

Chapter Six

Commission Chairman Seabury had formerly broken ground for the new capitol building on May sixth 1896 in the presence of some of the state's highest political and civic dignitaries, and surrounded by many of these same persons, Seabury put the finishing touches to the exterior by laying the last strip of gold leaf on the ball that surmounts the capitol dome more than six years later. Governor Samuel R. Van Sant was the first to occupy the executive rooms of the new Capitol, moving in the last week of December and just a few days before the end of his term of office on January fourth 1905. John A. Johnson one of Minnesota's gubernatorial immortals was sworn in on that day amidst great ceremonies and the 1905 legislature was also the first to occupy the commodious new senate and house chambers.

John A. Johnson one of Minnesota's gubernatorial immortals was sworn in on that day amidst great ceremonies and the 1905 legislature was also the first to occupy the commodious new senate and house chambers. The capitol cost the state four and a half million dollars, of which three million, a hundred and fifty thousand was spent on construction and one million and two hundred and fifty thousands dollars on furnishings and decorations. A few months after the building was completed and turned over to the state one of Americas leading architectural journals of its day said,

"It is probable that no other structure, in the United States, of its size and stability cost as little money."

Before Butler Brothers got into the capitol building picture the excavation of the site, upon a promontory which rises two hundred feet above the level of the Mississippi river, commanding a spectacular view of most of St. Paul and the beautiful rolling countryside round it, and the sub-basements of the building had been done by the George J. Grant Construction Company. Had Walter, Bill, John, or Cooley been able to foresee many of the architectural, engineering, financial, transportation, materials and labor problems with which they were later to be confronted I am sure now that Mike Ryan's prophetic warning that the capitol project was too big and too dangerous to handle might have been accepted.

In order to get the contract we had successfully underbid every major marble builder and contractor in the country, including Norcross Brothers and the Georgia Marble Company, both of Atlanta, Georgia, and each with at least a half a century of marble experience. Butler Brothers had based its low bid on a proposition whereby a subcontractor had agreed to lease us the land, quarry the marble, and load it on flatcars at Ballground in Pickens County, Georgia, sixty miles north of Atlanta, at twenty five cents per cubic foot. The specifications had called for the stone to be cut to size and finished at the site of the capitol so as to employ Minnesota labor. Norcross Brothers and the Georgia Marble Company had submitted their bids on the base price of forty cents per cubic foot. The specifications of Cass Gilber, the architect, had called for grayish white Georgia marble with the foundation, broad terraces, outside balustrades, and the steps of grey granite from the quarries at St. Cloud, Minnesota.

When the day came for our marble sub-contractor in Georgia to begin making his first shipments, we discovered for the first time that the man was financially irresponsible, that his claims to the marble quarries were questionable, that he had neither crews nor equipment for such a gigantic operation and in short that we would have to look elsewhere for our marble to fulfill our contract.

More than that the quarry was six miles from the nearest railroad. We immediately contacted Norcross Brothers and the Georgia Marble Company to see if they would furnish us the marble. Both said that they would be glad to but the price would have to be forty cents per cubic foot, a price which under our contract was out of the question.

John was sent to Georgia to look over the situation to see what might be done. It was then that John's resourcefulness and ingenuity made Butler Brothers' history. He took a lease from the sub-contractor for the lands on the basis of a two cents per cubic foot royalty and set about to find ways and means of getting the marble out himself. First there was fifteen to twenty feet of soil overburden to be removed to get at the stone. Next he built six miles of railroad connecting the quarry with the spur. He bought mules by the dozen and hired negroes by the scores to get the project under way. Labor was eight cents an hour for a ten hour day, skilled workmen and engineers earned from a dollar twelve to a dollar and a quarter a day for a ten hour day.

Most of the negro help were former slaves who had been owned by the Norcross and the fabulous Teit family of Georgia. During his first months in Pickens County, John boarded with a woman named Sally Dishhound and he built a one room shack to sleep in. John used to laugh when he'd tell how Mrs. Dishhound charged him two dollars and fifty cents a week for meals but that he paid her three dollars and fifty cents or a dollar extra for keeping the flies off him while he ate his meals. Mrs. Dishhound, whom I got to know later on, was a poor cook but she could spit tobacco juice across the dining room table and hit the fireplace every time.

