

# IMMIGRANT LABOR ON THE PACIFIC RAILROAD

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The Pacific Railroad is often presented as a grand accomplishment of American ingenuity and hard work; it is a symbol of her growing prosperity and impact upon the world at large. Books which tell the story of the railroad often reflect this idea of grandeur in their titles: John Hoyt Williams' *A Great and Shining Road* or Stephen Ambrose's *Nothing Like it in the World* are just two examples of the road being presented as a beacon of American greatness. One must ask, then, what is it that makes this railroad so great? What makes the Pacific Railroad stand apart and above the other roads that came before and followed after?

The Pacific Railroad is more commonly known as the Transcontinental Railroad, yet this name is misleading. When answering the question why the railroad stood out from the rest, many would say it was the first railroad to span a continent; it was not. The Panama Railroad linked the Atlantic to the Pacific in 1855 and thus claimed the honor of being the transcontinental railroad.<sup>1</sup> So if the railroad could not even claim to be the first to span a continent, the greatness must arise from somewhere else.

Whether one is learning about the railroad for the first time or spends a lifetime studying it, what becomes clear is the building of this railroad was a massive undertaking. Many historians will look at the sophisticated engineering required to punch through the Sierras or bridge the mighty rivers of the Great Plains, others will look at the political maneuverings and deals of railroad executives to help finance the staggering cost of construction. Yet these only tell part of the story. To understand what truly makes this railroad great, one must look at the story of those who built it. The majority of men who built the railroad were immigrant workers. Much of what is written about immigrant workers on the Pacific Railroad concentrates on the Chinese laborers constructing the Central Pacific Railroad east from Sacramento, California. The Chinese are often portrayed as facing the most difficult tasks of construction while living in the harshest of conditions during the construction of the Pacific Railroad, yet this blatantly ignores the many hardships faced by their predominately Irish counterparts working west from Omaha, Nebraska on

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<sup>1</sup> John Hoyt Williams, *A Great and Shining Road: The Epic Story of the Transcontinental Railroad* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 7.

the Union Pacific Railroad, and when taken into account, though differing in their circumstances, one can only conclude that the Irish immigrant laborers on either side of the Pacific Railroad lived harsh, difficult lives during the construction of the railroad.

To try and tell the story of the Pacific Railroad from conception to completion is itself a massive undertaking comparable to the railroad itself, and few works try to accomplish this, yet the aforementioned works by Ambrose and Williams do just that. Ambrose's *Nothing Like It in the World* is history as a story. While Ambrose certainly has completed much research regarding a topic he himself admits in the introduction he, "wanted nothing to do with," it must be noted the work is written for the casual reader. *Nothing Like It* also suffers from Ambrose's own personal bias toward centering the book around the executives of the railroad. Ambrose states the main goal of the book was to answer the question, "How did they build the railroad? - rather than How did they profit from it? or How did they use their power for political goals?"<sup>2</sup> This view tends to be more forgiving toward some of the more harsh treatments laborers faced from their companies, casting it as 'business as usual.' In contrast, Williams' *A Great and Shining Road* is an academic work which investigates the building of the railroad. Williams looks at the political and financial, engineering, and labor aspects independently, drawing examples from each to construct a larger view of the construction process.

Rather than attempting to write on the Pacific Railroad as a whole, some historians instead look at one of the two railroads involved. In his work *Railroad Crossing* William Deverell looks at the Construction of the Central Pacific Railroad, and how the railroad's construction influenced the future of the state. Because Deverell is looking at how the railroad influenced California, his focus is on the executives of the Central Pacific who worked, "diligently to ensure a popular reception for the railroad."<sup>3</sup> To maintain the image of the railroad, the executives went so far as to consider purchasing the

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, 8.

<sup>3</sup> William Deverell, *Railroad Crossing: Californians and the Railroad 1850-1910* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1994), 15

*Sacramento Union* which often wrote negatively of the railroad.<sup>4</sup> Deverell also uses correspondence between the Big Four to show the executives would do whatever it took to increase and protect their profit margins, including influencing members of the state legislature and Congress.<sup>5</sup> Despite the attention most works give to the Chinese and their involvement with the construction of the Central Pacific, Deverell only spends two sentences discussing their contribution.<sup>6</sup> While discussing little of the construction of the line or those who physically built it, Deverell's work does remind the reader that the Central Pacific was a corporation out to protect itself and the interests of its owners.

