

Railroads Need Better Management

RAILROADS hit their peak of prosperity and prestige during the "Roaring Twenties." Besides hauling the nation's freight, they provided luxury passenger trains that were the high point of many trips.

Today, we are engaged in a railroad dismantling program. Cries that we ought to be improving railroads and using them more in order to stretch fuel supplies aren't likely to change things.

The reason is that we don't have anybody to run the railroads. Probably the railroads could compete for the title of being the greatest management fiasco in the history of American business.

Railroads were built by businessmen with great vision and ambition, with an eye to subsidies in the form of gifts of public lands and cash payments by communities they were to serve.

Railroader William Henry Vanderbilt denied that he said "The public be damned!", as was reported in 1882, but the public got the im-

pression that rail management was selfish and greedy, anyway.

Unions have been working on the railroad for a long time, but they can't be counted on to run them efficiently.

John G. Kneilling, in a brochure titled "America's Railroads: Ruin and Reform," writes that in 1977 "Labor productivity is equal to each employee driving a 20-ton truck 40 miles during his working hours."

Kneilling charges that unions have "used their power destructively."

The government doesn't know how to run a railroad, either. When railroads faltered, Congress responded to appeals for help with its favorite tools: Subsidies and regulations. The situation has rapidly deteriorated.

Amtrak reduced the number of places you could reach by passenger trains, forcing travelers to use other conveyances. Now after increasing operating losses to nearly a billion dollars a year, Amtrak plans to cut off more customers, including all of Oklahoma.

Then Congress created Conrail out of bankrupt eastern railroads. It is reported to be losing a million dollars a day of taxpayers' money.

Nationalization of the remaining three dozen or so major railroads (there were 130 in 1945) has been suggested, along with deregulation of rail services and rates.

One rail expert argues that a heavy duty, steam locomotive can run 1,000 miles between coal and water stops, operating more economically and efficiently than comparable diesel engines.

But environmental laws would keep the smoke from coming out of the stacks, as it did so abundantly during our great years of agricultural, industrial and population growth.

Technologically, we could start a new era of railroad building with good prospects for success, in spite of high costs for rights-of-way, but where would we get somebody to run the railroads?

And would Congress let them do it, if they knew how?