



Allies of the Earth: Railroads And the Soul of Preservation

Alfred Runte

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What did America lose with the decline of the passenger train? Much more than most Americans think. The greatest loss is the alliance between technology and the land, according to public historian Alfred Runte. Once abandoning railroads would have been unthinkable, but we have virtually forgotten the importance of trains for our country and for ourselves. Now the landscape suffers in our mindless rush to get rid of old technology and blindly embrace the new.

Runte asks us to reevaluate existing modes of transportation and to recognize the need for railroads--not just as a safe, efficient, and interactive means of travel, but also as effective stewards for our dwindling landscape. Challenging the notion that speed is the only way to conquer our nation's expanse or that beauty does not matter, Runte reminds us of our love for distance, and the joys of open space. Travel is not only about arriving at our destination quickly, but is also what we experience along our route. Recalling train travel experiences of his own, Runte invites us to interact as we travel, to look out the train window at our country, and to care passionately about the landscape we see.

Noting our own history as well as Europe's, Runte points out what has gone wrong with the U.S. railroad system and calls us all to task: railroad companies, Amtrak, the U.S. government, environmentalists, economists, politicians, railroad historians, and ordinary citizens. As a true visionary with a deep respect for the land and its people, Runte asks us to open our eyes and our minds to the idea that beauty could once again be part of our daily lives. He gives us hope that railroads we so carelessly threw away may still be restored to preserve the remaining glories of our continent.

Although few Americans use passenger trains today, we still love railroads. We say we want to preserve our national parks, countryside, and urban landscapes, yet we keep tearing into the best of them every day. Once abandoning railroads would have been unthinkable, but we have forgotten the importance of trains for our earth and for ourselves. Alfred Runte challenges our notion that adding highways and airports will help us reach our destinations more quickly, or meet our transportation and environmental goals. He dares us to care about what we see as we travel and to believe railroads hold a key to preserving our national landscapes. As a true visionary with a deep respect for the land and its people, Runte gives us hope that by restoring our trains, we can save our nation's imperiled natural beauty.

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