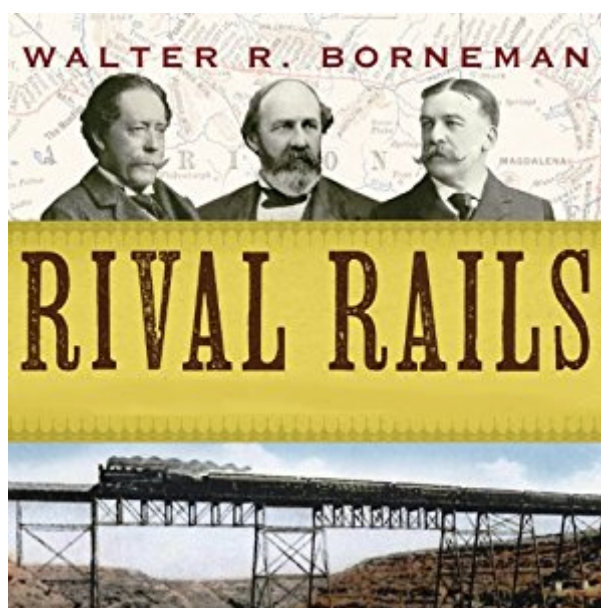


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# Rival Rails: The Race To Build America's Greatest Transcontinental Railroad



## Synopsis

The driving of the golden spike at Promontory Summit, which marked the completion of the country's first transcontinental railroad, was only the beginning of the race for railroad dominance. In the aftermath of this building feat, dozens of railroads, each with aggressive empire builders at their helms, raced one another for the ultimate prize of a southern transcontinental route that was generally free of snow, shorter in distance, and gentler in gradients. More than just a means of transportation, the railroads were a powerful mold, and the presence of a rail line had the power to make - or break - the fledgling towns and cities across the newborn American West. While much has been written about the building of the first transcontinental railroad, the bulk of the history of the railroads in the United States has been largely ignored. With a meticulous, loving eye, Walter Borneman picks up where most other histories leave off.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 15 hours and 5 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Tantor Audio

Audible.com Release Date: September 28, 2010

Language: English

ASIN: B0044X2U9S

Best Sellers Rank: #93 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Transportation #132 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Transportation > History > Railroads #206 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Transportation > Railroads

## Customer Reviews

I became a fan of Walter Borneman (*Alaska, 1812, The French and Indian War, Polk*) after reading "1812," and have since then pre-ordered each of his books as they become available through . "Rival Rails" is another excellent, focused book from this established historian. While touching on a century of railroad expansion and development in the vast southwest territory between Kansas City and the West Coast, this latest book from Borneman focuses on a relatively brief period from the 1860s to the 1880s during which a network of thousands of miles of railroad was built westward from Chicago and Kansas City to the west coast, with the dramatic accompanying population shifts and development of agricultural, mining, and other resources of these vast new western lands.

Through these rail connections, Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and California were rapidly incorporated into the commercial, social, and political sphere of the greater United States. The arrival of the railroads dramatically transformed the West Coast. Once connected with Chicago, Los Angeles rapidly grew from a sleepy coastal town into one of America's great cities. This expansion of a network of railroads westward was complex in its engineering challenges as well as in its political-financial processes, as entrepreneurs like Huntington, Gould, and Crocker, east coast and European investors, Congress, and even state and federal courts were regularly involved. Many players (some successful, some not) were involved in this expansion, and keeping these sorted out was a bit challenging as the book progressed. Fortunately, Borneman was kind enough to provide the reader not only with a series of railroad route maps within appropriate chapters, but also with two lists, one of the Railroads and another of the Railroaders, just after the introduction. My coherent reading was greatly aided by my bookmarking to maintain easy reference to these lists and to the maps. A substantial section of historical photographs adds to the enjoyment of the book. Though largely consolidated today, the trains still run over the rail beds originally laid down by these entrepreneurs, builders and engineers, and many, many thousands of workers who almost entirely by hand dug tunnels, built rail beds, and laid the tracks. Railroads are still vital to the U.S. economy (ask Warren Buffett), and Amtrak's ridership is at record levels. "Rival Rails" gives an excellent and readable overview of this brief but critical phase of U.S. development from a country largely operating east of the Mississippi to a country socially, politically, and commercially integrated from the Atlantic to the Pacific Coast.

Until I read *Rival Rails*, I knew little about transcontinental railroads beyond the famous photograph at Promontory Summit, where the Union Pacific and Central Pacific met in 1869. As Walter Borneman points out, however, that ceremony did not in fact mark completion of the first transcontinental railroad. Gaps remained between Sacramento and Oakland and between Omaha and Council Bluffs. The latter required the Union Pacific to ferry passengers across the Missouri River until completion of a bridge some three years later. Transcontinental travel entirely by rail first became possible in August 1870, when the Kansas Pacific--one of the "rival rails" whose history Borneman recounts--reached Denver. *Rival Rails* is an engrossing history of the less well known southern transcontinental lines. Generally snow-free, they were, and are, significant components of the national transportation infrastructure between the west coast and the rest of the country. Their building is a complex story, and Borneman provides sufficient detail without overwhelming the reader. He describes the political, corporate, financial, legal, and engineering obstacles that had to

be overcome and includes vivid portraits of the men who overcame them and who struggled against each other to build "America's greatest transcontinental railroad." The specialist can find additional details in the endnotes, some of which are quite extensive. As a part time Santa Fe fan, I was fascinated to read about the history of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe--even though it bypasses Santa Fe at Lamy--and was more than a little bit gratified that it rose to the "top of the heap" over its arch rival, the Southern Pacific. This it accomplished by judicious expansion, prudent management, and the food and lodging of the Fred Harvey Company. Borneman's writing is eminently readable and full of delightful turns of phrase. If one needed proof that sound scholarship can be entertaining as well, Rival Rails furnishes that proof.

As an audiobook for listening while you drive I don't recommend it unless you can ignore all the descriptions, statistics, back and forth time and place references, long list of people involved, etc. I found I had to just listen for the various stories that are intermixed with all the data. It probably would make a better book in written form with the maps that reviewers of the hardback book have said it includes. With the map maybe you can figure out all the references to where the gorges and rivers they had to cross or go through or around where located. I gave the book 3 stars because it was very well researched but I'm not a railroad buff so I can't comment on its accuracy. Others have commented that the book is a bore but do to the fine job that Norman Dietz does narrating the book it's quite tolerable.

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