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Article Summary: Frank H Spearman, a prolific writer of railroad fiction, created courageous characters who risked all for order and progress. His writing style may seem idealistic and stilted today, but his early stories are reservoirs of cultural and historical value to Nebraskans. They offer rich profiles of men who dared to run clattering, primitive machines across the Plains, forging a lifeline to settlers.

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Photographs / Images: Letter, 1886 to Gene; composite view of McCook, 1888; B & M roundhouse in McCook; McCook rail yard photo; two-story brick building built by Thomas Lonergan, McCook; the Spearman's house, 311 East Fifth Street, McCook; Frank Spearman, Eugenie, and her sister, taken near McCook in 1887; Frank Spearman; McClure Magazine; Train wreck on the Burlington Line in 1888; Joe LeFors, Wyoming Peace Officer; N C Wyeth's frontispiece for the first edition of *Whispering Smith*; Tim Keliher, Joe Lefors with posse; N C Wyeth oil painting for the first edition of *Whispering Smith*; Cover of *Whispering Smith* which sold 38,825 copies in its first six months; Alan Ladd, Robert Preston, Brenda Marshall, Donald Crisp movie poster, 1948, for *Whispering Smith*; J P McGowan, Gus Ingles, Timothy Keliher, Helen Holmes, and Frank Spearman

# FROM M<sup>c</sup>COOK TO WHISPERING SMITH



*Frank H. Spearman was a prolific writer of heroic fiction, especially about railroads and the men who built and ran them in the West in the late 1800s.*

BY TOM WHITE

DURING THE LAST HALF OF HIS LIFE, HE FOUND A substantial audience for his magazine stories and books, and early Hollywood created photoplays of several stories. His most famous work, *Whispering Smith*, became a best seller in 1906 and was filmed three times, the last in 1948, in Technicolor, starring Alan Ladd, Robert Preston, and Brenda Marshall.

That Spearman's writing, defined by a stylistic realism and plots built around devotion to duty, has not won him a place in the literary canon next to his more avant-garde, muckraking contemporaries, Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser, is not a surprise. The vitality, courage, and endurance of Spearman's characters, who risked all for order, progress, and their enterprise, seem idealistic and stilted today.

During most of the twentieth century, the rugged individualist hero fought for personal freedom, bucking the organization or government; they were not Spearman's duty-bound company men.

More curious, Spearman has remained virtually unknown as a Nebraska author. He lived and worked in the state for eight years and there discovered the drama and people who became the characters for his early tales. *The Nerve of Foley* and *Held for Orders*, collections of his best magazine railroad stories, are still in print and paint a generation of Nebraska rail pioneers during the state's most robust period of economic and population growth.

On August 25, 1886, Spearman, then a thin, asthmatic, twenty-six-year-old tea and coffee salesman, disembarked from a train in North Platte after a hot day's ride. Though he could not have known at the time, the letter he wrote to his wife in Chicago the next morning was prescient:

I have been so on the fly since I arrived in the state of Nebraska that I haven't had time to tell you my impressions of the noble expanse of country—Dakota is fine—but if there can be a choice—and I really believe there is—Nebraska is finer. I must admit I'm thoroughly gone on the mighty West. "Dead stuck on it" as the boys say.<sup>1</sup>

The West, then being transformed by railroads, would become Spearman's muse. And he saw a future for himself in the West, despite his weak, thin stature and refined city tastes so foreign to the frontier.

He wrote to his wife,

My ride through Nebraska from Sioux City to Omaha showed me a rolling country—simply magnificent. Yesterday's ride across the state due west was through the Platte Valley, which is from five to fifteen miles wide and flat as a billiard table, but ah, so fertile! On either side north and south you can see in the distance the line of hills which mark the limits of the valley—beyond these I am told that rolling character of the country returns—It's terrific.<sup>2</sup>

Ten days later, on September 3, after traveling the rails through western Nebraska and eastern Colorado investigating the prospects for establishing a bank in one of the new towns springing up at almost every water stop, he wrote to his older brother, Harry,

I have been looking just long enough to know what I want when I see it. McCook is the town for our business; and I will travel no further, if the next few days work confirms the general survey of today.

## B. & M. Eating House.

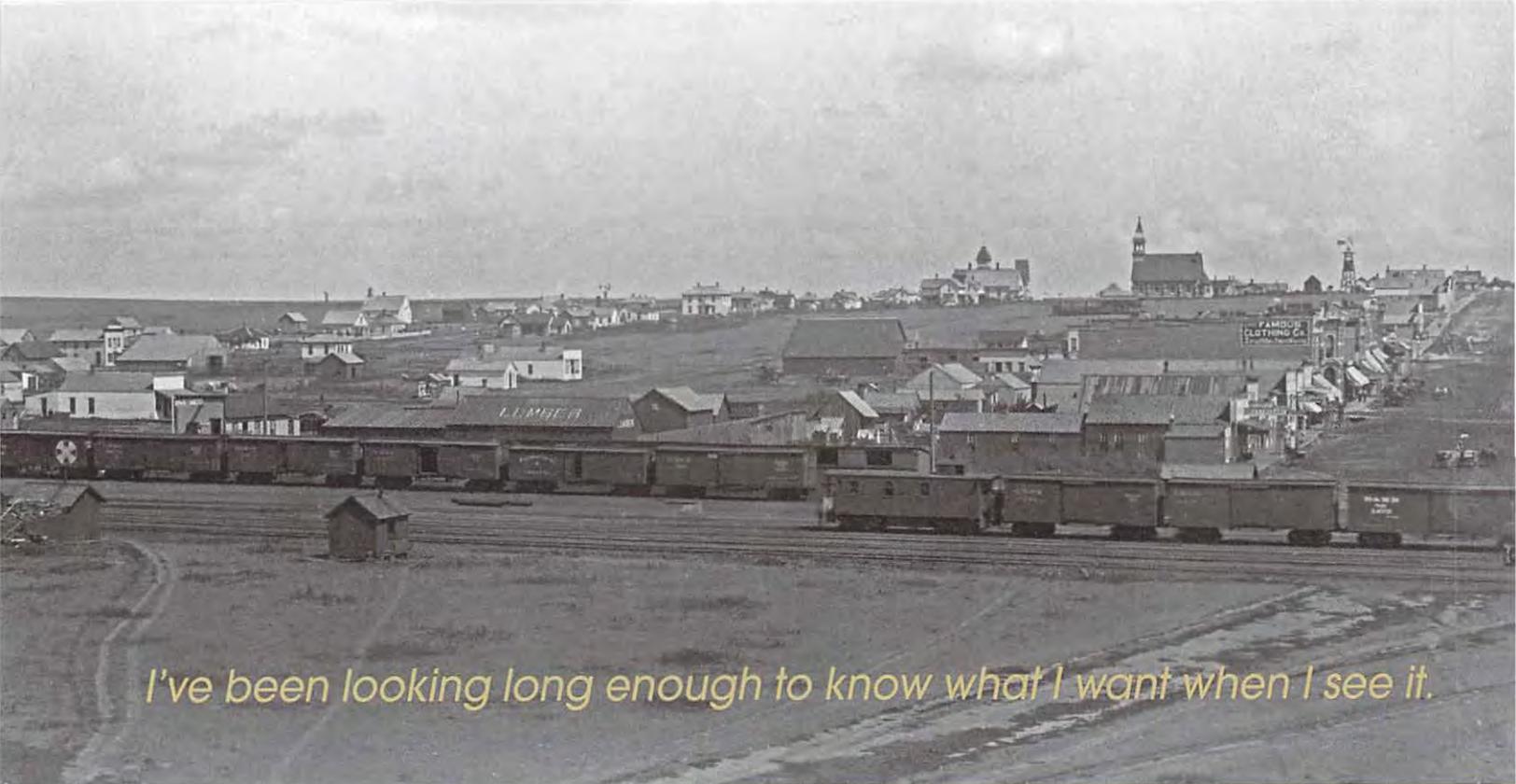
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roughing it— They have water works,

It is situated on the main Denver line of the B&M Road. A division station—you get into a sleeper at noon in Chicago and arrive at McCook at 9:45 the next night. The town is four years old: about 2,000 to 4,500 people [about 2,000 was correct in 1886]—the largest town between Hastings and Denver.<sup>3</sup>

The Spearman brothers had discussed starting a small bank; Harry would invest capital and Frank would manage the business. In his letter, Frank reported, "There are two banks here a National

To his wife, Eugenie, Frank wrote enthusiastically about McCook's amenities, attractive appearance, and business potential, adding the emphatic underlined declaration, "You will like the town!" Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery



*I've been looking long enough to know what I want when I see it.*

\$50,000 and a private one \$50,000. Chattel loans go quickly at 2½ to 5%. We begin with the country surround[ing] it: good farming lands about a town is the first consideration in our business. McCook is situated in the Republican Valley. The finest lands in the state lie on the divide between this and the Platte Valley [to the] north.”<sup>4</sup>

Though it would be ten years and two career shifts before Spearman began to pour out stories about the daring, hardy people he found on western rail lines, many of them first-generation immigrants, Nebraska and McCook had sparked his imagination.

Spearman was born in Buffalo, New York, in September 1859, the third and last child of Simon and Emiline Spearman. His father, age fifty-nine when Frank was born, had been a prosperous planter on the Maryland-Delaware border early in life. But the Civil War, financial reverses, and a second family—Emiline was eighteen and he was forty-seven when they married—forced him to look west to the frontier. First, he moved his family to Quincy, Michigan, and then in 1867, to Appleton, Wisconsin, where he opened a general store.<sup>5</sup>

Frank was a good student and avid reader as a boy, and spent time observing the store's trade and customers. He was fifteen when his father, who had worked as a traveling salesman in his last years, died at age seventy-four. At his mother's urging, Frank dropped out of Lawrence College after one year and took an office job at a woolen mill to earn money for the family.