Ernest Haycox, Jr. takes a different approach, and chooses to focus on the individual experiences of one individual and his life as an engineer for the Union Pacific Railroad. *A Very Exclusive Party: A Firsthand Account of the Building of the Transcontinental Railroad* recounts the memories of Union Pacific civil engineer Charles Sharman beginning in 1866. Sharman remained with the railroad construction crews all the way to Promontory Summit and the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869. Haycox is able to use the information recorded by Sharman for posterity to paint life on the Union Pacific construction crew. Sharman tells of life with the engineering crews, attacks by Native American tribes, as well as provides descriptions of camp life and the tasks of the Irish workers at the front of track. These firsthand accounts are helpful in understanding exactly what life was like for workers on the Union Pacific Railroad.

Some historians further break their research down to focus on a single element of one railroad. The Central Pacific Railroad's construction required cutting through the solid granite of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and crossing the vast high dessert of the Great Basin. Scott Carson, Irish Chang, and Paul Ong each look at the railroad and the decisions and efforts necessary to bring the line from Sacramento to Promontory Summit. In her book *The Chinese in America*, Chang focuses exclusively on the Chinese

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<sup>4</sup> Deverell, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 15.

contributions to the railroad, whereas Ong and Carson both address the economic factors with emphasis upon the Chinese labor force.

It cannot be stressed enough what an expensive proposition building the railroad would be. With each mile of track laid and approved by the commissioners of the United States government, the Central Pacific would then, and only then, receive the federal subsidies and land grants awarded for construction.<sup>7</sup> Put simply, the more track the company was able to construct, and the quicker the company was able to do so, the more money the company would receive from the government which could then be used toward the costs of future track construction.<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, “construction depended on access to a dependable labor force” which was becoming much more difficult to come by in California by 1865.<sup>9</sup> Carson looks at this correlation between the need of the Central Pacific to lay track quickly in order to raise capital, and the need to maintain a large labor force for the purpose of laying track as part of the driving force to bring Chinese laborers to work for the railroad. With European workers seeking the silver mines of Nevada, the Central Pacific was experiencing high transition costs from continually having to acquire and replace European workers.<sup>10</sup> With the Chinese practically banned from mining by the state legislature, the Central Pacific was able to tap into a readily available supply of laborers seeking employment. Here both Carson and Ong converge as they look at the role race played in the Central Pacific’s relations with its Chinese workforce.

Both Ong and Carson examine the Chinese workers and how the Central Pacific treated them as second class workers, often exploiting them. Both Carson and Ong recognize that the Chinese were relegated to “menial and dangerous jobs” on the Central Pacific.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the foreman and skilled labor positions were comprised entirely of those from European ancestry.<sup>12</sup> Ong argues that the wages

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<sup>7</sup> Scott Alan Carson, “Chinese Sojourn Labor and the American Transcontinental Railroad,” *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* 161, no 1 (March 2005): 83

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Carson, 90.

<sup>11</sup> Ong, 122.

<sup>12</sup> Carson, 93.

paid to the Chinese, while higher than the average Chinese labor wage at the time, were a necessary part of a Central Pacific monopsony that used higher pay to entice a larger work force.<sup>13</sup> The Central Pacific was then able to use the large work force to their advantage, exploiting the work of the Chinese for an estimated, “\$13 per month per worker,” which allowed the Central Pacific to make, “in just one month during peak construction... about \$130,000 in higher profits through the use of Chinese labor.”<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, Carson focuses on the job classification of the Chinese by the Central Pacific. Through the use of Census data collected along the Central Pacific’s route, Carson is able to show that “Chinese workers were significantly more likely than natives or Europeans to be classified as laborers and perform the physical work associated with railroad construction.”<sup>15</sup> Although these assignments were purely race motivated, Carson goes on to present Congressional testimony of Charles Crocker, the executive responsible for construction, and James Strobridge, chief of construction, who by completion of the line had changed their negative opinions toward the Chinese saying that if there was a job that needed to be done, “it was better to put on a Chinese at once” and that the work of the Chinese was “equal to the white man.”<sup>16</sup> According to Carson, the Chinese, therefore, were initially allotted assignments by race from the Central Pacific, but by peak construction they came to be the prized laborers of the entire operation.

