

Sunset Limited: The Southern Pacific Railroad and the Development of the American West, 1850–1930. By Richard J. Orsi. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xxii + 615 pp. Illustrations, photographs, maps, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 0-520-20019-5.

Reviewed by Don L. Hofsommer

Californians and other westerners for decades have loved to hate Southern Pacific (SP)—a railroad company headquartered in San Francisco, they have long earnestly and smugly contended, so powerful and so evil as to squeeze the life blood from its vast service area. It was a diabolical “Octopus,” flippantly chirped novelist Frank Norris. And these negative contentions have been an article of faith even among otherwise serious and thoughtful students and scholars.

Richard J. Orsi, in his masterful *Sunset Limited*, adeptly and thoroughly challenges such simplistic black-and-white conventions. Indeed, he obliterates tightly held myths. Orsi’s evenhanded, dry-eyed, and dispassionate analysis shows Southern Pacific admittedly and actively engaged in self-interest—benign self-interest—to develop California and much of the West in any number of ways that would benefit itself, to be sure, but would also profit its entire service area. SP was hardly alone in such affirmative campaigns; other western railroads were similarly engaged. What distinguished Southern Pacific was the creative nature, diverse range, and intense depth of its efforts—efficient settlement, economic development, forest management, scientific farming, urban water systems, diversified agriculture and aggressive marketing of both high-value and specialty crops, irrigation engineering and management, and even fire control.

Orsi is hardly Pollyanna. SP’s interests did, of course, occasionally conflict with interests of other companies or other groups energetically pursuing their own private goals. Yet, as he shows convincingly, SP typically took the long view in pressing its own welfare. The author makes a particular contribution in explaining and analyzing SP’s active role in wilderness preservation and resource conservation and in persuasively demonstrating how (usually faceless) midlevel managers shaped and executed important corporate policy.

Orsi’s research is impeccable. He exhibits thorough knowledge of the secondary literature and has expertly plumbed extensive primary sources at important research centers as well as in SP’s internal archive. A full 179 pages are required for documentation. (Extensive material in some endnotes could profitably have been placed in the text.)

Sunset Limited is a seminal work, not just as railroad history, but also in its elucidation and interpretation of the broader American western experience from the 1850s through the 1920s.

Don L. Hofsommer is professor of history at St. Cloud State University. He has written extensively on the history of the railroad industry. Among his recent publications is The Tootin' Louie: A History of the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway (2005).