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## Review of Plains Country Towns By John C. Hudson

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roughly ten-mile intervals along their main and branch lines. Sometimes, where tracks intersected, they built neighboring promotions. No one expected all the projects to succeed. They were a device used by the railroads to effectively dominate marketing activities. Hudson, a Northwestern University professor of geography, has written extensively about upper Great Plains country towns. He notes that the North Dakota railroad towns that lasted were neither products of a tendency to "agglomerate" nor of the "attractiveness" of their plans. "What caused trade centers to grow, instead, was the obliteration of all nearby business sites that took place when the railroad announced a new town," he concludes. "That, effectively, drove merchants out of their scattered locations and into the railroad towns. Railroads made the hinterlands repel business activity because their townsites were the only places where merchants could operate effectively" (p. 38).

No metropolitan area resulted from the town building activities. The main purposes of the railroads were to sell land, establish stations, and generate freight. All three railroads were Minneapolis and St. Paul companies interested in dominating the movement of grain. The location of the towns related to railroad managers' decisions on how best to expand business. Sometimes a town succeeded in a modest way. Most failed. The town designs showed little in the way of planning. Many were rectangular or square shaped, based on a gridiron concept. Some of the early ones were very large, covering up to half a square mile. In the twentieth century, because of taxes imposed on town sites, some covered only eight square blocks. By the 1980s almost the entire railroad net remained intact. As for the "inland towns," 300 had disappeared and many of the rest were little more than place names. Railroads, their profits never tied closely to the success or failure of the town sites, simply used them as a business device designed to help in achieving larger goals.

Hudson's well-written and organized study, based on a variety of secondary and primary

*Plains Country Towns.* By John C. Hudson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xi + 189 pp. \$13.95.

John C. Hudson's new book, *Plains Country Towns*, deals with the dynamics of town building in a 20,000 square-mile area of north central North Dakota. Between 1880 and 1920 railroad colonization agents and independent speculators platted over 500 town sites. Three railroads, the Soo Line, the Northern Pacific, and the Great Northern, planned towns at

sources including railroad and local records, fills a void in North Dakota history. *Plains Country Towns* also stands out as an important addition to the history of American town building in general, illustrating a unique situation in which growth was not necessarily a major goal. This fine study should be of interest to all people interested in the urban development of the United States.

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