

WOMEN AND THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD THROUGH UTAH, 1868–1869

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The first transcontinental railroad in the United States was built by the Central Pacific (CP) and Union Pacific (UP) railroads between 1863 and 1869. Based on the current written histories, women appear to have participated in the creation of the railroad to a very limited degree, at least through Utah.¹ Writers might occasionally note nameless “camp followers” and laundresses or list the individual wives accompanying specific businessmen or engineers, such as the Central Pacific’s Mrs. (Hannah) James Strobridge. And almost always, these descriptions include markers of class and respectability, such as the styling of Hannah Strobridge as “Mrs. James.” The newspapers of the time reported that four “ladies” were present at the golden spike ceremony on May 10, 1869, the wives and family members of prominent railroad men; only women of a higher social class or those women associated with the railroad notables were mentioned by name in print. Yet many other women, besides this handful of “ladies,” played supporting roles in the construction of the transcontinental railroad in 1868 and 1869; they included entertainers, hotel and newspaper operators, and Latter-day Saint women, as well as the wives of railroad employees. Because contemporaries considered these kinds of women to be “those of little note,” their stories are harder to find.² Although their work was often different from men’s, women still profited economically from the transcontinental endeavor and were critical to its success.

In the 1860s, few machines could move the work forward on the railroad, and the construction required intensive physical labor. This included lifting railroad ties and rails as well as hammering the spikes with large, heavy hammers. Because of the physical nature of the work, women generally did not labor on the actual construction. Additionally, most women living in the West were originally from the eastern United States or Europe. These women, although often having to take on male roles in their frontier homes, still ascribed to the domestic work “assigned to women in western civilization.”³ Regardless, women did work alongside the men in this work to complete the first transcontinental railroad joining the eastern and western United States.

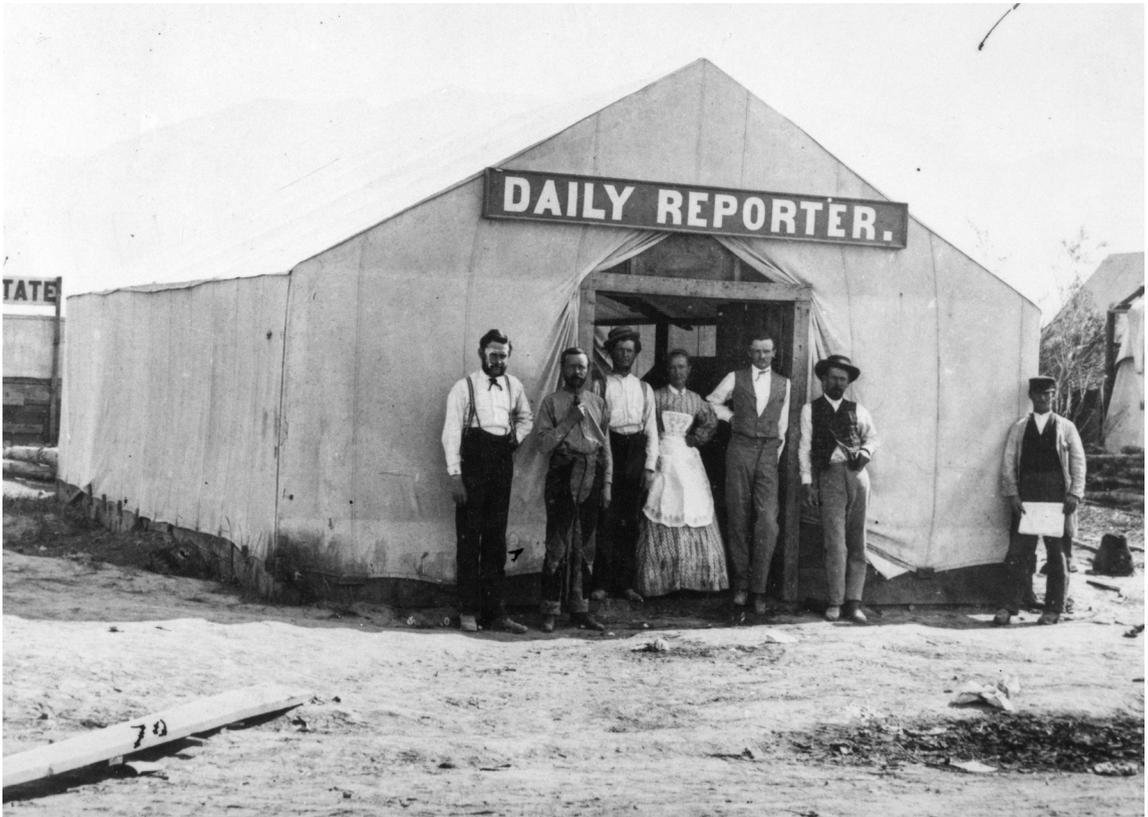


Fig. 1. The staff of the *Daily Reporter* in front of their office in Corinne, Utah, 1869. William H. Jackson, photographer. Utah State Historical Society, photograph no. 15273.

