

Steam and Cinders: The Advent of Railroads in Wisconsin, 1831–1861, by Axel S. Lorenzsonn. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2009. ix, 342 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, indexes. \$29.95, cloth.

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Wisconsin, with 7,554 miles of rail line in 1920, ranked 12th at that time among states in that respect. Its steamcar evolution was typical of what happened elsewhere. Early impulses dated from 1831, but they were extremely premature. By the end of 1850, however, Wisconsin claimed 20 miles of route in service, and before initial Civil War shots were fired the state boasted 925 miles of track. *Steam and Cinders* offers to tell “the story of the first thirty years of railroads in Wisconsin” (ix). The record here is part and parcel of this country’s early railroad westering experience — exuberant boosterism with promotions running well ahead of justifiable demand for transport. Wisconsin’s population was scant, its potential traffic volume inadequate, and investment capital proved to be scarce, competitive, and expensive. Nonetheless, enthusiastic advocates at Kenosha, Racine, Milwaukee, Sheboygan, and Fond du Lac — rival places all — dreamed of innovative financing that they hoped might merge rails from a bewildering array of pioneer roads, some of them mere “paper” fantasies, others that actually threw down ties and rail upon elementary grades that, for the most part, inched horizontally across the state from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River, with a growing overlay of vertical arteries stretching northward from the Illinois frontier. Much of the focus is on Milwaukee and on Byron Kilbourn and his many errands.

Steam and Cinders is a useful step-by-step recitation of early railroad development in Wisconsin. It is dense with detail and with tales of rejoicing when rails finally reached one aspiring community or another. Yet the Wisconsin record is not analyzed in broad context — it is not mirrored adequately against important economic and political patterns and directions, nor is it set against the rapidly unfolding national and regional railroad network. There is a tip of the hat to the growth and development of Chicago railroads as powerful tools of urban economic imperialism skillfully employed by business barons of that muscular city, but neighboring Iowa and Minnesota are barely mentioned. Wisconsin’s railroad experience appears as if in a vacuum.