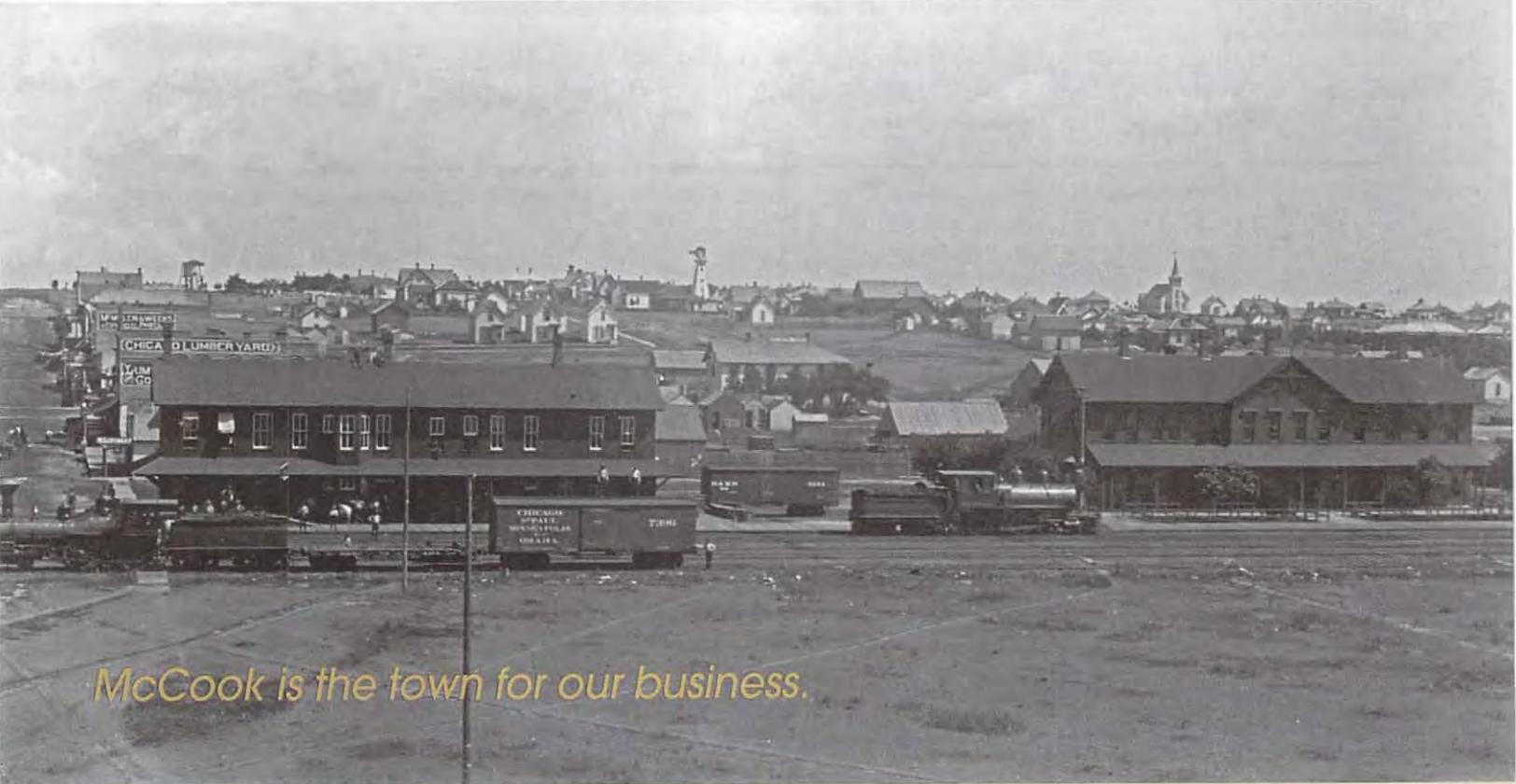
Emiline, described later by her son as high-minded, wholesome, and a sincere Methodist true to her convictions of right and wrong, instilled those attributes in him. Yet, when she died in June 1876 of uterine cancer at age forty-seven, Frank was left at sixteen with only his brother, Harry, nine years older, to lean on.

In the fall of 1877, Harry arranged for Frank to move to Chicago and live with the Patrick J. Towle family. For a period both Spearman brothers worked for Towle, Carle & Co., a wholesale grocer that later became known for developing Log Cabin Syrup. A large Catholic family, the Towles offered Frank entry to the edge of Chicago's upper crust, instructed him in the world of commodity trading, and would introduce him to his future wife.

In an odd way, they also led him to his most famous character, Whispering Smith, the railroad detective who came alive in his fiction years later. In 1925, when Spearman was asked to describe how he created his most successful book, he wrote:

At 18, I was a sugar broker in Chicago, The New York house with which I was connected had a large account in Sioux City with a firm of packers and wholesale grocers. The packers failed, and a burning telegram came from New York to our Chicago office asking us to send a lawyer to Sioux City. I still remember seeing that dispatch as it lay on the manager's desk. But all I have ever been able to recall of the message, was the question about the Chicago

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*McCook is the town for our business.*

lawyer wanted by the New York office: It was couched in these works: "Is Whispering Smith in town?"

Neither do I recollect anything more about the case. Whether Whispering Smith was in town, whether he went to Sioux City, what became of the account . . .

But for some reason, I never forgot the name. It stuck in my memory, as certain names have done and still do. It was not until years afterward—at least fifteen—before I had any occasion to use it. I was writing fiction then, and it seemed to me "Whispering Smith" was a good name for a character.<sup>6</sup>

Through the Towles, during the spring of 1879, Frank Spearman met Eugenie Lonergan, the oldest of six siblings in a prosperous Chicago family. Years earlier her father, Thomas Lonergan, had subdivided and developed six acres in an affluent area near Lincoln Park, and had been active in the city's real estate market for years.

For two or three years, Gene, as she was called, and Frank saw each other intermittently, but not as romantic partners. Nearly three years older than Frank, Eugenie was enjoying the social whirl of parties, concerts and balls and the attentions of numerous suitors, and Frank, already a step below her on the social scale, was frequently traveling as a Towle salesman. Years later Eugenie wrote she had found his manners polished and his brown eyes attractive. After several years of acquaintance a courtship developed between them.

For a time, Frank was uncertain if he could provide for Gene adequately. Nevertheless, in the spring of 1883 he proposed, and she, then age twenty-six, accepted on the condition that he convert to Catholicism. Thomas Lonergan further required that the couple wait a year. With those conditions met, on June 5, 1884, they married in Chicago.<sup>7</sup> The marriage, which would endure until Frank's death more than fifty years later and the change of religion were pivotal events in his life. With months of instruction in his new faith, he became a devout Catholic and later would focus several novels on tensions between human desires and teachings of the church.

During their first two years together, the Spearmans rented a home overlooking the Fox River in Appleton, Wisconsin, while Frank worked as a salesman, earning \$2,500 a year less his traveling expenses, selling coffee, tea, and spices for Franklin MacVeagh & Co. Early in 1886, the birth of the Spearmans' first son, Thomas Clark, combined with the stress of traveling and a recurrence of asthma attacks, prompted Spearman to look for a new place and line of work. After his brother encouraged him to go west and agreed to invest with him, Spearman spent much of the summer in 1886 seeking the right town and opportunity.

Before exploring Nebraska that August, he traveled to White Lake in Dakota Territory, west of Mitchell, and seriously considered a partnership in the established Aurora County Bank. But Gene urged him to look further. She wanted a bigger

**Founded in 1882 by the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad, McCook, was thriving by 1886 when Frank Spearman arrived. This 1888 view is a composite of two photos attributed to E. Leach. Left, NSHS RG3464-7; right NSHS RG3464-8**



*Partial view of Round House from inside*  
30 Halls

Choosing McCook for its division point midway between Denver and the Missouri River, the B & M line built this roundhouse and other facilities for servicing trains. NSHS RG3464-31

Lincoln Land Company laid out the new town with a roundhouse and machine shops south of the tracks along the river and commercial and residential blocks reaching up the northern slope. By July nearly one hundred buildings were going up.<sup>10</sup>

The town's population grew steadily. In 1890, eight years after the town's founding, the *Nebraska State Gazetteer* listed 117 businesses serving a population of four thousand. There were four hotels, including the McEntee House, which offered

"everything first-class" for \$1.50 a day; flour mills, brick yards, a creamery, two newspapers, four saloons, a veterinary surgeon, seven doctors, a tailor, a jeweler, and several cigar makers. The *Gazetteer* reported: "An abundance of pure water is supplied by the city waterworks, which are operated by the Holly or standpipe system with twelve miles of main pipe. The McCook Electric Light and Power Company have a costly plant and light the city with 24 arc and 570 incandescent lights."<sup>11</sup>

While wonders of their day, steam locomotives in the 1880s and early 1890s operated continuously for only a few hours before requiring service. On the Burlington line, engines were changed at Hastings, McCook, and Akron, Colorado. A ready, fresh engine and its crew took a train onward, while maintenance crews serviced and repaired the exhausted engine.<sup>12</sup>

A writer, possibly H. P. Waite, who later ran a McCook hardware store, described the rail traffic in town about the time of Spearman's arrival:

Four passenger trains a day—Nos. 1 and 39 westbound, and Nos. 2 and 40 eastbound—furnish adequate and satisfactory service to those who travel. The regular equipment of each of these trains is four cars—a combination mail and baggage car, a combination express and smoking car, one day coach and one sleeping car. Occasionally a fifth car is necessary. When a six-car train is run it is an event of moment. If an excursion train passes through in the day time—especially if it carries

town with an established Catholic Church—a bill that McCook would fill.<sup>8</sup>

Clattering along ribbons of rail beneath billows of steam and smoke, locomotives pulling wooden cars carrying passengers or freight literally transformed the Great Plains in the late 1800s from a pastoral landscape to a region with modern life. Like the computer and Internet industry a century later, railroads connected Americans and commerce in profound, new ways, and the speed and ease of the new technology created unforeseeable economic and social opportunities. Western railroading captured the imagination of a generation. Steam engines were the mammoth symbols of progress and drivers in the vast, complex enterprise of developing the West.

The Burlington and Missouri River Railroad, spurred by government land grants of more than 2.4 million acres in Nebraska—almost 5 percent of the land in the state—established the Lincoln Land Company in 1880 to systematically develop towns along a line through the Republican River valley. While this line would connect Chicago with Denver, the company's immediate financial payoff was selling land quickly and for as high a price as possible. With vigorous promotion and long-term credit, the Burlington found buyers for virtually all its land in Nebraska by 1905.<sup>9</sup>

In the spring of 1882 the B&M line reached Denver, and the railroad designated the site of McCook, midway between the Missouri River and the Colorado capital, as its division point. The

Locomotives transformed the Great Plains in the late 1800s from a pastoral landscape to a region with modern life.

representatives of any well known organization, such as the G.A.R. [Grand Army of the Republic], it is met by half the town's population, headed by the band, which starts playing as the train pulls in and is going full blast by the time the excursionists begin to descend to the platform. In fact, it is quite the custom for all our citizens whose vocations permit, to stroll stationward at train time, and to remain until the train takes its departure. Of course, there are those who have business at the depot. "Runners" for the hotels on the hill solicit guests for their respective caravansaries. Land "locators" are there seeking "clients" or "victims," as the future will determine. Always present are those for whom life holds nothing but the desire to extract from it such excitement and entertainment as they can with as little effort on their part as possible. The cars are painted a light yellow. The locomotives are diminutive, having the truck wheels, one pair of drive wheels and enormous smoke stacks shaped like inverted cones. The platforms at each end of the cars are open, and to pass from one car to another when the train is in motion is an undertaking not unattended with danger for anyone but a railroad man. Each car is furnished with hand brakes so set that they can be operated from the platform. When the engineer whistles for a station the services of both the conductor and brakeman are required to bring the train to a stop.<sup>13</sup>



railroading depended on a class of daring, young, strong men. Many were immigrants or first-generation sons; in the 1890s more than 20 percent of McCook's residents were foreign born. Those who survived and stuck with railroading might eventually graduate to graybeard roles of relative safety, such as passenger train engineer or conductor.<sup>16</sup>

When Frank Spearman found McCook in September 1886 he was not focused on railroading but on the town's business prospects and whether the community, with only a few yards of board sidewalks on Main Street, offered enough civilization to meet his wife's expectations.

