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Article Summary: Miller, who founded the *Omaha Herald*, went to great lengths to advance the prosperity of his city and his state. He fought for the construction of the Union Pacific bridge that brought the transcontinental railroad to Omaha.

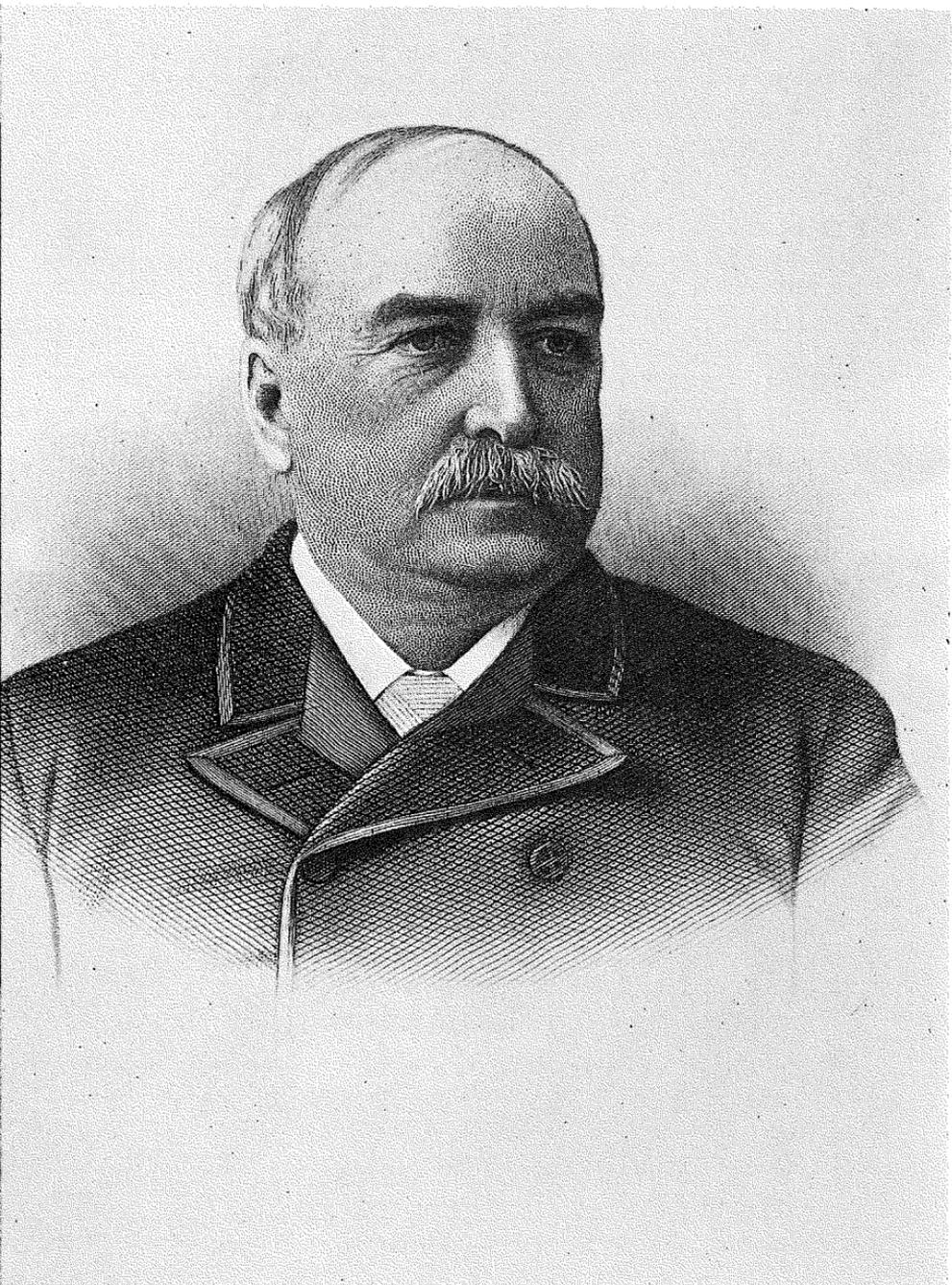
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George L. Miller.