UNION PACIFIC END-OF-TRACK TOWNS

As construction of the Union Pacific progressed westward, temporary communities followed along in its wake. These end-of-track towns, known famously as “hell on wheels,” consisted of flimsy tents and storefronts that housed offices and lodgings and sold anything from dentistry to alcohol—and women were part of them.⁴ Most visibly, perhaps, women in the Union Pacific end-of-track towns fulfilled the desire of railroad crews for entertainment: dancing and singing, talking to the men or having a drink with them, or selling them sex. Women also offered domestic support, such as cooking, laundering, sewing, and general camp maintenance, often using their own stoves and dishes. Other women worked with their husbands or families running boarding houses, printing newspapers, or reporting railroad events to newspapers throughout the country. Women whose husbands ran the railroad also provided an emotional as well as physical support system to their husbands in the frantic race toward the meeting of the rails.

Nineteenth-century observers generally relegated women who entertained men in track towns—as performers, drinking companions, and prostitutes—to the “fallen” category and spoke of them in that tone. It is difficult to discern the actual experiences of these women because few primary records of their own making exist. Plenty of popular accounts exist of prostitution in the West, but they should be approached warily. Meanwhile, the body of historical and archaeological literature about prostitutes and entertainers in the frontier West is growing, allowing us to get a general sense of what they might have encountered in the hell-on-wheels camps.

Contemporaries and popular writers have dismissed camp followers in terms both glib and salacious, suggesting that they had no real part in track towns or that they didn’t meet societal expectations of proper womanhood. One author, writing in 1979, noted that women were basically absent in the early West, but that “whores, of course, were there almost from

the beginning.”⁵ Such notions are false. Those women dismissed as morally inferior had important functions in the economic makeup of track towns, and many of them filled the role of prostitute because they had no other choice. As Cheryl Livingston puts it, “Poverty fed prostitution. One of the chief reasons why women became prostitutes was that they had no other option for employment.”⁶

Contemporaries usually mentioned, but did not discuss in detail, the presence of dance hall girls and other working women in the Union Pacific end-of-track towns. Several eyewitnesses recounted the wild nature of these towns. Henry Stanley wrote, “Mostly everyone seemed bent on debauchery and dissipation. The women were the most reckless. . . . They come in for a large share of the money wasted.”⁷ Samuel B. Reed, an engineer for the Union Pacific, penned a letter to his wife on July 30, 1867, describing the vice and crime that went on at the hell-on-wheels camps: “The first place we visited was a dance house, where a fresh importation of strumpets had been received. The hall was crowded with bad men and lewd women. Such profanity, vulgarity and indecency as was heard and seen there would disgust a more hardened person than I.”⁸ The strumpets, due to their profession, must have not exhibited the characteristics expected of women during this time period.

The *Frontier Index*—a newspaper that followed the Union Pacific Railroad, setting up in the end-of-track towns and publishing, only to pick up and move again when the railroad moved on—is a vital source about the transcontinental experience. A column from the *Frontier Index*, reproduced elsewhere, described railroad town social life in language that fit its times: hot-shot eastern visitors, who had already lost money gambling, continued on to “visit some of the dance houses and squander as much more in treating the ‘fair and frail’ girls to wine, whiskey, and other such beastly fodder; and when they return to their senses and find out how nicely they were inveigled, while intoxicated, their indignation knows no bounds.”⁹ Another piece of reporting, from June 1868, told of a “fast female” in Laramie City who “whipped her paramour in the street yesterday.”¹⁰ These accounts of end-of-track entertainers as “fast” women who charmed men and then took their

money were entirely consistent with descriptions of women in other free-and-easy frontier settings and likewise biased against seeing them as true women.

The flipside of these stories, which portrayed camp followers as temptresses, was a business move of proprietors throughout the West: the use of female companionship to attract customers to hell-on-wheels establishments.¹¹ A number of advertisements in the *Frontier Index* made this plain. Beginning in May 1868, the newspaper noted that J. C. Crisman was building one of the “largest and most splendid sporting houses in the West.”¹² Just what was meant by “sporting” became clear with advertisements throughout the summer inviting the people of Laramie to “get an introduction” to Crisman’s “Diana”:

Diana, Diana!—Diana the living Goddess.—She can be seen in all her glory at J. C. Crisman’s splendid galleries on Front street. Amusements of every name and variety surround you. . . . Games and plays, music and tempting luxuries, eatables and drinkables greet you in every nook and corner. Go and enjoy the fun.¹³

When the camp had moved along to Green River, Wyoming, in the fall of 1868, a similar announcement for the Alhambra resort described how the popularity of “the charming ways of those coy maidens, keep the rooms crowded and us awake until two o’clock every morning.”¹⁴ In these sorts of winking accounts, dance hall women were part of the advertisement for alcohol, gambling, and more.