On stationery from the B&M Eating House, he wrote her,

I honestly think that if I can't succeed here, I can't in Nebraska, at least without pioneering, and you will hardly call moving to as pretty a town as this roughing it. They have a water works, my dear! . . . The best cottages

The platforms at each end of the cars are open, and to pass from one car to another when the train is in motion is an undertaking not unattended with danger for anyone but a railroad man.

During the mid-1880s four freight trains also stopped at McCook daily. The 4-4-0 engines pulled eighteen to twenty cars, each loaded with 25,000 to 40,000 pounds of freight.<sup>14</sup> Before 1888 when Westinghouse developed a reliable air brake, stopping a train was a tough, risky job. A control wheel that projected above a car's roof was connected to a manual braking system by a long rod. On a whistle signal from the engineer, brakemen, usually two, one at the front and one at the rear of a train, would begin turning the wheels to engage the brakes. When a brakeman was done with a car, he would jump thirty inches or so from one rocking car to the next and turn the next wheel. If a brakeman over-tightened a brake, the wheel would skid rather than roll slowly, grinding a flat spot. Brakemen were often docked salary to pay for ruined wheels.<sup>15</sup>

Railroading in this era was not for the timid. Poor equipment and tracks, manual couplings, and braking made trains inherently dangerous; derailments and wrecks occurred frequently. Thousands of railroaders were killed and injured on the job. Operating with its own social strata,

here have the prettiest lawns and hedges that you can imagine. The town is growing very fast.<sup>17</sup>

In October the Spearmans moved to McCook, rented a house on the outskirts, and set about making a new life for themselves. Within weeks Spearman opened the Farmers & Merchants Bank in a small office and hired an assistant cashier, John A. Cordeal, a teenager who proved to be trustworthy and able. Cordeal became Spearman's protégé for a few years, and they developed a friendship that lasted long after the Spearmans left

McCook. Later Cordeal became a lawyer, successful businessman, and a Red Willow County politician, serving several terms in the Nebraska legislature. He was an ally and supporter of Senator George Norris and wrote numerous historical accounts about early county residents.<sup>18</sup>

Initially Farmers & Merchants Bank was financed by ten-thousand-dollar investments from Harry Spearman and Mary Lonergan, Eugenie's mother. A year or so later her father, Thomas Lonergan, also invested, building a two-story brick building on Main Street that he rented to the bank and buying several other properties including rental houses that Frank had built and managed.<sup>19</sup>

In February 1887 a second son born to the Spearmans died two days after his premature birth. Eugenie had gone into labor when her one-year-old collapsed one

morning after ingesting a piece of lead. He later recovered. The couple had two more children in McCook: Eugene Lonergan, born in February 1889, and Elaine Emiline, who died in August 1893, nine months after her birth. Though these losses took a toll, later in life Gene and Frank recalled many pleasures of their lives in McCook.<sup>20</sup>

On a Sunday evening two weeks after they had arrived in their new town, they heard the muffled cries and shouts of a large group of riders in the dark outside their house. Frightened, the couple doused their lights and moved furniture against the doors and windows. Frank fingered his double-barreled shotgun as the riders came closer and the noises grew louder.

Gene recalled, "Then suddenly a loud song of

welcome, laughter, and cow-bells. We were being 'charivareed.' With much embarrassment we invited them in after pushing the furniture once more."<sup>21</sup>

During the spring of 1887 the Spearmans built a handsome two-story house, which still stands at 311 East Fifth Street. Next to an outbuilding they added a tennis court, a novelty for McCook and perhaps all of western Nebraska at the time. Frank ordered equipment from New York and, according to Gene, created a stir with game blazers striped in yellow and black.<sup>22</sup>

When the Spearmans paid two teenage girls each eight dollars per month plus room and board to help Eugenie with the house and their young children, some neighbors were bold enough to ask what she did with her time.<sup>23</sup>

In 1887 Spearman embarked on his first writing project. In an essay titled "The Great American Desert," he recorded his insights and observations

---

Then suddenly a loud song of  
welcome, laughter, and cow-bells.  
We were being "charivareed."

---

on many subjects about the Great Plains and with an enthusiasm that sometimes slipped into hyperbole. Among his topics were:

**Women on the Plains:** "The 'unprotected' [woman] is much safer on the lonely prairie than she would be in New York City."

**Homesteaders:** "The homesteaders are very honest. You can leave a house unlocked at all time and your stores are perfectly safe—with the exception of what liquor you may have on hand for medicinal purposes."

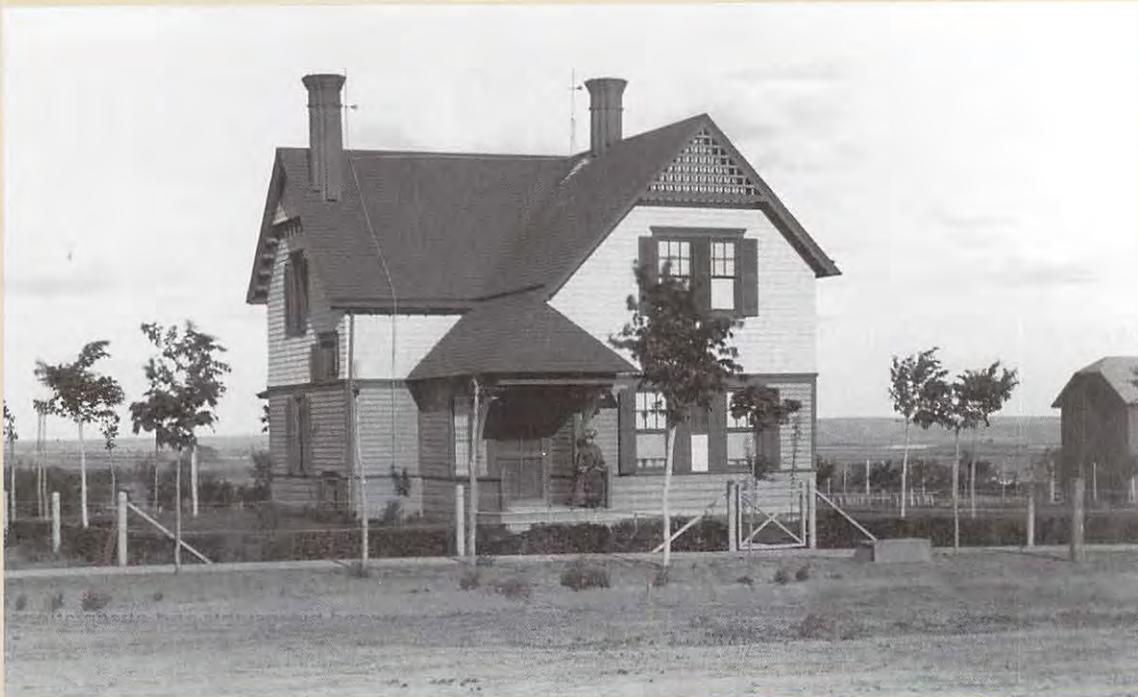
**Great Plains Weather:** "Take a medium latitude, such as southern Nebraska, and there you can find as near a perfect climate as the United States affords."

**Rainfall in Nebraska:** "The people out here, who know from their actual experience that we do have a liberal and bona fide rainfall in every portion of our immense desert, are not content with stating the facts . . . but rack their brains to find ingenious reasons for the beneficence of Providence."<sup>24</sup>

While acknowledging the grim realities for many settlers living on the prairie in dugouts and sod homes, absent running water and with little fuel, Spearman espoused a Darwinian scenario of adap-



In October 1886 the Spearmans moved to McCook, and Frank, with investments from his brother and Eugenie's mother, opened the Farmers & Merchants Bank. The next year Eugenie's father, Thomas Lonergan, built this two-story brick building on Main Street. NSHS RG3464-8



The Spearman's house still stands at 311 East Fifth Street in McCook. Their tennis court was a novelty for McCook and perhaps for all of Western Nebraska in 1887. NSHS RG3464-29

tation: "Yet these people are the pioneers of a true civilization; upon the wrecks of their fortunes abler hands will build anew; and if the second attempt fails, success crowns a third effort. Here the law of the survival of the fittest is seen in full play."<sup>25</sup>

In a theme that he would repeat in his novels, he saw westerners proudly struggling to overcome nature, scoundrels, and unfair burdens to establish a civilization:

We are heavily in debt, and there is no reason for denying it. Every state west of the Alleghanies has borne the same burden in its pioneer days, and developed its resources under precisely the same conditions. Go to a new country that is not in debt, and you will find the inhabitants as near a state of nature as they can get, and content to remain there. They will live like the crackers of Georgia or moonshiners of Tennessee, who are never in debt—except, perhaps, to the Internal Revenue Department. They are happy: perhaps, theirs is the wiser plan—to rust out instead of wearing out. But the restless, hustling, struggling Westerner is not cast in that mould. If he succumbs in the struggle against high interest, an exorbitant tariff, and the practical confiscation of his farm products by the freight rates of railroads, another man stands ready to take his place.<sup>26</sup>

Spearman was thrilled when *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* accepted his 6,100-word manuscript, paid him eighty dollars for it,<sup>27</sup> and

published his words in July 1888 with a map and thirteen pictures spread over fourteen pages.

Opposite the title page an editor with a sense of irony placed a photo of two homesteaders' dug-outs, framed with slabs of sod and rough boards, and added the caption, "The Dawn of Civilization."

Spearman published a second article in *Harper's*, titled "Some Phases of Western Railroad Management," in 1890, but most of his time not spent on business while in McCook went to civic and social affairs. He was a member of the board of education from 1888 to 1892, the only public office ever he ever held, and met William Valentine, the superintendent credited with establishing the McCook school system. Ten years after their association in McCook, Valentine wrote Spearman in Chicago after reading one of his early magazine stories:

You do me wrong to suppose me ignorant of your literary activities. I go regularly each month to my neighbors, the Lawsons, to borrow Lucille's St. Nicholas and always run rapidly down the index of my magazines in hope of seeing your name.

Frank Spearman, banker, was always an anomaly to me, while Frank Spearman, author, is a comprehensible entity.<sup>28</sup>

While in McCook Spearman was involved in politics. He was among the petitioners who sought to move the Red Willow County seat from Indianola to McCook, and he was selected as a Nebraska



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delegate to the 1892 Democratic Convention in Chicago, where he voted to nominate Grover Cleveland. Though nominally a Democrat throughout his life, he fell out with the party in 1896 over William Jennings Bryan's free silver stand and did not vote for another Democratic presidential candidate until 1928 when Al Smith, the first Catholic nominee, ran.<sup>29</sup>

Though he had no formal training, Spearman loved music and apparently had a knack for it. On February 24, 1892, he directed a cast of townspeople in Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *The Mikado* at Menard's Opera House.<sup>30</sup>

The *McCook Democrat* reported:

On last Wednesday night a packed house greeted the McCook Amateur Club in presen-

tation of the comic opera, "Mikado." The play was an unqualified success, and highly appreciated by everyone in attendance as was evidenced by the frequent encores which the different players received . . .