GEORGE L. MILLER AND THE BOOSTING OF OMAHA

By WALLACE BROWN

In the fall of 1865 George L. Miller, a young man of thirty five, founded the *Omaha Herald*. Miller who had been, among other things, doctor, territorial politician, real estate speculator, businessman and post sutler at Fort Kearny, since his migration from New York to the Omaha frontier in 1854.¹

Throughout his long career Miller exhibited great tenacity in advancing the prosperity of Nebraska in general and Omaha in particular. An examination of the early years of the *Herald* well illustrates this point. The "booming" of specific locations by newspaper editors was, of course, a commonplace of frontier history during this period, but this paper seeks to show that Miller's activities were of more than average importance.

Part of the reason for the *Herald's* immediate and lasting success was that it devoted a great deal of attention to local news, but much of the paper was clearly addressed to Easterners, as part of the editor's drive to attract settlers and investments. There were regular features devoted to immigration. One early article bore the headlines "Emigrants Attention!! Nebraska Territory Offers You Great Advantages!!" It suggested that Nebraska offered the pioneer "a soil whose productive powers are not surpassed in the whole world" while taxes were nominal and under the terms of the Homestead Act land was going begging.²

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A typical article was entitled "Questions and Answers—Nebraska and Omaha" which announced that "letters from all parts of the country are coming to us full of enquiries about Nebraska and Omaha." The article was designed to answer those questions as the scores of letters could not be answered personally.³ Another article headed "They are Coming" stated that letters of enquiry came to all the leading businessmen of Omaha and that the paper would now "enumerate some of the leading advantages possessed by this city and state."⁴ "Examine your maps, men of the East," the paper ordered, "Do not take our interested word for it, but look at the 'lay of the land' for yourselves. Observe the wide extent of the country, filled with untold mineral riches and an exhaustless agriculture, and tell us, in your own way, what of the next decade . . ."⁵

An editorial of January, 1866, dwelt at length on Nebraska's climate.⁶ This was clearly not addressed to the native Nebraskans, who well knew what their climate was like, but to the Easterners. The climate, pronounced "one of the most salubrious in the world," was favorably compared with that of New England with its wet atmosphere. "The New England typhnoid [sic] is hardly ever seen here." The Nebraska weather was held up as an inducement to immigration. "Our summers . . . [are] . . . not only healthful but intoxicating to the senses." A few minor drawbacks like thunder, lightning, small hurricanes and rain storms were conceded. "Men die in Nebraska, it is true," Miller admitted reluctantly, "but under like circumstances, and everything being equal, our climate certainly does furnish a greater immunity from fatal disorders than any other in the known world." If newcomers were lured by such accounts they may have felt a certain disappointment. Miller was sometimes rather carried away in his eager desire to sing Nebraska's praises.

It is generally held that the *Herald* soon had a national reputation and this is supported by the fact that eastern papers often quoted it.⁷ Unfortunately no figures of the *Herald's* circulation outside Nebraska are extant.

The importance of publicizing Nebraska, at that time, is enhanced when it is recalled that the myth of the Great Plains as the Great American Desert was still powerful.

But it was Miller's prime job to exhort Nebraskans themselves to improve their territory and state, and the inhabitants of Omaha to work for their city's prosperity. He said it was the newspaper's job to "explore and search out and proclaim the actual resources of the new land."⁸ He continued:

It was a treeless country, and much had to be done to persuade people to plant trees. It was Horatio Seymour who inspired me to preach the gospel of tree planting on this vast area when many thought that only soft cotton woods and maples could be made to grow on these soils. How much time and labor was devoted to this necessary duty of the farmer to himself and to the young by me, the records of the Herald attest.⁹

They do indeed. A typical article entitled "The Importance of Tree Planting" urged the farmers to plant trees and, most important, gave technical details of how to go about it.¹⁰

Miller's policy of promoting agriculture was stated at the outset of the paper's existence and he stood by his pledge throughout the period of his editorship. In October, 1865, his first month of publication, he announced:

The Farmers of Nebraska! These are the bone and the sinew of our strength, and the hope of the country. . .

