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Twilight Rails: The Final Era of Railroad Building in the Midwest

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identify the few who have been so influential in affecting the behavior and experiences of so many who have lived in the Twin Cities metropolitan area and major cities in the upper Midwest. Iowans who have visited Minnesota as business men and women, shoppers, sports fans, or vacationers will also recognize the impact that major buildings have on those who benefit from their presence.

For Iowa architects, readers should consult David Gebhard and Gerald Mansheim's *Buildings of Iowa* (1993), a guide to important structures across the state; the recent Iowa Public Television production "A Century of Iowa Architecture," presenting 50 significant buildings of the twentieth century and interpreting their meaning in the context of function and aesthetics of architecture (www.iptv.org); the Iowa Chapter of the American Institute of Architecture's *A Century of Iowa Architecture, 1900–1999* (2004); and Wesley I. Shank's *Iowa's Historic Architects: A Biographical Dictionary* (1999).

Twilight Rails: The Final Era of Railroad Building in the Midwest, by H. Roger Grant. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. xiv, 275 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$39.95 cloth.

Reviewer Gregory Ames is curator of the John W. Barriger III National Railroad Library, University of Missouri–St. Louis. He is the author of *Old Maud — A Life and Times: America's Pioneer Mallet* (2006).

At the turn of the twentieth century, there was no greater hope for a town of any size than to be on a railroad line. Railroads dominated not only the nation's economic landscape but its social and cultural life as well. To be "on the map" meant being on a *railroad* map. Many towns without a railroad felt the need to entice one in their direction or build one of their own, even in a state as well-networked with railroad track as Iowa was in 1900. H. Roger Grant, one of our foremost railroad historians, grew interested in these "twilight railroads," those built in the evening of the "railroad building craze." His latest book chronicles and evaluates the motivations, contributions, successes, and failures of eight such railroads from eight states in the Midwest from 1900 to 1930. More than "pure" business history, this book bridges economic and social as well as state and local history.

Grant, the Kathryn and Calhoun Lemon Professor of History at Clemson University, has written some 26 railroad and transportation-related books, including works on the Erie-Lackawanna, the Wabash, and the Chicago & North Western railroads. Lately, he has abandoned the large "Class 1" railroads on which he built his scholarly reputation to focus on smaller, ne'er-do-well pikes. These have special appeal to

rail enthusiasts who are susceptible to the romance of lost causes. Historians, economists, and general readers, however, might question the usefulness of looking so intimately at lines with comparatively little historical or economic import. But that is precisely the point: micro-economic stories have their own revelations of the macroeconomy to tell. Although few of the railroads described here can be seen as successful, their story is worth the telling. One of them, the Missouri, Arkansas & Gulf, wasn't much more than a "paper railroad," and most of the lines described here lived a kind of "twilight existence" — half dead and half alive (this is not the sense of the word Grant uses in his title) — until automobiles, trucks, or the Great Depression delivered a *coup de gras*. One, the Akron, Canton & Youngstown Railroad, proved a most important and "going concern." Its trackage is still in use today.

Thoroughly researched and remarkably readable, the chapters constituting this book are more than corporate histories. Presented here are human interest stories that are by turns humorous, poignant, and occasionally tragic; some of them have the emotional immediacy of a foreclosure notice. Readers may sympathize with some of the major players depicted here — townspeople, investors, and promoters alike — as they strive as we do today for economic relevance in a rapidly changing world. Many overly enthusiastic railroad builders paid the price of their naïve capitalism. The Creston, Winterset & Des Moines Railroad, dubbed the *Crazy Willy & Dandy Molly*, was lauded by one newspaperman as "Iowa's brightest railway project." Such hyperbole led many an overly optimistic investor astray. This short line endured more than its fair share of economic and psychological ups and downs as well as a painful and lingering demise that will make many readers wish for it a more merciful end.

If this book has a flaw, it is this: Grant is convinced of the economic benefits or contributions even of those less successful lines he depicts. "What became a distinguishing and historically significant feature of twilight railroads," he writes, "was the economic development they spawned. . . . Even the least successful road . . . improved the economic health of the area that it served." Grant is such a consummate researcher that one is tempted to take his word for it. But saying something does not make it so. Grant should support his claim more authoritatively than he does. He needn't venture where cliometricians dare to go, but some statistics and greater analysis would have done much to make this an even more valuable book than it is. Such research would serve neither to justify nor to vilify railroad proponents of that time, but to enable us to better interpret their railroad dreams and decision making, perhaps even equip us to make better decisions of our own.

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