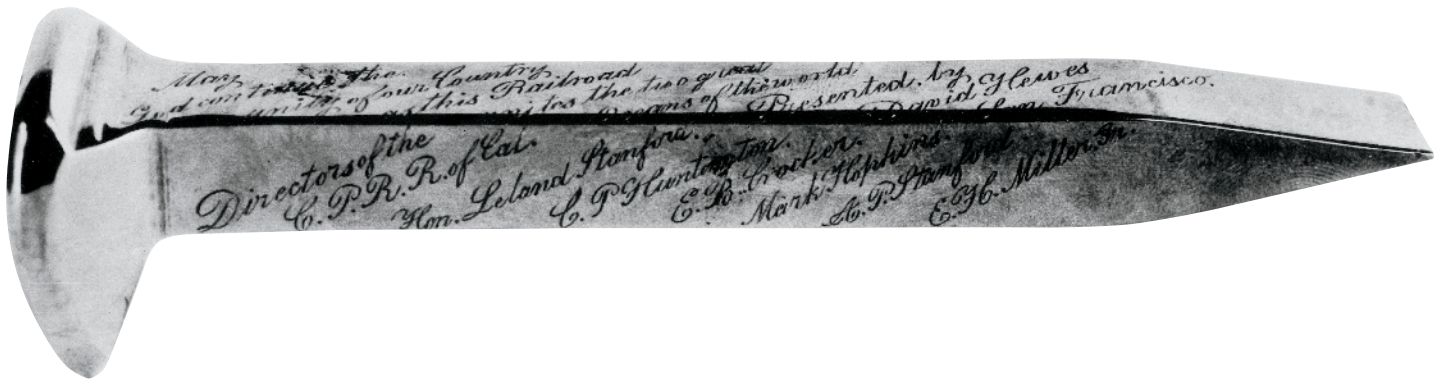


UNdriving the Golden Spike

BY JEFF TERRY, THORNTON H. WAITE, AND JAMES J. REISDORFF



The famed Golden Spike, driven at Promontory on May 10, 1869, was engraved with the names of the officials present for the ceremony. Less than 75 years later, that first line was sacrificed to fill metal needs during World War II.

Southern Pacific

By the 1940s, the original transcontinental main line around the north end of the Great Salt Lake had fulfilled its original purpose, and its 120 miles of steel rails were needed for World War II. The Promontory Branch, as it was known by then, ran through the desert from Corinne through Promontory to Lucin. It had not been profitable for Southern Pacific since the Lucin Cutoff across the Great Salt Lake was completed in 1904, but was kept intact as a secondary route. Traffic consisted of a weekly mixed train and occasional extra freights in peak harvest season.

SP first tried to abandon the Promontory Branch in the early 1930s after decades of losses. On April 3, 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression, the road petitioned the Interstate Commerce Commission for permission to cease operation over the majority of the line between Kelton and Lucin, 55 miles.

The first abandonment hearings were held by the Public Utilities Commission of Utah on behalf of the ICC. The high

desert land around Promontory was used primarily for grazing cattle and wintering sheep, and several shippers and ranchers protested the abandonment, stating that the railroad was needed to haul in feed for their animals since the few dirt roads in the area were not passable in winter. However, there was very little other opposition. By the 1930s just 60 families lived in the region, so passenger traffic was negligible, with a single coach or the train's caboose being adequate for the few travelers carried.

A surprise objection came from the U.S. government, which opposed the abandonment as it desired to keep the Promontory Branch intact either as a backup for the route across the Great Salt Lake or as a secondary main line in the event of war. It reminded SP that since the line had been part of the original transcontinental route and the land grants associated with it, the company had a moral (but no legal) obligation to maintain it.

SP countered the arguments by showing that it lost money operating the branch. The parties in favor of keeping

Overland
ROUTE
150

Everyone knows about the driving of the Golden Spike, but not many know about Southern Pacific's fight to abandon part of the original transcontinental railroad, or the "un-driving" ceremony that followed.



Locomotive 311 of scrapper Hyman-Michaels waits with the crowd near the Last Spike obelisk for the un-driving ceremony to start on September 8, 1942.

