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Review of A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America.

Russell S. Kirby

Arkansas Department of Health

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A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America. By Shelton Stromquist. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987. Maps, tables, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xix + 353 pp. \$29.95.

In this ambitious volume the author interprets the nascent railroad labor movement of the late nineteenth century within a broad socio-economic framework. "Boomers," the subject of this book, built and maintained the railroad lines, serviced the locomotives and running stock, manned the freight yards, ran and conducted the trains. Although many of these men had transitory employment histories, others demonstrated both geographical persistence and upward occupational mobility within the railroad industry. As Shelton Stromquist demonstrates, strike behavior on the railroads of the late nineteenth century was related to railroad management strategies, the locations of railroad towns or railroad lines with respect to markets, competition, and division or functional status, the varying prospects of railroad workers for advancement, and the supply of railroad labor, as well as to more general economic considerations.

Beginning with a minutely detailed but unfocused empirical analysis of railroad strikes during the period 1881-94, the author proceeds to investigate the underlying causes of patterns in strike activity. This is followed by an excellent overview of the early history of the railroad labor movement, which emphasizes the tensions between the railroad trades.

The most interesting part of the book for the social science historian is the comparative analysis of social mobility in relation to participation in organized labor in two Iowa towns, Burlington and Creston. While the railroad had a considerable role in the economic base of Burlington, a Mississippi River port, its importance was paramount in Creston, a small division town in southwestern Iowa. The role of the railroad in town development and the contribution of the industry to the social order of communities of differing status within the urban

hierarchy is also explored through comparative analysis of Burlington and Creston.

The final substantive chapter of the book explores the institutional response to the railroad labor crisis. Just as the strikes and other organized work actions by railroad workers were part of a learning experience, mechanisms for managing a large labor force, employed at distant locations in a variety of occupations, required testing and refinement. This process occurred simultaneously with the emergence of the modern railroad unions in the late nineteenth century.

Stromquist has a broad, all-encompassing view of his subject matter. His analyses of social and geographical mobility of railroad workers, railroad town formation and economic growth, and the political history of the early railroad labor movement suggest an intimate knowledge of the economic milieu within which the railroad industry developed after the Civil War. While the statistical power of his analyses could be strengthened and the representativeness of Creston and Burlington remains an open question, *A Generation of Boomers* is a fine addition to the University of Illinois series "The Working Class in American History." This book will focus the attention of social science historians on the local importance of the railroad industry as an institution, and of labor historians on the necessity for viewing the labor history of the railroad industry within a broader social, economic, and political context.

RUSSELL S. KIRBY
Center for Health Statistics
Arkansas Department of Health