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TOWNS OF THE WESTERN RAILROADS

JOHN C. HUDSON

From Chicago it is more than twenty-two hundred miles overland to any of the great cities of the Pacific Coast. For almost a century those who made this crossing traveled by train. If they chose to watch, and most did, they saw a three-day pageant of plain, mountain, and desert as it unfolded, hour after hour, across their view from the train window. The high point of the drama might have been an early evening view of Glacier Park, a crossing of the Great Salt Lake at dawn, or a midday climb over Glorieta, but the thousands who saw the West this way brought home other memories, too.

With a regularity that even the most disinterested traveler must have come to expect by journey's end, the pageant was diverted every few minutes by the fast approach through swirling dust and raining cinders of a neat row

of frame houses, followed always by store buildings, churches, elevators, a crossing where somebody stood waiting, then a depot, followed by more houses, and finally back to open fields again, all encountered in a flash, quickly blurred in the memory by so many others like it already passed.

Day and night, these towns along the western railroads kept a rhythm that was interrupted only when one of them was important enough to command the train to stop: La Junta, Glendive, or McCook might be observed more carefully, but hundreds of others were only glimpses, unremembered and unremarkable, except in their predictable appearance and disappearance, mile after mile. They made an impression collectively, not as individual places. Their similarities were noted far more than their differences, not only by those who passed through them quickly and in succession, but also by those who knew them individually and up close. Railroad towns were far more numerous than most people realized, and the story of how they became such a fixture of the landscape requires more than the simple, functional explanation that they were necessary.

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BACKGROUND

As the transcontinental railways stretched west in the 1860s and '70s, "every temporary terminus of track laying became a city, wicked, wonderful, and short-lived." A former railroad agent wrote in *Harper's Magazine* of one such place at the end of track in western Kansas. The town of Coyote consisted of "canvas saloons, sheet-iron hotels, and sod dwellings, surrounded by tin cans and scattered playing cards"; its principal street, known as "Rat Row," was temporary home for a gang of Irish track laborers whose behavior was set forth in shocking detail. The writer held that "the Pacific railways have been responsible for more and worse towns than any other single cause."¹

From the start, the railroad towns were condemned for their unimaginative design. "Dropped at random upon the flat and featureless prairies along our western railroads," the new towns were predicted to be failures. "In the ordinary course of civilization, such characterless sites are not the ones to which populations cleave," wrote a typically harsh critic in the *American Architect and Building News*.² To make matters worse, these blots on the record of city planning, these squalid shantytowns inhabited by ruffians, were the personal creations of railroad builders and their cronies, everyone's favorite symbols of greed and corruption in that Gilded Age.³

The towns themselves were symbols of a necessary step in the westward march of civilization. Along with some of the other less prosaic aspects of pioneering, they shocked the educated and the refined, but they were absolutely irresistible to others, and it was no time before a steady stream of young men and women began appearing on the muddy townsites to dicker for choice building lots in the grid of wooden stakes that poked up through the trampled prairie grass. The scene was reenacted thousands of times, in thousands of places.

Some of the towns grew to become important cities. Tacoma, Reno, Fresno, Cheyenne, Billings, and Albuquerque are successful

examples, but even a list of half a dozen requires some qualification because there is no suitably restrictive definition of a "railroad town" that would allow counting their numbers.⁴ Every sizable town, east or west, was served by a railroad before the end of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, very few settlements actually were owned by railroads after the fashion of company towns of that period.

What distinguishes a railroad town is that it was part of a railroad's strategy to populate and control the territory along its line. Successful or not, a railroad town was a component of corporate ambitions to manipulate people and resources, to command space and consolidate position, in order to maximize profits for the company. Hundreds of independent towns sprang up along the tracks, but they were not instruments of corporate strategy. Countless other towns were in place before railroads arrived, and sometimes they were successful in bringing the rails their way, but in neither of these cases could the railroad develop the full potential of a townsite for its own advantage.

The first railroad towns appeared east of the Mississippi River before 1860. The spread of new railroads was curtailed sharply by the Civil War, but construction resumed shortly thereafter. The nation's first transcontinental line (Union Pacific-Central Pacific) was completed during a building cycle that peaked in 1871. Western railroad construction was at a standstill from 1873 to 1878, but this was followed by two periods of rapid growth between 1879 and 1890, when most of the rest of the transcontinental network was begun. A final spurt of construction in the first decade of the twentieth century completed the pattern.⁵ Railroad towns were founded according to this same tempo of boom-bust cycles, and not as a steady, westward spread so often portrayed as typical of the advancing population frontier. From 1850 to 1910, these new towns were staked out across the nation. In the West, where few cities had existed before, they became the fabric of the settlement system.