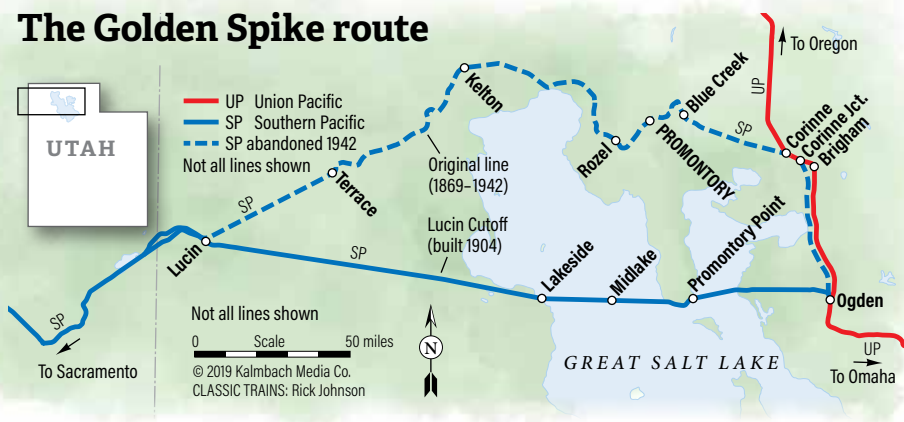
CLASSIC TRAINS Collection



Guests for the un-driving ceremony were treated to a chicken dinner at the Hyman-Michaels work camp at Rozel, 8 miles west of Promontory.

CLASSIC TRAINS collection

The Golden Spike route



the line intact claimed that the losses incurred in its operation were insignificant to the Southern Pacific's overall finances.

Based on these and other considerations, the ICC concluded that benefits to the sheep and cattle industry outweighed any inconvenience to the railroad — even though SP was only proposing to discontinue operations and to keep the line in serviceable condition. Thus, the initial abandonment effort failed when the ICC denied the petition on June 11, 1934.

SP was not willing to give up so easily. The petition was reopened on December 12, 1934, this time covering the Kelton-Lucin segment. Although the railroad's operating deficit had decreased, this was

primarily due to a reduction in maintenance. After years of neglect, the Promontory Branch was in poor shape — the track was deemed only “passable.” Future revenues were estimated to be unchanged. In spite of all of these factors the ICC again denied the petition to abandon on March 17, 1936.

Despite the ICC ruling, on March 31, 1937, the SP essentially abandoned the western part of the branch. This was accomplished by providing only “on-call” service between Kelton and Lucin after the Public Utilities Commission of Utah gave the railroad permission to discontinue regular service. Trains now operated on Wednesdays from Ogden to Kelton

as required. Passenger service was discontinued three years later, in April 1940.

In March 1942, three months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, SP again proposed abandonment — this time for the entire 120.8 miles between Lucin and Corinne. Traffic between Kelton and Lucin, mainly animal feed and livestock, had not changed much in the six years since the first abandonment hearings. One of the only gains was from the Rosette Asphalt Co. of Rozel, which was shipping out drums of asphalt at a rate of one carload a month, up from one or two annually in previous years. The expense of operating the line from Corinne to Dathol (Corinne Junction) was \$5,288, much greater than any income brought in by the minor increase in traffic.

Now was the time to tear up the line, Southern Pacific argued, because the rails were materials “urgently needed at the present time” due to the war. Additionally, in stark contrast to its earlier opposition, the federal government supported the abandonment since the gains to be made from rail salvage outweighed any possible role the branch could play in wartime traffic.

Once again abandonment hearings



Beyond the raised hat in the foreground, SP's L. P. Hopkins, Utah Gov. Herbert Maw, and UP's E. C. Schmidt stand with the just-removed "Last Spike," undoing 73 years of history. Often called "Promontory Summit," the location was simply "Promontory" to SP and in the *Official Guide*.

CLASSIC TRAINS collection

were held, and once again there was opposition. It was noted that many of those protesting did not ship by rail, chief among them local chambers of commerce and other civic groups. Box Elder County stated it did not want to lose the property taxes paid by the railroad.

This time the ICC quickly approved abandonment, with an effective date of June 11, 1942. It was stipulated that SP would sell the 4.8 miles between Corinne and Dathol to Oregon Short Line, a Union Pacific subsidiary, and the remainder of the line would be scrapped and the rails turned over to the U.S. Navy.

Salvage operations began almost immediately. A contract to lift the rails was awarded to Hyman-Michaels of Chicago. This firm had been salvaging rail lines for many years; now it was to dismantle the most historic of them all.

