

My name's Dave Nicandri, I'm the Director of the Washington State Historical Society and our program today is coming from the Washington State History Museum in downtown Tacoma, where we have on view the current, big narrative exhibition of the museum, "The West the Railroads Made." Our guest today is one of the co-curators and co-authors of the companion volume – Carlos Schwantes. Carlos is the endowed professor of Transportation Studies at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, and is a well-known figure in the history of the American West, specializing in transportation history, and who's notable early work is a magnificent volume in its own right, "Railroad Signatures Across the Pacific Northwest."

Carlos, let's start with your former book, on Railroad Signatures, and I highlighted you wrote that fifteen-twenty years ago...

[Carlos Schwantes]: I did.

[Dave Nicandri]: How has your understanding and appreciation for railroads history changed since you wrote that book?

[Carlos Schwantes]: It's gotten much broader, and since I wrote that book, I've been able to travel abroad and put things in a comparative perspective. When I wrote that book, I accepted certain things as "givens," and after being in the mother country of railroads – England – I saw that there were alternatives that could have happened, for various reasons didn't happen. And so, I think that in "The West the Railroads Made" there's a broader perspective of the impact of the railroads on the West, than there was in the earlier book.

[Dave Nicandri]: Now, you and Jim [co-author James Rhonda] in your narrative, I think one of your more interesting points, is you talk about how the railroads were quickly seen as an evolving technology or an evolving influence, and a very significant development in all of the important observers and commentators of the day – 1830s to 1840s – were quick to pick up on the significance including such people as Henry Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Try to give us some feel for how these great thinkers were conceiving of and making sense of this new technology.

[Carlos Schwantes]: There seemed to be no limit to the imagination when it came to thinking about the railroad and its impact. They could obviously see the impact of the railroad almost from Day 1. It changed the way commerce flowed; it was an impressive, new technology just in its own right: it was smoking, and made a clanking noise, and where the tracks went, you could see where the trains would go and there was always this track network, this support structure that was visible in the landscape even when there was no locomotive in sight. And so many people pondered the meaning of the railroad, including as you mention Henry David Thoreau; but one of my favorites that we didn't mention was Nathaniel Hawthorne, who actually wrote an essay called "The Celestial Railroad," where he compares the light of an individual – I believe it's a typical Christian light – on the way to Heaven, and how the Devil used the railroad to fool him, and make him think he's going to Heaven the easy way. It ends and he ends up on the wrong side of

the celestial river, with Heaven on one side and the railroad ending on the other. So, people use the railroad as a sort of metaphor for many, many things, and to me it's telling how deeply it penetrated the American consciousness of the authors, painters, sculptors and so forth, who used the railroad in their work.

[WSHS Narrator]: For a complete look firsthand of the exhibition "The West the Railroads Made," co-curated by authors Carlos Schwantes and James Rhonda, please visit the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma, now through January 24, 2009.