

The Meaning of the Transcontinental RR

We take the transcontinental railroad for granted; it doesn't overtly affect our daily lives. The transcontinental railroad, though, is responsible for the North Tahoe-Truckee-Donner Summit area today. Without the transcontinental railroad this area would be very different. One past president of the Truckee Donner Historical Society says, "it all started because of the railroad."

The railroad brought travelers and emigrants and made crossing the Sierra relatively painless. It enabled the local lumber and ice industries. Because of the railroad, Truckee (previously named Coburn's Station) was born. It brought artists and writers to capture the beauties of the area. It brought tourists. It made early winter sports successful and spawned the ski and snowboard industries in the area. The first transcontinental highway followed the railroad's general route as did the first transcontinental telephone line, the first transcontinental air route, and the Interstate. The sesquicentennial of the transcontinental railroad marks the amazing feat of spanning the continent with rails and setting in motion what became The Truckee-Donner Summit-North Tahoe area. The transcontinental railroad was a revolution for the area and a revolution for the country, given the change it enabled and engendered.

Today California is one of the largest, richest, and most advanced economies in the world. The State provides leadership in many fields. If it was a separate country it would be number 5 in annual GDP. Three 19th Century events set California on that path: the Gold Rush, statehood, and the building of the transcontinental railroad.

We take a lot of what is around us for granted. It's easy to pick up an electronic device and use it as a window on the world, communicating with friends and relatives, seeing pictures from the far side of the globe, getting immediate gratification by shopping digitally, and having instant access to the newest. If we take a step back we realize how remarkable all of that and more is, and things just keep getting better and faster. Really, we live in an age of wonder. Who would have thought just a few years ago that the answers to every question are at our fingertips for immediate retrieval and gratification? Smart phones and tablets are amazing. Self-driving cars are on the horizon and in a generation individual auto ownership may be passé. We are in the midst of a technological and transportation (here we use a useful tool called historian's literary license to develop vocabulary) revolution. The transcontinental railroad was at least as revolutionary for those of the 19th Century.

Age of Wonder

The 19th Century was an age of wonder too, changing lives amazingly. For centuries and millennia the average person's life had not changed. It went along at 3 or 5 miles an hour, the speed of a walking person or a horse.

The 19th century introduced the Industrial Age. There was an amazing number of inventions: clipper ships, the light bulb, electric motors, gasoline engine, iron ships, the battery, the revolver, repeating rifles, photography, the elevator, nitroglycerine and dynamite, and the machines to make those things. Labor saving devices made life easier in the home: the vacuum cleaner and the sewing machine. The cotton gin, the combine, and the reaper reduced the need for farm labor and people moved to the cities which had very different social structures from small rural communities and family farms. The frontier was disappearing. At the same time, machines made manufacturing easier and factories, instead of independent workers, began to be the primary manufactures. Interchangeable parts and division of labor made production more efficient. Sanitation and health improved. It had become accepted that germs caused disease and antiseptics could prevent infection. People were inoculated against disease. The steam engine powered factories and boats and then the railroads. Electricity brought light and motors. The telegraph and telephone made communication almost instantaneous. There were new theories of economics and sociology. Art was changing. At the end of the century America would become a world power and the richest nation on earth. There was even an airship company formed to take Argonauts to California during the Gold Rush. Some people bought tickets. Nothing seemed too outlandish. Americans could do anything. They more than doubled the size of their country. They were conquering a continent.

God, so it seemed, was indeed smiling on the United States

It was an age of wonder and experiment. What would come next?

During the Gold Rush a clipper ship took 3-4 months to go from New York to San Francisco. In the 1850's a wagon train traveled 10-15 miles a day and took 4-5 months to get to California from Missouri. In 1858 the stagecoach could travel 15 miles an hour and the trip from Missouri to California took 25 days.

The building of the transcontinental railroad was a wonder, going three thousand miles over and through mountains, deserts, ravines, and rivers. When it was completed in 1869 trains traveled at the incredible speed of 25 miles an hour and the trip, all the way across the country, took only 19 days!

19th Century citizens knew it was a wonder. If they had not thought about it, the idea was certainly brought to them. Certainly California's, and maybe even the whole Nation's feelings could be seen in an article, printed in a number of newspapers almost two years before the railroad's completion called, "The Mountains Overcome" celebrating reaching Donner Summit, the highest point on the road.

