
A Footnote to History: The U.S. Army at Promontory, Utah, May 10, 1869

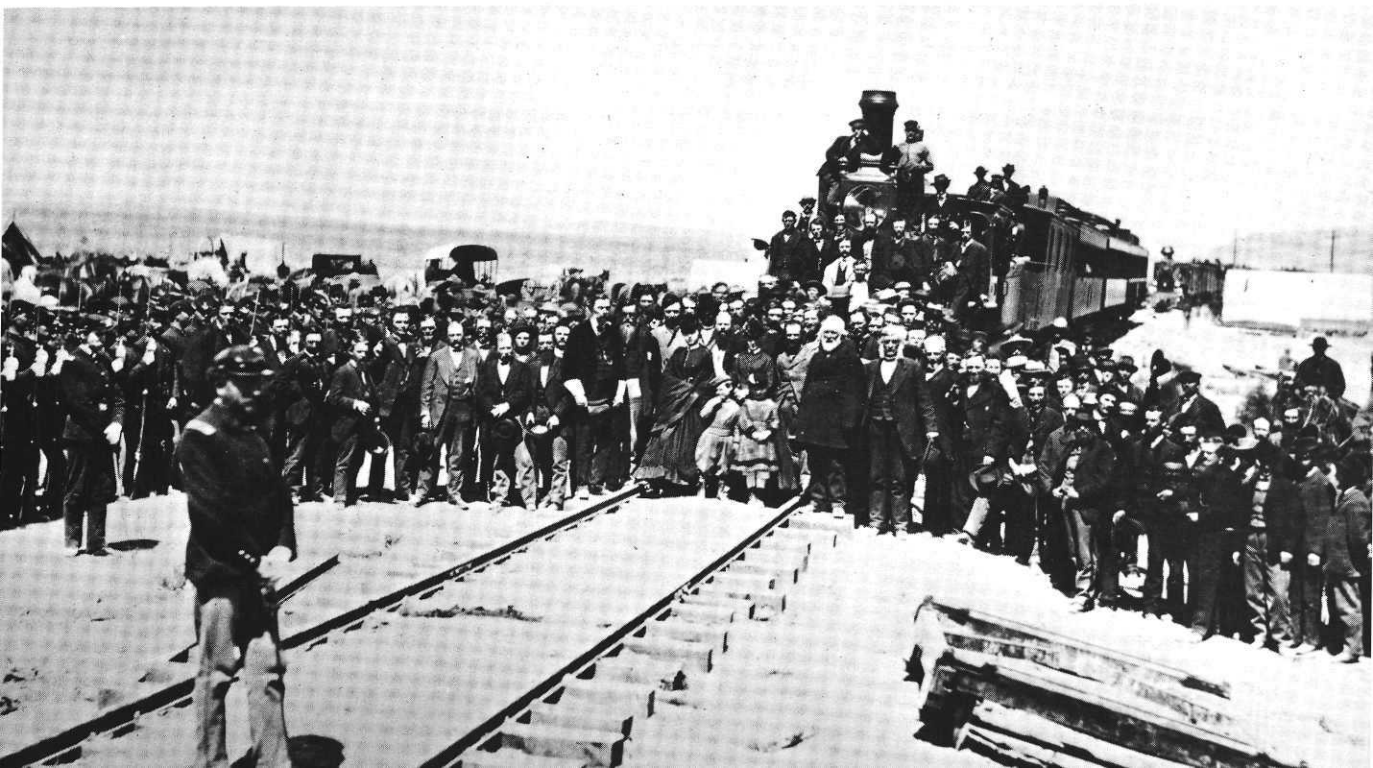
BY PAUL L. HEDREN

OF THE MULTITUDE OF EVENTS IMPORTANT IN trans-Mississippi western history, few matched the color, pageantry, and significance of the completion of the Pacific railway at Promontory, Utah Territory, on May 10, 1869. There, some 500 spectators cheered as the symbolic Last Spike was driven. Officials of the Central and Union Pacific railroads had anticipated a crowd of 30,000 or more, but Promontory then was well off the beaten trails of northern Utah. And it still is.

