

Arthur E. Stilwell

Railroad President
1859-1928

by Daniel Coleman

The triumphs, tragedies, and just plain interesting anecdotes of Arthur Stilwell's life could fill up a many-chaptered tome. Stilwell actually devoted himself to writing at the end of his life, penning a six-part autobiography for the *Saturday Evening Post*, numerous philosophical essays, and Christian Science hymns. Whether sharing his big dreams with Cornelius Vanderbilt or Pancho Villa, he was rarely at a loss for words, and his practical execution of the plans he promoted made him one of Kansas City's first successful venture capitalists.

Arthur Stilwell was born October 21, 1859, in Rochester, New York, son of Charles and Mary Pearson Stilwell. His grandfather, Hamblin Stilwell, had played an important role in the history of the Empire State, contracting to help build the Erie Canal, establishing the New York Central Railroad, and co-founding Western Union Telegraph Company. As a child, Arthur experienced what he believed to be visions from the spirit world—a juvenile mysticism his parents did not discourage and which led to his premonition at the age of 10 that he would one day build a great railroad in the West.

Eager to get an early start, at 19 Stilwell married his childhood sweetheart, Jennie Wood, then headed west to Kansas City in 1879 to begin a small business printing railroad timetables. During the next few years he moved about with the restlessness of a young entrepreneur. After a brief but successful run in the insurance business in Chicago, he returned to Kansas City backed by a group of Eastern investors.

In a first step toward realizing his railroad-building dream, Stilwell became involved with the Kansas City Suburban Belt Railroad, a small local line. Under his leadership it extended to Independence, and Stilwell created one of Kansas City's first amusement parks—Fairmount Park—to boost traffic between the towns. He cut a familiar, fanciful figure about Kansas City, sporting full sideburns and carrying a cane on which his name was inscribed in gold.



Stilwell's next railroad enterprise was perhaps the greatest accomplishment of his life. Envisioned as a more direct route to the Gulf of Mexico, Stilwell created the Kansas City, Pittsburg & Gulf Railway—later to become known as the Kansas City Southern—employing all the ballyhoo he could muster in gathering investors to build the line. He later claimed that he located its southern terminus in Port Arthur, Texas, (a town he created for the purpose and named after himself) in response to a spiritual message urging him to avoid ending the track at the nearby and more practical port of Galveston. His hunch proved correct within a few years of the line's completion when a hurricane in 1900 destroyed Galveston and killed thousands of its residents.

Stilwell became America's youngest railway president at age 32, but was soon ousted from the company in a leadership shakeup. Undaunted, he simply shaved off his sideburns to change his luck and announced an even more daring plan. Using a ruler on a map to illustrate his idea to prospective investors, Stilwell proposed to reach the Pacific by a rail route 400 miles shorter than the line then connecting Kansas City to San Francisco. The ruler pointed straight to a small California coastal village called Topolobampo. Stilwell's Kansas City, Mexico & Orient Railroad eventually reached all the way to the foothills of the Sierra Madre mountain range before rugged terrain and the Mexican Revolution brought it to a standstill.

After he lost the company (along with millions of his investors' dollars), Stilwell retreated from a barrage of ridicule to New York, where he immersed himself in religious practice and recorded his remaining visions on paper. He died at age 68 on September 27, 1928. Engineers finally tunneled through the Sierra Madre to Topolobampo in 1961, proving that while his timing may have been flawed, Arthur Stilwell's much-derided dream was not impossible.

Sources

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