Over the Range
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Chapter 7

A Regional Branchline
(1904–1942)

After the Lucin Cutoff diverted almost all of the railroad traffic away from the original line over the summit, telegrapher Earl Harmon recalled that, “There wasn’t much said about Promontory in them days.” This statement beautifully captures how Promontory declined in the early decades of the twentieth century. Born in 1901, Harmon witnessed the era when Promontory found itself off the mainline and became just another place on a branchline. The year 1904 was crucial for the line over Promontory Summit. In that year, the Southern Pacific formally opened its new, more direct line across a portion of the Great Salt Lake from Umbria to Ogden. Umbria was located just west of the small station stop called Lucin, which was soon called Lucin Junction after the SP mainline diverged here to run straight across the Great Salt Lake on a trestle. The railroad had planned this new routing for some time. In 1901, with traffic volumes increasing and Harriman in control, the line over Promontory Summit was slated to be superseded using the soundest of principles that any railroad engineer could appreciate: the best way for a railroad to run between two points is not only in a straight line, but over a line that is gradeless or essentially flat. Anyone looking at a map could see that the line over Promontory Summit—with its grades and curves—was less than ideal. It was, in effect, a place where traffic slowed as the railroad fought gravity and friction.

Of course, building a railroad line across the Great Salt Lake presented obstacles of its own as deep pilings were necessary. It is one thing to build a perfectly straight and level railroad on flat land, but quite
another to construct a veritable bridge or causeway for thirty miles. Although building a line across lake and salt flats would not be easy, that is exactly what the railroad did. One might ask, why replace an already existing line, regardless of how twisting or hilly, with a straight one at considerable cost? The answer was the connection of time to money. The new railroad cutoff would save hours between Lucin/Umbria Junction and Ogden—reducing the time from ten hours to about two. That was important because the Western Pacific’s proposed line across the Great Basin, conceived around 1900 and completed in 1909, would run in a fairly straight line along the southern edge of the Great Salt Lake west of Salt Lake City. The developing plans of that newcomer thus presented a clear challenge to Southern Pacific’s ability to move traffic competitively across the Great Basin to California. A straight and level line would also greatly reduce Southern Pacific’s long-term operating costs. In addition to paying less in wages due to the reduced time needed to haul passengers and freight via the original line, the railroad would spend far less on fuel. Then, too, the railroad would eliminate the need for helper engines and crews. In other words, the high cost of building the new cutoff would be amortized in a decade or two by reducing labor and equipment costs. What made the Lucin Cutoff irresistible, though, was the impact it would have on both the Southern Pacific and the Union Pacific. Harriman did not conceive the cutoff as a way of helping only Southern Pacific, but rather to ensure that his new, consolidated (Union) Pacific system would be without peer in moving traffic to the Pacific Coast from the Middle West.

A booklet titled *Going to Sea by Rail—Great Salt Lake Cut-off Primer* was part of the “Union Pacific-Southern Pacific Series” that helped clarify Harriman’s goals. In answering, “Why was the Great Salt Lake Cut-off built?” the booklet stated, succinctly: “To save the greater grades and curves and distance of the old line.” The booklet reminded readers that “the old line runs around the north end of Great Salt Lake over Promontory mountain” and then added some striking statistics. It noted that the curves on the old line “would turn a train around eleven times” and that the grades required enough power to “lift an average man eight thousand, five hundred miles.” As if this were not astronomical or mind boggling enough, the booklet stated that the power (that is, energy) saved by the new line could “carry a man four hundred times between New York and San Francisco.” A map on the booklet’s back cover substantiated the claim made earlier that, “The Cut-Off is as straight as the crow flies.” This map was reproduced in several versions of the booklet, including the updated *Great Salt Lake Cut-off 30 Miles from Shore to Shore* (fig. 7–1). All versions achieved the same
purpose. By showing the contorted route of the original line, the map confirmed Harriman’s assessment. Tellingly, the route over Promontory Summit was now shown as a thin line while the Lucin Cut-Off appears in the bold, thick style reserved for mainlines. Even though it signals the decline of the line over Promontory Summit, that map is valuable for the historian: In its effort to make the old line seem congested and complicated, it shows the major stations and even depicts some of the streams along the old route over Promontory.

Southern Pacific made frequent use of a comparative profile diagram (fig. 7–2) that showed just how much troublesome topography the Lucin Cutoff had eliminated. For our purposes, though, the diagram reveals the hilly/mountainous nature of the Promontory Summit line, where the tracks essentially ran across the grain of a portion of the mountainous basin and range province. Note that the run from Kelton to Ombey was the counterpart to the steep section from Blue Creek to Promontory. Those were the highest portions of the line—the two lowest portions being the areas around Corinne and Monument/Kelton.

After the completion of the Lucin Cutoff on November 26, 1903, some traffic was diverted off the Promontory line. On December 4, 1903, the Ogden newspapers reported that “the S.P. Pay car will reach Ogden for the first time over the Cutoff, this evening.” By early 1904, the townsfolk in Terrace no doubt realized their community’s heyday was nearing an end. Nevertheless, the old line could serve in the event
of problems on the new line. As if to remind everyone involved that railroading is hazardous business and that two options are better than one, a massive explosion shook Terrace with earthquake-like force on February 14, 1904. The source of that blast was a head-on train wreck on the recently completed Lucin Cutoff at Jackson, thirteen miles south-east of Terrace, but it seemed much closer. The wreck and subsequent explosion killed twenty-nine railroad laborers, who were living in outfit cars parked on a siding nearby. At times like this, when man-made or natural catastrophe strikes the mainline, a railroad seeks a temporary alternate route. Still intact and serviceable, the line over Promontory Summit would serve as a bypass from time to time. Doris Larsen recalled that sometimes the Lucin line (i.e., Lucin Cutoff) “sank” and required repair. “That is when the line over Promontory again experienced ‘long trains’ that were quite a thing to see.” Nevertheless, by the fall of 1904, the cutoff was handling virtually all of the mainline traffic that had run through Promontory. This change occurred in two increments. After the cutoff’s completion in late 1903, several months passed before regularly scheduled trains started using it in the spring of 1904. According to railroad historian David Myrick, “freight trains began crossing the lake on March 8th, while passenger trains took the old route via Promontory and Kelton (forty-three miles longer) until September eighteenth of that year.”

One of the truly stunning maps showing the line over Promontory Summit was actually prepared to show the Lucin Cutoff. Called Line Across Great Salt Lake—Lucin to Ogden, (fig. 7–3) the map was traced in
July of 1913 from blueprints. Using a combination of techniques that suggest both hachuring and contours, it shows both the Promontory Mountains and Hogup Mountains as obstacles around which the railroad weaves. It also shows the marshy areas adjacent to Great Salt Lake. Interestingly, this map, which was prepared ten years after the construction of the Lucin Cutoff, only shows the railroad crossing the lake as a thin black line, while all other railroads, including the line over Promontory [Summit], are shown using the bold line with crosstie pattern that was now a standard symbol for a railroad.⁶

A map featured in lantern-slide presentations in the period 1910–1920 shows the Promontory Summit branch of the Southern Pacific running
around the north end of the Great Salt Lake, while the Lucin Cutoff stands out as an arrow-straight line across the lake. Interestingly, slides showing the stages of construction of the Lucin Cutoff drew considerable attention. The feat was, after all, Herculean. The sight of the trestle taking shape as steamboats and pile drivers laid trails of smoke across the lake awed audiences. Ironically, one of the vessels involved in putting nails in the Promontory Summit line’s coffin here was called *Promontory*!7
Without doubt, the building of the Lucin Cutoff was one of the most publicized events in railroad construction history. A stunning series of photographs in the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento documents the construction, as does David Peterson’s book *Tale of the Lucin: A Boat, A Railroad and the Great Salt Lake* (2001). After its completion, too, the Lucin Cutoff was undoubtedly the most photographed portion of any railroad in the entire Intermountain West. Portraits of trains running over the cutoff (fig. 7–4) made great railroad publicity. The completion of the cutoff also coincided with the rise of picture postcards in about 1904. Tellingly, while no postcards of trains running over Promontory Summit during its glory days (ca. 1900) have been located, postcards of trains on the cutoff became common after about 1908. Simply put, the cutoff now served the American technological imagination in ways that the construction of the line over Promontory Summit had two generations earlier.