The largest single group of spectators that May 10 consisted of soldiers en route from Virginia to the Presidio of San Francisco. Although these boys in blue were well photographed during the ceremonies, few reporters and civilian spectators thought to record for posterity the role

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At left, troops stand at parade rest and a captain has stepped forward onto the tracks. Identifiable in the crowd are UP vice-president Thomas C. Durant (wearing gauntlets), Maj. Milton G. Cogswell (behind women and children), Sidney Dillon, a UP director (mutton chop whiskers), and UP chief engineer Grenville M. Dodge (leg outstretched). Golden Spike National Historic Site photograph.



these troops played in the Last Spike program. Time has dulled further the story; for 112 years later, not one single written source on the trans-continental railroad and the Golden Spike had the facts correct. But the soldier's role was an interesting one; and using regimental records, surviving photographs, and an officer's diary, it can now be told.

Contrary to some accounts, the army troops and band at Promontory on May 10 were not from a local military garrison, although Fort Douglas, Utah, Fort Bridger, Wyoming, and Fort Halleck, Nevada, were fairly close at hand. Rather, these men were involved in a mass transfer of an infantry regiment from one duty station to another.

Before the railroad's completion a cross-country change of station was a sizeable undertaking for soldiers of the United States Army. There existed then two common, though hardly speedy, methods of reaching the West. The first was to sail or steam down the eastern seaboard and through the Caribbean to the Isthmus of Panama. After an overland crossing of the Isthmus, troops would again take ship for the journey up the Pacific Coast. The second way west was on any of the numerous overland wagon roads that existed by the 1860s. Either way, travel was slow and costly. By 1868 the Union Pacific end-of-track had advanced into Wyoming, and already the army could service many of its northern plains posts by train. A year later, in April 1869, the Union Pacific and Central Pacific tracks had reached northern Utah, and completion was only one month away.

At the end of April the first nearly all-rail troop transfer was made when the Twelfth Regiment U.S. Infantry, commanded by Col. Orlando B. Willcox, traveled from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco.¹ Of the 2,800 miles between the cities, these soldiers had only to march overland some 150 miles from Bear River, Wyoming, and Wahsatch, Utah, to the Central Pacific's end-of-track, then west of the Great Salt Lake. Columns of soldiers marching along newly constructed railroad grade must have caused unusual excitement in the camps and hell-on-wheels towns associated with the railroad laborers.

Troops of the Twenty-first Regiment U.S. Infantry, the "Promontory Regiment," began their cross-country trip at Richmond, Virginia. The regiment had been ordered to concentrate at Omaha, Nebraska, and then travel via the newly constructed railroad to San Francisco, there to await further transportation to Arizona.

¹ *Salt Lake Daily Telegraph*, April 28, 1869. Copies of this and all documents cited below are in the Golden Spike National Historic Site Research Collections.

The diary of 2d Lt. J. Charles Currier of Company I provides illuminating insight on the regiment's progress. Currier was recently married, and his wife, Nataline, accompanied him on the trip. At Omaha

 TWENTY-FIRST REGIMENT U.S. INFANTRY

May 10, 1869

Field, Staff, and Band	Maj. Milton Cogswell 1st Lt. and Adj. George H. Burton 1st Lt. and Regimental Q.M. John L. Johnston Asst. Surg. Calvin DeWitt Sgt. Maj. Charles V. Fisher Commissary Sgt. Franz Hentschel Principal Musician William H. Menhemeit Chief Musician George A. Brenner Band — 13 privates		
		Total Field, Staff, and Band	21
Company F	Capt. Henry R. Putnam 1st Lt. Edward B. Hubbard (Attached from 32d Infantry per S.O.)	Total Company F	48
Company G	Capt. Robert L. Burnett 1st Lt. George G. Greenough 2d Lt. Guilford D. Jennings	Total Company G	38
Company H	Capt. Walter S. Franklin 1st Lt. John F. Cluley 2d Lt. John M. Ross	Total Company H	43
Company I	Capt. Richard F. O'Bierne (Attached from 32d Infantry per S.O.) 2d Lt. J. Charles Currier	Total Company I	58
Company K	1st Lt. Thomas F. Riley 2d Lt. James Riley (Attached from 32d Infantry per S.O.)	Total Company K	56
		Total at Promontory	264



