

THE LOST PROMISE OF THE AMERICAN RAILROAD

Much has been written about the first 100 or so years of railroading in America, when the industry roared forward in tandem with the U.S. economy. Seldom discussed, like some embarrassing relative who went to pot, are the years since 1940.

For the most part, railroad literature consists of individual histories of the dozens of railways that sprouted during the industry's heyday. Many of these books—and there are literally hundreds of them—are more anecdotal than historical, and, as often as not, emphasize pictures at the expense of text. In recent years, however, a number of company histories that transcend the genre have been published. Among the best are James D. Dilts's **Great Road: The Building of the Baltimore & Ohio, the Nation's First Railroad, 1828–1853** (Stanford, 1993); Maury Klein's **Union Pacific**, 2 vols. (Doubleday, 1987, 1989); and Allen W. Trelease's **North Carolina Railroad, 1849–1971, and the Modernization of North Carolina** (Univ. of N.C., 1991). These books serve as antidotes to the "railroads as robber barons" school of history, epitomized by Matthew Josephson's **Robber Barons** (1934), which continues to poison public attitudes toward the industry.

Dilts, a Baltimore-based independent scholar, notes that America's first railroad, the Baltimore & Ohio, cast the mold for many others. Launched in 1827 by a group of Baltimore worthies concerned about their city's future prosperity, the B & O was partially underwritten by the city government and the state of Maryland. The pattern of collective municipal effort and public subsidy was repeated in many parts of the country. The first great railroad boom pushed rail mileage past that of canals and plank roads in the early 1850s. Route mileage reached 30,626 by 1860 and shot past 250,000 in 1916.

What was the impact? Robert W. Fogel, an economist at the University of Chicago, won a Nobel Prize in economics last year partly on the strength of his **Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric History** (1964), which argues that railroads were not nearly as essential to the growth of the 19th-cen-

tury U.S. economy as is generally believed. His view remains highly controversial. The more conventional interpretation is advanced in George Rogers Taylor's **Transportation Revolution, 1815–1860** (1951); **The American Railroad Network, 1861–1890** (1956), by Taylor and Irene D. Neu; and Edward Chase Kirkland's **Men, Cities and Transportation: A Study in New England History, 1820–1900**, 2 vols. (1948). Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., the dean of American business historians and editor of **The Railroads: The Nation's First Big Business** (1965; Arno, 1981), emphasizes that the railroads did much more than build up steel and other industries. "The swift and widespread adoption of the railroad, together with the telegraph and ocean-going steamship. . . helped to lay the foundations of the modern American economy and to transform the nation into the world's greatest industrial power. The large corporation, the craft union, the investment banking house, and the regulatory commission all moved toward their modern form in meeting the financial and operational needs of the new instruments of transportation."

The nuts and bolts of railroading are the subject of many specialized books. John H. White, Jr., senior historian emeritus at the Smithsonian Institution, artfully conveys a vast amount of information on the evolution of rolling stock in two beautifully illustrated books, **The American Railroad Passenger Car** (Johns Hopkins, 1978) and **The American Railroad Freight Car** (Johns Hopkins, 1993). Carl W. Condit's **Port of New York**, 2 vols. (Univ. of Chicago, 1980, 1981), deals with the building of Grand Central Terminal and Pennsylvania Station in New York, the two greatest private civil-works projects of their day. On a more intimate scale, the central role of the railroad depot in rural America is explored in H. Roger Grant and Charles W. Bohi's **Country Railroad Station in America** (1978; Center for Western Studies, 1988).

The colorful lingo and folklore of trainmen were the subject of several studies in the 1940s, on the eve of the shift from steam to diesel power

that was to sweep away many of the old railroad ways. Notable examples include **The Railroader** (1940), by W. Fred Cottrell, **Railroad Avenue** (1945), by Freeman Hubbard, and **A Treasury of Railroad Folklore** (1948; Bonanza, 1989), edited by B. A. Botkin and Alvin F. Harlow. Even in 1940, Cottrell, a Miami University sociologist, had to remind readers of the railroads' "glorious past." He recalled that in small-town America every "air jammer," "baby lifter" and "club winder"—occupations defined in Cottrell's 21-page glossary—earned enough to be considered a man of substance, and was entitled as well to a certain amount of swagger by dint of his role in such a daring enterprise.

The neglect of the years after railways stopped expanding extends to the field of technology. Studies of the effects of post-1930s diesel propulsion, central traffic control, and other innovations are scant and superficial. Two exceptions are **Railroads in the Age of Regulation, 1900–1980** (1988), edited by University of Akron business historian Keith L. Bryant, Jr., which contains profiles of railroad executives and companies through the 1970s, and **The Life and Decline of the American Railroad** (Oxford, 1970), by John F. Stover, a Purdue University historian.

As the sickest part of the business, the passenger train has suffered from similar neglect. No one has bothered to write a comprehensive history of railroad passenger travel. By far the best documentation of the private-sector passenger train's problems comes from government reports and from the pages of railway and business magazines. Highly useful are the **Reports of the Special Committee on the Railroad Passenger Deficit Problem**, issued by the National Association of Railroad and Utilities Commissioners (1952, 1953, 1955, 1957). They document how federal airline subsidies undermined the economic viability of intercity rail service, and how ill-designed labor contracts exacerbated the problem. James C. Nelson's **Railroad Transportation and Public Policy** (1959) is a helpful, if

dry, supplement on the shifting nature of federal transportation policies. Other sources include the special issue of *Trains* magazine (April 1959), "Who Shot the Passenger Train?," and John Walker Barriger's **Super-Railroads** (1956), a forward-looking work suggesting ways in which rail service could be improved through public and private investment.

The development of Amtrak has revived interest in passenger trains, though most observers pay more attention to transportation politics than to improvements in service and technology. **Amtrak** (American Enterprise Inst., 1980) is a strongly argued critique of existing passenger service by economist George W. Hilton, cited by the Reagan administration in its attempt to cut off Amtrak's public subsidies. In **Off the Track** (Greenwood, 1985), Donald M. Itzkoff, a congressional staff member, also criticizes Amtrak's performance, but places much of the blame on Republicans in the White House. Amtrak also comes under unflattering scrutiny in **Supertrains** (St. Martin's, 1991), by Joseph Vranich, president of the High Speed Rail/Maglev Association.

One of the more valuable books of recent years on American railroads is Albro Martin's **Railroads Triumphant** (Oxford, 1992). The professor emeritus of history at Bradley University begins by asking why "an innovation as clearly revolutionary" as railroads came to be "despised and rejected" by the public. In no uncertain terms, he blames government overregulation for the plight of the railroads, and breathes a sigh of relief that the "stinking corpse" of this sort of regulation was buried with the Staggers Rail Act of 1980. The law reduced federal regulation of freight rates and otherwise freed the industry to compete with truckers and other rivals. The revival of the rail-freight business in recent years owes much to this measure. Martin thinks that even passenger rail will stage a comeback, and he writes serenely that we are at the dawn of "a new railroad age."

—Mark Reutter