**Railroads and the West notes for Metcalf Station**

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Feel free to email or message on Twitter any questions you may have over the summer, or any insights into the camps and roles that you play.

Americans like to mythologize the West, and much of this involves glorifying the individual: the cowboy, the trapper, the prospector, or the farmer. But to understand the American West, one needs to grasp what I call the “twin pillars” of western development: big government and big business. And those can be well understood through the railroads.

Before the Civil War it was understood by many that to successfully exploit the West and connect California, a railroad was needed and it needed public support in order to be built: no company would take such a risk. Rather, the public would shoulder the cost. The Pacific Railway Act of 1862 pledged to build a central route, providing low interest loans and generous land grants for each mile built. This was greatly expanded in 1864 to allow for more land and include many more railroads. Railroads became the most important entity in the West, determining where people lived and controlling vast chunks of land.

Railroads also demonstrate the optimism of the 19th century: if you build it, they will come. Railroads were given grandiose names to attract capital. The St. Louis, Rocky Mountain, and Pacific never extended beyond Colfax County, New Mexico.

The Cimarron and Northwestern came at the end of the railroad boom. Railroads were essentially overbuilt by that time. But short, local lines dedicated to a single industry could be useful.

By 1907, railroads were also seen as the bad boys of the American economy. In 1907, an obvious movement was progressivism, a wide-ranging movement to reform American society and correct some of the issues raised by industrialization in the 19th century. The main concern was the unequal distribution of wealth and power to unelected captains of big business. It was a sharply anti-business era as evidenced by many strike and the passage of a slew of anti-trust and regulatory legislation. Much of this was aimed at railroads, which were viewed as the corruptors of American society. Note that railroads were a strong and vital industry in 1907, but within 15 years was an industry in great trouble as they became highly regulated at a time when the automobile began cutting deeply into revenues. Railroads were an industry in decline until deregulation came in 1980.

Railroad misdeeds have been overemphasized. The fact is that most people saw their local railroad as a vital link and part of their identity, and the role of mid-level managers softened the face of a hard corporation.