Scrapping of the branch started near Corinne on July 1, 1942, with the gang

working westward. SP required Hyman-Michaels to provide its own motive power, which consisted of former Minneapolis & St. Louis 2-6-0s Nos. 311 and 319. Through the next two months, the scrappers moved across the desert, salvaging rails, ties, and all other hardware for reuse. By mid-August they were camped at the Blue Creek water tank east of Promontory, and by early September their outfit train had been relocated to Rozel, 8 miles west, where water was available for the men and the locomotives.

Lost to time are the details of who conceived the idea of an "un-driving" ceremony to pay homage to the original event. However, out of that person's proposal came a coordinated effort to arrange for an event that local and state politicians, civic and business leaders, and members of the military and the media could see history reversed. The ceremony was to be part patriotic fervor, part photo opportunity,

and part social function. Essential to the plan was the support of Hyman-Michaels, whose owners backed the "un-driving" as a way to obtain publicity for their firm.

By August 1942 the press reported that "within a few weeks" there would be a special ceremony to commemorate the un-driving of the Golden Spike. The date was originally set for September 4, when the scrap gang expected to be at Promontory. However, it was later moved back to September 8 because Hyman-Michaels was behind schedule due to the wartime labor shortage. Workers were hard to come by even at top wages of 75 cents an hour. Additionally, the scrappers were hampered by having to burn thick brush off the track before pulling up the rails. Range fires were a major concern, because if one got out of control it would pose a danger to adjoining grain fields and grazing lands, so the work was slowed to ensure that no such event occurred.



After removal, track material was forwarded to the Clearfield Naval Supply Depot south of Ogden and other military installations for reuse.

CLASSIC TRAINS collection

Meanwhile, for the un-driving ceremony, Southern Pacific prepared a special spike in its Ogden shops. Newspaper reports from the time do not indicate what was “special” about it, although it was presumably a steel spike dipped in brass or painted to give it the appearance of gold. It was presented for the ceremony by SP’s Salt Lake Division Superintendent L. P. Hopkins, but whether this spike was used during the “un-driving” uncertain.

The weather was warm and mild on September 8, 1942. An automobile caravan, headed by Utah Gov. Herbert Maw and a police escort, departed from Salt Lake City early that morning. Stops were made at Clearfield and Ogden to pick up representatives from the Navy and SP. While in Ogden, Maw took part in a special program about the un-driving that was broadcast over radio station KLO.

The caravan then continued to Brigham City, Corinne, and past Promontory to Rozel, where Everett B. Michaels, vice president of Hyman-Michaels, treated 88 guests to a chicken dinner with all the trimmings served under the direction of camp manager Jack Carson. Afterwards, the caravan traveled back the 8 miles to Promontory.

To re-create the 1869 ceremony, Hyman-Michaels’ two locomotives were positioned facing each other at the obelisk monument that had been erected decades earlier to mark the Last Spike location. A crowd of about 300 persons witnessed the un-driving — about half of the estimated 600 that attended in 1869.

Frank Francis, columnist for the *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, was master of ceremonies for the event, which started at 2 p.m. and lasted 30 minutes. George Albert Smith, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, gave the invocation. Removal of the “Last Spike” then commenced. Newspapers reported that Mrs. Ralph Talbot Jr., wife of the commanding officer of the quartermaster depot in Utah (and whose great-uncle had attended the 1869 event), presented Maw with a claw bar. Maw used it to raise the spike an inch from its position in the tie, followed in succession by E. C. Schmidt, assistant to the president of the Union Pacific; SP Division Superintendent L. P. Hopkins; and Everett B. Michaels, who removed the spike as the crowd cheered.

With the driving of the Golden Spike having occurred only 73 years earlier, there were two attendees in 1942 that had been present at the original ceremony. One was 85-year-old Mary Ipsen of Bear

River City, Utah, who at age 12 had been a cook’s helper at Promontory on May 10, 1869. Ipsen reminisced that she “got to eat whatever was left over after the construction workers had gotten their fill.” The other was Israel Hunsaker, then 90, who’d been a track worker on the line and helped to lay the rails over Promontory Summit. He was reported to have attended the “Wedding of the Rails” and appears in A. J. Russell’s famous “champagne photo” [page 4] as a young man in the front row, fourth from right, although some historians dispute this claim.

Other participants with ties to the first event included William C. Warner, then 86 years old, who, as the SP’s oldest pensioner, started work for the Central Pacific in 1870. Cora R. Gibbs also attended; her father, Edgar Stone, claimed to have been the engineer on CP’s *Jupiter*. (There has been debate over whether Stone or another person, George Lashus, was engineer of the *Jupiter* at the ceremony; other records show the engineer as being George Booth.)

