

# The Truth About that "Public Be Damned" Interview

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

**PASSENGERS!** The Railroads Love You. So reads the headline in a recent issue of a popular weekly magazine and the theme of the article thus titled is the present attitude of the railroads toward the citizens of these United States.

Lower rates, faster schedules, luxurious streamlined trains, air-conditioned coaches and sleeping cars, better and cheaper meals in dining cars, special excursions—all of these they are offering us now to halt the decline in passenger revenue. For they "have learned that competition, whether it comes from other railroads, from automobiles, airplanes or busses, is something to be dealt with by being nicer to the customer."

In other words: the public be pleased! How different is all this from their attitude half a century ago when an arrogant "railroad king" spoke for all of them and uttered the phrase which has been inseparably linked with his family name ever since.

"The public be damned!" he snorted scornfully but, contrary to popular belief, it was not old Cornelius ("Commodore") Vanderbilt who said that. The man who did say it was his son, William H. Vanderbilt, and the public, because of its prejudice against Wall Street and men of great wealth, never forgot that it had once been damned by a Vanderbilt.

Since old "Commodore" Vanderbilt was much more famous than his son, William, it is only



**CORNELIUS VANDERBILT**  
He Never Said "The Public Be Damned!" Even Though Many Americans Believe He Did.

natural, perhaps, that the phrase should have been tacked upon him and perpetuated in the long list of our "popular beliefs which are wrong."

That historic phrase was uttered in an interview with newspaper men in October, 1882. And just as there has been confusion as to the identity of the Vanderbilt who uttered it, so has there been confusion—and controversy—over the circumstances under which it was said. No less than three versions of the story, all agreeing in some details but differing in others, have been told and retold many times. To give the true version, based upon authoritative sources and contemporary evidence, is the purpose of this article.

## Three Versions.

As for the contradictory accounts of this incident which have been published, one of them says that it took place at an important meeting of railroad men in St. Louis at which William H. Vanderbilt, then president of the New York Central, was the leading figure. When the conference broke up, a crowd of newspaper reporters forced their way into the room and demanded to know what had been done. Vanderbilt, acting as spokesman for the railway men, answered that nothing was yet to be given out. A reporter, whose identity is not established in this version, tried to force the railway magnate to issue some statement. "Mr. Vanderbilt, the public wants to know and is entitled to know," he said, whereupon Vanderbilt replied wrathfully, "O, the public be damned!"

Another version places the scene in the Grand Pacific hotel in Chicago. The Pennsylvania railroad had recently put on a fast, deluxe train between Chicago and the East. It was the first of its kind and created something of a sensation. Clarence P. Dresser, a free-lance reporter (so this account identifies him), learned that William H. Vanderbilt was stopping at the Grand Pacific and called upon him there. Dresser asked what the New York Central was going to do to meet this new competition of the Pennsylvania.

Vanderbilt replied that he did not know that his company was going to do anything. "But won't the public demand it?" asked Dresser. "O, the public be damned!" was the reply.

Still a third version of the yarn has the same reporter but the circumstances under which he obtained his interview are different. It says that while Vanderbilt was eating dinner in his private car, which had been sidetracked in the Michigan Central yards in Chicago, Dresser forced his way into the car and de-

manded an interview. Vanderbilt replied that he was busy but the reporter was insistent.

"Well," replied the railroad president, "sit down at the other end of the car until I have finished dinner and I will talk with you."

"But," insisted Dresser, "it is getting late and I will not reach the office in time. The public—" At this point Vanderbilt interrupted him. "The public be damned! You get out of here!"

So Dresser "got out" and the next morning Vanderbilt's ill-tempered retort was heralded far and wide through the columns of the Chicago newspapers.

## Two Reporters.

The true story of this incident contains some of the elements of the second and third versions quoted above. It is true that Clarence P. Dresser was present at the interview when Vanderbilt made his historic reply but he was not the reporter who asked the question which provoked it. That reporter was John Dickinson Sherman, who at the time of his death in 1926 was feature writer for Western Newspaper Union and who once told the writer of this article the complete story of that famous interview.

In 1882 Sherman was Hyde Park correspondent for the Chicago Tribune and his friend, Clarence P. Dresser, was Hyde Park correspondent for the City Press, an organization which supplied routine news to most of the Chicago newspapers. Learning that Vanderbilt was en route to Chicago in a special train these two enterprising reporters on Saturday night, October 7, persuaded the crew of a freight train to let them ride on it to Michigan City, Ind. When the Vanderbilt special arrived the next day and stopped at Michigan City for a few minutes to change engines, they went aboard.

