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Off the Main Lines: A Photographic Odyssey

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Off the Main Lines: A Photographic Odyssey, by Don L. Hofsommer. Railroads Past and Present. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013. x, 307 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$55.00 paperback, \$45.99 e-book.

Reviewer Kevin Byrne is professor emeritus of history at Gustavus Adolphus College. His research and writing have focused on military history and the history of technology and railroads.

In *Off the Main Lines*, prolific and accomplished railroad historian Don Hofsommer displays his lifelong fascination with photographing the world of railroading. His black-and-white images of railways and his impressively detailed captions constitute the essence of this study. He opens with a short autobiographical introduction and provides brief contextual information for each chapter and subchapter. The volume traces 40 years of the author's whereabouts and of railroad history, from roughly 1950 through 1990, focusing on the declining branch lines and secondary roads that were "off the main lines."

Raised in small-town Iowa, Hofsommer subsequently followed a path that took him—and his camera—to Colorado, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Texas, and nearby states. Images from these locations dominate this aptly subtitled "photographic odyssey," and many of the captions disclose Hofsommer's memories of family excursions and railroad employees he knew by name. Rest assured, too, the book is excellent history. It transports readers through time and space, providing a visceral sense of the eroding dignity of branch lines and the locales that depended on them, as the embattled industry labored to adapt to changing circumstances. Fittingly, the upper Midwest features prominently: fully one-third of the volume focuses on the Hawkeye State; one chapter highlights Minnesota railways.

Overall, Hofsommer mourns the decline of these branch lines, but his concluding photos foreshadow their partial revitalization by the 1990s. The book is a fitting tribute to its subject; railroad enthusiasts across the upper Midwest and beyond will find Hofsommer's personalized history to be both edifying and immensely rewarding.