

Non-Stop: A Turbulent History of Northwest Airlines

Jack El-Hai

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
291 p. Cloth, \$39.95.)

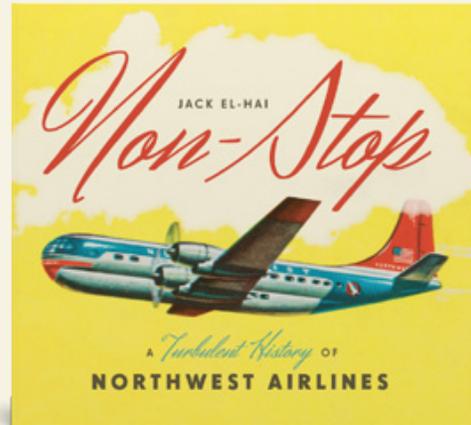
Any native of the Midwest over the age of 15 is familiar with the storied name of Northwest Airlines. The famous Red Tails filled the vast majority of gates at the Minneapolis—St. Paul International Airport for decades and provided the major transportation link between the Upper Midwest and the world. They were as much a part of the Minnesota landscape as pine trees and lakes, and the company provided employment for generations of people from across the region.

Growing from a tiny regional mail carrier into an international giant spanning the Pacific Ocean into Asia and the Atlantic into northern Europe, Northwest outlasted the majority of its competitors and became a highly successful enterprise that was finally brought to its knees only by the machinations of stock speculators and bad management. For years, however, it was a byword for careful management and frugality that, at times, pitted its leaders against its workers. The shrewd deployment of resources and attention to detail that characterized its leadership for decades allowed it to survive while larger competitors, including Pan American World Airways, Eastern Airlines, and Western Airlines, failed.

The men who led this celebrated company are well portrayed in this book by Jack El-Hai—men such as Lewis Brittin, Croil Hunter, the inimitable Donald W. Nyrop, and on to Steven Rothmeier and the architects of Northwest's final decline, Al Checchi and Gary Wilson. Rothmeier's quoted comments on the greed and incompetence of Checchi and Wilson are memorable.

No executive had as powerful an effect on Northwest Airlines as did Nyrop. This man who became an aviation-industry icon headed Northwest from 1954 until 1979, after which he became chairman for a time. Nyrop was both the architect of the airline's vaunted efficiency and profitability and the focus of frustration for employees and passengers alike for his frugality and single-minded determination to restrain costs at nearly any price. He standardized aircraft, communications, and computer equipment, achieving both stability and cost savings that set industry standards. Unfortunately, the labor strife for which his administration was also known often eclipsed his achievements in the press and, thus, in the public imagination.

Business history can be dry and technical, laced with statistics, analysis, and remarkably little about the personalities whose proclivities and interactions shape corporations in every respect. El-Hai makes no such mistake. While offering plenty of detail on Northwest's operations, he does not neglect the intensely human tales that make up the fabric of its history. Northwest is a prime candidate for making business history



into a corking good story, and El-Hai is just the writer to balance the details with the drama. He unfurls a corporate history replete with the attributes of both grand opera and soap opera.

The book contains lively documentation of everything from the evolution of planes and routes to the development of cabin service and the intermittent conflict between labor and management. The tale of the evolution of food service is enough to provoke the envy of air travelers today, to whom the menus will seem unimaginably lavish. There are vignettes on subjects as diverse as pioneering mechanics, murdered employees, and the effects of terrorism on the airline industry.

In the end, El-Hai paints a poignant, saddening picture of the destruction of a highly valuable enterprise by a small group interested in nothing but reaping that value at the expense of everything—and everyone—else. The leveraged buyout that Checchi and Wilson engineered used the greatest of Northwest's strengths—its gilt-edged balance sheet—to pay for an acquisition that benefited only them and their associates.

The book is handsomely produced and printed on high-quality paper, which ensures that the photographs on nearly every page look marvelous. Indeed, the roster of photographs is spectacular, illustrating every aspect of Northwest's history and the people who made it. This remarkable book is not just a collection of photos with captions or a well-written narrative, but a skillful combination of the two.

To fully and accurately recount the history of a complex business with an 80-year trajectory that defines “turbulent” is far from simple. Jack El-Hai has created a definitive account of a great American enterprise that called Minnesota home.

