



GERRIT VAN GINKEL

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One of the most active and successful “boosters” of Des Moines thirty years ago was Gerrit Van Ginkel, who not only helped the town, but accumulated wealth, not by speculation, but legitimate business enterprises.

Born in the land of the canals, windmills and wooden shoes, December Eleventh, 1849, he came, with his parents, to America, landing at New Orleans in 1857. They came up the Mississippi Valley to Pella, and joined the community of sturdy, intelligent Hollanders who had settled there. The father engaged in farming, while Gerrit did what he could find to do, for board and clothes, and attended the excellent schools which have been the notable feature of the town since its foundation, until eleven years old, when he went to learn the printing trade in the office of the *Week-blad*, published by the well-known banker, Henry Hospers, where he remained until 1867, when, at the age of eighteen, he established the *Pella Gazette*, which he published two years, when, his health becoming impaired from overwork, he was compelled to abandon it, for he was a complete bundle of energy and activity, an omnivorous reader, diligent student, and delver for knowledge, giving himself little time for the rest and recuperation necessary in the adolescent period.

He then sought outdoor work of any kind he could get. He husked corn for one dollar a day. When outdoor work was not obtainable, he took the road and worked in printing offices in Chicago and other cities. Typesetting in those days was quite different from what it is to-day. Instead of sitting in a chair and working a keyboard similar to that of a typewriting machine, he had to stand on his feet and pick up each letter with his fingers.

Eventually, he reached Des Moines, in 1869. The best opening he saw for work—idleness was foreign to his nature—was truck farming. He purchased

a tract of land south of 'Coon River and began raising vegetables on a small scale. By industry and strict attention to business, regardless of sunrise or sunset, excellent skill and management, his trade so increased that he enlarged his fields until he became an extensive shipper to other places. In Winter months, he set type in the *Register* office.

While he was running his gardening enterprise, he prospected for coal on his land, and found, at a depth of one hundred and thirty-five feet, an excellent strata underlying his entire holdings. He at once sunk a shaft, and in 1882-1883, had three mines in operation, employing one hundred and fifty men. He opened yards at First and Court Avenue, and became one of the prominent coal operators in the town, his trade being mostly local. He was always on good terms with the miners and his customers, his rule being to give everyone a fair deal, and his tons to weigh two thousand pounds. In 1890, he went out of the coal business, and his yards were removed to give place to the Brown-Hurley building.

While he was in the coal business, he established a large brick-making plant, which turned out millions of brick annually. He also organized and put in operation the Iowa Mineral and Ochre Paint Works.

In 1885, Doctor M. P. Turner was operating a street railway under a charter granted in 1866, giving him the exclusive use of the streets for cars moved by animal power, and he was occupying several streets in his free-and-easy-going way. He never got in a hurry, and nobody had to run to catch his cars. They were also small and narrow, the track being only three feet gauge. Van Ginkel concluded the service could be greatly improved, and, with H. E. Teachout, in 1886, applied for a franchise for a road of four feet eight and a half inch gauge, the cars to be drawn by horses. At the same time, Van Ginkel and John Weber applied for a charter for a road from 'Coon River bridge to Sevastopol, with the same gauge. Of course, the Doctor vigorously opposed it, and he found friends enough in the City Council to stave it off for a year, but in 1887, both were granted. Construction was commenced at once and pushed vigorously. On the East Side, track was laid on Locust Street from Sixth to West Fourth, north on Fourth to Center, and west on Center. Streets paralleling the Doctor's lines were also taken. The

cars were up-to-date, larger, and more comfortable than the Doctor's cars, evidencing the push and energy behind the enterprise. The Doctor became alarmed at the apparent purpose to crowd him out of business, and applied to the District Court for an injunction restraining the use of the broad-gauge cars. Then it was up to the lawyers—the best in the town—and the contest was a vigorous one. The Doctor finally won, Judge Marcus Kavanagh, now one of the most highly esteemed and popular judges in Chicago, granting the injunction prohibiting the use of broad-gauge cars on and after May First, 1888.

Van Ginkel and Teachout at once appealed to the Supreme Court, setting out the claim that the Doctor's charter was for a narrow-gauge road. After some further delay, the court held that the width of the gauge did not affect the Doctor's exclusive right, under his charter, to the use of animal power to move his cars, and affirmed Judge Kavanagh's decree.

Incidentally, during the hearing—it was not set out in the appeal—the question arose as to the right to use other than animal power, but the court, under its general rule not to beg questions nor express extra judicial opinions, and as the question was not in the case at bar, declined to give an opinion. It simply affirmed Kavanagh's decree. The broad-gauge cars were tied up.

It was then again up to the lawyers. But Van Ginkel decided to take the bull by the horns, as it were, and electrify the road. New and larger cars were ordered, the horse cars remodeled, the track relaid. Electricity for moving railway cars was then in an experimental stage. Its utility had not yet been satisfactorily determined, but Van Ginkel, from his study of the subject, was satisfied it would be a success, and the first contract made by the now extensive Thomson-Houston Electric Company for an electrical railway equipment was for this Des Moines road.

