

WHEN
THE
Railroad
LEAVES TOWN

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES
IN THE AGE OF RAIL LINE
ABANDONMENT

WESTERN UNITED STATES

JOSEPH P. SCHWIETERMAN

Foreword by John R. Stilgoe

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Front cover photo: Abandonment is only a few years away for the “Slim Princess”—Southern Pacific’s narrow-gauge line in eastern California. In this classic 1953 scene, the southbound mixed train heads through the Owens Valley, south of Laws. The snow-capped elevations of the Sierra Nevada loom in the distance (Wendell Mortimer, Jr., courtesy of Mallory Hope Ferrell).

Back cover photo: The tracks are gone and little more than the crumbling abutments of an old water tower remain along the Southern Pacific narrow-gauge. This photograph was taken at nearly the same location as the one appearing on the front cover (James N. Saylor).

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the American West is an epic tale richly accompanied by the sounds of the railroads. From the thunderous roar of steam locomotives to the rhythmic churning of wheels on track, these sounds are the background beat to an extraordinary saga of technological innovation and engineering achievement. For shrewd businessmen assembling far-flung transportation systems, they were a cadence of opportunity and enterprise.

Despite all its glory and all the miles it tamed, this saga could not in the end triumph over changing times in many western towns. Thousand of miles of railroad routes steeped in history are now dusty trails bereft of their former significance. Rendered expendable by evolving market forces, these bygone corridors are testaments to the profound changes in the way we travel and conduct business.

Through the use of maps, photographs, and historical perspective, *When the Railroad Leaves Town* tries to illustrate the circumstances surrounding the rise and fall of rail service in places that are distinguished for their illustrious railroad histories or for their unusual experiences with rail line abandonment. The experiences of these towns demonstrate how rail line abandonment can be the culmination of a process dating back many years and can bring unexpected and enduring consequences. What emerges is a portrait of an industrial shift that has left an indelible mark on the region's social, economic, and physical landscape.

Featured in this book are fifty-eight communities on the Pacific side of that imaginary line that divides the eastern and western halves of the American rail network and that stretches from Chicago to Peoria, south to St. Louis, and down the Mississippi River to New Orleans.

A wooden culvert slowly rots along a now-abandoned portion of the country's first transcontinental railroad near Corrine, Utah. (Photo by author.)

These communities vary greatly in population, ranging in size from Honolulu, Hawaii, which has more than 800,000 residents, to Promontory, Utah, which today is home to only a park ranger. Representing great geographical diversity, the communities extend as far north as Nome, Alaska, and as far south as Kerrville, Texas.

Although separated in many instances by thousands of miles, all these places once contributed to the colorful mosaic of western railroading. Some communities were important terminals or division points on steam railroads, while others were thriving hubs for electric interurban railways. Several derived much of their prosperity from logging railways reaching deep into the hinterland. A few towns heard only the whistles of trains operating on obscure branch lines before feeling the effects of abandonment issues germinating many miles away.

The incidents highlighted in this volume illustrate how communities not only grew up around rail lines but also came to depend on them for employment, industrial expansion, and municipal leadership. The essence of the railroad remains part of the fabric of a community many years after the last train departs.

The Abandonment Saga

Readers familiar with the history of rail line abandonment recognize that this volume considers only some of the more noteworthy places that today are separated from the rail system. Since 1916, the nation's railroads have abandoned roughly 125,000 miles of routes—nearly half of the total system. When the lines eliminated by streetcar companies and electric interurban railways are added to the total, there is enough abandoned mileage to build at least forty railroads from the east coast to the west coast of the United States.

Although there has been no definitive estimate made of the number of towns across America that have lost their rail service, the diminishing size of the *Official Guide of the Railways* offers insight on the total. The number of the cities, towns, junctions, and other places listed in the index of this publication, excluding Canadian and Latin American points, declined from about 75,500 in 1916 to about 53,000 in 1957, and then to about 34,000 in 2004.¹ The number of communities losing their rail service appears to have exceeded 25,000.

The bygone transportation corridors that crisscrossed the country hold a deep fascination for many people with an interest in the changing Americana—of

whom I am certainly one. For the past twelve years, I have tried to systematically investigate the withdrawal of railroads from American communities. My efforts began with the collection of data for 1,900 communities that currently do not have any rail freight or rail passenger service. As the project advanced, I found myself in touch with growing numbers of planning officials and historians while making visits—and in most instances repeat visits—to the communities featured in this book.

