

Merging Lines: American Railroads, 1900–1970. By *Richard Saunders Jr.* DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001. xix + 492 pp. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN 0-875-80265-6.

Reviewed by Clifton Hood

Most of the historiography of American railroads is concentrated in the industry's heroic ages in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. George R. Taylor and Irene D. Neu's *The American Railroad Network, 1861–1890* (1956) explores railroading's systemization, for instance, while Gabriel Kolko's *Railroads and Regulation, 1877–1916* (1965) and Albro Martin's *Enterprise Denied: Origins of the Decline of American Railroads, 1887–1917* (1971) present diametrically opposed interpretations of regulation. By contrast, very little has been written about railroads' more recent history. That neglect is regrettable. Just as railroads set precedents for other American businesses in terms of managerial structures, technological innovations, regulation, and labor relations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so, too, does their post–World War II collapse and revival have a bearing on business history. Scholars who want to understand the reorganization of once-dominant industries that have fallen on hard times should start with the railroads.

Richard Saunders Jr.'s *Merging Lines* examines an important dimension of this story: railroad mergers. A revised edition of Saunders's *Railroad Mergers and the Coming of Conrail* published in 1978, this book addresses the efficacy of mergers, a topic that was frequently debated in railroad circles in the 1970s. Countering the idea that mergers were a panacea for the ailing industry, Saunders argues that many combinations were ill conceived and poorly executed, often as a result of strategic and financial flaws. Most mergers delivered relatively few of their promised benefits. Saunders suggests that merger mania was a sideshow that diverted attention from railroads' competitive disadvantages. "The real problem," he writes of the industry's travails in the 1960s, "was that there were fewer and fewer services that railroads could perform as well as their competitors for which anyone would pay enough for the railroads to make a profit" (p. 416). Saunders bases his conclusions on detailed examinations of numerous attempted and actual mergers dating from the turn of the twentieth century to 1970, in particular the cases of the Erie Lackawanna and the Chessie System, and, inevitably, the Penn Central debacle of 1966–70. He also discusses salient events in the political economy of railroading, such as the Transportation Act of 1920 and the Kefauver hearings of the early 1960s.

However, *Merging Lines* is flawed by a lack of synthesis. Saunders begins his introduction with this declaration: “This book is not about generalizations. It is about individual railroads, individual executives, individual corporate strategies, and the political economy in which they existed. That is why it is so long” (p. 3). He is certainly true to his word. The book consists of streams of facts linked together but lacking an overall intellectual order. Drawn largely from the docket files of the Interstate Commerce Commission, *Merging Lines* is an institutional history. Yet institutional histories require some theory that frames the organizations under study and the environment in which they operate. Though Saunders describes the activities of the competing power groups, such as management, labor unions, regulators, and political leaders that influenced the mergers, he does not synthesize his observations.

Saunders has a thorough command of railroad history, however. His brief discussions of new technologies like “piggyback” trains and electric yards are illuminating. There are many small gems here, including a set piece on the Pennsylvania Railroad’s Elmira (New York) branch line that captures the corrosiveness of deindustrialization, and another on the Southern Railway that heralds the coming of today’s high-tech, labor-productive railroading. There are also acerbic sketches of railroad executives. Although its lack of synthesis limits this book’s usefulness as a scholarly monograph, the comprehensiveness of Saunders’s knowledge of railroads and the factual completeness of his account of mergers should provide grist for other historians who wish to understand the remarkable transformation of American railroads.

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