

Transcontinental Train Travel: Riding the Railroads

By Bill Oudegeest, Donner Summit Historical Society

The arrival of the transcontinental railroad was earth shaking. It was the technological feat of the 19th Century but that was for the railroad and the engineers. It was a marvel for comone people too. Now people could travel to what they'd only heard about and they could see the marvels of the west with their own eyes. They could do it too, at the incredible speed of 20 MPH or so. Train travel over long distances was expensive though and so most people with the money to devote to a cross country experience or without the time, had to rely on correspondents and there was no lack of them.

For Samuel Bowles in "Our New West" (1869) The Pacific Railroad unlocks the mysteries of Our New West. It opens a new world of wealth, and a new world of natural beauty, to the working and the wonder of the old." He went further in another book, "The Pacific Railroad Open, How to Go, What to See (1869) "It is the unrolling of a new map, the revelation of a new empire, the creation of a new civilization, the revolution of the world's haunts of pleasure and the world's homes of wealth."

According to the Pacific Tourist (1881) guidebook for travelers, "In no part of the world is travel made so easy and comfortable as on the Pacific Railroad... with absolutely no fatigue or discomfort. One lives at home in the Palace Car with as much true enjoyment as in the home drawing room... with the constant change of scenes afforded from the car window.... [a] little section and berth allotted to you, so neat and clean, so nicely furnished and kept... Here you sit and read, play your games, indulge in social conversation and glee, and if fortunate enough to possess good company of friends to join you, the overland tour becomes an intense delight." The train, gives "an appearance of strength, massiveness and majestic power, you can but admit it is exceedingly beautiful and impressive... it seems the handsomest work... The slow rate of speed, which averages but sixteen to twenty miles per hour, day and night, produces a peculiarly smooth, gentle and easy motion, most soothing and agreeable."

Trains stopped three times a day so passengers could eat. "Usually all the eating-houses on both the Pacific Railroads are very excellent indeed. The keepers have to maintain their culinary excellence under great disadvantages... as all food but meats must be brought from a great distance... meals at all dining-halls are excellent, and food of great variety is nicely served ; buffalo meat, antelope steak, tongue of all kinds, and always the best of beefsteak."

Wm. Meluishish took the train in 1870 and said the food was good and reasonably priced. He also said it was important to secure one of the sleeping car berths. First class carriages were constructed "so as to prevent any person from lying down..." Train cars were packed with passengers, two people sitting on each. "Sitting upright for seven days' and nights, in the motion, is beyond endurance."

Double seats were slid together and folded down to make a sofa six feet long by three wide, on which he puts a good thick hair matrass [sic], feather pillows, clean sheets and rug." Overhead a hinged shelf was let down making a ship-berth. Occupants had a looking-glass, a lamp, a portable table, and a spittoon. The seats were covered in velvet and the floor was carpeted. There were

separate dressing rooms for men and women that had washstands, clean towels, ice water, "&c." Baggage could be checked the whole distance, and access had to it at all times. Only a small bag was allowed in the car.

"The scenery changes from the grand and sublime in the wild Rocky Mountains to grassy plains, dreary desert, smiling homesteads, pretty farms, orchards, gardens, villages, towns, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, &c, &c, like a kaleidoscope ; something fresh every minute, and never tiring. Very little risk is run ; the drivers are extremely careful ; the ascents and descents are gradual and easy, every bridge, cutting, and embankment is slowly gone over at the rate of four miles an hour." A fellow named Wm. Fraser remarked on the scenery too as his train went over Donner Summit. "The glimpses one gets are just sufficient to tantalize and not prolonged enough to satisfy. The view of Donner Lake is the most charming of them all." Above Summit Station "the peaks of the mountains tower cloudwards. The scene is one of unprecedented grandeur."

Passengers had to change trains at Promontory, going from UPRR trains to CPRR trains. They moved their luggage, got new sleeping berths and got a meal. They also had time to stroll through the town and see the sights in the town made "partly from canvas or wood" because initially the railroad companies did not coordinate their trains. Passengers waited up to fifteen hours at Promontory to continue. One wooden dwelling that attracted notice had muslin curtains "within the window." That house had "two or three smiling females" ready to welcome all who would enter. That was a "characteristic of all these rude settlements..."

To help the town economy agents were sent up the rail lines to take the trains back to Promontory. On the trip they would talk to the passengers and upon arrival at Promontory the agents would take their new friends to try their luck. Then Fraser described 3 Card Monte and how it was conducted to the disadvantage of the train travelers. The game could be considered perfectly fair if fairness consisted of uniform winning on one side and uniform losing on the other.

Robert Louis Stevenson traveled to the U.S. in 1880 and wrote about his railroad travel experiences in "Amateur Emigrant." He boarded an emigrant train heading west, "There was a babel of bewildered men, women, and children." "It was a tight jam; there was no fair way through the mingled mass of brute and living obstruction... we stood like sheep... and... the porters charged among us like so many maddened sheep-dogs;..." People were separated into cars by category. The Chinese were in one car, single men were in another, and families in were a third. Passengers shared benches and if they did not have traveling companions they were paired up with a partner, which Stevenson called "chums" to share a plank on which to sleep. They prepared their own food except when there were stops along the way. Trains could leave with no warning. Being on time was not a priority and conductors were rude and uncommunicative. The railcars were long narrow wooden boxes "with a stove and convenience, one at either end..." The benches were narrow and short.

RLS complained about the travel but also included a letter by an 11 year old from twenty years previously to put things in perspective. The child was part of a wagon train that was attacked by Indians. His family was killed and the child had a much more difficult time getting to California.

Travel was hard but RLS was enchanted by the scenery. “I stood on the platform by the hour;... I began to exult with myself upon this rise in life like a man who has come into a rich estate.”
“The Great Plains – rich and various, and breathed an elegance... it was a sort of paradise.”

Sidebar:

- For more information and a list of summer activities going on in Truckee to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Transcontinental Railroad go to <https://goldspike.org> or the Facebook page: Donner Summit-Truckee Golden Spike Celebration.

About the author:

Bill Oudegeest has had a house on Donner Summit for more than forty years. He is a retired public school teacher and administrator and one of the founders of the Donner Summit Historical Society. He writes and edits the Donner Summit Heirloom, has published two books on local history, written a variety of pamphlets and exhibits, leads hikes, etc.