Similarly, Robert V. Grewell, who started working on the railroad in the spring of 1869, described his experience in a place called Wyoming City: “It consisted of a saloon and some tents. I went to the saloon and asked the man if he had any work. . . . Then they put a floor in the saloon. The next thing the man did was to go to Laramie and get four girls and start a dance hall. After every other quadrille the girls would go to the bar and get a drink. By midnight they would be pretty mellow, I tell you.”¹⁵

Closer to the Promontories, the *Deseret News* reported how Echo City sprang up almost

overnight, with a list of products and services that devolved into female availability: “Today I have counted exclusive of the UPRR buildings, some fifty structures, most of them true enough, mere duck tenements. Under this vigorous spread of cotton luxuriate wholesale and retail groceries, dry goods, general merchandise, clothing, hardware, bakeries, blacksmith and wagon shops, cheap Johns, carpenter shops, saloons, doggeries, whiskey-holes, dram-barrels, gambling hells, restaurants, eating places, lunch covers, pie and gin resorts, corrals, hotels under shingles and dimity, ‘private dwellings,’ whence femininity stalks out with brazen publicity expressly denominated here as nymphs du grade.”¹⁶

The contemporary author Samuel Bowles, depicted the track town of Benton as “a village of few variety stores and shops, and many restaurants and grog-shops; by day disgusting, by night dangerous; almost everybody dirty, many filthy, and with the marks of lowest vice; averaging a murder a day; gambling and drinking, hurdy-gurdy dancing and the vilest of sexual commerce, the chief business and pastime of the hours. . . . Where these people came from originally; where they went to when the road was finished . . . were both puzzles to intricate for me.”¹⁷

These were just some of the descriptions given of the hell-on-wheels towns. No women are mentioned by name, but obviously they were present. Bowles, for instance, noted that “one to two thousand men, and a dozen or two women” had encamped in Benton.¹⁸ The settlements along the Union Pacific route featured tents whose very structure facilitated the sale of sex. The so-called “Big Tent,” which measured one hundred feet long by forty feet wide, was lined on one side with a bar full of liquors and cigars. Music was furnished by a band, and gambling surrounded the dance floor. As the filmmaker Gregory Nickerson puts it about the “Big Tent” in Cheyenne, Wyoming, “inside, customers who spent enough money could get a drink, play a game of cards, dance with a girl, hire a prostitute and get treated for venereal disease all in one visit.”¹⁹ The working girls of these camps remained nameless and disregarded by observers, yet their work and their bodies were clearly a part of the economy and the social world along the grade.

The Union Pacific attempted to control the activities in the end-of-track towns, with little effect. Grenville M. Dodge wrote, “Two or three times at the end of our tracks a rough crowd would gather and dispute our authority, but they were soon disposed of.”²⁰ The Central Pacific, which largely employed Chinese immigrant labor, had different dynamics. Hell-on-wheels camps were not present at the end of the CP line. Chinese camps had their vices but were generally quiet. No prostitutes were brought into these towns. Chinese performed many of the domestic services, such as laundering and cooking, that women provided for the Union Pacific workers. Therefore, it would be less likely to find the presence of prostitutes and dance hall women at these camps. As an archaeological report for the Golden Spike National Historic Site has noted, “the characteristics of these [UP] towns contrasted sharply with that of the Chinese and Mormon Camps.”²¹

Other women, in addition to entertainers and prostitutes, contributed to the world of the railroad camps, as is evident from newspaper accounts and historic pictures. One Mrs. T. Clapp apparently joined her husband, a reporter for the Springfield, Massachusetts, *Republican*, on the railroad grade.²² Likewise, William Henry Jackson photographed the staff of the *Daily Reporter* in Corinne, Utah, which included a



A Chinese tea carrier, captured in this image by the official photographer of the Central Pacific, Alfred A. Hart, circa 1863–1869. *Utah State Historical Society, photograph no. 00530.*

woman wearing a work apron and standing just inside of the *Daily Reporter* tent. Perhaps she worked with her husband setting type or writing columns or perhaps she was a member of the newspaper's staff in her own right (see figure one).²³ Publishing in the 1890s, Cy Warman wrote about life in the UP camps and described the role of one woman running a hotel tent.²⁴ Warman portrayed the boss of the hotel tent as a jovial, somewhat lazy character whose wife was the real powerhouse of the camp:

From four in the morning until midnight this slave of the camp is on her feet. To be sure, there are men cooks and flunkies and dishwashers, but the boarding boss has but one wife, and she must oversee everything. She must see that nothing goes to the pigs until all the boarders have refused it. . . . She is at once a mother to the beardless and a sister of charity to the bearded men. Her private tent is the one spot respected at all times by the rough men of the camp, whether they be drunk or sober.²⁵

Warman's description of the hotel matron is surely idealized, but it is also a tribute to the hardworking women on the transcontinental railroad. One has to wonder how many women contributed to this endeavor but are lost to history or are out there waiting to be found.

