

# Allies of the Earth

railroads and the soul  
of preservation

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Alfred Runte

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## Preface

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We Americans have been without good railroads so long we have virtually forgotten what railroads do—do for people, that is, not just for commerce. Above all, railroads encourage us to respect the land. Once it would have been unthinkable that Americans would abandon a technology so complementary of natural beauty, but we did abandon it. This book will explore that cultural disconnect in a manner consistent with our forgetfulness: What did we have? Why did we lose it? And how do we get it back?

That we should want it back may seem counterintuitive, and yet we cannot deny our history. Above and beyond our obsession with the economy, the land is our identity. With the decline of the passenger train we lost the struggle to make beauty part of our daily lives. Increasingly, our most beautiful landscapes are remote, defined principally by wilderness and the national parks. Even there, the forgotten story is the railroads, whose promotion of parks greatly assisted preservationists. Suddenly, the railroads stopped caring—stopped beckoning to anyone, even if the caring had been just promotion. More to the point, Americans stopped believing the railroads should care. Why should corporations have a social conscience? Let the railroads obsess about the economy too.

This book will define why America, through its railroads, should insist on the partnership we let go. Neither the railroads nor we can escape the advantages of that partnership, beginning with construction that values art. Railroad architecture delights us still, from the stone masonry of Starrucca Viaduct to the cavernous interior of Grand Central Terminal. Each special gateway promised a right-of-way that was itself a work of art. This is why preservationists believed in railroads. For the railroad companies, publicizing the land may have been economic, but it helped preservation too. From the start, railroad design was imbued with a genuine sensitivity for all that a passenger sees from a train. A railroad remains what it is—a statement about the land, not mindless conquest.

This much is certain with the decline of railroad travel: we have ceased reveling in ourselves as a continent. The creation of Amtrak in 1971 only hardened the nation's growing perception that beauty and size

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The dining car of the *Lake Cities*, late winter 1967. The photographer and his friends have just arrived for breakfast, expectantly waiting their passage through the Delaware Water Gap. Photograph courtesy of Walter E. Smith.

were obstacles. Consider a passenger train doing 80 mph—still doing only 80 mph. How in the 1970s could that be “progress?” Agreed, America should keep a few trains for commuting and perhaps, when they really could go *fast*, reconsider trains for longer distances. Otherwise, take one from coast to coast? What possessed anyone still to be thinking *that*?

No wonder we have forgotten landscape, having fixated on speed for all these years. Speed can be wonderful; Europe proves that and Japan’s bullet trains have proved it too. Finally, even American trains, mostly in the Northeast, are winning back passengers solely through faster schedules. But what does faster mean for landscape—speed at any cost? Why deny, just for the sake of efficiency, what originally led us to believe in the passenger train as so much more?



To be sure, distances in America are greater than in Europe, and population densities lesser (for now), but is that not the point? America still has something worth discovering; the West is awesome space. East or west, conceding that growth is here to stay is not the same as conceding that it need be ugly. America once believed (as Europe still believes) in trains as the servants of public space. Europe knows to use railroads for preservation, while America forgets what it truly wants preserved.

Ironically, it was during the so-called environmental decade of the 1960s that the decision to drop trains was finalized. What markets might the railroads have protected where the passenger train still excelled? The government was funding interstate highways; where might government have lent the railroads equivalent aid?

Cars and airplanes were not inevitable—they were the nation's choices. Allowing itself a limited mandate, apparently the nation felt that two out of three modes was good enough. But we may choose to assess technology rather than accept it blindly. Imagine returning the country to a balance. Imagine a country served by a reasonable minimum of passenger trains, everywhere, one in the morning, afternoon, and night. For once, invite the possibility that we made the wrong choice, or at least that our choices have been incomplete.

Even as America came to believe in the environment, it somehow missed preserving that earlier belief in landscape. Making a wiser choice for travel is not about making our worst habits greener. Although we dared not see this when trains were commonplace, let us dare to see it now. The passenger train, as a means of movement and preservation, is still the choice too good to lose.

