

Home on the Rails: Women, the Railroad, and the Rise of Public Domesticity. By Amy G. Richter. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xiii + 272 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations. Cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-8078-2926-9; paper, 0-8078-5591-X.

Reviewed by Margaret Walsh

Gender history has moved ahead from the time when—primarily female—historians decided that women, as well as men, were important constituents of the American economic and social past. Indeed, gender history has progressed to the stage where its practitioners feel confident enough of its main principles to expand the boundaries of the field and begin to tackle the deconstruction of the established “malestream.” *Home on the Rails* engagingly takes on the traditional male domain of the nineteenth-century railroads, recasting them as women’s space. By characterizing the railroads as a new setting, in which neither men nor women were paramount, Amy Richter has produced a nuanced exploration of gender in America during the Victorian era.

Her journey starts with the emergence of the railroad as a technological catalyst that transformed American business and economy in the mid-nineteenth century. The railroad opened up the nation’s horizon, thereby, according to one interpretation, creating a masculine scenario of producers and workers, or, according to another view, acting as a macroeconomic tool of growth. Travelers viewed the railroad as an agent of change that allowed them to challenge the existing social order. Though many women in the middle, and even in the late third, of the nineteenth century may have had qualms about venturing onto what appeared to be monstrous, dirty vehicles, they climbed aboard nevertheless. In so doing, and in recounting their experiences to others of their sex, they assailed the Victorian cultural mores that enforced strict separation between the private and public spheres. Women found acceptance as train travelers, but they had conflicting expectations of how to behave on the rails. Were they to be sheltered from the male gaze? Could they expect a male family member or a male friend to help them with commercial transactions, such as purchasing tickets or ensuring their seating arrangements? Were they likely to receive courteous attention from male railstaff? Train travel promoted new

female identities, which in turn stimulated broader changes within the national culture. A new way of life was being forged as notions of femininity and masculinity were being continuously reshaped by rail encounters.

How did this new concept of public domesticity affect the business ethos? Women, and also some men, carried the habits and qualities of their private lives onto the train, thereby amending the meaning of home and public arena. As railroad passengers, women, along with Americans who worked in commercial establishments such as hotels and department stores, were creating a socioeconomic place that integrated domestic values into marketplace transactions. The consumer ethic that entailed the accumulation and display of goods had already invaded the private sphere, but it was further modified by the injection of notions of self-restraint and gentility into business dealings. Women could not, however, rearrange public space by themselves. They needed the support of men—either other rail travelers or railroad employees—who practiced good manners. For the former, courtesy was likely to be a cultural trait; for the latter, courtesy became part of standardized and impersonal work patterns, which were eventually adopted as a part of the strategy of good public relations. The mingling of these newer gender characteristics gradually created a stronger, more capable form of womanhood, but one that still depended on male support.

Female rail travelers influenced economic activity in other ways. Women were not all the same. Though the first female passengers may have been white and middle class, as the nineteenth century progressed, women of other classes, races, and ethnic groups also took to the rails, raising complicated social questions. African-American women offered the most visible challenge to standards of rail behavior. Were black women to be thought of as females? Or were they to be defined by their race? If the former, then they had to be allowed in the women-only rail cars, which offered a degree of shelter and gentility; if the latter, then they could be consigned to second-class accommodations, which were often crowded and rowdy. Though African American middle-class women tried to insist on their right to be treated as ladies, and even fought legal battles to gain this status, their claims were often dismissed. Segregation of the races was viewed as a more pressing social requirement than acknowledgment of the good character of black ladies. Immigrant railroad cars also pointed to differentiation

among women. In the early years of rail travel, these new arrivals sat on bare wooden benches with their worldly belongings placed alongside them; later in the nineteenth century, their accommodations still lacked the comfort afforded passengers in other sections of the train. Women and children shared space with ordinary ticket buyers, who could be unruly. Presumably these women were not sufficiently Americanized or genteel to warrant entry into women-only compartments, where they would receive the courteous treatment accorded their native-born white peers.

Home on the Rails reveals new ways in which considerations of gender complicate traditional history. This book continues the painstaking research of earlier scholars who wrote about the confluence of gender and business and are only now being recognized for their pioneering work. It also extends the territory of women's history by taking up economic concerns, thus ensuring that the economy is no longer a "no-go" area for research in this field. Yet *Home on the Rails* is more than either or both of these approaches, because it also examines American culture in order to explore the reasons for the changes in American mores. The study of railroads usually has been considered the prerogative of economic and business historians, but these—primarily male—historians will need to find their gendered spectacles if they are to obtain the full benefit of this stimulating book.

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