Over the Range
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Chapter 8

A Changing Countryside & Landscape (1904–1942)

By the early twentieth century, speculators eyed the Central Pacific lands, which on a map appeared to be part of a huge checkerboard pattern awaiting development (figs. 8–1a and b). The major activity in this area was ranching, and it would soon face competition from farming. Consider, for example, the fate of the Promontory Ranch Company, or PRC, as it was often called. According to its articles of incorporation filed in San Francisco on November 30, 1897, the Promontory Ranch Company was created for the purpose of engaging in and carrying on “the business of raising, buying, selling, exchanging and generally dealing in all kinds of live-stock;” and also “to buy, sell, hire, lease, let, hold, mortgage and improve all kinds of real property . . . .” That broad charter would seem to offer nearly unlimited possibilities. And yet, PRC was formally dissolved on December 28, 1921.

The demise of the Promontory Ranch Company was part of a broader trend in land use and ownership in northwestern Utah. Great Basin historian Leonard Arrington noted that the Central Pacific was given alternative, odd-numbered sections of land from Corinne to Kelton, of which 400,000 acres eventually “became the personal property of Charles Crocker” whose large house soon became a landmark. Upon Crocker’s death in 1888, two companies—the Promontory Ranch Company and the Curlew Ranch Company—were created. The main purpose for creating these enterprises was “to handle the vast
stock ranches then operating on the tract." Crocker’s holdings had most of the water sources, making it virtually impossible for those who owned land in the even-numbered sections to subsist in this arid area. Crocker interests were unwilling to sell small parcels, in effect stifling development in much of the area adjacent to the railroad. That began to change in 1908, when Utah Congressman Joseph Howell and David Eccles proposed to buy all of Crocker’s holdings in Utah and Idaho. Formed in 1909, the Promontory-Curlew Land Company purchased all 400,000 acres—about 625 square miles—of the former Crocker land. This, by considerable stretch of the imagination, was easy land
on which to subsist. One observer candidly called it “this world of grizzled sage,” but others saw real promise in it. In 1910, the Promontory-Curlew Land Company’s holdings were valued at $1,651,472; of this, the new town site of Howell was worth $41,275, irrigated land was

FIGS. 8–1A AND B
Map showing the land ownership of the area through which the Promontory Summit line of the Central Pacific Railroad ran reveals the checkerboard pattern of alternate railroad/private ownership west of Promontory and the largely non-railroad private holdings eastward.
estimated at $135,000, and the largest portion, dry farming land, was valued at $1,475,197.²

A map (fig. 8–2) located in the Box Elder County Courthouse shows a portion of township no. 10 north and range no. 6 west, revealing the area surrounding Promontory Station to be owned for the most part by the “Promontory Curlew Land Co” and three other owners: Frederick E. Houghton owned 160 acres just southwest of the station; to the northeast, James P. Snodgrass also had a staggered parcel of 160 acres; so, too, did Lewis Eugene Whitaker about a mile northwest of the railroad. On this map, which is not dated but apparently reflects the situation around 1910, Promontory shows as a cluster of three buildings. The one south of the tracks is evidently the Central Pacific station, and the two other buildings, possibly houses, lie just north of (and parallel to) the Central Pacific tracks. This map is tantalizing, both for what it shows—and even more so for what it does not show: where, we should ask, are the approximately ten other buildings, which existed according to other descriptions, actually located? How is the town laid out in regards to roadways? These, alas, are not shown, but from this map, we get a good idea of the dominance of the new Promontory-Curlew Land Company in local affairs.
The political machinations in the formation of this company involved a close partnership between the private and public sectors. Much of the land in the Promontory Summit area was sagebrush-covered ranchland held in large parcels by individuals associated with the Central Pacific Railroad until the early twentieth century. When the honorable Joseph Howell, Utah’s Congressional representative from Logan, met with Crocker interests in Washington, D.C., to begin developing the area into dry farms in 1909, it was part of an exciting experiment. Dry farming is the process by which plowed land in semi-arid areas is opened for cultivation. In many cases, seemingly marginal land can yield good crops of grain without irrigation—providing conditions are right. Successful dry farming requires knowledge of the climate, soils, slope of land, and other factors. Although practiced for millennia in varied parts of the world, Utah first pioneered American dry farming in 1865. When early settlers developed methods by which certain crops, especially grains like wheat and oats, could be grown on land that was otherwise only used for ranching, they expanded the definition of agriculturally productive land.

In dry farming, the objective is to utilize the moisture in the soils. This moisture is usually most plentiful in the late winter and rapidly evaporates as the spring progresses. However, by selecting crops such as winter wheat that can thrive in these conditions, farmers can raise a crop before the withering high temperatures of summer damages it. Summer fallow (that is, letting the land rest between plantings) further helps reduce the evaporation of soil moisture. Given its relatively deep soils, tendency to receive at least some winter precipitation, generally semi-arid climate, and varied slope patterns, the area around Promontory Summit proved suitable for dry farming. Normally, in this part of the West, crops of wheat can be harvested about three years out of five. This means about a 60% chance of success. With good luck, a farmer can harvest five years in a row. With bad luck, however, only one year in five, or even fewer, might be profitable. This makes dry farming a gamble with acceptable odds—at least for those willing to take the risks.

In 1910, when the Promontory-Curlew Land Company purchased much of the area to the north of Promontory Summit, including Promontory Station, it seemed to suggest that a new era was at hand. The company’s letterhead presented a grand view of the future—a verdant, well-cultivated landscape through which a train chuffed confidently (fig. 8–3). The letterhead also noted “370,000 acres in Box Elder County, Utah, and Cassia and Oneida Counties, Idaho.” As part of their operations, the Promontory-Curlew Land Company offered large tracts of land in the Blue Creek Valley and the Curlew Valley, creating the town of Howell close to the “Big House” of Charles Crocker, which
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had been moved there in 1908. Despite its new location, people still called it the “Big House” (or sometimes “Big Blue House”), but it symbolized the transition from ranching to dry farming. Photographs in the Promontory-Curlew Land Company’s brochures (fig. 8–4) showed farmers contemplating the removal of huge tracts of sagebrush at a scale that would require environmental impact statements today. At that time, however, environmental concerns were in the future. Nature represented so much land to be reconfigured and so much brush to be removed before farming could work. The big questions back in the 1910s and 1920s were: would this new development work, and would it, in turn, stimulate the moribund rail line here?

It is tempting to think everyone believed that the line over Promontory Summit was doomed when the Lucin Cutoff was constructed. However, many investors thought otherwise. On the mainline or not, the Promontory area seemed to have good prospects as wheat farming country. The opening up of the lands to wheat here followed an early twentieth-century trend in dry farming in other parts of the American West. Developments north of the railroad line also prompted the Promontory-Curlew Land Company to lobby for an extension of track north into the more promising agricultural land of the Blue Creek Valley in the vicinity of the aptly-named, new town of Howell. As revealed in company records, the board of directors approached the Southern Pacific about this issue in 1910. This may have seemed like so much overzealous speculation, but a handwritten note on the ICC valuation maps reveals that in effect, the proposed branch would begin at Blue Creek and run northward into the valley. If the line had been completed, it would have been something of an oddity—a branchline off a branchline. More
specifically, it would have been a new branchline off an otherwise atrophying secondary line whose future was less than certain.

