

Life Stories of Successful Men

Frederick Douglass Underwood

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Author of "The Buccaneers"

IT would be possible to get a fairly good idea of the character and career of Frederick D. Underwood by simply studying his photograph.* The face is that of a man accustomed to the handling of large responsibilities, self-reliant and determined, trained to meet emergencies and to handle men.

First a clerk, then a brakeman on the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul road in 1870; President of the great Erie Railroad System in 1901—that is the beginning and the end of his story. Between it lies a record of hard, conscientious work, of steady climbing, of constant growth in capacity, which cannot fail to prove inspiring to the American boy who is ambitious to rise in the railroad business, and who starts, as did he, with no advantages save those of good health, native ability, and bull-dog determination to "get on."

Though the president of one of the greatest of Eastern railroad systems, Mr. Underwood is of the West, Western. He belongs to that large and exceedingly important class of Eastern railroad executives who received their early training in the freer and less formal air of the Middle and Far West. Strangely enough, it may be remarked in passing, there is no Western railroad president who came to his position from an Eastern training and who has made a great success in his new post.

Mr. Underwood was born in the little Wisconsin village of Wauwatosa, fifty-three years ago. He went to the public schools of his native town, and a little later attended the fine old Wayland Academy at Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. At eighteen he was ready to go to work. From the very first he showed one of those qual-

ities which have since proved factors in his success. Although he had an academic education, he did not feel himself above settling down to hard manual labor. The railroad business appealed to him, and he began to learn it at the bottom, starting as brakeman on a local run. That was on the old Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway, in the service of which he remained for eighteen years. During that time it would be hard to name a position on the operating side of the road which Mr. Underwood did not fill—from twisting a brake wheel up to superintending a division. He served as superintendent of elevators, as train master, and in half a dozen other capacities from the one post to the other.

The Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul road was Mr. Underwood's *alma mater* in the railroad business. When he left it to assume larger responsibilities, he knew the business literally from the ground up. There was nothing in the operating department of a railroad of which he was not master. Eighteen years is a long apprenticeship for an ambitious young man to serve in any business. It makes the four-year period spent in preparation by a professional man seem trivial in comparison. But that it was well spent and was well worth spending, Mr. Underwood's subsequent career has sufficiently demonstrated.

When he left the St. Paul to take the position of General Superintendent of the Minneapolis & Pacific Railway in 1886, Mr. Underwood took with him two qualities which have ever since been especially valuable to him. One was an ability to meet any crisis in the operating of a railroad, quickly and successfully. That was a direct result of his practical acquaintance with every detail of railroad operation. When an accident happened, Mr. Under-

*NOTE.—Mr. Underwood's portrait forms the frontispiece in this number.

wood was always quick to understand its causes, and to decide what were the steps necessary to be taken. His long training had made him resourceful; it is said of him that never has he been cornered.

The second great quality is that of always keeping in touch with the working force under him. It is easy to understand that an executive who has himself served as a brakeman will be quicker to understand and sympathize with brakemen, than will one whose knowledge of that part of the work is purely theoretical. This quality has enabled Mr. Underwood to develop among the operating force of every road with which he has been connected a splendid *esprit de corps*—the spirit of loyalty and enthusiasm.

Nothing is more important to the success of any large enterprise. When employees, even down to the most minor, speak of "our road" and know that its president is always ready to hear their troubles and complaints, the battle has been half won. On a great system employing thousands of men, such a general feeling is one of the most valuable of assets. The man who can inspire and maintain it is hard to find; and, once found, railroad owners will hold him at almost any cost.

The third in the trinity of great qualities which have made Mr. Underwood one of the foremost of railroad managers, is that of a tireless personal energy. His

associates speak of him as a perfect whirlwind of determination and action. Like every railroad president, he carries responsibilities which would quickly crush a man less thoroughly trained—less hardened to the constant strain.

In 1886 Mr. Underwood was called to take charge of the construction of the Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Ste. Marie Railway; and afterwards of its operation. He retained the position of General Manager of that road for thirteen years, which covered the period from the time the first rail was laid until 1899. Upon leaving the service of that railway, his work there was epitomized in the following resolution of its Board of Directors:

"His service with the Company began in its infancy, and he leaves it with 1,260 miles of well-constructed and thoroughly equipped railway, in successful operation, with all promises for results, created largely through the energy, ability, and wisdom of his management."

In January, 1899, he went to the Baltimore & Ohio as General Manager. In June, 1899, he was promoted to Second Vice-President. In May, 1901, he was called to the presidency of the great Erie Railroad and its allied companies. In that capacity he has since served, ranking among the ten or a dozen great railroad managers who to-day have practically the whole transportation interests of the country under their direct charge.