TOWN DEVELOPMENT

The railroads' clear purpose in developing townsites was to promote and control business along the line. Every railroad that promoted agricultural settlement also tried to lure prospective business people to their new towns. There was little disagreement over how the system should perform: farmers expected that trade-center towns would be created, merchants expected that there would be a surrounding population to support the trade, and railroads did their part by replicating in the West that system of town-country settlement familiar to Americans. Some railroad towns were created in nonagricultural areas, but the majority of places were designed to be nothing more or less than trade centers. While anyone might promote business growth in towns along the line, the railroads had an interest in controlling it by limiting the number of stations. A regular spacing, at seven- to ten-mile intervals, discouraged subsequent entries by independent promoters.

Many railroads entered into agreements with private parties who platted and sold the townsites. Railroad survey engineers determined town locations and then turned over their data to townsite agents, who hired surveyors (sometimes from the railroad) to stake out the plat. There was no shortage of men who wanted to get into the business, especially during the boom periods of westward migration, but there was little chance for most of them. Railroads generally placed responsibility for all the townsites on a line in the hands of one man, or a small group, and those chosen were already connected financially with the road. James J. Hill of the Great Northern Railway insisted that his company did not engage in this business, but Hill nonetheless had a substantial investment of his own money in several townsite companies that appeared to be independent of his railroad. Such an arrangement was common.

The greatest of all the western townsite creators was General Grenville M. Dodge, who had charge of the Union Pacific's towns in the

late 1860s and later, with his son-in-law, R. E. Montgomery, directed townsites for the Texas & Pacific and the Fort Worth & Denver City. Dodge was in charge, although there is little evidence that he ever became well acquainted with his creations.

It was General Dodge who claimed credit for influencing President Abraham Lincoln to choose the Union Pacific route west from Council Bluffs for the nation's first transcontinental line. When Dodge left the army in 1866, he immediately became chief engineer for the Union Pacific. That same year he was elected to Congress from the western district of Iowa, and in May, 1867, he was appointed agent in charge of Union Pacific townsites.⁶

Dodge directed railroad operations from Washington, where his presence and his reputation clearly benefited the Union Pacific. He repeatedly requested, and was granted, the presence of cavalry units to protect construction gangs in Nebraska and Wyoming. He prevailed upon Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton to urge a prohibition of the sale of whiskey in the vicinity of Union Pacific construction. Dodge knowingly had the city of Laramie, Wyoming, platted on the grounds of a United States military reservation (Fort Sanders) "for the protection of our property and the people connected with our enterprise," and then persuaded General William Tecumseh Sherman to approve it.⁷

In 1884, when he and Montgomery were involved in Texas townsites, Dodge sold the government land for military posts along the route of construction, and then used his influence to rearrange military operations so as to protect his investment. As a recent biographer noted, "Dodge's favorite occupation was anything that made money, irrespective of whether it were ethical or permanent."⁸ No other man simultaneously commanded the attention of eastern railroad investors, the United States government, and local officials as Dodge could. He was atypical of townsite agents also in his ability to direct operations he rarely, if ever, saw. Cheyenne, Laramie, Midland, and Odessa were some of his creations, but most of his

towns, like those platted by others, never achieved more than a modest success.

Possession of a land grant was more than enough to entice a railroad to promote townsites. The Illinois Central Railroad, for example, the first to receive such a grant, was forbidden by its charter from engaging in the town business. The Illinois Central may have set the pattern for later years, however, by creating the Associates Land Company, an organization led by some of the directors of the railroad, which platted and sold town lots around the railroad's stations in Illinois.⁹

There is evidence of direct borrowing on the experience of earlier lines, and this may account for some of the uniformity in townsite practices among railroads. In 1868 General Dodge sent a Union Pacific official, O. F. Davis, to visit the land departments of the Illinois Central and the Cedar Rapids & Missouri River. Davis examined both operations closely and made recommendations to Dodge on the strong points of each, an indication that the Union Pacific had not then decided how to market its land and town lots.¹⁰ In addition, men with townsite experience on one road often hired out to companies just entering the business, and this succession moved the townsite strategies from company to company as lines were built west.