CENTRAL PACIFIC END-OF-TRACK TOWNS

The Central Pacific, building from the Pacific Coast toward Utah, had different circumstances: for the most part, CP towns were populated by Chinese male workers, and there were no hell-on-wheels camps at the end of the line. Between ten to twelve thousand Chinese labored on the CP at any one time, many of them intending to return to China. Chinese women generally stayed behind in China while their men worked in America and sent remittances home. In 1870, just one year after the completion of the transcontinental railroad, there were 429 Chinese men and sixteen Chinese women in Utah.²⁶ In the words of Vanessa Hua, "These immigrants played a crucial role in finishing the railroad, performing hard, dangerous work

for long hours at low wages that were one-half to two-thirds of what their white counterparts were earning. Afterward, some returned to China, but many found work in other trades or continued to work on railroad lines throughout the United States."²⁷

The Chinese workers lived in canvas tents of about thirty to forty men along the grade. Each group was overseen by a white foreman with a bilingual Chinese overseer or headman.²⁸ The headman directed the Chinese workers, purchased provisions, and handed out wages to the crews. The Chinese did not associate with the Irish, Cornish, and Native Americans employed by the CP. Because of this, their railroad camps were male-dominated communities where men took on the jobs considered to be women's work: cooking their own food, washing their own laundry, and performing other domestic tasks.²⁹ The Chinese workers did enjoy gambling and the use of opium, but since the men kept to themselves, no women, outside professional gamblers, or saloon keepers were involved in these camps.³⁰

LATTER-DAY SAINT WOMEN AND THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

The role of Latter-day Saint women in the history of the transcontinental railroad has received little attention. Newspapers from the East and far West missed the part that these women played in supporting the railroad through Utah because they focused on the more sensational subject of polygamy. A reporter from the *Evening Bulletin*, a San Francisco-based newspaper, wrote: "The only female Mormon face, married, that I have seen that looked at all bright, was a young wife, say third or fourth, and she looked as if she had a part to play before her husband, and her anxiety to gratify him exhibited itself painfully. To please him was the task she kept constantly before her."³¹ Another reporter, this time with the *Daily Alta California*, described "a party of stalwart fellows returning from their labors. They march with the wagon, carrying their tools and provisions; seated in the wagon is a laughing Mormon girl, whose white teeth form a beautiful contrast with her sunburnt healthy face. She was the only female I saw. The Mormons who have been employed on the railroad, as a

general thing, left their wives behind them.” But the boss of the party, who reportedly had nine wives, “brought along with him only one, and that the ninth and youngest. . . . Her position was rather one of triumph.³² In both of these accounts, Mormon women appear as simple, easily recognized characters: the young wives of older, polygamous men. The actual experiences of LDS women on the railroad were more complicated.³³

Latter-day Saint women at the railroad camps performed typical domestic labor for the railroad workers. A *Deseret News* reporter described the Mormon-run Harvey’s camp, located near Echo, as “one of the most picturesque scenes I have looked upon for some time. . . . Nesting among the willows are tents, wagons doing duty for sleeping chambers, neat boweries and inviting looking wick-e-ups. Here a lady busy with the needle, there another superintending some culinary operation; with children enjoying themselves among the feathery foliage, and the movements of busy life on every hand.”³⁴ Although many Mormon men did leave “their wives behind,” articles like this one clearly show that there were women present in the Mormon camps. Numerous family histories and biographies also tell about the women who went with the Latter-day Saint men to work on the railroad. Unlike the working women of the UP camps, many Mormon women left a history of their lives. As already mentioned, most of the women remained at home to run the households, stores, industries, and farms that

the men left. Mormon men went to work for the railroad generally for two purposes: first, the leader of their church, Brigham Young, requested that they do so; and second, cash, to be paid by the railroad was a rare commodity in the newly formed territory of Utah and there was great need of it among the population.³⁵

Mary Larsen Ahlstrom, who lived near Heber City, described in 1919 how the cash her husband made working on the railroad affected her and her family: “That summer lots of men were called to go out in Echo Canyon to work on the railroad, and papa went. He came home a few days and had money, so we got some flour and shoes and clothe to make us some clothes. He went back again to work till winter came on so they couldn’t work. In 1869 the train came to Ogden, Weber, Utah. Now we had better times. That fall I got my first stove (Well I have never had only two and I got the last one yet.)”³⁶ As the railroad passed through Morgan County, women and families there also supported the construction gangs: taking in their laundry and selling milk, butter, and eggs to the camp cooks. Local families benefited from the railroad in other ways, receiving old clothing from railroad officers or taking in boarders for extra income.³⁷

In nearby Wasatch County, men and women alike traveled from the valley to work on the UP line. William Lindsay, a twenty-year-old Scottish immigrant, left for Echo Canyon in 1867. He returned to Heber City that fall with



The cabins of graders employed in the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad, Echo Canyon, Utah. *Utah State Historical Society, photograph no. 00847.*

an ox team and wagon because he and the other Wasatch County men needed cooks—and even such necessities as a stove and dishes.³⁸ Lindsay arrived back in Echo Canyon in early October with his mother, Christina Howie Lindsay Muir, and his future wife, Mary Mair. The two women worked in the canyon until December 1, cooking for twenty men. As William Lindsay later wrote, “Each received about \$90.00 for their services. Men with teams were getting \$10.00 a day, but flour was 10.00 a hundred and other things in proportion at that time. By this time it was very cold and most of the men were quitting and coming home so they quit and came back to Heber, it took three days and it was very cold camping out.”³⁹

Muir’s life history adds a few more details to the story. She was from Scotland and came to Heber City, where she met her second husband, George Muir. There she worked in the fields by her new husband and acted as a midwife and doctor in the area. When Lindsay returned to Heber to ask his mother’s help, she had two young children to care for, yet “she took her stove and what things were needed and with the help of Mary Mair they fed the men and made \$90.00 each. With some of this she bought a sewing machine, about the first in Heber and did sewing for other people.”⁴⁰ The Lindsays and Muirs were recent immigrants to America and recent settlers in Utah. Working for the railroad entailed sacrifice, but they must have seen it as worthwhile and they later reinvested their earnings in equipment such as a sewing machine.

