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Review of *The Metropolitan Frontier: Cities in the Modern American West* by Carl Abbott

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Metropolitan Frontier: Cities in the Modern American West. Carl Abbott. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1993. xxiii+224 pp. Maps, photos, tables, and references. \$29.95 cloth, (ISBN 0-8165-1129-2).

Carl Abbott enhances his reputation for excellence with this interpretive survey of the modern western city. He begins with World War II when heavy federal spending revitalized urban areas stagnating from twenty years of farm-mine depression. Abbott highlights the findings of Gerald Nash, Greg Hise and others while injecting his own scholarly insights at strategic points, a pattern that continues throughout the book. For example, he expands upon D. W. Meinig's concept of imperial Texas by extending Dallas-Fort Worth's range of influence far up into the Wyoming oil country. Then, building upon his own recently published work, Abbott develops further his notion of imperial California extending eastward to encompass parts of Arizona and Nevada as well as northward into Oregon and Washington. This enables him to make the convincing argument that the old nineteenth century east-west pattern of hinterlands shaped by the transcontinental railroads has been transformed by freeways, business networks and "commuting zones" linking urban Californians and Texans with the Northwest and Rockies, respectively, thereby creating more of a north-south axis.

In another section, Abbott exhibits his proven talent for constructing typologies by using an ingenious point system to divide the West's regional urban system into a hierarchy of twelve cities. He also uses his now familiar concept of the "networked city"—one whose banks and corporations connect it to regional, national and even global markets—to distinguish between major entrepôts like Denver and regional "junior partners" like Salt Lake City. His analysis of why cities in the "Rangebelt" of the central Rockies and northern plains grew more slowly than those in the southwestern Sunbelt is the best that I have seen.

Like John Findlay and others, Abbott tackles the question of why western cities look different from their eastern counterparts. First, he provides substantial evidence to demonstrate convergence between the two in both density and decentralization of activities. Then he correctly attributes the "formless" appearance of western cities to their hilly terrain, unique architecture, and abrupt change in land use especially along the edges of high-rise downtown cores.

A chapter on politics traces why downtown-based growth coalitions gave way in the 1950s and 60s to left-leaning activist groups emphasizing community preservation and minority rights. This trend, he argues, was followed by a shift back to the political center in the 1980s-90s, as Henry Cisneros, Diane Feinstein, and others helped reconcile the need for controlled growth with local concerns.

The book's shortcomings are minor. By abruptly beginning in 1940 Abbott minimizes many of the continuities associated with heavy New Deal spending in western cities during the thirties. While his discussion of multi-nucleated urban areas is first-rate, he largely ignores efforts at governing megalopolitan areas in Texas and especially California. He also neglects some of the "instant cities" that have recently sprung up such as the Laughlin-Bullhead City complex on the Colorado River—a new Phoenix-Southern California "recreation shed." But, these omissions hardly detract from a truly fine work. Indeed, the field of western urban history could use surveys of similar quality for the earlier years. **Eugene P. Moehring**, *Department of History, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*.