Outside parties were prohibited by law from creating townsites within the limits of the Union Pacific's land grant before it was surveyed, but not after. In order to be sure of getting desirable locations, the railroad had to select townsites ahead of the land survey, but in so doing they had no way of knowing if the tracts so selected were on their (odd-numbered) sections or not. Dodge called it "a singular streak of fortune" that "with one or two exceptions the towns are now on odd sections." Until the land grant was considered earned, however, the company could not give more than quit-claim deeds to town lots on its own sections. Grand Island, Nebraska, was platted partly on UP land and partly on a school section purchased by the railroad. The company was able to issue general warranty deeds on

the school section but not on the odd section, a condition that skewed Grand Island's early development away from the railroad grant.¹¹

While land grants encouraged townsite development, lines built without such aid probably generated just as many new towns. The promoter needed to sell only a few choice corner lots in order to recover his investment. The principal risk was the inevitable slump in lot sales that took place after the buyers' attention had shifted to the next new town down the tracks. If the town plat was too large in relation to demand, unsold lots became a burden in later years because of the annual property taxes that had to be paid on each lot. More than one railroad official tried to devise a means for vacating portions of a plat in order to avoid taxes. Most companies cut short their losses by selling all the remaining lots to a single buyer, or else they vacated those blocks in which no sales had been made.¹²

A shift of emphasis in the townsite business occurred after the transcontinentals had been built across country; any new construction after that consisted of shorter branches or secondary lines designed to serve territory, rather than bridge it. As the network of railroad lines grew more weblike, companies began to vie with one another for the interstitial trade, and in some cases the competition was intense.¹³ When the railroad builder had his eye on the horizon, he was less interested in adding more trade-center towns along his line, but when he was in the business of capturing trade, he packed in as many towns as he could in order to soak up as much produce of the rural hinterlands as possible. As a result, the number of new railroad towns increased, rather than decreased, after the transcontinental lines had been completed. The timing was as bad as it could have been. This strategy placed on the market hundreds of new trade-center towns with diminished prospects for rural business just when forces outside the system were dictating hard times for towns that did not already have an established clientele.

IDEOLOGY

The railroad town was a Yankee invention. Some of its formative influences stemmed directly from the sources of railroad investment. New York and especially Boston sank far more of their investment capital in the western railroads than did Philadelphia, Baltimore, or any other major city.¹⁴ The idea of building railroads west of the Berkshires, west of the Alleghenies, west of the Great Lakes, and finally west of the Mississippi held a strong appeal for the young men of New England and upstate New York, and they came west to take part in one venture after another. These early western railroad builders were educated in engineering or in business, steeped in Yankee traditions of commerce, and eager to establish themselves financially in the new emporia of the West.¹⁵

Philadelphia is acknowledged to be the birthplace of urban land speculation on this continent, and railroad towns saw plenty of it, but it was not Philadelphia's influence, its money, or its citizens that shaped western railroad towns. It was in New England and New York that the custom of formally platting a settlement, no matter what the size or purpose, had become accepted by 1820, and it was into this milieu that the western railroad builders were born. A grid of streets—though it might have been an irregular one—with building lots of various sizes and extra-wide avenues for important thoroughfares, all done up in a neat, compact layout, was as Northern as an informal arrangement of stores and houses at a crossroads was typically Southern. New England's town settlements had not begun this way, and the southern colonies had some elegant urban designs, but these early traditions did not prevail past colonial times.

The first decades of the nineteenth century witnessed what has been described as "an orgy of town platting" in western New York.¹⁶ Later, a similar orgy took place in Ohio, where a prescient territorial legislature had passed a law in 1800 requiring that town plats be filed with county recorder's offices. By 1878,

fifteen other states and territories had passed such a law; only two of them were south of the Ohio River.¹⁷ The idea that towns had to be platted to be real was firmly entrenched in the Northern mind, and along with that went the idea of selling lots on a checkerboard to energetic businesspeople who would make an effort to boost the town.

The Civil War injected another heavy dose of Northern influence into railroad building throughout the West. In his memoirs, General Dodge frankly acknowledged that "the construction of the Union Pacific was upon a military basis." The heads of the engineering parties and all the construction chiefs had been officers in the war.¹⁸ More than that, the Civil War, with its difficult logistical problems, had been a training ground for young men who found themselves thereby possessed of engineering skills that were in great demand by the new railroads in the West. Northern money and Northern men thus came to dominate the railroads and their towns from Canada to the Gulf. Western railroad towns reflected this influence.

The creation of a townsite was only the first phase in a company's economic strategy. Railroad towns also had to be sold, which meant that prospective buyers had to be found, sent to the right places, and urged to bid on property. Townsite agents thus became information brokers as well, responding to inquiries from merchants, lawyers, doctors, newspapermen, and a host of others who were seeking profitable business locations. Knowledgeable agents could suggest whether a given town might support several general stores, one or two hardware stores, one newspaper, and two livery stables; or whether another might support twice that many, in the same ratio. The formulas used to make such calculations were, in effect, folk location theories—preconceptions that anyone familiar with trade-center towns of the Middle West or the Northeast might have carried in his head.