We honor the farmers of Nebraska, and if we have one purpose nearer to our hearts than any other it is to render ourselves useful to the great cause of Agriculture in this Territory.¹¹

Acting on his philosophy that Nebraska was an agricultural state, or nothing, he constantly published helpful technical articles. Illustrative of this was an article reprinted from the *American Agriculturalist* which explained in detail the cultivation of certain types of potatoes.¹² Miller was never slow to advocate experimental agriculture as, for example, when he urged the growing of

grapes.¹³ A fairly regular column of the *Herald* entitled "Agriculture," solicited contributions and news of farming results and progress.

In an article of October 20, 1865, headed "Fruit Culture," Miller characteristically stressed agricultural wealth. "The demonstrations of the fact that the best pears in the world are successfully grown here, in certain soils, should be regarded as a discovery of almost as much value to the real wealth of Nebraska as the opening of a productive vein of coal would be.¹⁴ Fruit growing, he thought, would have an elevating and ennobling influence on men's characters by bringing them in contact with the forms of nature. But more practically:

Men struggle, animated by paternal regard for their children, all their lives, to get bank stock, government bonds, commercial interests and so forth for their future reliance. They seem never to think that smaller investments in the bountiful Earth are more valuable, become more enduring than all these, and simply because they are permanent, lasting and sure.¹⁵

The issue of January 19, 1866, announced that the Platte Valley, "cannot be excelled as a stock raising country. Mr. Creighton, one of our number, having practically proved it with a herd of 1,700 cattle on a single island, and room for hundreds of thousands more can be found throughout the valley." Miller was one of the first men to recognize the value of the Nebraska range for cattle growing.¹⁶

Later Miller wrote:

In the '60s Dr. H. Latham. . . first gave the world knowledge of winter grazing on the self-cured grasses of the plains and the mountains through the columns of the *Herald*, and also of the fact that wool of fine fibre could be raised in the mountains at altitudes as great as the snow line. It devoted much effort to the support of Dr. Latham's views, and the Union Pacific Co. printed 20,000 pamphlets that contained his letters and the *Herald* editorials upon the subject that were sent broadcast over the country. Beef raised on those grasses I myself have eaten in London.¹⁷

Latham contributed regular dispatches from Laramie where he was a surgeon with the Union Pacific Railroad.¹⁸

Later in his life Miller became one of the principal advocates of winter wheat, and partly through his personal efforts it had become an extremely important crop in Nebraska by 1900.¹⁹

As was typical of early newspapers, the *Herald* office rapidly became a place where people would bring news or examples of new resources. The bringing of fruit occasioned the article on fruit culture quoted above, and only a few weeks after the founding of the *Herald* an article entitled "More Fruit—Nebraska Apples" was occasioned by some samples brought in by a Mrs. J. H. Kellom.²⁰ F. V. Hayden, the geologist, who discovered Wyoming or lignite coal brought his first specimens to the *Herald* office where he "dumped the black beauties on the floor of the editor's room."²¹ Miller referred to Hayden as an "intimate friend" whose mind finally became unhinged when the coal proved to have little future.²²

As early as the summer of 1855 Miller had accepted the position of medical officer with a military expedition to Fort Pierre, partly in order to scan the banks and islands of the Missouri for coal deposits,²³ and in the early years he had high hopes for the importance of minerals in Nebraska, hopes which were to be disappointed. Recalling this disappointment, he said that it simply made him redouble his efforts on behalf of agriculture.²⁴ He made a virtue out of necessity and became something of a physiocrat declaring, "it would be losing trade to swap over fertile and inexhaustible corn and winter wheat and other cereal-producing lands for coal lands or any other mineral lands. Corn beats Coal."²⁵ He also stressed that the mineral wealth farther west would mean prosperity for Nebraska farmers by providing expanding markets.²⁶

