

Some Sources for Northwest History

RAILROAD ARCHIVES

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BENEATH TWO MAPS entitled "The Revolution in Rail Transportation, 1860-1890" in his *Political and Social Growth of the United States, 1852-1933*, A. M. Schlesinger declares: "The history of the time might almost be written in terms of railways." In the social and economic sense this statement is particularly true in regard to the Northwest. Although it was possible to establish a lumber industry in this region on the basis of river and lake transportation, the large-scale cultivation of grain, the development of mining, and the growth of the dairy business awaited the coming of the railroad.¹ A comparison of maps showing the railways on the one hand and the density of population on the other during the latter part of the nineteenth century reveals the striking correlation between railroad construction and the development of the Northwest.² In those days civilization followed the rails; it was perhaps inevitable that the railroads then, and for a long time thereafter, determined the economic and social life of the region.

This phenomenon, familiar to all students of the Northwest, has been often and ably described in historical writing. Frederick Jackson Turner, for example, sketched its broad outlines and general implications in the *International Monthly* for December, 1901.³ Frederick Merk discussed and analyzed certain economic and political phases of the situation in his illuminating *Economic History of Wisconsin during the Civil War Decade* (1916). "The Colonization Work of the Northern Pacific Railroad," written for the *Mis-*

¹ See, for example, William J. Wilgus, *Railway Interrelations of the United States and Canada*, 122 (New Haven, 1937). Schlesinger's book appeared in 1934.

² Such maps for 1840-80, inclusive, drawn on the same scale, may be found in the writer's *Burlington West*, 12, 24, 190, 310, 394 (Cambridge, 1941).

³ Turner's article is reprinted in his volume on *The Frontier in American History*, 126-156 (New York, 1920). See especially p. 143-153.

Mississippi Valley Historical Review of December, 1926, by James B. Hedges, drew attention to the significant role played by one company in the direct settlement of the Northwest, and incidentally suggested the wealth of source material that might be available to the historian. In 1939 the same author presented, in *Building the Canadian West*, his full-length study of the Canadian Pacific's colonization work north of the border. Approaching the subject from a fresh angle, William J. Wilgus emphasized the international significance of the northwestern roads in an informative chapter of the *Railway Interrelations of the United States and Canada*, published in 1937. A valuable and detailed corollary to the two latter authors was provided in 1939 by Leonard B. Irwin's *Pacific Railways and Nationalism in the Canadian-American Northwest, 1845-1873*. Furthermore, colorful sidelights have been thrown on the subject by many a biography, including such well-known works as Walter Vaughan's *Life and Work of Sir William Van Horne* (1920), Hedges' *Henry Villard and the Railways of the Northwest* (1930), and Henrietta M. Larson's *Jay Cooke: Private Banker* (1936). These are but a very few of the studies concerned with the northwestern roads, yet they suggest the richness of the subject, the possible diversity of treatment, and the unexploited wealth of source material that is available.

Public sources for the writing of railroad history, such as newspapers, trade publications, local and federal government documents, and the like, are familiar to investigators in the field. It is the specific purpose of this paper to consider the primary records that are in the possession of the railroad companies themselves.

The heart and core of railroad archives are the corporate records which are usually under the jurisdiction of the secretary. These include charters, minutes of directors' and stockholders' meetings, annual and special reports, land-grant records (if any), contracts, corporate leases and deeds, and other material of a more or less permanent character. Surveys, maps, topographical data, records of construction, and in general all material pertaining to buildings, roadbed, bridges, ties, and rail are located in the engineering depart-

ment. A record of the original physical properties, modified and kept up to date by subsequent inventories, together with information concerning the cost and value of facilities, are also in this department, which in turn is usually a part of the operating department. Since the operating department is also in charge of transportation, maintenance, and labor relations, and is thus the largest department of any railroad, its records are correspondingly voluminous. They cover, for example, such matters as train operations, upkeep, reclamation, equipment (including motive power), tests and research, shops, labor contracts, safety, and so forth.

The traffic department keeps records of traffic, rates, revenues, and service, and usually includes within its jurisdiction the agricultural and industrial development bureaus. The latter carry on, under modern conditions, whatever colonization may have been undertaken in earlier days; in their files are records of agricultural and technological demonstrations and of current community development. In many organizations all publicity and advertising originates in the passenger traffic division of the traffic department, although in some cases public relations are segregated and handled directly by the executive department. In any case, these publicity agencies generally have extensive information, including maps and photographs, concerning the history and current operations of the road. This material, however, may not be strictly primary in nature, having been derived from corporate, operating, or traffic source records.

The history of corporate financing is centered in the treasury department, although the law department, which participates in preparing contracts, mortgages, and equipment trusts, has nearly as much material on the same subject. The law department likewise has records of all cases in which the company has participated, both in the courts and before administrative agencies. This material covers a wide range of subjects, including construction, abandonment, unification, operation, finance, claims, and so forth. A land and tax department, in some companies organized within the law department, keeps right-of-way records and handles current real-estate and tax matters. It works in close collaboration with the agricultural and industrial development bureaus.

Vital statistics and service records concerning employees are located in the employment, personnel, or relief departments, while health records are kept in the medical department. Statistics for the entire operation of the railroad, as well as income and balance sheet records and accounts, are in the accounting department; records of purchases of company material are usually located in a separate department of purchases and stores. For matters of general policy there are the records of the executive department.

It should be pointed out, however, that various departments may contain supplementary records on the same subject. Therefore, even within the relatively restricted range of company archives, it may be necessary to look in several places for material concerning various phases of the same subject.

In addition to its permanent records, each department has, of course, voluminous files of correspondence. These, under section 20 of the Interstate Commerce Act, must be preserved for a varying number of years according to their contents.⁴ Frequently, however, correspondence that may have some continuing value to the company is kept longer than the required period and may be stored with the permanent records. Inquiry would probably reveal that most companies have somewhere more than one basement or old freight house choked with what may be potentially significant historical material. On the other hand, many records of undoubted value from the historian's standpoint have been destroyed, pursuant to law, because of their lack of value for current railroad purposes.

Direct access to railroad archives depends primarily upon the judgment of the officers of each particular road. Most company archives contain material that is sufficiently technical in nature to require a trained man for its proper investigation, and it is not always easy for a company to ascertain an investigator's capabilities. Probably the best approach for the historian is to submit some evidence of his ability and to make his request as specific as possible.

In closing, a word of caution to the would-be writer of railroad

⁴ Association of American Railroads, *Regulations to Govern Destruction of Records of Steam Roads Prescribed by the Interstate Commerce Commission* (Washington, 1938).

history may be ventured. Most historical writing tends to follow a chronological pattern, but generally speaking the distinctions between different phases of railroading and between the railroad history of different regions are clearer, both in fact and in available material, than are those between the events of specific years or decades. Consequently, there is much to be said for organizing a railroad study primarily along analytical or geographical lines, although within such limits the various homogeneous subdivisions may and probably should be treated chronologically.

When it comes to choosing a specific topic for investigation in such a broad and colorful field as railroad history, the greatest temptation is the common one of undertaking too much. The history of railroads is often of a controversial nature, thus requiring the conscientious historian to examine a wide range of sources, both public and private, before he can arrive at a sound conclusion on even relatively minor points. It is, therefore, obviously desirable at the outset to fix as definite limits as possible to any given study and to keep in mind its relation to other aspects of the general subject. Otherwise the green and tempting field of railroad research may turn into a dark and impenetrable morass.



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