

*Main Lines**Rebirth of the North American Railroads, 1970-2002*

By Richard Saunders, Jr.

(DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003. Pp. xxi, 436. Maps, tables, notes, works cited, index. \$49.95.)

Richard Saunders, Jr., calls this volume “the first that I know of to cover this material in a systematic way, a kind of first draft of history” (p. xii). Intended as a sequel to his earlier *Merging Lines: The American Railroads, 1900-1970* (2001), this work provides an extraordinarily detailed and insightful look at the complex and profound reconfiguration of American railroads since the Penn Central debacle. During these thirty years the once-crowded ranks of major railroads, each with its own proud name and heritage, boiled down into four American and two Canadian mega-systems surrounded by coveys of smaller lines. In the process the nature as well as the structure of railroading underwent profound changes.

The Penn Central bankruptcy in June 1970 signaled a broader financial and operational crisis in American railroads at a time when they were struggling to handle more traffic than ever before. Woefully short of investment capital, plagued by archaic work rules, hamstrung by regulation attuned to a much earlier era, burdened by unprofitable passenger traffic, and haunted by the fear of nationalization, the railroad industry underwent an astonishing metamorphosis. A government corporation,

Conrail, meshed the better remains of Penn Central into a giant but efficient rail company that finally turned a profit in 1981. Another government corporation, Amtrak, relieved the railroads of their passenger traffic in 1971 and remains a lightning rod of controversy, especially to congressional conservatives.

Three pivotal pieces of legislation, the 3R (1973), 4R (1976), and Staggers (1980) acts, freed the carriers from the shackles of rate and other regulation, enabling them to make contract rates, shed unprofitable branch lines, and innovate in other ways that helped attract much needed capital to the industry. The struggle to modernize work rules dragged on for two decades. “With the labor settlement of 1991,” notes Saunders, “the railroads had the ingredients of their rebirth in place. The physical plant was sound. They had the technology to compete in time-sensitive, service-oriented markets. They had the flexibility to deploy labor productively” (p. 219). The loosened regulatory environment also prompted a series of mergers that redrew the railroad map into one dominated by super systems fed by regional and local lines forged from castoff roads. The result was a revitalized industry serving global markets with the aid

of new technologies and techniques that would have stunned earlier railroad men. The new American railroad bore little resemblance to its ancestor lines, which remained steeped in cultural nostalgia even as they became business dinosaurs.

This bare outline does little justice to Saunders's rich narrative. He has tackled a dense, convoluted chain of events and given them not only clarity but a persuasive interpretation as well. His spare, punchy style works well with this material, and he weaves his own views into the narrative in a graceful and unobtrusive manner. Above all, he reminds us that rail-

roads remain a vital and indispensable part of the American transportation system at a time when most people are scarcely aware of their existence. Far from being a tentative "first draft of history," this work is likely to remain the standard account of how the modern rail system came into being for some time to come.

MAURY KLEIN is professor of History at the University of Rhode Island, Kingston. He is the author of several books and articles on American railroad history, including *Unfinished Business: The Railroad in American Life* (1994).

