Introduction

In the 1890s, travel writers faced a daunting task: spectacular western sights often tempted them to write fanciful, exaggerated prose for the public. One writer, Stanley Wood, claimed that he had resisted that temptation when he wrote the popular book *Over the Range to the Golden Gate.* As Wood put it in his preface, “No attempt will be made at ‘fine writing’; every effort will be made to state just such facts as the traveler would like to know, and to state these facts in clear and explicit language.” Like Stanley Wood, I hope to share new facts about a portion of the same transcontinental railroad line that he traversed as he went “Over the Range,” which is to say, across the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific. However, unlike Wood, I shall dwell in considerable detail on just one portion of the first transcontinental railroad, the section over Promontory Summit. And unlike Wood, I must admit to having an emotional attachment to the area under discussion. The countryside in the vicinity of Promontory, with its abrupt mountains, dazzling salt flats, and sweeping vistas, is as enchanting as it is interesting. Hopefully, that admission will enable readers to understand why I will provide some personal aesthetic insights, as well as facts, about this part of the Great Basin.

In the process of traveling over the Promontory Range on his fact-finding mission, Stanley Wood made some insightful comments about the countryside travelers saw on the famed transcontinental railroad. As it turns out, Wood’s 1904 edition would be the last to make this claim as the mainline of the transcontinental railroad soon bypassed the site of Promontory Summit, where history was made as the rails were joined on May 10, 1869. Most people traveling through this area by rail after 1904 merely mentioned that Promontory Summit, lying north of the stretch of the railroad that ran directly across the Great Salt Lake, was now bypassed and forlorn. That desolation, however, should not deter
the serious historian, tourist, or naturalist. Truth is, the area around Promontory Summit is special in terms of both its natural and cultural history, and it is time to share that richness.

As Stanley Wood did, I make many remarks on the landscape along the route. I also share insights about what remains of the present ghost railroad line. My task, however, was a bit more difficult than Wood’s for several reasons. First, Wood had fewer sources to consult. He read and summarized some contemporary reports, then integrated them into a lively travelogue. Second, Wood wrote about the present: everything he needed was right in front of him as he traveled, whereas I had to dig for information about what happened in the past along the route over Promontory Summit. Third, because the railroad line over Promontory became part of the Southern Pacific, researchers face an additional burden: About a century ago, the great fire in San Francisco, which resulted from the April 1906 earthquake, destroyed almost all of the company’s records. Although that is a factor affecting all histories of the Southern Pacific’s railroad activities, on Promontory I faced yet another challenge: for several reasons, the line over Promontory Summit was among the least photographed of the Southern Pacific’s lines. Why? Although Promontory was on everyone’s lips in 1869, interest faded quickly as writers turned their pens, and photographers pointed their cameras, to other more interesting phenomena—for example, the spectacular snowsheds in the Sierra, or the part of the line through Weber Canyon.

To most people, Promontory was about as bleak a place as can be imagined. Naturally, there was little interest in it aside from what happened there on May 10, 1869. As many people pointed out, the entire railroad line ran through rather inhospitable country for dozens of miles on either side of Promontory Summit. There were few amenities, and only rudimentary services, along much of the line from Corinne, Utah, westward into Nevada. Lastly, with the opening of the Lucin Cutoff in 1904, the Promontory line and Promontory itself faded into obscurity until the mid-twentieth century witnessed the rise of interest in history. At that time, paved roads gave a new generation of Western history buffs and tourists easy access to Promontory and other sites associated with the Old West. For these and many other reasons, the story of the line over Promontory has been difficult to decipher.

There are, however, several bright spots for the researcher and reader. Due to that increasing interest in history, which gathered steam during the Great Depression and began to reach a fever pitch after World War II, the experience at Promontory is one of the most documented subjects in the American West. First, we have at our disposal nearly one hundred
books dealing with the building and completion of the transcontinental railroad. Some are better than others, but most highlight the importance of what happened here in 1869. Among the best of these is David Haward Bain’s *Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad.* The typical book about the transcontinental railroad emphasizes what occurred from Omaha to California, culminating with the driving of the Golden Spike at Promontory Summit in May 1869. The book you are about to read, however, focuses on the section of the transcontinental railroad in the vicinity of Promontory—specifically about fifty miles on either side of Promontory Summit—and it continues in time well after that memorable event in 1869.

Second, since the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which coincided with growing interest in commemorating the centennial of the driving of the golden spike, numerous government agencies have sponsored reports on the archaeological and historical resources around Promontory Summit. Among them is the United States Department of Interior, for the site itself became part of our national heritage to be protected and interpreted after the National Park Service acquired it. This book is different because it brings together two separate types of literature—popular history-based, and cultural resource-based. Moreover, it will bring two normally separate disciplines (history and geography) together as it places the line over Promontory Summit in the context of a broad period of history, ca. 1820 to the early twentieth century. Doing this requires using as many primary sources as possible. Add to this the wealth of information now on the Web sites of organizations like the Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History discussion group, and the Web sites of the National Park Service and the California State Railway Museum, and the resource picture brightens considerably.

Yet another bright spot is the availability of rich and varied collections of maps. Some, like David Rumsey’s collection, are online, while others must be visited. Many maps that are closely associated with the transcontinental railroad at Promontory have never been studied carefully. These maps reveal the development of Promontory Summit’s place in history. As historian Andrew M. Modelski noted, railroads and modern American mapping techniques were closely associated. The advent of the railroads stimulated mapmaking along many fronts. In the early nineteenth century, a number of promoters of water and rail transportation were, in fact, also surveyors and mapmakers. The close relationship between railroads and commercial cartography was evident by the 1870s, when publishers like Rand McNally & Co. rose to prominence as purveyors of railroad-related maps. Various levels of government
have also had a long relationship with railroad maps. Railroad routes often appear on county maps—as in the case of Box Elder County, Utah, through which the railroad line over Promontory Summit runs. Actually, federal maps showing projected travel routes often predated even the formation of counties, which began about 1850. By the early-to-mid 1850s, federal railroad surveys produced highly detailed maps of projected routes that were proposed for railroads in the western United States. The line over Promontory Summit was among these.

In addition to commercial and government maps, the railroads themselves prepared many maps; some were made to help the railroads claim the best routes, while others were of completed lines. The latter were created for purposes of operating and promoting the lines that the railroads had built. These maps, among others, will be employed to tell the story of this railroad. Of the many governmental maps, those by the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) from around 1916 contain a wealth of information about trackage, buildings, and other important features. All government railroad maps remind us that a close, and sometimes contentious, relationship has existed between public authorities and privately owned transportation companies that serve the public. All of these maps were once tools of a growing empire, but now are tools of the historian.

This book, then, tells Promontory’s story in historic and geographic context using words, photographs, and maps. It differs from other published works because it tells the story of Promontory for almost two centuries rather than one big day—May 10, 1869—in the life of the community. It therefore also tells the story about how the railroad affected the surrounding countryside, and how it operated over a long period—seventy-three years—from 1869 to 1942. Moreover, it also relates the activities at Promontory, and elsewhere, that led to the creation of the Golden Spike National Historic Site, one of the nation’s most important transportation-related properties, and a crown jewel of western American history.