Four hundred thousand acres of the Promontory-Curlew Land Company consisted of only the odd-numbered sections in townships 6 to 15 north, ranges 4 to 10 west, Salt Lake Meridian in Box Elder County, Utah, as well as township 16 south, ranges 29 and 30 East Boise Meridian in Oneida County, Idaho. Although Howell’s initiative led to the creation of the company by mid-1909, the actual sale of property to individuals took well over a decade. Ideally, the huge property would be divided into smaller parcels, and if all went as planned, sold off to farmers. The vision represented something like the Homestead Act (1862) in that it was meant to open up land to farmers. However, goals here were profit for the Promontory-Curlew Land Company and success for individual farmers. Congressman Howell is listed as the company’s president, an action that was common enough before concerns about public-private conflicts of interest surfaced with the famous Teapot Dome oil lands in Wyoming about fifteen years later (1924). To his credit, it should be noted that Howell’s ultimate goal was stimulating northwestern Utah’s agricultural production and strengthening the local and regional economy. With the creation of the Promontory-Curlew Land Company, the area was set to boom—at least according to the hopes and visions of the company’s boosters.

The company was dedicated to opening the area to individual farmers; before it could do so, however, it had to address the issue of the land’s potential for crops. On June 19, 1913, the company’s secretary sent a letter to Mr. John Q. Critchlow outlining the results of soil tests...
of Curlew Valley. The report revealed the concentrations of alkali to be .006% in areas where only sagebrush grew, .0068% where sage and shadscale grew together, and fully .0085% where only shadscale grew. The letter also noted that the “most successful” dry farming appeared to be practiced where alkali concentrations of .005 to .011 were found. In other words, the lower, alkali-rich areas near the lake would be far less productive, while the higher sloping land far above the lake was best. The results, then, showed most of the company’s lands to be well within that range. Being located at the moderate to high elevations, the company’s lands were well drained and potentially productive.

Nevertheless, increased demand was needed to make the company’s plans successful. By about 1915, the company found just the ticket to claim increasing demand—a world war. In a startling flyer prepared during World War I, the Promontory-Curlew Land Company claimed that “America Must Prepare to Feed the Old World, which has forsaken its Ploughshares and Pruning Hooks for Implements of War and Destruction.” It claimed that the “European War will Make Wheat Raisers Millionaires.” Noting that “non-irrigated lands are yielding from TWENTY TO FORTY BUSHELS OF WHEAT TO THE ACRE,” the flyer also claimed, “THE SOIL is deep, rich and productive . . . THE CLIMATE is similar to that in the Salt Lake, Bear River and Cache Valleys . . . WATER for culinary purposes and truck gardens may be secured by drilling wells.” Moreover, the flyer noted that “THE S.P. RAILROAD to Kelton crosses Promontory-Curlew Lands, thus affording ample facilities for marketing crops and securing necessities and luxuries not provided naturally in this section.” The flyer concluded that “THE TOWNS of Snowville, Howell, [and] Promontory . . . are adjacent to the company’s holdings” and that “[e]ach boasts first-class schools and good general stores.” A map produced as part of the flyer reveals—in bright orange—the huge holdings of the Promontory-Curlew Land Company. A caption below noted that “Promontory Station, which Lincoln chose as the meeting point of the U.P. and C.P. Railroads, where the golden spike was driven, completing the first transcontinental railroad connecting the East with the West, is shown.” The use of President Lincoln’s name here was gratuitous at best, for he had been dead for several years before Promontory was selected as the site. Nevertheless, the claim made a good impression despite its inaccuracy. The point here was that farmers could now join part of a national effort to prosper as a result of peace at home and war abroad. Posters prepared by the company during the war in Europe offered lurid details about how the world needed food as the countries participated in the conflict. As might be expected, the posters predicted a boom in demand for wheat and other crops that would be shipped long distances.
Coincidentally, these were just the types of crops that could be produced by enterprising farmers in Utah, or so the posters and brochures claimed. War, in fact, added to an already growing economy in the 1910s.

The solid economic picture, as well as war and rumors of war, resulted in talk of extending the railroad from Kolmar farther north into the bucolic Blue Creek Valley in 1913–1914. Actually, the Promontory-Curlew Land Company had begun to lobby for additional railroad lines several years earlier, to no avail. Now, however, the time seemed right and the company made a formal request. W. R. Scott of the Southern Pacific responded by noting that the railroad would indeed consider building a line into the northern Blue Creek Valley—provided that the company “furnish right of way, build grade and deed it to us if we complete the line and operate it.” If those conditions were met, the railroad would offer limited service. Scott envisioned “service each way daily except Sunday, and perhaps less than that, unless business would warrant it.” The service would be by a “mixed train,” that is, one that carried freight cars and at least one car for passengers. Recognizing his advantage here, Scott noted that he would not specify anything other than this minimal service. However, nothing ever came of this as Scott’s words—and conditions—must have been sobering to the company’s directors and to the farmers with whom he corresponded. Despite this lobbying for expanded rail service, then, the existing railroad infrastructure along the Promontory line would have to suffice for the Promontory-Curlew Land Company—at least for the present.

A brochure titled “A Winning Combination” describes the Promontory-Curlew-area lands using several maps. On the inside front cover, a Utah map containing a small United States map features Utah and Idaho in a shaded pattern; to accentuate their actual location, an arrow directs the reader’s eye to the area north of the Great Salt Lake on the map of northern Utah. This map’s adjoining text claims that these lands offer the “Greatest Dry Farm Opportunity in the West Today!” It also lists the advantage of the “Trans-continental Railroad through the property,” along with “good schools, churches, and prosperous towns.”

In addition to glowing text, the brochure includes photographs of the lands under development and transportation facilities. The photo of a “Central Pacific Railroad Train at Monument Utah” (fig. 8–5) offers a glimpse of a mixed train stopped at the station, which appears to be little more than a freight-loading platform and an old caboose body. That caboose appears to be a 1900 vintage wooden car with blind ends (i.e., it has no end platforms) and a cupola. Given the scarcity of photographs taken along the line, we are fortunate to have this vignette. Moreover, the brochure features other photographs promoting the
company’s lands, and agricultural equipment helping to reap bumper crops of wheat.