Following the un-driving, visitors and dignitaries quickly departed, and the scrappers wasted no time in getting back to the task at hand. Photographs suggest the scrap gang made short work of tearing up the main track upon which the ceremony had just been held, with some

area residents who attended the event lingering to watch the rails be removed.

The 1942 ceremony resulted in several relics from the occasion, some now clouded in mystery. Following the un-driving, the spike SP prepared for the event was presented to the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, and was exhibited for a time at the Utah State Capitol in Salt Lake City. However, its current whereabouts are unknown.

A small, rusty iron spike removed from a cross tie, which supposedly occupied the same position as the original one into which the Golden Spike had been driven, was presented to Brigadier-General Ralph Talbot Jr., by E. G. Schmit of the Union Pacific. The spike was later included in a glass-covered display that eventually wound up in a back room at the quartermaster depot at Ogden, largely forgotten until it was rediscovered many years later. Unfortunately, with all witnesses deceased, there is no way to confirm its authenticity.

The two rails that corresponded to the position of the last two rails originally laid in 1869 were donated to officials from Brigham City and Ogden, respectively. While the section that went to Ogden has been lost, disposition of the rail given to Brigham City is readily known, since members of the Box Elder Junior Chamber of Commerce were determined that Brigham City would remember the day that it was un-spiked. In December 1943, a marble marker incorporating the rail was dedicated in a public ceremony at the southwest corner of the Box Elder County Courthouse; today it's displayed near Brigham City's former UP depot.

It took Hyman-Michaels another month after the un-driving ceremony to complete the removal of the Promontory Branch, working at a rate of up to 3 miles per day. Its contribution to World War II was significant; the Navy utilized the rail to build sidings and spurs at Utah's Clearfield Navy Supply Depot and at the Army's Defense Depot Ogden Utah — both major hubs of activity during the war. Some of it was also reportedly used at the arsenal at Hawthorne, Nev. At 120 miles, the Promontory Branch was the longest single line abandonment in the U.S. during 1942.

With its rail line now history, many predicted that the future for Promontory was bleak. Although the obelisk monument remained by the abandoned right of way, there were precious few remind-



The 1904 completion of the Lucin Cutoff across the Great Salt Lake relegated the original transcontinental main line to the north to secondary status, leading to its eventual removal.

A. P. Hill collection

ers of the historical event that had occurred there. There were seldom any visitors, as it was a long drive along a rough dirt road to reach the location.

In the next two decades a few scattered events were held to celebrate the driving of the Golden Spike, most notably in 1949 when railroad enthusiasts Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg re-enacted the ceremony at Promontory, but most of the anniversaries were held at Corinne, a much easier location to reach. In the 1950s the Sons of Utah Pioneers opened the Railroad Village Museum in Corinne, with two early 1900s-era steam locomotives situated face-to-face in the "Promontory pose."

For one local resident, Bernice Anderson, simply looking at old pictures and old engines in a museum wasn't enough. She wanted the site of the Golden Spike to be saved and recognized, and after many years of lobbying, the National Park Service created the Golden Spike National Historic Site in time for Promontory's 100th anniversary in 1969. Ten years later, in 1979, replicas of Union Pacific's No. 119 and Central Pacific's *Jupiter* were constructed and are used today for re-enactments.

In a span of 73 years, Promontory went from being the historic location of

the completion of the nation's first transcontinental railroad to a siding on a secondary branch line to an abandoned right of way with only a stone monument remaining to mark the ceremony that joined the nation. It can be debated whether or not the events that took place at Promontory in 1942 nearly destroyed a major part of American history under the guise of patriotism, but fortunately, because of preservation efforts over the past five decades, Promontory is now recognized for its role in American history and serves as living reminder of the events that took place 150 years ago. ■

JEFF TERRY is a Utah native, railroad photographer, and historian who lives near St. Paul, Minn. He is a rules instructor for Canadian Pacific in the Twin Cities.

THORNTON B. WAITE lives in Idaho Falls, Idaho, and has written several books and numerous articles on railroad history.

JAMES D. REISDORFF is a freelance writer and publisher from David City, Nebr. His South Platte Press has published more than 100 books, mostly on western railroad topics, since 1982. That includes The Un-Driving of the Golden Spike, released in 2013, by the same authors, on which this story is based. The book is available at www.southplattepress.com.