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Martin Hector: A Pioneer to Remember

By Susie Yakowicz

When Martin Hector left Chicago for Dakota Territory in the early 1870s, he couldn't have imagined the mark he would make on Fargo-Moorhead. After all, nothing at the time seemed to be going right.

His father had recently died, leaving behind a wife and five children. Money for a horse hadn't been available, so the journey would be made on foot. And traveling to an unfamiliar part of the country presented its share of hazards and discomforts.

But Hector's older brothers had written to him about work in Duluth, Minn. Work that was abundant. Work that, in the young Hector's mind, translated to opportunity. And so, he filled his knapsack and bade farewell to his grief-stricken mother and his younger brother Henry.

Though a wagon ride here and there shortened the trip, Hector arrived in Duluth tired and sore. Worse, he quickly came to learn that the only work available revolved around the cargo ships on Lake Superior.

All he could think about was his long voyage from Hammerfest, Norway, when as a young boy he'd accompanied his family on the ship to America. It had been years earlier, but the wretched seasickness that had nearly killed him was still fresh in his mind. Martin Hector had grown to hate the sea and everything about it. Life as a sailor would not be an option for him.

Still, he wasn't about to turn around and head back to Chicago. Determined to give this new land another chance, he followed a tip he'd heard from a stranger. The railway running through the Red River Valley was expanding west. Builders would be needed for the many stations along the new line.

Getting to the railway wouldn't take long, compared to the trek he'd already made. And this type of work appealed to him, having learned the carpentry trade from his father. With newfound enthusiasm, he set out for the Red River.

Unsure of exactly where to go, he aimed for the source of the river just above Lake Traverse. Once there, he decided to follow the river north until he came to the point where the Northern Pacific Railway crossed over it. He soon spotted a barge traveling up the river. He agreed to chop wood and feed the fires of the boilers in exchange for a ride.

It was May of 1872 when 19-year-old Martin Hector arrived in Moorhead. And it was here that his story really began.

A Man with Two Faces

"Why won't you join me?" a friend had asked, determined not to take no for an answer. "There'll be music and dancing. Why, you could even bring your mandolin!"

"I don't know," Hector had answered in his reticent way. "Although, I'd sure like to dance." Next to ice skating, dancing was Martin Hector's passion.

In the end, Hector agreed to accompany his friend to the Headland farmhouse south of Fargo. It was a snowy evening, making it necessary for the two men to hire a horse and sled to attend the dance. The Headlands were gracious hosts, and the evening was filled with gaiety. But when it was time to leave, the weather had turned worse. The Headlands insisted that Hector and his friend spend the night.

Not used to such offerings of kindness, Hector reluctantly agreed. After a hearty breakfast prepared by their hosts the next morning, the men hopped on their sled and trotted off.

Two sides of Martin Hector unfolded after that event. He never stopped bemoaning the fact that the livery man charged double for not returning the horse and sled on time. Yet til the day he died, he never forgot the generosity of the Headlands. So affected was he that in later years he stopped a foreclosure from happening on their farm.

The Road to Success

Hector worked hard as a lathing contractor for all the Northern Pacific buildings constructed between Brainerd and Fargo. He saved his money well, waiting on an opportunity for fortune to present itself. He wouldn't have long to wait.

Back in the 1870s, Moorhead was a town of saloons. Liquor shipments represented a big investment for saloon keepers. One unfortunate saloon keeper met with disaster after a riot broke out at his establishment. The saloon keeper was killed, leaving behind a newly arrived shipment on which the railway was charging storage. Hector soon learned of this shipment and its potential to make him money.

At first, he was hesitant about the ill-reputed liquor business. One thing was certain: Martin Hector wanted to be in good standing with the town's citizens. "What will people think?" was always a question in the forefront of his mind.

But he did own by tax deed a choice piece of land near the railway track, a perfect spot to store the unclaimed liquor shipment. Within days, the shipment was moved and a building built around it. And from that act, the Hector Wholesale Liquor Company was born. It was a lucrative business, earning Hector large sums of money. Ironically, Martin Hector was never a drinker, and he later attributed his success much to that fact.

Hector had seen the growth potential of Fargo and Moorhead almost immediately. In 1878, he had sent for his brother Henry to join him. He helped Henry establish a grocery business for

himself. He also found Henry a wife—the sister of Martin Hector’s own wife, Caroline "Carrie" Paulsen.

The Martin Hectors built a two-story home on 11th Avenue and Broadway in North Fargo. The house was later renovated, becoming a Fargo showplace with its many bays, wide porches, and a large curved driveway in addition to a stable and coach house. Carrie Hector gave beautiful dinner parties around a table always complete with 24 settings of china and silver.

A Community Booster

As money from the liquor business rolled in, Hector was making plans to get out. He turned his attention to one of the most respected businesses of all—banking. In 1897, along with fellow officers O.J. DeLendrecies and W.C. McFadden, Hector founded Fargo National Bank. He served as its president until his death. Shortly after the bank's organization, he sold the liquor business and continued to focus on the community.

As president of the Fargo Commercial Club, predecessor of the Chamber of Commerce, Hector worked with the men of the city as they built the town. In 1893, he was chosen a member of the Board of Commissioners to represent North Dakota at the World's Fair in Chicago. He dedicated a year of his time, without compensation, to preparing a proper exhibit of North Dakota's valuable resources. Hector also served as mayor and president of the Fargo City Council.

Hector spent years promoting a bridge to cross the Red River at the north end of Broadway which would provide easy access for the people north of Moorhead. Though businessmen pledged money to build the bridge, many pledges were not kept. Hector made up the difference through personal funds and after the dedication in 1937 drove the first vehicle across the bridge.

His most notable gift was the land for Fargo's airport, which bears his name. In 1927, he donated the use of the 160-acre tract without cost under a five-year lease. Three and a half years later, he gave the land to the city outright. His daughter-in-law Margaret Hector would carry on his legacy by later donating additional parcels for expansion of the airport.

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When Carrie died in 1912, Hector devoted even more time to his three children—Minnie, Evelyn, and Fred--and numerous grandchildren. Evelyn married and settled out east; Fred and Minnie raised families in Fargo. Fred would follow in his father’s footsteps as a banker and community leader until his life was cut short by complications from appendicitis.

Unlike Fred, Martin Hector was not the hale-fellow-well-met type, recalled one granddaughter, the late Mary Suhr. "I do not even remember hearing [him] actually laugh," she wrote. "When he was pleased he smiled, and if he was displeased about something he simply froze up."

Yet as vivid as this memory was the one of all the Christmas and Thanksgiving meals Suhr helped pack and deliver to the needy, all provided by Martin Hector.

In March of 1938, a year before his son's passing, Martin Hector died of pneumonia. He was 86 years old. At the time, he was considered one of Fargo's longest residents. Memories of him would be seen and felt for years to come. Even today, anyone flying into Fargo will be touched by the pioneer who, over a century ago, graced Dakota Territory with his determination and generosity.