

OAUSA Net
Railroads of the West
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I've been fortunate to travel with several people who were railroad history buffs and they always had great stories to tell about the railroads. All I could see in front of me was some old track beds and remains of some trestles, but their stories brought the history to life and painted a picture of the effort to settle the West.

As I was developing notes for the net, I could see that there were a lot of common elements between the railroad companies. It seemed as if every group of businessmen in the west were dead set on starting their own railroad and making money hand over fist. In fact, many did just that! Some of the big names in our country's history owned railroads. Some famous names I'm sure you'll recognize were railroad developers. John D. Spreckels and the San Diego and Arizona Railway Company, Leland Stanford and the Central Pacific Railroad, Cornelius Vanderbilt and several eastern rail networks, and on and on.

I've posted some maps on the Net Preview forum to help you follow along with tonight's topic.

The history of railroads in the U.S. was marked by extreme competition, cut-throat politics, and a patriotic believe that the nation's destiny was to stretch from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The first rail network to develop in the U.S. was the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in about 1830. From the famous B&O, hundreds of railroads developed and are too numerous to even list. Very quickly, railroad barons started consolidating small railroads into big railroads. In the process, some tracks were built up and some tracks were abandoned. We see the result of that consolidation today, and to trace the history of a particular railroad can be a challenge. I can't begin to discuss even a few of the big names in this net, but there are some basics milestones in railroad history that are of interest to those of us who go off-road and explore the desert.

In 1862, President Lincoln approved the Pacific Railway Act. The act authorized the federal government to financially back the construction of a transcontinental railroad. The dream of a transcontinental railroad was the cornerstone of a national policy called "Manifest Destiny", which is basically the belief that the United States should occupy all of North America. Due to the Civil War, construction was delayed but by 1866, the Central Pacific Railroad started laying track east from Sacramento and the Union Pacific Railroad started laying track west from Omaha, Nebraska. It was a race of sorts to see which railroad company could lay the most miles of track before they joined up. While it is fun to think of railroad barons cheering their teams on, it was actually a significant financial benefit to lay each mile of

track. The federal government paid the railroads \$16,000 for each mile of track plus giving them generous land grants along the track. By the time they joined up at Promontory Summit, Utah on May 10, 1869, the Central Pacific had laid 690 miles of track and the Union Pacific had laid 1,087 miles of track.

Eventually, three other transcontinental links were in place by 1883: The Northern Pacific Railroad stretched from Lake Superior to Portland, Oregon; the Santa Fe extended from Atchison, Kansas, to Los Angeles, and the Southern Pacific connected Los Angeles with New Orleans, Louisiana. A fifth line, the Great Northern, was completed in 1893. Each of these companies received extensive grants of land, although only the first received government loans.

In the four years following the joining of the first transcontinental rail line, the length of track in the U.S. doubled to over 70,000 miles. By the turn of the century, virtually the entire country was accessible by rail, making a national economy possible for the first time -- and profits were huge! While federal assistance with money and land was vital to the expansion, it amounted to only 8% of the total track laid with private investment responsible for the vast majority of railroad construction.

It was the land grants that eventually made the most money for the railroads and shaped the development of the western movement. At the same time that the federal government was giving away land to the homesteaders by means of the Homestead Act of 1862, the government was giving away huge sections of land to the railroad developers. The government's goal was to encourage the railroads to construct their tracks where few people lived in order to help settle the country. For example, approximately 16% of Nebraska's total land mass was given to various railroad companies, either by the federal government or the state!

Along the major rail lines, companies such as Union Pacific and the Burlington were given every other square mile of land (called a section). This checkerboard of land extended back twenty miles on both sides of the track. This means that the railroads owned a total of twenty sections of land for each mile of road constructed! I've posted some images on the forum to give you some idea of the scope of the land given outright to the railroads.

On top of the official federal land grants, states and towns would often give the railroads free land, buildings, or other concessions in order to lure the railroads to route tracks to their benefit. The politics of where the tracks were laid was intense and often violent. The proximity of the railroad was often the make or break element in a town's survival. Just like in the later years, the routing of a highway or freeway could make or break a city (remember Route 66 and Amboy?)