Townsite agents broke with tradition in one important respect. Since each business needed a building lot, the way to produce more lot

sales was to encourage more businesses, limited in size, each specializing in fewer lines of trade than had been the custom up to that time. General stores were welcome, but shoe stores, harness shops, confectioneries, oyster houses, and dry goods merchants were even better. The result was an expanded business population not warranted by the trade to be had.

When railroad officials referred to "colonization," they were almost always speaking of their efforts to recruit farm settlers. Townsite promotions also involved recruiting people, but these operations generally were handled by a separate department of the railroad or by affiliates who did not draw a salary from the company at all. This division in railroad promotion efforts reflected a strong ethnic and class bias held by railroad management, and it was a division to be replicated in the settlements themselves.

Carl B. Schmidt, who was once commissioner of foreign immigration in the land department of the Santa Fe Railroad, reminisced in his later years about how he had brought the wheat-raising Mennonites to Kansas. Then a successful businessman in Pueblo, Colorado, Schmidt was worried about the future supply of foreign labor: "The fruit growers in the Pacific Coast states already complain that their Chinamen are . . . getting too old to work; with no new Chinamen coming in, who is to take their place to prevent the orchards from becoming unprofitable and ruined?" In the Pueblo smelters, he said, "the men who do the rough, hard work are the Slavs and the Italians, while native Americans hold the positions of foremen, engineers, and other high places, in which the brain and the tongue are more essential than muscle."¹⁹ Schmidt, an immigrant himself, was not alone in his view that certain races and nationalities were especially suited to back-breaking toil on farms and in factories. The land departments of nearly all western roads sought immigrants, especially from the non-English-speaking countries of northern Europe, in the belief that they would work harder, complain less, and produce more than anyone else.

The approach was altogether different when

it came to recruiting merchants. The immigration agents from competing railroads who fought each other over the Russian-German Mennonite wheat farmers would not have thought of enticing such people, or any others they perceived as peasants, to open up a store on a railroad townsite. Towns were for the native-born and educated; railroad officials perceived merchants to be such a class of people, who would somehow, immediately, through their brains and thrift, produce a prosperous town, just as the hard-working farmers beyond the city limits would begin producing bumper crops of grain. The picture was static, with no room for change, except for the type of growth that maintained the same pattern.

TOWN PLANNING

Platting towns as a grid of streets demarcating blocks to be divided into building lots was an idea firmly established long before railroad companies took up real estate as a sideline. The subject often is discussed in terms of land speculation and paper towns. That is a useful perspective on the motivations of many who boomed western townsites, but the emphasis is slightly misplaced in the case of railroad men. They entered this business as much to control town development as to profit from it. Their strategy was to eliminate, in effect, all but a few acres out of each hundred square miles as possible locations to do business. The railroad's instrument of control was the townsite plat.

Plats brought back from the field by survey engineers and recorded in the county court-houses were not undifferentiated, checkerboard designs. Each plat contained many visual cues as to how the town should develop. Residential lots, six to the blockface, were 50 feet wide. Anyone who looked at the official plat knew that the 25-foot lots were for businesses and that streets lined with these narrow lots would be in the business district. The most important streets were 80 or 100 feet wide, and buyers knew that the principal intersection would be

where two streets of this width crossed. Residential streets were 60 feet wide, and alleys (generally thought desirable at that time) were 20 feet.²⁰ The streets were named on the plat, but the names were less important than the visual cues. The corner of Main Street and First Avenue might or might not have been the best location in town; it depended on the width of the streets and the arrangement and sizes of lots.

In the early years all lots were sold over the counter at fixed, predetermined prices by resident agents of the railroad. It was soon learned, however, that an opening-day auction sale drew more attention because bidders knew they had to be there early and go high for those four choice corner lots, and that is where the auctioneer generally began his sale.