The route change left Promontory off the mainline, but local traffic still required telegraphers like Earl Harmon. Interestingly, Harmon came from a long line of railroad telegraphers. In fact, he remembered that his uncle Frank Davis was “one of the old-time telegraphers, and he was the first telegrapher they used out here at Promontory.” Harmon believed that his uncle “. . . was the man that sent the message that it was finished” in 1869. That claim, if true, would mean that Frank Davis sent that message telegraphed around the world on May 10, 1869. However,
most sources, including David Bain, claim that Central Pacific’s Louis Jacobs and Union Pacific’s Watson N. Shilling were the operators, with the latter credited with signaling, “done.” Despite Harmon’s memories, Promontory declined during Harmon’s lifetime: Of course, 1869 would be a difficult act to follow, though the railroad continued its operations there first as the mainline (1869–1904) and thereafter as a branchline. Harmon recalled, on his first visit there that “. . . it was just sagebrush. There was nothing there.”

Promontory Summit’s fall from glory occurred quickly as the original railroad line was replaced by the Lucin Cutoff. Comparing activity at Promontory in the 1910s with that of, say 1875, reveals a story as different as night and day. That is because Promontory was now no longer where the urgent express trains roared through along the Overland Route from distant city to distant city, their smoke clearing long enough for another plume to appear on the horizon and the telegraph key in the depot rarely silent. But after 1904, Promontory found itself relegated to a secondary line much like a branch line. In fact, it began to be called the Promontory Branch at about this time. Now the rails might bask in the sun for many hours, even a full day, before the next train appeared. The telegraph key remained mostly silent except for a crescendo of activity close to train time. It was precisely during this period that Promontory began to fall off the map. Its major claim to fame was an event in 1869 that, however momentous at the time, now became an increasingly distant memory.

Even though Promontory was no longer on the mainline, excitement could and did occur from time to time. Promontory’s folklore includes reference to a train robbery that is said to have occurred in the early twentieth century, probably 1908. According to one source, it supposedly took place when a local passenger train, evidently eastbound, was waylaid “over on the hill coming up where it is the steepest place” and the train was easiest to stop due to its slow speed. The robbers were apprehended “over at Monument, and they didn’t have the money with them.” They had hidden it “somewhere between there and over, well maybe it’s Kelton, somewhere over on the other side of . . . [the west side of the Promontory Mountains].” Many locals, including Merlin Larsen’s father, looked for the lost treasure. This story is more-or-less confirmed by Isaac W. Finn, who related a variation of it. Finn was present when, after a passenger train finished taking on water at the Rozel water tank, “somebody started yelling ‘Holdup!’” Finn wondered what was happening but quickly realized that the person meant train robbery. While the train was stopped, three robbers evidently held up the express car. This was apparently not a wise idea.
As a sheriff was also present in Rozel to supervise the loading of cattle into stockcars nearby to “see that there was no strays amongst ‘em.” Upon hearing that cry about the “holdup,” the sheriff quickly yelled, “[C]ome on boys” and an informal posse set out on the trail of the train robbers. After some careful tracking, the posse neared the train robbers, who started firing at their pursuers. All three robbers were reportedly killed in the resulting shootout near Monument, but the money was nowhere to be found. As one might imagine, this piqued local curiosity and interest. Looking for the booty became a “weekend vacation for people,” as Mr. Finn recalled, “I don’t know how long people would go out there. Some of them would go out there and stay overnight.” Although searching for that treasure became a major pastime, participants only got exercise and fresh air. Finn concluded: “. . . to this day, nobody’s found that money.”

After the driving of the golden spike in 1869, the countryside near the railroad began to change. In the Promontory area, for example, ranching soon became an important activity. Local historian Bernice Anderson noted that the country “was covered with bunch grass” and considered fair enough grazing lands to encourage the creation of the Golden Spike Land and Cattle Company, which brought in about 75,000 head of cattle in the 1880s. The Crocker family owned the ranch, but Captain Bufford ran it. Most of the grazing lands were to the north of Promontory, and on this sprawling spread there once stood a large ranch house. Called the “Big House,” it stood about 1½ miles north and a bit west of Promontory Summit. That huge house, standing in a treeless, grass- and sagebrush-covered landscape, symbolized the concentration of wealth, but confirmed how broadly scattered the resources were that would require others to make a living here.

In some ways, dependence on ranching was also a factor in the area’s declining health. Although much of the area looked unpromising, it was in fact rangeland. Those grasses in the area, especially in the middle elevations away from the lake, were the basis of the ranching economy. An old-timer named Pappy Clay, who called himself the “Sage of the Sagebrush,” confirms that Promontory became a ranching area by the 1880s. Wild mustangs ranged here, but ranching changed the area’s ecology. The house that Crocker built became the center of ranching operations. Called the “Big Money House” by locals, presumably after the Big Money Springs where the house was located, it became the headquarters of the Promontory Land and Livestock Company’s ranching operations in the area. Given the “invigorating desert mountain air” of its setting, it served the “Pacific Coast elite” around 1895. The hard winters of 1888 and 1889, however, decimated the “thousands of
Hereford cattle” that the Promontory Land and Livestock Company had brought here. Such large numbers of livestock effectively overgrazed the vegetation.14

The area was also home to many smaller ranching enterprises, and the construction of the Lucin Cutoff benefited them in an odd way. As John Whitaker (born 1911) recalled, he and his father had used a lot of old timber for construction. Its source? “Dad and I went down on the lakeshore and picked up [old lumber] which had drifted off from the cutoff, you know, planks and poles, and we’d haul them up with horses.” This lumber was used for buildings in the area, including a barn.15 Those buildings represented the livelihood of people attempting to make a living off the land. Among these were dozens of ranch families raising stock, who were naturally dependent on the railroad for transportation.