When the first shipment of marble reached the capitol site, Cass Gilber hit the ceiling. Gilbert's inclusion of Pickens' County marble in the specifications had been based upon an earlier observation incorporating the use of Pickens County marble supplied by the Georgia Marble Company for the then new St. Josephs Hospital in New York. What Gilbert had seen was white marble with a faint bluish cast, which Gilbert's artistry conceived would blend favorably in the land of the sky blue water. This development meant a trip for Gilbert, brother Bill, and our chief stone cutter, Joe Beauchaut, to New York to look over the hospital and see how the stone effects had been accomplished.

They found out that the color effects that Gilbert strove for could be attained by a rubbing process. But for a time it appeared that Butler Brothers were not going to get the stone accepted and its inspection passed. We thought at that time that Gilbert's attitude was vicious, but a man who made Butler Brothers' work even more difficult was a fellow named Charlie Abbott, a state of Maine Yankee and a mean fellow if I ever met one. It seemed that nothing Butler Brothers did was right so far as he was concerned, and he once made the statement that if he had anything to do with it, he was going to break Butler Brothers.

Cooley was responsible for setting up a situation by which we were subsequently freed of the domination of Abbott. The details of the situation developed unwittingly but looking back on it now I can see that it worked out a little bit like the badger game. A girl friend of Cooley had come down to St. Paul from Duluth to witness the laying of the capitol cornerstone by Alexander Ramsey, the first governor of the Minnesota Territory on July twenty seventh 1898. Charlie Abbott took a fancy to the girl, and somehow or other persuaded her to go with him to a tavern on Tenth and Rice streets. Cooley traced the girl and Abbott to the back room of the tavern and in the fight that ensued Cooley administered an unmerciful beating to Abbott and scratched and marked his face very badly.

To conceal from fellow workers his facial disfigurement Abbott arranged to fall off a Selby Avenue cable car, suffer some bruises, and acquire an injury story that would stand up. Cass Gilbert under whom Abbott worked somehow got the truth of what had really happened and he confronted Cooley with the information. The next day Abbott was fired.

There was the equivalent of nine phases of work each covered in a separate contract on the capitol building. Successive sessions of the legislature appropriated the funds. As each phase of the constructions was undertaken new bonds had to be posted, equal to two percent of the total amount of the contract. The National Surety Company was our guarantor. The marble coming out of the Georgia quarries was cut to prescribed dimensions. It took approximately twenty six days to cut a single thirty two foot marble column weighing twenty tons and it required a flat car for each column, and these were delivered to us by the Minneapolis and St. Louis Railroad. In those days the railroads gave shippers rate refunds per volume a practice which has long since been ordered discontinued by the interstate commerce commission. The brick which went into the building came from the then famous brick kilns at Chaska, Minnesota. The granite columns employed on the exterior were quarried and shipped from Ortonville, Minnesota.

There was a special contract calling for four hundred thousand dollars for construction of the capitol dome alone, details of which I will disclose later. A stone setter, one of the most skilled of all the building trades was paid forty five cents an hour for work on the capitol, and a red headed Swedish immigrant named Nilson, a former sailor who wore a red goatee, was our chief stonemaker. Nilson's crew which included himself, a hoisting engineer, a fireman, and three laborers, set seventy five percent of all the stone used on the capitol project.

Nilson had just a natural faculty for getting work done. The son of a sea captain in the Swedish Merchant Marine, and having stood before the mast from the time he was twelve years old, Nilson knew just about everything there was to know about rigging, pulleys, block and tackle, and derricks. Every man on the job from Butler Brothers on down respected Nilson's ability and never questioned his judgements. Except Cass Gilbert. We were swinging a twenty ton marble column into position in the interior of the capitol concourse one afternoon when Gilbert came on the scene and shouted at the derrick operator;

"Stop."

Nilson saw what was happening, came around to where Gilbert was standing and said to him:

"What in hell are you braying about?"

Gilbert explained that he thought one of the ropes in the rigging was about to break. Nilson reminded him that he had sent all of the stone already set in the building up those same riggings and that no rope had broken yet. Irrated because his authority had been challenged Gilbert sought out Brother Bill and told him to get Nilson off the job. Bill said;

"Mr. Gilbert, that man has set nearly all of the stone in the building and before I can leg him go I'll have to ask you to get me as good or a better man."

