

## East to Promontory

Trackside Series #17

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Last fall a friend of mine and I spent several days exploring the abandoned grade of the original transcontinental railroad around Promontory, Utah. That trip will be the subject of this, the seventeenth installment of our *Trackside Series*.

Anybody that knows anything about trains or railroading knows that the first transcontinental railroad was completed with the driving of a golden spike at Promontory, Utah on May 10, 1869. That event was the culmination of years of an extraordinary effort by the Central Pacific Railroad, building from the west, and the Union Pacific Railroad, building from the east. After years of hard work both sides of this country were finally united by the joining of two strands of iron in the desert of northern Utah. This happened at a tiny, non-descript spot near the northern edge of the Great Salt Lake called Promontory.

There is a common misconception that the rails met at Promontory Point however this is incorrect. Promontory Point is at the southern end of the Promontory Mountains, several miles south of the town of Promontory. Promontory Point was actually on a new line built in 1904 that was known as the Lucin Cutoff.

It had been my intention for a number of years to visit Promontory and the Golden Spike National Historic Site that has been established there. I'd been close to the site on several occasions, passing by on I-84 about twenty miles to the north, and had seen the highway sign that mentions the location. However, those were business trips so I hadn't had the time to actually visit the site. And besides, I'd been driving a government vehicle and had the taxpayer's dollar to be concerned with.

That changed in 2005 when my wife and I were again headed east, this time to a reunion with several of my navy shipmates. We were meeting in Deadwood, South Dakota and had the time to swing south from I-84 and spend a few hours at Promontory. We visited the museum there and were lucky enough to see the reenactment of the two steam locomotives moving forward to meet each other for the first time. They use newly built, almost exact replicas of the Central Pacific's *Jupiter* and the Union Pacific's No. 119 and the brightly painted locomotives really sparkled in the bright sunlight.

Driving up to the historical site we noticed the old abandoned grades approaching Promontory from the east. It was easy to spot several of the larger cuts and fills and the overall alignment of the abandoned grade as this is wide open desert and they have changed little since the rails were pulled up in 1942.

One of my passions is the exploration of abandoned railroad grades. I enjoy photographing and mapping them then using this material to create photo albums that document their locations. As soon as I saw the two grades snaking their way up and over Promontory Summit I knew that I wanted to return to the area when I had more time to explore and photograph them.

I made that a priority so during the fall of last year, when a buddy of mine asked where we should spend our annual camping trip, I immediately blurted out, Promontory,

Utah! Since Rick is also interested in all types of history and likes to explore new sites it was easy to convince him to head east and visit the area.

The portion of the original transcontinental railroad that was built across northern Utah was constructed by both the Central Pacific Railroad and the Union Pacific Railroad in early 1869. The Central Pacific was building eastward from the Nevada border and the Union Pacific was building north and westward from Ogden.

Prior to the U.S. Congress deciding on Promontory as the meeting point, grading crews of the two companies had already met and passed each other, continuing to build in opposite directions. This resulted in many miles of parallel grade on either side of Promontory. Each company had hoped to maximize their miles of laid rail so Congress had to step in and intervene, deciding in April 1869 that Promontory would be the final meeting point.

Between May 10th and December 1869 the Central Pacific and Union Pacific trains met at Promontory. However, as that location was quite isolated, the Central Pacific decided to purchase the portion of the UP grade between Promontory and Ogden. Beginning in Dec. 1869 Central Pacific trains began running east into Ogden where they were met by Union Pacific trains headed west.

As a result, rails were removed from the Union Pacific grade on the eastern slopes of Promontory Summit and spiked down on the parallel Central Pacific grade that had been constructed prior to the driving of the golden spike. This was done due to the fact that the original Central Pacific grade had been built to a much higher standard.

In 1904 the newly constructed Lucin Cutoff was completed and the original mainline through Promontory and around the northern end of the Great Salt Lake became known as the Promontory Branch. The cut-off branched from the old original line in Ogden and headed west, crossing the Great Salt Lake and tying back into the original line near Lucin at what became known as Umbria Junction. As a result, traffic on the original line dropped way off and gradually the small towns and stations along the line were abandoned. The rails on the portion of the line between Corinne and Umbria Junction were finally removed in 1942 during the scrap drives for steel in World War II.