"The telegram which, starting from the summit of the Sierras [sic] on Saturday afternoon last, flashed across the continent to the shores of the Atlantic and underneath that ocean to Europe, announced an event which will probably seem greater to those far away than to those nearby; to those who read of it in history than to those who witnessed it in fact. On that day the track of the Central Pacific Railroad reached the summit of its grade. ... The flag of the Union was immediately planted near the spot, fitly signifying that an event had occurred which, more than any other, assures the continued unity of this great republic. For the completion of a railroad across the Sierras [sic] removes the only obstacle which has been regarded as insuperable to a vital connection between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. For California it means much, but it means more for the country at large and for mankind." "The people of this continent are no longer severed by mountain barriers which would make of them two nations, diverse and hostile. We may now make certain of a common national life that shall secure not only our own best interests, but the largest and noblest influence upon the nations, from whom, on either hand, we are parted by an ocean, and whose destinies we must seriously affect."

For the average person the Daily Alta California said on November 10, 1867 that when the railroad was completed in what the writer thought would be two years and a half or so, "we shall be able to whirl across the continent from the Sacramento to the Missouri in three days and a half... May I be there to ride... [we will be able to] say good -bye to our Sacramento friends in the morning and greet our New York acquaintances next day..."

Another correspondent to the Sacramento Union wrote April 22, 1867, the railroad "will give to our wealth and progress an impetus so great that even the most sanguine among us will find this calculation far exceeded by the reality."

That same year The Sacramento Daily Union (December 2, 1867) enthused, "... The company have great reason to congratulate themselves upon the monument of American engineering, energy and enterprise which their road undoubtedly is. No other great public work has met with obstacles apparently more insuperable, and none has overcome its difficulties of various kinds, with more determined perseverance... in the East and in Europe they will fill the public mind with added respect for the practical genius of the American."

One visitor to Donner Summit to view the railroad's progress was succinct about its meaning, "Nothing is impossible anymore." (Daily Alta California November 10, 1867)

The Daily Alta California (June 20, 1868) got into the act almost a year before the road was finished saying it was "The grandest highway created for the march of commerce and civilization around the globe."

Two days before the railroad's completion and the driving of the Golden Spike The Sacramento Union said (May 8, 1869) that the railroad was "a victory over space, the elements, and the stupendous mountain barriers separating the East from the West, and apparently defying the genius and energy of man to surmount. Every heart was gladdened by the contemplation of the grand achievement."

The long anticipated completion of the railroad in 1869 was a national event. There were huge celebrations.

Once the immediate reporting was done, book authors took up the celebratory task. Alfred Richardson in *Beyond the Mississippi*, published in 1869, said, "...this magic key will unlock our Golden Gate, and send surging through its rocky portals a world-encircling tide of travel, commerce, and Christian civilization."

The celebrations and the florid language were appropriate. The Transcontinental railroad was an amazing feat of 19th Century engineering. Nothing like it had ever been done before. Capital had been raised on a scale not seen before. Congress had to pass enabling legislation it had never before considered. It was the greatest construction project of the time using the largest wage-labor force of the 19th Century.

The results too were admirable. The new railroad tied the country together. It opened California to the country and to the world. The land of dreams and better lives – the Golden State – was accessible. Emigration to California was spurred and California's goods could get to the rest of the country. Mail was faster, the transportation of goods was faster. Besides California, whole areas of the country were opened, the resources to be used by a growing nation. Towns and cities were born. News could travel and be read while it was still relevant. Innovation was spurred.

Albert Richardson, in *Beyond the Mississippi* (1869), listed the benefits he saw for 19th Century America: The road will protect our military interests, open natural resources, revolutionize trade and finance, and strengthen us socially and politically. "Great indeed must be the vitality of the republic when the warm blood from its heart pulsates to these remote extremities" because the railroad would "Do away with isolation; cut through the mountains! This enchanter's wand will make New York acknowledged queen of cities and San Francisco her eldest sister - this magic key will unlock our Golden Gate, and send surging through its rocky portals a world-encircling tide of travel, commerce, and Christian civilization." You can almost hear the stentorian cadence of someone giving a speech and exhorting the audience with each item.

There were negatives as well of course. The coming of the railroad was a harbinger to the destruction of the great buffalo herds and the Native Americans. It was a nail in the frontier's coffin and many small towns, bypassed by the railroad, simply disappeared upending lives.

In keeping with the age of wonder that was the 19th Century, the entire country was able to participate in the driving of the Golden Spike at Promontory Point, Utah on May 10, 1869. The transcontinental railroad was finished and the dignitaries had gathered. The driving of the Golden Spike was to be the ceremonial finish. A wire had been attached to the spike maul and another wire to the Golden Spike. Each strike of the maul on the Golden Spike would send a click across the telegraph wires to the country. The nation would instantaneously know the tracks from the east and the west were joined. It was truly an age of wonder.

Governor Stanford missed the spike on his first strike but the telegraph operator dutifully clicked the key anyway. Bells rang; people rejoiced.

