

# *THE* LAST SPIKE IS DRIVEN



*A Reenactment Script  
for the Golden Spike Ceremony*

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# Foreword

The driving of the golden spike was indeed an historic event, and the men who participated in the May 10, 1869, ceremony delivered eloquent speeches worthy of the occasion.

Three generations of spectators have heard those speeches, thanks to a volunteer cast of area residents. A county tradition before the location was given National Historic Site status, the annual reenactment is rooted in a dedicated cast. A third generation of descendants of some participants now fills the roles.

Earlier observances had been held at the site in the 83 years since completion of the transcontinental railway, but the first scripted reenactment took place by the obelisk at Promontory on May 10, 1952. According to its author, Marie Thorne Jeppson, the first reenactment was presented by the Box Elder County Camp of Daughters of Utah Pioneers on April 4, 1947, at the Hotel Utah in Salt Lake City in commemoration of Utah's centennial year. Her mother, Oneta J. Thorne, was Box Elder County DUP president and prevailed upon Mrs. Jeppson to write the reenactment script.

The reenactment's public debut was in 1951 when Box Elder County and Brigham City observed their centennial. Mrs. Jeppson included "Driving of the Golden Spike" as a vignette within a pageant written for the occasion.

Early in 1952 the Brigham City Chamber of Commerce, cast members and local residents decided to make the reenactment an annual event at Promontory in response to Bernice Gibbs Anderson's continuing efforts to bring official recognition to the site.

The event was a rousing success, and the crowds grew larger in succeeding years. The show went on in all kinds of weather and with occasional changes in cast through the years from 1952 to 1969.

As the show went on annually, so did efforts to create a National Historic Site, with full

designation granted in 1965. Plans were drawn up by the National Park Service for a visitor center, and also for a huge Golden Spike Centennial celebration in 1969.

Such an auspicious occasion, plus historical source materials available through the Department of the Interior, called for a script revision. Mrs. Jeppson worked closely with park historian F. A. (Andy) Ketterson to create a new and more historically accurate script. The number of characters doubled to include others who took part in the original ceremony. It was designed to fit into the 27 minutes recorded by the telegrapher through his messages to the nation. An estimated 28,000 people viewed the reenactment during the May 1969 performance.

Each year, folks look to the reenactment as the highlight of the program. The cast doesn't disappoint them. It is all there: fancy words, eloquent prayer and, of course, the missed strike of the spike by railroad officials.

In more ways than one, the reenactment cast is a family. Some represent succeeding generations of early cast members—sons, grandsons, nephews and in-laws. As old soldiers fade away others join the ranks.

As in all families, they have memories: Reverend Todd's prayer tucked into his hat, bloopers and ad-libs, migrating mustaches, blowing top hats, costume seams giving way... memories are part of the glue that has held them together.

Their ardor in keeping those eloquent words of May 10 alive could be matched with that of workers and financiers who dedicated years to building the first transcontinental railroad. Those are whom the reenactment honors.

*Sarah Yates*

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# Cast of Characters

**Narrator**

*Telegrapher*

**Edgar Mills**

*Sacramento Banker and  
Master of Ceremonies*

**Dr. H. W. Harkness**

*Sacramento newspaper  
editor and publisher*

**Reverend Dr. John Todd**

*Reporter of the Boston  
Congregationalist*

**Leland Stanford**

*President of the Central  
Pacific Railroad and Ex-  
Governor of California*

**Dr. Thomas C. Durant**

*Vice-President of the  
Union Pacific Railroad*

**Gen. Grenville M. Dodge**

*Union Pacific Chief Engineer*

**Mr. F.A. Tritle**

*U. S. Railroad  
Commissioner and  
Candidate for Governor  
of Nevada*

**Governor A.P.K. Safford**

*Governor of the Territory  
of Arizona*

**Mr. L.W. Coe**

*President of the Pacific  
Union Express Company*

*nonspeaking parts,  
railroad dignitaries*

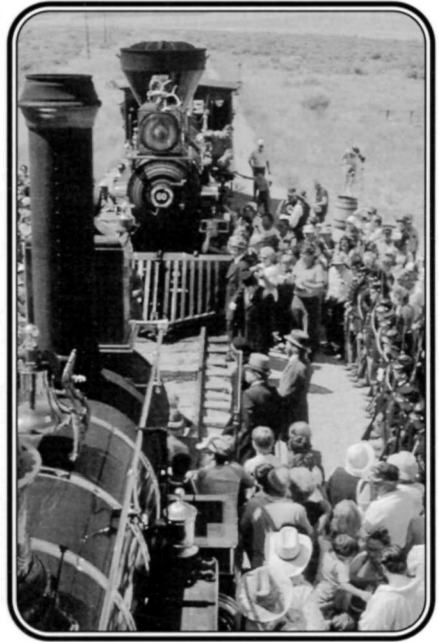
**H. Nottingham, William  
Sherman, and J.W. Haines**