There was considerable variety in railroad town plats even within the rigid grid pattern they all followed. The earliest idea, and one popularized by the Illinois Central Associates, was a parallel arrangement with the railroad track as the axis of symmetry (Fig. 1).²¹ The prototype is hard to discern, but it was commonplace for businesses to face the artery of commerce, whether that was a road, a canal, or a waterfront; perhaps the railroads were imitating that layout. The arrangement created two business streets, with buildings facing

each other across 300 feet of railroad right-of-way. The wide strip was designed for elevators, coal yards, and other businesses that needed direct access to the railroad. This land was underused, and some towns eventually acquired a portion of it for parks. It was rare to see both railroad-facing business streets developed equally; if First Avenue North was the major concentration, then First Avenue South became the "other side of the tracks" with a row of saloons and cheap hotels. It proved unreasonable to assume that the business district would develop as a single unit where there was a strip of land the length of a football field separating its two halves (Fig. 2).

Placing businesses on both sides of the same street made better sense, and this arrangement soon gained favor. The most common solution was to have the business street cross the railroad tracks at an angle, so that only one crossing was required between the two parts of the commercial district (Fig. 1).²² The railroad, with its strip of elevators alongside, bisected Main Street; the form was orthogonal. The depot generally was placed near this crossing, in the middle of the plat. Nevertheless, towns continued to develop more on one side of the tracks than on the other, and the orthogonal plan soon evolved to its final phase, the T-town (Fig. 1).

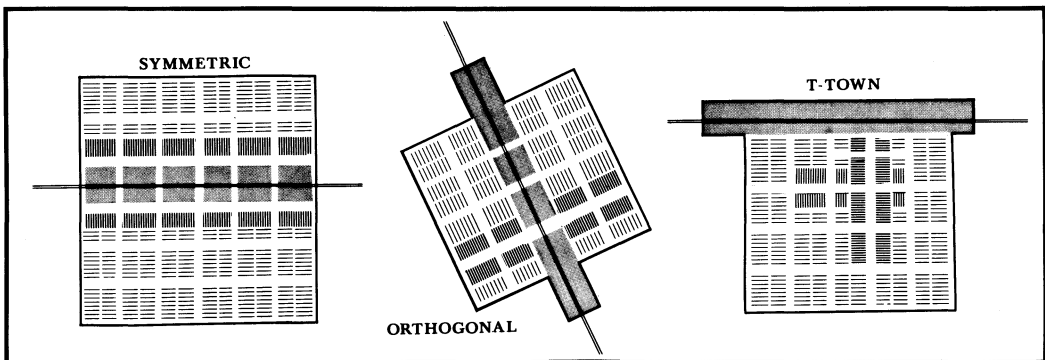


FIG. 1. *The changing form of the railroad town. Symmetric plats were the earliest, and they were succeeded by the orthogonal form, which in turn was replaced by the T-town variety. The types exhibit no clear geographical variation, however. See footnotes 21, 22, and 23 for examples.*



FIG. 2. Land along the tracks in a symmetric town was intended for businesses that needed access to the railroad (top: Farina, Illinois). In some cases the business district faced the tracks across a narrow park (bottom: Rock Springs, Wyoming).

The T-town was a stable solution, more acceptable to the railroad and to townspeople (Fig. 3). It came into vogue in the final phases of railroad building, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when railroad towns were built mainly along branch and feeder lines in the United States, but it was dominant in the Canadian West, where the railroad building phases came into sequence about two decades later.²³

These progressive stages in the refinement of townsites gradually removed the railroad from its position as a town's centerpiece. In the first shift, parallelism was replaced by orthogonality; in the second, symmetry was replaced by asymmetry. The trends in town

planning were a response to practice, not planning; they reflected the gradual process of readjustment and realignment made by the residents themselves. The T-town was a railroad innovation that simply confirmed what had been happening anyway.

TOWN BUILDING

Just as the two-dimensional railroad town developed according to a few commonly shared ideas, the same was true of the third dimension as buildings and other material improvements started to appear. Some places took on a ragged look from the start because of the railroad's clumsy attempts at land speculation. The Union Pacific followed the idea of selling every other 24-foot business lot at a bargain price and withholding the rest from sale until lot prices had been bid up. Their man in Laramie suggested, quite reasonably, that some prospective buyers might want two adjacent lots in order to construct wider buildings, but the company did not allow such sales.²⁴ The 24-foot restriction guaranteed that buildings would be small and that the businesses occupying them also would be small and specialized. Some of the Northern Pacific's towns were developed jointly with syndicates that owned every other lot (none adjacent) on the townsites. The syndicate men naturally pushed their own lots, while the railroad did little to sell theirs.²⁵ The result, again, was to spread the business district over a much larger area than was necessary and to create a townsites dotted with small buildings.