Although soldiers of the Twenty-first Infantry are not in this photograph, many ex-soldiers are. At least eight men are wearing army caped overcoats or other parts of old uniforms. Many UP laborers had served with the Union or Confederate Army. Union Pacific Railroad Museum Collection.

the newlyweds purchased last-minute household articles they would not find in Arizona. Of the prospering city, Currier observed that

every business relation revolved around the "U.P." road, as the Union Pacific is termed for short. You see "UP" goods, "U.P." saloons, "U.P." hotels, etc. A friend remarked as he priced some stores today that everything was "UP" here, a very appropriate remark I think.²

By May 2 all ten companies of the regiment were in camp at Omaha Barracks north of town, and that evening they paraded together for the first time in two years. Prior to this assembly they had been scattered by companies and detachments throughout Virginia on Reconstruction duty

² Harriet Currier Hale, ed., "First Train West," Sacramento County Historical Society *Golden Notes* 15 (April 1969): 9.

and, earlier yet, had seen Civil War combat at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, and Petersburg, among other famous engagements.³

For the trip west the Twenty-first was divided into two five-company detachments. The battalion consisting of Companies F, G, H, I, and K, plus the field, staff, and band, commanded by Maj. Milton Cogswell, was the first to depart Omaha. Currier recalled on May 4, "Left station at 5:20 mid the cheers of a great crowd. Fearfully warm day and dusty."⁴ The battalion was 265 men strong, including fifteen officers, an assistant surgeon, and the fifteen-member regimental band.⁵ Many other officers' wives, in addition to Mrs. Currier, accompanied their husbands.

The troop train progressed nearly 300 miles a day and at speeds Currier recalled of up to 40 miles per hour. The Curriers were amazed at how quickly they could pass through the West. They marveled at prairie dog towns, Indian villages, herds of antelope, and soldiers of frontier units out on the scout. Of the latter the young officer wrote, "they exchange friendly greetings with our men as we whirl by. They all look as though they had seen hard service."⁶

Lieutenant Currier was keenly perceptive of the revolutionary changes the railroad would bring to his profession. As the Twenty-first passed through Cheyenne, Wyoming, for instance, they were greeted by officers of the Twenty-seventh Foot stationed at nearby Fort D. A. Russell. "They are nice looking fellows," recorded Currier, "and seem very glad to meet us fresh from civilization. This road had been a Godsend to them."⁷ Further down the line, at Fort Fred Steele, Charles wrote:

The road runs right through the Fort; part of its buildings on one side and part on the other of the track. What a great change to the beleaguered officers and men who have been stationed here the past five years to hear the cheerful whistle of the locomotive and see civilization pass on the cars. It seemed funny to look out and see an officer of the day in full dress way up here among the clouds. Formerly the only means of reaching this place was by slowly moving mule team.⁸

On May 6, as the soldiers traveled in western Wyoming, they were nearly called to the rescue of Thomas C. Durant, vice-president of the

³ Ibid., p. 11; Theodore F. Rodenbough and William L. Haskin, eds.; *The Army of the United States* (New York: Argonaut Press, 1966), pp. 673-79.

