

Transit book has large appeal

Metropolitan Railways, William D. Middleton, US\$59.95, hardcover ISBN 0-253-34179-5, 275 pp, Indiana University Press.

This historical publication describes the growth and development of urban rail transit systems in North America. The book is so well illustrated that it makes the reader want to visit the locations and even consider being a passenger.

The author has done a good job of tracing the history of rail transit technology and incorporating details provided by knowledgeable people with experience in this area. It's these details that help to round out the history and add a certain richness to the text. Photographs of early construction sites, both underground and above ground, give the reader a clear picture of the many systems in use in the early years.

Communities in the 1800s began to experience growing pains. In an effort to solve transportation problems and service a need, they set out to offer townspeople a convenient and efficient way of moving from one end of the town to the other, and eventually from one town to another. Specialized corporations formed to design and build passenger cars for the various communities. Designs included a long life expectancy, and in some communities these older systems are still providing adequate service.

Over the years, design ideas and materials often borrowed from technology in other sectors, e.g. aviation and automotive. Information about designs and progress over the years in developing and using these designs is well documented in the book, and could be easily understood by a lay person. I myself started with the index, flipping to specific pages of interest, before taking in the entire book. Content includes everything from the 1832 horse-drawn streetcar, and the 1871 train above the streets of Manhattan, to the first urban subways, and eventually light rail systems in 1970s. It's really one-stop shopping for the reader in terms of the subject material.

We've heard the expression "comfort food," and I tend to think of this text as a comfort book for engineers and non-engineers interested in transportation and history.

Reviewed by Nick Monsour, P.Eng., PEO Councillor

