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## The Tootin' Louie: A History of the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway

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most of them apt, many of them colorful and entertaining, but some a bit off the mark and, to a historian's ear, less than convincing. Also, the "Overview" and "Introduction" are thin stuff, the most useful parts of which are repeated later in the text. Likewise, some might object that the author is inclined to romanticize Native American life prior to the incursion of whites, with their technologies, their diseases, and their hunger for land and other resources. In the end, though, the positives—not least the author's enthusiasm for the story at hand—substantially outweigh the negatives.

*The Tootin' Louie: A History of the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway*, by Don L. Hofsommer. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. xiii, 374 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, index. \$73.95 cloth, \$39.95 paper.

Reviewer Jamie Beranek is an independent researcher living in Cedar Rapids. He is engaged in a study of railroad structures along the Rock Island line.

With memories of its small-railroad charm, friendly employees, genteel poverty, and flashes of big-time mainline operation, the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway (M&StL) remains a favorite of rail fans and residents of the upper Midwest nearly 50 years after it was absorbed into the Chicago & North Western Railroad. Don Hofsommer, author of several recent books on Iowa and Minnesota railroading, now offers an informative and detailed history of this colorful railroad. Prior to Hofsommer's book, the only full-length treatment of the M&StL was Frank Donovan's folksy *Mileposts on the Prairie* (1950). Both books cover the railroad's first 80 years—*The Tootin' Louie* in much more detail than Donovan's corporate-sponsored account—and Hofsommer updates the story to the present.

The M&StL was chartered in 1870 by Minneapolis millers and lumbermen to transport wheat, timber, and coal to Minneapolis and to carry flour and finished lumber out to the surrounding territory. To that end, the road first extended to White Bear Lake, Minnesota, in 1871, with a connection to the Great Lakes port of Duluth. In 1877 it reached Albert Lea to the south, where it met the Iowa-managed Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern (BCR&N), becoming an integral part with the BCR&N and the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy in the operation of through train service between Minneapolis and St. Louis.

From the beginning, however, the M&StL's ultimately fatal flaws were obvious—its routes were too short and the territory it served too honeycombed with other railroad competition. As Hofsommer traces the company's shifting fortunes, salvation always appears

around the corner. A potential rescue by the Northern Pacific Railway was stymied by the Panic of 1873. Later, the Rock Island Railroad got stock control of the M&StL but lost interest after the M&StL slid into bankruptcy in 1888. After financier Edwin Hawley was named the railroad's president in 1897, the railroad remained fairly prosperous up to the beginning of World War I. After Armistice Day, however, a combination of high wages and static rates again sent the road into bankruptcy in 1923. There it remained for the next 20½ years, one of the longest bankruptcies in history. Salvation appeared in 1935, when Lucian Sprague, an up-from-the-ranks railroader, was named co-trustee and later president of the company. He was able to guide the M&StL through the Great Depression, stymie plans by the government to dismember it and parcel out its pieces to competing railroads, and handle the extraordinary traffic demands of World War II.

Frank Donovan's *Mileposts on the Prairie* ends in 1950 at the company's postwar high-water mark: profitable, debt-free, the property and equipment in good shape, with new streamlined passenger coaches, a soon-to-be-completed new headquarters building in Minneapolis, and, reported by no less an authority than Hedda Hopper, interest from Paramount Studios in making a movie about the rebirth of the railroad and its flamboyant president, Lucian Sprague. Donovan concluded that the Minneapolis & St. Louis was prepared to compete "in an age of jet-propelled planes and television."

Unfortunately, as Don Hofsommer continues the story, the company was ultimately not prepared to survive against interstate highways and railroad megamergers (and nothing came of Paramount's interest, either). When a U.S. Supreme Court in December 1959 overturned an effort to acquire the Toledo, Peoria & Western Railroad (which would have allowed the M&StL to lengthen its haul east of Peoria), any future prospects for expanding the M&StL disappeared. The railroad soldiered on for another 11 months until it was merged into the Chicago & North Western. Massive abandonments ensued in the following decades, with the result that today less than 25 percent of the M&StL's mileage remains in operation.

*The Tootin' Louie* is the definitive history of the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway. Hofsommer's approach is to describe and analyze national and regional trends that affected the railroad throughout its 90-year life and then to leaven the history with many colorful details about its operations—everything from the makeup of two representative freight trains in December 1910, to who rode the road's passenger trains and why, to descriptions of its resort traffic to Lake Minnetonka. Hofsommer's obvious affection for the M&StL always comes through in his

writing. He grew up along the railroad in Callender, Fort Dodge, and Spencer, Iowa, and his long association with the company is reflected in his often eloquent writing about its legendarily loyal employees, the details of its operations, and the sadness, however unsurprising, of its demise. At times the amount of detail can be overwhelming—this is not a book for the casual reader—yet the fruits of his voluminous research will be useful to those interested in not just the M&StL but midwestern economic development and other area railroads as well.

I have two gripes, the first minor: Hofsommer has the annoying habit of ascribing unknowable emotions and expressions to people and inanimate entities. Thus, events “put a pucker” or a “frown” on someone’s face; railroads variously “sigh,” “sputter,” and “fuss”; individuals “bellow,” “bluster” and “growl”; periodicals “moan” and “intone.” It’s fine to liven up one’s writing, but too much “color” becomes distracting. Second, there is no all-time map of the M&StL, showing it at its peak mileage. A map of the railroad’s currently surviving line segments would have been particularly useful. That said, however, Don Hofsommer has written an extremely informative, detailed, and colorful look at a railroad, a region, and an era.

*Permeable Border: The Great Lakes Basin as Transnational Region, 1650–1990*, by John J. Bukowczyk, Nora Faires, David R. Smith, and Randy Widdis. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005. vii, 298 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliographical essays, bibliography, appendix, index. \$34.95 cloth.

Reviewer Mel Prewitt teaches at Scott Community College. His research and writing have focused on the impact of emigrants from the midwestern United States on the society and politics of the Canadian prairie.

Four authors have shared the daunting task of describing the development of a region that seems to defy recognition and cohesion. Equipped with diverse backgrounds, both academic and national, this team charts the changing economic and political climate of the transnational Great Lakes region from both sides of the political boundary, bringing historical and geographical disciplines to bear on 340 years of history of the borderland.

Regions are often defined by grand geographical parameters such as rivers and mountain ranges. At other times, regions are distinct ethnic homelands. The Great Lakes region has nothing to compare to such markings of specificity and permanence. Even some who teach regional cultural geography seem to question its reality or relevance in a modern world. These four gallant researchers diligently build a solid