The tour de force of the brochure, though, is the large centerfold map showing Promontory-Curlew Land Company property in Utah and Idaho (fig. 8–6). The entire area around Promontory is shown in a checkerboard pattern with the section numbers circled. A stippled pattern indicates “land sold,” while a blank or white square indicates “land available.” As can be seen, the best land—that is, the better-watered upland with richer soils—went first. Note, too, that a web of “proposed railroads” suggests that the company planned additional railroad service for farmers on the western slope of the Promontory Range and then north into Idaho. The position of this proposed railroad seems to anticipate the closure of the line over Promontory, for if that eventuality occurred, the railroad would run from near Promontory Point on the new Lucin Cutoff and avoid all topographic obstacles as it meandered along the western edge of the Promontory-Curlew Land Company’s holdings.9

Although new settlers were attracted here, the farming was difficult. Sagebrush-covered lands seemed to offer great hope but cutting down the tall plants required hard work. It was, in effect, like pulling up small trees. The Great Basin’s Indians have an expression about sagebrush—that when the world experiences catastrophe and turns upside down, one should hold onto a sagebrush because its roots will keep one from falling off.10 Sagebrush was everywhere, served many purposes, and lingered for a long time in the memory of these early twentieth century dry-farming pioneers. In Howell Valley history, Luella Douglas recalled that “[f]or firewood we burned sagebrush.” In fact, as Douglas quickly added, “[m]ost of the farm was in sagebrush when we first saw it and had to be cleared and grubbed off.” Douglas was
On this map showing available parcels of land, the Promontory-Curlew Land Company shows not only the existing Central Pacific line over Promontory (and the Lucin Cutoff), but also two projected rail lines—one from Monument Point, and one north into Idaho from a point near Spring Bay.

nearly overwhelmed by this plant; “I can still smell the sage burning. It was . . .” as she put it, “a sweet sickening smell.” The family kept the sage in “a big woodbox by the stove,” but “[y]ou could never get the sage into the stove without spilling it all over the floor and it would
only burn for a few minutes, then it was out and you had to start all over again.”

All of the commercial literature seemed to suggest good prospects for railroad development here. Although Promontory had been bypassed by the Lucin Cutoff, the land adjacent to the tracks took on added importance as prospective development promised to stimulate the area’s economy. To learn about how the land was used—and what potential it had—we can again turn to maps prepared by the railroad. In 1916, Southern Pacific Company prepared a series of Right of Way and Track Maps at a scale of 1 inch = 400 feet. These were, in effect, valuation maps that coincided with the ICC valuation report. The Promontory Branch, as it was now officially called, required thirty-five separate maps in Box Elder County, which comprised Valuation Section 2. About ninety miles in length, this section ran from Lucin (Map V2–1) to Bonneville (Map V2–35). The last map in the series (V2–36) detailed the track about four miles into Weber County. From there to Ogden, a new series (V3) consisting of three maps covered the line. At Ogden, the series featured several highly detailed maps including the yards and engine terminal. At this time, the Southern Pacific had a 100-foot turntable, a 30-stall roundhouse, and large car shops and mainline shops as well as a yard consisting of eighteen tracks. Ogden was the hub of Southern Pacific’s Salt Lake Division and locomotives. While most of the activity was over the Lucin Cutoff, locomotives used on the Promontory Branch were also serviced here.

For our purposes, several sections of the Promontory Branch are worth a closer look because they reveal so much about both the railroad and the countryside through which it ran. From Ogden to Corinne, the line is single track running in the center of a strip of land 400 feet wide. What makes these original maps at the National Archives of even greater interest, though, is the written commentary on them. The adjacent land was evidently interesting enough to note as “good farm land” and “fair farm land” near Bonneville and Brigham City. Owners of adjacent properties are named in a box on the map. Just east of the river and Corinne, the maps feature some additional notations. “Good pasture land—[and] a little farmland” and “very fine spot” are mentioned, as is “low pasture good land (soil)” along the east side of the Bear River. Those maps are also an excellent source of information about railroad facilities. Corinne has a passing siding and small yard, with a connection to the OSL (Oregon Short Line), as recorded in detail on Station Map S32–60935. At Corinne, the map shows a cluster of railroad buildings, (including a tool house, cook house, and coal house) and a stockyard east of the “SP Co Warehouse” which is located between the yard track and passing siding.
West of Corinne, the penciled-in marginal comments about land quality become even more detailed. Just west of town, the land is noted to be “level [and] mostly irrigated” while other areas where “portions are in pasture and sage brush” represent good land with considerable agricultural potential. As the comments noted, “A drainage district has been formed,” “[t]he land is bonded for 17.50 [dollars] an acre,” and “When reclaimed it will produce good crops.” With the “water right[s] worth 50.00 per acre,” these drainage district lands are now valued at $67.50 per acre. Several miles west of Corinne, however, the situation changes. Although there is some “fair grazing land,” increasing mention is made of “alkali wast[e] land” along the stretch of track toward Blue Creek. At Blue Creek, the situation improves, with “Dry farms at a distance from track” noted. A wye for turning helper locomotives was also found here at Blue Creek, the turntable having been replaced some years earlier.

As revised in 1924, the Lampo detail on the sheet map (V2–27) shows a grain elevator, stockyards, warehouses, scales, and other indications of a thriving agricultural economy. An inset on the map also shows the railroad’s 3-inch pipeline running from numerous springs to Lampo and Blue Creek (V2–27). At the sweeping curve just north of Lampo, notations show “Dry farms below R[ight] of W[ay] . . .” while alongside the rugged Promontory grade, “some side hill grazing” was reported near Surbon (Map V2–26). Between there and Promontory, “side hill grazing land” yields to “bench land at top of grade,” which is “partly dry farmed.” At Promontory (fig. 8–7), the comments record several buildings, namely a “store and 3 houses” (Map V2–24). This map also shows the location of the numerous railroad-related buildings in the town at this time.

Just west of Promontory (V2–24) is “mostly level dry farm land about ⅓ to ½ [of which is] in grain. Balance in sage brush.” This condition, it was noted, “applies to whole map.” West of Promontory Summit, the maps show the single track line winding down the west side of Promontory on its 400-foot right of way to Lake, where another wye is located for helper engines (V2–20). A passing track was also shown, but as the commenter observed, there was “nothing here.” West of Lake, the commenter noted one bright spot: “Part of land farmed on this [south] side of the railroad tracks. Near Kosmo, things became a bit bleaker: “Level dry farm land—small crops” and “Level dry farmland—poor” and “sage brush . . . .” West of Monument, which featured a passing track parallel to the curving main line, the land was characterized as “generally level but some of it rolling. Suitable for winter sheep grazing only.” (Map V2–18) Similarly, near Nella, the “land throughout this map (V2–17) was characterized as “sagebrush [sic] desert generally
flat but some of it rolling country suitable only for winter sheep grazing.” Much of the same was written for the next two maps (V2–16 and V2–17). The latter included Kelton, which was noted as “a shipping point for some grain[.] trains run from here to Brigham [City].” At Kelton was a double-ended yard track and passing siding, a passenger and freight depot stockyard, sand house, pump house, and square water tank, as well as a 27 x 30 foot section house, bunk house, ice-house, cook house, and cellar. A hotel and seven houses were also mentioned north of the tracks (V2–17). Kelton, it will be recalled, was the place where the only through train over the line changed numbers and ran on varying days.