Today, about 1 ½ miles of track had been re-laid at Promontory where the rails first met in 1869 and the location has been designated as the Golden Spike National Historic Site. Short portions of the old grade on both sides of Promontory have become either hiking trails or auto tour routes and the entire line from Promontory, west to Umbria Junction, has been designated as the Transcontinental National Back Country Byway by the Bureau of Land Management.

Upon arriving at the site we visited the museum, watched a couple of the videos that were being presented and looked through the gift shop. Outside we took a look at all the interpretive signs but we were unable to see the locomotives as the reenactment activities had been shut down for the approaching winter months. It was late in the day so we found a campsite for the night and made plans for the coming day.

We had decided to trace the route of the old grade from east to west so first thing the next morning we headed east into the town of Corrine. Located a few miles west of Brigham City, Corrine is the spot where the rails currently end. From here the abandoned grade extends west about twenty-five miles, before reaching Promontory, then continues westward, on across the desert, for another ninety miles before connecting with the newer Lucin Cutoff at Umbria Junction.

The first twenty miles of the old grade are mostly flat and straight as they cross an area of swampy salt marshes and alkali mud flats along an arm of the Great Salt Lake known as Hull Lake. However, the grade begins to get interesting at a point on the railroad formerly known as Lampo. It's here that the old line leaves the flats and begins its climb up the east side of the hills towards Promontory Summit.

Just before reaching the summit we located two of the most interesting sites along the entire route. The Union Pacific grade crossed a large swale on what is known as the Big Trestle and the tracks of the Central Pacific crossed the same swale on a large fill now referred to as the Big Fill. The large wooden trestle is long gone but the earthen approaches are still easily spotted. However, the large fill used by the Central Pacific is still in place. A trail, known as the Big Fill Loop Trail and about two miles long, traverses both of these features so we took the time to hike and photograph the route. In addition to the Big Fill and Big Trestle sites, the trail that follows both of the grades passes through several large cuts.

During the construction of the transcontinental line the famous photographer A. J. Russell was hired by the Union Pacific to photograph a portion of the construction of the railroad. One of his better known photos shows a UP construction train resting atop the large wooden trestle in the early days of April 1869. With a copy of this photo in hand we were able to find the exact spot from where Russell took the photo. We took a picture of the same spot, showing it in today's condition, almost one hundred and forty years later. Other than the trestle being gone, the site appears much like it did so many years ago.

Continuing west for a couple of miles we encountered a portion of the original Central Pacific grade that had been designated as the East Grade Auto Tour. It follows the CP grade for about two miles and passes sites known as Chinaman's Arch and Last Cut. The parallel grade of the Union Pacific, abandoned in Dec. 1869 when the Central Pacific began running into Ogden, is easily seen just below the route of the auto tour.

Having completed the driving of the auto tour segment of the grade, we again headed west. A couple of miles later we again approached Promontory and the site of the museum. Evening was rapidly approaching so we drove the few miles to where we had parked our camp trailer that morning and got ready for the coming evening. It had indeed been an interesting day.

We begin this second portion of *Trackside Series #17, East to Promontory*, on a bright sunny morning, camped along the abandoned grade of the first transcontinental railroad, near Promontory, Utah. The previous day had been spent exploring the old line from the current end of track at Corinne, Utah, westward as far as the Golden Spike National Historic Site at Promontory.

As with a short portion of the abandoned grade just east of Promontory, the segment of grade immediately west of Promontory has been converted to the West Grade Auto Tour. Again, the Central Pacific grade as used while the parallel Union Pacific grade remains untouched nearby. Remember, however, that the Union Pacific grade lying west of Promontory never saw rails as it was abandoned in April 1869 when congress decided on Promontory as the point where the two companies would join. As a result, many of the small cuts and fills were never completed and remain unfinished to this day. They exist almost exactly as they did when the UP construction crews were pulled off of them almost one hundred and forty years ago.