By the early twentieth century, ranchers and farmers in the Promontory area noted an increase in the rabbit population—perhaps in part because gardens were becoming more common. Rabbit Drives were conducted to rid the area of these pests. These, Lorna Larsen Phillips recalled, involved men, boys, and some girls, who would gather where rabbits were numerous, usually “where there was a large cover of sage brush, or rabbit brush, which was different from sage brush; and they’d surround a large area and drive the rabbits, making noise and yelling and hollering, and into a corral that had wings . . . so that the rabbits would be gathered into the corral . . . .” Mrs. Phillips remembered hating the sound of the rabbits being clubbed to death, but these drives resulted in “rabbit meat [that] was used for food.”16 In this endeavor, the new settlers may have been re-enacting a much older Native American ritual: With the possible exception of the materials that the “corral” wings were constructed of, this is a close continuation of the rabbit drives Shoshones had held in this region. John Bidwell noted seeing the wings of such a Shoshone rabbit-drive corral in 1841 north of the Great Salt Lake. Now, however, the goal was eradication of the rabbits as pests that compromised agriculture. To meet hunters’ demands and perhaps further encourage agricultural prospects here, the Southern Pacific at times ran a local train for the convenience of hunters in pursuit of wild fowl. The special train would stop at promising locations, drop off groups of the hunters, and then return later at an agreed-upon time. The railroad’s operations also dovetailed with the seasonal demands of local enterprises. The line over Promontory Summit featured a number of stock pens where animals were placed aboard stock cars. Cattle were loaded at Kelton and a number of other stations adjacent to the ranches.
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Normally, railroad historians rely in part on photographs to help decipher the story. However, railroad operations over the Promontory line in the period 1880–1942 were not well documented, especially during the early twentieth century. One wonders why railroad-oriented photographers avoided the Promontory line at this time, especially since a stone monument, reportedly erected here in 1916 by Wilson Wright of the Southern Pacific Company, became a landmark to travelers and those exploring the backcountry (fig. 7–5). That obelisk-shaped monument contained a rectangular metal plate commemorating the driving of the last spike. The selection of an obelisk shape for the marker built on the century-old American tendency to copy objects from ancient history, in this case the venerable Egyptians. As early as the War of 1812, Americans searching for the best design to commemorate events debated which design would best serve that purpose. A statue of an individual might work, but that personalizes the event rather than making it represent a broader, national effort. As the ancient Egyptians discovered several thousand years earlier, the obelisk was both ethereal and simple. To the Americans, the obelisk’s abstract quality made it perfect for commemorating anything of importance. As cultural historian Neil Harris observed, this stunning simplicity of the obelisk, coupled with its association with permanence, made obelisks the logical choice for monuments nationwide.17

Up until this time, a simple wooden sign had marked the location where the rails had been joined. That sign (fig. 7–6) served well enough
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for decades, but it had a flimsy, temporary quality that seemed inappropriate for permanent commemoration. And yet, because the sign was easier to read and something was also needed on the other side of the track to inform passengers seated on the side opposite the obelisk, this wooden sign persisted into the 1930s. Interestingly, the concrete marker was erected at just the time that the automobile was revolutionizing transportation. That concrete pyramid, then, symbolizes the railroad—at least in American terms—as an ancient work worthy of permanent recognition.

Many people assumed that the line over Promontory Summit was abandoned immediately after the Lucin Cutoff was built, or that trains stopped running long before the rails were taken up in 1942. Even today, many old-timers believe(d) that trains only ran as far west as Promontory, the remainder of the line to Lucin being torn up at an early date. These impressions, though not correct, likely began or persisted because the line was now so marginal that relatively few people visited, much less used it. One might assume that Southern Pacific would simply abandon the line, but as we will see, its potential as a dry farming wheat bonanza line kept that from happening. Although the main line now bypassed the area around Promontory, it continued to witness considerable investment and interest by developers. And by keeping the line intact, Southern Pacific had an ace in the hole, so to speak. This old line could be—and was—used on occasion when the new cutoff needed extensive repairs. Every so often, when a wreck or maintenance on the new line dictated, Southern Pacific ran its mainline trains over the summit. The railroad ultimately learned, at great expense, that lake levels

Fig. 7–6
The sign commemorating the driving of the last spike at Promontory in a scene dating from about 1930.
could rise in wet periods, necessitating new construction that, in effect, raised the level of trestles and causeways across the lake.

The Lucin Cutoff not only affected traffic volume over Promontory Summit, but also resulted in operating changes at the east end of the line. After the cutoff was completed, travelers found themselves taking a new route that paralleled the old line from Corinne to Ogden. Had they looked carefully at the old trackage, they would have noticed it deteriorating in the period from 1904 to World War I. By January 12, 1918, a portion of the original line at Corinne had fallen into such disrepair that, as an Interstate Commerce Commission evaluation report put it, “from MP 803.23 to the end of the valuation section . . . . This line is not in use; [and] a number of the bridges are burned or washed out.” This deterioration had actually begun more than a decade earlier. When the Lucin Cutoff rerouted traffic in 1904, Southern Pacific essentially abandoned that portion of its line from Corinne Junction to Cecil Junction, near Ogden. Since 1904, then, the Southern Pacific had shared trackage rights with the Oregon Short Line (Union Pacific) between these two communities. There is a note of irony here as that portion of the line that the Central Pacific had fought so hard to claim in 1869—namely, the trackage in the rich Utah farmlands along the Wasatch Front—was now in the hands of a former competitor that had become a partner under the Union Pacific shield. That, of course, would change on December 2, 1912, when a “momentous decision” by the United States Supreme Court declared the Harriman scheme monopolistic.

That decision traumatized both railroads, but they still inherited many cost savings from the Harriman era and its standardization. This indirectly affected the line over Promontory Summit in several ways and was timed perfectly. The development of dry farmed wheat lands in the area adjacent to Promontory coincided with the standardization and modernization of boxcars perfectly suited to grain traffic. These boxcars were hallmarks of the Harriman period. First ordered in 1902, there were soon two thousand of them in operation on the Southern Pacific and Union Pacific lines by the fall of 1904. Southern Pacific received about 700 cars and Union Pacific about 1,300 cars. These cars had pressed steel underframes, and thus no longer used the truss rod system. They were 40 feet long, 50-ton capacity cars with 2,730 cubic feet of interior space. They appear in photographs of the Promontory line during the period when wheat was loaded into boxcars at numerous stations, including Promontory, Lampo and Rozel. A photo of one being loaded from a wagon, ca. 1920, captures a typical vignette along the Promontory line (fig. 7–7). Through the teens and twenties, these cars were joined by post-Harriman cars of various types.
In a sense, the line over Promontory Summit became a technological relic in the twentieth century. With a new line now bypassing the original, Southern Pacific elected to hold off making improvements that would have been required on a mainline. In addition to resulting in lower speed limits and shorter trains over Promontory than those now rushing across the Lucin Cutoff, this had the effect of limiting the kind of equipment that could operate over the old line. This became apparent as Southern Pacific purchased or built new locomotives such as 4–8–2s, 2–10–2s and articulated engines like the huge 2–8–8–2s and 4–8–8–2s. As locomotives and railroad cars became longer and larger, the curves and grades on the line over Promontory Summit became increasingly problematical. The branch was limited to the smaller locomotives such as 4–6–0s and 2–8–0s. The fact that locomotives with no trailing trucks tended to derail when running backward at brisk speeds, especially on curving trackage, may help explain the persistence of turntables at certain locations on the Promontory line. The premise here is that it is easier to turn a locomotive around using a turntable than pull one out of a ditch using a wrecking crane. At any rate, the use of smaller locomotives on the Promontory Branch certainly helped this line retain a 1900–era quality for decades into the twentieth century. Similarly, newer passenger cars of steel construction, which became common after 1910, apparently never ran over Promontory with any frequency. For the remainder of its life, the branch over Promontory Summit witnessed traditional steam-powered short trains. The few available photos reveal that mixed trains with wooden passenger cars were common up until the end of service.

