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Book Review: The Old Iron Road: An Epic of Rails, Roads, and the Urge to Go West

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The Old Iron Road: An Epic of Rails, Roads, and the Urge to Go West. By David Haward Bain. New York: Viking 2004. xii + 434 pp. Photographs, maps, references, index. \$27.95 cloth, \$15.00 paper.

David Haward Bain has written a different book. The author of the widely-acclaimed study of construction of the Central Pacific-Union Pacific, *Empire Express: Building of the First Transcontinental Railroad* (1999), took his wife and two children in the summer of 2000 on an extensive cross-country tour of more than 7,000 miles. His overall intention was to trace large sections of historic emigrant trails of the mid-nineteenth century that once hosted thousands of seekers after a better life. The family journey also involved following the first transcontinental rail route and the much later Lincoln Highway (U.S. 30), which at times shadowed those earlier rutted wagon roads.

Bain has created part contemporary travelogue and part historical narrative. Coverage begins at the Missouri River in the Kansas City, Missouri, area, moves to Council Bluffs, Iowa, an important point on the Mormon Trail of the 1840s and eastern terminus of the Union Pacific, and continues westward across the Great Plains and into the Rocky Mountain West and beyond. The carefully planned journey unfolds through a format in which Bain first describes a place the family visited and then discusses aspects of the history related to the site. As the Bains take in Chimney Rock in western Nebraska, for example, the author not only relates their reactions to this memorable scene, but offers a succinct history of the location, neatly connecting the present to the past.

The Old Iron Road is a joy to read. Bain, who teaches writing at Middlebury College, has an

engaging prose style. More significantly, he has a good eye for what is historically important. And he has done an outstanding job researching the past. The kinds of errors that greatly marred the Stephen Ambrose book on the building of the Central Pacific-Union Pacific are virtually non-existent. Of course, Bain has recycled notes from his *Empire Express* project, but he has also conducted fresh research. For one thing, he has used appropriate volumes of the WPA Federal Writers' Project state guide series to great effect. Further adding to the book's strength are a variety of Bain's own photographs as well as images from the past, ranging from a delightful shot of Don Snoddy, former curator of the Union Pacific Museum, who holds a gun and scalp, to a magnificent print of a poster used in the 1880s by Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Readers are sure to be impressed with how much of the historic "Old West" remains, whether on the Great Plains of Nebraska or in the high deserts of Nevada.

There are few disappointments here. Some readers might fuss about the lack of documentation. Happily, though, Bain includes important references on a chapter-by-chapter basis. And for individuals who wish to replicate the journey or learn more about specific sites, the book contains a listing of addresses and Web sites for many of the places discussed.

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