Having driven the seven miles of the auto tour, which operates one way, west to east, ending back at Promontory, Rick and I again headed west along the abandoned grade. From the western end of the auto tour, the abandoned grade stretches almost ninety miles, around the northern end of the Great Salt Lake and across the desert of Utah, before reaching the connection with the existing tracks of the Lucin Cutoff at Umbria Junction. The entire distance has been designated as a National Back Country Byway by the Bureau of Land Management and almost all of it is drivable.

Making sure we had air in our spare tire, plenty of food and water and enough film in the cameras, we ventured west. The BLM has placed signs at each one of the former station sites and railroad sidings along the line and the first one we encountered was Rozel, just a couple of miles into our trip. We learned from the sign that the site had originally been christened Victory on April 28, 1869 when the Central Pacific construction crews had rested here for lunch after laying six miles of track on that famous day that they laid a total of ten miles in one day.

After photographing the sign, and a quick look around we were back in the rig and again headed west. We could see the never used Union Pacific grade off to our left, just below our route and spotted remnants of several small trestles and wooden culverts as we covered the next ten miles. Needless to say there were numerous stops to read signs, photograph construction features and do a little more exploring.

A short time later we reached the site formerly known as Lake. Here we had to deviate from the abandoned Central Pacific grade due to the fact that it crosses a fairly large area of mud flats at the extreme northern end of the Great Salt Lake. As a result, the BLM has not maintained the grade to a condition that's drivable so we had to use a local gravel road a short distance further north.

The detour was quickly covered and we were able to get back on the abandoned Central Pacific grade near Kosmo, about five miles west of Lake. During World War I Kosmo had been the site of the large Salt Lake Potash Co. operations. Remnants of the old ponds, canals, processing plant and numerous other structures could still be seen. In addition, we discovered where a railroad spur had extended south from the Central Pacific mainline, crossed the Union Pacific's un-used grade and extended out across the mudflats to the ponds and system of canals. The old wooden ties still remained on much of the spur where they had been left when the rails had been removed.

A couple of miles further west we arrived at Monument, so named for nearby Monument Rock. The site had been the location of the Desert Salt Works Co., which also required a short spur track, but little remains today. It's also at Monument that the parallel Union Pacific grade ends, for the most part. There are short segments further west but we were unable to locate them. The next ten miles were arrow straight as we continued west towards Kelton.

Arriving there just in time for lunch, we took time out from our travels to have a quick bite and look around. Fortunately we had brought our own food since the only surviving feature of Kelton is its old cemetery. At one time Kelton had been the second largest town along the entire one hundred and thirty miles of abandoned line and was the southern terminus of the Utah, Idaho and Oregon Stage Co. Even the last tree in town has died and only its barren, sun-bleached trunk remains.

Having finished lunch we re-boarded our train, I mean climbed back in our rig, and again headed west. Westward from Kelton we again had to detour onto a nearby gravel road that parallels the Central Pacific's grade because the alignment of the railroad begins a gradual climb along the side of a hill and many of the gully crossings have washed out. However, the old roadbed is easy to spot, especially since a range fire had burned through the area the previous summer, removing all vegetation.

After traveling about eight miles on the adjacent gravel road we were able to get back on the railroad grade. It was here that we found the largest cut along the entire route between Promontory and Umbria Junction. Known as the Peplin Cut it was about forty feet deep and two hundred feet long where it curved through a point of a ridge below nearby Peplin Mountain.

Now back on the actual alignment of the Central Pacific grade, we again headed west. We continued to find and explore numerous interesting features such as rock culverts, many in excellent condition, a large borrow pit and wye at Ombrey and the high fill across Sinks of Dove Creek. In addition, old wooden ties were found on the wye at Matlin, several other wooden trestles were spotted and we stopped to read and photograph each of the BLM signs marking former sidings and stations.

Another old cemetery, smaller than the one we had seen at Kelton, was spotted near the grade as we approached Terrace. At one time Terrace had been the largest of the Central Pacific's towns in Utah. Acting as the maintenance headquarters of the Central Pacific's, and later Southern Pacific's, Salt Lake Division, facilities had included a 16-stall roundhouse, shops and an eight track switchyard. At one time several hundred people had called Terrace their home but today the only living creature we found was an occasional jack rabbit scampering through the piles of brick rubble. We were also able to locate the spot where the roundhouse had stood and the site of the turntable due to the depressions they left in the ground.

