Chicago is the quintessential railroad city. Although it was founded before the railroad, it grew from a village to an industrial and commercial metropolis because of the railroad and the commercial and industrial opportunities that the railroad created and enhanced. This work attempts to explain how Chicago became the railroad capital of the nation in the nineteenth century and how it maintained that status even until today.

The book begins with a look at Chicago before the railroads came to town and the transportation challenges of the old northwest during the period from 1800 to the 1830s. It then describes the arrival of the railroads, not just one or two but all of them as the author states in a mild exaggeration. Futile attempts to bypass the increasingly congested rail terminals and yards of Chicago are described as well. Chapters 5 and 6 are likely to be among the most interesting to H-Urban readers. Chapter 5 is titled “Shaping Chicago” and details how in the 50 years from 1848 to 1898 Chicago became a transportation center and the importance of the back haul for the railroads. One can see some vintage Alfred Chandler in this chapter. Chapter 6 is entitled “The Suburbs” and is a succinct examination of the growth of railroad suburbs. Even today, commuter rail is very important to Chicago and its suburbs and this importance is traced back to the period just after the Civil War. In two 30-year phases, Young describes the growth of suburbs and the commuter rail services that spawned and sustained them. This chapter is well written and reflects much contemporary scholarship including Ann Durkin Keating, Kenneth Jackson and Robert Fishman. The myriad stations and terminals that occupied land in the central core of the city are well presented in the next chapter.

While the author does a good job in the first half of the book, little of what is contained should be a surprise to scholars familiar with the subject. If the book ended here it would be a valuable, if not groundbreaking, addition to the literature on the history of Chicago. However, Young goes further. Beginning with chapter 8, he continues the story of how the railroads and the city interacted up to the present day. He examines not only things like the growth of belt lines and movements to eliminate grade crossings by elevating trackage but also strange entities like the freight subway [1] and freight interurban efforts. He devotes a chapter to the railway supply industry and manufacturers like Pullman and the Electro-Motive Division of General Motors, both of which had large Chicago area operations which are now extinct. How railroads dealt with the advance of automobility after World War II is the focus of a couple of chapters. This had interesting implications for the city. As railroads consolidated and shrank, much prime development land in the central core became available. Most of the classic railroad terminals were torn down except Dearborn Station which was redeveloped as an upscale residential district. Appendices chart population growth along the major rail corridors out of the city and list some major railroad disasters. Ample endnotes, bibliography and index complete the book.

Author David Young is the former transportation editor for the Chicago Tribune newspaper and has written three previous books on Chicago transportation history examining public transit, maritime trade, and aviation. He is clearly an expert on transportation and well versed in transportation history but his analysis of urban history and growth is somewhat lacking. While he cites many prominent historians and works such as Cronon’s...
Nature’s Metropolis (1991) and others it is clear that he is a transportation expert first and an urban historian second. Nonetheless, for historians desiring a detailed introduction to the railroad history of the former and present railroad capital of the nation, Young’s work stands out as a good one.

Note

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