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Henry J. Kaiser: Builder in the Modern American West (American Studies)

Mark S. Foster

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In the 1940s Henry J. Kaiser was a household name, as familiar then as Warren Buffett and Donald Trump are now. Like a Horatio Alger hero, Kaiser rose from lower-middle-class origins to become an enormously wealthy entrepreneur, building roads, bridges, dams, and housing. He established giant businesses in cement, aluminum, chemicals, steel, health care, and tourism. During World War II, his companies built cargo planes and Liberty ships. After the war, he manufactured the Kaiser-Frazer automobile. Along the way, he also became a major force in the development of the western United States, including Hawaii.

Henry J. Kaiser: Builder in the Modern American West is the first biography of this remarkable man. Drawing on a wealth of archival material never before utilized, Mark Foster paints an evenhanded portrait of a man of driving ambition and integrity, perhaps the ultimate "can-do" capitalist. He covers Kaiser's entire life (1882–1967), emphasizing many business ventures. He demonstrates that Kaiser was the prototypical "frontier" entrepreneur who often used government and union support to tame the "wilderness."

Though today the Kaiser industries are no longer under family management, the Kaiser legacy remains great. Kaiser played a major role in building the Hoover, Bonneville, Grand Coulee, and Shasta dams. The Kaiser-Permanente Medical Care Program still provides comprehensive health care for millions of subscribers. Kaiser-planned communities remain in Los Angeles; San Francisco; Portland, Oregon; and Boulder City, Nevada. Kaiser Engineers was actively engaged in hundreds of huge construction jobs across the nation and around the world.

U.S. and business historians, scholars of the modern West, and general readers will all find much to absorb them in this well-written biography.

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