Perhaps there was one purpose even nearer to Miller's heart than the agricultural and other resources of Nebraska. It was more especially in Omaha that Miller had

cast his fortunes since 1854, and the prosperity of Omaha did not entirely depend on Nebraska's agriculture. In the early territorial years Miller had played an important part in the struggle to keep the capital in Omaha,²⁷ but this was only a modest beginning of his espousal of Omaha's cause. Characteristically, the *Herald* usually referred to Omaha as "The Future Chief City of the Missouri Valley."²⁸ His predictions for Omaha's future were based mainly on its actual and potential importance as a route center.

Already in 1865 Omaha was second to none west of Chicago and north of St. Louis. The valley of the Platte and its tributaries was most important as routes west, especially to the mining regions of Colorado and Montana. In October, the *Herald* pronounced on "What Omaha Really Needs." Miller stated, "Our commercial consequence is our chief reliance for the future. Whatever tends to enhance this, must be considered important and worthy of care." The importance of communications was stressed. In the same edition the editor urged, "Let our people inquire what they can do to enlarge their commercial importance . . . The Platte valley is a natural inlet to the golden regions of the West and Omaha is its commercial key." He recommended the building of roads and bridges, and suggested the formation of a permanent committee for that purpose.²⁹

While in New York in 1867 in connection with the Union Pacific Bridge, Miller wrote back with some gratification to his home town:

A gentleman of good standing, speaking of Nebraska yesterday in Broadway inquired, "How far is Nebraska from Omaha?" This in fact. Besides illustrating Eastern ignorance of Western affairs, it has a good deal of meaning. It shows that even with otherwise intelligent men Omaha as a town has greater reputation than Nebraska as a state. The *Herald* [i.e. *New York Herald*] mentions "Wheeling and Omaha" as pointing geographical extremes of the northeast of the mountains. There is not a better known locality on the continent than Omaha is today. No place such universal

confidence of becoming a large city between Vancouver and Cape Cod, or between Penobscot and the Rio Grande, and time and events will justify that confidence.³⁰



Omaha, Nebraska as pictured in 1886.

In his later years Miller was known, respectfully, as the "Father of Omaha." He was not, of course, the sole begetter, but no one else deserved the title more.

This is well illustrated by Miller's attitude towards the transcontinental railroad and more specifically to the dispute over the Union Pacific Railroad bridge across the Missouri.

The very creation of Nebraska Territory had been largely the result of railroad interests, and especially Chicago railroad interests, which saw in the Platte valley the natural route west. The whole railroad question had, of course, aroused wide sectional dispute before the Civil War but with the South out of the Union the way was clear to build.

In July, 1862, Congress had given a charter to the Union Pacific Company to build the eastern half of the railroad, and in December, 1863, President Lincoln tele-

graphed to Peter Dey (the company's chief engineer), in Omaha, announcing that according to the terms of the act, the initial point was to be fixed on the "western boundary of the state of Iowa, opposite Omaha."³¹ This decision was reinforced by a Proclamation the following March. In July, 1864, a second act doubled the land grant and eased the financial situation. Although ground had been broken at Omaha, on the day of Lincoln's telegram to Dey, it was not until the end of the Civil War that construction began. It was not certain whether Omaha or Council Bluffs was the eastern terminus. The President had fixed the initial point on the western boundary of Iowa, and the Company finally took this to be the western and not the eastern bank of the Missouri, so that even in 1871 when the bridge over the Missouri was completed, passengers and freight arriving in Council Bluffs had to get into dummy trains, cross the bridge, and then board the Union Pacific in Omaha.³² The doubt about the terminus created a keen rivalry between Omaha and Council Bluffs. Omaha started calling Council Bluffs, "East Omaha" and "Milkville" while the latter retorted with such names as "Bilkville," "Train Town" and "that Union Pacific Depot across the River."³³