Passenger service on the Promontory Branch appears to have relied on the Common Standard wood sixty-foot coaches and chair cars. These
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dated from May 1905, which almost perfectly coincided with the beginning of the line’s branchline status. These cars featured wood truss weight-bearing construction on their sides with metal truss rods. Four-wheel trucks were common, and the cars had closed vestibules. Each car had a toilet at opposite ends of the car—one for men and one for women. Clerestory roofs and side windows with transoms above them were a standard feature. Chair cars usually sat fifty-eight passengers and coaches seventy passengers. Day coaches had more seats and less legroom but were otherwise very similar in appearance to chair cars. The common paint scheme at this time was dark green with gold lettering, which was much more somber than the brightly colored (often yellow) and elaborately lettered cars of the period 1870–1885 (fig. 7–8).

In addition to these wooden, early twentieth-century cars, it is possible that steel, arched roof coaches of the Harriman lines traversed the Promontory Branch on mixed trains from time to time, but no photographs confirming this have so far been located.

The Promontory line became something of a museum, where small, turn-of-the-century-type locomotives hauled their consists over an increasingly archaic—but still operating—physical plant. There was simply no place for modern steam power here. This, coupled with the relatively light population density and marginal economic activity, ensured a slower pace of railroad operations. There is considerable debate about how often trains ran over the Promontory line on a regular basis after 1904. One resident of the area, Mayme Wells Lower, had good reason to remember the train schedule to and from Promontory: She worked for the U.S. Post Office (Postal Service) and delivered the mail three times a week for “a little over thirty years.” She delivered mail to the Promontory Station “before they took the rails out . . . .”

Fig. 7–8
Built in 1906, this Southern Pacific wooden chair car No. 1762 is typical of the “coaches” that carried passengers on the Promontory line during its declining years.
Lower recalled that the train “... would go from Ogden out to Lucin and back” on a regular schedule “[t]hree times a week. The same as the mail goes.”

Lower’s statement reveals that the railroad still had a contract to deliver mail to this remote area. That contract, and the arrival of prospective wheat farmers, gave the railroad some cause for guarded optimism. Certainly, passenger traffic was light enough to justify downgrading service. Operations on the Promontory line now consisted of mixed trains carrying both passengers and freight cars in the same consist. Lower recalled that the mixed train hauled “[m]ail and some freight, but it would haul the grain when they’d start harvesting up top”—that is, on the broad slopes at the base of the Promontory Mountains where wheat farming was developing. Lower did not recall any storage bins for the grain at Promontory, adding that “[i]t just came straight down from the harvest to the train” where “they’d shovel it off into the car[s], [which were] grain cars, and they had what you’d call grain doors.” Lower was referring to the openings on the sides of boxcars, through which grain was loaded as the larger doors were kept shut and sealed so the grain would not spill out. She also recalled the cattle corrals at Promontory, which were located “behind the house, behind the store,” on the east side of the railroad tracks. Those helped the railroad generate additional traffic as ranchers brought cattle for shipment to market.

An interview conducted in 1974 with Taro Yagi confirmed that the westbound train ran across Promontory Summit three times a week. Most of the grain was loaded at Blue Creek and Lampo. When the mixed train running west had a heavy load of eight or ten cars, those freight cars would be spotted (temporarily left) at Kelton. Yagi then described how the crews battled to move heavy traffic westward from Kelton. As many as three extra locomotives were required to pull the wheat trains “over what we’d call Red Dome hill” which, Yagi speculated, “must be the steepest, the highest in [the] route going to Lucin . . . .” To move this westbound traffic, Yari noted:

they’d have these extra engines and they’d load up all these cars, I mean put on all these cars at Kelton and go on out and each engine pulling those hills would have probably maximum power with maybe eight or ten cars so they would double up and then there’s a number of times when they would take these cars and leave them at the bottom of this hill before they got to Watercress and they’d leave it there and they’d pull what they could and then the three engines or the three extra engines would come back and pull the rest of them up and over.
Taro Yagi’s almost breathless run-on sentence reveals how much effort and skill it took to move traffic over this line and how exciting this process was to those witnessing it. Of course, at this time, the line over Promontory Summit was only a secondary branch line, but Yagi’s statement also reveals why this line was such a bottleneck to Southern Pacific’s transcontinental traffic until it was bypassed in 1904.

Leona Yates Anderson recalled riding on the passenger cars to Promontory. As she put it, “they had lovely passenger cars all plush, red plush.” By this, she meant the double seats in the passenger cars were red—“[s]ort of a wine-velvet effect.” When asked if the interior was really plush, Anderson replied, “Oh, yes. It was plush. It was sort of dirty.” She also recalled the car’s interior lighting, and the “stove in it with a fire and windows that slid up and down.” From this description, Anderson appears to be describing the older wooden coaches or chair cars so common on branch lines during the 1910s and 1920s. She did, however, “remember when the main line train went through and they had sleepers and everything,” adding “[w]hen I was a kid, we went down there and rode on them and yes, they had sleepers.”25

Mayme Wells Lower recalled riding the train from Corinne to Promontory on a number of occasions in about 1918 or 1919 when she was a child of about five or six. The trip took about three or four hours and “would get there about 12 o’clock [noon].” Although she did not ride the train after that time, she recalled seeing it operate. When asked by the interviewers if the train needed a helper engine to get up the hill, she replied: “Sometimes, up over this side, for grasshoppers, I understand.” This likely refers to the possibility that large numbers of grasshoppers or locusts could cause the locomotive to lose traction as it crushed the insects beneath the wheels, slickening the rails. She also noted that “if you had an outfit, uh, a train that was bringing some cars in for wheat, why, they’d have to have a helper [engine].”26 Taro Yagi recalled that the trains he rode from Brigham City to Kelton via Promontory Summit had a helper engine “[a] number of times” from Blue Creek westbound when “[t]hey’d pick up a tremendous amount of wheat, more sox [sacks?] than anything, wheat and cattle.”27 Yagi added, “Most of the wheat went west” to California via Montello, Nevada.

According to Lower, the mixed train did not have a passenger car, though she did recall seeing some: “Oh, maybe once in a while they might have one of these cars on, but very seldom.” However, Yagi, who rode the train on occasion using a pass provided by the railroad to his section foreman father, recalled that the train “had a passenger car and some freight cars.”28 Lower distinctly recalled that passengers rode in the caboose. As she put it, “[u]sually about all they had was a baggage
car and a caboose.” By baggage car, she might have meant a “combine,” that is, a passenger car that only had a section devoted to passengers, with the rest of the car partitioned off into a closed baggage section. She recalled that the train carried a wide range of goods, including milk, and that many items—stoves, ironing boards, anything that was in the catalog—were shipped by mail. This was called “lcl” (less-than-car-load) service, wherein smaller items or quantities that did not require a full car, were shipped as separate items.

It is likely that cabooses were used at times because many other old-timers also recall riding in them. As Evan Murray (born 1901) remembered catching the train in the morning: “The train, of course, was just a freight train with just a caboose attached to it.” There was, as he put it, “[n]o passenger train there that late,” so “[w]e got on the train and rode the caboose.” Murray recalled the caboose being pretty comfortable, as it had “wooden benches,” and “[t]here were other riders . . . four or five” on the train that day. All of them, like Murray, were teachers bound for a meeting. It is possible that Murray and his colleagues took a scheduled freight run that happened to have a caboose that could accommodate the passengers. Incidentally, Murray remembers that “at Promontory, you’d make a stop of some little time.” Promontory made an impression on him. As he put it: “I still remember getting off the train at Promontory, walking back a few yards, going in the store, and buying some candy.” He had the time because, as he recalled, “[w]ell, the train did whatever bit it had to do there, see that was a shipping point there, too.” While walking around Promontory, Murray noted the water tower, warehouse, loading dock[s], tie section houses, the obelisk or pyramid-shaped monument, and the wye which “they used to use [to turn] a helper engine that went up there.”