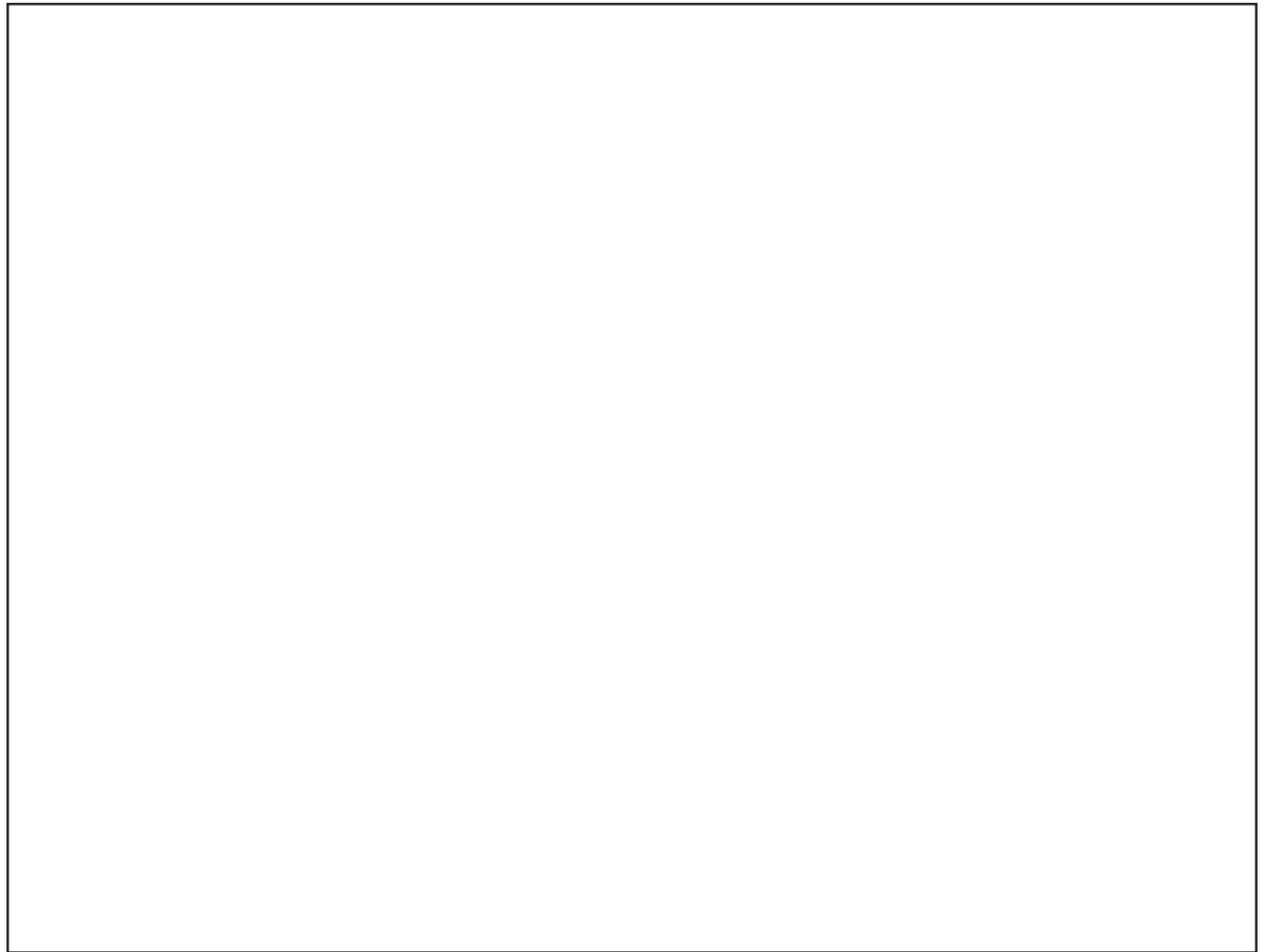
From the exercise, it became quite clear that, contrary to the prevailing view that abandonment has eliminated predominantly redundant lines, this phenomenon has left many places with large populations bereft of all rail transportation. In fact, a number of the places in question have populations of more than 80,000; some even have economies large enough to support commercial air service.

The collection of this information also showed that the closing of railroads was significant to communities in ways that have not been adequately documented in other works. Although the amount of local traffic handled by the railroad had often dwindled to almost nothing, the abandonment of lines still had a tendency to elicit a sharp municipal response. In some instances, municipal governments, local chambers of commerce, and businesses took extraordinary steps to keep trains running.

To commemorate the departure of the last train, citizens in some communities assembled at the depot and took part in ceremonies extolling the railroad's historical contributions. Railroad enthusiasts came from considerable distances to capture on film the images of the last train working its way down the rails; newspapers often deemed the event worthy of a front-page news article. To mark their final run, locomotives and trolley cars were occasionally festooned with signs and flowers.

