

Book Notices

Platte River Road Narratives: A Descriptive Bibliography of Travel over the Great Central Overland Route to Oregon, California, Utah, Colorado, Montana, and Other Western States and Territories, 1812-1866, by Merrill J. Mattes. Foreword by James A. Michener. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988. xiv, 632 pp. Map, index. \$95.00 cloth.

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The title of this monumental reference book accurately describes its scope and implies its value to scholars. Merrill Mattes, a retired National Park Service researcher, has examined the holdings of ninety-six libraries to identify, describe, and evaluate 2,082 diaries, journals, letters, or recollections of more than fifty years of travel over the Great Platte River Road.

Mattes arranges entries chronologically by year of travel and then alphabetically by surname. Most entries comprise a rating system of up to five stars, a brief description of the text, its location(s), a summary of the itinerary followed by the author, a synopsis of the contents (often with highly effective quotation from the original), and a terse but well-informed evaluation by the editor. Mattes sets each text in a context, cross-references some of them, and interprets many problematic matters such as multiple and changing place names, common misperceptions, and misspelled surnames of people met on the way. A map and additional introductory material not only clarify the geography but also facilitate the use of this reference book.

This volume provides an invaluable overview of more than two thousand first-person narratives relating to the movement of a half-million people along a significant route into the West during the half-century before the railroad replaced the trail. Clear summaries, commentaries, and bibliographic references will help other scholars understand this important aspect of American history; and the quality of the questions the compiler posed in approaching this work will speed research by others who address themselves to questions of how—over a period of some fifty years—people of different ages, backgrounds, and genders experienced migration from the Midwest into the West.

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