FOREWORD
BY WILLIAM H. GOETZMANN

To the generation of Americans who remember the World War II home front, Henry J. Kaiser is the unforgettable “can do” industrialist whose Liberty Ships, built at an incredible rate, were a major factor in defeating the Axis powers. To latter-day business historians, he is a one-of-a-kind eccentric whose operations defied all the logic of scientific management. For cultural historians, Kaiser is a Horatio Alger story—that of the boy, born of modest parents, who quit school after the eighth grade and began a seemingly endless success story with his skill in marketing cameras, including an ever-increasing series of cheap photographic products just then being produced for the first time by Kodak. From the beginning he seemed to grasp the broader implications of twentieth-century technologies and engineering developments. As an industrialist he became a national legend—one not always admired by his fellow industrialists, who resented Kaiser’s boldness and ability to attract media attention. Because he became, in himself, such a many-sided phenomenon—master builder of huge dams, like the Hoover and the Grand Coulee, producer of instant Liberty Ships, a steel producer, a cement maker, a man who understood and even admired organized labor, and, finally, a man who revolutionized medical care with his Kaiser Permanente Medical Care Program—Henry J. Kaiser is a fitting figure for inclusion in a series devoted to interdisciplinary studies of American life.

Like American Studies students, he doesn’t fit easily into one disciplinary or theoretical framework. He was bold enough to transcend the normal specialties of an increasingly specializing American industrial structure. He had so few bureaucrats on his managerial team that it often appeared to rivals that he did not know what he was doing whenever he entered an unfamiliar field. Needless to say, Kaiser was a fast learner with an empathic personality. Indeed, with respect to the latter quality, some said that

his success in building massive public works during the New Deal was entirely due to the fact that he was the only contractor who could get along with Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, FDR's official curmudgeon. Certainly Kaiser was an important figure in providing massive WPA employment during the Depression, in part because he offered a private industrial alternative to the Army Corps of Engineers, which Ickes detested so much that he even wrote a book denouncing it for the boondoggle institution that he considered it to be. Better than most businessmen, Kaiser knew Washington's corridors of power in the 1930s. At almost the same time, but with different goals, another young man was also learning about the power structure in Washington. Thanks to this knowledge, Lyndon B. Johnson became one of the capital's leading brokers of power, and eventually president of the United States.

Besides their understanding of power and their ability to empathize with the masses of ordinary men and women workers, the two men had one other thing in common. They were at heart western men. Indeed, one of the things that is so striking about Kaiser is his western way of doing things. Like the early oil mogul, Bet-A-Million Gates, Kaiser was a wildcatter who loved to take a chance on new projects. He gambled on his intuition, his charm, his public relations skills, his persistence, and he usually won. As the shadows of the twentieth century lengthen over the American West, it behooves policy-makers, as well as scholars and writers, to understand the often perverse western maverick mentality. Millions of television viewers around the world now identify the typical western man not as the cowboy (including the Marlboro Man), but as the wheeler-dealer J. R. Ewing of *Dallas*.

One of the fascinating things about Kaiser is how he seems to be characteristic of at least one of the benign Ewing wheeler-dealer archetypes. He thought big. He was flexible and pragmatic. He got things done on a grand scale. Even more fascinating, however, than the comparison with the Ewings (one with which his conservative rivals would have happily agreed), is just how much Henry J. Kaiser represents continuity and tradition in the winning of the West. He liked to think of himself as a rugged individualist, a self-made man who, taking Horace Greeley's advice, went West and "grew up with the country." The truth is that, like virtually all of the early western entrepreneurs, Kaiser succeeded only with the help of a federal government which, as a rugged westerner, he was supposed to despise. However, Kaiser, whether building dams or constructing Liberty Ships, resembled nothing so much as the old-time western entrepreneur who existed on purveying supplies to the frontier army, or who traveled in stagecoaches and wagon trains often protected by the U.S. cavalry. As the Corps of Topographical Engineers mapped the West, laid the main wagon roads, and inventoried the potential riches of the country, they made it

possible for pioneers to better survive and prosper. The great Powell, King, Hayden, and Wheeler geographical and geological surveys after the Civil War represented even more substantial federal aid to the western entrepreneur. Then there were the land-grant colleges that began to turn out legions of men and women who, thanks to the federal government, were able to aid in the development of the West. Finally, too, the federal creation of national parks and monuments knitted together the West's most characteristic industry—one in which Kaiser participated in his latter days as he developed hotels and resorts in far western Hawaii—tourism.

Thus, though Henry J. Kaiser appeared in many roles, the one that perhaps fits him best and sets him aside from the old-money “enterprising elite” of the conservative East and the Midwest, is his role as the descendant of the typical western entrepreneur—whether cattleman, sodbuster, city-builder, or transcontinental railroad mogul. Perhaps he didn't realize it, though many who knew him sensed it, but Kaiser took on his real lineage from the Old West. He became a more modern part of the legend. In this respect, as well as any number of others, his story is a fascinating one as told by Mark Foster in this book.

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