The Railroad and the Frontier West

by Rick Ewig

The last half of the 19th century witnessed the settlement of our country's last frontier, the American West. Such an impressive feat of conquering so vast an area in a relatively short space of time could not have occurred without a reliable and efficient means of transportation—the railroad. The contribution railroads made to the Trans-Mississippi West cannot be overestimated.

Looking toward the West in the early 19th century, it soon became apparent to its future settlers that transportation techniques that had worked in the East would be impossible in the West. Generally, the West lacked the proper building materials for roads and the necessary waterways for steamboats and canals. A new tool was needed. A network of railroad tracks was obviously necessary, but even the railroad had to overcome difficult obstacles before it could prove its worth to the West.

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Two obstacles still stood in the way of a transcontinental line. Would the massive undertaking be built and financed by private or government sources and what route would it follow? Many believed that private business should build a transcontinental railroad because it would do so more efficiently. This argument paled, however, next to the controversy over which route it would take. Sectional controversies flared during the 1850s. Neither the North nor South wanted the other to benefit, resulting in no route being chosen and limiting the action taken to planning and surveying the West.

The demands of the erupting Civil War would seem to have doomed the building of a transcontinental railroad, but in effect it had just the opposite result. In the absence of Southern Congressmen... organization of a territorial government was rendered necessary by... a railroad. Heretofore the railroad has been the follower instead of the pioneer of civilization.

Congress chose a non-Southern route and agreed to provide federal aid. Those who believed the railroad was a military necessity found their hand strengthened by the war. Such a line would bind the then isolated Pacific states to the Union as well as allow the army to supply more effectively the frontier outposts on the plains coping with the Indian trouble.

Arguments for a national line were not entirely military, however. Businessmen looked at the vast commercial opportunities for them on the west coast, while the merchants wanted faster and cheaper transportation of goods and... photography by A.J. Russell.
the public wanted better mail and passenger service.

The idea of the federal government providing assistance to the West was not a new idea. Never known to deny the West, the government had already aided the area by establishing forts to protect Oregon Trail travelers and letting government contracts to private companies for the delivery of mail. With the passage of the Pacific Railroad Act in 1862, Congress continued to aid in the development of the West. This act called for the Union Pacific Railroad Company to construct a railroad west from Council Bluffs, Iowa, and the Central Pacific Railroad to build one east from Sacramento. As incentives to the companies, Congress granted them ten alternate sections (later increased to twenty) of public land for each mile of track laid. In addition, the federal government agreed to lend each company $16,000 for each mile of track laid on the Plains, $32,000 for each mile on the plateau between the Rockies and Sierras and $48,000 for every mile in the mountains. The needs of the ongoing war did prevent the railroad from progressing rapidly and not until the war ended did the companies proceed. By 1867, the Union Pacific had crossed Nebraska and had entered what would become known as Wyoming.

The significance of the railroad to the West can be seen in its effect on Wyoming. The coming of the Union Pacific is the most important event in Wyoming's history. Before 1867, very few Anglo-Americans had settled in the area. In the first part of the 19th century, trappers and traders exploited the beaver population. Later the westward emigrants traveled through the plains only to write disparagingly of the area as a potential site for future settlement. Wyoming and other parts of the West became known as the Great American Desert. Only various trading posts along the Oregon Trail and military forts built to protect the emigrants and railroad workers from the American Indians dotted Wyoming’s landscape. The building of the Union Pacific brought permanent Anglo-American settlers to Wyoming. Towns quickly sprang up along the railroad. Not all of these rough and tumble hell-on-wheels towns survived, but those that did matured and became the basis for a new territory. Created in 1868, Wyoming's territorial government officially formed in 1869. In his inaugural address to the territorial legislature in 1869, Governor John A. Campbell noted the unusual way Wyoming began: “For the first time in the history of our country, the organization of a territorial government was rendered necessary by the building of a railroad. Heretofore the railroad has been the follower instead of the pioneer of civilization.”

The railroads hastened the demise of American Indian autonomy and land base. Not only did the tracks bring soldiers and settlers who desired Indian lands, the railroad also quickened the slaughter of the buffalo and the loss of that vital resource. The Indians' loss, however, proved to be an economic boom to the country.

Paralleling the growth of tracks in the West was a nationwide commercial and industrial expansion. In order to provide a market for future business, the railroads successfully encouraged settlement by advertising throughout the United States and northern Europe. This created a new market for eastern goods while also ensuring the railroads' prosperity. In return, the West provided agricultural products for the growing urban population, raw materials for the country's growing industries and much of the capital needed for industrialization. In only a generation, the country had experienced tremendous growth and the western railroad played a leading role in this drama.

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