Finally, historians can look at just a single aspect that is unique to one of the railroads, as in the case of David A. Norris’ article *“Hell on Wheels” and the Big Tent*. In his article, Norris explores the “rolling carnival of vice” that followed the work camps as the Union Pacific Railroad progressed westward.<sup>17</sup> Norris looks at the services these mobile towns provided, and at what cost, to the workers of

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<sup>13</sup> Ong, 119.

<sup>14</sup> Ong, 122.

<sup>15</sup> Carson, 93.

<sup>16</sup> Carson, 99-100.

<sup>17</sup> David A. Norris, “‘Hell on Wheels’ and the Big Tent,” *History Magazine* 14, no 2 (December 2012/ January 2013), 11.

the Union Pacific. This in turn, can be looked at to view the living conditions of the laborers on the Union Pacific.

Every story has a beginning, and the story of immigrant labor on the Pacific Railroad must surely begin with recruitment. Constructing the railroads was to be a huge undertaking, requiring a vast army of workers to complete the job. On the morning of January 7, 1865, the *Sacramento Daily Union* published a wanted ad calling for, “Five thousand laborers, for constant and permanent work.”<sup>18</sup> The advertisement directed interested applicants to apply with J. H. Strobridge, the chief of construction for the Central Pacific, at the railroad’s work at Auburn, roughly 30 miles east of Sacramento. To gain perspective on what a substantial workforce the Central Pacific required, in the census of 1860, the city of Sacramento only had a population of 13,785.<sup>19</sup> The combined population for Nevada, Placer, Plumas, and Sacramento Counties, where the railroad would eventually be constructed, totaled 58,191 of which 29,844 were men between the ages of 20 and 40.<sup>20</sup> In short, the Central Pacific was looking to recruit roughly six percent of the available workforce, and, “nothing was scarcer in California than labor in 1865.”<sup>21</sup>

To make matters worse, the Central Pacific was having difficulty retaining workers. Many of the working men of Northern California were likely to labor in agriculture or mining, believing it to be easier and more profitable than back-breaking railroad work.<sup>22</sup> To make matters worse, the newly discovered Comstock Lode in Virginia City, Nevada, beckoned to the men of California who were eager to strike it rich. Nearly two thousand men responded to the *Sacramento Daily Union*’s ad, and after only a week had

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<sup>18</sup> Central Pacific Railroad, “Wanted” (advertisement), *Sacramento Daily Union*, January 7, 1865.

<sup>19</sup> United States Department of the Interior. *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census, Under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior, by Joseph C.G. Kennedy, Superintendent of Census*. 38<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, House Miscellaneous Document (Washington, D.C., 1864), 30.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-24, 28.

<sup>21</sup> George Kraus, “Chinese Laborers and the Construction of the Central Pacific,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Winter 1969), 43.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

passed, fewer than one hundred men remained with the Central Pacific, the remainder collecting their pay and continuing east toward the Nevada riches.<sup>23</sup>

It was clear to the Big Four that if construction of the road were to continue, a dependable source of labor was a necessity. The Chinese population of California in 1865 is estimated (the U.S. Census did not begin collecting country of origin for Asian immigrants until 1870) at close to fifty thousand, of which approximately 90% were young men.<sup>24</sup> Recognizing this untapped labor source, Charles Crocker, the executive who oversaw construction for the Central Pacific, directed Strobridge to hire a group of 50 Chinese laborers and review their work over the period of one month.<sup>25</sup> At the end of the trial period, Strobridge admitted the Chinese were superb workers, working perfectly in teams while taking few breaks, and were especially proficient at rock work and blasting.<sup>26</sup> Lee Chew, a Chinese laborer, would later recall, “No one would hire an Irishman, German, Englishman, or Italian if he could get a Chinese, because our countrymen are so much more honest, industrious, steady, sober, and painstaking.”<sup>27</sup> The Central Pacific immediately began sending recruiters through the mining camps to entice Chinese laborers to the railroad, retained a labor contractor from San Francisco to comb the state for an additional two thousand workers and, if needed, import additional laborers from China.<sup>28</sup> By the end of 1865 the Central Pacific had hired approximately 3,000 Chinese.<sup>29</sup> In April 1867, the *Daily Alta California* was informing its readers that, “the Chinese are swarming in the direction of the Central Pacific,” and that “within the next thirty to forty days, there will be at least 20,000 of these prospective unbleached American citizens scratching gravel on the great national highway.”<sup>30</sup> The Central Pacific had solved its labor problem.