*(The narrator sits at the telegrapher's key and the rest of the cast stands between the two locomotives. The audience quietly murmurs and then becomes quiet as the Narrator begins to speak.)*

## **Narrator:**

The date is May 10, 1869. The location is Promontory Summit, Utah Territory—an unlikely place for the culmination of an undertaking that will mark the end of the Old West and the beginning of the New. Yet they have come, the wealthy and the poor, the laborer and his boss, the Chinese and the Irish, people of many



rac<sup>es</sup> and many creeds—even a few adventurous women and children. The gathering is both festive and anxious, awaiting that moment of miracle when two common railroad spikes driven into an ordinary crosstie will link a continent. A gentle breeze blows under an almost cloudless sky. The thermometer on the shaded side of the Central Pacific telegraph car registers 69 degrees. Above the babble of voices can be heard the hissing of the steam locomotives which herald the beginning of a new era. Then Edgar Mills, a wealthy banker from Sacramento and a friend of the Central Pacific Railroad officials, steps forward and signals for silence. So the nation as well as the spectators gathered here awaits, as the drama of men's hopes, prayers and dreams begins to unfold.

## **Mills:**

Ladies and gentlemen, in behalf of the officials of both railroads, the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific, I bid you welcome. We are met today to commemorate the completion of a project which is a remarkable example of the vision, the determination, and the labor of thousands of men, in a union which this day shall be consummated forever.

We are assembled to link the ends of the earth, to complete a new and shorter route between Europe and the Orient, and to join the raw riches of the American West with the finished products of the industrial East.



We are also met today with mixed emotions; with joy that in a combined effort and common cause, the brains, the sweat, and the muscle of thousands of men have joined together this great adventure under the guidance of Almighty God. But it is with profound sorrow we remember and pay homage to the hundreds of men who, in construction of the Pacific Railroad, gave their lives that you and I might stand here at this moment and share, one with another, this sacred occasion. It is, however, noteworthy that this Pacific railroad has been completed six years ahead of the time allotted for its construction.

Among those whose attendance we are honored to acknowledge are several Pacific Railroad officials not taking part in the ceremony. Also present are reporters from some of America's great newspapers. From Utah Territory comes Bishop John Sharp representing the Mormon prophet Brigham Young and Mayor Lorin Farr of Ogden. Our music is provided by the Tenth Ward Band from Salt Lake City. We also welcome the officers and ladies of the 21st U.S. Infantry en route for duty in California. Finally, I direct your attention to our telegrapher. Through the miracle of electricity, he is keeping the entire nation informed of these proceedings as they transpire.

And now, to unite us in thanks to our Creator, may I introduce a man who has come many miles to be with us today. He is the Reverend Dr. John Todd of Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Reverend Todd...

*(Reverend Todd comes forward. Todd and Mills shake hands.)*

**Narrator:**

*(Tapping the key as he speaks.)* Bulletin! Almost ready. Hats off! Prayer is being offered.

**Todd:**

Our Father and God, and our Father's God, God of creation and God of providence, Thou hast created the heavens and the earth, the valleys and the hills; Thou art also the God of all mercies and blessings. We rejoice that Thou hast created the human mind with its power of invention, its capacity of expansion, and its guerdon of success. We have assembled here this day, upon the height of the continent, from varied sections of our country, to do homage to Thy wonderful name, in that Thou hast brought this mighty enterprise, combining the commerce of the East with the gold of the West, to so glorious a completion. And now we ask Thee that this great work, so auspiciously begun and so magnificently completed, may remain a monument of our faith and of our good works. We here consecrate this great highway for the good of Thy people. O God, we implore Thy blessing upon it, and upon those who may direct its operations. O Father, God of our fathers, we desire to acknowledge Thy handiwork in this great work, and ask Thy blessing upon us here assembled, upon the rulers of our government and upon Thy people everywhere; that peace may flow unto them as a gentle stream, and that this mighty enterprise may be unto us as the Atlantic of Thy strength and the Pacific of Thy love, through Jesus the Redeemer. Amen.

