

Train Travel on the Transcontinental Railroad I

We take cars and planes and go hundreds of miles quickly. We pick up cell phones on the spur of the moment to call people a thousand miles away. With the internet we can see what is happening on the other side of the world as it's happening. Life goes really fast. It's easy to forget that life was not always like this.

150 years ago life went at a much slower pace. It went three or five miles an hour, the speed of a horse or what people could do on foot. A trip to San Francisco from Truckee took a week where now it's a couple of hours. For emigrants to California in 1869, once people left their friends and relatives back east, they probably never saw them again.

People's relationships and expectations must have been very different from today. So imagine how amazing it must have been to experience the rapid change in travel in the 19th century. Imagine how the world opened up with the coming of the railroad and its incredible speed: maybe 22 MPH. The railroad enabled people to see what they'd only heard about.

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 6-15 miles an hour and the trip from Missouri to California took 25 days.

The building of the transcontinental railroad was a wonder. Three thousand miles over and through mountains, deserts, ravines, and rivers. When it was completed in 1869 the train traveled at the incredible speed of 22 miles an hour and the trip, all the way across the country took only 10 days!

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

The train was expensive. A trip from Sacramento to Promontory Point, Utah (where the Central Pacific joined the Union Pacific for the rest of the trip across the country) cost \$50 first class and \$25 second class in 1869. That was too much for many people. Into the breach stepped newspaper reporters who wrote about riding the train. In the context of the times riding the train for a long distance was an exciting but difficult event.

According to the Pacific Tourist (1881) guidebook for travelers the best way to travel was by Pullman Car, "Palace Car Life on the Pacific Railroad.— In no part of the world is travel made so easy and comfortable as on the Pacific Railroad... with absolutely no fatigue or discomfort. One lives at home in the Palace Car with as much true enjoyment as in the home drawing room, and with the constant change of scenes afforded from the car window, it is far more enjoyable than the saloon of a fashionable steamer. For an entire week or more, as the train leisurely crosses the Continent, the little section and berth allotted to you, so neat and clean, so nicely furnished and kept, becomes your home. Here you sit and read, play your games, indulge in social conversation and glee, and if fortunate enough to possess good company of friends to join you, the overland tour becomes an intense delight." The train, gives "an appearance of strength, massiveness and majestic power, you can but admit it is exceedingly beautiful and impressive ... it seems the handsomest work of ... The slow rate of speed, which averages but sixteen to twenty miles per hour, day and night,

produces a peculiarly smooth, gentle and easy motion, most soothing and agreeable.”

Trains stopped three times a day for food for 25 minutest per stop, “Usually all the eating-houses on both the Pacific Railroads are very excellent indeed. The keepers have to maintain their culinary excellence under great disadvantages, especially west of Sidney, as all food but meats must be brought from a great distance. Travelers need to make no preparations for eating on the cars, as meals at all dining-halls are excellent, and food of great variety is nicely served ; buffalo meat, antelope steak, tongue of all kinds, and always the best of beefsteak.”

That guidebook was targeted at tourists and attracting customers. Correspondents wrote about the actual travel.

William Meluishish took the train from San Francisco to New York in 1870 and described his experience. Meluishish thought the meals were pretty good and reasonably priced. He suggested that getting a reservation in a sleeping car was imperative since the first class carriages were constructed “so as to prevent any person from lying down...” Train cars were packed with passengers two people sitting on each seat with a central aisle down the center of the car. “Sitting upright for seven days' and nights, in the motion, is beyond endurance,” he said.

In the sleeping cars it was better. Double seats were slid together and folded down by a “darkey” to make a sofa six feet long by three wide, on which he puts a good thick hair mattress [sic], feather pillows, clean sheets and rug.” Overhead a hinged shelf was let down making a ship-berth. Heavy curtains were hung giving privacy and the occupants had a looking-glass, a lamp, a portable table, and a spittoon. The seats were covered in velvet and the floor was carpeted. There were separate dressing rooms for men and women that had washstands, clean towels, ice water, “&c.” Baggage can be checked the whole distance, and access had to it at all times — train in motion or not. Only a small bag is allowed in the car.