Many old-timers rode the mixed train in the 1910s and 1920s, but they became more and more dependent on automobiles as time progressed. Mayme Wells Lower’s last time riding the train, 1919, coincided with the family’s purchase of an automobile—a Baby Overland—which she remembered as being “a pretty good little car.” That Overland, an automobile that ironically bore the name of the famed overland pioneer wagon route that was replaced by the Southern Pacific’s Overland Route line, now helped reduce the Southern Pacific’s passenger revenues as more and more people traveled by automobile instead of trains. The automobile cut into mainline traffic but was especially hard on branch lines, where populations were smaller and more scattered. Rural folk always depended on mobility to get their goods to market, and the area served by the Promontory line was rural indeed. Located at the edge of two distinctively different types of environments—the well-watered
irrigated oasis of Mormon farms and towns along the Wasatch Front near Brigham City and the sparsely populated ranching and dry farming area to the west that is typical of the Great Basin Desert—Promontory occupied a pivotal place in the West. As Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg observed in their classic book *Central Pacific*, “West from Promontory, Everything is Nevada.”\(^{31}\) Like Nevada, the area experienced a minor boom as would-be wheat farmers plowed under sagebrush.

Some of these dry land wheat farmers came from Europe and Russia. A few sources state that Russian farmers settled west of Kelton. This is an interesting issue, as one of the placenames in this area—Russia Hill—may commemorate their presence here. Russians had evidently settled Russian Knoll, as old-timers called it, around 1915, but they were not successful. Evan Murray claimed it was because they were “down in the farthest side of the valley trying to dry farm, down on Duck Creek.” This area at the lower reaches of the Curlew Valley is extremely dry. As Murray put it, “no water comes down there.” Moreover, “the rainfall there is much more limited than in this area.” As he concluded, “[y]ou don’t get a lot of snow, a lot of wind, but not very much snow.” Murray recalled hearing that there was a Russian cemetery, but little else, remaining in this forlorn area.\(^{32}\) Although farmers did arrive to dry farm wheat here, there was no way of denying that much of the Promontory line ran through remote country indeed. Consider the life of a railroad family in this area such as the one Taro Yagi was born into. Yagi’s father came from Japan in 1906 to work for the Southern Pacific as a section hand in Nevada. In about 1916, he began working in Utah, first as a section foreman at the west end of Great Salt Lake at Lakeside. Then, in late 1918, just five months after Taro was born, the family moved to Kelton. According to Taro, his father “...loved the hunting and fishing and wild game at that time [which] was in abundance out there.” The fishing at Locomotive Springs, nine miles southeast of Kelton, “was real good. It was paradise as far as we were concerned because it was nothing for Dad to catch an eight or nin[e] pound trout.” However, “[m]osquitoes would be so bad during the summer months at Locomotive [Springs] so we’d go up to cooler area[s]”—namely “those creeks up in Park Valley and Yost area . . . .”\(^{33}\)

Yagi recalled that transportation at that time “was nil on most of the roads,” which were especially muddy in the spring season and rutted throughout the year. In the winter, the roads were impassable by car because they were not plowed; therefore, sled transportation was the rule. Yagi recalled that people from the area would “come in after mail” by sled during the winter months. “The railroad was the only thing they had excepting sleighs [which] would go to points of Park Valley.”\(^{34}\) Yagi
recalled riding the train from Kelton through the Promontory area and on to Brigham City on many occasions because “the railroad furnished a pass so it was free” for the Yagi family. At Promontory, Yagi remembered, Bernice Houghton would “always meet the train to bring the mail and we really got to know her when we were little[e] kids.” Yagi was referring to the fact that certain railroad employees could ride free of charge using a pass that was about the size of a business card, and signed by a railroad official authorizing its use. He noted that Houghton was always there to meet the train, and probably “[n]ever had a sick day in her life because no matter when we’d come through I’d always see her.” The Houghton store was seemingly stocked with many items and also served as a post office where mail would be put in individual boxes and sack(ed) mail would be provided to carriers servicing the rural routes. Like many others who grew up during this time, Taro Yagi recalled the Model A Fords that transformed the area by the late 1920s.

Promontory in the 1920s was a bleak locale, and trees were rare. Those few trees that did grow here were artificially cultivated, for water had to be brought to the site. It is likely that trees were accidentally introduced here. Water was stored in cisterns and trees sprouted where water overflowed near the water trough. Old-timers recall a box elder tree at this location east of the depot. A large, old tree seen in the 1920s evidently began growing shortly after the town was founded and had died before 1928 or 1929. Taro Yagi remembered a younger but robust box elder tree near the cistern and water trough. It is unknown when Promontory’s old wood-sided water tank house was removed. Yagi did not recall Promontory having an actual water tank, but some people claimed that it had a cylindrical wooden water tank mounted on a stilt-like support framework. A photograph reportedly taken at Promontory in 1942 shows one (fig. 7–9). It may have been the same water tank mentioned in the earlier ICC valuation reports, but no evidence has been found to confirm this. Most of the buildings in town related to the railroad. The buildings included an engine house, station-hotel, pump house, and several section houses where section hands lived. These workers were called “gandydancers,” and they helped maintain the track. The term gandydancer is of unknown origin. Some claimed it was from the Gandy Manufacturing Company of Chicago, but the trouble with this explanation is that there was no such company. The use of the term gandydancer was first recorded in 1918, though it may date from before then. Some say a gandy is a petty crook, or tramp, while it has also been used to define Italians, active socialites, and even womanizers.

The term section hand was common at this time. As part of the Salt Lake Division, the line over Promontory Summit consisted of several
“sections,” that is, portions of the line under the supervision of a section foreman who supervised a crew of perhaps a dozen section hands. These sections were usually about ten or twelve miles long. The main job of the section crew was to keep the track inspected and in good shape. When bridges needed work, B&B—short for bridges and buildings—workers were sent out from Ogden. Typically, each section was headquartered about midway on the section where both the homes of section foreman and the section hands were located. In recalling her husband’s job as a section worker who worked out of Kelton for twelve years in the 1920s and early 1930s, Anderson recalled that the crew worked in both directions out of Kelton: “They had their little sections up to Ombey or Peplin or one of those little towns . . . .” In addition to section houses, one could usually find a hand-car shed and other buildings.
housing supplies at these section points. Over the years, Lucin, Bovine, Watercress, Terrace, Kelton, Promontory, and Blue Creek (among others) served in such roles. As the son of a section foreman based out of Kelton, Taro Yagi was able to describe the section houses at Promontory in considerable detail. He remembered that there were five section houses, and that “the biggest share of them were tie houses with dirt roofs.” When asked to elaborate, he added they were “clay roofed or dirt roofed.” Some of the section houses had dirt floors, and “[s]ome of them had cruded [sic] plank[s] in there to keep the moisture away . . . .” Yagi noted that rooms were often small, about seven-by-seven feet, and had low ceilings “about six feet high.” The section houses were very Spartan. According to Yagi, “those tie houses had no special designs” and were “simply made.” Most of the houses had one large room where the occupants did “their cooking, and their eating.” When needed, additional rooms could be added onto the houses using more railroad ties. As Yagi recalled, “[S]ome of these [tie houses] had small additions where their children had grown up[,] I guess to segregate the family, girls from the boys, I guess you’d say it that way.” Like the earlier tents at Promontory, all of the section houses faced the railroad line; the majority of Promontory’s section houses were located on the north side of the tracks, facing south. None of the section houses had electricity; illumination was provided by kerosene lamps. None of the houses had toilets; all used outhouses located “towards the back.”