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<sup>23</sup> Ambrose, 148.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, 95.

<sup>25</sup> Ambrose, 150.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, 97

<sup>27</sup> Chang, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, 97.

<sup>29</sup> Carson, 83.

<sup>30</sup> State Items, “More Force on the Road,” *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco), April 26, 1867.

The Union Pacific, working out of Omaha, had no such problems with labor. By 1865, the American Civil War had come to a close and both Union and Confederate soldiers were looking for work.<sup>31</sup> One of these was Irishman John Joseph McGlinchey, a Civil War veteran who wrote, "After the war, many a man, including myself, could not find employment earning wages beyond those that kept a man out of the poor house."<sup>32</sup> Like many of McGlinchey's countrymen, "providence reached out, and I was recruited as part of a work gang... for the Union Pacific Railroad."<sup>33</sup> So huge was the labor force recruited by the Union Pacific in 1865 that the city of Omaha doubled in size to a population of around 15,000.<sup>34</sup> With its workforce in place, the Union Pacific set out across the Great Plains of Nebraska with the difficult task of grading the route and laying the rails.

The laying of rail was, of course was of the priority for the railroad, and as such, the process of laying track had to be as efficient as possible to maximize the amount of rail laid per day. The predominantly Irish track crews consisted of approximately 300 men who, under the supervision of J.S. Casement, were divided into work gangs of ten to twelve men each responsible for a specific task.<sup>35</sup> As shown by the photograph in Appendix I which depicts an Irish track gang on the Nebraska plains in 1866, track laying was a well-choreographed dance. Near the end of track a supply train was staged progressing forward with the rails. There a flat car containing supplies would be unloaded onto a waiting cart. Approximately forty rails, and the proportional amount of spikes and cribs were placed on the cart, then drawn by horse atop the rail already constructed to the end of track where the supplies were unloaded, and the process repeated.<sup>36</sup> This supply cart is visible in the center of the photograph just behind the track layers. Chairs and spikes would be removed from the cart, cribs placed on the ties and spikes placed on

<sup>31</sup> David A. Norris, "'Hell on Wheels' and the Big Tent." *History Magazine* 14, no. 2 (December 2012/January 2013), 9.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Michael Collins, *Irish Gandy Dancer: A Tale of Building the Transcontinental Railroad* (Create Space Independent Publishing, 2010): 32-33, Kindle.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 33, Kindle.

<sup>34</sup> Ambrose, 167.

<sup>35</sup> Ernest Haycox, Jr., "A Very Exclusive Party: A Firsthand Account of the Building of the Transcontinental Railroad," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 27.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, 124.

the ground next to each tie. Once the cribs were in place, two men would grab a rail with thongs from either side and begin forward while other men would take hold with their thongs until the rail cleared the cart, then all proceed forward at a run until they reached the end of track.<sup>37</sup> The photograph focuses on this moment. Each rail was 28 feet long and weighed 700 pounds.<sup>38</sup> At the command “Down!” the workers would drop the rail into its place. The call “Down!” came every thirty seconds, and a new rail was laid in place. Ambrose eloquently summarizes the constant call with the dropping of rail as the, “pendulum beat of the railroad.”<sup>39</sup> Following the track layers were the spike maulers who had the arduous job of driving the spikes that would secure the rail to the tie. Thirty men stood outside and inside the rail to drive the spikes into place. An Irish laborer later recounted there were, “Three strokes of the sledgehammer per spike, ten spikes to a rail, four rails to a mile, eighteen hundred miles to San Francisco. Twenty-one million times those sledgehammers had to be swung.”<sup>40</sup> John McGlinchey working on the end of track wrote of “long hours of intense back breaking work in the hot sun” full of repetitive work.<sup>41</sup> “Up and down, up and down, all the day. I can barely open my hands from clutching the handle all day. My back is sore, and I am exhausted.”<sup>42</sup> To the Irish laborers, efficiency meant ten hours of hard, repetitive work each day. It is also worth noting, that the Central Pacific tack gangs were also predominately Irish.