The ideal solution for a railroad was lay the track, get the land grants, get paid for cargo, promote development, and then sell the land. This proved very

profitable for the railroad companies and they heavily promoted land opportunities to farmers and ranchers. Flyers in the east promised the sun, moon, and stars to anyone who wanted to buy passage to the west. Economic fads such as 'dry land farming' lured people to the desert to try growing just about anything. In fact, dry farming techniques were tried in the Mojave Desert in the Landfair Valley. Despite abundant unscrupulous speculation, many fortunes were made and incredibly rapid growth of the west was made possible.

All in all, the government was well compensated for their investment of money and land. By opening up new markets for eastern goods, and connecting mineral and fertile farming land, it is estimated that by the end of World War II that rail companies returned over \$1 billion dollars, or over 8 times the value of the lands to the economy. In terms of the western expansion, the principal commodity transported across the rails to California and a passenger could go coast to coast in as little as six days! An important point often overlooked was that families could now accompany the workers with relative ease, forever changing the nature of the wild west.

Over time, the railroad barons and their railways grew by absorbing all the smaller railroads or by buying up their track and right-of-ways as they went broke.

Some of the more notable local railroads left remnants behind that we see in our explorations. While there are too many to name, I'll talk about about the Tonopah and Tidewater Railroad, one of my favorites and one many of you will recognize.

The Tonopah and Tidewater Railroad was started in 1905 and ran from the Santa Fe rails near Ludlow, CA north to Gold Center, NV near Tonopah. Side spurs ran to Beatty and Rhyolite in Nevada and spurs in Death Valley to the Lila C Mine. It was completed in 1907, merging with the Bullfrog Goldfield line and also the Las Vegas and Tonopah Railroad. It was originally intended to connect Las Vegas and Death Valley to Los Angeles but ran into competition problems with the Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad. I've heard stories that the name Tonopah and Tidewater gave the competition the idea that the T&T was meant to run all the way to the ocean and compete with the Los Angeles lines, who did everything possible to block their way. As there were no other 'tide waters' in the desert, it may very well be true. The T&T made money hauling minerals such as gold ore from Rhyolite, but primarily borax from the mines in Death Valley and Boron. The portion of track that runs through Broadwell Dry Lake, just north of Ludlow, CA was abandoned in 1933 after major flooding. At that point, operations for the T&T were run out of Crucero. The flood of 1938 inundated the entire southern Mojave area and basically ended future of the T&T. By 1940, the entire line was out of service, and in 1942 the rails and supporting hardware were scrapped over the period of a year to support the war effort during World War II.

If you've been to Afton Canyon near the western end of the Mojave Road, you've probably seen Crucero, one of the 'mystery' towns you often run into. By mystery town, I mean a town that shows street layouts on the maps, but there is nothing there to indicate it ever existed. I found out that towns like Crucero are marked on the maps based on plans that were filed at some point with the county and they persist today. You'll see them on your GPS and some map atlases but they never really existed. Of note, Crucero was the crossing place of the Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad, now the Union Pacific. Remnants of the bridge crossing can still be seen.

For railroad history buffs, or just curious explorers, it is interesting to follow the track beds starting in Ludlow and heading north on Broadwell Dry Lake. Starting at the Dairy Queen in Ludlow, you can follow the elevated track bed across the dry lake, through the hills and into Crucero at the southern edge of the Afton Canyon watershed. From there, you'll need to navigate west to find the nearest crossing for the UP tracks and work your way back to Crucero on the north side of the tracks. You can follow the track bed intermittently up to the eastern edge of Soda Lake and still see the elevated track bed in the sand dunes there. If you use a topo map, the track bed is still marked as it passes over the mountains heading toward Alamogosa Valley, and Death Valley and parts of it can be reached. I haven't followed the route beyond that point, but I have found parts of the track bed that still exist near Tonopah, NV. Little remains of the T&T's terminus in Gold Center, NV except the foundations of a stamp mill, and the remains of a cyanide plant (cyanide was used to leach gold from the ore). The area recently became home to Nevada's newest bordello called Bikini's Gentlemen's Club. If you remember anything about boom towns from the net on Ghost Towns of the Mojave, you know that means the area is on it's way up!

That is all I have for tonight's net. Jump in with comments or information about any other railroads you may have.