dozen miles on a straight run; twenty and twenty-five miles with transfers.

The Citizens' Company and the unorganized properties on the north side of the river were all managed by local talent when we reached Riverport. It was impossible at the beginning to do business with the Citizens' bunch. They had the cream property of the town—and they knew it. They were waiting to take the north-side properties when they were ready—and we knew that. The north side of the river was still the laughing-stock of Riverport. The directors of the Citizens' were saying they would buy the north-side lines when they came to them in the receiver's sale. While they were talking we were buying. We gathered up everything that the Citizens' Company had left untouched; and, lest it should become alarmed, we turned the entire trick in thirty-six hours.

When we were done we had a choice junkheap—about one hundred and ten miles of battered track, three or four hundred cars equally battered and of every variety, and some assorted real estate of questionable value. It had cost us a little over eleven million dollars—for two of the companies had come rather high—and we capitalized at twenty millions, so as to get the thing into round figures. We began to issue bonds for the regeneration of our property.

So was born North Side Traction. I realized the fondest dream of my boyhood and became railroad president, for Relligan did not move to Riverport, keeping his interest in the property through his holdings and his chairmanship of its board. Below me ranged an organization made up of the best men we had inherited with our properties. They ranked high in loyalty. We could pick up ability as we needed it.

We had hopes for the future. The South Side, because of its cramped geographical location, seemed to be nearing its limit of growth. Our cars monopolized the only highway bridge that crossed the broad river, and by grace of the Citizens' Company we were permitted to deliver our passengers at a stub-end terminal abutting Congress Street—the Broadway of Riverport—which I shall always remember as the

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