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Building Big Iron: The Epic History of Locomotive Building in the United States from 1830 to the Present

Bill Yenne

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Building Big Iron is the story of an industry that arrived in the United States at almost the very moment the Industrial Revolution began to touch American shores, and which remains a powerful part of the ongoing America's industrial infrastructure.

This is the story of myriad companies and factories that built steam locomotives, and a smaller number of companies that built electrics and diesel-electrics. It is the story of small companies that came and went, and of small companies that became large companies. It is the story of large companies that evolved into the Big Three of Steam—Alco, Baldwin, and Lima. It is the story of the Big Two of Diesel—GE Transportation and Electro-Motive—that have held that mantle for half a century while undergoing internal changes and challenges.

This is the story of hardworking men with calluses on their gnarled hands and grease under their nails. It is also the story of men who sat in head offices and peered out across vast manufacturing operations.

The building of America's railroads has been the subject of countless books and even a few movies. However, one cannot approach this literature without considering the locomotives that made it all possible, however. In 1884, Scientific American mentioned the great American railroad network, and reminded readers that, "side by side with this enterprise in railroad building, at once caused by and promoting it, has been the wonderful growth of every industry pertaining to the equipment and operation of railroads. There were a few locomotives imported in the infancy of railroad building here, which met with only indifferent success, but our own inventors and mechanics early began to take the lead in this branch of manufacture and in car building, which they have ever since held."

The uncredited technology writer who penned this eloquent passage went on to say, "the locomotive of today is one of the most wonderful of all the products of man's skill, and has reached a point of perfection from which it seems hardly possible to attain further progress, so long as we obtain power from coal and wood according to principles now understood."

If he could have peered into the future a few decades, he would have seen that great innovations in steam locomotives were just beyond the horizon, and great innovations in diesel-electric technology were a bit farther beyond. In short, he would see the wonderful evolution of one of America's greatest industries, which I have tried to assemble in this volume.

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