

The Carriage Trade: Making Horse-Drawn Vehicles in America. By *Thomas A. Kinney*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. xi + 381 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, tables. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN: 0-801-87946-9.

Reviewed by Domenic Vitiello

One of the central debates in business history has pitted scholars who believe in the inevitability of big business and mass production, led by Alfred D. Chandler Jr., against those who stress the importance of flexible, specialty, and batch production, led by Philip Scranton. In *The Carriage Trade*, Thomas Kinney makes a valuable contribution to this debate, tracing the evolution of a small-scale craft into one of North America's largest and most pervasive industries. In his account of technology, business organization, labor, and production, he clearly sides with the Scranton camp. "The rise and fall of the American wagon and carriage industry," he writes, "diverges significantly from the accepted pattern of American industrial development. Our understanding of industry depends entirely too much on the automobile, the steel mill, and the machine shop, just as it does on the vertically integrated corporation" (pp. 2–3).

Though perhaps a mundane topic compared to the railroads, steamships, and other powerful machines that dominate most accounts of nineteenth-century manufacturing, carriages, wagons, and their makers nevertheless have a lot to tell us about industrialization. On the surface, Kinney's is a story about the persistence of craft labor and production, of small shops, woodworking technologies, specialty and batch production, partnerships, and family firms. Yet the story also contains large, highly mechanized mass producers like the Studebaker firm, which successfully made the transition to auto manufacturing in the early twentieth century while most of the carriage industry was dying. Ultimately, this is a book about the diverse, "textured" patterns of industrialization within a single national sector.

The Carriage Trade's early chapters provide a detailed account of the craft origins of wagon- and carriage-making and the emergence of factory systems and parts manufacturers. In-depth case studies of the Brewster family of Connecticut and New York and the Studebaker firm of Ohio are followed by a consideration of the impact of

industrialization on workers in the industry. A concluding chapter, entitled “That Damned Horseless Carriage,” traces responses to the automobile and the demise of wagon-and-carriage manufacturing in the early twentieth century.

The book covers many familiar themes found in the literature on industrial production and business practice, from drafting to mechanization and rationalization to advertising and sales. Contrary to the Chandlerian narrative of technological convergence, Kinney argues, “industrialization increased the number of choices throughout the entire process of making, selling, and purchasing a horse-drawn vehicle” (p. 111). In the wagon and carriage trade, “interchangeable parts flowing from the large accessory factories permitted minimally capitalized small firms to successfully assemble and market wagons and carriages in competition with large mass producers” (p. 300). This, in turn, shaped divergent experiences of labor. While “the combination of special-purpose machinery and rationalization ensured that the average accessory-factory hand resembled the archetypical industrial laborer,” a wider range of skills persisted among vehicle builders. “Workers punching in at one of the huge, highly rationalized vehicle factories might perform tasks similar to those of the specialty factory hand, while employees of smaller factories and shops exercised a wider range of skills.” Ultimately, Kinney concludes, “If the skilled craftsman’s window of opportunity narrowed, it remained open nevertheless, and through to the very end of the industry” (pp. 260–61).

Kinney has produced a study of a major national sector. Readers will encounter dozens of individuals, firms, and institutions in a narrative that reads much of the time as a lively story about people’s everyday experiences and interactions. Kinney explores an appropriately broad set of perspectives on the industry—those of proprietors, craftsmen, laborers, trade-journal publishers, trade organizations, apprentices in small shops, and students in the national trade school.

But what does this book add to debates and discussions about industrialization among business historians, besides a detailed, readable survey of an understudied sector? For one, *The Carriage Trade* uncovers the simultaneous transformation and persistence of craft production in an industry that was very different from those we typically associate with even the first industrial revolution. It forces us to consider woodworking not only in the early national and antebellum periods but also in the age of steel, as

carriage building remained a vital industry even at the turn of the twentieth century. In his case studies of Brewster and Studebaker, as well as in his shorter accounts of other firms, Kinney expands on the literature of family capitalism. For anyone interested in regional variations in industry, his fine treatment of shifting business patterns in the Northeast, Midwest, and South constitutes a robust economic geography of markets ranging from the elite “carriage set” of metropolitan centers to small farming communities in the rural United States. Finally, as a history of a “democratized” consumer product that was affordable to most families, the horse-drawn vehicle joins the bicycle as a critical antecedent to the automobile.

One of Kinney’s most important accomplishments in this book is that he has read history forward—not backward, or teleologically, from the perspective of the ultimate “winner” in transportation history, the auto. This strategy allows us to take the carriage trade seriously in the first place, and it also permits us to appreciate the complexities and contradictions of the industry’s decline. Kinney cites the inability of most firms to adapt their technology and their failure to attract significant financial capital as the main explanation for so few carriage makers becoming auto makers. “As a vehicle requiring no animate power—one that was *automotive*,” the horseless carriage “really was more than simply a cart without a horse” (p. 286). Though many tried, few firms followed the path of Studebaker, whose robust marketing operations, large capital reserves, and wise decisions to acquire firms with automotive technology allowed it to survive and thrive as an auto manufacturer. While these may sound like Chandlerian ingredients for success in the second industrial revolution, Kinney sees no great inevitability in Studebaker’s success, but rather a great measure of choice. Other firms shifted to making parts, accessories, and sometimes bodies for cars and trucks, though the metalworking technologies of bicycle manufacturers made for easier transitions than those of wagon and carriage makers. *The Carriage Trade* will by no means close any debates about industrialization, economic restructuring, or decline, but it adds a rich account of a central and often ignored part of American business history.

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