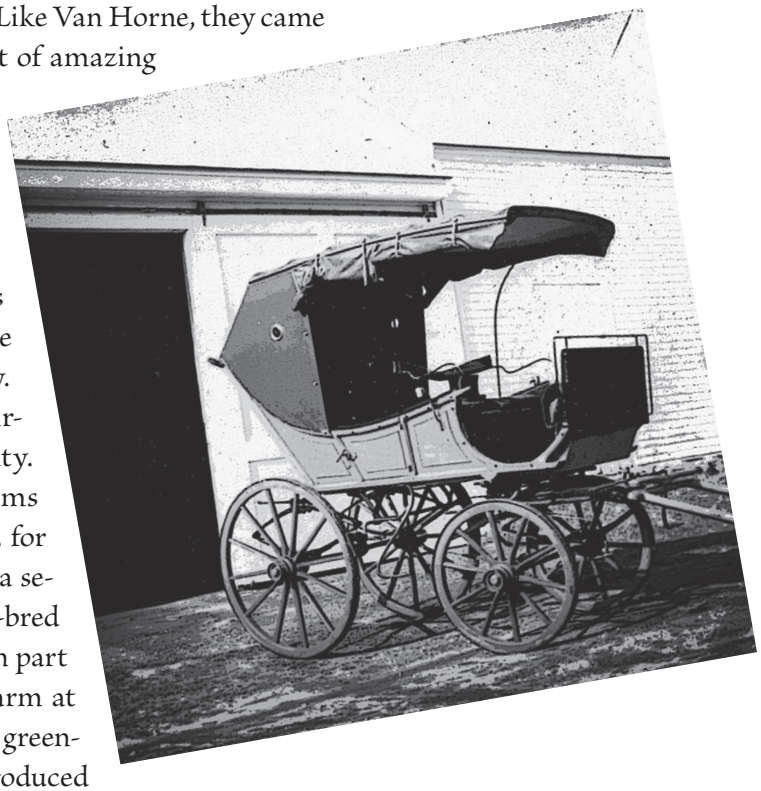
Chapter Five

POSTSCRIPT

Sir William expressed great interest in the agricultural development of the province and tendered some valuable suggestions as well as unbounded hospitality to the commissioners during their stay. Speaking of St. Andrews, Sir William said, "I consider this the best spot of any part of the world which I have ever visited, in which to live."—Saint John Telegraph*, July, 1908.*

SIR WILLIAM Van Horne was a great Canadian, and in some ways his Minister's Island estate reflected that greatness. For Van Horne wasn't just a great railroad man, the man who was in the public eye while the Canadian Pacific Railway, the great symbol today of Canadian unity, was being completed. He was that, certainly, and he certainly deserved that fame. But it remains to be asked why George Stephen, for example, and Donald Smith, investors and businessmen of genius no less important to the success of the CPR, are not today the same names to conjure with as Sir William? Like Van Horne, they came from families of modest means and by dint of amazing shrewdness and perseverance worked their way up to the very pinnacle of their professions. But while they were extraordinary in what they did, Van Horne seems to have been more of a Renaissance man. There were many facets to his character, he was always brimful of ideas, and he insisted on being the best at whatever took his wide-ranging fancy.