Taken as a whole, this play was the most successful of anything of the kind given in McCook, and The McCook Democrat feels safe in saying that it but voices the sentiments of those in attendance when it ventures to hope that The McCook Amateur Club will in the future be able to present another play to our ever appreciative townspeople.<sup>31</sup>

The *Democrat* got its wish. On April 29, Spearman directed *H.M.S. Pinafore* to similar acclaim.<sup>32</sup>

While Spearman did not take up writing fiction



Taken near McCook in 1887, this photograph of Frank Spearman, his wife, Eugenie, and her sister was the basis for an illustration accompanying Frank's first published work, an essay called "The Great American Desert" in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, July 1888. Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery

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until later, his McCook years were a fertile period of casual research. He saw the stresses of railroading daily and observed the violence of the 1888 Burlington strike that reached into Red Willow County. After he left McCook he would never again live in a small western town or associate daily with the railroaders and characters who would soon populate his most popular stories and novels. Looking back in 1902, he wrote in an article for the *Chicago Journal*:

In Nebraska I was acquainted with pretty much the whole Burlington force from George W. Holdredge, general manager at Omaha, to George Foster, foreman of the car-tinks—the fellows that used to rap the wheels, you know, but they don't rap them any more because the

wheels are different—to George Foster, I say, foreman of the car-tinks at McCook, the "McCloud" of the railroad stories. I even knew every man of George Foster's crew, the huskiest of who was Gottlieb Orrman, a type of Russian switchman, "Chris" in the story of Shockley.

Country bankers mix more or less in politics and through strenuous efforts on my part to marshal voters in county seat fights and that sort of thing, I came to know nearly everybody in town and country around. Indeed it is no exaggeration to say for a considerable time I knew, personally, by sight and name, every last railroad man on the payroll at McCook. It will hardly be necessary for me, after this confession, to tell you where I got "color" for railroad yarns.

Moreover, a train, an engine, has always had for me a fascination. I would stop tomorrow and turn to see a train go by. It seems quite natural, therefore, that when I began writing pictures of American life, as I knew it, I should give some of the tales a railroad setting.<sup>33</sup>

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THE FARMERS & MERCHANTS BANK,  
THE SMALLEST FINANCIAL FIRM IN McCOOK,  
WAS AMONG 101 BANKS  
TO FAIL IN NEBRASKA BETWEEN 1892 AND 1896.

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The early 1880s were prosperous years in Nebraska. Average rainfall for the state was 24.18 inches, nearly 10 percent above normal. Waves of settlers brought by the railroads ballooned the state's population to 1,058,910 in 1890, a 134 percent increase over ten years. But before the decade was done, the speculative prosperity fueled by the state's greatest in-migration was over. By 1890 farmers were producing far more than the markets demanded, and when crop prices continued in a downward spiral a populist revolt stirred against the railroads—then charging a bushel of grain to transport another bushel to market—and against the banking system.<sup>34</sup>

Drought struck in the early 1890s and a worldwide depression in 1893 sent ripples onto the Plains. Spearman felt the sting of the economic Darwinism he had written about a few years earlier. The Farmers & Merchants Bank, the smallest



Leaving McCook in 1894, the Spearman family lived for a year and a half in Omaha, then moved to Wheaton, Illinois. With a steady cash flow assured from property rentals, Spearman decided in 1897 to pursue writing full time. From *Memories*, by Eugenie Spearman, published privately, 1914.

financial firm in McCook, was among 101 banks to fail in Nebraska between 1892 and 1896.

If Spearman wrote about the collapse, his explanation does not survive. Years later, his youngest son, Arthur, gave this account in an unpublished biography of his father:

As the smaller and younger of two banks [the *Gazette* counted four in 1890] the Farmers & Merchants Bank was not in a position profitably to survive the six years of drought which settled on Western Nebraska.

While the records show that the bank always made a small profit and gave a living through salaries to the cashiers and book-keeper, it became clear

that the future was not promising, and with the consent of all concerned the bank obligations were paid off in full, and the partnership ceased to exist.<sup>35</sup>

In May 1894 the *McCook Democrat* reported, "Mr. and Mrs. Frank H. Spearman, accompanied by their two children, Clarke and Lonergan, left Wednesday on No. 4 to make their home in Omaha, where Mr. Spearman's business interests are now centered."<sup>36</sup>

Spearman held on to three commercial lots in McCook until 1917, and for forty years kept a regular correspondence with John Cordeal, to whom Spearman would dedicate *Held for Orders*, his second collection of railroad stories. It is unclear whether Spearman ever returned to the town where he once saw so much promise. But with his memories and knowledge of McCook, the town and many of the people he knew there would play large roles in his future.

In Omaha Spearman took a position as secretary of the Columbia Distillery Company. It was a start-up business with plans to distill alcohol from the molasses of sugar beets. While the process was successful, the east Omaha operation shut down about a year after Spearman joined it. He blamed

the tight-money economy for the company's demise.<sup>37</sup>

While living at 2526 Wirt Street in Omaha, Spearman wrote short fiction during the evenings. His stories included a railroad tale, "The Beverly Switch," and "The Velvet Claw," the first story in which the name Whispering Smith appeared. While none of his stories were published for several years, Spearman had adopted an essential habit for a writer: putting ink on paper daily.<sup>38</sup>

Thomas Lonergan died in March 1894 and Mary Lonergan in November 1895. Through the division of the Lonergan estate, worth \$320,000, Eugenie received a property at 1855 Clinton Street in downtown Chicago valued at \$53,000.<sup>39</sup>

In the fall of 1895 the Spearman family, now numbering five with the birth of Frank Spearman Jr. in July, moved again, this time to 111 Washington Avenue in Wheaton, Illinois. Twenty-five miles west of downtown Chicago, it was close enough for Frank to commute to the city daily. He took an office on LaSalle Street, and his business card read "Frank H. Spearman Business Property Rented and Managed." Much of his time in 1896 was spent developing the Clinton Street property. The Spearman family borrowed \$20,000 to construct a brick building on the lot. When completed, the building's rental income, netting about \$6,600 annually, gave the family a steady cash flow.<sup>40</sup>

Spearman continued to write short fiction at night and commuted to his real estate office until one day in 1897 he surprised his wife by asking, "Gene, would you trust me to earn a living for you as a writer?"<sup>41</sup>

With her blessing, he immediately pressed to market himself as a writer, first as a freelancer covering golf and tennis matches for the *Chicago Daily News* and *Chicago Evening Post*. Then he branched out to boys' stories in magazines and journals. The most notable was *Harper's Round Table*, a boy's magazine that accepted his dog and adventure stories and published his first railroad story, "Second Seventy-Seven," in December 1897. Albert Lee, an editor at *Harper's Round Table*, asked Spearman for more railroad tales, which he quickly produced in his flowing longhand. Always the businessman, he developed the discipline of working alone and often writing whatever an editor or market asked.

Spearman carefully noted all receipts from his writings. In the beginning they were meager. During 1898, the first year he wrote exclusively, Spearman noted total receipts of \$598.25, which included \$50 for a story titled "The Duffer" in

*Munsey*, a widely circulated eastern pulp magazine of the period.<sup>42</sup>

In a diary entry dated May 31, 1899, Spearman wrote:

Today I got a letter from Albert Lee, Editor of Harper's Round Table asking me if I didn't think it time I was collecting my railroad stories together for a book. My first book: Another milestone reached. But who would have thought my first book would be a volume of railroad stories for boys! A year ago I had written only "Second Seventy-Seven" and not thought of another railroad yarn.<sup>43</sup>

Late that summer the birth of the Spearman's last child, Arthur, coincided with the good news that Samuel T. McClure, owner of *McClure's Magazine*, which published the leading political and literary writers of the day, wanted ten railroad stories. For the first, "Sankey's Headlight" in October 1899, Spearman received \$60. By the time "Run of the Yellow Mail" was published in May 1901, the payment had increased to \$125. In a letter to Spearman in 1900, McClure called him "a natural born writer," and urged him to send *McClure's* everything he wrote. Later Spearman would write, "I am satisfied now that the appetite for railroad stories among editors is a morbid one and that it grows by feeding. Difficult at first to cultivate, it threatens to survive even strenuous efforts to gratify it." At last, at age forty, Spearman had found footing in a new career.<sup>44</sup>

The publication of *The Nerve of Foley and Other Railroad Stories* in 1900 and *Held for Orders* the next year, each with ten stories—sketches, really—established Spearman as a premier writer of railroad fiction. The stories, distinct pieces linked by common characters, had been previously published in magazines. While this genre was narrow and virtually vanished as the western lines became established and service more routine early in the twentieth century, for a few years railroad tales were widely read in the United States as popular romantic fiction.<sup>45</sup>

Spearman's stories were set in the western division of a transcontinental railroad where uncommon men—brave, competent, cool and resourceful—overcame challenges from which the sedate eastern lines were exempt. Spearman obscured the names of real places and features. McCook became McCloud, Benkelman was Benkleman, the North Platte River was the Rat River, the South Platte was the Peace River, and descriptions of Spiderwater correspond to the Missouri. Though the stories were similar in form—

men faced with deadly disaster, impossible deadlines, and overwhelming forces of man and nature—these tales were distinctive and thoroughly alive. The best, including "The Switchman's Story," "The Run of The Yellow Mail," "The Nerve of Foley," and "The McWilliams Special," have energy and verve that carry readers, even a century later, briskly past their flaws.

A 1905 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, headlined "Lingo of Rail Is His Forte," examined Spearman's writing. In an interview Spearman shared his experience with railroaders in McCook and told the reporter that the railroad life had become part of his during that period:

Every time I passed an engine that had come in on a run or stood with rhythmic exhaust and the air-pump panting waiting to take out a train, I felt that here was something alive. There was a sentiment about it that appealed strongly to me and I simply followed the line of least resistance in writing about such things.

Most of the characters I have used are drawn from real life. It hardly was necessary to go without the bounds of facts to get good stories.

Sometimes it might have been necessary for a man in a story to lose his life to give the proper touch to the tale. In one case of this kind I found an old character alive and driving an express wagon in a small town long after he was dead in fiction.

Geographical questions sometimes bothered me. With a river and a mountain in some instances 500 miles apart in fact, it was necessary to bring them into a juxtaposition for the sake of the story.<sup>46</sup>

Their dialogue written in clipped, realistic jargon, Bucks, the line president, Pat Francis, the odd old conductor, and Shockley, the brave switchman who died saving Chris Oxen's life, spoke with an authenticity that anticipated the hard-boiled voices of Dashiell Hammett's characters by twenty years.

The stories flowed with descriptive morsels. For example, in "The Switchman's Story" Spearman related the emptiness that Chris, the Russian switchman, felt after Shockley's death:

So Chris drew his cap a little lower, for so he always began, pulled mechanically from his pocket a timetable, tore off a strip, and holding it carefully open sprinkled a few clippings of tobacco on it and rolled his cigarette. He tucked it between his lips; it was company for the silence, and he could more easily stop the listening. But he did not light; only pulled

his cap again a little lower, buttoned close his reefer, looked at his bandaged foot, picked up his lamp and started home.