—James E. Fogerty

JAMES E. FOGERTY was head of documentary programs at the Minnesota Historical Society, where he worked for 40 years. He acquired the archives of Northwest Airlines for the Society and lists Donald W. Nyrop among the many Minnesota business leaders he has interviewed. He is currently a consultant on oral history and archives.

BOOK REVIEWS

Shaping the North Star State: A History of Minnesota's Boundaries

William E. Lass

(St. Cloud, MN: North Star Press, 2014, 230 p. Paper, \$16.95.)

Through his readable and informative narrative, William Lass takes us back to a time in our history when the internal geopolitics of the United States shaped the culture and economics of the entire Mississippi watershed. The Civil War dominated the era and continues to dominate the historical record; however, the commodification and political organization of the land were critical to the formation of the nation. The highly contested arguments over the number, size, shape, and boundaries of the states were overshadowed by the bloody events of the Civil and Indian wars and their aftermath. Nonetheless, the outcome of those geopolitical conflicts, mapped and marked on the landscape, control much of our daily life. It is hard to image the United States with different political configurations. It is even harder to transport ourselves back to the time when the state boundaries we take for granted did not exist.

There are three phases in the establishment of a political boundary: negotiation, delimitation on a map, and demarcation on the land. Lass is one of the few writers who can combine these three phases in an integrated narrative. He discusses the grand political and economic narratives of the nineteenth century, the mathematical details of border mapping, and the physical processes of the boundary survey. After a thorough discussion of how the U.S.—Canada border was negotiated and delineated, he guides us through the political debates in Iowa and Wisconsin that determined Minnesota's southern and eastern borders. Lass notes that the residents of Iowa once had the opportunity to set their northern boundary so as to include the Falls of St Anthony. Instead, they settled for a smaller—to their mind, more governable—state. Lass's presentation of the arguments and dreams of the geopolitical leaders of Iowa is masterful. The debate over the western border of Wisconsin seems to have been more intense. By the time Wisconsin was ready to petition for statehood there was a vocal, if not large, population living in the St. Croix valley and around Fort Snelling who wanted to play a role in setting the boundary. Once again, Lass takes us through the details of the debate and allows us to form an understanding of the economic issues, strong personalities, and regional rivalries that shaped the process.

In his discussion of the debate over the division of Minnesota Territory into the State of Minnesota and the Territory of Dakota, Lass clearly articulates the intriguing concept of squatter sovereignty and the impact of the hopes and plans of the railroad builders. It is hard for the generations who have memorized Minnesota's present boundaries and unique shape to imagine the possibility of a drastically different set of po-

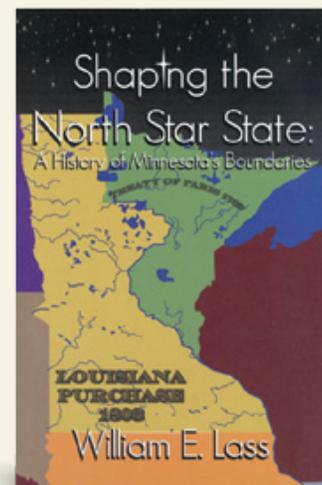
litical units of “North and South Minnesota.” Some of the debates over the competing visions of the state have been popularized through the stories about the effort of Joe Rolette to keep the territorial capital in St. Paul. However, the deep argument between the agriculturalists and town folk of the southern counties on one side, and the lumbermen and traders in north on the other, is

very complex. Lass contextualizes this argument in the great national debate over slavery and the emergence of the national political parties. As he points out, it is impossible to know if people at the time were more concerned about the routes of proposed railroads or governmental structures. Nonetheless, the book's treatment of the lobbying in Washington for both railroad grants and statehood is very informative.

After fears of illegal cross-border activities were raised by mining and timber interests in northern Minnesota, the international border was finally demarcated in 1918. Until recently, most maps showed the state ending at the shore of Lake Superior. However, in 1948 Congress approved the Tri-State Compact that delineated the border some distance from shore. In fact, 2,546 of Minnesota's 86,943 square miles are under Lake Superior.

Although the book includes a large number of portraits of key protagonists, I think the publisher should have made a greater effort to include more maps. Reproductions of maps published during the debates would greatly help the reader to see the emerging territory and state through the eyes of the past. Despite this geographer's quibble, this book is a must read for everyone interested in the history and geography of Minnesota.

—David A. Lanegan



DAVID A. LANEGAN is the John S. Holl Distinguished Professor of Geography at Macalester College. His most recent publication is *Minnesota on the Map: A Historical Atlas* (2008).



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