

for faculty and students and of institutional commitments in public and private affairs despite intense political criticism. The famous quotation inscribed on a plaque in Bascom Hall, 1915, expressed in general what Van Hise himself successfully stood for: "Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe the great University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found" (p. 206).

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*The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad.* By Larry Gara. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1961. Pp. ix, 201. Index. \$5.00.)

"The legend of the underground railroad," according to Larry Gara, "tells of intrepid abolitionists sending multitudes of passengers over a well-organized transportation system to the Promised Land of freedom" (p. 2). The legend had its origin in the ante bellum period, but it reached its greatest flowering in reminiscences and memoirs published in the generation following the Civil War. Later it was incorporated into many works of history as well as fiction. Among historians, William H. Siebert did most to perpetuate the legend. In his numerous writings Siebert relied heavily upon the reminiscences of former abolitionists and their descendants. In his critical and scholarly little book Gara has used many of the materials which Siebert collected but has come to different conclusions than Siebert did.

Gara finds that the legend of the underground railroad, like most legends, contains some elements of truth but also much exaggeration and folklore. His conclusions are not particularly startling, and some of them have been anticipated by other historians, but his is the first systematic examination of the legend. Briefly summarized his findings are as follows.

First of all, there was no tightly knit organization on a national scale dedicated to helping slaves escape, but there were a few localities in which there was a flourishing underground railroad—as, for example, in eastern Indiana where Levi Coffin was active. Not all slaves who ran away tried to come North. Some sought relatives or friends in the South or ran away and hid to escape punishment. The number who actually reached the free states or Canada was very small. The legend emphasized the daring and heroism of the white conductors of the railroad rather than that of the slaves. In the revised version which Gara gives us, "the abolitionists play a less important part and the escaping slaves a more important one . . ." (p. 18). Slaves who escaped were likely to be those who were most intelligent and who had had the greatest educational advantages. They usually made the break for freedom on their own initiative and were largely self-reliant. Expectation of assistance from white abolitionists in the North played little or no part in the decision of most slaves to try to escape. In fact, slaves often were unaware of any organization in the North which might help them. The escapees usually headed, when possible, for the homes of Negroes who might lend them aid. Obviously the most difficult and

dangerous part of the escape involved travel through slave states. Such aid as white abolitionists rendered was available only after the most hazardous part of the fugitive's journey was accomplished.

By no means all abolitionists supported underground railroad activities. Although they were usually ready to help an individual fugitive who happened to come their way, many abolitionists looked askance at efforts to entice slaves to escape, preferring to use legal rather than illegal means to gain their ends. Moreover, many of them felt that assistance to fugitives did not really weaken the institution of slavery, which was their real objective. Nevertheless the fugitive slave issue, especially after the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, and the sight of runaway slaves were powerful factors in converting northerners to antislavery views.

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*Old Gentlemen's Convention: The Washington Peace Conference of 1861.* By Robert Gray Gunderson. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961. Pp. xiii, 168. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$5.00.)

The title of this book is taken by its author from the characterization which Horace Greeley derisively made of the Washington Peace Conference. It was, in fact, largely an old man's convention as measured by the standards of longevity in those days, for out of the 132 delegates who actually attended, only seven were under forty years of age and twelve were seventy or more.

Representatives from twenty-one states met in Washington on February 4, 1861, for the purpose of applying in the sectional dispute that old American custom of compromising, which had saved the day on several important occasions in the past. But as Professor Hesseltine notes in his Foreword, extremists in both North and South had passed beyond the point where they were willing to give and take.

Though a convention to compromise sectional difficulties had been suggested as early as the summer of 1860, nothing concrete developed until Virginia called for such a convention in January, 1861; but the very day on which the delegates assembled in Willard's Hotel Hall there also assembled in Montgomery, Alabama, delegates who were soon to organize the Confederate States of America. Although some leaders who were setting up the Confederacy were willing to re-enter a "re-constructed" Union, it was now late in the day for compromise.

Of the twenty-one states that sent delegates to Washington, only six were slave states, and all of the free states were not represented. Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan sent no delegates, and the Pacific states were too far away to attend. There was no chance of the convention working out a compromise that would be accepted by northern and southern extremists, who in reality were largely in charge of the destinies of the country, although there is a general opinion among historians, shared by the author of this book, that a majority of the people in both North and South would have accepted a compromise—the compromise that the convention worked out or the Crittenden Com-