After the train was well on its way, they succeeded in getting into Vanderbilt's private car where he sat alone after his Sunday dinner. Explaining the reason for their intrusion, they asked permission to ride with him to Chicago and ask him some questions. He agreed to this and the interview began. It led finally to this question which was put to him by Sherman:

"Do your limited express trains pay or do you run them for the accommodation of the public?"

"Accommodation of the public? The public be damned!" replied Vanderbilt. "We run

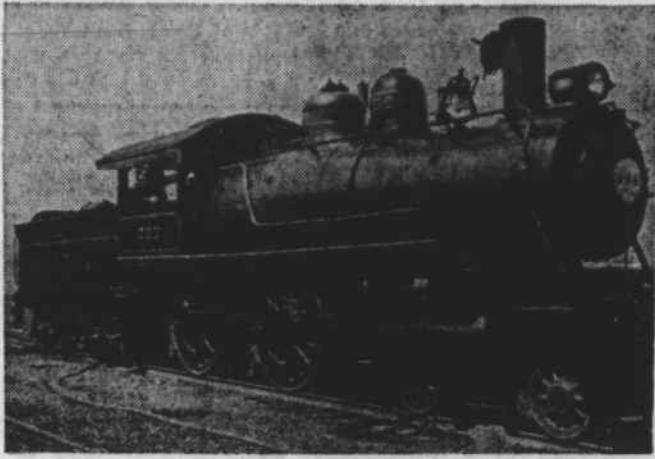


**JOHN DICKINSON SHERMAN**  
The Reporter Who Got the Famous "Public Be Damned" Interview.

them because we have to. They do not pay. We have tried again and again to get the different roads to give them up; but they will run them and, of course, as long as they run them we must do the same."

After that there were many other questions—about freight rates, wages of railroad employees, a proposed union depot for Chicago, the condition of other railroads, his interest in them, etc.—and upon their arrival in Chicago, the two reporters hurried to write their stories for the next day's editions.

For some reason, the railroad editor of the Tribune saw fit to change Sherman's story in one



**THE EMPIRE STATE EXPRESS LOCOMOTIVE**  
The New York Central "Flyer" Which Made Railroad History at the Turn of the Century.

important particular. Instead of giving Vanderbilt's famous reply verbatim, the story in that paper quoted him as saying "Accommodation of the public! Nonsense! They do not pay either. We have tried again and again to get the different roads to give them up; but they will run them, and, of course, as long as they run them, we must do the same."

But if this editor, sensing the "dynamite" in the railroad king's answer, was trying to protect him from the consequences of his intemperate words, he failed. Other Chicago papers, using the City Press (Dresser's) account of the interview, had not been so charitable. Typical of their handling of the story was Victor Lawson's Chicago Daily News which displayed the story prominently on page one under the headline:

**Mr. W. H. VANDERBILT**

**The Magnate Talks Plainly**

**He Deprecates the "Nickel Plate"—Railroads Are Not Run for the Dear Public**

And Dresser's version of the famous question and answer was this:

"Does your limited express pay?"

"No, not a bit of it. We only run it because we are forced to do so by the action of the Pennsylvania railroad. It doesn't pay expenses. We would abandon it if it was not for our competitor keeping its train on."

"But don't you run it for the public benefit?"

"The public be d—d! What does the public care for the railroads except to get as much out of them for as small a consideration as possible. I don't take any stock in this silly nonsense about working for anybody's good but our own, because we are not. When we make a move, we do it because it is our interest to do so, not because we expect to do somebody else some good. Of course, we like to do everything possible for the benefit of humanity in general, but when we do we first see that we are benefiting ourselves. Railroads are not run on sentiment, but on business principles and to pay, and I don't mean to be egotistic when I say that the roads which I have had anything to do with have generally paid pretty well."

## Vanderbilt's Denial.

When a report of the interview was telegraphed to New York, the New York Times printed it and editorially recommended to the people that they go to Vanderbilt's house and tack placards on it bearing the words: "Damn the public." Realizing the blunder that he had made, Vanderbilt resorted to the expedient since used by so many public men to save face when there is an unfavorable reaction to one of their utterances. He declared that he had been misquoted by the reporters. "I have frequently been interviewed by the New York press and everyone knows I never use the language or expressions attributed to me by the reporters," he said in formal statement disavowing the words attributed to him.

Even though he did disavow using the "language or expressions" attributed to him, there is available other evidence of his contemptuous attitude toward the public. The Chicago Times, instead of using Dresser's report, sent one of its own reporters to interview the railroad king at his hotel the next day, and in its report he is quoted as saying: "Railroads are not run for the public benefit but to pay. Incidentally, we may benefit humanity, but the aim is to earn dividends."