*(Todd steps back and Mills steps forward.)*

**Mills:**

Thank you Reverend Todd. To begin our program, we will complete the laying of the last rail of this great Pacific Railroad. Three of our distinguished guests will step forward to fasten the final bolt and drive all but the last two spikes. They are Mr. H. Nottingham of the Michigan Southern and Lake Shore Railroad and United States Railroad Commissioners William Sherman and J.W. Haines. Gentlemen...

*(The railroad commissioners clumsily attempt to drive the last half dozen spikes. There is laughter in the crowd. Haines takes a track wrench and tightens the last bolt on the fishplate.)*



**Mills:**

Gentlemen, we thank you for your efforts. Our first presentation will be an elegant polished cross-tie of California laurel wood. On its face is a silver plate with the inscription, "The last tie laid upon the completion of the Pacific Railroad, May 10, 1869; presented by West Evans, manufactured by Strahle & Hughes, San Francisco." Construction Superintendent Strobridge of the Central Pacific and Construction Superintendent Reed of the Union Pacific will now place this tie at the junction point.

*(Strobridge and Reed bring up the ceremonial tie. With Strobridge on the north and Reed on the south, they slide it into place.)*

**Narrator:**

*(Tapping the key as he speaks.)* Bulletin! We have got done praying. The spike is about to be presented.

**Mills:**

Thank you superintendents Strobridge and Reed. And now it is my pleasure to introduce a fellow resident of Sacramento, Dr. H. W. Harkness, who will present ceremonial spikes to Governor Stanford of the Central Pacific and Dr. Durant of the Union Pacific. They will place these spikes in holes that have already been drilled in the laurel wood tie *(Mills points in the direction of the tie)*. Ladies and gentlemen, let me point out that these two spikes are no ordinary spikes. These are golden spikes made from pure California gold! *(The audience oohs and aahs.)* Dr. Harkness...

*(Harkness steps forward and shakes hands with Mills as audience applauds.)*

**Harkness:**

Mr. President: The last rail needed to complete the greatest railroad enterprise of the world is about to be laid; the last spike needed to unite the Atlantic and Pacific by a new line of travel and commerce is about to be driven to its place.



To perform these acts, the East and the West have come together. Never, since history commenced her record of human events, has she been called upon to note the completion of a work so magnificent in conception, so marvelous in execution. When Venice was mistress of the seas, and her argosies let go their anchors in every port, it was the custom of her Doges to propitiate the genii of the seas by wedding the Adriatic with a costly jewel. More proudly than Venice can America boast of her wealth and commerce. Not the sea only, but the continent is made thus a pathway. Unlike the Doges of Venice, we have no genii of the seas to propitiate, but in emulation of their example we may fitly ornament and decorate with gold and silver these iron rails, on which, to a large degree, the trade and travel of a continent is about to roll, and it is in this mode that California, within whose borders and by whose citizens the Pacific Railroad was inaugurated, desires to express her appreciation of the vast importance to her and her sister states of the great enterprise which by your joint action is about to be consummated. From her mines of gold she has forged a spike, from her laurel woods she has hewn a tie, and by the hands of her citizens she offers them to become a part of the great highway which is about to unite her in close fellowship with her sisters of the Atlantic. From her bosom was taken the first soil, let her's be the last tie and the last spike. With them accept the hopes and wishes of her people that the success of your enterprise may not stay short of its brightest promise.

Governor Stanford, please accept this highly engraved golden spike, the gift of San Francisco businessman David Hewes. On its head is



inscribed, "The Last Spike," and on its shaft are the words, "May God continue the unity of our country as this railroad unites the two great oceans of the world."

*(Bells/whistles. The audience applauds. Harkness presents the spike to Governor Stanford who places it in the prepared hole in the laurel tie, at the outside of the south rail.)*

Dr. Durant, this second golden spike was donated by Frank Marriott, publisher of the San Francisco Newsletter. Its inscription reads, "With this spike the San Francisco Newsletter offers its homage to the great work which has joined the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. This month—May, 1869."

