

When the Railroad Leaves Town: American Communities in the Age of Rail Line Abandonment. Volume 2, Western United States, by Joseph P. Schwieterman. Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2004. xxxii, 333 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper.

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Few industries have suffered as public a meltdown as U.S. railroads. At their peak in 1916, carriers operated 254,251 miles of track, served 75,000 towns, and affected virtually everyone's life as traveler, shipper, consumer, or employee. By 1996, they had abandoned approximately one-half of that mileage, ceased serving more than 40,000 towns, and had essentially disappeared from public consciousness. In Iowa, the state's rail system shrank from a peak of 10,500 miles in 1914 to 4,163 miles by 2005—a decline of over 60 percent.

Joseph P. Schwieterman's two-volume *When the Railroad Leaves Town* describes this drastic decline and its effects. Volume one covers the states east of the Mississippi plus Missouri. Volume two, reviewed here, examines 58 towns in 25 western states, including Wisconsin. Twelve of those communities are in California, two (Decorah and West Branch) are in Iowa, and between one and four in each of the other states.

The author presents a brief history of each town from its founding through the rise and fall of rail service, concluding with the community's response to abandonment. Regardless of the state, these histories have an amazingly similar progression: a rail line is built primarily to serve a specific industry or constituency, whether mining (Virginia City, NV, and Platteville, WI), farming (Currie, MN, and West Branch, IA), lumber (Bothell, WA, and Ely, MN), vacationers (Hot Springs, SD, and Eureka Springs, AK), suburbanites (Lake Geneva, WI, and San Rafael, CA), or industry (Decorah, IA, and Carpentersville, IL). Rail service reaches its peak and then . . . the mines play out, the forests are stripped, mineral springs lose their appeal, industries close, farm prices drop. Cars and trucks begin to siphon away the remaining traffic. The Great Depression comes close to being the final blow. World War II offers a respite by boosting passenger and freight traffic, but after VJ Day, the old trends resume—interstate highways, the decline of manufacturing, the rise of a service and tourist economy, the depopulation of rural areas, railroad mergers, bankruptcies, and deregulation—and all too often the result is a rusted locomotive hauling a few freight cars down a weed-grown track for the last time.

The heart of *When the Railroad Leaves Town* is what happens after abandonment. There are some happy endings: Sacramento's conver-

sion of the Folsom, CA, branch into a light rail line; the rebuilding of the legendary Virginia & Truckee Railroad in Nevada; far-sighted governments that have purchased abandoned lines and are holding them for future use either intact or as hiking or biking trails. More commonly, though, the book recounts often fierce landowner opposition to re-opening abandoned lines or to converting them into trails (Decorah and West Branch are examples of the latter). Other outcomes: plans to acquire defunct lines are thwarted by lack of financing; proposed tourist railroads never get off the ground (West Branch's stillborn excursion train to West Liberty is one example); community-owned short lines fail due to lack of shipper support.

In the histories he has written and the conclusions he draws from them, Schwieterman has produced a valuable book. One conclusion that strikes the reader repeatedly is the inevitability and ruthlessness of change in a market economy—even the most basic and flourishing industries can wither and die. Given this reality, the railroads often made defensibly rational decisions to abandon lines after the original reasons for their existence had vanished. And once a line is gone, it is very hard to bring back.

The maps that accompany each town are exceptional, showing every location—town, lake, junction—mentioned in the text. Although this is not a photo book, the selection of photographs, both historic and contemporary, is excellent (the view of train time at the Milwaukee Road's Decorah depot in the 1920s is classic). Of interest to railroad archeologists and preservationists, a brief epilogue at the end of each chapter describes what artifacts (structures, rails, grades, and fills) remain from the abandoned railroad.

The title may lead some readers to expect a more detailed analysis of the economic effects of railroad abandonments on each town. Unfortunately, the author specifically puts such analysis outside the scope of his work—certainly his prerogative—but the book would have been more useful if it had included an examination of specific pre- and post-abandonment economic indicators—such as sales tax receipts, property values, employment—so that readers could see how much of an effect an abandonment actually had on a community. At the end of the book Schwieterman does summarize the economic effects of abandonments on rural, urban, and metropolitan areas and illustrates these effects using town histories. This is helpful, but it is still a general summary.

That said, *When the Railroad Leaves Town* will be of interest and value to students of social and railroad history and of economic trends.

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