It was dark, and the wind from the north was bitter, but he made a great detour into the teeth of it—around by the coal chutes, a long way round, a long way from the frog of the east house-track switch; and the cold stung his face as he limped heavily on. At last by the ice house he turned south, and reaching the face of the bench paused a moment, hesitating, on the side of the earthen stairs; it was very dark. After a bit he walked slowly down and pushed open the door of his dugout. It was dark inside, and cold; the fire was out. The children were asleep; the woman was asleep.

He sat down in the chair and put out his lamp. There was no Christmas that night in Little Russia.<sup>47</sup>

In "The Striker's Story" Spearman introduced the main character this way:

McTerza didn't give up very much to anybody; not even to his own chums, Foley and Sinclair. The fact is he was diffident, owing, maybe, to a hesitation in his speech. It was funny, a bit of a halt, but not so odd as his disposition, which approached that of a grizzly. He had impudence and indifference and quiet—plenty of each.<sup>48</sup>

And in "The Trainmaster's Story" the narrator tells of hopping a freight:

The night was bitter bad, black as a Fuzzy and sleeting out of the foothills like manslaughter. When the train stopped at Rosebud for water, what with gripping the icy hand-rail and trying to keep my teeth steady on my knees I must have been a sight. Just as the train was ready to pull out, Dave came by and poked his lantern full in my face.

He was an older man than I, a good bit older, for I was hardly more than a kid then, only spindling tall, and so thin I couldn't tell a stomach ache from a back ache. As I sat huddled down on the lee step my cap pulled over my head and ears, he poked his light full into my face and snapped, "Get out!"

If it had been a headlight I couldn't have been worse scared, and I found afterward he carried the brightest lamp on the division. I looked up into his face and he looked into mine. I wonder if in this life it isn't mostly in the face after all? I couldn't say anything, I was shaking in a chill as I pulled myself together and climbed down into the storm.

Yet I never saw a face harder in some ways than Dave Hawk's. His visor hid his forehead

and a black beard covered his face till it left only his straight cold nose and a dash of olive white under the eyes. His whiskers loomed high as a Cossack's and his eyes were onyx black with just such a glitter. He knew it was no better than murder to put me off in that storm at a mountain siding; I knew it; but I didn't much care for I knew before very long I should fall off, anyway. After I crawled down he stood looking at me, and with nothing better on I stood looking at him.

"If you get up there again I'll break your neck," he promised, holding up his lantern. I was quiet; the nerve was out of me.

"Where you going?" he asked shortly.

"Medicine Ben—"

"Get into the smoker, you damn fool."<sup>49</sup>

Both books of short stories were widely and favorably reviewed. Apparently unaware that many of the stories were set in Nebraska, in July 1900 an *Omaha World-Herald* reviewer of *The Nerve of Foley* wrote that Spearman was "gifted with a peculiarly vivid descriptive style and his stories are the sort that appeal to all ages." A *Chicago Tribune* writer said the book's writer "is conversant with every detail of railroad life, and that his view has been taken from the engine cab, and not from the parlor car." In December 1901 the *McCook Tribune*, noting that Spearman was a former resident, wrote that *Held for Orders* dealt with life "intimately associated with the town's welfare and economy."<sup>50</sup>

In 1940 Frank P. Donovan Jr. surveyed railroad writing through history for the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society. Based on these short story volumes, which he called classics, and *Whispering Smith*, he declared Spearman "the dean of railroad novelists."<sup>51</sup>

Despite the acclaim for his railroad writing, in 1901 Spearman turned to a new vein—a melodramatic city romance. This Chicago boarding house story told of Dr. Henry Bryson, a brilliant ophthalmologist, and his courtship of Helen Eliot, a beautiful, moral woman whose faithless husband left her and their daughter. The essential dilemma, which Spearman would use in several more books, was the tension of human attraction between two people and the Catholic sanction against divorce. Spearman would always hold the high moral ground for the Church, but his deserving characters would endure personal ordeals and wrestle with duty and desire before finding resolution.

He believed the Protestant majority in America was morally lax, and saw his books as a method to argue for a correction. In a 1912 article titled "Why



Samuel T. McClure, owner of *McClure's Magazine*, called Spearman "a natural born writer," and urged him to send *McClure's* everything he wrote. Private collection

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Spearman. . . is conversant with every detail of railroad life, and . . . his view has been taken from the engine cab, and not from the parlor car.

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Sightseers pose with wrecked cars on the Burlington line near Orleans in 1888. Train wrecks are a common feature of Spearman's railroad fiction, and it is possible that he saw this one. NSHS RG5251-21 (detail)

I Became a Catholic," Spearman made his case: "The stunted family, the one child or two or no children home, the easy divorce—first aid, now as always, to mere passion—have found good standing and more than tacit sympathy within the tolerant limit of its [the debasement of marriage] elastic practices."<sup>52</sup>

While Spearman continued to supply magazines with stories, he hired an agent to shop this manuscript, originally titled *Helen Elliot* and ultimately published as *Dr. Bryson*, to East Coast

book publishers. Several lesser houses had turned it down when, in April 1902, William Crary Brownell, a lead editor at Charles Scribner's Sons, conditionally accepted it.<sup>53</sup>

It was a pivotal professional moment for Spearman. Scribner's was on its way to becoming a leading American literary publisher during the first half of the twentieth century, and Spearman's association with the house would last thirty years and open many opportunities for him. By 1902 Spearman's brand of realism had attracted readers, but he was still a largely untrained writer dependent on fickle magazine tastes. Scribner's offered him editing within well-considered standards and a keen knowledge of the literary marketplace. At that time, writers were usually self-trained. There were no creative writing workshops or other formal training for would-be authors.

During their first years, Brownell and Spearman developed a long-distance relationship through correspondence. Written in the margins of manuscript drafts, Brownell's comments and critiques served as a structured course for Spearman. While his relationship with Scribner's was never exclusive, Spearman sensed that the publisher, and especially Brownell, would move him forward, and he quickly agreed to changes the editor proposed for the manuscript.<sup>54</sup>

Brownell, who edited much more accomplished writers including Edith Wharton, Henry James and George Santayana, saw vitality, literary realism, and commercial potential in Spearman's work. He would edit, applying his conservative aesthetic sensibilities, and casually guide Spearman's books at Scribner's from a distance until his death in 1928.

Late in 1904, in a letter to Brownell, Spearman sought legitimacy as an author. He wrote, "Best of all with you as a literary godfather, I begin to feel quite literary myself; though I have at times difficulty in persuading myself that I am a legitimate claimant to the title 'author.'" In his comments over time, Brownell apparently would confer that status.<sup>55</sup>

While Brownell did little to shape the plots of early efforts, his revisions laundered Spearman's copy of most slang and crudities one example occurs in *Dr. Bryson*. When Helen rejected Henry's declaration of love, Spearman wrote, it "only inflamed him." After Brownell put a question mark

on the phrase, Spearman changed it to “made the situation worse.” With Brownell’s editing, the characters emerged with more class, and the manuscript became less graphic. To a modern reader, the novel appears tame and contrived. Today Spearman’s raw railroad stories offer more



Spearman began writing *Whispering Smith* in 1904, and soon met Joe Lefors, above, noted Wyoming lawman, and Timothy Keliher, a special agent for the Union Pacific and former sheriff of Lincoln County, Nebraska. Their experiences were the inspiration for many of *Whispering Smith*'s adventures. Joe Lefors, *Wyoming Peace Officer: The Autobiography of Joe Lefors*. Laramie, Wyo., 1953.

realism, but Brownell knew the genteel market of that time. The review in the *Literary Digest* said, “A love-story full of interest and color. If the love is passionate it is wholesome and splendidly human. Mr. Spearman has put strength and clear human nature into this book in the most admirable fashion.” *Dr. Bryson* sold 4,700 hard-cover copies and 17,000 “cheap” sales, a success for a first novel.<sup>56</sup>

In his major work of 1902, Spearman returned to the western mountain railroad division with *Daughter of the Magnate*. It was serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post* and then published by Scribner’s as a novel in the fall of 1903. Reviewers were again taken with Spearman’s descriptions of railroading drama, which included

some characters introduced in his short stories, but many reviewers disdained the melodramatic romance between Abner Glover, a construction engineer, and Gertrude Block, daughter of the president of the line. It was a flaw that would plague Spearman. He knew how to craft action-packed plots around railroading, but his portrayals of romances and most of his women characters fell flat. Nonetheless, the novel sold over nine thousand copies in its first six months.

In 1902 Spearman also published a 7,500-word story titled “A Night with Whispering Smith” in the May issue of *McClure’s*. In this case, the name that had stuck in his head long ago referred to a hotel detective. After *Whispering Smith*, the novel, was published, Spearman had lunch in New York City with several writers, including Sidney Porter, better known as O. Henry, the renowned short story writer. Porter told Spearman that he thought his

*Whispering Smith* magazine story was “a cameo” without a spare word. Spearman told Porter that before *McClure’s* would publish it, he had edited out 6,500 words.<sup>57</sup>

After the success of serializing *Daughter of the Magnate* the *Saturday Evening Post* commissioned Spearman in 1903 to write a series of non-fiction accounts of the making of ten great railroad systems in the country. He eagerly presented the railroads as heroic enterprises advancing civilization. He genuinely liked railroad builders, from engineers to magnates, and marveled at the ingenuity involved in building a system. For this series, however, he had moved from rubbing shoulders with trainmen at a busy division point in McCook and into the executive suites and cars of rail owners. He shamelessly glorified their achievements, and in turn basked in their compliments and favors. Scribner’s published the series in the fall of 1904 as *The Strategy of Great Railroads*.<sup>58</sup>

Spearman’s account of railroad builders in nonfiction is a stark contrast to Frank Norris’s 1901 novel *The Octopus*, which painted a grim picture of the Southern Pacific Railroad’s stranglehold on California’s economic life and politics. But



Spearman was never the muckraker. He stood for order, duty and progress, characteristics that became synonymous with the enterprise, whether it was business or religion.

