

UP and DOWN the STREET

By F. Hornstein

The writer takes pleasure in dedicating this week's "Up and Down the Street" to Jim Hamilton, janitor of the Rugby schools. For over twenty years Jim has been the engineer and fireman (often the rest of the crew) for the biggest boiler works and the biggest plant and business in town. And never has the business had to shut down for any negligence or incompetence of Jim's. While thousands of children have "worked" their way thru his buildings, grown to manhood and womanhood, got married and sent their children back to the same school, Jim has tended his fires and his dozens of routine daily duties.

Sounds simple and commonplace, doesn't it? But when Jim started he was a frail-looking man nearly fifty-five years of age. Today at 74 he is still a frail-looking old man. The kind you'd think should be hobbling around with a cane, wearing out the seat of his breeches on benches for men who have earned comfort and retirement in their sunset years. But our hero is of a tough breed – the very toughest, I think. How would you like to have a routine about like this: get out of bed at four, grab a cup of coffee, rush to the school and begin your day by cleaning out 84 flues, 4 inches in diameter and 12 feet long – filled with the very finest coal and ash dust! (Says he would like to have an X-ray of his lungs – thinks they must be like the inside of his coal bin.) Then he starts the stoker and the rest of the day about every TWENTY MINUTES Jim has to add coal to the hopper! In the month of January he has shoveled better than 60 TONS. On top of that he takes care of all of the old building. When the weather is at all cold he has to stay three nights a week until 10 or 11 o'clock – the other three nights Charlie Harkison takes the late shift. And in the summer time he has to work at cleaning windows, varnishing floors, etc., in the hot rooms – at reduced pay. It seems a pity for his pay for 15 and 16 hour days is a might long ways from the income tax brackets.

When you meet a fellow that has worked as hard with his hands all his life as Jim has it makes you feel like going out on the street and button-holing every tax payer to tell him his story and asking him to be generous – or to start beating the drums for the Townsend Plan¹. If Townsend had fellows like Hamilton in mind, I'll take back all that I said last week. But Jim doesn't complain, says at his age he's mighty thankful to have a job which will keep his home provided with life's necessities.

Hamilton was born and reared on a farm near Ontario, Canada. He got his share of hard manual labor early in life for those were the days when the farmers cut their hay with a hand scythe and "cradled" their grain crops. In 1888 he and his brother Jack homesteaded some land 4 miles north of Langdon, North Dakota – just a year after the railroad had come into the country from Devils Lake. He and his brother worked their stakes with oxen. Their crops froze three years in succession. Everybody that was footloose left what they thought was a hopeless country. But his brother, having married by that time, stayed and enjoyed 12 good years in succession! (Jack has been in the court house either as auditor or deputy since 1906 – another Oscar Spillum, I guess.)

Following the great frosts at Langdon, Jim went back to Canada, to the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893, back to Canada, then worked ten years for the Remington Paper company in New York – spent several years in the state of Michigan – came to Rugby in 1906 to work as second man to Harry Hall at a lumber yard. For about ten years he worked for the city digging sewer and water mains. He probably dug more of them than any two or three other men. He worked by contract and his daily quota was from 30 to 40 feet – the ditches 22 inches wide and 8 feet, 6 inches deep!

¹ a pension plan, proposed in the U.S. in 1934 but never passed by Congress, that would have awarded \$200 monthly to persons over 60 who were no longer gainfully employed, provided that such allowance was spent in the U.S. within 30 days.

Jim has raised a family of five, three sons, Charlie, John and Lawrence; two daughters, Nellie and Gertrude. The boys while at school resembled their dad, in that none of them looked very athletic. Yet they all were – each was quick, wiry and surprisingly durable and tough. Charlie was probably one of the best all-around athletes this school ever had – and “little Jack” could lick anybody in a fight ring that wasn’t twice his size.

When Hamilton first came to Dakota in territorial days he took out his first citizenship papers – he didn’t take out his second until he came to Rugby. He had carried his first papers around with him for nearly twenty years. But after he got them he learned from Judge Burr that he had wasted his money – because when the territory became a state Jim had automatically become a citizen! He still has those first papers.

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