The ride is most delightful. The scenery changes from the grand and sublime in the wild Rocky Mountains to grassy plains, dreary desert, smiling homesteads, pretty farms, orchards, gardens, villages, towns, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, &c, &c, like a kaleidoscope ; something fresh every minute, and never tiring. Very little risk is run ; the drivers are extremely careful ; the ascents and descents are gradual and easy, every bridge, cutting, and embankment is slowly gone over at the rate of four miles an hour. The greatest speed is 25 miles — the average 18.

Wm. Fraser, 1871, raved about the Pullman cars in “Westward by Rail”. “No Royal personage can be more comfortably housed than the occupant of a Pullman Car...” One of the cars on his train had staterooms, a kitchen with “every appliance necessary for cooking purposes,” water tanks, a wine cellar, an ice-house and orders for five kinds of bread, four kinds of cold meat, six hot dishes, eggs cooked seven ways, seasonable vegetables and fruit are taken.

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Passengers had to change trains at Promontory, going from UPRR trains to CPRR trains to continue on to California. They moved their luggage, got new sleeping berths and got a meal. They also had time to stroll through the town and see the sights in the town made “partly from canvas of wood” because initially the railroad companies did not coordinate their trains. Passengers waited up to fifteen hours at Promontory to continue their journeys. So there was lots of time to explore. The sights were less than picturesque although one wooden dwelling that attracted notice had muslin curtains “within the window.” That house had “two or three smiling females” ready to welcome all who would enter. It turns out that was a “characteristic of all these rude settlements... the abode of women with few scruples to overcome and no characters to lose...” There were many saloons but only one gambling “hell.”

To help the town economy agents were sent up the rail lines to take the trains back to Promontory. On the trip they would talk to the passengers and upon arrival at Promontory the agents would take their new friends to try their luck. That gambling hall was an open-air affair only a few yards from the rail line. Then Fraser described 3 Card Monte and how it was conducted to the disadvantage of the train travelers. Fraser said the game could be considered perfectly fair if fairness consisted of uniform winning on one side and uniform losing on the other.

Fraser was taken with the Sierra scenery. “The glimpses one gets are just sufficient to tantalize and not prolonged enough to satisfy. The view of Donner Lake is the most charming of them all.” Above Summit Station “the peaks of the mountains tower cloudwards. The scene is one of unprecedented grandeur.”

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The Sacramento Daily Union (September 9, 1870) wrote about taking the train to the summit. Apparently the Central Pacific for day travelers was not so comfortable. It took all day for the trip and so there was “no fun.” “...a ride all day long in crowded cars in the hot sun, as is almost always the case, furnishes no great amount of pleasure or healthy recreation.” That said, once the misery was forgotten the “gratification of seeing grand scenery” was what stayed in one’s mind.

“But to enjoy a visit to the sublime scenery of our mountain chains, as it ought to be enjoyed; to drink in the beauties of the region, and cultivate the aesthetic, which Americans too much neglect, the eye needs more than a casual glance. Time, sunset and sunrise, to give shade and coloring to the objects in that grand lacustrine region among our high mountain peaks, are requisite, and these the common excursionist does not have. To educate the sense of the beautiful and grand in the people should be one of the objects of an enlightened eye. To give respite to toil and recreation in its intervals is one thing and good, but to extend and cultivate these oases in the life of the toiling millions is something better.” “The constant motion, crowded cars, and summer heat” provide no gratification in the round trips. “greater benefits would accrue to the world, if not to the railroad company, by giving an opportunity to excursionists to see the sun rise and set on Lake Tahoe and tint the glories of our Alpine region.”