South and west of Kelton, the same notation of sagebrush desert land that was generally level to rolling and only suitable for winter sheep grazing continued for several maps. At Peplin, the commenter noted that there was “no town.” Similarly at Ombey, he noted, “nothing here.” However, Ombey did have a wye, passing siding, and a spur track. Matlin had almost exactly the same minimal arrangement—a wye for turning locomotives, passing siding, and a spur track (V2–9). At Terrace, the
commenter noted only “an old brick building about 28 or 30’ by 70 or 80’” was standing. That building shows on the map as a “machine shop,” and it was evidently the only aboveground feature left there. The commentor must have been amazed by how things had changed from the time when Terrace was a major railroad town! Aware of Terrace’s history, he wrote about its heyday in some detail. “There was a small town here at one time,” he began. Noting of the former improvements that “[t]he townsite was largely graded with cinders,” he added that “[t]here was a roundhouse here at one time” (fig. 8–8). The site he visited was forlorn. As he put it, “[t]here are no houses here now.” Nevertheless, at that time, he still could report that “[t]here is a siding and there is a small amount of freight shipped from here.” As he put it, though, Terrace had no future. “All outside of 200’ R of W [on each side of the tracks] should be classed as N.C. No station grounds necessary here.” The meaning of N.C. is not given, but it likely meant nonconducive for agriculture.

A few miles farther west, at Watercress, that same notation about the land only being good for winter sheep grazing is found. Watercress did have a passing siding, two corrals, two tie houses, a water tank and an old railroad car body, which likely served as a storage shed (fig. 8–9).
At Bovine, the commenter found “no town,” though there was a passing siding, water tank, car house (presumably a house made from a railroad car, but also possibly a handcar shed), and section house. At Lucin, the commenter evidently found little except the connection of the Promontory Branch with the much shinier rails of the mainline. The map shows a wye here. It also notes that the original line that joined the mainline at an acute angle had been “abandoned.” Replacing that junction was a reverse curve that took the Promontory Branch into the mainline as one leg of a wye. The commenter did, however, summarize the area’s landscape in almost exactly the same way on every map from Kelton to Lucin: “The land extending throughout this map is all sagebrush desert generally level but some of it rolling, only suitable for winter grazing for sheep.” He did, however, add one additional note to what had evidently become a mantra. The “entire zone,” as he put it, was “of [the] same general character.” (V2–1)

The population figures, however, began to reveal a change in the character of the area. By 1910, farmers outnumbered all others in the Promontory precinct, including railroad workers. Of the two hundred residents counted in the census, forty-six listed their occupations: Twenty-eight were farmers, fifteen were railroaders, and the remaining three were a miner, a blacksmith, and a road commissioner. The 1910s
were an interesting time in this area as there was substantial interest in agriculture. With increasing tensions in Europe, the prospects for agriculture brightened considerably.

If 1919 was a banner year for Promontory, that was only because it marked the fiftieth anniversary of the joining of the rails. Ironically, though, virtually all of the celebratory activities were centered on Ogden, where the Golden Jubilee ceremony was held on May 10. The weather just before the ceremony brought intense rain, but the sun soon appeared and the parade traversed the city’s streets. One of the unique floats featured “a replica of the ancient engine Jupiter.” Reportedly, the original engineer, George Lashus, was on the pilot of this replica. This, of course, does not square with historians who claim that George Booth operated the Jupiter in 1869. Could Lashus have been the fireman of the Jupiter? Given the paucity of official records, we may never know. At any rate, the other dignitaries on hand in Ogden in 1919 included William H. Hood, who was in “charge of more railroad construction work than any other man in the world.” Another float—a daughter of the West with the beaus of the East—showed the advantage obtained from the union of the rails. Mostly, though, the Golden Jubilee provided the opportunity to tout the progress that had been made rather than to portray history accurately. A special air show, for example, featured planes buzzing in formation. To that end, a float depicting the Lucin Cutoff was also highly visible. Despite the emphasis on progress, others compiled lists of engineers on the various locomotives in May 1869. The conflict over the identity of Jupiter’s engineer notwithstanding, this list might prove invaluable to future researchers.15

One should not overlook the commercial motivation for the 1919 Jubilee celebration. A 1919 advertisement for West Ogden Milling and Elevator Company in The Ogden Examiner asks, “Why Not Try the Golden Spike Flour?” The illustration with this advertisement, evidently the flour’s beautiful label, shows two dignitaries pounding in the golden spike at Promontory Summit on May 10, 1869. No doubt, this brand originated with the flurry of activity surrounding the big celebration for the 50th anniversary of the Golden Spike on May 10, 1919. Meanwhile, Promontory Summit persisted in relative isolation, though many of its agricultural products, including wheat, found their way east to Ogden via the rails of the branchline.

In the period 1910–1930, farming became the major economic activity along the Promontory line. The 1920 census for Promontory precinct reveals only ten railroaders (eight Italian section laborers, one engineer, and one section foreman), thirty-two farmers, two farm laborers, nine stock farmers, one U.S. Army stockman, one cowboy, and
seven sheepherders (mostly Mexican). Thirty-three were potash laborers, and one was a potash “Kemist” (chemist). This suggests that mining of potash was important for a brief time.\(^{16}\) That was typical of life in the area of Promontory, which was sustained by agriculture and periodically hosted, with only limited success, extractive industry.

A specially published map of the State of Utah showing “lands designated as non-irrigable by the Department of the Interior under the Provisions of the Enlarged Homestead Acts” (1920) shows lands qualifying under the “general provisions” in red, and under “non-residence provisions” (Section 6) in blue. With the exception of a few small areas, most of the area in Box Elder County consists of blue squares, and most of these lie to the north of the Promontory Branch, with the important exception of land south of Promontory and Rozel.\(^ {17}\) Under the Enlarged Homestead Acts, individuals and families could settle on, and claim, up to 640 acres of land, a huge increase from the 160 acres under the original Homestead Act. The checkerboard pattern around the Promontory Branch reveals the private ownership that resulted when the railroad was given land in alternating sections as a provision of the Pacific Railroad Act. Now, with the expansion of the Homestead Act and the rise of dry farming, the area near the Promontory Branch was being offered to souls brave enough to try their hand at agriculture.

