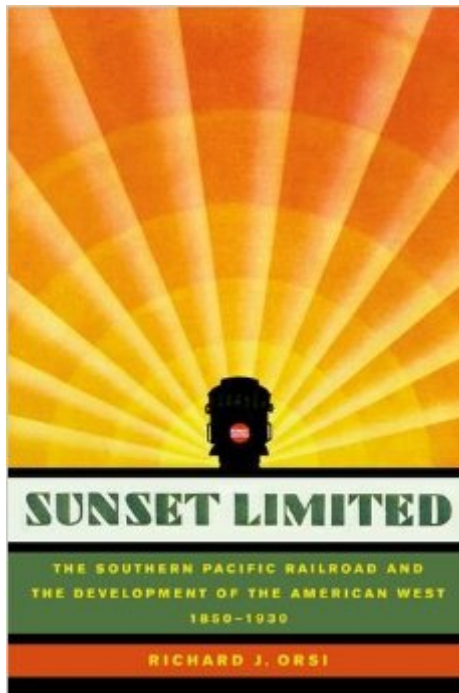


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Sunset Limited: The Southern Pacific Railroad And The Development Of The American West, 1850-1930



Synopsis

The only major U.S. railroad to be operated by westerners and the only railroad built from west to east, the Southern Pacific acquired a unique history and character. It also acquired a reputation, especially in California, as a railroad that people loved to hate. This magisterial history tells the full story of the Southern Pacific for the first time, shattering myths about the company that have prevailed to this day. A landmark account, *Sunset Limited* explores the railroad's development and influence—especially as it affected land settlement, agriculture, water policy, and the environment—and offers a new perspective on the tremendous, often surprising, role the company played in shaping the American West. Based on his unprecedented and extensive research into the company's historical archives, Richard Orsi finds that, contrary to conventional understanding, the Southern Pacific Company identified its corporate well-being with population growth and social and economic development in the railroad's hinterland. As he traces the complex and shifting intersections between corporate and public interest, Orsi documents the railroad's little-known promotion of land distribution, small-scale farming, scientific agriculture, and less wasteful environmental practices and policies—including water conservation and wilderness and recreational parklands preservation. Meticulously researched, lucidly written, and judiciously balanced, *Sunset Limited* opens a new window onto the American West in a crucial phase of its development and will forever change our perceptions of one of the largest and most important western corporations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Book Information

Hardcover: 637 pages

Publisher: University of California Press; 1st edition (May 16, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520200195

ISBN-13: 978-0520200197

Product Dimensions: 9.3 x 6.4 x 1.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.3 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (12 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,425,710 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #646 in [Books > Engineering & Transportation > Transportation > History > Railroads](#) #1005 in [Books > Engineering & Transportation > Transportation > Railroads](#) #30627 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > State & Local](#)

Customer Reviews

This actually could have been a three star review, but I have to give credit to the thoroughness of the scholarship, the excellent photographs and the superb 200+ end notes, which are a mini-book in themselves. Orsi's book is "revisionist" if it is proper to call a thesis that glorifies a massive American corporation "revisionist". I suppose that it qualifies if one is taking the scholarship of major American and French universities from the sixties onward as the standard. Simply put, Orsi's goal is to set the record straight about the Southern Pacific. No "Octopus" in his eyes, the Southern Pacific was an important innovator in the area of agriculture, conservation and scientific forestry. Indeed, without the Southern Pacific, California and the west as we know it would not have been possible. Aside from rewriting bits of history from the railroad's perspective, Orsi's main scholarly contribution is his access to the Southern Pacific's own corporate records. Certainly this is an approach that gives a more complicated picture of the corporations motives and morals than the simplistic "Octopus" portrait of Frank Norris. Orsi also has access to better statistics than scholars operating in the past had (i.e. the railroad's internal statistics), so that allows him to fairly castigate those who have painted an unrealistic portrait of, say, the size of the Southern Pacific's land grants. Although I am sympathetic to his attempt to rehabilitate the image of the Southern Pacific, I found some of the assertions regarding the tremendous difficulties the S & P had in carrying out its good intentions hard to take.

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