*(Bells/whistles. The audience applauds. Harkness presents the spike to Dr. Durant who places it in the prepared hole in the laurel tie, at the outside of the north rail.)*

## Mills:

Thank you, Dr. Harkness. It is now my pleasure to introduce F.A. Tritle, United States Railroad Commissioner and candidate for the governorship of Nevada. In behalf of that great state, he will present a spike of pure silver. Commissioner Tritle...

*(Tritle steps forward with silver spike in hand.)*

## Tritle:

To the iron of the East and the gold of the West, Nevada adds her link of silver to span the continent and wed the oceans.

*(Audience cheers. Tritle shakes hands with Stanford and gives him the spike. Stanford places it in the laurel tie on the inside of the south rail.)*



**Mills:**

We are privileged today by the presence of the Honorable Anson P.K. Safford who is traveling to Arizona as the newly appointed territorial governor. He was kind enough to delay his journey in order to present a fourth ceremonial spike in behalf of the Arizona Territory. Governor Safford...

**Safford:**

Ribbed with iron, clad in silver and crowned with gold, Arizona presents her offering to the enterprise that has banded the continent and dictated the pathway to commerce.

*(Audience cheers. Safford shakes hands with Durant and gives him the spike.)*

*(Durant raises the spike into the air, showing it to the audience. Then he places it in the hole of the laurel tie on the inside of the north rail.)*

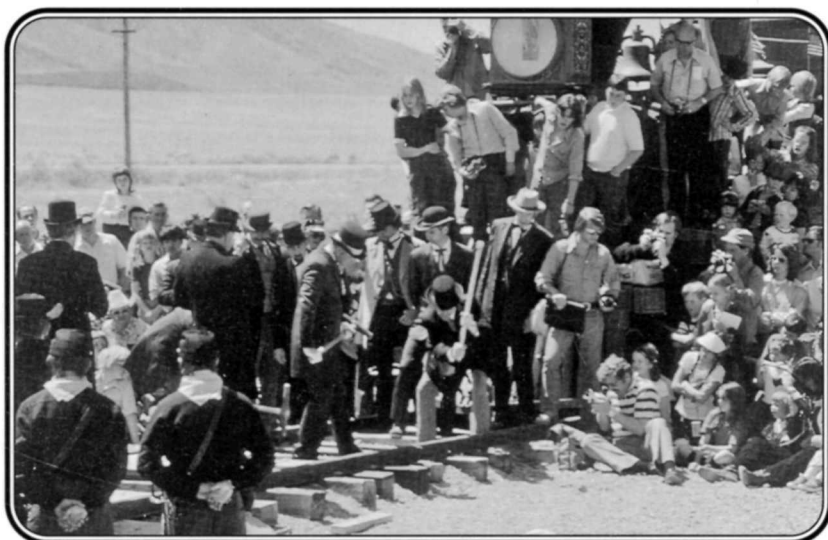
**Mills:**

And now, friends, it is not only my duty but my honor and privilege to present a man of vision, a man of courage, a humanitarian, and one who is highly esteemed by those of us who are privileged to call him our friend. He is a Californian whose farsightedness has contributed in large measure to the success of this great enterprise. Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the Central Pacific Railroad, Governor Leland Stanford.

*(Audience applauds and cheers.)*

**Stanford:**

Gentlemen: The Pacific Railroad Companies accept with pride and satisfaction these golden and silver tokens of your appreciation of the importance of our enterprise to the material interests of the sections which you represent on this occasion—the material interests of our whole country, East and West, North and South. These gifts shall receive a fitting place in the superstructure of our road. *(While Stanford speaks Durant steps over to Mills and whispers in his ear.)* Before laying the tie and driving the spikes in the completion of the Pacific Railway, allow me to express the hope that the great importance which you are pleased to attach to our undertaking, may be in all respects fully realized. This line of rails, connecting the Atlantic and Pacific, and affording to commerce a new transit, will prove, we



trust, the speedy forerunners of increased facilities. The Pacific Railroad will, as soon as commerce shall be given freely to realize its advantages, demonstrate the necessity of such improvements in railroading as to render practicable the transportation of freights at much less rates than are possible under any system which has been thus far anywhere adopted. The day may not be far distant when *three* tracks will be found necessary to accommodate the commerce and travel which will seek a transit across the continent (*people murmur in disbelief*). Freights will then move only one way on each track, and at rates of speed that will answer all demands of cheapness and time. Cars and engines will be light or heavy according to the speed required and the weight to be transported. In conclusion, I will add that we hope to do ultimately what is now impossible on long lines, transport heavy, coarse, and cheap products for all distances at living rates to the trade. Now, gentlemen, with your assistance we will proceed to lay the last tie, the last rail and drive the last spike.