Dry farming always suggests risk, but it can also cause potential problems by removing the natural vegetation and exposing the soil to erosion by wind and water. With that risk in mind, perhaps, the U. S. Bureau of Agricultural Economy (BAE) prepared a series of maps from 1934 to 1937 showing the “Problem Areas” of Utah. Using a base map originally compiled by cartographer A. S. Hasson, in 1921 and 1922, the BAE identified areas such as eroded range land, irrigated farmland, and dry farm land. On one map (fig. 8–10), apparently prepared in 1934, a pattern of diagonal lines indicates areas that potentially could be dry farmed, but also shows areas in yellow that evidently were dry farmed. Note that much of the arable area of northwestern Utah (including western portions of the Curlew Valley) is not indicated as being dry farmed, but that much of the area near Promontory Summit is. The area near Howell and Blue Creek shows as a swath of dry farming, with an area of irrigated farming close to Howell. The “tongue” of dry-farmed land extending in a north-south direction sweeps to the west of Promontory, reaching almost to the Great Salt Lake near Monument Point. From Promontory Summit and extending southward, a smaller tongue of dry farming is also found.

The map indicates a very large area of “eroded range land farther west of Promontory, in the area west and south of Kelton. This, evidently, was a result of overgrazing in the very fragile desert ecosystem—a legacy of
the late nineteenth century. Tellingly, this is the same area where the comments were found about land “only suitable for the winter grazing of sheep” on the Southern Pacific Company’s Right of Way and Track Maps of the Promontory Branch in the mid-1920s. Now, in the 1930s, with the realization that overgrazing was irreparably damaging the land, measures were taken to stop, or at least slow, the erosion. It should be noted here that although all grazing has an affect on the land, some grazing animals have a greater negative impact than others. Sheep are notoriously hard on land as they graze the grasses and other vegetation down to, or at least very close to, the roots. Even if sheep could graze the grasses here in winter, the hot, dry summers would take their toll on the vegetation, with consequent soil erosion following. With the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934, there was a steady improvement in the range. Even today, however, the area near Terrace is still recovering long after years of overgrazing followed by repeated droughts. Minimal vegetation and gullying are common.
Dry farming, too, could have a negative impact, especially in those marginal areas where low precipitation is normal and droughts occur with regularity. To that end, the BAE also prepared another problem area map showing “Land Use Adjustment” (Preliminary) (fig. 8–11). Note that there are two types of dry farming shown on this map. The dry-farmed areas near Promontory, and toward Blue Creek and Howell (shown in orange), are healthy enough. However, a very large dry-farmed area, colored a pale yellow, stretches all the way from Idaho southward to Promontory Point and is shown as “problem dry farmed land.” This assessment was based on the impact of dry farming on the land here. Coupled with the fact that crop failure was far more common here than in the more well-watered, deeper soils near Promontory and Howell, the best advice to farmers was to avoid dry farming in the area altogether.
On yet another Preliminary Land Use Adjustment Map, this one dated 1937 and presumably still in final draft form, the dry farm land area remains much the same. However, the “problem dry farmed land” on the other map is now replaced by the term submarginal dryfarm land. The meaning, however, is much the same: dry farming is not a wise idea here. West of Kelton, a new category appears: “Railroad Land—Every other sec[tion] Desert Quality.” This, of course, means the land may not be utilized for any use—at least not on a long-term basis. With these three maps, we see that the Promontory Branch ran through varied country that was changing due to both the experience that people had acquired over the years, and the increasing regulation of land use by governmental bodies. That rise of government was in part a result of the Great Depression which created “alphabet agencies” (like the BAE, WPA, and so on) to help private industry get back on its feet and individuals find work.18

As land was fenced, and wheat planted, the countryside’s appearance and character changed. One aspect almost overlooked during this transition is that it tamed the land, so to speak. In the period 1910–1920, as ranch life began to be eclipsed by dry farming, wild horses became scarcer. Isaac W. Finn (born 1886) recalled that these horses were called “Promontory Mustangs” and that they were “mighty good horses.” Finn recalled breaking “more than you can count on all your fingers,” and that they were shipped from Rozel, where he loaded them “for $2.50 a head.” According to Finn, Hereford cattle dominated the range. There were “stockcars here and the chutes running right up into the cars” which made it easier for the wranglers to “drive the cattle right up the chutes and into the cars.”19

In 1920, the Promontory-Curlew Land Company began to explore the possibility that the area held significant reserves of oil. Ten years later (1930), petroleum geologist S. Goring Vidler prepared a report for the company on its “lands lying in Box Elder County, Utah and Oneida County, Idaho.” He began by noting that these lands “lie just West [sic] of what is known as the promontory which extends into the Great Salt Lake, making a physical protuberance which is well recognized.” This protuberance was, of course, the Promontory Range. Vidler continued that “[t]he lands are a rolling terrain for the most part covered by sage brush which in itself is indicative of fertile soil, and where cultivated land produces excellent crops of wheat, etc.” Of the geology, Vidler noted that under the land’s surface, at a depth of approximately 1,300 feet were “black carbonaceous shales of the basic Pennsylvania[an] and upper Mississippi[an].” The material above these shales was dense enough to trap oil, forming as Vidler called it, a “natural reservoir . . . .” After providing what he called “a short dissertation on the genesis of oil,” Vidler
concluded that “there are four possible horizons from which oil could be produced on this property, all above 4,000 feet [below the surface] . . . .” Vidler’s assessment was glowing, to put it mildly. He noted that “during my twenty odd years in the profession as a geologist and having had seven [oil] fields already to my credit, I wish to say that from the geological and geophysical evidence here, this should be one of the greatest potential oil fields that has yet been discovered on the North American continent.” Vidler’s recommendation, of course, was “that drilling be started immediately . . . .”20 Having made favorable prognostications about the value of resources themselves, the management of the Promontory-Curlew Land Company was evidently cautious about undertaking extensive—and expensive—drilling. Nevertheless, oil was an enticing prospect.

By this time, most of Southern Pacific’s steam locomotives were fueled by oil, as was the developing automobile and trucking industry, but alas, the area did not become an oil producer despite Vidler’s grand prediction. This was ironic, for Southern Pacific’s Ogden facility now featured a huge oil tank that stored bunker C locomotive fuel, a thick oil that required heating before it would flow into the firebox. Locomotives on the Promontory line now burned this fuel oil, as evidenced by their semi-cylindrical whaleback and Vanderbilt tenders (fig. 8–12). The relatively small Consolidation (2–8–0) locomotives like No. 2661 featuring these oil tenders were the largest power used on the line.
In addition to Ogden, oil facilities on the Promontory Summit line were located at Kelton. Leona Yates Anderson’s husband was based out of Kelton for about twelve years. She recalls that Kelton had “a pit, a big pit that they kept the oil in.” This lined pit was covered, but one could still smell the oil in it when the wind was right. The pit was filled with locomotive fuel oil when “[t]hey’d bring an oil tank [car in] and hot it up to the pit and leave it on the high line [an elevated track] and it would go down [i.e., drain by gravity] into the pit.” To get the oil into the locomotive tenders, “they’d pump it out and pump it in to the engine.” As Anderson noted, that “heavy, black” oil—“kind of like a tar oil . . . . That’s what run the engine.” This type of oil pit was common on the Southern Pacific at this time, and the remains of the one at Kelton are still visible.