One effect of these restrictions was that most business buildings were similar in size and shape. This meant that when one business went under and the proprietor wanted to sell out, he had little difficulty in finding a buyer, no matter what use the new owner had in mind. Small buildings were moved easily, and it was common for a single structure to occupy more than one location and serve more than one function in its lifetime.²⁶ This pattern persisted in towns that saw little new investment after the early boom years. A trickle of new businesses slowly filled in most of the gaps, creating



FIG. 3. Main Street in the T-town begins at the railroad tracks, generally at a row of elevators (top: High Prairie, Alberta) or at the depot (middle: Clovis, New Mexico). Public buildings often mark the horizon at the end of the street (bottom: Judith Basin County Courthouse, Stanford, Montana).



FIG. 4. *Business rows. Gaps along Main Street characterize towns that attracted little new capital investment after the early boom years (top: Colman, South Dakota). Minor variations in store fronts give the appearance of variety, although most business buildings were of a single size and shape (middle: Butte, Nebraska). Larger business blocks are hallmarks of towns that benefited from continued investment (bottom: Anadarko, Oklahoma).*

a street lined with small buildings of various heights, but fires and business failures took their toll in later years, and the gap-toothed look returned to Main Street. Towns that escaped this syndrome were fortunate to have a few aggressive entrepreneurs of some means who tore down the original structures and replaced them with larger business blocks; those towns are the ones surviving today as trade centers (Fig. 4).

Although small buildings were a pervasive feature of all railroad towns, there was a distinct, regional architectural variation among them. A North Dakota Main Street was virtually a corridor between two walls of bare-faced, false-front buildings, set high, above snow depth. Farther south, the horizontal dimension took over, false fronts were shallower, the storefront was sheltered by a canopy over the sidewalk, and the floors tended to be closer to street level. Brick and stone were unusual, except for banks, in the Dakotas and Montana, frequent in Nebraska and Kansas, and dominant in Oklahoma and Texas. Such variations are not, of course, confined to towns created by the railroads, nor do they reflect anything so much as well-known regional preferences and climatic adaptations in building design that moved in parallel streams, from east to west, along with the people (Fig. 5).

Most townsite proprietors realized that they had to bend a little in order to build up a successful community. Few ministers of the gospel passed up the chance to ask for a free building lot for a church, and most such requests were granted routinely, although the lots they were given generally occupied the far corners of the original plat, where small-town churches remain to this day. Somewhere was begun the practice of giving free lots to newborn babies; these requests, too, were often granted, however grudgingly, by the townsite agent.²⁷ Requests to use unsold lots (free) for a pasture for the family cow, to place a temporary building (free) on a salable lot, and many others were received and frequently granted. Because townsite proprietors received little good publicity, they undoubtedly used



FIG. 5. Tall, bare false fronts characterize northern railroad towns (top: Barton, North Dakota). Shorter elevations and canopied walks were built simultaneously in railroad towns of the South (bottom: Dime Box, Texas).

such opportunities to show that they were human, too.

Although they donated lots for churches, schools, courthouses, and other public buildings, proprietors had a blind spot when it came to improvements that might make their towns more livable. Parks, when they were donated at all, were taken from unsold, and probably unsalable, marginal land on which the proprietor wished to avoid further taxes. Requests to plant trees, gravel the streets, or drain wet depressions were overlooked unless the public rose up in anger. Townsite companies had no legal responsibility to make such improvements, and they constantly encouraged their towns to incorporate formally so that such problems would fall to local governments to solve. Once a town had gotten its start, company interest faded quickly as attention shifted to the next town lot sale somewhere else.

CONCLUSION

The railroad companies took a restricted interest in the towns they had created, but the results of their efforts produced as many unintended effects as intended ones. There can be no doubt that their townsite strategies discouraged the appearance of other new towns created by parties other than the railroads. Only when railroads left the field open to intruders, and thereby signaled their lack of interest, did independent townsites find a permanent place along the tracks. Had railroads not been primarily interested in controlling these developments, there undoubtedly would have been more new towns platted, they would have fought each other for dominance, and some would have emerged successfully to grow into stable communities. In the long run, however, the changing conditions of retailing and marketing determined the success of a trade center.

The unintended effects of railroad townsite policies made a greater impact on the internal structure of the communities themselves. First among these was the leveling effect produced by the railroads' view that all towns along the line would perform essentially the same function, that of funneling traffic to the railroad. This was to be accomplished by setting in place an up-and-coming business class that would make a good showing for the town. Railroads created a highly specialized division of labor among merchants at the outset by their policies on lot sizes and sales, which, in turn, encouraged small proprietorships rather than fewer but larger business firms.

