Henry Posner III pursued a career in railroads at a time when the industry was facing an unsure future. After an early failure to buy a local railroad, Posner began pursuing the privatization of railroads in emerging countries. He and his Railroad Development Corp. have long been one of Pittsburgh’s most unlikely business exports, owning and operating railroads in such far-flung locales as Peru, Estonia and Mozambique. His company is the subject of a new book by historian H. Roger Grant entitled “Railroaders without Borders: A History of the Railroad Development Corporation.” We recently caught up with Posner and discussed the adventures of international railroading, the limitations Pittsburgh faces in transit options and why failure can be so compelling.

What made your company worthy of a book?
One thing about us is we had a number of high-profile failures. While lots of people like to talk about their successes, I think the failures are more interesting stories. Where we have failed, it’s been quite spectacular. But fortunately, one success pays for at least five failures, and that’s why we’re still in business. And more to the point, if everything that you try works, then you’re not trying hard enough.

How was pursuing a career in the railroad business perceived when you were starting out?
It was considered a suicide mission because the industry was in decline, with 25 percent of the track mileage in the United States owned by companies in bankruptcy. It was considered extremely poor judgment. It was a dead end.

What was it like to have that spectacular early failure attempting to buy the local Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad?
It was probably a low point in my life. Here we are trying to save our local railroad company, and we had raised everyone’s expectations, especially our own. And to see it eventually on the front page of the local newspaper everyday was quite painful. It embarked us on a path that took us far from McKee’s Rocks.

How did that prepare you to pursue railroads in other countries?
For one thing, I think we were relatively well positioned to do what became the international privatization business simply by virtue of having passports and speaking Spanish in the early 1980s, being in Argentina, our first significant privatization initiative.

Railroads are unique. But I think that each country needs to have a different approach. What might work in one Latin American country isn’t going to work in another. The geography, the culture and the politics are all different. You could say the same thing about states in the United States. Why have some states done so well in developing transit systems and others haven’t? Some states consider mobility an asset, and some states consider it a liability.

Is Pennsylvania among the latter?
Absolutely. Why is there no busway stop in Edgewood, and why was it so hard to locate a light-rail station in Mt. Lebanon? It’s because they were afraid of the type of people who use public transportation.

What do you think of all the attention with electric cars and research into self-driving vehicles, such as what Uber is attempting to do in the Strip District?
I think it still reflects our cultural fixation on driving and doesn’t really represent a broader need for an alternative to the automotive culture. In the meantime, the city streets are disintegrating, and our traffic congestion worsens. We’re chokings on our prosperity. Nothing is being done to address the absence of a real transit system. The No. 1 priority for light-rail expansion has been to the North Shore, which you could walk to. It’s been a half-billion-dollar free parking lot shuttle. The flight to Paris at the airport. Both of those reflect that mobility is not a priority. That’s going to have to change because it’s going to become a constraint on our economy.

As somebody who has worked in such different places around the world, how does this alter your perspective of Pittsburgh?
We keep on talking about our quality of life, and we never talk about the quality of work. To me Pittsburgh is a relatively difficult and a relatively expensive place to work due to the lack of mobility. And I think that is going to be more of a problem in the future as our economy grows.

Given you have no business here and your operations are all somewhere else, why do you and your company stay based here?
We’ve evolved over the years into a group all of whom have deep family connections in the region. The fact that I’m here is because of a decision my grandfather made 100 years ago when he came from Poland.

— Tim Schooley
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Henry Posner III, chairman of Railroad Development Corp., is surrounded by railroad memorabilia in his office November 9, 2015. (Joe Wojcik)