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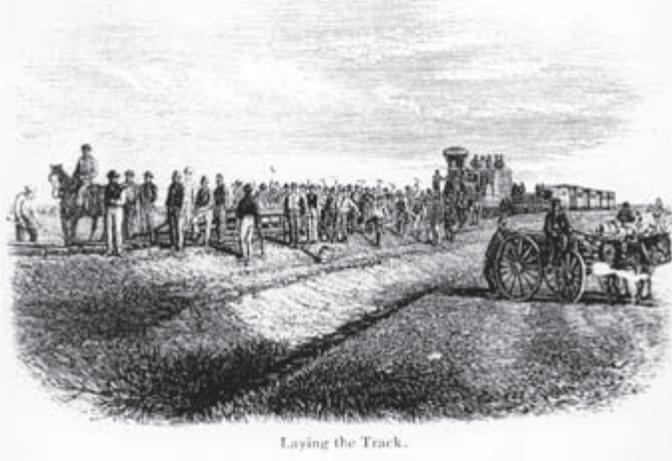
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Rails to the Rockies

How Denver Got Two Railroads (Sort of),
but Not the One It Really Wanted

Eric L. Clements

Above: Laying the track for the Kansas Pacific Railroad. From New Tracks in North America by William A. Bell (London: Chapman and Hall, 1869). 10027376

ISOLATION was the greatest problem confronting Denver City in 1860. Horace Greeley, visiting in 1859, noted Colorado goods selling “at far more than California prices.” He recommended “a railroad from the Missouri to the heads of the Platte or Arkansas.” The locals certainly agreed, but Colorado’s first railroad wasn’t even intended for the territory. The Union Pacific crossed nine miles of northeastern Colorado in June 1867 on its way to Promontory Point, but the company’s decision that same summer to build north of Colorado was received with much dissatisfaction in Denver.¹

To understand Denver’s enthusiasm for railroads, consider the alternatives. The town’s first stagecoach arrived in May 1859 after a nineteen-day slog from Leavenworth, Kansas. Service got faster, a week to ten days, but never much easier. Demas Barnes, traveling west from Atchison, Kansas, described the stagecoach experience as “fifteen inches of seat, with a fat man on one side, a poor widow on the other, a baby in your lap, a bandbox over your head, and three or four more persons immediately in front leaning against your knees.” Even the arrival of the railhead at Cheyenne in 1867 only alleviated the stage trip’s agony by decreasing its duration.²

And such abuse did not come cheap. In the spring of 1859, John M. Hockaday & Co. advertised stage service from Atchison to Denver City for \$100 per passenger and board, with forty pounds of baggage. If you intended to do more than visit, you would need much more than forty pounds of kit. Pratt and Hunt’s 1859 *Guide to the Gold Mines of Kansas* recommended that a party of four outfit themselves with 3,000 pounds of supplies for a six-month sojourn at the mines. To haul this household, the guide suggested using oxen at \$80 to \$100 per yoke or mules for \$125. Mules could make the passage from eastern Kansas to the mines in thirty days, oxen in thirty-five or so. The guide put the cost of moving freight by “freight express trains” over the same distance at \$250 a ton. That first season one company advertised an ox-team “express” for \$50, with a transit of “about 30 days.” One small detail: “Women, children or sick persons only will be allowed to ride by this express. To those accustomed to walking . . . this will be a pleasant and cheap mode of conveyance.”³

Western railroad explorations began even before the Mexican War officially ended. John C. Fremont led an expedition into the Colorado Rockies in December 1848, hoping to demonstrate the practicality of wintertime rail passage through the mountains. His demonstration ended with a third of his thirty-three-man party dead of exposure, with perhaps a little cannibalism involved—not the best advertisement for a Colorado transcontinental. In

the 1850s locating the transcontinental corridor became a sectional issue, unresolved until Congress passed the Pacific Railway Act in 1862 after the southern secession. The act stipulated that the Union Pacific Railroad be built “from a point on the western boundary of the State of Iowa, to be fixed by the President of the United States.” In November 1863 President Lincoln, a former railroad lawyer from Illinois, declared Omaha, almost due west of Chicago, to be the Union Pacific’s starting point.⁴



