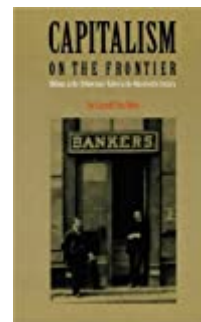


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carroll Van West. *Capitalism on the Frontier: Billings and the Yellowstone Valley in the Nineteenth Century.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993. xiii + 281 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-4755-0.



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Published on H-Local (May, 1995)

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Part 2-

Capitalism on the Frontier: Other Reviewers' Comments. Publisher's Synopsis.

"Unquestionably the best study of a Montana urban place that has been written."-William Lang, coauthor of *Montana. A History of Two Centuries* (1991). "This impressive study should attract a wide readership among those interested in community history on the frontier, economic development in the American West, and Montana's history in the nineteenth century."-Clyde Milner II, Editor, *Western Historical Quarterly*.

Focusing on the Clark's Fork Bottom, a twenty-five-mile stretch between present-day Park City and Billings, Montana, this path-breaking study examines the successive stages of capitalist development in Billings and the Yellowstone Valley during the nineteenth century. From the subsistence and barter economy of the Native Americans, through the fur trade era and the settlers' introduction of a market economy, the introduction of industrial capitalism by the Northern Pacific Railroad, and the increasing influence of Corporate capitalism in the latter part of the century, Carroll Van West shows how each stage affected the relationships and choices shared by the local inhabitants.

Carroll Van West is an assistant professor and project Coordinator for the Center for Historic Preservation, Middle Tennessee State University. He is the author of *A Traveler's Companion to Montana History*(1986) and *Images of Billings: A Photographic History* (1990).

Part 3-

Capitalism on the Frontier: Book Review

Long overshadowed in historical monographs by its more infamous western neighbor-Butte-Billings has failed to garner the attention it deserves as a center of northern frontier development. Carroll Van West tries

to address this deficiency by tracing the efforts to turn a hot, tressless, alkali flat in eastern Montana into the “second Denver” of the West. *Capitalism on the Frontier* is an attempt to place the development of this region into a larger network of market relations and economic transformations that directly linked Montana’s largest city to the greater society of the region.

Beginning his study with an exploration of the patterns of exchange and barter economies that thrived in the 1870s and 1880s between Native Americans and the early Anglo settlers, West illuminates the successive economic orders that dominated and transformed the Yellowstone Valley. The arrival of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1882 displaced this earlier face-to-face exchange system with a market-based economy that mirrored patterns established elsewhere in the westward migration of America’s railroads. This incursion of early market capitalism marked the beginning of a significant displacement of native culture with the powerfully manipulative culture of nineteenth-century boosters. Well-known figures of eastern monied interests like James J. Hill, J.P. Morgan, and Henry Villard replaced this localized market system with the final stage in Montana’s economic maturation, an impersonal corporate capitalist system that operated on a national and even international scale.

The text is focused primarily on the crucial early years of Billings’ development—1877 to 1907. Rather than analyze the political forces at work in the Yellowstone Valley in isolation, Van West does an excellent job of placing community dynamics, especially these critically important years of expansion, within the greater scope of western urbanization. Van West successfully illustrates how Billings first struggled with, then adjusted to, the assorted growing pains of economic growth and urban expansion in the rural West. For example, how to attract “proper” community institutions, find sufficient financial support, establish political autonomy, and ensure a profitable and long-lasting local economy are all issues the

early visionaries of Billings faced and each receives extensive attention in Van West’s analysis.

A certain strength of *Capitalism on the Frontier* is Van West’s ability to show how forces far removed from the Yellowstone Valley affected the development of the Billings area. Local entrepreneurs are manipulated like puppets as decisions made in the banking boardrooms of Boston, New York, London, and Berlin controlled their fate and that of their fledgling city. To this end, Van West’s look at the boom-and-bust cycle of Billings’ close neighbor Coulson, past over by the railroad despite considerable booster efforts, is especially illuminating. While the author’s narrative outlining the development of this region may not be new to those familiar with the history of western community building, the close examination of exactly HOW the process works is a significant contribution to the larger story of western growth. Van West adeptly illustrates how local Native American groups, speculators, capitalists, and other major players moved on and off stage as the region followed the leading edge of capitalism’s progression across the northern plains.

The emphasis on economic growth in the Yellowstone Valley is well done, but little is said of the cultural, social, and political institutions that must have accompanied the transformation from river-bottom to city. Adding reference to the social environment in which these changes were occurring would have added another layer of depth to this community and its members. This small criticism aside, Carroll Van West has created a well-written and highly readable text for anyone interested in the histories of urban growth, railroad development, the northern Rockies, and especially, Montana.

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Citation: John Herron. Review of West, Carroll Van, *Capitalism on the Frontier: Billings and the Yellowstone Valley in the Nineteenth Century*. H-Local, H-Net Reviews. May, 1995.

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