Leaving Terrace we drove another couple of miles before reaching the next old station, this one called Watercress. Between the two townsites we spotted two wooden trestles that were still in remarkably good shape for having been abandoned almost sixty-five years earlier.

It was at Watercress that the late afternoon sun began to approach the western horizon so we decided to call it a day. We headed out to a connection with a nearby highway and pointed the rig back towards our campsite for the one hour drive that we

faced. It had been a fun filled day, having driven about sixty-five miles and exploring the numerous features and sites along the way.

After a quick breakfast the next morning we were again back on the highway as we drove back to Watercress. Reaching the site, we drove the short distance back to the two large wooden trestle to re-photograph them in the bright morning sun then again resumed our travels west as we continued to follow the abandoned railroad grade.

We had about twenty miles to go to reach the end of the route at Umbria Junction and it was again as straight as an arrow. Except for the occasional short deviation from the railroad grade where we bypassed an existing culvert or tiny trestle, there wasn't so much as one curve along the entire twenty mile segment. However, that didn't keep us from stopping every so often to take a picture of the grade showing it disappearing off into the distant desert.

A couple of hours later we passed a sign marking the site of "Historic" Lucin. This was the first of two locations using the same name so has been labeled as the historic site whereas a station with the same name was later established on the nearby Lucin Cutoff. While exploring the location we were treated to a Union Pacific train headed east on the Lucin Cutoff, less than half a mile away. With this we knew we were getting close to the end of our journey.

Climbing into the pickup we headed west. A short distance down the grade it made a slight curve to the right and pointed us directly at Umbria Junction and the connection with the current Union Pacific mainline, about a mile away. When we reached the site we located the last interpretive sign. It explains the building of both the original mainline in 1869 and the Lucin Cutoff in 1904 and points out the fact that the new line shortened the distance between Umbria Junction and Ogden by forty miles.

Our journey had taken us across more than one hundred and twenty miles of the Utah desert and had taken the better part of three days. We had traversed the portion of the first transcontinental railroad that had been constructed in late 1868 and early 1869 and had been completed with the driving of the famous golden spike at Promontory. On that date in May of 1869 the driving of the last spike had signified everything that made this nation of ours so great. That was the ability to push forward and tame the wilderness, undaunted by what must have seemed like insurmountable obstacles at the time. As we stood there, soaking in the moment, another Union Pacific stack train raced past us, headed east with its hundreds of containers of cargo and four powerful locomotives on the head end. It felt strange, almost like we were being tugged between two completely different eras.

For anyone that's interested in learning about the story of the building of the first transcontinental railroad there are several books that I would recommend. Probably the best one is titled *Empire Express*, written by David Howard Bain. Another one, *A Great and Shining Road*, was authored by John Hoyt Williams and a third one is Stephen E. Ambros' *Nothing Like It in the World*. There are several others but these will give the reader the best understanding of what it took to complete such an undertaking. There is also a book, *Rails East to Promontory, the Utah Stations*, that describes, in detail, the portion of the abandoned line between Umbria Junction and Promontory. It was printed as part eight of the Bureau of Land Management's Cultural Resource Series and originally came out in 1981.

However, the best way to get a feel for the area is to jump in your car, head east, and visit the Golden Spike National Historic Site at Promontory. After visiting the museum and walking out to the tracks and visiting the actual spot where the spike was driven, allow yourself enough time to do a little exploring. Even if you don't drive the entire route, at least take in the two auto tour routes and hike the Big Fill Loop Trail. Only then will you begin to really appreciate the history of this area.

Having completed our exploration of the abandoned route, Rick and I returned to the spot where we had unhitched our camp trailer earlier that morning. However, instead of staying on the paved highway and turning towards home, we returned to Umbria Junction, this time with our trailer in tow. We located a small mound alongside the busy Union Pacific mainline and set up camp for the evening. We had decided to spend the night along the tracks. The sun was sliding low in the western sky as we grabbed our lounge chairs and with dinner in hand we watched still another train pass our location. What a perfect way to end the perfect outing.