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Isabella Bird in A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains, 1872 wrote letters to her sister. Letter III was about train travel. She embarked on the train at Truckee at 11 PM at night. conducted me to my berth—a luxurious bed three and a half feet wide, with a hair mattress on springs, fine linen sheets, and costly California blankets. The twenty-four inmates of the car were all invisible, asleep behind rich curtains. It was a true Temple of Morpheus. Profound sleep was the object to which everything was dedicated. Four silver lamps hanging from the roof, and burning low, gave a dreamy light. On each side of the center passage, rich rep curtains, green and crimson, striped with gold, hung from silver bars running near the roof, and trailed on the soft Axminster carpet. The temperature was carefully kept at 70 degrees. It was 29 degrees outside. Silence and freedom from jolting were secured by double doors and windows, costly and ingenious arrangements of springs and cushions, and a speed limited to eighteen miles an hour.

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from New Zealand

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Not far from Salt Lake City the train reached Promontory. When Fraser arrived they had not yet settled the point of junction for the CPRR and the UPRR so the companies were compromising with a station at Promontory. Each company had been anxious to earn as much of the Government subsidy as possible they so they’d “carried their respective lines as far as an hundred miles to the east and west of Promontory.” “These unfinished roadways are still to be seen side by side of the completed line.”

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Unfortunately for Fraser the travel by Pullman was over upon changing to the CPRR. Their “silver palace cars” were very inferior. The Pullman had a conductor and “coloured servants.” to wait on passengers. The CPRR cars had only a “coloured man” who was in charge and was attendant. Service was bad on the CPRR but the condition of its rails was vastly superior to the UPRR.

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See picture "traintravel" in 5/12 heirloom

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19th-20th Century Travel Times: chart below from <http://donsnotes.com/hist/calif/i80-hist.html>

Mode	Destination	Speed	year
Sailboat. (via Cape Horn)	New York to Calif.	3-4 mos.	(1840)
Wagon Train 10-15 mi./day	Missouri to Calif.	4-5 mos.	(1845)
	New York to Missouri	3 weeks.	
Steamship-overland (via Panama)	New York to Calif.	30 days.	(1848)
Steamship-Rail (via Panama)	New York to Calif.	21 days.	(1855)
Stage Coach 6-15 MPH	Missouri to Calif.	25 days.	(1858)
Pony Express 200 mi./day	Missouri to Calif.	10 1/2 days.	(1860)
Train 25-40 MPH	New York to Calif.	10 days	(1869)

Pacific tourist 1881

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At Omaha, as you view the long Pacific train just ready to leave the depot for its overland trip, (often over 600 feet in length), giving an appearance of strength, massiveness and majestic power, you can but admit it is exceedingly beautiful and impressive ; this feeling is still more intensified when a day or so later, alone out upon the upland plains, with no living object in sight, as you stand at a little distance and look down upon the long train, it seems the handsomest work of science ever made for the comfort of earth's people. The slow rate of speed, which averages but sixteen to twenty miles per hour, day and night, produces a peculiarly smooth, gentle and easy motion, most soothing and agreeable. The straight track, which for hundreds of miles is without a curve, avoids all swinging motions of the cars ; sidelong bumps are unknown.

the world.

A Pullman Pacific car train in motion is a grand and beautiful sight too, from within as well as from without. On some lovely, balmy, summer, day, when the fresh breezes across the prairies induce us to open our doors and windows, there may often be seen curious and pleasant sights. Standing at the rear of the train, and with all doors open, there is an unobstructed view along the aisles throughout the entire length. On either side of the train, are the prairies, where the eye sees but wildness, and even desolation, then looking back upon this long aisle or avenue, he sees civilization and comfort and luxury. How sharp the contrast.

Hints

Bring a good companion

Check your baggage. Over 100lbs 15 cents/pound

The trains of the Union Pacific Railroad are arranged so as to stop at excellent stations at convenient hours, for meals.... Usually all the eating-houses on both the Pacific Railroads are very excellent indeed. The keepers have to maintain their culinary excellence under great disadvantages, especially west of Sidney, as all food but meats must be brought from a great

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