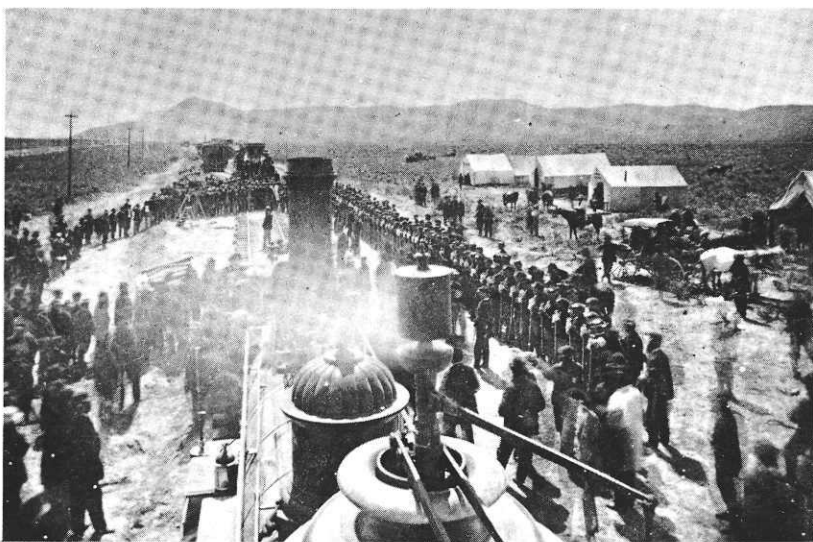
⁴ Hale, "First Train West," p. 11.

⁵ Office of the Adjutant General, Regimental Returns, Twenty-first Infantry Regiment, May 1869, RG 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as Regimental Returns.

⁶ "First Train West," p. 13.

⁷ Ibid., p. 14. *Foot* is a historic term for infantry.

⁸ Ibid., p. 15. The larger story of the U.S. Army and the western railroads is ably told by Robert G. Athearn in "The Firewagon Road," *Montana, the Magazine of Western History* 20 (Spring 1970): 2-19.



Three companies of the Twenty-first Infantry parade on the west side of the transcontinental mainline at Promontory, May 10, 1869. In the lower photograph, taken from the roof on the Central Pacific's "Jupiter," one can see soldiers from the other two companies mingling with the crowd on the right. Union Pacific photograph, Golden Spike National Historical Site; Central Pacific photograph, Union Pacific Railroad Museum Collection.