Early in 1904 a third Spearman novel, *The Close of the Day*, was published by D. Appleton and Company after Scribner's had declined it. Written apparently before *Dr. Bryson* and *Daughter of a Magnate*, it was an odd tale of a man in decline as the woman he secretly loves achieves success. Reviewers widely panned it. The *Washington Post* was kind, saying it did not rank as Spearman's best. Plainly were the *Literary Digest*, which called it "a cheap little tale," and the *San Francisco Call*, whose headline read "Spearman Is Lost Without an Engine."<sup>59</sup>

Spearman began writing *Whispering Smith*, which would become his most successful novel, in Wheaton in November 1904. But he had completed only a few pages when he and Eugenie, who was ill and tired of the town and cold, decided to take the boys to California for a year. Before entraining Spearman asked his railroad acquaintances for letters of introduction to Union Pacific officials in Cheyenne, Wyoming, where he

hoped to gather information and color for the new novel.<sup>60</sup>

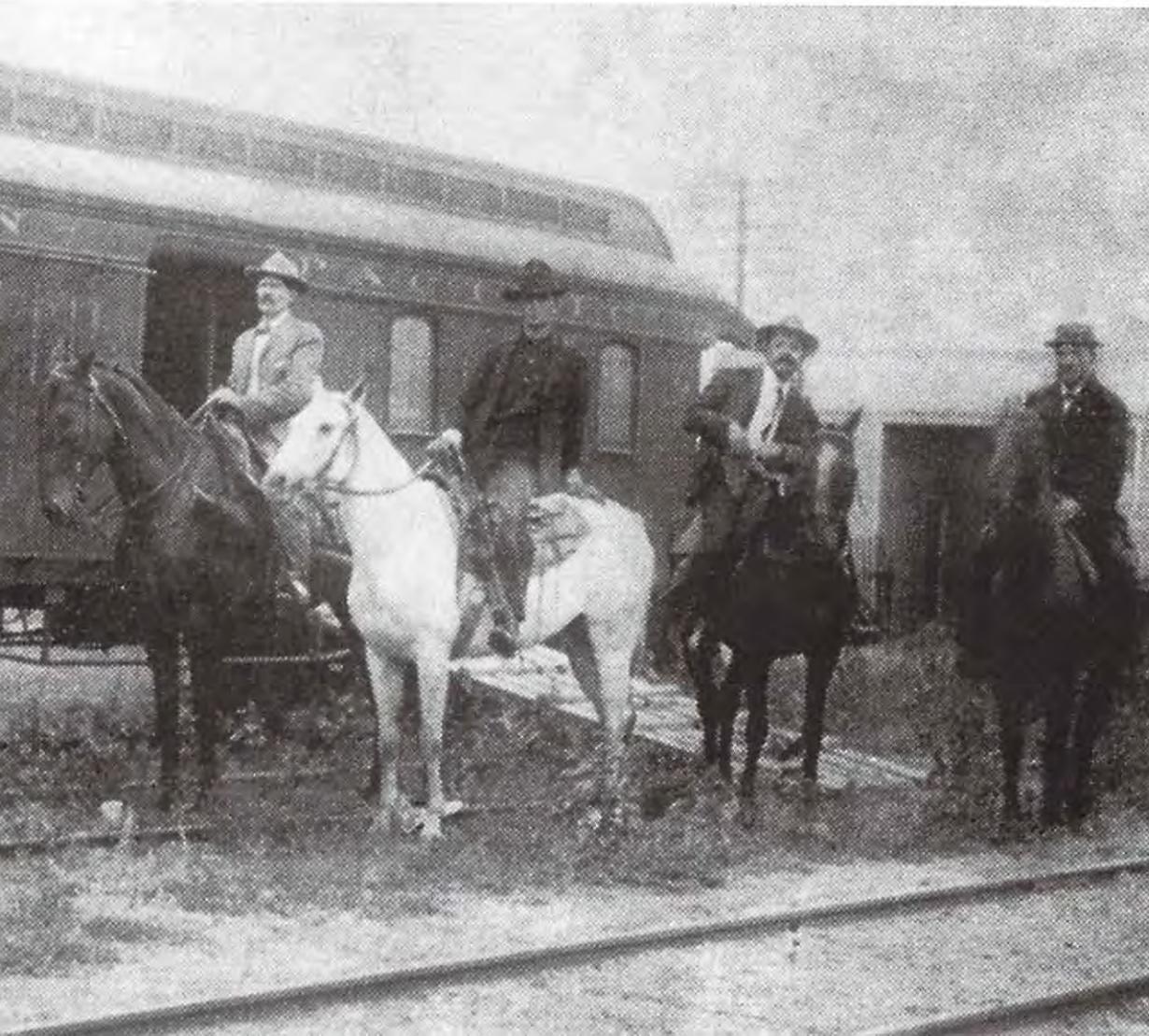
Arthur Spearman, then six years old, recalled that Timothy T. Keliher, a special agent for the Union Pacific at Cheyenne, joined the Spearmans on the train in Omaha. Keliher, raised in North Platte, had served four terms as sheriff of Lincoln County, Nebraska, before joining the railroad. When a series of train robberies occurred in Wyoming a few years earlier, Keliher successfully organized a force of guards to defend the trains and pursue the bandits. Keliher's posse used special railcars to quickly transport men and horses to the point of a holdup. He related his stories to Spearman and introduced him to several guards, including Joe LeFors, a noted Wyoming lawman and agent for the Montana Cattlemen's Association.<sup>61</sup>

In a letter in 1940 Keliher recalled meeting Spearman on this information-gathering trip:

Mr. Spearman was first of all a cultured gentleman in all that the words imply—very unusual man, a medium sized, mild mannered man, rather slender, wore a Vandyke beard, keen but friendly eyes, a soft pleasing voice,



N. C. Wyeth's frontispiece for the first edition of *Whispering Smith*. Private collection



Tim Keliher, second from left, had organized a posse that was transported in special cars to the site of distant train robberies. Joe LeFors, third from left, rode with Keliher's posse, which gained fame from their pursuit of the "Wild Bunch." Joe LeFors, *Wyoming Peace Officer: The Autobiography of Joe LeFors*.



**Whispering Smith begins with a train wreck investigated by Division Superintendent George McCloud. At the wreck site he meets Dicksie Dunning, the novel's love interest. The moment was depicted by N. C. Wyeth in one of four oil paintings he made for the 1906 first edition. From Frank H. Spearman, *Whispering Smith*, New York, 1906.**

a refined, intellectual face, was very temperate in all his tastes and habits—a friendly, pleasing personality with the faculty of making friends and putting them at their ease. A splendid listener, with the extraordinary ability of asking just the right questions to bring out everything one knew about the subject matter.

I used to call him "the human sponge," because he could listen for hours at a time and never make a note. . .

He could go out into a railroad yard or railroad shop plant and absorb the atmosphere of the place and the talk and the spirit of the men

and their objectives. The same applied when he met cowboys, ranchers, sheriffs and other law enforcement officers—just a few polite and nicely phrased questions and they told him all they knew and some things their grandfathers knew—and that retentive human sponge never forgot a word they said, or the scene described by them.<sup>62</sup>

After a week or two of gathering information in Wyoming the Spearman traveled on to California, where, on the advice of a conductor, they landed in Hollywood, a quaint little town before the advent of the film industry. There, Spearman crafted his story.<sup>63</sup>

While *Whispering Smith's* essential plot—railroaders fighting nature and a great man gone bad—is simple, the book won readers with a classic Western balance of romance, realism, character, and a wealth of action.

Spearman set the novel in an imaginary area of the intermountain West at a time just after the railroad had scaled the passes. The new division superintendent, George McCloud, divides his time between running heavy traffic over hastily built lines and trying to improve the routes. He works to instill organization and selfless efficiency in the company in a region where fierce individualism and personal bonds were revered.

The novel begins with a wreck at Smoky Creek where McCloud fires Murray Sinclair, an able, likable wrecking crew boss, and all of his men after discovering they are looting from the wreckage as they clear the track.

After the division suffers sabotage of a bridge, Gordon "Whispering" Smith, the railroad's detective, is sent to help McCloud. Through vignettes and conversation, Smith's enigmatic character—the book's most intriguing force—slowly dawns on the reader.

Early in the story, Spearman paints him as ordinary:

His round, pleasant face, his heavy brown mustache, the medium build that concealed under its commonplace symmetry an unusual strength, his slightly rounded shoulders bespeaking a not too serious estimate of himself—every characteristic, even to his unobtrusive suit and black hat, made him distinctly an ordinary man—one to be met in the street to-day and forgotten to-morrow.<sup>64</sup>

When Whispering Smith determines that Sinclair, a man he's known and admired since they grew up five years apart in the same small Wisconsin town,

because he could listen for hours...and never take a note.

is behind the bridge-wrecking he tries to reason with him:

"Every sensible man wants something, Murray. This is a big country. There's a World's Fair running somewhere all the time in it. Why not travel a little? What do you want?"

"I want my job, or I want a new superintendent here."

"Just exactly the two things, and, by heavens! the only two, I can't manage. Come once more and I'll meet you."

"No!" Sinclair rose to his feet. "No—damn your money! This is my home the high country is my country; it's where my friends are. . ."

Whispering Smith looked up in admiration. "I know you're game. It isn't necessary for me to say that to you. But think of the fight you are going into against this company. You can worry them; you've done it. But a bronco might as well try to buck a locomotive as for one man or six or six hundred to win out in the way you are playing" (p. 113).

After drawing this test of wills Spearman involves Smith, McCloud, his beautiful, headstrong, young love interest, Dicksie Dunning, and Marion Sinclair, Murray's estranged wife, in perilous situations and extricates them with predictable romance and melodrama.

Once, this foursome is huddled in a tent during a rainstorm when Smith shares his philosophy of trouble:

Trouble! Why, bless you, it really is a blessing; pretty successfully disguised, I admit, sometimes but still a blessing. I'm in trouble all the time, right now, up to my neck in trouble, and the water rising this minute . . . Here's to trouble! May it always chasten and never overwhelm us: our greatest bugbear and our best friend! It sifts our friends and unmask our enemies (pp. 199–200).

Later Smith confides to Dicksie the reason he came West was to get rich quick: "For once in my life to [have] two pairs of suspenders—a modest ambition, but a gnawing one" (p. 211).

In 1925, when Spearman was asked to describe how he created Whispering Smith, he described the character as the Western everyman, resourceful, poised, endowed with good judgment and integrity, and quick to decision and action. Noting a duality between his characters Smith and Sinclair, Spearman said they differed only in one respect, "One is selfish and the other unselfish."<sup>65</sup>

In a promotional article for *Book Buyer*, William Brownell argued that Spearman "has accomplished that rarest of feats in fiction—the creation of a new

character." Noting that Whispering Smith had the heroic qualities a reader would expect, Brownell wrote he had an additional virtue, "a sterling integrity of character, which quite takes him out of the customary class of secret agents, and a gentleness of disposition . . . which gives him a genuine distinction for such a role as his of being lovable as well as formidable."<sup>66</sup>

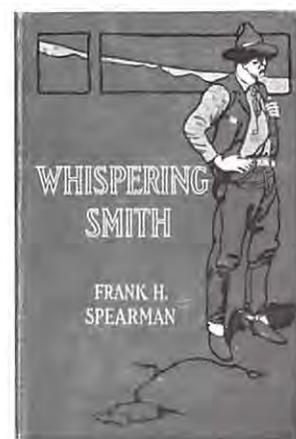
Anointing Smith as a new character in fiction is a stretch. Owen Wister's *The Virginian, Horseman of the Plains*, published in 1902, had a strong, knowing, character who became a Western icon. But Whispering Smith was a curious, multidimensional man—determined, upright, and when necessary deadly, yet sensitive enough to write poetry and enjoy delighting others with it.