On the Central Pacific, track laying was the easy part; clearing a path through the granite of the Sierra Nevada would consume the efforts of the Chinese laborers for the greater portion of the construction. When the Chinese reported to Strobridge at Auburn, they were immediately set to digging cuts and creating fills in the foothills above Auburn. The Lawrence & Houseworth photograph in Appendix II shows such a work. In the background, a three tiered cut can be seen with horse drawn carts progressing out on a fill where the sediment is dumped to create a smooth grade for the track to progress

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<sup>37</sup> Ambrose, 180.

<sup>38</sup> Norris, 10.

<sup>39</sup> Ambrose, 180.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>41</sup> Collins, 97, Kindle.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 46, Kindle.

through the mountains. From sun up to sun down, the Chinese laborers diligently cut into the hill side with nothing more than picks, shovels and tiny wheelbarrows. The Chinese were quite literally moving mountains one basket at a time. When the granite became more formidable they blasted the rock with gunpowder.<sup>43</sup> In a particularly treacherous portion of the right away called Cape Horn, 3,000 Chinese were dispatched to cut a path along an almost sheer granite facing 2,200 feet above the American River. Drawing on methods used by their ancestors, the Chinese would lower themselves from the top of the cliff in baskets, drill into the facing then set powder charges blasting the facing off. Many Chinese workers fell to their death, did not escape blasts in time, or were struck by flying debris.<sup>44</sup> Clearing the roadbed was often the most dangerous task on the railroad. The Central Pacific required a 100 foot path through the mountains, with 25 feet on either side of the track cleared of all rock and vegetation. This often required cutting down ancient redwoods whose stumps were so massive they could not be dug out. The Chinese turned to black powder to blast the stumps out of the way, and in the process, many a Chinese was maimed or killed by flying splinters.<sup>45</sup> Moving earth baskets at a time meant progress was slow, and by September of 1865, just ten months after the call for five thousand laborers, the Central Pacific had progressed only 14 miles to Colfax.<sup>46</sup> The Chinese and the Central Pacific juggernaut became the irresistible force slamming into the immovable Sierra. While these hardships are certainly not to be made light of, the Irish faced many of the same challenges on the Union Pacific once the railroad had advanced to the Rocky Mountains and Wasatch Range blasting rock, and removing dirt by wheel barrow.

More than any other task, the challenge that would require most from the Chinese would be the boring of tunnels. The Central Pacific had a total of fifteen tunnels,<sup>47</sup> and by the autumn of 1866, John R. Gillis, a civil engineer for the Central Pacific reported, “the approaches to all the tunnels were covered in

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<sup>43</sup> Williams, 114.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 113-114.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 114-115.

<sup>46</sup> Deverell, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Jeff Brown, “Uniting the States: The First Transcontinental Railroad.” *Civil Engineering* 82, no. 7/8 (July/August 2012), 42.

men... [who] worked day and night in shifts of eight hours each.”<sup>48</sup> The rock was described by tunnel engineer Henry Root as, “so hard it seemed impossible to drill into it to a sufficient depth for blasting purposes.”<sup>49</sup> Alfred A. Hart’s photograph *Heading of East Portal, Tunnel No. 8* (Appendix III) presents the solid mass of rock through which the Chinese drilled. The men stood side-by-side with only faint candle light to work by, each chiseling away with nothing more than hand drills. Once a hole was deep enough in the facing, black powder would be added to blast the facing. When the blast was complete the Chinese would return to the tunnel, breathing in the granite dust, clearing the rock debris by shovel, and carried out by wheelbarrow or basket. The work was so strenuous that even the most hardened Chinese laborers would collapse from exhaustion.<sup>50</sup> For all the dangers the Chinese toiled through, the tunnels progressed an average of just seven inches per day.<sup>51</sup> Because of the slow pace, the Central Pacific decided early on that the tunnel work would continue throughout the winter. The area around the summit which the Chinese were working in was the same area already made infamous for its severe winters when the Donner Party became stranded there twenty years prior.