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No book is an individual enterprise, no matter who gets to write it. Forty years ago, a dear friend, Walter Smith, started me down the path of railroad history. Together we crisscrossed the cradle of American railroading in Maryland, New York, and Pennsylvania, Walt endlessly describing the influences of geography and natural resources on rail development. Above all, he challenged me to consider how railroads had been a way of life. Sensing the twilight of our hometown railroad (and his employer, the Erie-Lackawanna), he also determined that my lessons should come first-hand. I got used to phone calls in the middle of the night, Walt suggesting we wake our girlfriends and take the train to New York City. "My God, Walt, it's 3:00 AM!" I had all my life to sleep, he reminded me, but the trains would soon be gone. How could I say no? So an hour later the four of us would be stumbling aboard the *Lake Cities* in Binghamton, New



# The Earth on Display

It was 1915, the place was San Francisco, and America's railroads were stealing the show. The nation (and an estimated 18 million visitors) believed the focus of the huge celebration underway at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition was the completion of the Panama Canal. But the railroads were packing the house with their message: they were the proud owners of America the Beautiful. In the Palace of Transportation at the exhibit called "The Globe," four railroads had bypassed the Panama Canal entirely, presenting the transcontinental railroad in miniature. "The earth itself is on display," they announced. "The United States, with its mountains, rivers, valleys, national parks, and cities, is taken in at a glance. In fact, the eye travels with tiny trains which flit across the huge miniature exactly as the trains they represent are in flight across the continent." Even if the Panama Canal became important, the railroads held the land and had since 1869. The cities glowing in the exhibit were their achievement and so too were the national parks. "Yellowstone, Mesa Verde, Rocky Mountain, and Yosemite National Parks and Great Salt Lake are indicated by squares of soft light." No canal would be taking that business from the railroads. America the Beautiful was theirs to sell.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, all the railroads had come to the fair to advertise, sparing no expense. Hosting the largest exhibit, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe

Railway had appropriated six acres for a giant replica of the Grand Canyon. Visitors skirted the rim “in an electric observation parlor car,” stopping at “seven of the grandest and most distinctive points.” More than 100 miles of the canyon were on display, “reproduced accurately, carefully and wrought so wonderfully that it is hard to realize that you are not actually on the rim of the Canyon itself.” Not to be outdone, the Union Pacific Railroad was exhibiting Yellowstone on four acres, including “the Great Falls of the Yellowstone,” its “grandeur akin to the original.” Dominating the grounds filled with other “natural wonders,” a full-size replica of the Old Faithful Inn seated two thousand for lunch and dinner. “There is no curtailment in proportions,” the railroad reported, “no elimination of details. The reproduction is exact.” Patrons dined while enjoying an eighty-piece orchestra, then stepped outside to watch a replica of Old Faithful Geyser steaming to full height “at regular intervals, uniform with those of its prototype.”<sup>2</sup>

And the railroads were just getting started. On the roof of the Grand Canyon diorama, a Pueblo Indian Village, inhabited by Pueblo Indians, displayed their life and art. And members of the Blackfeet tribe in full ceremonial dress greeted visitors entering the Great Northern Railway building, promising “a wonderful display of the beauties of Glacier National Park.” The even grander building of the Southern Pacific Railroad featured “the Glade, where are reproduced with most natural effect in beautiful landscape settings noted scenes on Southern Pacific lines.” The Glade won the grand prize.<sup>3</sup>

Although the eastern railroads were well represented, it was obvious why the western railroads had spent so lavishly. After all, the show was all about the continent, and the West represented the American dream. In the mind’s eye, the Panama Canal was not about heading east. As if that message might be lost in San Francisco, San Diego dared to repeat it, offering a second exposition, hardly less popular, on the grounds of Balboa Park.

The railroads’ exhibits were so memorable they were talked about for decades. In tracing the origins of the National Park Service, its founders acknowledged the importance of 1915. A third major conference on

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As a reminder that they had opened the country first, America’s railroads participated lavishly in the 1915 California expositions celebrating the completion of the Panama Canal. In this brochure, the Union Pacific describes its exhibits. Author’s collection.

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