Photographs taken at Lampo (fig. 8–13) and Blue Creek (fig. 8–14) beautifully reveal the Promontory Branch in the 1920s and 1930s. The large, outside-braced boxcars hauled grain and other materials at this time and were the largest freight cars on the line. Most boxcars now were forty feet in length, while some were fifty feet long—twice the length and nearly twice the weight, of the first boxcars used on the line in 1869. Remarkably, the Blue Creek water tank house was still standing at this time, after about sixty years of service, which was listed as the serviceable lifetime of such water tanks when the ICC valuators visited the area in 1916–1917, and the tank was evidently making good on that
promise. This water tank house was among the last of the nineteenth-century structures standing and serviceable on the Promontory Branch. To the SP, though, economics—not historic sentiment—was the order of the day. That old water tank house represented just one more item that would soon need replacement. In a 1974 interview, Joseph Nicholas (born 1907) fondly remembered the water tank at Blue Creek in the 1920s. The “big tank,” as he called it, was “I’d say close to sixteen feet high and at least twenty feet across.” In winter, because “the tank leaked a little bit,” ice would form “chunks [that seemed to be] as big as this room . . . and being damp in there like that, why it’d stay in there until July.” As Nicholas recalled, in early summer, “sometimes we’d go to town and stop in and get a drink of water and bust off a chunk of ice and take it home and make ice cream.”

As Promontory matured, which is to say declined, the commemoration of the golden spike became an issue as people drove over the back roads in increasing numbers. As noted earlier, there was still some interest in the big event that had occurred in 1869, though it was a distant memory to old-timers. The people who did travel here took notice of the white, concrete obelisk-shaped marker put up in 1916 to commemorate events nearly fifty years earlier. That concrete marker suggested a kind of permanence, as well as antiquity, and it became a landmark at the site. The 1917 valuation maps show the marker as originally
placed on the south side of the tracks as close as possible (or known) to where the original golden spike was hammered home. By the 1920s and 1930s, then, the passage of time had begun to increase Promontory’s allure. The Golden Spike Monument was isolated and associated with a grand event in the Victorian West, and it drew an increasing number of history-seeking adventurers willing to tackle trails and rugged roads of the West on foot or in automobiles.

Many people traveling through the back roads here found themselves at the obelisk-shaped marker and posed for photographs in front of it. An old family photograph shows a radiant Ella Stokes flanked by beaming travel companions John Chugg and Ferman Westergard in about 1931 (fig. 8–15). Their tall, laced boots and jodhpurs suggest that they are prepared for adventure, and the monument almost appears archaeological—an obelisk commemorating the great works of the ancients of Egypt. To give that scene a touch of more modern archaeological drama, an old building (possibly, the Houghton store) is visible in the background. Promontory at this time had attained the status of ghost town—a forlorn place that even though not entirely abandoned, had seen much better days. Now, more than a half-century after the big event, Promontory represented a fragment of a vanished West marked by memories of wood-burning locomotives, ornate passenger cars, and obligatory station stops.

At just this time (namely the 1920s and 1930s), an interest in the history of Promontory began to grow, but the railroad contemplated abandoning it. After all, carloads were relatively few compared to many other areas, and passenger traffic was virtually nil. Besides, the state (and federal) government increasingly built roads, so that trucks might just as easily handle the traffic here. In other words, the railroad viewed abandonment as a way of reducing red ink. It was no secret that the Promontory Branch cost far more to operate and maintain than it earned in income. Not surprisingly, then, abandonment increasingly seemed like the only way out in the 1930s. As the ICC valuation report showed, the railroad line here was now a second-class line at best. In April of 1933, Southern Pacific sought permission from the Interstate Commerce Commission to abandon the 55-mile section of the Promontory Branch from Lucin to Kelton. This section was the most forlorn, and lightly used, on the line. Still, though, the ICC refused Southern Pacific’s request. The line hung on into the early 1940s. However, by the beginning of World War II, with calls for scrap metal to assist the war effort, the time seemed right. Accordingly, in early spring of 1942, the railroad applied for abandonment of the entire line from Corinne to Lucin.

Abandonment hearings are usually intense affairs, and this one was no exception. At a formal meeting in Salt Lake City on May 2, 1942, the
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Official “Abandonment Proceedings” convened. Among the testimony received was that from W. H. Barnard, a farmer from Hansel Valley. When asked for more details about his occupation, Barnard stated, “My principal crop is wheat. I am what they call a dry-land farmer.” In response to other questions, Barnard noted that he was located close to the point on the Southern Pacific line called Kosmo, which was located southwest of Hansel Valley. When asked how many acres in the roughly five-square-mile valley was planted in dry-farmed wheat, Barnard stated “practically all of it . . . approximately twenty thousand acres of land, of wheat land.” That amounted to “around two hundred thousand

Fig. 8–15
In about 1931, a beaming Ella Stokes is flanked by travel companions John Chugg and Ferman Westergard as they pose in front of the obelisk-shaped marker commemorating the driving of the golden spike here.
bushels” of wheat. Barnard noted that the distance to the Union Pacific Railroad at Tremonton was about thirty-eight or forty miles, over a divide. By contrast, it was a gradual slope—“a natural down-grade”—to Kosmo, and that Tremonton took considerable time and effort to reach. Barnard noted that he and about fourteen other farmers had “put up our own loading facilities” at Kosmo at a cost of “between fifteen hundred and two thousand dollars.”

The subject of sheep and cattle ranchers also came up, at which time D. H. Adams of Layton recounted the names of those licensed to run stock in the area, including “the Browning people [who] have a license for four thousand . . . on the old Promontory.” Barnard specifically noted just west of the old Promontory station “the Ellisons and many others from there down to the Salt Wells Valley and around Monument and around that country . . . is set aside for cattle only, and I am satisfied there are fifteen thousand cattle in there, between there and the Nevada line in the winter time.” Adams concluded that abandonment of “this branch line from Corinne to Lucin,” as the hearing examiner called it, “would have a serious effect on all of those that are licensed to stay in there.”

Yet, when pushed to state where the livestock were sent to railhead, Adams had to concede that most were “loaded over at Burley, Idaho” and at Oakley. “There are,” he admitted, “not any of them loaded on the old line here”—although he added, “there are a few loaded down at Lucin on the main line, but that is all.” The examiner then asked an interesting question: Is it “a fact that if the railroad was maintained to Kelton, that you would have a fair degree of security–[?]” Adams answered, “No—no, because of the fact that from the north end and from Ombey, Matlin and Watercress, you would be so far from Kelton that it would be impossible for your horses to pull a load through there.” Another examiner asked Adams about the number of individuals who graze their sheep in the territory “from Promontory west to Lucin,” and Adams guessed about 125. Of these, Adams stated that anyone “building up an outfit, I would say, whether it would be a dry farm or a ranch” would be adversely affected by the railroad’s closure. As Adams put it, “because he wouldn’t want a ranch or a sheep outfit or a cattle outfit out in the desert some place where he couldn’t get feed if it was necessary, and your railroad facilities make a nice setup.” Adams concluded, “without the railroad I would feel that my investments wouldn’t be worth what they are at the present time with the railroad.”