Edward L. Berthoud, 1864
10041097

That northern location clouded Denver’s transcontinental dream, but the city’s boosters were already working on the problem. The *Rocky Mountain News* frequently extolled Colorado’s “large and constantly increasing trade,” especially when compared to the “sterile and barren country” to the north. But the paper’s assertions that a line through Denver would be “the shortest and most practical . . . route between the two oceans” would be put to the surveyors’ tests.⁵ Coloradans had begun to scout the possibilities in 1861, with a survey up Clear Creek led by E. L. Berthoud. Engineer F. M. Case, with *Rocky Mountain News* editor William Byers in tow, resurveyed

Berthoud’s pass the following July and returned with discouraging findings. His assessment was partly dictated by the terms of the Pacific Railway Act, which required that the railroad’s “grades and curves shall not exceed the maximum [2.2 percent] grades and [400-foot minimum] curves of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad.”⁶

Case reexamined potential routes west of Denver in the fall of 1864, this time as the Union Pacific’s division engineer. He quickly realized that every option he scouted presented formidable challenges, including routes up the Platte and Cache la Poudre valleys and over Hoosier and Berthoud passes. In one instance he didn’t even do the survey, just the math. Case estimated between Boulder City and Boulder Pass “a difference of elevation of 6,300 feet [to be] overcome in a distance at most of 35 miles [an average grade of 3.4 percent]. Knowing these facts, I have not even visited the Boulder Pass.”⁷

The Union Pacific conducted a few more surveys, and Union Pacific chief engineer Grenville Dodge and his surveyors visited Denver and the mountains

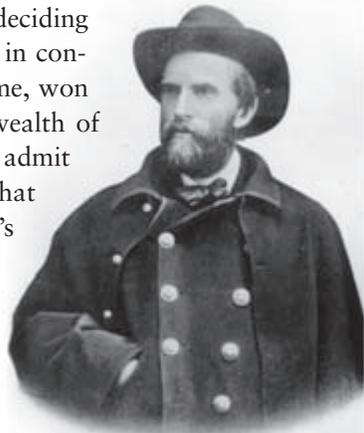
for one last look in September 1866 before deciding to build to the north of Colorado. Savings in construction and operating costs, as well as time, won out against detouring south to claim the wealth of Denver and the diggings. Although loath to admit it at the time, the *News* later conceded that railroaders would not build over Colorado's 11,000-foot passes when they could cross Wyoming's divide at less than 8,000 feet, "and they would be fools to attempt it."⁸

Following the decision, Denver's allegiance to the Union Pacific quickly shifted to the Union Pacific, Eastern Division (UPED), a separate company later renamed the Kansas Pacific. This company was building west along the Smoky Hill River in Kansas under a provision in the Pacific Railway Act intended to mollify St. Louis for the loss

of the UP to Chicago. At the end of 1865 the UPED surveyed to Denver, and in February 1866 stockholders determined to build to the city within three years. But the cash-starved road built slowly across the prairie and came to a halt forty miles east of the Colorado border in September 1868.

So that year saw one transcontinental railroad building north of Colorado and another stopped dead in its tracks in Kansas from lack of funds. But by then Denver's do-it-yourself project was in the works. Some of the city's business leaders incorporated the Denver Pacific Railway and Telegraph Company on November 19, 1867, capitalized at \$2 million. Residents privately subscribed \$300,000 within a few days to help finance the project and overwhelmingly approved \$500,000 in Arapahoe County bonds for the railroad in January 1868.

