
*Main Lines: Rebirth
of the North
American Railroads,
1970-2002,*
by Richard
Saunders, Jr.,
Northern Illinois
University Press,
2003. 436 pp.
\$49.95 hardbound

Contemporary History Impressively Told

Main Lines is destined to become the standard work on the railroad renaissance of the past 30 years. Unlike Albro Martin's bombastic and polemical *Railroads Triumphant*, Richard Saunders' *Main Lines* leavens the author's optimism and enthusiasm with careful analysis, extensive documentation, and a willingness to mete out criticism where criticism is due. This book and its predecessor *Merging Lines* (reviewed in No. 187) have established Saunders as one of the preeminent historians of American railroading. Taken together, these two books—which reflect Saunders' research at the Interstate Commerce Commission and his obvious affection for that unfairly discredited agency—provide a magisterial synthesis of railroad history during the 20th century.

Main Lines begins with Penn Central's collapse in 1970 and with many other railroads on the verge of a death spiral—unable to generate enough revenue or attract sufficient financing to keep their track in good repair, thus producing poor service and further declines in traffic in revenues. Yet railroads contained the seeds of their own revival. A few farsighted, nontraditional managers understood the importance of marketing initiatives, quality service, and such new technologies as piggyback, computers, and unit coal trains. The PC bankruptcy persuaded labor leaders that the entire railroad industry was indeed teetering on the brink of disaster, and they negotiated significant wage and work-rule concessions.

The federal government, unwilling to contemplate either nationalization or a total collapse of the railroad industry, negotiated a middle course of deregulation and government assistance. This included the 1973 Regional Rail Reorganization (3R) Act and the 1976 Railroad Revitalization and Reform (4R) Act, both of which were precursors to the 1980 Staggers Act. The Federal Railroad Administration provided loans that allowed some railroads to rehabilitate their lines and restore adequate service, yet consigned other, marginal routes to extinction. A necessary elimination of excess capacity, perhaps, but one that had anguishing consequences for many companies, workers, and communities. Finally, the often-overlooked 1981 Economic Recovery Tax Act dramatically increased the industry's ability to generate capital by treating the right of way as a depreciable asset. As important as these developments were, they would not have saved the



Hardcoal Chronicles

Union Pacific unit train 9157 with high-capacity coal hoppers near Bill, Wyo., on May 7, 1997

railroads without the increased productivity and the new technologies that were already being implemented.

While revitalized railroads gained traffic and increased their rate of return, ominous signs of trouble lay ahead. Relatively small mergers (such as Union Pacific's acquisition of Chicago & North Western) caused service disruptions. When the Surface Transportation Board replaced the ICC, attempts to maintain competition gave way to an ideological commitment to free-market economics. The result was rubber-stamp mergers, the "meltdown" that followed the UP-Southern Pacific merger, the mismanaged breakup of Conrail, and growing outrage from shippers. Even with those problems under control, railroads struggling to accommodate soaring traffic levels are currently facing an unexpected shortage of capacity.

Main Lines links railroads to the largest global events, and to the smallest midwestern town, and to everything in between. In other words, the book situates railroads exactly where they should be: embedded in a complex political, economic, and social matrix. This is a masterful achievement, especially because Saunders provides such a detailed overview of railroads as large as Burlington Northern Santa Fe and as small as New York, Susquehanna & Western. This diversity itself illustrates that once-mighty railroads can be reduced to near-oblivion, and then reborn, as competitive patterns and corporate strategies change.

The encyclopedic coverage of all of these events can get a bit tedious and repetitive. Saunders himself suggests following the fortunes of specific railroads by skipping through the

book, rather than reading it from cover to cover. The first chapter in particular (and Saunders acknowledges this) both restates information from *Merging Lines* and provides a rudimentary overview of the railroad industry that most readers would find unnecessary. However, subsequent chapters often presume that readers have substantial background knowledge of railroad operations and railroad geography. The book's 48 maps help considerably in this instance, but (as was the case in *Merging Lines*) they are prone to error: the Southern Pacific diverged from its Cotton Belt subsidiary at Corsicana, not "Corsicane" (p. 273) and the Mississippi state capitol is in Jackson, not "Jacksonville" (p. 284)

While Saunders generally delivers on his promise to give the reader "the factual foundation" without ideology (p. xii), he does sometimes play favorites. It is clear that he applauds bipartisan political pragmatism (and Democrats and Republicans alike contributed to the salvation of the railroad industry), abhors ideological zealotry (as manifested in the "fire-sale" privatization of Conrail), and considers the deregulation of all other industries, contemporaneous with the Staggers Act, to have been abject failures. Saunders divides railroad management into three basic groups: nice guys caught in the past, dedicated and outstandingly innovative saviors, and financially manipulative martinetts, yet the book's scope is so sweeping that we can do little more than accept his assessment with little detailed corroborating evidence.

The book contains little information on passenger traffic in general and Amtrak in particular; this is appropriate, given the mix of traffic and freight on American railroads. In spite of its focus on North American railroads, only a dozen or so pages discuss the major Canadian carriers and the deregulation of the Canadian railroad industry. Aside from the effects of NAFTA, there is virtually no mention of the Mexican railroad industry (Mexico is in North America, after all) and its insightful saga of nationalization and privatization.

These criticisms are insignificant when compared to the impressive scope and analytical content of this history. *Main Lines* is somewhat more relevant and useful than *Merging Lines*, if only for its greater immediacy and its broader context. The two books, taken together, provide academic audiences, railroad enthusiasts and, it is to be hoped, industry executives and elected officials with the best overview they are likely to find of the evolution of railroading during the last century.

Albert Churella is a historian of business and technology at Southern Polytechnic State University. He is currently researching a history of the Pennsylvania Railroad.