

With the completion of the transcontinental railroad, celebrations immediately broke out. The entire country was able to participate in the driving of the Golden Spike at Promontory Point, Utah on May 10, 1869. The transcontinental railroad was finished and the dignitaries had gathered. The driving of the Golden Spike was to be the ceremonial finish. A wire had been attached to the spike maul and another wire to the Golden Spike. Each strike of the maul on the Golden Spike would send a click across the telegraph wires to the country. The nation would instantaneously know the tracks from the east and the west were joined. It was truly an age of wonder.

Governor Stanford missed the spike on his first strike but the telegraph operator dutifully clicked the key anyway. Bells rang; people rejoiced.

The railroad was done.

People had even been giddy with excitement earlier as the railroad climbed over the Sierra. As one correspondent to the Sacramento Union wrote in 1867, the railroad “will give to our wealth and progress an impetus so great that even the most sanguine among us will find this calculation far exceeded by the reality.” With the driving of the Golden Spike there could be real celebration of accomplishment and opportunity. Festivities were the order of the day. Sacramento, the starting point of the western portion of the road, and San Francisco had huge celebrations that must have been planned far in advance. There were also celebrations in Virginia City, Stockton, Petaluma, Placerville, and Vallejo.

In Sacramento there had been ads in the papers drawing people to the celebration. The Sacramento Union said on May 8, 1869 that “a victory over space, the elements, and the stupendous mountain barriers separating the East from the West, and apparently defying the genius and energy of man to surmount. Every heart was gladdened by the contemplation of the grand achievement..”

The Daily Alta California reported (May 9, 1869) “A minute ... before 10 o’clock the completion was announced of the laying of the last rail and the driving of the last spike on the Central Pacific Railroad. Immediately following the report there went up a most unearthly din, produced by all the engines owned by the Company, which were gaily decorated and arranged along the city front, with a chorus of all the stationary engines and city boats and the ringing of city bells, which continued ten minutes, during which persons of weak tympana put their fingers in their ears, and rejoiced when the chorus was over. Thousands were present who never before and never will again hear such a grand diapason. The engineers vied with one another in producing screeches and sounding notes. There was harmony and discord... All the principal streets were packed, rending locomotion difficult. The procession commenced moving at eleven o’clock.”

The first shovel used to build the railroad was exhibited as were the first tie and a picture of the last one.

The grand parade included bands; the militia, the National Guard accompanied by artillery, firemen, machinists, blacksmiths, boilermakers, wagons with machinery; contingents of civic organizations; a boiler and attached smokestack; 29 omnibuses, carriages, and wagons of school children; politicians; a contingent of weavers; carriages, buggies, and horsemen, rail workers; wagons from the telegraph company and Wells Fargo; etc. Participants arrived in 18 trains. There was bunting, banners with stirring quotes, and flags; speeches and poems; there was music and there was prayer.

There were throngs of people, even some of the workers who’d laid the 10 miles of track in one day. The parade took hours to pass.

The San Francisco Bulletin reported Judge Nathan Bennet’s speech at the San Francisco celebration. He said this triumph of railroad construction was wholly



Above: China Wall, constructed by Chinese railroad workers. The stones fit perfectly with no mortar.

owing to the fact that his fellow Californians were “composed of the right materials, derived from the proper origins... In the veins of our people flows the commingled blood of the four greatest nationalities of modern days. The impetuous daring and dash of the French, the philosophical spirit of the German, the unflinching solidity of the English, and the light-hearted impetuosity of the Irish, have all contributed each its appropriate share... A people deducing its origins from such races, and condensing their best traits into its national life, is capable of any achievements.” It was stirring.

There were no Chinese at all, even though they had made up the vast majority of CPRR workers who filled the cuts, bored the tunnels, leveled the hills, cut the trees, drilled the holes, blasted and moved the rock, and laid the rail and were the ones who laid the record ten miles of track in one day to win a bet for Charles Crocker, one of the Big 4.

Not far in the future mobs would burn out Chinatowns and Chinese businesses along the route of the railroad and assault individual Chinese. Prejudice would be officially mandated by court decisions in California and, nationally, the Chinese Exclusionary Act would be passed just a dozen years later.

How quickly people can forget.

“I wish to call your minds that the early completion of this railroad we have built has been in large measure due to that poor despised class of laborers called the Chinese – to the fidelity and industry they have shown.”

Sacramento Daily Union May 8, 1869



# Chinese Railroad Workers

Without the Chinese, it would have been impossible to complete the Western portion of this great national highway.

Leland Stanford