So soon as the cars were running, the Doctor pounced on them again for an injunction, claiming he had the exclusive right to the use of the streets of the city for railway purposes; that the city could not give the right to another, and thus destroy his business. Again, the matter went up to the Supreme Court, and to save time, on an agreed case between the parties. On that

appeal, the court held that, while the Doctor's charter of 1866, gave him the exclusive right to the use of the streets for a railway operated by animal power, the City Council was not precluded from granting the use of the streets for cars run by some other power. His right was to use horse cars, with all improvements that could be devised, but nothing more. "As well," said the court, "might the owner of a rope ferry forty years ago insist that his exclusive right prohibited the use of steam." The decision of the court below was reversed, which sealed the doom of the horse cars, and in 1889, Jeff. Polk purchased the franchise and property of all the lines, and consolidated them with his own chartered steam roads, in the present system.

Van Ginkel then sought other fields, and in June, 1890, went to Springfield, Illinois, and started another electric street railway system. Though an entire stranger to the people, his energy and activity elicited the good-will of the community, and in three months he had cars running. On the opening day a mass meeting was held to celebrate the event. There were brass bands, fireworks, and oratorical pyrotechnics galore. The whole town was out. One of the speechmakers, named Graham, said he did not know Van Ginkel, had never seen him before, nor had he ever spoken to him, but he had just returned from a short stop at Des Moines, where he learned that he was well known there as a man who does things. Before they got through with the jollification, Van was called up and presented with a beautiful gold-headed cane as an expression of the public esteem of him.

While he was operating at Springfield, he and Colonel M. T. V. Bowman, of Des Moines, established an electric street car system in South Bend, Indiana.

In 1894, Van returned to Des Moines, and decided to invest some of his surplus dollars in a testimonial of his faith in his home town. He leased, for a term of ninety years, the corner of Fourth and Locust, and ordered plans made for a ten-story building. Soon after, he was having a frolic at home with his own and other little children, when he received a bruise on the temple, causing a blood-clot on the optic nerve, resulting in total blindness. The building plans were completed, but he would not allow work to begin

unless he could see the plans. While he was in darkness, his eldest daughter sickened and died, thus adding more to his burden of sorrow.

His total blindness extended several months, but suddenly, one evening, passed away, when his building was pushed to completion, in the early part of 1896, at a cost of one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars, exclusive of the ground rental. It is ten stories high and contains one hundred and forty business offices. Above the roof is a cupola five stories high. The roof is encircled with a guard-rail and fitted up for roof-garden entertainments in Summer. It is an ornament to the city, and a testimonial of the energy, enterprise, business capacity, and boosting faith in the town of a young man who landed in it with just twenty dollars in his pocket.

In 1899, he had another attack of street railway fever, and went to Dallas, Texas, where he found an embryo city with six horse car lines of railway in operation, with little system or profit. About twelve miles distant was Exall Lake, a favorite pleasure resort. Lakes are scarce in Texas, hence, to him, its apparent prospective importance. He at once built an electric line to the lake, then purchased the other lines, consolidated them with his own line, and operated them under a system similar to that in Des Moines, with great success, until June Eleventh, 1901, when he sold it, having made preliminary arrangements to build an electric road from Omaha to Lincoln, in Nebraska.

A few days after the sale, he attended a picnic at the lake, in the evening. A car was to come after the party, but was delayed some time, when Van and a friend started up the track to learn what caused the delay. After going a short distance, Van said he was very tired, and stopped. His friend said he would go on and meet the car. Van warned him to be cautious, as it was dangerous. He went on, met the car, boarded it and it ran to the lake. Being down grade, it made little noise, the power being cut off. Just before reaching the lake, it suddenly struck an object, which proved to be Van. He was badly injured, and death came before the town could be reached.

Politically, he was always a Republican, took an active part in civic affairs, yet gave little or no attention to partisan politics. Socially, he was public-spirited. His benefactions for educational and church purposes were little

known, for he avoided public notice—so much so, that he would never consent to pose for a photograph, and the picture presented herewith was snapped by a kodak a few hours before his decease. He was a firm believer in the Salvation Army, frequently stopped and listened to their service, but seldom left without placing fifty cents or a dollar on the drum. He was fond of children, a sincere friend of the laboring man, and an active member of the Order of Odd Fellows. He built a two-story brick in Sevastopol, and donated it to Lodge Number Sixty-five, conditioned that the lower story be equipped and permanently maintained as a public library. It is now a branch of the City Library. In recognition of the gift, he was made a life member of the lodge. He was also a prominent member of the Masonic fraternity, and the Elks. He was plain of speech, reticent, positive, and highly esteemed by those who new (sic) him best.

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