This civic enthusiasm was propelled, in part, by threats from rival towns along the Front Range. The most significant came from Golden, where, in 1865, William A. H. Loveland and his associates organized what became the Colorado Central Railroad to connect with a road arriving from the east, northeast, or north, and then to build west over Berthoud Pass. The plan progressed so far as to reach a construction agreement with the Union Pacific and push railroad bond elections with some success in the counties the line proposed to traverse. This initiative presented an intolerable challenge to Denver's supremacy. The *Rocky Mountain News* reacted by attacking the

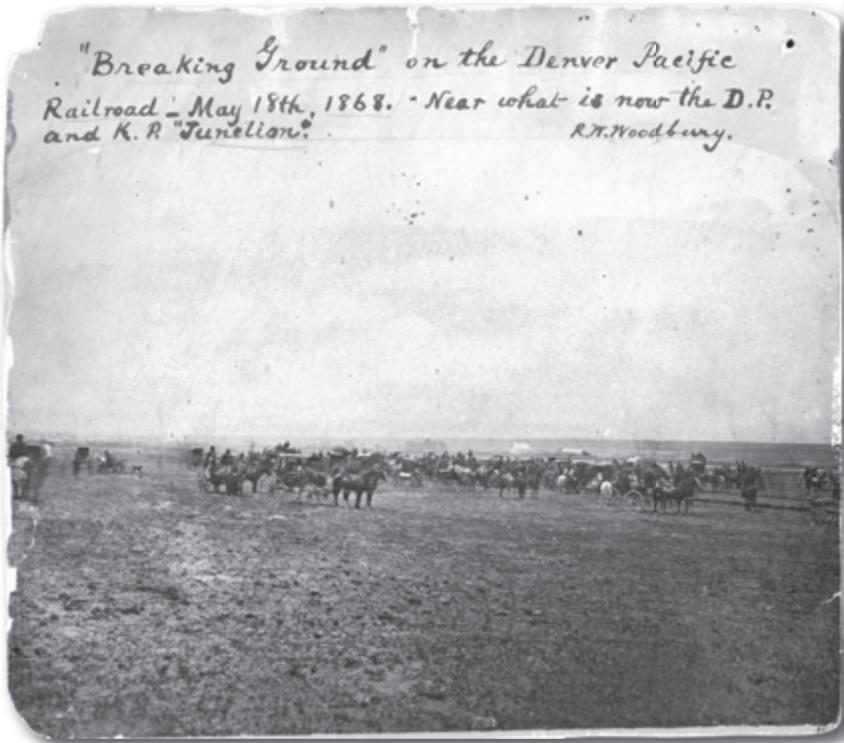


MAJOR-GENERAL GRENVILLE M. DODGE
Commander
Department of the Missouri
1862.

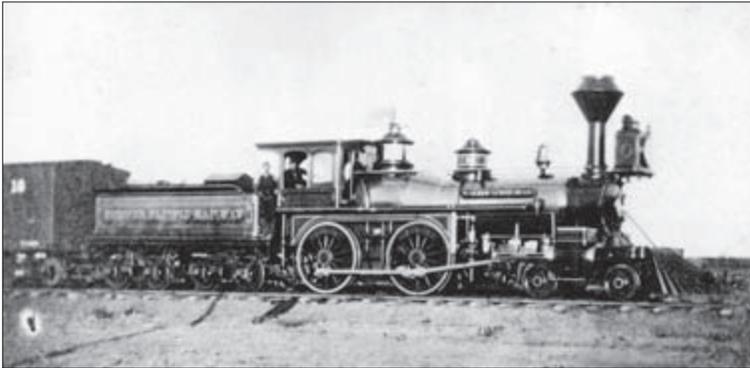
*Courtesy Denver Public Library,
Western History Collection*

Golden syndicate's "insane and foolish efforts to cut Denver off from the mountain trade" while exhorting Denver "to meet the issue promptly and take care of her interests before suffering loss." Although busy abusing the plans, motives, and character of its rivals, the paper deflected accusations of partisanship by blandly declaring that "Denver cannot work against any part of Colorado because, being the heart of Colorado, an injury to any part of it injures herself."⁹

Railroads adeptly played on these town rivalries to win valuable concessions, but localities were not above threatening railroads with other railroads. Having had little success selling the Arapahoe County bonds, the directors of Denver's home road adopted the sharper tactic of pitting the transcontinental railroads against each other. First, the Denver Pacific reached a construction agreement with the Union Pacific in April 1868. When that fell through the following year due to the UP's own financial weakness, the Denver Pacific reversed course and allied with the Kansas Pacific.



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The Walter Scott Cheeseman locomotive of the Denver Pacific Railway pulled the first passenger train to Denver from Cheyenne. Courtesy Denver Public Library, Western History Collection.

In 1869 the Kansas Pacific ceded its federal land grants north of Denver to the DP, and the two companies signed a construction, operating, and revenue-sharing agreement that effectively merged them. Thus the Denver Pacific acquired financial backing at the cost of local control—not the last Colorado railroad to make that devil’s bargain—and the Kansas Pacific eliminated competition at the western end of its line, at least temporarily.

With these settlements, Denver’s eleven years of railroad frustration evaporated in as many months. The Denver Pacific began laying rails south from Cheyenne in mid-September 1869, crossed into Colorado in early October, and reached Denver on June 22, 1870. The Kansas Pacific built into Colorado at the beginning of 1870 and finished by connecting near Strasburg on August 15, with a second track gang building eastward from Denver. Celebrating the arrival of the Denver Pacific, the *News* boomed that “a new era of progress and prosperity opens before us.”¹⁰

Sometimes the boosters are right. After a mere 0.21 percent population increase between 1860 and 1870, from 4,749 to 4,759 persons, Denver witnessed a 649 percent jump in the ensuing decade, to 35,629 residents by 1880. In 1890 after another 200 percent gain, Denver, with its 106,000 residents, was the twenty-sixth-largest city in the country, a position it retains to this day. The 1880 U.S. Census attributed the 1870s population surge to the Leadville bonanza, but a Denver city directory estimated the city’s population as 23,856 in 1875, putting 62 percent of the increase in the first half of the decade—before the Leadville excitement.

By 1880 Denver hosted five railroads, radiating in all directions, and had become the state’s political, financial, and transportation hub. The rail-

roads decisively ended Denver's prairie-grass isolation. An 1879 guidebook advised that "in going to Colorado . . . no laying in of stores or supplies is necessary, for everything that can be obtained in an ordinary Eastern town can be had there," and this "as cheaply or with but a trifling advance on New York prices." The guide noted that the passenger trip from Kansas City took thirty-two hours at a round-trip fare of \$38—dramatic contrasts with the thirty-five-day trudge of the ox-wagon "express" or the \$200 (or more) round trip by stage.¹¹

On the threshold of victory in October 1869, the *News* welcomed Denver's railroads "better late than never." True, the city would not have its outlet to Salt Lake City for another sixty-four years, but, as the paper observed, "we could not do the best thing and so have done the next best." In little more than a decade, the next-best thing would be good enough to transform rude Denver City into the Queen City of the Mountain West.¹²

NOTES

- 1 Horace Greeley (Charles T. Duncan, ed.), *An Overland Journey from New York to San Francisco in the Summer of 1859* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1964), 315.
- 2 Demas Barnes (W. Storrs Lee, ed.), *Colorado: A Literary Chronicle* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970), 226.
- 3 Pratt and Hunt, *A Guide to the Gold Mines of Kansas* (Chicago: C. Scott and Co. Printers, 1859), 15, 17, 29 (un-paged advertisement at rear), 30.
- 4 "An Act to Aid in the Construction of a Railroad and Telegraph Line from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean," [hereafter Pacific Railway Act], Section 14, www.ourdocuments.gov, U.S. NARA, April 1, 2005.
- 5 *Rocky Mountain News* [hereafter RMN], December 29, 1865, 2; September 22, 1866, 1; October 5, 1866.
- 6 Pacific Railway Act, Sec. 12.
- 7 "Report of F. M. Case, Division Engineer, on Surveys of Cache La Poudre, and South Platte Routes; and other Mountain Passes in Colorado, made in 1864" (copy in the Western History Collection, Denver Public Library), 1, 2, 4, 6, 9.
- 8 RMN, July 18, 1868, 1.
- 9 RMN, November 25, 1868; April 27, 1870.
- 10 RMN, June 29, 1870.
- 11 Frank Fossett, *Colorado: Its Gold and Silver Mines, Farms and Stock Ranges, and Health and Pleasure Resorts* (New York: C. G. Crawford, Printer, 1879), 7, 8, 10, 35, 83.
- 12 RMN, October 13, 1869, 1.