In a 1974 interview, Bernice Anderson remembered the last remaining railroad section house in some detail. She recalled that it was painted “what you’d call a Southern Pacific yellow,” adding that “[t]hey painted all their buildings that [color].” By this, she meant the characteristic creamy yellow color (with a light brown trim color resembling milk chocolate) that Southern Pacific used from about 1900 until the railroad merged with the Union Pacific in the 1990s. Anderson mentioned that she “scraped the yellow paint” off and found that this building had been painted a dull red underneath”—very likely its original color during Central Pacific days. In describing the fate of this building, which was in good condition when she first saw it, Anderson mentioned that it had burned down, probably as a result of lightning. This, she recalled, had happened “not too long ago,” presumably in the 1950s or early 1960s.

Mayme Wells Lower also remembered the section houses at Promontory, which “were made out of [railroad] ties . . . .” The outside of these section hand houses “was ties and chucked [chinked] and they were lined with floor boards as we call it . . . . Just like what they used to put the floor in the houses, you know.” She recalled that these buildings
had “dirt roofs,” that gently sloped both ways. She had been in such houses many times, noting that “[i]t’d be just like walking into a little low house” with ceilings close enough to touch. Each of these buildings was heated by either a coal stove or a cook stove. Depending on the number of men who worked on a section or lived in the houses, “there’d be a kitchen and a dining room and a bedroom and maybe there’d be two to one room.” Because water had to be hauled inside from a big red barrel, there was no sink. The water was provided via a cistern, which was filled via a windmill-driven pump. These tie houses were also common on the Utah and Nevada portion of Southern Pacific’s Overland Route, and are beautifully described by Frank Wendell Call in the book *Gandydancer’s Children: A Railroad Memoir*.

Chinese track workers were common, but after about 1910, Italians began to replace them on many section crews. In recalling life as a section hand, retired Southern Pacific section foreman Germano Pucci (born in Bazzone, Italy in 1898) noted that, in the 1920s, “practically all the people working for the Southern Pacific, they practically all from [the same] town, you know what I mean, close together there.” Pucci worked mostly on the Lucin Cutoff but recalled that one of his compatriots—“that fellow Cocci [who] use[d] to be section foreman up at Promontory”—came from his hometown of Bazzone. Another Italian, Riamundo DiTorre (or Diatorri), was also a foreman at Promontory in about 1930. Pucci agreed with Bernice Houghton Gerristen, who had the store at Promontory: she responded, “Oh yes,” when asked if there “were Italian section men out there” at Promontory. As Pucci put it, they “usually came on boat and they get together, that’s the way it used to be.” Like other track workers, Pucci recalled that “they used to have a section at a distance of about ten or twelve miles apart” and that in maintaining the track, “[y]ou had so many miles of track and the other man had so many miles and so on, you see.” Pucci also noted that Mexican track workers were increasingly common after about 1920. Very likely, these recently arrived Mexican Americans were refugees of the Mexican Revolution (ca. 1910–1920), a conflict that wreaked havoc on their homeland and helped change the demographics of the American West.

In describing life in one of these Southern Pacific section houses at Promontory in the early 1920s, Pablo Baltazar (born in Guanajuato, Mexico, in 1896) noted that “[t]he company furnished everything right there, coal in the winter, coal oil. You know, no got electrical [sic] right here.” At this time, Promontory had no electricity. Baltazar noted that section hands slept in bunks, used coal stoves, and went to the larger boarding house to eat dinner. The meals were free, or as Baltazar put it, “. . . the railroad pay, I no pay nothing. The railroad paid everything.”
The food, Baltazar remembered was “good.” When asked if the woman cooking ever made “any Mexican food for you,” Baltazar replied, “no, no”—a reminder that assimilation and economy, not accommodation to ethnicity, was stressed by the railroad. This assimilation, of course, only went so far: Interestingly, Baltazar called Promontory by its name in Spanish—“Promontorio.”

Being the son of a section foreman who operated out of Kelton, Taro Yagi was also familiar with dwellings occupied by the track bosses. At Promontory, he recalled that the section foreman lived in a larger home than the track workers’ section houses. He also stated that this section foreman’s house had been built later than the section houses. It “was what you’d call a two story”—actually more like a story and a-half—with “a bedroom up in the attic . . . .” Although Yagi never saw the upstairs of this house, he recalled the first floor layout in some detail. It had three rooms—“a living room, a kitchen, and a bedroom.” The rooms were “fairly small” and the occupants had to obtain water from “a storage tank or cistern, whatever you want to call it.” Sam Nagata confirms Earl Harmon’s account of Promontory by the 1930s. In an interview, he stated that, except for the white monument, “there was nothing there then . . . [n]othing at all,” adding that “[i]t was a desolate place.” Nagata observed that out of about ten local Japanese families, only one—the Yagis—worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad.

In 1904, in his popular book, Over the Range to the Golden Gate, Stanley Wood summarized the importance of this rather forlorn location:

PROMONTORY. A Point of Historical Interest

A small station surrounded by country covered with sage brush, and only worthy of mention for its history. At this point, on Monday, May 10, 1869, the Union Pacific Railroad, building west, and the Central Pacific Railroad, building east, met.

The original edition of Wood’s book a decade earlier (1894) contained much the same information. Wood was quite correct in his characterizing Promontory as “only worthy of mention for its history,” for that was its only real claim to fame. Truth be told, Promontory was now little more than a historical curiosity, the place where the two railroads had once met. The fact that the meeting of the rails had taken place well within the recollection of many people tended to diminish its significance. Only when those people began to age, and then pass on, did commemoration of the event begin to become an issue. That, however, was still about a decade in the future.
In the meantime, people living along the Promontory line now faced reduced service. The drop off in rail traffic over the summit was immediately apparent, as revealed by the timetables of the period. In the January 1906 issue of the *Travelers Railway Guide Western Section*, the Southern Pacific lists ten daily passenger trains on the “Ogden Route.” Two years earlier, all those named trains, plus about ten freight trains, would have gone over the summit at Promontory. Now the tracks were idle for many hours, sometimes most of the day. Although all now traveled over the Lucin Cutoff past “Promontory Point,” there is a cryptic box titled “Salt Lake Div.” that shows an unnamed “daily, except Sunday” train leaving Ogden at 8:15 a.m. and arriving in Montello, Nevada, at 3:50 p.m. Its counterpart left Montello at 6:30 a.m. and arrived in Ogden at 3:50 p.m. This was evidently the train on the line over Promontory Summit, for it took most of the day—about 7½ hours to travel just 166 miles. The difference in eastbound and westbound times are likely the result of the train crossing the time zone at the Utah-Nevada border.

Ironically, the map reproduced in this 1906 *Travelers Railway Guide Western Section* is apparently older/dated, as it does not even show the Lucin Cutoff! One can only imagine the occasional bewildered passenger looking at the map showing the line going through Blue Creek and Kelton (Promontory is unnamed) only to gaze out the window at the surface of the Great Salt Lake! By the 1910s, everyone knew about the Lucin Cutoff. One could sense the nostalgia developing for the better days when Promontory had been on the mainline. Guidebooks frequently give it the mention normally reserved for obituaries. The United States Geological Survey’s *Guidebook of the Western United States, part B, The Overland Route* (1915) was one such book. Published as a way of keeping travelers informed about sights (and sites) along the Overland Route, this guidebook made only one brief reference to Promontory when it tersely noted that, “The old transcontinental railroad line of the Central Pacific went west from Brigham [City] over Promontory Range and around the north end of Great Salt Lake” but “[i]t is little used now, for the trains go from Ogden straight across the lake.”