In other communities, the scene unrolled in a more prosaic fashion. Freight trains crept over the tracks with a string of empty cars, barely noticed by those living nearby. The railroad era often ended without fanfare, earning little more than a passing glance from residents who happened to be in the track's vicinity. Within a few weeks, a salvage crew would arrive to pull up the rails and draw to a close that chapter of the town's history.

Abandonment, of course, was rarely the end of the story. Some communities soon found their abandoned rights-of-way the source of disagreement—accompanied by either threatened or actual litigation—as various parties sparred over issues related to land ownership and reuse. In many places, the withdrawal of the railroad forced community leaders to come to terms with the



industrial or technological changes that threatened to separate their town from the flow of commerce—a phenomenon that made the term “abandonment” applicable to much more than the loss of the train. For other towns, the closing of the railroad was a springboard to municipal improvement. In many such places, it freed up large swaths of land for economic development, highway projects, or new outdoor amenities.

The emotional impact of the closing of rail lines in small communities is a poignant, largely undocumented, part of the American railroad saga. For older residents, the loss can be a sad and unwelcome reminder of the ways in which everyday life has changed. Among both young and old, it can elicit nostalgic sentiment about the excitement and romance associated with travel years ago. Or it can rekindle fond childhood memories of watching trains pass, waving to engineers, and hearing the echoing sounds of locomotive whistles. In some communities, the railroad’s withdrawal was the impetus for the creation of

Flowers bloom on a high embankment supporting a steel trestle at Long Pine, Nebraska—a magnificent span once part of the Chicago & North Western “Cowboy Line.” (Photo by author.)

historical societies, museums, and tourist railways.

Even for those who do not have a personal connection to trains, the sight of abandoned railroad corridors in the process of being reclaimed by weeds and trees often stirs profound reactions. Evoking images of the powerful market forces that pushed once mighty transportation companies toward oblivion, these routes are reminders of how the work of entire generations can be discarded with the advent of new technology or business practices. Where once these routes hummed with the sounds of steam power and commerce, now they elicit mere whispers of an industrial saga that brought prosperity to past generations but remains little known to many in contemporary times.

The Orientation of This Volume

Like those community sketches in the companion volume devoted to the eastern United States, the descriptions appearing in this book have been prepared with cooperation from many local historians and railroad enthusiasts. Representing collaborative efforts, they draw upon the knowledge and insights of people who have studied or experienced the decline of rail service in various towns; some of these individuals have written extensively on the topic, while others have shared their knowledge through less formal means.

Readers will notice several notable differences between this volume and the companion volume devoted to the eastern United States. The aura of the Wild West, where legend and exaggeration prevail, is clearly felt in these chapters. Generally tending to play larger and more prominent roles in American history, many of the communities featured here are today notable tourist destinations, renowned for their pioneering role on the seemingly limitless frontier.

Great mining booms, the lumber industry, and the challenges posed by rugged terrain become familiar elements to the stories in this volume. Not surprisingly, private industrial railways, such as lumber and mining operators, are more common in the chapters that follow than in the earlier volume. On the other hand, electric interurban railways and streetcar companies, as well as the efforts to serve heavy industry—especially those involving the fabrication of iron, steel, and textile products—receive less attention in these towns.

In all their variety, these communities show why bygone rail lines have had the capacity to inspire historians and railroad enthusiasts to spend years accumulating

artifacts, information, and photographs. Several communities are the focus of books that have become classics in the transportation field; others are the focus of excellent technical articles. To draw attention to the most notable of those works, suggested readings are offered at the end of each section with special emphasis given to the publications of railroad historical societies.

For a more general account of the changing railroad scene in the West, readers are encouraged to consult historical works by Gerald M. Best, H. Roger Grant, Donovan L. Hofsommer, George W. Hilton, David Myrick, Fred A. Stindt, and many others listed in the reference section. For an informal perspective of the market forces that led to the abandonment of rail lines through the twentieth century, readers may wish to consult the background chapter of the eastern United States volume.

As a striking manifestation of a phenomenon described by economist Joseph Schumpeter many years ago as “creative destruction,” abandoned rail lines underscore the profound effects of new transportation technologies on our communities and our lives. If we stop and view the landscape that has emerged from this transformation, we find trails of ballast, embankments overgrown with weeds, telephone poles marching wireless to the horizon, and viaducts crumbling from erosion. All are poignant reminders of the changing American scene.

ENDNOTE

1. Estimates are derived from reviewing the June 1916, July 1957, and January 2004 editions of the *Official Guide of the Railways*. This approach slightly overstates the number of communities with rail service in 2004 due to the growing propensity for some railroads to list in the index certain places they do not directly serve.

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“p” following page numbers = “photograph”

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