Miller had first heard of the transcontinental railroad as a "practical measure and not a dream . . . when Peter A. Dey . . . called upon me at Fort Kearney in 1862 and told me that the locomotives would be snorting their way through the Platte Valley in two or three years."³⁴

By 1865 Miller was well aware of what he termed this question of "vital import" adding, "Into this controversy the *Herald* entered with whatever energy it possessed" because Omaha's future depended upon it.³⁵ For this reason Miller maintained good relations with T. C. Durant, the Vice-President of the Company, and head of the notorious Credit Mobilier. Miller also maintained a friendship with General Grenville M. Dodge, who became chief engineer in May 1866, after the resignation of Dey. Miller's support of the Company or "puffing" as it was

called in those days, paid off in other ways than the advancement of Omaha. Dodge wrote that he got an order from the Company to turn over to Miller "what printing was done at Omaha, which he was very grateful."³⁶

The *Herald* took a keen interest in the progress of the railway, and most editions of the period contain some reference to it. "Omaha is the Great Terminus," proclaimed the *Herald* of January 5, 1866. "We already have twice the reputation our population would give us but for the prospective benefits we receive from the Pacific Road. Let us keep pace with our own importance by timely and effective exertation and all will go well with us."

Miller was also a keen advocate of branch lines both before and after the completion of the transcontinental line. In January, 1866, he advocated in the *Herald* that a branch line be built from Omaha to Boone.³⁷ Even in 1869 just after the transcontinental line was completed he warned that Omaha's vigilance must not slacken—the city still needed more branch lines to ensure its mastery of the economic situation.³⁸ In October, 1870, he felt that Omaha's continued prosperity lay in the building of new railroads into the interior.³⁹ At that time, a town in the West was judged in accordance with the number of railroad lines which focussed on it.

Miller also supported the railroad in a private capacity. In June, 1865, before the *Herald* was even founded he wrote to Dodge urging him to push Omaha's cause, and put pressure on Durant.⁴⁰ In July he wrote again expressing his fears that Silas F. Seymour, the consulting engineer, was openly favoring Bellevue, which lay a few miles to the south, as the terminus, adding, "This must necessarily fix Omaha in determined opposition to the Co. I am sorry but men must fight for their existence."⁴¹ But the first rail was soon laid in Omaha, and for a time the city could breathe again.

In October, Miller expressed his policy vehemently in another letter to Dodge in which he was angling for a

share in a transfer company connected with the railroad in Omaha. He continued:

I am working for the company with all my might and giving every paper and every man the devil who says a word against him [i.e. Durant] or the Co. . . . I am bringing our people to appreciate what the great road is. I have no claim on Dr. Durant, nor on you, for this but if the Dr. befriends anybody here, as I think it is in his interest to do in the transfer matter, I intend he shall not be ignorant that the editor of the Herald is and has been, as you well know, faithful when others faltered.⁴²

Whatever the outcome of the transfer matter⁴³ the columns of the *Herald* bear out the truth of this letter. As he wrote later, the *Herald* "was never misled by any man into the supreme folly of waging war upon Durant and the Union Pacific R.R. Co."⁴⁴ Durant and the Company were much attacked in those early years, and there was the constant danger for Omaha that Bellevue or some other nearby spot might become the terminal.

On January 6, 1866, the first forty miles of the Union Pacific west from Omaha were accepted by the railway commissioners. The *Herald* described the event under the heading "Great Day for Nebraska." By August the line



Omaha Daily Herald Building.

had reached Kearny, by November it was at North Platte; in late 1867 it was at Cheyenne, and on May 10, 1869, it joined the Central Pacific, reaching out from San Francisco, at Promontory Point in Utah.