The railroad actually had a democratizing influence by making it possible for those with little capital to start a business, but if the people who entered into these ventures held the ideals expected of them, they were not likely to be satisfied with such a state of affairs. Many were not content, and they soon emerged as community leaders, pooling their assets, founding stronger financial institutions, buying out their weaker competitors, building elegant homes, and generally behaving as merchants

were expected to behave. Towns that witnessed such developments were seen as aggressive and healthy, and they were favored by railroad officials despite the fact that such economic evolution came about as a way of surviving the railroad's blueprint for settlement.

Most railroad towns were failures. They did not have secure enough standing to survive the technological changes that began making small towns obsolete after 1920; this was especially true of the great number of towns founded in the last wave of American railroad building between 1905 and 1915. The failure of a town was blamed on the inhabitants—a judgement that was justified only to the extent that many towns did have an identical start. The evidence of failure, however, was that such towns were never able to throw off the small-business mentality that surrounded their creation by the railroad. They were static, born full grown, and they withered in a world that was anything but static. The western railroads thus bear a heavy burden for the losses suffered by hundreds of thousands who believed what townsite agents told them about the prospects for a good life doing business in their town.

Was there an alternative? What might have happened if federal land policies had played as significant a role in town building as they did in farm building? The few examples of government townsites in Oklahoma offer mixed evidence of success. Government townsite laws were few and they had little impact on the success of communities.²⁸ If the railroads had taken a less active role in creating towns, however, there probably would have been greater variety from the results of diverse, uncoordinated attempts to build not only trade-center towns but cities. That, after all, had been the pattern up to the time that railroads came along. The outcome might have been an urban geography much different than the West has today.

NOTES

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1. W. E. Webb, "Air Towns and Their Inhabitants," *Harper's Magazine* 51 (1875): 828-30.

2. "The Shaping of Towns," *American Architect and Building News* 2 (1877): 195-96.

3. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age* (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Co., 1873). The chronically deceitful Col. Beriah Sellers in this novel promotes, among other things, a railroad townsite of his own invention, known as Napoleon (pp. 134-35). Col. Sellers has been suggested as "the prototype" for the "avarice and unrestrained rapaciousness" characteristic of the town promoter; see Keith L. Bryant, *Arthur E. Stillwell, Promoter with a Hunch* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), p. 87. Sellers may have been modeled after the promoters of the Missouri end of the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad; see H. Craig Miner, *The St. Louis-San Francisco Transcontinental Railroad* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1972), pp. 72-73.

4. By far the best source on this subject is the recent volume by John W. Reps, *Cities of the American West: A History of Frontier Urban Planning* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).

5. Julius Grodinsky, *Transcontinental Railway Strategy, 1869-1893* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962), chaps. 11 and 12.

6. Wallace D. Farnam, "Grenville Dodge and the Union Pacific: A Study of Historical Legend," *Journal of American History* 51 (1965): 632-50; and Stanley P. Hirshson, *Grenville M. Dodge: Soldier, Politician, Railroad Pioneer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967).

7. Grenville M. Dodge Papers, Iowa State Historical Society, Des Moines (hereafter DP), box 153: J. A. Evans to Dodge, February 13, 1868; W. B. Bent to J. E. House, February 15,

1868; and Dodge to E. M. Stanton, February 24, 1868.

8. Hirshson, *Grenville M. Dodge*, p. 173 n. 6.

9. Arthur M. Johnson and Barry E. Supple, *Boston Capitalists and Western Railroads* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 150-53; and Paul W. Gates, *The Illinois Central Railroad and Its Colonization Work* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934).

10. Evans to Dodge, March 19, 1868, DP, box 154.

11. Plan for the Organization of the Union Pacific Railroad Town Lot Department, 1871, DP, box 170.

12. As an example, the Great Northern Railway's Dakota & Great Northern Townsite Company platted Aurelia, North Dakota, on a branch line west of Minot in 1906; the plat contained 216 lots, 144 for houses and 72 for businesses (Ward County, Register of Deeds Plat Book, Minot, North Dakota). By 1937, 195 lots remained unsold, and the railroad's Real Estate Committee directed that all remaining lots be sold for a lump sum of \$1,800 because "Aurelia is in too close proximity to the main line to ever be an active townsite." The railroad, which had paid no taxes on the unsold lots after 1930, paid the relatively high price of \$11,613 for the land in the "boom" year of 1906 and had realized \$10,901 from the 21 lots it had managed to sell by 1937. Thus, although the townsite clearly failed, the railroad suffered little or no loss on the venture. Furthermore, the company carried the unsold lots on its books at a value of \$2,834, the "effective loss for income tax purposes" if no buyer was found. President's Subject Files, no. 9080, Great Northern Railway Collection, Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul.

