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Book Review: Going Places: Transportation Redefines the Twentieth-Century West

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What was unique about the West in twentieth-century transportation history? Carlos Schwantes does not make the claim, but the bulk of what he writes suggests that aviation's triumph as the preferred mode of passenger travel owes a great deal to the circumstances of geography in the American West. Getting there faster was the business traveler's need. Railroads could provide this in the East, but not in the West, where distances simply were too great. In one of the most interesting sections of Going Places, Schwantes shows how the government's manipulation of air mail contracts not only helped define the outlines of intercity commerce in the West, but also created the network structure of the nation's leading airline companies.

Schwantes's focus is that of the social historian, writing from archives, photo collections, and an array of advertising brochures and passenger timetables. The images he includes are well chosen and help connect the rather dull, abstract notion of "transportation" to the West itself. But even though he makes the human dimension come alive, he misses much of transportation's business side.

One might make the case that the real changes in transportation in the twentieth-century West involved freight, not people. The shift from railroads to trucks affected every agricultural commodity. The shift from a national to a global economy made Los Angeles the nation's most important seaport and produced massive increases in business at all of the West Coast ports. The construction of pipelines to transmit oil and gas from the Texas, Oklahoma, and Gulf Coast fields revolutionized home heating and electric power generation. Invention of the unit grain train made it cheaper for Great Plains farmers to ship their crops west instead of east. The Clean Air Act of 1970 and the unit coal train made Wyoming the leading source of energy for electric power generation. Deregulation of the airline industry, overnight parcel delivery, and the creation of airline hubs totally reshaped the airline business and made the likes of Denver and Dallas central rather than peripheral to the nation as a whole.

These were innovations that led, one by one, to intense competition between transportation modes as well as between individual companies and touched off a wave of corporate mergers that has yet to subside. In all cases it was the American West, with its great distances between isolated, growing populations, that demanded more, faster, and better transportation. Schwantes alludes to some of these developments, but he might have told
us more. His thesis is stronger than his examples are exhaustive.

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