The automobile dealt a double blow to passenger service on the line over Promontory Summit. On *Clason’s Guide Map of Utah ca. 1918* (fig. 7–10), the major road taking motorists west out of northern Utah is the “Pike’s Overland Peak Ocean to Ocean Highway.” However, a secondary route generally parallels the old railroad line over Promontory Summit. This is, in part, the road blazed by early motorists like Lester Whitman, who had chugged over Promontory Summit in his 1903 Oldsmobile a generation earlier.
By the 1920s, passenger service over Promontory Summit continued to decline. This, it should be noted, occurred despite the fact that Promontory’s population was fluctuating. From 1900, when it had a population of 148, Promontory lost about twenty people by 1910, but then rose to 266 in 1920. In 1923, The Official Guide included timetable 19A, which covered “Corinne-Kelton-Montello.” Train Number 181 left Corinne at 9:40 a.m. on Monday, Thursday, and Saturday, arriving in Promontory at 11:10 a.m., Rozel at 11:30 a.m., and Kelton at 12:50 p.m. Its eastbound counterpart, Train Number 182, left Kelton at 12:01 p.m., Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday, arriving in Rozel at 1:37 p.m., Promontory at 1:57 p.m., and Corinne at 5:25 p.m. This meant that service was not continuous but rather used Kelton as a stopping, and train re-numbering, point.

Service from Kelton to Montello via Lucin was provided by Train Number 205 on Monday and Thursday. A slow train in the classic sense, Train Number 205 left Kelton at 1:20 p.m., reached Lucin at 4:35 p.m., and arrived in Montello at 5:30 p.m. This train’s eastbound counterpart, Number 206, left Montello on Tuesday and Friday at 8:00 a.m., reached Lucin at 8:50 a.m., and arrived in Kelton at 11:40 a.m. The schedule was timed to enable a through trip over the line most days—even though the train numbers changed at Kelton for reasons known only to the railroad. One thing was certain. The service was no longer daily except Sunday, for one could not travel through to Lucin (or Montello) on Saturday; nor could one travel over the line except on particular days of the week. In response to this reduction in both the frequency and speed of rail service, locals in the area humorously called their train the “Alkali Flyer.” Certainly no match for the transcontinental trains that now rolled across the Lucin Cutoff, saving hours, the Alkali Flyer averaged about twenty-two miles per hour on its leisurely journey over the Promontory Summit line.

In one of the truly idyllic references to the Promontory Branch line’s passenger train, Lorna Larsen Phillips (born ca. 1906) recalls seeing it from her family’s farm on the south side of the Promontory Range. The train was typically short and worked hard to get up the mountains; Phillips remembered it “[g]oing up the grade, one little old engine puffing away with a lot of smoke trailing it and maybe two or three cars. We knew the time of day by when that train came . . . . And if it was late we were bothered about it. We waited to see it.” Despite the informality of railroading on the Promontory Branch, the railroad was evidently serious enough about operations to run that train on a regular schedule. For local people, too, the mixed train over Promontory became part of the timing of life’s activities. Still, fewer and fewer people rode it as the twentieth century wore on.
During its long downhill slide, Promontory became Mecca to Western history buffs. The town’s most avid student, perhaps, was the late Bernice Anderson. Still affectionately referred to as “Bernice” by old-timers, she is immortalized as a guardian of the Promontory line’s history. Born in Colorado in 1900, Anderson moved to Kaysville, Utah, when she was six months old. Her stepfather owned a ranch in Black Pine Canyon with two brothers, and they drove the cattle over Promontory Summit in the summer. Accompanying her mother in a buggy in 1905, she got her first look at Promontory. Being a curious youngster, Anderson later remembered that she had “. . . heard about Promontory even then from the cowboys that collected in our home and herded the cattle and took them out to the range.” The cowboys told her stories about the Irish and Chinese workers blowing each other up with sticks of dynamite until the “fun,” as she put it, was stopped by mutual consent, and mutual necessity. This supposed
conflict between the varied ethnic workers here is not confirmed, but it certainly did occur elsewhere in the West.

Because she was fascinated by what she heard about Promontory, her grandmother took her to the railroad station here. Over the years, Anderson watched the old railroad station, once the scene of so much activity in the nineteenth century, become an empty shell (fig. 7–11). She recalled that there was a water tank there as well as “several box elder trees, big box elder trees,” that were probably “watered some way from the tank . . . .” The water tank was filled by a water train that hauled water up from the Bear River at Corinne in tank cars. The tank was needed to provide water to road locomotives and helper engines.
powering local trains up the steep east side of the Promontory grade. She also remembered the post office as a section house where she thought a man lived with his family. This was Promontory after it had been bypassed by the Lucin Cutoff, and it was a rather quiet place. As she put it, “[t]here were no trains there at the time I was there.” By this, we can assume that they were still running, but that Anderson had not seen any on the occasions she visited the site. The lack of trains did not cool her ardor, and may have actually fueled it. After all, there is something captivating about a ghost railroad, or one near that status. A 1927 photograph of Promontory reveals it as a forlorn location with a few buildings including the Houghton store. A close-up photo of the store’s abandoned façade and overgrown surroundings (fig. 7–12) confirms Promontory’s ghost-town setting.

Along with the railroad station, the general store was one of Promontory’s most important buildings. The store was apparently owned by a Mr. Brown before Mr. Houghton purchased it and appears to have
been built about 1890. Although rather modest in style—seemingly more like a house than a commercial building in design—its façade did face Promontory’s main street and had a few flourishes of classical trim, namely its window lintels. Given its design and the fact that the proprietor and his family lived in a part of the store, it appeared to be both a commercial and residential building. This was apparent in its surroundings. John Whitaker (born 1911) recalled stories about goings-on in and around the store, which featured a hitching post and was adjacent to a small corral and livery stable. The store also featured some pea vines, which grew nearby. One fixture, a fifty-gallon barrel was part of the scene when Brown owned the property. Located near the hitching rail, this barrel figured in the folklore when a sheepherder took someone up on a $50 bet that his dog could not remove a particularly nasty badger from it. According to Whitaker, “[s]o this little sheepherder, he walked around and . . . went over and picked his dog up and threw his dog in the barrel.” The outcome? “The badger grabbed the dog and the dog jumped out and drug the badger out.” The sheepherder won the
$50 bet, though one wonders if the dog was as delighted as its owner. Interestingly, although the store is long gone, as are all involved in the story, badgers are still common in and around Promontory Summit. Whitaker’s tale is a reminder that sheepherding was an important activity in the hills surrounding Promontory.

The Houghton Store was a landmark, and several people remembered it in later years—the 1920s and 1930s—being painted yellow similar in color to the railroad section houses. Some, however, remember it as light green. It was one of Promontory’s more verdant spots: Della Owens recalled that “[a]ll around the store there were trees, and of course . . . that vine. He [Houghton] had this vine that went all around . . . a fence around his store and grounds, and this vine went all the way around.” Some also remember Houghton’s wife being in charge of the store. According to Grace N. Brough (born 1885), “Mrs. Houghton’s store” seemed quite large when she was a girl. Like most old-timers, Brough recalled it being a frame building but was especially impressed by the fact that “[i]t had these bushes that grewed all around there.” She also remembered “a big, old tree” near the store, but what impressed her most was “a lot of these old bushes, I forget what they call them now.” Even at that time, though the store—like Promontory itself—had seen better days. Brough remarked, “I guess it was quite a store at one time when the railroad, when they had a . . . major presence here, including the roundhouse, at Promontory.” Incidentally, the vines so common in Promontory and vicinity are called “pea vines” by some, “tea vines” by others, and even “Martha Washington vines” by a few. They could almost completely cover fences and low buildings.