Bill told Nilson that he would probably be able to patch up the situation if Nilson would apologize to Gilbert. That same day Bill took Nilson around to Gilbert's office to make the apology. Gilbert opened the conversation.

"Mr. Nilson," he said, "you have been a sailor and when you were a sailor you took orders from your captain, didn't you?"

"You're a damn fool," Nilson rejoined. "Sailors don't take orders from the captain. They take orders from the boatswain bos'n. Bill Butler is the captain around here. I'm the bos'n, and you're just nothing."

The facility with which the construction work progressed was a tribute to the calculating genius of John and Bill, I think. One of the first steps we took after the project got under way was to build a narrow gauge railroad that ran around the entire building, and this facilitated the handling of the heavy stone and marble columns that went into the building. If I do say so myself, our handling of the material and equipment at the capitol project became the talk of the whole construction world. Specifications were followed to the letter. Every shipment of cement had to be delivered at the site four weeks before it was to be used, and it was subjected to every known test in the laboratories at the University of Minnesota. The same was true of the sand we used.

The whole project was fraught with comedy, pathos, and endless problems. It seemed that the inspectors were constantly reminding us of the specifications from which we dared not make the slightest deviation. Some of the work expected of us was extremely difficult, but it was because the plans and specifications made it difficult. In order to turn the marble columns on the lathes we had to drill a dowel hole in the centers of the column extremities and these later were filled with plaster of paris. It never occurred to us then that the plaster filling would draw moisture from the air but they did and when the first cold weather set in the freezing moisture expanded, broke the butts of the columns

all over the place. The outside surfaces of the marble columns had to be smooth and perfect in every respect. It was unavoidable however, in the handling of such massive weights, that now and then the surfaces of some of the columns would get chipped. We employed a fellow who called himself Michael Angelo, a stone carver who worked only at night. Angelo would slip into the building under cover of darkness, patch the damaged surfaces, and by morning they would look just as good as new. I don't think to this day that the inspectors knew the difference. But there is more waxwork in some of those battalion marble columns and staircases in the capitol than meets the eye.

Our mortar man on the project was an old timer named Magnus Magnusson, a veteran in Butler Brothers' employ, who had a singular shortcoming of disappearing for a week or two every once in a while. He had been on a more protracted drinking spree than usual and had just returned to the site when I met him one morning. After I inquired about his physical condition to be back on the job, Magnusson told me that he was feeling fine, except that his little toe hurt him.

"If that's all that's ailing you," I suggested, "Cut off the toe and get back on the job."

I hardly suspected that Magnusson would take me so literally. But a couple of hours later one of my workmen came running. Magnusson had taken off his shoe and sock, placed his foot on a marble slab, and cut off his little toe with a hand axe, and when I looked over to where he was, Magnusson was lacing up the shoe and getting ready to go back to work. We called a doctor, rushed Magnusson to the hospital and he was laid up for more than a month.

During the nearly four years required to erect the superstructure, we seldom had more than sixty men employed at one time. Wages for common laborers ranged from twelve and one half to seventeen and one half cents and hour for ten hours; stonecutters were getting forty five cents; and stonemasons, the highest paid of mechanics, sixty cents and hour. We had brought a few expert men from Georgia to help us train the Minnesota labor we were required to employ. Some of the Georgians nearly froze to death that first winter. After the construction had progressed to the interior of the building, when we needed plumbers, plasterers, heating engineers, and other crafts, we employed as many as two hundred craftsmen and laborers.

An official publication of the state of Minnesota written some years after the capitol was completed and occupied, referred to a portion of the construction in these words;

"The capitol dome is of solid grey white Georgia marble and is topped by a circular columned lantern over which is a gold ball. Encircling the base of the vaulting is a broad band from which external ribs extend ^{to} ~~from~~ the balustrade surrounding the lantern, and between these ribs are two rows of dormers. Double columns on which stand huge eagles decorate the drum and its wall is penetrated by pedimented windows. The architect boldly broke away from the conventional placing of the Greek pediment beneath the dome as in St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome and St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and set it squarely upon the central part of the main structure which is composed of horizontal and vertical lines, the whole giving an excellent impression of solidity, grace and distinction."