Mary Petersen Ipsen, together with her mother, also worked for the UP railroad construction crews. She was born in Aalborg, Denmark, in 1857 and came to America in 1858 with her family. In 1868, when Ipsen was still a young girl, her father died; her mother, Christine Nesen Petersen, moved the family to Bear River City, Utah, where she married Peter Alberson. Like Christina Muir, Petersen had young children and was a recent immigrant, newly widowed and remarried. Her life, to say the least, was in flux. In the spring of 1869, as construction of the Union Pacific moved west through Box Elder County, Petersen began cooking for the railroad crew. Ipsen, only twelve years old, went to work as a cook’s helper. A family

member recounted that, “Mary indicated that the work was hot and dusty, and paid very little. She recalled the big soup kettle which played an important role and the old cook stove, hauled forward with the line in its own special wagon. Both the cook and the helper ate anything that was left after the men were finished, if anything was left.”⁴¹ Because of her work with the crews across the Promontories, Mary Ipsen was present at the driving of the golden spike on May 10, 1869, a fact that was widely recognized at the end of her life.⁴²

Two other Danish immigrant families show the difficult circumstances of Latter-day Saint women who worked on the railroad. Catherine Scow Davidson was born in Denmark, where she joined the LDS church. She later immigrated to Utah in 1866. Davidson’s father was a carpenter, and they moved often looking for work. Her father and brother worked on the railroad, and “Catherine and her mother (Ellen Marie Jensen Scow) cooked, sewed, and laundered for these crews.”⁴³ Catherine was also present for the driving of the golden spike, “which was the finish of this massive project.”⁴⁴ Johanne Bengtson Valentine also emigrated with her family from Denmark in 1866. For the Valentine family, work was very hard to find. Johanne’s sons went freighting to Missouri, and her husband joined the Union Pacific Railroad, taking an eleven-year-old son with him.⁴⁵ The family moved to Bryant near Green River, Wyoming, to work for the railroad. Here they made adobe for buildings and lived in a dugout with no furniture. The Valentines eventually built a log house. Johanne’s husband found work as a carpenter while she and her daughter took in washing. The family was doing quite well when trouble broke out between the two railroads. Mr. Valentine, feeling their lives were in danger, moved in the middle of the night. He took their ox team and cart and headed for Salt Lake City. That spring, they all worked for the railroad again until its completion.⁴⁶ Both the Scows and the Valentines were immigrants in difficult economic circumstances—patching together livelihoods as entire families—and work on the transcontinental railroad provided them with some opportunity.

Another family history, of Miriam Ann Richins Jones, describes the work that she and her



Miriam Richins Jones, who took in laundry for construction workers in Echo Canyon, even as her husband graded the railroad. *Courtesy of Alden Richins.*

husband did for the railroad. In 1868, Miriam and Robert Jones lived in a family member's home about two miles east of Echo in Weber Canyon. Grasshoppers had ruined the crops the year before, and so Robert went to work for the railroad company near Echo.⁴⁷ First he worked by hand for seventy-five cents per day. Later he worked with ox team and scraper.⁴⁸ Miriam did her share to help out the struggling family. While her husband was away, there were many men, some with families, working for the railroad and stationed at Echo. Miriam saw the opportunity to help support her family, and she took in their laundry, which was shuttled to and from Echo by young boys. Laundry work was difficult, but Miriam was paid well for it.⁴⁹ Around this time Robert and Miriam were making plans to build a home in Henneferville or Henefer, in Summit County. They used the money that they had made from working for the railroad to start their own home.

The diary of John Gerber provides further information about daily life on the grade, including an interesting story about women visiting a Mormon UP railroad construction camp but

not necessarily providing domestic services. He wrote these entries in his diary while working on the railroad through Echo Canyon in July 1868: "We 29—thru- Th 30. This evening brother [William] Young arrived with his wife. Wrote letters to my father and family and sent my letters by bros. Wm S. Young's express. Sister M. Smpy [?] also came to stay a while with Sis. Young at our camp which gives us considerable more to do as we have an extra table to set."⁵⁰

Gerber related another incident that made clear the difficulty of domestic duties amidst railroad work: "Su 19. Today our company of men has been increased from at an average of 20 men to 40, which keeps us busy at baking bread and cooking for them. One day last week we twisted beans in a kettle where there was previously soap made in of concentrated lye. . . . which caused the men who ate of the beans to have exceeding great pain in their bowels with diareah but by the next morning were well again."⁵¹ (Forgetting to thoroughly wash a pot that was used to make lye soap is not something that many women of the time would have done.)

