

HENRY ROWLEY

Henry Ward Rowley was born in Oneida County in upstate New York in 1858, where his father was a farmer and lumberman. The family moved to Farmington, Minnesota when Henry was 10. After high school there, he went on to take civil engineering courses at the University of Minnesota.

After graduating, Rowley got a job with the Northern Pacific Railway, and came to Montana in 1880 to work on surveys for placing railroad lines. He explained once that he rode the train as far as Bismarck, and walked the rest of the way to Billings. He continued this work for two years.

A group of NP executives and stockholders formed the Minnesota and Montana Land and Improvement Company (MMLI), which purchased from the railroad the land for the site of Billings, along with a great deal of farmland in the valley. Rowley went to work for the new company. He set to work constructing irrigation canals, and supervised the canal functions for another year. He later was active in another local canalbuilding enterprise that serviced an area now in the Heights.



In 1883, Rowley married Harriett Meeker, and together they would have six children. Five survived to adulthood, after their son Jules died at the age of 12 in 1915 from food poisoning.

During this time, Rowley had also worked real estate deals, and boosted the new town, encouraging investors to build here. One of them was capitalist Henry Belknap. Belknap became the principal investor in the Billings Water Power company, and Rowley became the manager of the company. Under his direction, the company built the city's water system, which also provided electricity to the young town. Rowley later bought controlling interest in the company. He sold the electricity generation plant to Montana Power in 1904, and the water plant to the city in 1916.

His real estate business was developed with I.D. O'Donnell about 1890, and Suburban Homes took over the remaining properties of the original townsite from MMLI. Rowley was president of this company and also of the Billings Realty company which owned many parcels north and west of the growing town. The pair made the start of the Billings Sugar company, sold a year later to Great Western Sugar. By 1910, Rowley partnered with J.B. Arnold for the Rowley-Arnold company for real estate investment, purchasing downtown properties and commercial buildings and irrigated farmland nearby.

Rowley also was one of the organizers and directors of the Merchants National Bank, and stayed on its board as it evolved into the Midland National Bank. His banking interests ranged even farther, as a director of the First National Bank of Seattle, and of the Federal Reserve bank in Helena.

In 1903, Rowley oversaw the building of the Northern Hotel, and it remained one of his primary interests. The lobby was remodeled extensively in 1912 and a third story was added later. In the 20s, it

expanded into the top floor of the building next to it. The Rowley-Arnold company built a garage next door.

Rowley, Arnold and T.A. Snidow started the Billings Traction company with a New York investor in 1911. This company ran a streetcar through Billings until the advent of automobiles made it start to lose money. Among other commercial interests, Rowley owned part of the Vaughn-Ragsdale store and owned stock in the *Billings Gazette*.

Beyond the business world, Rowley was also involved in civil affairs. He was on the first City Council after incorporation of the city in 1885. He served on the school board in the early days as well. Rowley contributed generously to local causes. He served as president and director of early chamber of commerce and Billings Commercial Club organizations. He supported the Eastern Montana Pioneers and its work in preserving memories of the settlers in the region.

Rowley joined a number of fraternal orders, including holding a number of high offices in Masonic orders. He was a charter member of the Al Bedoo Shriners in Billings.

Rowley had enjoyed long hunting trips as a young man. He later took up golf, joining the Hilands Golf Club. After becoming involved with the Seattle bank, he made a summer home on Lake Washington and joined the Seattle Yacht Club.

In the spring of 1931, Rowley contracted pneumonia, and though he recovered, he was left with a weakened heart. Rowley passed away in June of that year at the age of 72. An editorial published after his death noted that "in business he was aggressive to the point of being domineering, but he possessed remarkable vision, acumen and courage."

Sources:

- *Billings Gazette*, "Henry Ward Rowley", June 26, 1931
- *Billings Gazette*, "Long Business, Civic Career is Ended by Death", June 25, 1931
- *Billings Gazette*, "Rowley Will Build a \$20,000 Store Block on First Avenue", February 22, 1915
- *Billings Gazette*, "Street Cars Will Run Next Week", March 29, 1912
- "Biographical Facts of Henry Ward Rowley", March 7, 1925. Collection of Billings Public Library

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- Collection of Billings Public Library