In 1974, Leona Yates Anderson (born 1895) recalled that the Houghton store at Promontory Station was “just a country store. It had everything.” Although “[t]he main line didn’t run through at that time, you understand,” the store “had groceries and candy and everything that a farmer would need—nails, straps. Well, anything you would need.” Anderson recalled the store as being small, but what impressed her most about it was Mrs. Houghton, who “was the nicest little lady” and who had an English accent that was both appealing and interesting. According to Anderson, “Mrs. Houghton ran the store,” and at this time it served people from the surrounding area: “There were dry farms all around, and they raised a lot of wheat, [and] barley.”

By the 1930s and early 1940s, Promontory was haunted by its early status as the place where the rails met, and where almost nothing was happening now. In 1930, the population held at 132 souls, but by 1940, only 46 lived here. In order to imagine life in Promontory during the twentieth century, we need to consult as many information sources as
possible. At interviews, old-timers are asked questions and their answers are recorded on tapes and later transcribed. This, of course, makes us reliant on their words. What would happen, though, if one of these interviewees actually drew a map of Promontory as he or she remembered it or was assisted in doing so by a researcher? That is exactly what John Whitaker did when Ellis J. LeFevre interviewed him. The last page of Whitaker’s interview indicates, “MAP STAPLED AT BACK OF TYPED HARD COPY (as of 20 Nov. 1995) . . . hard copy located in File 103–Cla, which is located ‘in the archives.’” In the NPS Archives at Promontory, the researcher finds a simple white sheet of paper on which is a real treasure—a hand-drawn map summarizing Whitaker’s recollections (fig. 7–13). On this map, which is oriented west (west is at the top of the page), the railroad shows as four parallel lines evidently drawn with a ruler. Crossing the railroad at an angle is a sinuous road that evidently postdates Promontory’s heyday as it cuts through the former location of the turntable and roundhouse. Just to the right (east) of the crossing, where the symbol “RXR” is drawn, is a large tree. Left of the crossing is the “Spike Site.” Below (south of) the tracks, a rectangle indicates the “store,” which stands near a smaller tree and a line indicating the “hitching rail.” Farther down the road, another larger rectangle indicates the “corral & livery stable,” beyond which the road curves near a “well,” which is shown as a circle symbol. Presumably, researcher LeFevre and old-timer John Whitaker worked together on this map, which joins the others in this book as part of the fragmentary, but essential, cartographic record of Promontory.

Oral histories are important and informative, but for the most definitive information on the railroad-related features along Promontory Branch in the early twentieth century, we must turn to the records of the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC). The ICC conducted a thorough valuation of the property from Corinne (MP 820.78) to Lucin (MP 578.3) inventorying the trackwork, bridges, buildings/structures, and other related property. The valuations were conducted under the direction of E. Z. Kinnear. Beginning at Corinne in the early summer of 1917, a team of two inspectors (Kinnear and L. W. Clark) inventoried all the structures along the nearly 140 miles of branch line. By then, the roundhouse at Promontory, which existed from the 1870s until about 1913, was gone—a reminder that this line was called the Promontory Branch with good reason.

When the ICC Division of Valuation (Pacific District) conducted an inventory along the line on June 16, 1917, R. E. Towne noted that the railroad’s schedule affected his ability to obtain information: “owing to the fact that Terrace is off the main line of the Southern Pacific
Railroad, and can be reached by train only on Tuesday of each week, the return trip being made the following Wednesday, a statement of original cost and condition of this property by carrier was accepted in lieu of actual inspection, as such inspection would have entitled the loss of a week’s time for both I.C.C. representative and pilot for this small amount of property.”¹⁶⁵ If a railroad inspector had trouble getting from place to place along the line, we can only imagine the difficulty Southern Pacific’s fragmented schedule now posed for local travelers here.

Nevertheless, the inspectors documented a tremendous amount of information. From Lucin to Lake Station, for example, the rails were sixty and sixty-two pounds per yard. From Lake Station eastward over
Promontory, however, the rail was heavier—seventy-five and seventy-six pounds per yard. “There are,” as a representative of the railroad put it, “some little variations in that—a little short piece of one or the other here and there.” Another indication that this branch line was not up to main line standards was revealed in the types of railroad ties used for replacements. In responding to a query about this, a Southern Pacific official admitted that, “In the past years, most of the ties placed there were old ties.” The official added that they were “second-hand ties” taken from some other place on the system. Moreover, the replacement rails on the Promontory line were “taken up [from] some of the old sidings, and we have drawn upon such supplies as that for our relaying in the case of a broken rail or a rail taken out of service for any cause.” As the official finally concluded after interrogation: “There is no new rail on the Promontory Branch.”

Whether the irony of this—the Promontory line’s activities helping to support the railroad’s mainlines elsewhere—went unnoticed or not is unknown.

At just the time that traffic on the Promontory Branch dwindled, it was also dwindling on many other branch lines. Accordingly, Southern Pacific experimented with, and adopted, new ways to serve the public without having to offer trains pulled by locomotives. These alternatives included self-propelled rail cars like the gasoline-powered McKeen Cars (which Union Pacific Superintendent of Motive Power and Machinery, William McKeen had developed in 1904) and gasoline-electric cars produced thereafter by other manufacturers. Although these types of self-propelled railcars operated on many Southern Pacific branch lines from around 1908 to the 1930s, saving the company considerable expense, there is no evidence that they ever operated on the Promontory line. Similarly, there is no record that a diesel-electric locomotive ever ran on the Promontory line. Although the diesel-electric locomotive was pioneered in the 1930s and began to show up in switching service on Southern Pacific by the late 1930s, some railroad historians note that Southern Pacific was somewhat slow to dieselize—perhaps because it successfully built many of its own steam locomotives at its venerable Sacramento shops. The Promontory line, then, appears to be quintessential steam railroad territory from start (1869) to finish (1942).
The Promontory Branch operated at a slow pace during the 1930s, though nature provided some excitement at times. At 8:05 a.m. on March 12, 1934, an earthquake registering 6.6 on the Richter scale shook the area near Monument Point. The Hansel Valley earthquake resulted in four cracks crossing a road bordering the mud flats near Monument Point, and “one crack crossed and bent tracks of the Central Pacific Railroad.” This did not pose a serious problem as rail traffic was light, especially at this time of year, and the damage was quickly repaired.

In oral history interviews, Pappy Clay recalls that after the Lucin Cutoff was built, and service further declined, “the old Central Pacific (now Southern Pacific) line over Promontory Summit was only running a jerk train a week as far as Kelton so most of the section houses between Corinne and Kelton had been abandoned.” Still the line over Promontory hung on, appearing more like a museum than an operating rail line. Train service was infrequent, and the physical plant was deteriorating. Given its forlorn status and quaint appearance it is surprising that more railroad enthusiasts did not seek out the old railroad line. Their absence here helps explain the paucity of photographs. Those that we do have, however, confirm the marginal nature of operations here at the margins of the Great American Desert.