The accounts from Latter-day Saint diaries and family histories, which depict the railroad experience as one of difficult work and much-needed earnings, differ greatly from newspaper reports of pretty polygamous wives and older husbands. This is not to say that polygamous families were not part of the construction, but rather that they were not stock characters. Ezra Taft Benson, one of the three LDS contractors for the Central Pacific, had multiple wives, one of whom is known to have played a role in Benson's work on the transcontinental railroad. Mary Louise Larsen was born in Denmark where, as a young woman, she managed the households of several wealthy families. In 1863 Mary Larsen immigrated with her family to the Salt Lake Valley. The next year, Benson hired Mary Larsen to work for his family. In 1866, Larsen and Benson were married and had two sons; she was his eighth wife.⁵² The story of this couple ties in with the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad.

In 1868, Ezra T. Benson's firm, Benson, Farr, and West, obtained a contract from Leland Stanford to build the railroad west of Ogden.

Mary Larsen Benson, equipped by her years of managing households in Denmark and Utah, organized the food for the men working for her husband's firm. In order to do so, she would have necessarily been present, at least part of the time, at the work headquarters set up by the firm near Promontory. A history of Ezra T. Benson states that their headquarters were "located about two miles southwest of Junction City," which is now known as Lampo.⁵³ The archaeological evidence shows the presence of many worker camps in this area, but which one was the Benson, Farr, and West site is not currently known. A family history notes that through her work with the railroad, Mary Larsen Benson met Stanford. The quality of her work reportedly impressed him so much that he offered her the management of his household in California.⁵⁴

There are likely more histories of Mormon women who worked on the railroad, yet even from this handful of stories, we can see a number of common themes. The Latter-day Saint women who contributed to the railroad effort apparently did the domestic duties of cooking and laundering for male construction workers, who sorely needed the help. These women were recent immigrants in difficult conditions, and their work was often part of a larger project to keep a family afloat that involved grownups and children alike. More positively, the cash from the railroad could be reinvested into equipment and homes. Finally, having assisted in something as monumental as the transcontinental railroad was evidently a point of pride for these families, for a record of it is preserved family recollections, personal histories, and local newspapers.

WIVES OF RAILROAD EMPLOYEES

According to an early history of the golden spike by Bernice Gibbs Anderson, "Mrs. Strobbridge, Miss Earl and a Miss Annie Reed were the only 'real ladies' recorded in history as being present."⁵⁵ Some of these women appear in the historic photographs of the 1869 joining of the rails at Promontory Summit: Hannah Strobbridge and her family; Jane Ann Reed and her daughter, Anna Reed; and Minerva Earl, sister of Jane Ann Reed.⁵⁶ As noted above, additional research adds several other women who were there with their husbands who worked for the

railroad. The class and status of the wives of prominent railroad men provided them with options that most of the other women in this study did not have: the opportunity for education, the privilege of not working, and the ability to be mobile. Still, some of these women probably did have to provide domestic work and play supporting roles for their husbands. In several instances, we know about these women because of their class status; in other words, contemporaries saw them as worth mentioning.

Hannah Maria Strobbridge is, perhaps, one of the best known railroad wives who traveled with her husband during the CPRR construction of the transcontinental railroad. Although other wives came and left, Strobbridge brought her two adopted children with her and set up house in a train car. Strobbridge's car had three apartments; the Strobbridges had one, the wife of the Joseph Graham, an engineer, lived in another, and the third served as an office. Hannah Strobbridge seems to have been well respected among the railroad workers and was known as the "Heroine of the CP."⁵⁷ An eyewitness at the driving of the golden spike, Amos L. Bowsher, stated that after the telegraph wires were disconnected from the spike, "several people took a swing at the spike, including Mrs. J. H. Strobbridge."⁵⁸ Her two adopted children were also present at the wedding of the rails.⁵⁹

Bowsher also mentioned that Mary L. Swearingen Ryan, the wife of Emmons Black Ryan, first secretary to Leland Stanford, was also there on May 10, 1869.⁶⁰ Like other railroad women, Mary had a life filled, somewhat, with movement and family concerns: she was born in Missouri but spent her youth in California. After marrying as a teenager, she bore a handful of children, including a daughter with the middle name *Stanford*. It is commonly accepted that Mary L. Ryan was one of the main women featured in the photographs of the "joining of the rails."⁶¹ Other women associated with the CP who were present that day were the wives of O. C. Smith, a paymaster for the CP, and Mike Stanton, a track boss for the CP and a relative of Hannah Strobbridge.⁶²

The most prominent woman associated with the Union Pacific Railroad present at the golden spike ceremony was Jane Earl Reed. Her