Not all the complainants were farmers or ranchers. For example, J. C. Wood represented the Quaker Crystal Salt Company at Monument. Wood, who also owned a ranch “on this old line,” noted that the “salt company leased land from the Southern Pacific to the beaches of Great Salt
Lake.” The Quaker Crystal Salt Company began operations about 1939 and was developing canals and roads to expand its current operation of “about 85 acres of salt gardens.” Wood noted the importance of the railroad, but was forced to admit that Quaker Crystal had not yet shipped any salt on the Southern Pacific, as the rates were too high. When the subject of shipping salt northward out of the area to Highway 30 came up, Wood noted that was not feasible because the roads were so poor.29

Given his farming interests, the examiners then asked Wood about shipping wheat by truck. Wood, who noted that “at this time I am loading from Promontory and Lampo; [but] not loading anything from Kosmo,” stated that he would have trouble because “I can’t move my crop unless I can get some tires”—which was unlikely given the rationing of rubber during World War II. Wood confirmed that people developed farms near Howell precisely because the railroad ran nearby at Blue Creek. Wood agreed that “with the loading point at Lampo,” farmers had “a ready and easy means to get their crop onto the railroad.” Wood stated that “we loaded out 47 carloads last year—15 or 16 hundred bushels to the car.” Returning to the issue of salt production, Wood concluded that if the railroad was abandoned, the Quaker Crystal Salt Company would have to close down.30

The hearings continued with others testifying as to the railroads’ importance. John P. Holmgren of Bear River City, a “farmer, livestock grower” and “businessman too” was also president of the Box Elder County Cattle and Horse Growers’ Association. Holmgren stated that “we located, as cattlemen and ranchers, all the way from Tremonton to Lucin, expecting the railroad to remain there, and we have built accordingly, and if the railroad is taken away we have thousands of acres that will be reduced in value for saleable purposes.” Holmgren also predicted that Box Elder County “will have a big reduction in income from taxes from the Railroad Company . . . .”31 Despite this statement, Holmgren admitted that he personally had not used the railroad to ship stock from his ranching land near Monument. Upon learning this, Holmgren was asked why he hoped the railroad would not be abandoned: “What, in your opinion, is the necessity of having this branch line and maintaining it around north of the Lake, west to Kelton and Lucin?” Holmgren quickly responded, “There are occasional severe winters, when that railroad has been very serviceable to the cattlemen and farmers in the west, to import cottonseed cake and corn and baled hay at certain seasons of the year, when severe winters come along.” Holmgren continued that about thirty livestock growers from the area west of Promontory stated at a meeting that “the loss to them in range values would be considerable if this railroad were abandoned.” Moreover, that under the “present
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crisis”—by which he meant the war—truck shipments were difficult, so that even farmers would be hard put. He speculated that “a dry-land farm will decrease in value I will say five dollars an acre” and that “I think the sheepmen and the cattlemen will suffer a good deal for the necessities of that railroad in bad seasons” if the railroad were abandoned.32

Later in the hearing, W. S. Young, an employee of Farmers’ Grain Co-operative of Ogden, reported on the importance of grain to the branch line. The co-op, which had been in business since 1938, averaged 75,000 to 100,000 bushels of grain per year from the Kosmo District. Young estimated that this was about half of what was grown there. Moreover, he cited some impressive figures from the Southern Pacific that he made into “exhibits.” Over a five-year period, 901 cars of wheat had been shipped of which 51 were from Kelton. The 850 cars from east of Promontory carried more than 1 million bushels of wheat. The average number of bushels from the Lampo area was 560,000, but only 62,750 originated from Promontory. Additionally 200,000 bushels were grown in the vicinity of Kosmo. The total for the entire area shipped by rail was 1,340,767 bushels, but 4,113,750 bushels were shipped out by all types of transport. Young estimated that “only one car by rail for every three” trucks was the norm—meaning that trucks were normally the more economical way to ship. However, his figures for the last year revealed an increase in rail traffic. This, according to Young, “definitely indicates that the movement is back toward the rails.” The reason? Evidently, because “truck tires are wearing out.”33

The Rosette Asphalt Company of Rozel also weighed in on the proceedings. According to a Mr. Janssen, their business had shipped two carloads in 1937 and one each in 1938, 1939, and 1940—but four cars in 1941. Moreover, during the first four months of 1942, they had shipped one car per month! Buoyed by increasing orders for asphalt, the company planned to ship 2.5 to 3 million pounds of asphalt in drums. One problem with current shipments by rail was that Southern Pacific would not handle any lcl (less-than-carload) freight from a point marked in red on the map used at the hearings. That point was “on the east side of the lake,” so Rosette Asphalt had to ship their product by truck. Janssen noted that the bad condition of the road over Promontory made it difficult to ship by truck to Brigham City. Moreover, there was another problem. In noting the distance to Brigham City on a map, the mileage showed as 39; however, the mileage on several cars [that is, automobiles] showed it to be 50.34 This is yet another example of a problem with a map, only this time it came at the very end of the life of the Promontory line. But this shipper made a critical point: “Where our product goes we will have priorities. All our stuff goes into Defense, in
other words.” Interestingly during the hearing, it was stated that sugar beet traffic accounted for 75 percent of the volume of the line. This was technically true, but virtually all of that traffic was derived from the very eastern end near Corinne and Brigham City.

Toward the end of the hearing, it became apparent that this was a complicated case. Southern Pacific revealed that it had already entered into discussions about divesting itself of the property—that is, selling it. Then, too, it was stated that the Navy Department proposed to requisition the property if the railroad could not sell it outright. The issue of salvage value of the “sixty-two pound rail from Kelton to Lucin” also came up, as one applicant was interested in that. The day’s hearing concluded with the presentation of expense figures on the portion of the line from Corinne to Dathol or Stokes, which totaled $5,288. In itemizing this figure, the costs for station employees ($2,056), wages of train engineers ($550), trainmen ($754), and fuel oil ($221) were also given. As these figures were contrasted with income, the handwriting on the wall became clearer.35

The effective date of certification of abandonment, June 11, 1942, was extended to September 10, 1942, but that was merely a stay of execution, and a technicality. In “cases disposed of without printed report,” a terse listing is found: F.D. No. 13655 Central Pacific Railway Company Et Al Abandonment, Decided June 11, 1942.” The certificate permitted “abandonment by the Central Pacific Railway Company of the part of its Promontory branch between Lucin and Corinne, Utah; and (2) abandonment of operation by the Southern Pacific Company (a) over the Promontory branch between Lucin and Corinne Junction, and (b) over the Oregon Short Line Railroad between Corinne Junction and Ogden, in Box Elder and Weber Counties, Utah. Condition prescribed.”36

