Over the Range

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In describing the recent (2004) completion of Australia’s first transcontinental railway through the desert heart of that huge country, historian Geoffrey Blainey observed that, “there’s something symbolic about a railway.” Blainey noted that, “a railway is created in one grand gesture” as opposed to a road, which usually develops in stages along the route of earlier trails. Uniting Adelaide with Darwin was, to the Australians, much like uniting New York and San Francisco to Americans almost a century and a-half ago. Both railroads were exercises in “nation-building,” as Prime Minister John Howard characterized the Australian project in 2004. In 1869, the completion of the Pacific Railroad promised to bring two disparate parts of the country together, and it delivered on that promise. Like the first American transcontinental railroad, Australia’s new railroad drew considerable attention for both its practical and symbolic value. As Blainey concluded: “We’re a visual people, and a line drawn across the map, almost dead center, captures the imagination.” Americans, too, are a visual people, and the line of their transcontinental railroad drawn across the Great American Desert in 1869 captured their imagination. Like Australia’s new railroad, ours traversed the most desolate country imaginable, but did so in the spirit of national unity. The route over the Promontory Range was, and is, part of our nation’s rich heritage. It was once the future, and now our past. Hopefully, readers of *Over the Range* can now better visualize that railroad as a line drawn across our collective mental map of the American West.'