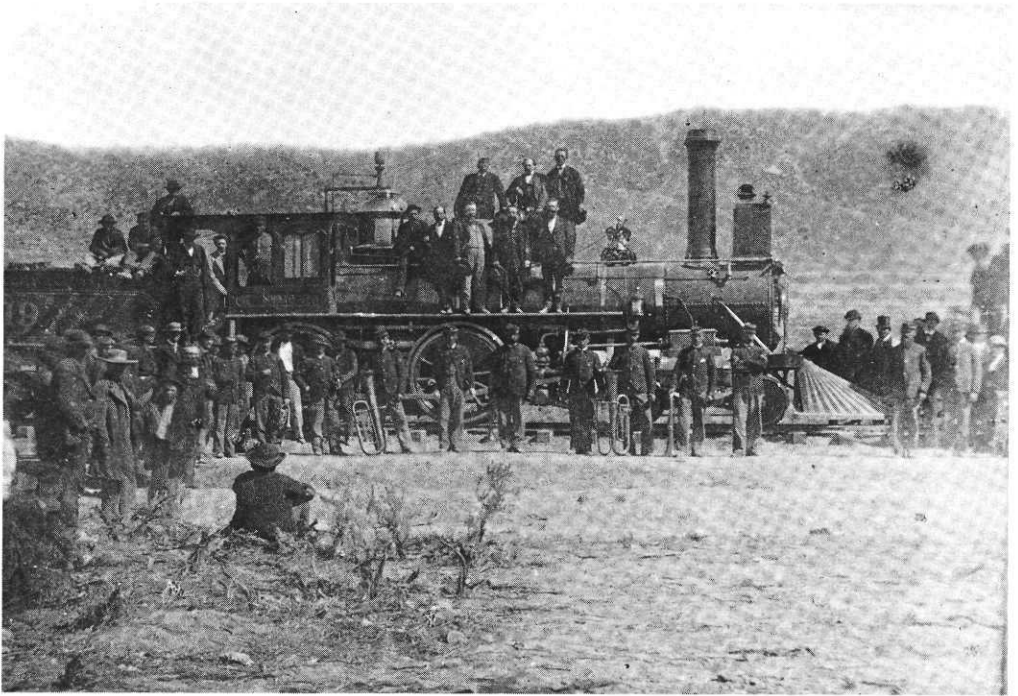


After the formal program and the driving of the Last Spike, many spectators and dignitaries posed for the camera. In this famous May 10 "champagne photograph" two soldiers are barely visible in the back row, center. Courtesy of the Oakland Museum.

Union Pacific Railroad Company. Durant and other UP officials were en route to Promontory for the completion ceremonies; but his special train was stopped at Piedmont, Wyoming, and his car sidetracked by angry, unpaid construction workers demanding their wages. The railroad rashly considered sending in the infantry, but discretion prevailed. Durant kept the soldiers at a safe distance, saw to it that the workers were paid, and then resumed his own trip west.⁹

On Friday, May 7, at about noon, the infantrymen reached Wahsatch Utah, then the end-of-track for Union Pacific passengers. The soldiers learned that they would be taken on, however, as the rails were so near a junction. Progress on Friday and Saturday was slow owing to scattered incomplete sections of track, and the men spent much time enjoying the scenery and exploring the shanty towns that dotted the line. One enlisted man, John Stone of Company K, took advantage of a leisurely day on

⁹ Ibid., p. 24; Robert M. Utley and Francis A. Ketterson, Jr., *Golden Spike* (Washington, D.C., Government Publishing Office, 1969), p. 46.



The Twenty-first Infantry Regimental Band stood alongside the Union Pacific's locomotive "119" and the Central Pacific's "Jupiter." Other soldiers share the limelight.

May 7 and deserted his comrades. Army life, or maybe the thought of service in Arizona, had proved to be too much for him.¹⁹

On May 9 the trip westward resumed in earnest. A number of the officers and their wives traveled in Durant's private car to Promontory Summit, arriving there at 7:00 A.M. on May 10. The enlisted men of the regiment arrived later that morning and prepared to participate in the Golden Spike ceremony.

The tent community at Promontory was blossoming on May 10. It was the last of the rough-and-tumble towns that followed the progress of the Union Pacific Railroad. By noon, sixteen tents, most of which were saloons, had been set up. Ironically, it was water, not liquor, that proved

¹⁹ Office of the Adjutant General, Muster Rolls, Twenty-first Infantry Regiment, Company K, May-June 1869, RG 94, National Archives. Hereafter cited as Muster Rolls. Stone must have been a hardened man. When later recaptured and tried by court-martial, his sentence read, "To be indelibly marked on the left hip with the letter 'D': to forfeit to the U.S. all pay & allowances that are or may become due; to be confined at hard labor for the period of two (2) years, wearing a twelve (12) pound ball attached to his leg, forfeiting all pay & allowances, except \$2. per month for the same period, and then to be Dishonorably discharged [from] the service."



The soldier with folded arms near the pilot wheel of engine "119," opposite, is Sgt. Maj. Charles V. Fisher. Both photographs courtesy of the Oakland Museum.

to be the most valuable refreshment at the little town, at least according to one reporter.

Water is the great want in all this Region. . . . It is a pitiful sight to see five hundred [*sic*] soldiers of the Twenty-First, while at Promontory, going to the tank cars of the Central Pacific with canteens, cups, flasks, teakettles, pails, kegs, and every imaginable contrivance that would hold water, to get a supply of the precious liquid.¹¹

The program on May 10 was hastily formulated; up to the last minute officers of both roads had been unable to agree on any details. As it turned out, ample recognition was afforded many individuals, followed by the formal presentation and placement of four precious metal railroad spikes. Judging from the photographs, the battalion from the Twenty-first was primarily used to hold back the pressing crowd. Three companies formed a line on the west side of the tracks while the other two held a similar position on the east side. The men were a splendid-looking lot,

¹¹ *San Francisco Daily Morning Call*, May 19, 1869.

each attired in undress blue uniforms with white gloves and shouldering Springfield breechloading .50-caliber rifles with fixed bayonets.