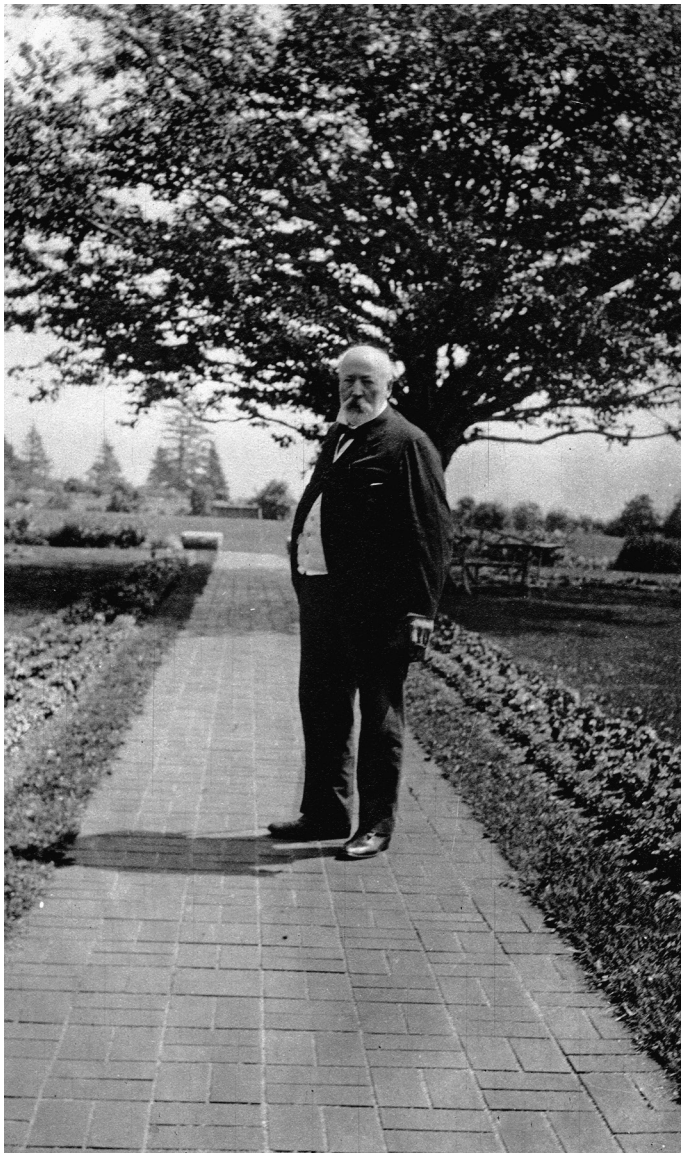
A Van Horne carriage
COURTESY HENRY CLARKE

His summer home in St. Andrews mirrored that curiosity, variety and versatility. Other summer people had their hobby farms where they could have fresh milk and eggs, for instance, but the Van Horne operation was a serious breeding farm which turned out pure-bred Clydesdale horses and Dutch Belted cattle, in part to supply his even more serious breeding farm at East Selkirk, Manitoba. Similarly with the greenhouses, vineries and grounds. The Island produced top-quality fruits and vegetables, some of which were otherwise unknown in the area. He was an expert gardener himself, and micromanaged these operations as closely as he did his cattle and horse breeding. He had a particular interest in botany, especially fungi, a passion he shared with his sister Mary and passed on to his daughter Adaline. When the Hosslers bought Minister's Island they found one room in Covenhoven whose entire theme was fungi—fungus wallpaper, ashtrays, ornaments, and a bookcase of studies on the subject. As a young man Van Horne was an amateur geologist, and one of the few pieces of Van Horne furniture still remaining in Covenhoven is a stone-topped table in which numerous fossil specimens are embedded.

As a result of the opening up of Asia by the CPR, many nineteenth-century travellers began to cultivate a taste for things Japanese, and

Van Horne was one of them. But while others might have brought back the odd souvenir or two, Van Horne became not just a collector, but a Canadian authority on Japanese pottery. His homes at Covenhoven and Sherbrooke street were filled with it. Perhaps a bit oddly for an industrialist he was also an avid painter of no mean skill. Though his compositions are valued today more for their historical value than as art, some of them are quite well done. When Van Horne was in Europe on business, he typically found or made time to visit art galleries. His homes in Montreal and St. Andrews were liberally decorated with his purchases, and formed a spectacular backdrop to any visit there. Even something as mundane as canning sardines had to be approached by Van Horne as an operation in which only the best would do, though in the case of the Canadian Sardine Company, the additional debt made an already critical situation even worse, and hastened its demise.

Upon the occasion of his retirement from the Presidency of the CPR, his son Benny wrote him a respectful letter in which he said that now that through hard work you have reached the pinnacle of success, "you may certainly claim the right to call yourself your own and enjoy your painting and entire rest." Little did he know his father. This was just before Van Horne launched himself into the Cuban Railway project, one which was to occupy him continuously for the next decade, and which would eventually employ Benny himself. Van Horne always had a vision before his eyes, drawing him onward. That was true of his vast business empire and also true of Minister's Island. Under his eye the Island was constantly being reshaped, and became a kind of work of art in itself. Just before Donald Smith's death, Van Horne wrote a letter in which he asked whether Smith intended to ever take up the option on the Island which had been held open for him for almost twenty years. All this time, he complained gently, a good part of it has been kept in a wild state. One wonders what Van Horne might have done with his much loved summer estate, had he been given complete freedom. Given the splendour of the Island under his hand, it is difficult to imagine it much more beautiful than it was.



LEFT

One of the last photographs of Van Horne
Circa July or August, 1915

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RIGHT

AUTHOR'S PHOTO, 2007