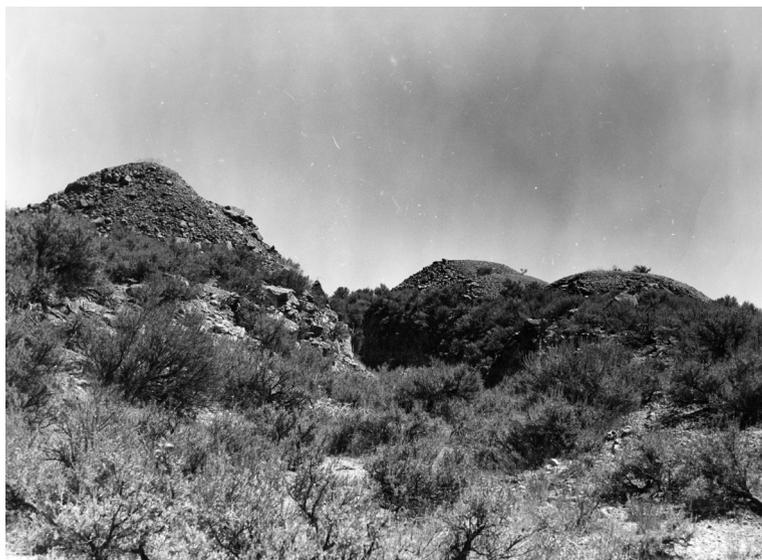
daughter Anna Reed and her sister Minerva Earl were with her at the time.⁶³ Jane was the wife of Samuel B. Reed, who started working for the Union Pacific as a locating engineer. She was born in Pennsylvania in about 1827 and would have been about forty-two years old in 1869. Samuel worked for about six months surveying the railroad route between Green River, Wyoming, and the Wasatch Range in Utah. By 1866, he had changed positions in the company from surveying to engineer of construction and superintendent of operations. Samuel supervised all phases of construction on the final railroad construction to Promontory Summit. Since he led the work for the Union Pacific, it would make sense that his wife and family—which included three young daughters and a sister-in-law—were with him at least through the final stages of construction.⁶⁴

In 1895, Louis Howard Hyde, a grandson of the Reeds compiled Samuel's letters and made notes concerning his life.⁶⁵ Samuel filled his letters, written mainly to his wife, with details of the difficulties of the race to the Promontories. He seems to have relied on his wife for support in his tough decisions and for comfort at a very busy time. She was able to join him near the completion of the railroad. In April 1869, Jane, her three daughters, and her sister arrived at Echo, in Weber Canyon, Utah. They stayed here with Samuel until the joining of the rails. Unfortunately, the three girls contracted scarlet fever on the way to Utah Territory and only

Anna, the eldest daughter, was able to “attend the ceremony of the laying of the last rail” with her mother and aunt.⁶⁶

From newspapers and other accounts come snippets of information about other women who were present with their husbands, employees of the UP; these include the wives of Isaac Sisson and E. P. North. In March 1869, the *Deseret News* wrote about the progress of the Union Pacific and mentioned that Sisson, “a regularly graduated grader” and foreman had his wife “with him, and they are veritably at home in camp.”⁶⁷ Little is known of Mrs. E. P. North other than she was present at the golden spike ceremony and that her husband worked as a civil engineer on the UP.⁶⁸

More information is available for, Caira Simpson, who joined her husband, Jabez B. Simpson, while he was working as an engineer on the railroad in Byron, Wyoming. According to her obituary, Caira at first took her “meals in a tent boarding house . . . later taking charge of the eating house built by the UP.”⁶⁹ Caira continued to on with the railroad and was present at the driving of the last spike in May 1869. Caira left her work with the UP that summer of 1869, when she returned to New Hampshire to visit her mother and her first son was born, a fact that means she was most likely pregnant during the final weeks of construction. The family later settled in Laramie, Wyoming, where Jabez became a rancher.⁷⁰



Piles of rock from construction of the railroad, near Promontory, July 1949. This photograph provides an idea of the landscape women such as Anna Jenkins Ewing experienced during the building of the transcontinental railroad. *Utah State Historical Society, photograph no. 15750.*

Perhaps one of the most intriguing stories comes from the local Promontory lore. For many years the story was told that an entire family “took up housekeeping in one of Promontory’s caves during the railroad construction.”⁷¹ Edwin Hancock added details to the story. According to the account given to Hancock by his grandparents, Earl Ewing and Anna Jenkins, the couple met and were married while working for the UP. His grandmother, an English immigrant, was a cook, and his grandfather was a construction engineer. “Just before completion of the railroad, with his wife in the final days of pregnancy, Earl found a large Promontory cave and moved Anna to their new ‘home.’ (Their daughter) Ella was born in the cave on April 13, 1869, and was in her mother’s arms during the Golden Spike Ceremony on May 10th.” Hancock’s account is supported by census data that shows the Ewings, including baby Ella, in Box Elder County in 1870.⁷²

These are a few of the stories of women who worked for the railroad or were married to railroad workers. Each story is different, but each also illustrates the many ways that women played a role in the work of the transcontinental railroad. The commonalities among these women center on the respect and relative comfort that came from their husbands’ employment with the railroad. Yet they still dealt with the difficulties of disease, childbirth, and a frontier environment that less prosperous or famous women experienced.



