

Book Reviews

ments and in organizing relief expeditions for beleaguered emigrants is thorough and well documented.

The foundation of intensive research is constantly evident in these two books. Scholars of the westward emigration would have been indebted for the bibliographies alone. However, a word or two on style would not be remiss. Unruh's presentation is far more successful than is Mattes'. Unruh has more thematic headings under which to marshal a wealth of illustration, but he uses illustration with far greater restraint than does Mattes. With essentially one thematic concern, Mattes quickly and consistently engages in quotation overkill. Unruh can occasionally be faulted for over-argumentation. Taken together, however, these two historians have made richly significant contributions.

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The Devil Wagon in God's Country: The Automobile and Social Change in Rural America, 1893-1929, by Michael L. Berger. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1979. pp. 269. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$17.50.

During the period covered by *The Devil Wagon in God's Country*, the automobile, in the eyes of rural Americans, evolved from a physical menace symbolizing the decadence of the city into a practical necessity providing a richer style of life. After first blocking its intrusion with restrictive laws, ruralists discarded their qualms and purchased nine million automobiles by 1930. Michael L. Berger has examined the automobile as an agent of social change in the countryside and in small towns. "The motor car," he writes, "transformed the very institutions that defined life outside urban areas" (p. 52).

Adoption of the automobile eroded the cohesiveness of rural families and shook the walls of local loyalties. Picking friends, choosing where to trade, affiliating with organizations—all became transactions based more on individual choice and less on physical proximity. Leisure activity changed from home gatherings and communal endeavors to escapist recreation, including band concerts, motion pictures, roadhouses, and tourism, all separate from home and work. Country churches and hospitals withered, but at the same time clergy-

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men and physicians used increased mobility to serve their charges better, although perhaps on a less personal basis. School consolidation accelerated with motorized transportation of students, forcing farmers and urbanites to cooperate in at least one area of common interest. County extension agents and traveling public librarians penetrated the hinterlands with technology and culture. Noisy engines, smelly exhausts, and garish billboards disrupted rural tranquillity. Motels, gasoline stations, and other service businesses sprang up.

Berger evaluates the social effects of the motor car without bias, refusing to invoke the anachronistic sense of loss of innocence that it would be so easy to adopt in a study such as this. In an argument proffered for its very obviousness, he absolves the automobile, an inanimate machine, from credit or blame for social changes, for it was only the tool by which people realized their wishes. "The motor car was not introduced by government fiat, nor were funds voted for its acquisition by the village council," he points out. "Purchase was an individual act" (p. 74). Individuals and families acted separately to fulfill what they saw as their best interests. Since they also acted concurrently, their individual choices accomplished vast changes.

Devil Wagon is a useful, readable, good book that meets a need in the history of rural America. Based largely on periodicals, government reports, and reminiscences, it is by nature a general survey that leaves room for research more specific in topic and scope. For instance, the work does not consider the different effects the automobile might have wrought in diverse regions. Since most social adjustments to the automobile involved a changing perspective of distance, then they must have varied at least in degree among regions with different densities of population. Developments in Iowa may have diverged considerably from those in Montana or Delaware.

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