13. John C. Hudson, "North Dakota's Railway War of 1905," *North Dakota History* 48 (1981): 4-19.

14. Johnson and Supple, *Boston Capitalists*, n. 9 and passim.

15. By far the largest number of western railroad builders and townsite promoters came from New England and New York state and, later, from northern Ohio. This statement is based on a reading of the many railroad corporate histories that have been written about

the western roads. One significant exception was Cyrus K. Holliday, from Pennsylvania; however, his Santa Fe line was dominated by Boston and New York men in the nineteenth century. For a list of corporate histories, see Donovan L. Hofsommer's bibliography in *Journal of the West* 17 (1978): 95-100.

16. Turpin C. Bannister, "Early Town Planning in New York State," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 3 (1943): 39.

17. From information in *Engineering News*, November 14, 1878, p. 361; the states and territories that required town plats to be filed were, in addition to Ohio: California, Colorado, Dakota, Illinois, Indiana, Florida, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Oregon, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Connecticut had a similar law.

18. Grenville M. Dodge, *How We Built the Union Pacific Railway* (Council Bluffs, Iowa: Monarch Printing Co., n. d.), p. 118.

19. Carl B. Schmidt, "Reminiscences of Foreign Immigration Work for Kansas," *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society* (1906): 485-86.

20. These dimensions were not universal, but they were common; see Walter H. Dorsey, "The Laying Out of Towns," *Engineering News*, August 29, 1891, pp. 192-93.

21. This form also was favored by the Northern Pacific (e.g., Jamestown, Bismarck, Billings, North Yakima) through the mid-1880s; it was used, in abbreviated form, in the 1860s by the Burlington & Missouri River in Iowa (e.g., Creston), by the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (e.g., Sedalia, Missouri), and by Dodge's men in the Union Pacific towns of Cheyenne, Laramie, and Rock Springs, Wyoming; the Atlantic & Pacific used it in Ash Fork, Williams, Winslow, Gallup, and Flagstaff; the Central Pacific used it in Fresno, Modesto, and, in a strange sort of hybrid with a Spanish-style plaza, in Reno; it was also used along later Southern Pacific lines in Texas (e.g., D'Hanis and Hondo). This partial list illustrates the geographical range of the form.

22. The orthogonal form was used by the Burlington & Missouri River in its Nebraska towns (e.g., Harvard) and by the Santa Fe in Kansas (e.g., Strong City). Dodge used it in North Platte. Other examples indicative of the range include the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul

(Aberdeen, South Dakota) and the St. Louis & San Francisco (Seligman, Missouri). This type had many variations from one company to another, although it is readily distinguishable from the symmetric form by the absence of a row of business houses facing the tracks.

23. The T-town is found from British Columbia (Dawson Creek; Northern Alberta Railways) to south Texas (Dime Box; Texas & New Orleans). The distinguishing feature is the nearly total lack of town development on one side of the tracks, at least in the initial plat. Other railroads using this type, especially on lines constructed after the mid-1880s, include the Soo Line, Great Northern, Canadian Pacific, Illinois Central (in Iowa), Rock Island, and Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul (Puget Sound extension).

24. W. B. Bent to J. E. House, May 10, 1868, DP, box 153.

25. The Northern Pacific had such an arrangement in what it called "trustee towns"; Bismarck, Mandan, Milnor, and Minnewaukan, North Dakota; Helena, Montana; and North Yakima and Ellensburg, Washington, are examples. W. B. Phipps to M. P. Martin, August 28, 1894, Land Commissioner's Letterpress Books, Northern Pacific Railway Collection, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

26. John C. Hudson, "The Plains Country Town," in *The Great Plains: Environment and Culture*, ed. by Brian W. Blouet and Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), pp. 99-118.

27. A good sample of the range of human problems brought to townsites promoters to solve is found in the correspondence of A. A. White and S. G. Comstock, who operated several dozen townsites along the Great Northern in Minnesota, North Dakota, and Montana; Solomon Gilman Comstock Papers, Northwest Minnesota Historical Records Center, Moorhead State College, Moorhead, Minnesota. An interesting account of two railroad and townsites promoters in Oklahoma is given in Donovan L. Hofsommer, "Townsites Development: The Case of the Wichita Falls & Northwestern Railway," *Great Plains Journal* 16 (Spring 1977): 107-22.

28. A summary of townsites laws through 1884 is found in Thomas Donaldson, *The Public Domain* (New York, Johnson Reprint Corp., 1970), pp. 298-99.