The novel's two dramatic gunfight scenes came from real situations that Joe LeFors had lived to tell about. Evidence that Spearman heard these stories while in Wyoming is in his personal papers. Spearman's handwritten notes on four pages on stationery from the InterOcean Hotel in Cheyenne, relate details of LeFors's accounts of the shootings that closely match the gunfights found in the novel and in LeFors's autobiography.<sup>67</sup>

This first showdown moves quickly:

More serious than all, Smith found himself among three fast revolvers, working from an unmanageable horse. The beast tried to follow the fleeing cowboys, and when faced sharply about showed temper. The trained horses of the outlaws stood like statues, but Smith had to fight with his horse bucking at every shot. He threw his bullets as best he could first over one shoulder and then over the other, and used the last cartridge in his revolver with Du Sang, Seagrue, and Karg shooting at him every time they could fire without hitting one another.

It was not the first time the Williams Cache gang had sworn to get him and had worked together to do it, but the first time it looked as if they might do it. A single chance was left to Whispering Smith for his life, and with his coat slashed with bullets, he took it. For an instant his life hung on the success of a trick so appallingly awkward that a cleverer man might have failed in turning it. If his rifle should play free in the scabbard as he reached for it, he could fall to the ground, releasing it as he plunged from the saddle, and make a fight on his feet. To so narrow an issue are the cleverest combinations sometimes brought by chance. He dropped his empty revolver, ducked like a mud-hen on his horse's neck, threw back his leg, and with all the precision



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IN ITS FIRST  
SIX MONTHS  
*WHISPERING SMITH*  
SOLD  
**38,825**  
COPIES.

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Paramount Studio's Technicolor version of *Whispering Smith*, starring Alan Ladd, included an original musical score and is now available in DVD format. Private collection

he could summon, caught the grip of his mule in both hands. He made his fall heavily to the ground, landing on his shoulder. But as he keeled from the saddle the last thing that rolled over the saddle, like the flash of a porpoise fin, was the barrel of the rifle, secure in his hands. Karg, on horseback, was already bending over him, revolver in hand, but the shot was never fired. A thirty-thirty bullet from the ground knocked the gun into the air and tore every knuckle from Karg's hand. Du Sang spurred in from

the right. A rifle-slug like an axe at the root caught him

through the middle. His fingers stiffened. His six-shooter fell to the ground and he clutched his side. Seagrue, ducking low, put spurs to his horse, and *Whispering Smith*, covered with dust, rose on the battle-field alone.

Hats, revolvers and coats lay about him. Face downward, the huge bulk of Bill Dancing was stretched motionless in the road. Karg, crouching beside his fallen horse, held up the bloody stump of his gun hand, and Du Sang, fifty yards away, reeling like a drunken man in his saddle, spurred his horse in an aimless circle. *Whispering Smith*, running softly to the side of his own trembling animal, threw himself into the saddle, and, adjusting his rifle sights as the beast plunged down the draw, gave chase to Seagrue (pp. 302–304).

Though his writing was interrupted by travel and outings in California, Spearman sent the *Smith* manuscript to Scribner's in March 1906. He believed he had created a story destined for success and asked the publisher for good illustrations and promotion. On May 3, 1906, he received assurance on one count in a letter from J. H. Chapin of Scribner's Art Department: "N. C. Wyeth is going ahead with the illustrations and drawing for the cover of the book so we may get one drawing and the cover very soon for the dummies."<sup>68</sup>

Ultimately, Wyeth, who would become a highly regarded American artist, executed four oil paint-

ings and the cover drawing to illustrate *Whispering Smith*. Today, Wyeth's color illustrations drive the prices of good first editions of the book. Spearman saw the value. After the book was published he bought the original oil painting used as the frontispiece from Scribner's for forty dollars.<sup>69</sup>

To promote the book Scribner's created a poster using the Wyeth cover drawing and printed a two-foot book store ad reading "Have You Read WHISPERING SMITH?" The same question was used in major newspaper ads.<sup>70</sup>

The campaign and novel struck a chord. In its first six months, *Whispering Smith* sold 38,825 copies, netting Spearman, at his royalty rate of 22.5 cents for each sale, \$10,668.75. In a series of editions, the novel remained in print for forty years.<sup>71</sup>

*Whispering Smith* also became one of the film industry's first and enduring Western characters. The first *Whispering Smith* film was made in 1916 with J. P. McGowan directing and Harold Lloyd, assistant director. Spearman praised the 1926 Metropolitan remake with H. B. Warner in the title role. In 1927 Universal Pictures made a ten-episode serial named *Whispering Smith Rides*. The first talking version was Fox's 1935 *Whispering Smith Speaks*, starring George O'Brien.<sup>72</sup>

Paramount's 1948 color movie, starring Alan Ladd, included original music and is now available in DVD format. The character was spun off again in 1951 in Hammer-Lesser/RKO's *Whispering Smith Hits London*. The final interpretation to date came in 1961 when NBC produced 26 episodes of *Whispering Smith* as a television series starring Guy Mitchell. Guest stars included Robert Redford, Forrest Tucker, and Richard Chamberlain.<sup>73</sup>

*Whispering Smith* was published in September 1906, the month Spearman turned forty-seven years old and it capped his most productive period as a writer. Starting as an unpublished fiction writer, in nine years he produced seven books and hundreds of magazine and newspaper short stories and non-fiction articles. He had gone from an unknown ex-banker and real estate agent to the bestseller list, and had assured his financial future.

Spearman would not publish another book for four years. Then he returned to the defense of marriage theme in *Robert Kimberly* (1911) and again in *The Marriage Verdict* (1923). Of the twelve novels he wrote after *Whispering Smith* only one, *Nan of Music Mountain*, become a top ten bestseller at number seven in 1916. That novel, also illustrated by N. C. Wyeth, was filmed in 1917, starring Wallace Reid, who also starred in *The Love Special*,

an adaptation for the screen of *Daughter of the Magnate*.

Spearman's later westerns included *Laramie Holds the Range* (1921), *Selwood at Sleepy Cat* (1925), *Flambeau Jim* (1927), *Hell's Desert* (1933), and *Gunlock Ranch* (1935). *Merrilie Dawes* (1913) was a business and society story, and *Spanish Lover* (1930) is a sixteenth-century historical romance of Don Juan of Austria. His last book, *Carmen of the Rancho* (1937), was a romance set in early California.<sup>74</sup>

Eugenie suffered a mental breakdown in 1909. Although she recovered after being bedridden for six months, she largely withdrew from social life. The Spearmans moved to Hollywood in 1915 and within a year built an impressive mansion they named Beausoleil, where they lived out their lives. In addition to novels Frank wrote essays and brochures on Catholic issues, dabbled in public affairs, and managed his literary properties.<sup>75</sup>

In June 1934 the Spearmans celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary, and a year later Frank was awarded the University of Notre Dame's Laetare Medal for "the interesting and wholesome fiction he has provided through many years for

a large reading public." Established in 1883 the medal is the most prestigious honor given to American Catholics.<sup>76</sup>

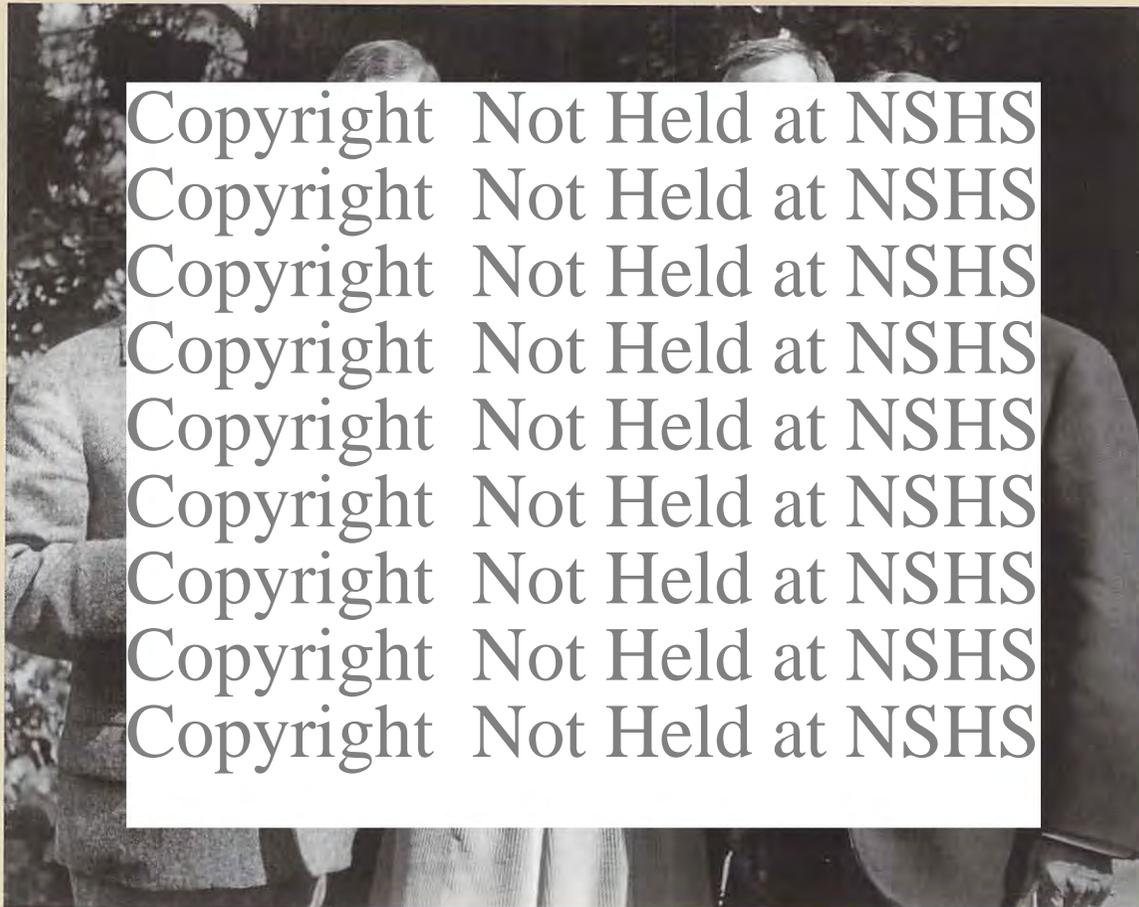
After a year of physical decline Frank Spearman died, of a bleeding stomach ulcer or cancer, on December 30, 1937, at age seventy-eight.<sup>77</sup> Eugenie, who as a girl had survived the great Chicago fire in 1871 and lived through the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, died quietly at age eighty-eight in Los Angeles on November 8, 1945.<sup>78</sup>

On January 8, 1938, nine days after Frank Spearman's death in California, the *McCook Gazette* published a two-column remembrance of his life written by his old friend, John Cordeal, whom Spearman had hired as assistant cashier fifty years earlier when Cordeal was a teenager.

He began, "Mr. Spearman lived in this community between 1887 and 1894, and was actively engaged in the economic, social and political life of this part of the state during his stay here."<sup>79</sup>

He recounted Spearman's writing successes, the honors he won, and the assistance he lent to young men, including Cordeal, while in McCook.

