Richard T. Wallis has written a David and Goliath railroad story that has all the elements of a corporate thriller. He sets the locally owned and operated Hoosier line, the Terre Haute & Indianapolis that opened in 1852, against the juggernaut of the East, the Pennsylvania Railroad, which coveted the road to cement its connections with St. Louis. William McKeen, a Terre Haute banker and an archetypal self-made man, fought off powerful opponents such as James McCrea and George Roberts to preserve his control of the TH&I and ensure that it served his home town.

The author not only sets the local railway in the national context but has written a book that is partly a McKeen biography and partly a TH&I corporate history. He succeeds on both counts; he concentrates on the tension between McKeen’s aspirations (both personal and corporate) and his battle with the eastern interests, but he never loses sight of the story’s main threads.

To further attract the reader, Wallis injects a large dose of evil in the personage of Henry S. Ives, an obscure, tubercular financier who, in his short appearance on the national stage just before he went to jail, tried to take over the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. McKeen made the biggest mistake of his life in 1887 when, after failing to sell the small railway empire he had assembled around the TH&I to the Pennsylvania interests, he suddenly unloaded his shares to Ives, who promptly milked the TH&I of its assets to buy the B&O.

McKeen ultimately emerges as the hero of the saga. After Ives went broke, McKeen took over the TH&I and welded together a patchwork system, the Vandalia lines, and labored to pull it back from the brink of bankruptcy. Getting older and exhausted by his political exertions on behalf of the Indiana Republican party and running his bank in Terre Haute, he sold out to the Pennsylvania in 1894.

Wallis has adeptly chronicled a prime example of what was happening all over the country as railway consolidations gobbled up smaller, independently-owned railways. While it was inevitable that the Vandalia’s location, directly athwart the Pennsylvania’s interests, would sooner or later undermine the company’s independence, McKeen postponed that outcome as long as possible.

The book is graced by good writing and a wonderful story; its maps and photographs also greatly enhance the volume. The Pennsylvania at Bay is a valuable addition to the meager railroad literature on midwestern roads and their relationships with their much more powerful eastern connections.

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