*(Bells/Whistles. Audience applauds.)*

**Mills:**

Thank you, Governor Stanford, for your astute and timely remarks. Ladies and gentlemen, Dr. Durant has asked to be excused from speaking. In his place, General Grenville M. Dodge, Chief Engineer, will now represent the Union Pacific with a few remarks. General Dodge...

*(Dodge comes forward and shakes hands with Mills.)*

**Dodge:**

Gentlemen, the great Senator Thomas Hart Benton proposed that some day a giant statue of Columbus should be built on the highest peak of the Rocky Mountains, pointing westward, denoting this as the great route across the continent. You have made that prophecy today a fact! *This is the way to India!* *(He raises his hand and points to the West.)*

*(Bells/Whistles. Audience cheers as excitement grows.)*

**Mills:**

Thank you, General Dodge. Ladies and gentlemen, we have almost reached that moment for which you and the nation have been waiting—the driving of the last spikes. But first, Mr. L.W. Coe of the Pacific Union Express Company will make a final presentation.

**Coe:**

Gentlemen of the Pacific Union Railroad: The Pacific Union Express Company desire to express their appreciation of your enterprise, and have expressed this silver hammer expressly for this occasion.

*(Coe gives the silver maul to Governor Stanford who makes a few ceremonial taps. Stanford then hands the maul to Durant who also taps the spikes.)*



**Mills:**

*(Continuing.)* At this point we should explain that the last two spikes are regular iron spikes which can be driven with a maul. Governor Stanford's spike and maul are wired to the transcontinental telegraph wire so that the entire nation can hear the blows as the spike is driven. And now ladies and gentlemen, the moment has arrived. Indeed, throughout the length and breadth of the entire nation, coast to coast and from North to South, people everywhere are anxiously waiting. When

the telegrapher gives the signal over the wire that the last spikes are driven, bells and steam whistles will sound across the nation. In San Francisco the fire alarm bells will ring, and a cannon will be fired electrically in salute at Fort Point. Dr. Durant and Governor Stanford will now drive the last spikes to complete the Pacific Railway. Gentlemen, are you ready?

**Stanford and Durant:** *(In unison.)* We are ready!

**Narrator:** *(Tapping the key as he speaks.)* Bulletin! All ready now. The spike will soon be driven. The signal will be three dots for the commencement of the blows.

*(Stanford with the wired maul and Durant with a regular maul tentatively swing and miss the spikes. They continue to make a few light taps on the spikes.)*

**Stanford:** Strobridge, would you and Mr. Reed finish the job?

*(Strobridge and Reed step forward, take up unwired mauls, and pound the spikes home.)*

**Narrator:** *(Tapping the key as he speaks.)* Promontory to the country. Bulletin: D-O-N-E Done!

**Mills:** Ladies and Gentlemen: The Pacific Railroad has been completed.

*(The audience cheers especially loud, exclaiming "it's finished!" Durant reaches across the rail and shakes Stanford's hand.)*

**Durant:** Let's give three cheers for the Central Pacific Railroad! Hip, hip... *(everyone: HURRAY!)* Hip, hip... *(everyone: HURRAY!)* Hip, hip... *(everyone: HURRAY!)*

**Stanford:** Let's give three cheers for the Union Pacific Railroad! Hip, hip... *(everyone: HURRAY!)* Hip, hip... *(everyone: HURRAY!)* Hip, hip... *(everyone: HURRAY!)*

*(On the last cheer, the cast freezes in position with arms extended upwards. They stand completely still until the narrator finishes his concluding remarks)*



**Narrator:**

At that moment one era ended and another began. America's westward movement would no longer be limited to the plodding pace of a covered wagon; it would forge ahead with the speed of a locomotive. Soldiers, settlers, merchants, miners, and many others poured into the wilderness bringing all the trappings of an industrial society. For the Indians, it was a difficult and often traumatic time. By the early 1890s, the frontier process in the United States had come to a close, hastened by four transcontinental railroads eventually built across the west. Yet it all began here, Promontory Summit, Utah, where a golden spike became a symbol of American strength and the promise of a better tomorrow. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your attention.