The account concluded, "His untimely death has deprived the reading world of an autobiogra-



The first *Whispering Smith* film, directed by and starring J. P. McGowan as *Whispering Smith*, was made in 1916 at Signal Studios. From left, Gus Ingles, a Hollywood agent; Timothy Keliher, former special security agent for the Union Pacific; Helen Holmes playing Marion Sinclair; McGowan, and Frank Spearman. Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery

phy that would have been of absorbing interest. It is to be hoped that one of his literary contemporaries will complete the story of his life. In his passing one has gone whose place, in the affection of his friends, cannot be filled.<sup>80</sup>

Time has not treated Frank Spearman's legacy as a writer well. Hailed in 1931 when he received an honorary degree at Loyola University in Los Angeles as "dear to the heart of every American as a novelist of the first order," during the past fifty years, his work, most of it out of print, has been largely ignored. Despite his literary pretensions, Spearman's action books, popular with readers of their time, fit best into the pulp genre. His writing, often overexerted, was not high art. His moralizing tales, pitting human desires against religious norms, were straws against the twentieth century's wind of increasing personal liberty. And unlike Zane Grey, a Spearman contemporary who made a career out of writing formulaic, wholesome, western pulp, Spearman did not become such a brand, partly because he was more experimental and less consistent.<sup>81</sup>

Unlike those devoted to well-known Nebraska authors, such as Willa Cather, John Neihardt, and Mari Sandoz, there have been no academic studies of Spearman's work or life. Only one or two magazines tailored to railroad enthusiasts have offered Spearman profiles, usually with a reprint of one of his stories, during the past half century. Indeed, he is virtually unknown as a Nebraska influenced writer. That may be because he had left the state before his work was published, he obscured locations and names in his fiction, and he had few if any champions, save John Cordeal, extolling his books in the state.

Nonetheless, his early railroad stories are reservoirs of cultural and historical value to Nebraskans. They express dominant cultural values—order, progress, and enterprise—alive on the prairie during the 1880s and 1890s. They offer rich profiles of men who dared to run clattering, primitive machines across the Plains, forging a lifeline to settlers. They share, albeit sometimes breathlessly, tales of success and failure about the era's cutting-edge technology, the railroad. From the vantage point of a small town banker and with unusual insight and curiosity, Spearman witnessed Nebraska's rapid evolution from unsettled to modern life, and his early stories, especially the twenty pieces compiled in *The Nerve of Foley* and *Held for Orders*, offer a window into that fascinating period. 📖

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Frank H. Spearman (hereafter FHS) to Eugenie Spearman, Aug. 26, 1886, box 12, Frank H. Spearman papers, Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery. Here and in subsequent quotations from Spearman's letters, in which dashes abound, punctuation has been regularized. The Spearman papers include 7,000 pieces in 41 boxes and 46 bound volumes. The papers include family papers, business papers, correspondence, manuscripts, miscellaneous, printed publicity, photographs, ephemera, scrapbooks and photograph albums. Stored in boxes and somewhat organized with the help of an unpublished preliminary inventory finding aid available in the repository, many of the pieces are loose and undated. (Hereafter cited as Spearman Papers, HHL).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> FHS to Harry Spearman, Sept. 3, 1886, Spearman Papers, HHL, box 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted, information about Spearman's life and his family is taken from notes for an autobiography collected by his son, Arthur Dunning Spearman, Spearman Papers, HHL, box 32; "Rails to the West, A Life of Frank Hamilton Spearman," an unpublished biography by Arthur Spearman, box 17, Spearman Papers, HHL (hereafter RTTW); *Memories*, a reminiscence by Eugenie Lonergan Spearman (hereafter ELS) printed privately by Modern Printers, Los Angeles, 1941 (hereafter *Memories*); Frank Hamilton Spearman III, "Frank Hamilton Spearman," a story in the *Spearman Quarterly News Letter*, Issue 10 (Spring 1996), published by The Spearman Family Association.

<sup>6</sup> FHS, "Noted Author Tells How He Wrote Most Successful Book," *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 1, 1925.

<sup>7</sup> *Memories*, 19–20, 117.

<sup>8</sup> FHS to ELS, Aug. 17, 1886, and ELS to FHS, Aug. 19, 1886, Spearman Papers, HHL, box 12.

<sup>9</sup> James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 3rd. edition, 1997), 163–66.

<sup>10</sup> *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago, Western Historical, A.T. Andreas, proprietor, 1882), "Red Willow County"; Gene O. Morris, *McCook's First One Hundred Years* (McCook: The High Plains Historical Society, 1882), 33–50.

<sup>11</sup> *Nebraska State Gazetteer, Business Directory and Farmers List for 1890–1891* (Omaha: JM Wolfe & Co., 1891), 283–85.

<sup>12</sup> Walt Sehnert, "When McCook Was Railroad City," *McCook Daily Gazette*, Jan. 10, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Unpublished manuscript, possibly written by H.P. Waite, The Museum of the High Plains collection.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Margo McPhillips and Connie Snyder, "Railroad Job Descriptions," <http://www.rootsweb.com/~nerailrd/job.html> (Dec. 10, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.; on 20 percent of population being foreign born, Walt Sehnert, "The Memorable William Valentine," *McCook Daily Gazette*, Mar. 11, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> FHS to ELS, Sept. 3, 1886, Spearman Papers, HHL, box 12.

Time has not treated Frank Spearman's legacy as a writer well.

<sup>18</sup> Farmer's and Merchants Bank 1887 letterhead lists Cordeal as assistant cashier, Spearman Papers, HHL, box 1; Cordeal profile in *McCook Daily Gazette* Centennial Edition 1882–1982 (bound edition, unnumbered pages at Nebraska State Historical Society); Cordeal profile in Addison Erwin Sheldon, *Nebraska The Land and the People* (Chicago and New York: The Lewis Publishing Co., 1931), Vol. 3, 500.

<sup>19</sup> Spearman Papers, HHL, box 1 and RTTW, chapters 14–44.

<sup>20</sup> *Memories*, 22–25.

<sup>21</sup> RTTW, chapter 32.

<sup>22</sup> *Memories*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> RTTW, chapter 32.

<sup>24</sup> FHS, "The Great American Desert," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, July 1888, 232–45.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>27</sup> RTTW, chapter 32.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from William Valentine to FHS, Feb. 23, 1898, Spearman Papers, HHL, box 17.

<sup>29</sup> John A. Cordeal, *McCook Daily Gazette*, Jan. 8, 1938, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Flier for the production, Spearman Papers, HHL, box 1.

<sup>31</sup> *The True Democrat* newspaper clipping from Feb. 24, 1892, Spearman Papers, HHL, box 1.

<sup>32</sup> Spearman Papers, HHL, undated clipping, box 1.

<sup>33</sup> FHS, "How Spearman Came to Write His Marvelous Railroad Stories," *Chicago Journal*, Jan. 7, 1902.

<sup>34</sup> On rainfall, Olson and Naugle, 405; on population, Olson and Naugle, 157; on populist revolt, Bruce Nicoll, *Nebraska A Pictorial History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 103.

<sup>35</sup> RTTW, chapter 32.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> FHS notebook, entry dated July 1, 1897, Spearman Papers, HHL, box 2.

<sup>40</sup> Draft of letter to Northwestern Railroad regarding purchase of the property, Spearman Papers, HHL, box 12.

<sup>41</sup> RTTW, chapter 32.

<sup>42</sup> FHS notebook, Spearman Papers, HHL, box 2.

<sup>43</sup> FHS diary entry on May 31, 1899, Spearman Papers, HHL, box 2.

<sup>44</sup> FHS lists his magazine payments in "1898–1902 Cash Book," Spearman Papers, HHL, box 3; McClure letter quoted in RTTW, chapter 33; quotation about appetite for railroad stories, *Chicago Journal*, Jan. 7, 1902.

<sup>45</sup> Frank P. Donovan, Jr., *The Railroad in Literature* (Boston: The Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, Inc., Baker Library, Harvard Business School, 1940), 5–6.

<sup>46</sup> "Lingo of Rail Is His Forte," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 28, 1905.

<sup>47</sup> FHS, *Held for Orders* (McClure, Phillips & Co., 1901), "The Switchman's Story," 37–38.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, "The Striker's Story," 111.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, "The Trainmaster's Story," 300–303.

<sup>50</sup> Spearman Papers, HHL, scrapbooks of press clippings, box 33.

<sup>51</sup> Donovan, *The Railroad in Literature*, 6–8.

<sup>52</sup> Spearman Papers, HHL, scrapbook clipping dated Dec. 13, 1912, box 33.

<sup>53</sup> Marc H. Aronson, "Democratic Standards: William Crary Brownell, Literary Culture, and the Marketplace," Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, History Department, New York University, December 1994. (hereafter cited as WCB), 368.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 369–400.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 511.

<sup>56</sup> Spearman Papers, HHL, scrapbook of press clippings, box 33, and royalty reports, box 3.

<sup>57</sup> FHS, "Noted Author Tells How He Wrote Most Successful Book," *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 1, 1925.

<sup>58</sup> FHS, *The Strategy of Great Railroads* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904).

<sup>59</sup> Spearman Papers, HHL; scrapbook of press clippings, box 39.

<sup>60</sup> RTTW, chapter 33.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*; "T.T. Keliher, Train Robbery Foe, Dies at 86," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 16, 1954; *Joe LeFors, Wyoming Peace Officer—The Autobiography of Joe LeFors* (Laramie: Laramie Printing, 1953).

<sup>62</sup> Donovan, *The Railroad in Literature*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> *Memories*, 27–28.

<sup>64</sup> FHS, *Whispering Smith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), 75. Subsequent quotations are from the same edition. Page numbers are noted in parenthesis.

<sup>65</sup> FHS, "Noted Author Tells How He Wrote Most Successful Book," *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 1, 1925.

<sup>66</sup> WCB, 526.

<sup>67</sup> Spearman Papers, HHL, box 33.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, boxes 12 and 38.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, receipt from Scribner's, June 11, 1907, box 3.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, printed promotion, box 33.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, royalty reports, box 3.

<sup>72</sup> "Whispering Smith," [http://www.thrillingdetective.com/eyes/whispering\\_smith.html](http://www.thrillingdetective.com/eyes/whispering_smith.html) (Feb. 2, 2005); "Frank H. Spearman," <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0817336/> (Feb. 4, 2005).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> RTTW, chapter 42.

<sup>75</sup> *Memories*, 60–64.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, on wedding anniversary, page 95; "Spearman, Writer, Is Laetare Choice," *New York Times*, Mar. 31, 1935.

<sup>77</sup> "F.H. Spearman Dies' Fiction Writer, 78," *New York Times*, Dec. 31, 1937, 16.

<sup>78</sup> Spearman Papers, HHL, box 36.

<sup>79</sup> Cordeal, *McCook Daily Gazette*, Jan. 8, 1938, 3.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Degree citation from Loyola Marymount University archives.

