

The same was true after graduation. Had he revealed his history with polio, he might have been classified 4-F and exempted from military duty. Instead, he neglected to tell anyone, did his military service, and then returned to civilian life as a graduate student. What followed was a long career in extension and in teaching and in writing. At every turn, he pushed himself to succeed. Today, he continues writing while fighting with post-polio syndrome, a return of symptoms that affects many adult survivors in their later years.

*Limping through Life* is well worth reading. It is an engaging mid-western story of pain, striving, and hard work. Apps's descriptions of his parents' reactions to his illness are priceless and heartbreaking. His father's successful attempt to rehabilitate him through hard work and horse liniment captures both the strengths and weaknesses of farm families facing hardship. They made the best they could of what they had but unfortunately missed the damaged soul that needed tending. This story of farm childhood, polio, and making a new life where a weak leg would not matter is bound to intrigue anyone with an interest in the history of the Midwest, agriculture, or childhood, and makes an excellent addition to the list of recently published memoirs detailing farm life at the middle of the twentieth century.

*Rock Island Requiem: The Collapse of a Mighty Fine Line*, by Gregory L. Schneider. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2013. xviii, 380 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$37.50 hardcover.

Reviewer Kevin Byrne is professor emeritus of history at Gustavus Adolphus College. His research and writing have focused on military history and the history of technology and railroads.

In the words of a venerable song, the Rock Island line was "a mighty fine line." Gregory Schneider's history of the railroad from roughly 1948 to 1988, however, demonstrates that the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad became a mighty troubled line during those years. How those troubles arose, how executives sought to allay them, and how their efforts failed are the central issues Schneider explores. The Rock Island—ultimately extending from Chicago through Des Moines to Denver, from St. Paul to Galveston, and into Memphis and New Mexico—had played a significant role in midwestern history since the 1850s. Following World War II, however, the company ran aground, eventually leading to the massive liquidation that accounts for the term *requiem* in the book's title.

A historian of American conservatism, Schneider admits to deep affection for this particular railroad. The author's regard for "the Rock"

is evident throughout his well-researched volume, as he seeks to explain the demise of what had been a powerful midwestern railroad. He draws knowledgeable on government hearings and legal proceedings, the railroad's corporate archives, newspaper accounts, and the work of other scholars to produce a "policy history" (9) involving lots of business and legal history. Familiarity with topics such as regulatory agencies, mergers, and bankruptcy is not absolutely necessary but helpful for understanding Schneider's account.

Emerging from 15 years of bankruptcy in 1948, the Rock Island prospered for a decade as America's economy boomed. By 1960, though, declining profitability led the railroad's president and its directors to seek assistance. The most promising, and perhaps sole, solution involved merger. Of two main suitors, managers concluded that the Union Pacific Railroad presented the sounder option, given its fiscal strength and complementary service area. Merger, however, required permission from the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), which opened hearings in 1964. To the chagrin of management and the detriment of the railroad's fiscal and physical condition, those hearings stretched on for 11 years. Schneider rightly castigates the ICC for the unreasonable delay, although his narrative also points strongly to the machinations of the president of the Chicago & North Western, who repeatedly devised legal and procedural obstructions to thwart the merger. In fact, many other railroads contributed to the devastating interval, placing narrow self-interest ahead of a more comprehensive solution to the industry's problems. Each objection lengthened the process.

Schneider also criticizes the federal government for withholding from the Rock Island the corporate welfare it lavished on the Pennsylvania–New York Central merger (the Penn-Central) and later on Conrail. Unlike the Rock Island, those entities received enormous outlays of federal dollars. By 1974, when the ICC finally approved the Rock Island merger, Union Pacific leadership had lost interest, and the Rock Island filed for bankruptcy once more the following year. Rampant inflation, a stagnant economy, and oil crises in the 1970s exacerbated the railroad's headaches. Despite subsidies from the states of Iowa and Illinois and some shippers, declining revenues doomed the railroad. A court-appointed trustee labored for five years to develop a viable reorganization plan but was stymied at each critical point. Some of the Rock Island's own investors preferred its liquidation, as did competing railroads, and labor unions successfully lobbied to continue service on drastically unprofitable routes. Mother Nature also piled on, producing three brutal winters in the late 1970s. A major labor strike precipitated

the final crisis. The Carter administration partially deregulated railroads in 1980, too late to stave off the company's termination.

Remarkably, liquidation proved successful. In 1984 the Rock Island became the Chicago Pacific Corporation. While maintaining railroad holdings, the corporation diversified into several other sectors and benefited from an improving economic environment. Maytag purchased Chicago Pacific in 1988. The core east-west line, meanwhile, emerged as the Iowa Interstate Railroad, and the core north-south tracks ironically were subsumed by the Union Pacific. All prospered.

The "major culprit" (297) in the demise of the Rock Island, Schneider concludes, was the federal regulatory system. Certainly the failure of federal agencies to adjust to a changing economic landscape led to profound inequities; for example, trucking and airline industries competed with railroads but received billions of dollars in indirect subsidies (via the interstate highway system and tax-financed municipal airports). Yet Schneider acknowledges that several other culprits were crucial, even noting that "the biggest reason for the Rock Island's collapse" was far more structural and complex: "shifts in technology, demographics, communication, and government relations with business" (299). Overall, his evidence supports this more nuanced emphasis, one accentuating an array of forces, from weather to organized labor to determined, even devious, resistance by railroad leaders to the Rock Island's survival. Readers, of course, will judge for themselves how to apportion blame. And many will join Schneider in understandably lamenting the loss of a railroad crucial to the Midwest's past.

*RAGBRAI: America's Favorite Bicycle Ride*, by Greg Borzo. Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013. 168 pp. Illustrations, tables, index. \$22.99 paperback.

Reviewer Leo Landis is museum curator at the State of Iowa Historical Museum, where he curated the exhibit, *Riding through History: A River-to-River Legacy on Wheels*.

The *Des Moines Register's* Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa (RAGBRAI) began in 1973, when John Karras and Donald Kaul invited readers to participate in a six-day ride from Sioux City to Davenport. It lacked organization and did not have an official name or vendor support. Today, it is a seven-day ride, and the *Register* claims that it is the oldest, largest, and longest recreational bicycle ride in the world. It attracts an international audience numbering more than 10,000 cyclists.