## Afterword

The reenactment script of the Golden Spike Ceremony is based on extensive research in primary historical sources. Fortunately, many of the nation's newspapers sent correspondents to report on the original events at Promontory Summit, Utah. Unfortunately, there is much disparity among the accounts they left. Only a handful of people out of the hundreds that attended the ceremony were close enough to see and hear what went on, and no one account seems to be entirely verifiable. Only by looking at the sources as a whole and using a bit of common sense can one come up with a reasonably good idea of what happened at the Golden Spike Ceremony and the order in which it happened.

Most of the speeches that were made that day were distributed in written form to the press for publication. The texts for the speeches of Reverend Todd, Governor Stanford, and General Dodge are drawn from an account in the *Deseret News* of May 12, 1869. The words of Dr. Harkness came from the *San Francisco Daily Alta California* of the same date. Master of Ceremonies Edgar Mills seems to have spoken extemporaneously, and there is no known record of his remarks. His speeches in the script, though based on historical context, have been recreated.

Knowledge of the ceremonial objects comes from a variety of sources. The Hewes golden spike, the Nevada silver spike, and the silver-plated spike maul are preserved at the Stanford University Museum of Art. The Arizona spike is in the collection of the City Museum of New York. The laurel tie is thought to

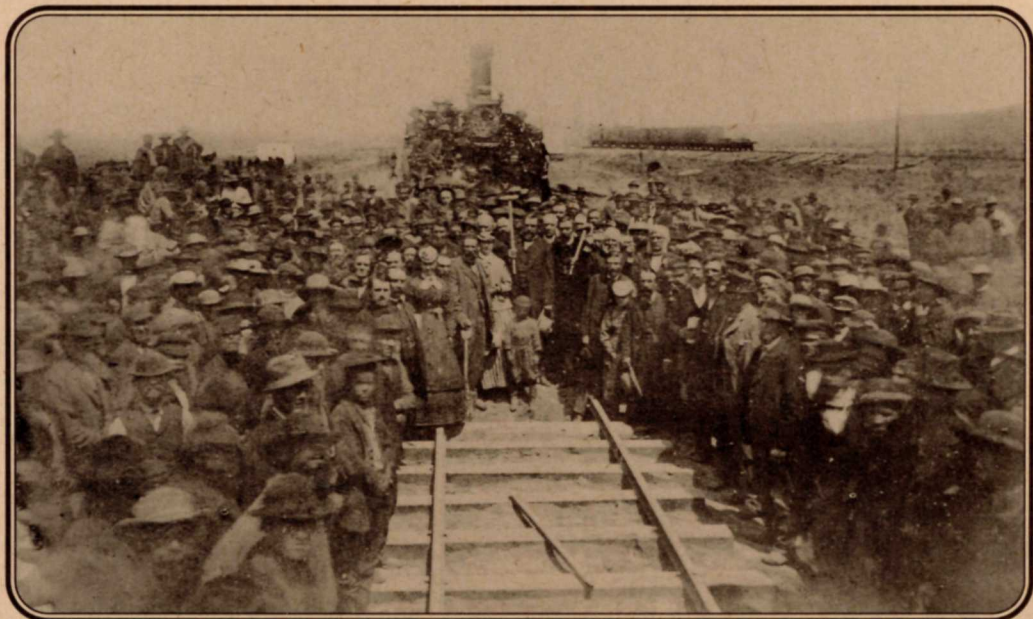
have been destroyed in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, but good descriptions of it were offered in the *Sacramento Daily Bee* and many other newspapers. Only the second golden spike remains a mystery. Fortunately, a few sources make mention of it. The *Utah Daily Reporter* of Corinne described it in detail and reported its inscription.

*The Last Spike Is Driven*, the dramatic reenactment of the Golden Spike Ceremony, reflects the work of many professional and amateur historians over several decades. The current version is the result of wide-ranging research in special collections, microfilm, and online resources that were simply unavailable to previous generations of scholars. While it is a big step forward, it will hopefully not be the last step. As we find new sources and research tools, *The Last Spike is Driven* will continue to be a work in progress.

*Michael Johnson*

*Michael Johnson is a professional historian and Director of the Utah History Fair, an outreach program of Utah State University. Johnson received his masters degree in History from that institution in 1987 where he was a Presidential Fellow. He has some twenty-five years of experience in education and public history and for several years was a seasonal ranger at Golden Spike National Historic Site.*





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