The railroad was done.

With the driving of the Golden Spike there could be real celebration of accomplishment and opportunity. Festivities were the order of the day. Sacramento, the starting point of the western portion of the road, and San Francisco had huge celebrations that must have been planned far in advance. There were also celebrations in Virginia City, Stockton, Petaluma, Placerville, and Vallejo.

In Sacramento there had been ads in the papers drawing people to the celebration. The Sacramento Union said on May 8, 1869 that the completion of the railroad was "a victory over space, the elements, and the stupendous mountain barriers separating the East from the West, and apparently defying the genius and energy of man to surmount. Every heart was gladdened by the contemplation of the grand achievement."

Sacramento had a grand parade and The Daily Alta California reported, "A more favorable day could not be asked. A bright, unclouded sky, the sun tempered with refreshing air, Sacramento never saw a more favorable occasion for a public celebration. At dawn the people were moving; ...At an early hour a train arrived with firemen of Nevada Engine Company, No. 1, from Gold Hill,... fine stalwart fellows, and well capable of battling with the destroying element anywhere... [more firemen arrived from elsewhere]... About the same hour the boat arrived from San Francisco, bringing five bands... Every manufacturing establishment and mercantile house is gaily decorated... There is a great profusion of bunting and flags... The streets are now crowded, the people expecting the commencement of the exercises by the announcement of the driving of the last spike... Everybody is in holiday garb. The hotels are full... The scenes in the principal streets are

indescribably lively. Constantly steamers, trains, cars and country vehicles are arriving, adding confusion to the throng... One thousand school children from city and country are here to participate in the fruition and the hope of their parents.”

“A minute... before 10 o’clock the completion was announced of the laying of the last rail and the driving of the last spike on the Central Pacific Railroad. Immediately following the report there went up a most unearthly din, produced by all the engines owned by the [railroad] Company, which were gaily decorated and arranged along the city front, with a chorus of all the stationary engines and city boats and the ringing of city bells, which continued ten minutes, during which person of weak tympana put their fingers in their ears, and rejoiced when the chorus was over. Thousands were present who never before and never will again hear such a grand diapason. The engineers vied with one another in producing screeches and sounding notes. There was harmony and discord... All the principal streets were packed, rendering locomotion difficult. The procession commenced moving at eleven o’clock.”

The parade included bands; the militia; the National Guard accompanied by artillery; firemen; machinists; blacksmiths; boilermakers; wagons with machinery; contingents of civic organizations; a boiler and attached smokestack; 29 omnibuses, carriages, and wagons of school children; private societies in parade attire; politicians; a contingent of weavers; carriages; buggies; and horsemen; rail workers; wagons from the telegraph company and Wells Fargo; etc. Participants arrived in 18 trains. There was bunting, banners with stirring quotes, and flags; speeches and poems; there was music; and there was prayer. There were throngs of people, even some of the workers who’d laid the 10 miles of track in one day. The parade took hours to pass.

The first shovel used to build the railroad was exhibited, as were the first tie and a picture of the last one.

There were speeches and the San Francisco Bulletin reported Judge Nathan Bennet’s speech at the San Francisco celebration. He said this triumph of railroad construction was wholly owing to the fact that his fellow Californians were "composed of the right materials, derived from the proper origins... In the veins of our people flows the commingled blood of the four greatest nationalities of modern days. The impetuous daring and dash of the French, the philosophical spirit of the German, the unflinching solidity of the English, and the light-hearted impetuosity of the Irish, have all contributed each its appropriate share... A people deducing its origins from such races, and condensing their best traits into its national life, is capable of any achievements.” It was stirring. Could anything derail California or the nation?

Equally stirring was Governor Haight’s address in Sacramento. “Fellow Citizens: — We meet today to celebrate one of the most remarkable events of this eventful age, one whose influence upon the future of our country and upon human destiny it would be difficult properly to measure; one of the greatest triumphs of American enterprise, engineering and constructive skill and energy of which our history can boast. It ushers in a new era in American progress, and while it is an event of world-wide significance, it is one of special importance to our own country and our own State.

“I would that its great results to California could be set forth on this day of rejoicing by eloquence more worthy of the theme than any poor efforts of mine; but in consenting to accept the invitation with which you have honored me, to be your speaker on this occasion, I have rather yielded to the necessities of official position than assumed a task to which I felt adequate...”

“The day is at hand when a more splendid civilization than any which has preceded it will arise upon these distant shores. A vast population will pour into this Canaan of the New World. Tourists will be attracted by the most sublime scenery on the continent,, and thousands will come to repair physical constitutions racked by the by the extremes of climate, the inclement air, and the miasma of the states east of the mountains.”

Enjoy the Sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad.