
The Big Fill Trail

A short walking tour along two rival railroad grades

Ed De Leonardis - June 22, 2019



Introduction

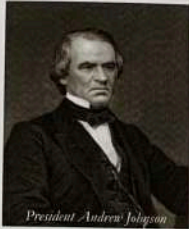
To observe the 150th Anniversary of the completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad my wife, Alice, and I visited northern Utah this May. Knowing that the actual Golden Spike site would be swamped with visitors on May 10, we were able to go two days earlier and quietly travel back in time.

As the two competing railroad companies, the Central Pacific (CP) and Union Pacific (UP) approached each other in 1868, the race accelerated to win as many government bonds and land grants as possible. As the location where the two rail lines would meet had not yet been established, grading crews from both companies actually passed by each other. In spite of this, no duplicate completed railroad tracks were ever laid.

The nearby photo (from a large poster prepared by the California State Railroad Museum, and displayed during an excellent presentation by Scott Inman at the joint Southern Pacific Historical & Technical Society and Union Pacific Historical Society Meeting) discusses how in the final months of construction Collis

THE FIRST TRANSCONTINENTAL

Grading Wars



President Andrew Johnson

Huntington - Battle of the maps:
Huntington took interest in the provision of the law that allowed for an advance on its subsidy for partially completed work beyond the end of track. He claimed the surveys and grading CP had done earned partial subsidy to Ogden. Fearing what would happen when his working relationships within the Johnson administration disappeared, he pushed hard to get the payment before Grant's inauguration on March 4, 1869.

Huntington to President Andrew Johnson - *"We earnestly protest against any delay which will postpone our rights to the decision of another administration."*

His political maneuvering worked, because on March 3, 1869, Secretary of the Treasury, Hugh McCulloch, issued bonds to the Central Pacific to milepost 740 (near Ogden). This was one day before the inauguration of President Grant. It accomplished two things. First, it brought in money. Second, it blocked UP from getting paid for work past Ogden.

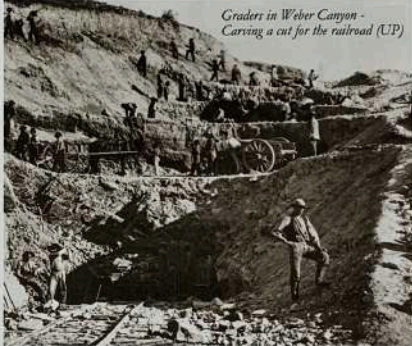
Late 1868 - Crews for both railroads had surveyed across Promontory Summit in an effort to secure a route for their railroads. As the race sped up, changes were needed in the routes to make them faster to build and cheaper.

As a first strike, Thomas C. Durant (UP) ordered graders 300 miles past the end of track to Humboldt Wells, Nevada.


Early 1869 - At the direction of Stanford (CP), Civil Engineer George Gray (CP) and crew rerouted the Central Pacific grade to be faster and cheaper to build.

January 1869 - Thomas Durant (Vice President - UP) with engineer Silas Seymour (UP) and Thomas Morris (UP) changed Dodge's (UP) line. The new route required the "Big Trestle".

Spring 1869 - In an effort to outdo each other, the two railroads ended up with almost a hundred miles of parallel grade. See map below.



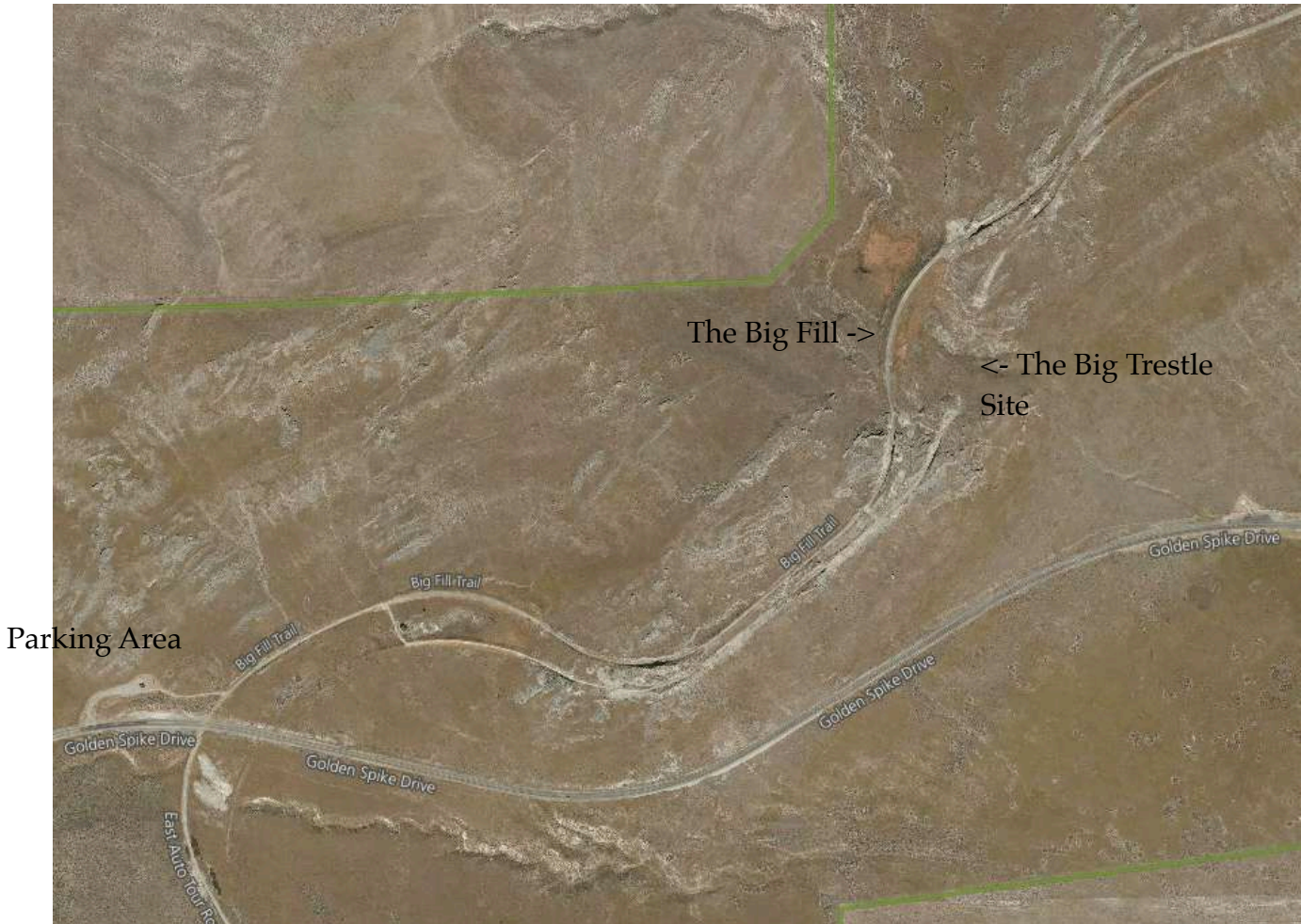
Graders in Weber Canyon - Carving a cut for the railroad (UP)



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Early Union Pacific civil engineering camp near Ogden at the entrance to Weber Canyon

Huntington, Central Pacific Vice-President out-maneuvered the Union Pacific to secure Central Pacific access to Ogden, Utah.

Adjacent Railroad Grades on The Big Fill Loop Trail



A highlight of our visit was walking The Big Fill Loop Trail. There is a parking area on the right about four miles before you get to the actual Golden Spike site. A free, descriptive audio tour is available to access from your cellphone.



The trail begins on the original Central Pacific grade. Alice is looking out toward the adjacent Union Pacific grade. In the distance you can see the cut for the Union Pacific route. The Central Pacific cut is hidden around the curve. As the Central Pacific grade was kept up until 1942 when the line was abandoned and now by the Park Service, it remains in good condition. The Union Pacific route was abandoned by 1870 and is more narrow and rustic. The marker is for Cell Phone Tour Stop #2.



The Central Pacific cut in the distance, leading to The Big Fill.



Walking through the deep cut.

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After you exit the cut, there is a straight section along the ridge before you reach The Big Fill. Barely discernible is the now narrow Union Pacific Grade directly below. Golden Spike Drive is seen curving in the distance.

Below is The Big Fill with Cell Phone Tour Stop #6. Fresh green grass covers the grade's slope.





This aerial view plaque above shows The Big Fill and the approaches to the long removed Union Pacific Big Trestle. Below is a prominent nearby cut in the mountain used to obtain material for The Big Fill. Wisely, the material was moved downhill.

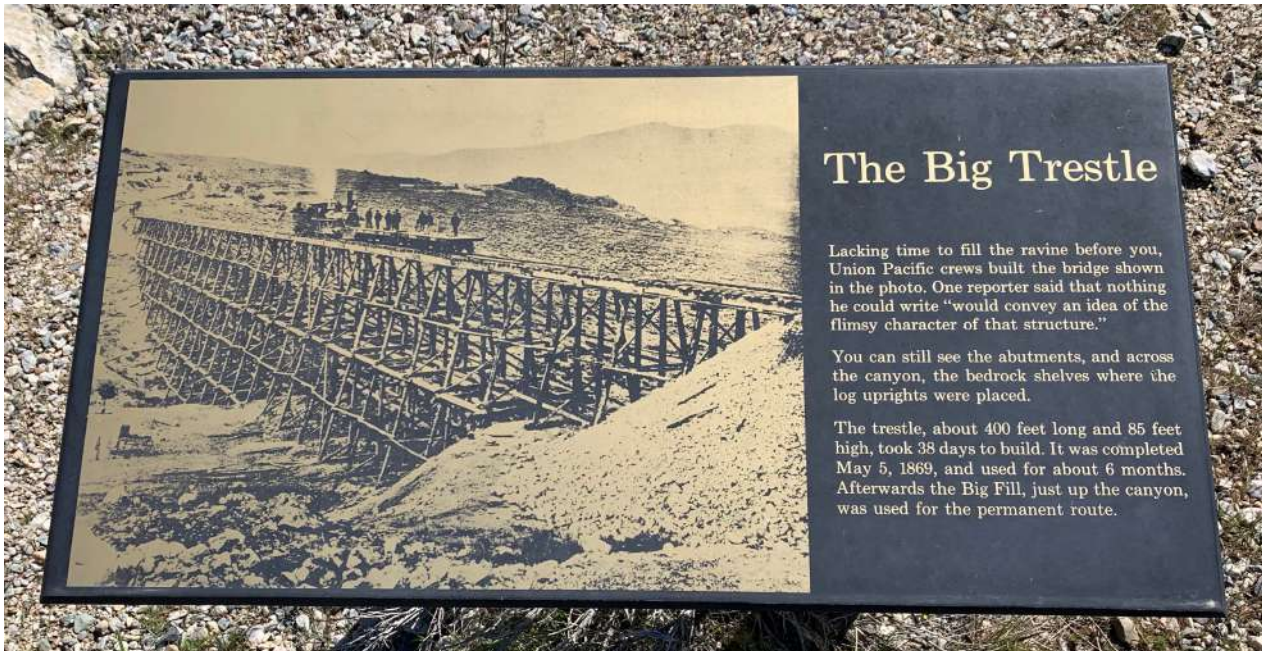




From the beginning of The Big Fill, you may continue on the Central Pacific grade or hike down on the Loop Trail 20 feet to the west end of the UP grade at its Big Trestle Site. Above, we are near the end of the west grade for the UP trestle site.



The UP Big Trestle site.





Beginning to return on the original UP grade through its cut, camera looking westbound. Note how narrow the long abandoned grade is without any significant maintenance for nearly 150 years.

The Big Fill Trail, Part 3

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Inside the Union Pacific cut camera looking westbound.

Below is a closer view of one of the walls of the UP cut. The vertical white lines are original hand drill scars where the blasting powder was placed.





As you leave the UP Cut (on the right) you can look back and see the CP Grade above (on the left). Amazingly, there is a partial cut in between the two grades (UP False Cut, middle). The descriptive narration said it was a cut begun by the UP crews but then abandoned in favor of the shorter one on the right.



The Big Fill

From Golden Spike Drive turnout, you can see The Big Fill in the distance. The UP Big Trestle would block most of the view of The Big Fill, green this May from all the rain.





The two parallel horizontal thin green lines (just to the left of center, in the middle of the photo) are from spring grasses growing on the adjacent CP (above) and UP (below) grades. This view is from the East Auto Tour on a different section of the old CP grade. Just around the bluff to the right where a cut is visible is The Big Fill, out of sight from this view.



Panoramic view south from the East Auto Tour with an extension of the Great Salt Lake and further, snow on the Wasatch Mountains. Except for the modern vehicles, probably not much has changed in 150 years since the rails were joined a few miles west.