It is commonly believed that the Last Spike was heartily driven with a spikemaul. Instead, the soft gold spike was carefully placed into a predrilled hole in a ceremonial tie, and then only gently tapped with a silver-plated spikemaul. The presiding officials allowed several officers of the Twenty-first Infantry to participate in this feature of the program, and it may be the officers' taps with the hilts of their swords that are the only visible blemishes on the head of the famous Golden Spike.¹²

After the formal remarks, the Twenty-first Regimental Band and the LDS Tenth Ward Band from Salt Lake City entertained the crowd. The spectators did not disperse immediately but posed for an almost endless number of photographs. Surviving today, they are a superb eyewitness record of the celebration.

The men of the Twenty-first Regiment were not the only soldiers at Promontory for such an auspicious occasion. From Salt Lake City came retired Brig. Gen. Patrick E. Connor, a respected Indian campaigner who had established Fort Douglas. One newspaper report mentions that Maj. George P. Ihrie of the Paymaster Department was present. Further, several photographs reveal cavalry officers in the crowd. And, of course, there were numerous Civil War veterans among the spectators, including the Union Pacific's chief engineer, Gen. Grenville M. Dodge, along with dozens of laborers, of whom many still wore remnants of their army uniforms.¹³

The regimental band played, as Currier noted, "until they had taken too much ardent spirit." By 6 P.M., however, the railroad officials had retired to their personal cars, and the crowd was fully dispersed.

The infantrymen were scheduled to depart Promontory at 6 P.M., but it was after midnight when the command finally rolled on. In the interim, the men enjoyed a leisurely army meal and frequented the numerous hell-on-wheels saloons that made Promontory famous. The freedom was too much for one soldier, John Connel of G Company, who deserted before the regiment left town.¹⁴

¹² Hale, "First Train West," p. 27; J. N. Bowman, "Driving the Last Spike at Promontory, 1869," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 37 (Winter 1969): 99; Utley and Ketterson, *Golden Spike*, p. 51.

¹³ Hugh F. O'Neil, "List of Persons Present, Promontory, Utah, May 10, 1869," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 27 (April 1959): 161.

¹⁴ Muster Rolls, Company G, May-June, 1869.

With the excitement of the May 10 celebration behind them, the infantrymen continued their journey. After a day in the harsh deserts of Nevada, the springtime beauty and color of California's mountains stunned them. Later, when the soldiers entered Sacramento near the end of their trip, they climbed to the tops of their cars. "We [sang] Hail Columbia and other national airs and there is general rejoicing . . .," wrote Currier.¹⁵ On May 14 the battalion arrived in San Francisco. They were followed by Companies A, B, C, D, and E of the Twenty-first Regiment, which had left Omaha on May 8. With the final links in the line completed, they arrived in San Francisco only a day after the first battalion.¹⁶

Although this second battalion passed through Promontory only a day or so after the May 10 ceremonies, it was the men of Companies F, G, H, I, and K who stood in the limelight. They were the first United States troops to cross the West completely by train. They were at Promontory to hear the words and forecasts of important railroad officials. Those 264 men witnessed history — they made it. And many of them knew it.

¹⁵ Hale, "First Train West," p. 34.

¹⁶ Regimental Returns.

Soldiers lingered at Promontory until nightfall. Here several share the stage with UP superintendent of construction Samuel B. Reed (with beard and open coat behind his young daughter, Anna). Mrs. Reed stands at her husband's right. Golden Spike National Historic Site photograph.