I believe that a sidelight to the construction of the dome is a fascinating story. It involves the imagination, mathematical genius, and wizardry of Everett Shahan, an itinerant young Irishman who was a key Butler Brothers' employee for many years.

Shanhan was at that time twenty two years old. His father had been a stone setter. Cass Gilbert's ethereal design for the dome posed a number of problems new to Butler Brothers' experience. Young Shanhan built the working pattern from which the dome was ultimately constructed piece by piece, and there were hundreds of them, in full size on the gymnasium floor of the St. Paul Y.M.C.A. Then he made out a ticket with the design and the dimensions of each piece of stone on it and the stone cutting crews worked from these.

Young Shahan had been in our employ only six months when we began to take notice of his accomplishments. At the capitol project brother Bill noticed that day after day young Shahan led the crew in the amount of cut stone he could turn out. And he was competing with some of the finest stone cutters and stone setters in the business. Shahan didn't drink or smoke and he had no interests in women. What passion he had was wrapped up in horse racing, and at least once a month he came up with a new system for beating the bookies. Gambling on the horseraces became such an obsession with him that he would stay up all night checking the past performances of the entries of the next day's horse races, adjust his own mathematical odds at beating them, and correcting the previous day's faults. in his calculations. We had no objections to an employee's indulgence in the habit of gambling, but there were days when Bill had to put a man along side of young Shahan to keep him awake. Gambling on the horses plagued Shahan most of his life and he worked for Butler Brothers intermittently over a period of thirty five years. I recall an occasion when Shahan went to sleep while I was standing talking to him. Some jack rabbits jumped out of a thicket near the project on which we were engaged and that brought Shahan to life.

He jumped to his feet and started to run after the rabbits. I told him he couldn't catch the rabbits and that he better go home and get some sleep.

Cass Gilbert had calculated the dimensions, the height and the weight of the dome with great accuracy. The distance from the ground surface to the top of the dome was intended to be two hundred and twenty feet, and the addition of the copper ball on top of the dome gave an overall height of two hundred ~~and~~ forty feet, six inches. ^{A Few} ~~Two~~ weeks after the last stone of the dome had been set in place, Gilbert returned from New York and had his engineers determine for him how much if any the dome had settled. Engineers with their tape measures swarmed over the inside and outside of the capitol and they spent hours making their mathematical calculations. After all the calculations were adjusted the engineers computed that the dome had settled a shade less than five sixteenths of an inch, which young Shahan had predicted in advance the dome would settle. The next morning the St. Paul newspapers carried headlines which said;

"CAPITOL DOME SETTLES EXACTLY THE DISTANCE
CASS GILBERT SAID IT WOULD."

Work on the capitol had progressed for more than a year before all of the law suits connected with the acquisition of the site were settled. Two who gave the state the most trouble were John Larkin and Patrick Reagan, who resisted the condemnation proceedings against their property to the limit. By the time Larkin and his family were removed from their home by the force of law, the excavators had carved a deep crater around Larkin's house, leaving it perched forty feet above the ground. Reagan was evicted a short time later. Subsequently Reagan went to work for us as a night watchman. Al Childs, who later joined the St. Paul police force, had worked for Butler Brothers several months before we learned that he had once held up a bank in Indiana. John O'Connor was chief of police. I was sitting in Charlie Bogg's saloon, Seventh and Jackson streets, St. Paul one night taking in the fun. While I watched I saw Childs revert to his pickpocketing habits and lift nine dollars out of a young Swedish workman's pocket. Chief O'Connor talked me out of prosecuting Childs. O'Connor had a peculiar philosophy regarding the handling of the criminal element. He once told me:

"Never put a man in jail to reform him. Make him work."

Of all those who had an interest in the construction of the capitol, none was more keen than my father. He knew most of the workmen by their first names. He used to make the rounds of the crews at least once a week, encouraging the men, speeding them up, and they loved him. He used to delight in getting together, usually after dinner, with his five sons, to listen to them plan work for the next day, the next week, or the next month.

It was a matter of official state pride for many years after the capitol was completed and probably still is that not one dollar in graft was paid to anyone. I know, because Butler Brothers handled most of the money.

End Chapter Six.