The study of women who played roles in the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in Utah and neighboring areas is highly interesting. These women were from different classes, even from different nations, and included entertainers, hotel and newspaper operators, Latter-day Saint women, railroad worker wives, and prominent railroad wives. From Hannah Strobridge, who was called by some the “heroine of the CP,” to the LDS women who took in laundry and cooked for the workers, to the prostitutes and hotel owners, each of these women profited, to an extent, in the construction of the rails. They each played different roles, working alongside the men. All of these different stories work together to draw a more complete picture of the history of the railroad construction.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nothing Like It In the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad, 1863–1869* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); Robert West Howard, *The Great Iron Trail: The Story of the First Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Bonanza, 1962); Wesley S. Griswold, *A Work of Giants: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad* (London: Frederick Muller, 1963); John Hoyt Williams, *A Great and Shining Road: The Epic Story of the Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Times Books, 1988).
2. This idea is especially influenced by the work Elizabeth M. Scott. See Elizabeth M. Scott, ed., *Those of Little Note: Gender, Race and Class in Historical Archaeology* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 3.
3. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, “Women’s Work on the Mormon Frontier,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 277.
4. Charles Vollan, “‘Hell on Wheels’ Towns,” *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, accessed February 24, 2020, plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.ct.027. See *Frontier Index* (Bear River City, WY), November 3, 1868, 3, 4, for a representative list of advertisements and announcements in the Union Pacific camp towns. For typical secondary summaries of the towns, see Leonard J. Arrington, “The Transcontinental Railroad and the Development of the West,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (January 1969): 7; John J. Stewart, *The Iron Trail to the Golden Spike* (New York: Meadow Lark, 1994), 10; Brigham D. Madsen, *Corinne: The Gentile Capital of Utah* (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1980), 3.
5. Richard Erdoes, quoted in Catherine Holder Spude, “Brothels and Saloons: An Archaeology of Gender in the American West,” *Historical Archaeology* 39, no. 1 (2005): 103.
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7. Dick Kreck, *Hell on Wheels: Wicked Towns along the Union Pacific Railroad* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2013).
8. Lynne Rhodes Mayer and Kenneth E. Vose, *Makin’ Tracks: The Story of the Transcontinental Railroad in the Pictures and Words of the Men Who Were There* (New York: Praeger, 1975), 102.
9. “The Newspaper on Wheels,” *Edgefield (SC) Advertiser*, July 15, 1868, 2.
10. *Frontier Index* (Laramie City, WY), June 2, 1868, 3. The 1868 volume of *Frontier Index* is available online at newspapers.wyo.gov.
11. Brooks McNamara, *New York Concert Saloon: The Devil’s Own Nights* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 84; Holly George, *Show Town: Theater and Culture in the Pacific Northwest, 1890–1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 79–88.
12. *Frontier Index* (Laramie City, WY), May 19, 1868, 3.
13. *Frontier Index* (Laramie City, WY), May 26, 1868, 3. The Crisman “Diana” advertisement appeared in the *Frontier Index* throughout the summer of 1868. For further evidence of dance halls and female-centered entertain-

- ment, see *Frontier Index* (various locations), May 22, June 19, September 1, November 10, 1868, 3.
14. *Frontier Index* (Green River City, WY), October 2, 1868, 3.
 15. "Saw Golden Spike Driven York Man Recalls," *World Herald* (Omaha, NB), April 25, 1939, 10A.
 16. Quoted in Mayer and Vose, *Makin' Tracks*, 136; David Hampshire, Martha Sonntag Bradley, and Allen Roberts, *A History of Summit County* (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society and Summit County Commission, 1998), 57.
 17. Samuel Bowles, *Our New West; Records of Travel between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean . . .* (New York: J. D. Dennison, 1869), 56–57, available online at memory.loc.gov, accessed March 2, 2020.
 18. Bowles, *Our New West*, 56. See *Frontier Index* (various locations), April 21, 28, May 29, June 5, 16, October 6, 1868, for brief mentions of women.
 19. Gregory Nickerson, "Industry, Politics and Power: the Union Pacific in Wyoming," *WyoHistory.org*, published November 18, 2018, accessed February 24, 2020.
 20. Quoted in Mayer and Vose, *Makin' Tracks*, 102. The *Frontier Index* offers some insight into the social make-up and, at times, lawlessness of these camps with accounts of vigilance committees, drunken fights, and the like. See, for instance, *Frontier Index* (Bear River City, WY), November 3, 10, 13, 1868, 3.
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 23. Foe Bauman, "History Online," *The Record: News from the National Archives and Records Administration* 4, no. 3 (January 1998): 20; Mayer and Vose, *Makin' Tracks*, 164.
 24. Mayer and Vose, *Makin' Tracks*, 46–48.
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 29. Bryn Williams, "Chinese Masculinities and Material Culture," *Historical Archaeology* 42, no. 3 (2008): 58.
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 32. "Over the Union Pacific Railroad," *Daily Alta California*, May 18, 1869, 1.
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67. "Article Describing the Progress of the Union Pacific through the Utah Territory," *Deseret News*, March 30, 1869.
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70. "Obituary for Mrs. Caira Simpson"; "Descendant of Martha Washington Passes On," *Independent-Record* (Helena, MT), April 4, 1930, 4. A diary for Caira Simpson (1908–1914) is held at the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming. "American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming: Guide to Wyoming and the West Collections," 311, accessed April 2, 2020, uwo.edu/ahc/_files/collection_guides/wy-west-guide-2014-ed2018jan.pdf.
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72. *A Guide to the Big Fill Trail; 1870 United States Federal Census*, database online, Corinne, Box Elder, Utah Territory, roll M593_1610, page 44B, Ella Ewing, accessed April 1, 2020, ancestry.com. Genealogical data also verifies that the Ewings were Hancock's ancestors. See familysearch.org/tree/find/id, s.v. KF5J-WD9, Bertie Ella Ewing.