



The West The Railroads Made

Carlos A. Schwantes

James P. Ronda

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Bold entrepreneurs, big visions, daring engineering, great scenery, a huge new economy, and sweeping social change are among the elements that Carlos Schwantes and James Ronda masterfully describe in their exuberant and lavishly illustrated volume. The “Pacific railroad” was a fine, much-discussed dream, but hard reality required immense projects, armies of settlers, and endless revenue; in 1848, Asa Whitney, in stating, “I propose, by this work itself, to change the wilderness waste to cities, villages, and richly cultivated fields,” announced a hope and foretold an outcome. But, in the event, Huntington, Hop-kins, Stanford, and Crocker, whose names live on in California, were the builders. And, of course, the spread of the railroads trans-formed the West, confronting nature, adding (and occasionally removing) physical features, and also, through imaginative publications, marketing an unknown half of the American continent.

The authors’ narrative demonstrates that the railroads achieved nothing less than a revolution, powerfully shaping the development of Chicago, St. Louis, Seattle, and other cities, and dealing a blow to steam navigation as well as river and canal transportation, leading the way for telegraph lines and the demise of the Pony Express, and changing the nation’s time-keeping habits with “railway time.”

PETER SKINNER (January 9, 2009)

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