Leading up to this, an order of the ICC, held at its office in Washington, D.C., on July 10 that “the Central Pacific Company was permitted to abandon, and the Southern Pacific Company, lessee, to abandon operation of, inter alia [among other things], the line of railroad extending from a point near Lucin to a point near Corinne, approximately 120.78 miles . . . on the condition that the carrier first named shall sell the segment of the line between Dathol and Corinne to the Oregon Short Line Railroad Company or the Union Pacific Railroad Company at a price equal to the fair net salvage value thereof . . . .” The document went on to state that “It further appearing, that negotiations are in progress between the applicants, the Navy Department, which has requisitioned the line, and representatives of the Oregon Short Line Railroad Company or the Union Pacific Railroad Company for continued operation of the portion of said line extending from Dathol to Corinne, approximately 4.8 miles . . . .”37
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The actual abandonment of the Promontory line was apparently unlike any other abandonment in western railroad history. Just as a ceremony marked the completion of the line in 1869, so, too, was the removal of a spike that signaled the demise of the line. More than two hundred people attended the event, which took place on September 8, 1942. As in 1869, two steam locomotives faced each other, speeches given, music played, and news was again made (fig. 8–16). The steam locomotives, however, were relatively modern and more typical of the power that was used on the line at the present time. Their somber black paint was a reminder of just how much railroading had changed from the days of Jupiter and No. 119. This event, too, was far more somber. Whereas the golden spike driven in 1869 symbolized Promontory’s place in the future, the removal of a simulated golden spike at the event in 1942 symbolized the end of Promontory’s rail connection to the outside world. The removal of the spike also signified another sacrifice, as the steel rails were scheduled to go to the nationwide metal drive necessitated by the war industry. In this case, the rails would go to the Navy’s Clearfield supply depot and other locales. Significantly, at almost exactly this time, the Geneva Steel Mill in Provo opened, and it required huge amounts of iron ore and scrap. It is unknown whether any of the Promontory

On September 8, 1942, two contemporary steam locomotives participated in the “undriving” of the spike that signaled abandonment of the Promontory Branch after seventy-three years of service.

Fig. 8–16

On September 8, 1942, two contemporary steam locomotives participated in the “undriving” of the spike that signaled abandonment of the Promontory Branch after seventy-three years of service.
line’s 123 miles of removed rail went there. Most sources suggest that the rails were in good enough shape for reuse as trackage in various naval depots, and therefore not actually scrapped. Most people present felt the removal of the line was for a good cause, but a few questioned whether the quantity of steel removed really justified the dismantling of this important piece of railroad history. It should be recalled that at this crucial time in history, other historic objects made of metal, including historic automobiles and locomotives, were sometimes scrapped.

At any rate, Promontory was about to lose its railroad but would not go out quietly. In anticipation of the line’s dismantling, the large ceremony was a carefully orchestrated event. Ogden Standard-Examiner columnist Frank Frances was master of ceremonies and officials present included Utah Governor Herbert Maw, officials L. P. Hopkins of the Southern Pacific and E. C. Schmidt of the Union Pacific, and Everett Michael of Hyman-Michael Company. In contrast to the 1869 event, LDS Apostle George Albert Smith provided the invocation, after which officials made speeches. Confirming that this event was a team effort, each official “undrove” the spike about an inch until it was free. Interestingly, only one person was present at both this ceremony and the joining of the rails seventy-three years earlier: Mary Ipsen had served as a waitress on the mess car in 1869.

Removal of the line was still fresh in the mind of Merlin Larsen in 2005. Larsen, it will be recalled, lived along the line most of his life. In 1942, at about twenty-five years of age, he was part of the crew that removed the rails for the Southern Pacific. The railroad contracted this crew, likely due to labor shortages during the war. Larsen’s job was to pull out all but three spikes so that the rails could then be easily slipped out. To do so, Larsen recalls, “I had a big clamp, like an ice clamp, hooked onto the rail, [which] tipped over the rail, so it could slide out over [the] spikes.” With this done, the crew “lifted it with a pulley, then shoved it onto a flat car.” The train removing the line had three or four flat cars, and they were brought to Lucin “to hook up with another” that evidently carried the rails off.

Larsen recalled that the removal crew “started at Lampo, [and] went west to Rozel” and he confirmed that the work did not proceed without incident. He noted that “the sharpest bend on the whole railroad was near Rozel, and as they pulled the spikes, the last three wouldn’t hold—the rail moved and the locomotive ‘dropped’ onto the ties. It took several hours to jack up the locomotive and jack the rails underneath it.” The locomotive on the work train was typical. Larsen recalled that it had six drive wheels—probably a Mogul (2–6–0) or Ten-Wheeler (4–6–0)—though Consolidation (2–8–0) locomotives were often used
on the line, too. The entire project of removing the track was rather more difficult for other reasons. Some of the men were bitten by rattlesnakes, others suffered heatstroke in the late summer sun, and the work had to be suspended briefly as a brushfire of unknown origin burned the tinder-dry vegetation along the line.

As a lasting tribute to the early construction of the railroad, Merlin Larsen noted that many of the ties (4\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 4\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches by about 8 feet in length) were in good enough shape to be reused as fence posts by farmers. Larsen and his brother “pulled down the telegraph line from Corinne to the other side of Locomotive Springs.” At the golden spike site itself, Larsen recalled that there were about six poles, driven so deep that we busted them off.” These redwood telegraph poles were still sturdy enough for use as billboard posts—another testimony to the durability of the California redwood brought in by the Central Pacific railroad.

At Promontory itself, the few buildings that remained had developed the patina of abandonment. A reminder of the town’s ranching and farming days was seen in the old windmill and what locals call the “old school,” whose pine boards have been burnished to a bronze color by the sun, rain, snow, and wind (fig. 8–17). Like the railroad itself, the
With the abandonment of the line over Promontory Summit in 1942, rails were removed for the war effort, leaving the Promontory line one of Utah’s many ghost railroads. This picture at Lucin Junction looks westward from the old roadbed of the Promontory line which is marked by the leaning poles (right) to a point where it intersected with the Southern Pacific main line (left).

fabric of the community was time-worn but tenacious. Both, however, were living on borrowed time.

The line over Promontory did not surrender easily, but by fall of 1942, it was added to the many miles of ghost railroad trackage in Utah. Travelers on the mainline just west of the Great Salt Lake could gaze northward at Lucin Junction to see the remains of the old line to Promontory, which was now only an abandoned roadbed with all track removed (fig. 8–18). The old line to Promontory stretched off into the distance in a northeasterly direction while the mainline headed straight for, and across, the lake. In 1942, during the early days of World War II, a traveler heading to San Francisco recalls that mention was made of the old line to Promontory at this point as she rushed westward in her Southern Pacific passenger train. Promontory had been well established as both a fact and a legend at this time. With the abandonment of the old line to Promontory, an era spanning more than three quarters of a century had ended, but another had already begun.