But the News, while printing this denial on page one, said editorially: "Mr. Vanderbilt rises to explain and deny the interview with him published in the Chicago papers a few days ago. It is not strange that he should be disgusted even with himself when he read his profane, egotistical remarks on paper. But that he did

say what was credited to him is beyond all question, his own pointed denial to the contrary notwithstanding. There were two reporters present at the interview; both report it substantially alike and their notes agree almost exactly. The fact is, Mr. Vanderbilt is in the habit of revising his interviews before they appear in print and it is very evident that he had better insist upon such a privilege in the future although it was not accorded him in this instance."

A day or two later the Chicago Times printed in its "Gotham Gossip" dispatches from New York the following:

"In regard to Vanderbilt's extraordinary damnation of the public in Chicago but one opinion prevails in Wall Street. Everyone firmly believes that he did use the words attributed to him and every one declares him to be a crazy loon for having done so. 'Everyone knows,' he said in his letter of denial, 'that I never use such language as attributed to me by the reporter.' But ask any of his friends and they will tell you at once: 'Why, it's W. H. all over!'"

## "Four Fatal Words"

Newspaper paragraphs made wisecracks about "the four fatal words" and editorial denunciation of his statement became so widespread that the Cincinnati Gazette finally declared:

"It is surprising, to say the least, that the sayings of a man like Vanderbilt should so disturb the world in general and country editors in particular. His Chicago interview amounts to nothing at



**W. H. VANDERBILT**  
The Railroad President Who Uttered the "Four Fatal Words."

all, and the public is giving both Mr. Vanderbilt and his silly talk altogether too much prominence. If he were a great railway manager, or a great financier, or if he understood the first principles of the science of transportation, some weight might be attached to his utterances. But he is nothing of the kind. From a tiller of the soil, and a very common tiller at that, he sprang at one bound to the top round of wealth. But in point of experience in ways of trade and commerce, and in the elements of greatness, he stopped short off in the subcellar of progress, philanthropy, generosity, liberality and brotherly love. The public condemn him for doing and saying outlandish things when he can not help doing and saying them. He knows no better . . ."

A week later the Tribune carried this significant news story: "W. H. Vanderbilt and party returned from their Western trip yesterday afternoon and put up at the Grand Pacific hotel where they remained overnight. Mr. Vanderbilt refused to be interviewed again, as his experience in this respect when he passed through here on his Western trip seemed to have taught him the lesson that 'speech is silver but silence is golden'!"

That was more than 50 years ago, but to this day mention of the name Vanderbilt brings to the mind of the average American the "four fatal words" which one of them once uttered—"The public be damned!" The public, it seems, like the elephant, never forgets!

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## Wives, Know Yourselves!

Accurate Analysis Will Do Much to Overcome Difficulty in Wedded Life

**SPEAKING** on the question of trial marriages, a well known writer said, "There should be no need for trial when two people know their own abilities and have measured themselves accurately. Two people who understand themselves will never, I believe, have any difficulty living happily together after marriage."

That is a new slant on the question of success in marriage, supplements a woman writer of national fame. Not "Know thy husband"—or "wife," but "know thyself!"

And, come to think of it, isn't most of the discontent and dissatisfaction in marriage traceable to ideas of ourselves—that may be misconceptions, no less than our illusions about the other person?

How many women's dissatisfaction with their husband has as its source the thought of all they gave up to marry him, all they "might have had" if they had married a certain other man?

How many women's discontent with the role of wife and mother springs from the thought of how much more fascinating pastimes they might have had if they had followed that career?

How many girl's impossible expectations of a fulltime lover and Prince Charming originates in an exaggerated notion of their own devastating beauty and charm?

**Two Impressions of the Loveliest Things**

A school teacher put this question to a group of children: "What are the loveliest things you know, persons not counted?"

Here is the list of one girl: The scrunch of dry leaves underfoot, the feel of clean clothes, climbing up hill and looking down, hot water bottle in bed.

Here is one boy's list: The feel of running, looking into deep clear water, a swallow flying, water being cut at the bow of a boat, an express train rushing, a builder's crane lifting something heavy, the mounted policeman's horse, the feel of a dive, a thrush singing.—Stanley High.

If all discontented wives would look deeply into themselves, measure themselves, stop fooling themselves, many might discover that the other man they might have married is a self-nurtured illusion; that the career of their dreams is not a soft snap and a joy forever; but a grueling, exhausting job which might have worn them out if they had qualified for it, which they probably would have been unable to do; that they themselves are neither devastating beauties nor always charming, but women who are frequently disappointing and difficult to live with. They might discover and admit to themselves that they are greatly in debt to their husbands for many things that make life easier and better and more worthwhile—that they would not get along so well without them.

Then they might think more of doing their part of trying to make those husbands happy. And that effort on the part of one must inevitably go a long way toward a mutually happy and successful marriage.

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## BOB JOINS THE RANGERS!



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