Meanwhile, although Omaha was undoubtedly the terminal point, it would not necessarily get the bridge across the Missouri (an act of Congress of July, 1866, had provided for the construction of certain bridges). On the eastern side of the Missouri, the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad had reached a point opposite Omaha, and it would not be long before the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific would reach the river. Branch lines were being built, but no common focal point had been determined. Possible bridge sites included Childs Mills, three miles down river, where it was claimed that the bridge would cost five hundred thousand dollars less,⁴⁵ and Bellevue Crossing. Miller, a friend of Silas F. Seymour, and his son George, asked the latter to telegraph him when the Company decided on a bridge point.⁴⁶ In March, 1868, Miller received the telegram, "Bridge located at Childs Mills yesterday by board of directors. George F. Seymour." It came, as he said, "like a clap of thunder from a clear sky," and a "death knell to Omaha." "It was not a scare it was a fact."

The immediate result was the formation of a committee of eight, including Governor Saunders, and headed by Dr. Enos Lowe, to go to New York and get the decision changed. As Miller said, "the steel-mounted logic" of the decision was that "Council Bluffs would be the Great City and Omaha would be a farm." The committee was "instructed in general terms by men, who largely owned Omaha, to pay any price, and 'cut the town in two,' if necessary . . . to bring that bridge back." After a few weeks the committee telegraphed, "Send Dr. Miller to New York next train." He had previously been elected to head the committee, but had been unable to accept. In New York, mainly through the influence of Miller's old friend Durant, the board changed its mind and a contract was drawn up on the spot. Durant was offered fifty

thousand dollars worth of bonds in gratitude, but he refused them.⁴⁷

The Omaha businessman's point of view was well expressed in a letter which the committee sent to the President and the Directors of the Union Pacific:

Relying upon the good faith of the government and the company thousands of men have invested in our city every dollar they possess. To change the initial point or *so locate the bridge as to deprive our people of the benefits which they had a right to expect as the result of the original location, would be a breach of faith, render comparatively valueless all of these investments.* . . .⁴⁸

The committee regarded the decision as a violation of Lincoln's proclamation of 1864 concerning the initial point. Already a quarter of a million dollars worth of ten-per-cent bonds had been voted to pay for the terminus.⁴⁹ Many inhabitants of Omaha had not only invested heavily as the committee stated; they had, like Miller, also invested their whole future in the city which was now threatened.

However, with the bridge secured, Governor Saunders sent his "celebrated" message, "Sound the loud timbrel."⁵⁰ He also telegraphed the good news to the *Herald* which greeted the event in its edition of April 1, 1868, with a plethora of headlines on its front page:

OMAHA

The Natural Highway of America.

Nature Chalked it out on the map of Our Country.

Omaha the Nucleous.

New York and San Francisco the Mutual Recipients.

The Bridge Located and We Rejoice.

The event that transpired yesterday formed one of the most important epochs in the history of our city. From it will date that steady and perpetual growth, that progressive stability which in the future as in the past, marks us especially as the embodiment of every element that illustrates the onward march of the Western World and Western progress . . .

Omaha, yesterday, through her able and indefatigable New York delegation, convinced her opponents that to oppose her progress was to furnish her with the stimulus that enabled her to succeed. Bon fires were lit and . . .

The pent up feelings of doubt, anxiety and suspense which for sometime had overshadowed our feelings and to some extent clogged the wheels of enterprise displayed itself in universal joy and in congratulation of the new epoch that depended upon the location of the Bridge.

It must have been with a real sense of pride of achievement that Miller viewed the ending of the race between Union Pacific and The Central Pacific as they met in Utah in 1869. Shortly before the celebrated ceremony of driving the golden spike at Promontory Point, Utah, was to take place, Miller wrote, "People of Omaha, we are sure will not allow the completion of the Pacific Railroad to pass without an appropriate celebration of that event."⁵¹ The town council failed to take any action so Miller seized the initiative. He became chairman of a "Committee of Arrangements." The result was a great day of celebration on May 10, the day of the Promontory Point ceremony. The *Herald* suggested that the day be made the "Omaha Fourth of July" if for no other reason than "All it is, and all that it expects to be as a town, is due to this great work."⁵²

Miller's committee sent out many invitations to various groups and bodies to attend the celebration, and the result was a huge parade through Omaha culminating in a salvo of one hundred guns fired as the telegraph operator received the tapped out message that the golden spike had been driven home. This was followed by the inevitable speechifying in the course of which Judge A. C. Wakely paid a just tribute to Miller. Speaking of the part the press had played, the judge commented that Miller, "has done more, perhaps, than any one individual . . . to defend Omaha interests."⁵³ This praise more nearly approximated the truth than is usual on such solemn occasions.

NOTES

- ¹ For details of Miller's early career see Wallace Brown, "George L. Miller and the *Omaha Herald*, 1854-1869," 1959. Unpublished M. A. thesis in the University of Nebraska Library.
- ² *Omaha Herald*, February 2, 1866.
- ³ *Ibid.*, February 19, 1868.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, February 12, 1868.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, March 11, 1868.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, January 19, 1868.
- ⁷ See Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
- ⁸ J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1913), II, 720.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 720-721.
- ¹⁰ *Omaha Herald*, February 16, 1866.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, October 27, 1865.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, March 18, 1868.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, October 20, 1865.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Anonymous MS (1919). George L. Miller materials, *Omaha World-Herald* office, Omaha Nebraska.
- ¹⁷ Morton and Watkins, *op. cit.*, p. 721.
- ¹⁸ For example see *Omaha Herald*, May 5, 1869.
- ¹⁹ *Utica Observer*, September 24, 1901.
- ²⁰ *Omaha Herald*, October 20, 1865.
- ²¹ Morton and Watkins, *op. cit.*, II, 721.
- ²² George L. Miller, "The Fort Pierre Expedition," *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, III, 117.
- ²³ See Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
- ²⁴ George L. Miller, "Early Dreams of Coal in Nebraska," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, XV, 191.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ *Omaha Herald*, March 11, 1868.
- ²⁷ Brown, *op. cit.*, Ch. II.
- ²⁸ For example, *Omaha Herald*, March 11, 1868.
- ²⁹ *Omaha Herald*, October 20, 1865.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, April 1, 1868.
- ³¹ James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1955), p. 118.
- ³² See Nelson Trottmann, *History of the Union Pacific* (New York, 1923), p. 109.
- ³³ See Edwin L. Sabin, *Building the Pacific Railway* (Philadelphia, 1919), p. 84.
- ³⁴ Morton and Watkins, *op. cit.*, II, 721.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Grenville M. Dodge, *Autobiography*, Unpublished MS in the Public Library, Council Bluffs, Iowa, IV, 931.

³⁷ *Omaha Herald*, January 5, 1866.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, May 10, 1869.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, October 14, 1870.

⁴⁰ Miller to Dodge, June 30, 1865. Dodge, *op. cit.*, II, 360.

⁴¹ Miller to Dodge, July 10, 1865. *Ibid.*, II, 363.

⁴² Miller to Dodge, October 20, 1865. *Ibid.*, II, 524.

⁴³ I have found no record of Miller being engaged in such an enterprise.

⁴⁴ Morton and Watkins, *op. cit.*, II, 72.

⁴⁵ A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago, 1882), p. 119.

⁴⁶ For Miller's account of this episode see Morton and Watkins, *op. cit.*, II, 722-723.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 722.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 113.

⁴⁹ A. Sorenson, *History of Omaha* (Omaha, 1889), p. 307.

⁵⁰ Morton and Watkins, *op. cit.*, II, 722.

⁵¹ *Omaha Herald*, April 28, 1869.

⁵² *Ibid.*, May 12, 1869.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, May 19, 1869.