While the Chinese faced off against nature, the Irish on the Union Pacific had to remain vigilant toward an entirely separate threat: attacks from Native American tribes. General Grenville Dodge, Chief Engineer for the Union Pacific wrote, “Each party entering a country occupied by hostile Indians was generally furnished with a military escort...not notwithstanding this protection, the parties were often attacked.”<sup>52</sup> The Federal government sent twenty-five companies of troops to the plains to help protect the railroad and immigrants, but tribes such as the Sioux and Cheyenne continued raiding to protect their ancestral hunting grounds.<sup>53</sup> “Sunday was a lazy morning and an extra nap was taken, but this Sunday morning a sound of horses’ feet awoke us” wrote Charles Sharman of one raid. “We saw an interesting

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<sup>48</sup> Kraus, 47.

<sup>49</sup> Williams, 115.

<sup>50</sup> Chang, 59.

<sup>51</sup> Williams, 115.

<sup>52</sup> Grenville M. Dodge, *How We Built the Union Pacific Railroad and Other Railway Papers and Addresses* (Council Bluffs, Iowa: Monarch Printing Company, 1910), 15.

<sup>53</sup> Williams, 105.

sight. A band of Indians, stripped to the waist, decorated with war paint and feathers, came riding at full speed, emitting that penetrating yell that only an Indian is capable of making.”<sup>54</sup> Another such raid swooped down on the track layers in May of 1867 while government inspectors were there observing the progress of the railroad.<sup>55</sup> Raids such as this were common throughout construction and would become a part of life for the laborers.

Aside from the attacks, living conditions on the railroad also left something to be desired. The Union Pacific paid their laborers between \$2.50 and \$4 per day based on their assignment, with room and board provided by the railroad.<sup>56</sup> Near the end of track was the work train which included specialty built bunk cars (see Appendix IV) which would cram 144 men to a car.<sup>57</sup> John McGlinchey wrote, “The railroad cars are reason enough to put a man in a foul mood, with so many of us cramped in and barely enough room to turn around... When I signed on to work this job, I was happy to learn I would not have to sleep on the ground, but I now I do so on my own accord because of the stench of the unwashed men, [and] the noises they make tossing and turning.”<sup>58</sup> A seventy-five foot dining car was also included in the train feeding 125 men at a time. A cattle herd grazed beside the train, the beef freshly slaughtered, boiled or grilled, then served to the men with potatoes, onions, bread, and coffee.<sup>59</sup> If a laborer wanted anything beyond this, it was available for purchase at the company store.

Following the end of track on the Union Pacific came towns known as “Hell on Wheels” which catered to the demands of the laborers. The hell towns derived their name from the establishments and services offered to the men building the railroad: gambling halls, brothels, and most especially, saloons and liquor stores. The centerpiece of these towns was always the Big Tent, a forty by one hundred foot portable lumber framed canvas tent. Inside one would find a, “splendid bar with every variety of liquor

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<sup>54</sup> Haycox, 30.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>56</sup> Ambrose, 178.

<sup>57</sup> Norris, 10.

<sup>58</sup> Collins, 97, Kindle.

<sup>59</sup> Norris, 10.

and cigars.”<sup>60</sup> “Every kind of vice imaginable occurs in this shanty town, and it seems to attract every type of Satan,” wrote John McGlinchey, “Men are murdered there nearly every day with their pockets picked cleaner than a chicken’s neck.”<sup>61</sup> For those who did not approve of the living conditions the railroad provided, room and board was available, for a price. A single meal could cost a laborer as much as a dollar, “with the understanding that your host is not to make you sick... by placing too bounteous a feast before you” one reporter wrote.<sup>62</sup> Some of these hell towns would boom into thriving communities with permanent structures. One such town was Benton, Wyoming, shown in the photograph in Appendix V. The photograph displays a mix of tent and wooden buildings, with the prominent business featured in the photograph being the liquor store. Like many other hell towns, Benton’s boom would not last. Set up in July of 1868, by September the track and work gangs had pressed ahead, and the town disappeared, moving ahead with the railroad. Many a man would go to town with their week’s earnings on a Sunday, and return broke and drunk on Monday.

The living conditions of the Irish on the Union Pacific, could not differ more from the Chinese on the Central Pacific. “The Chinese board themselves. One in their number is selected in each gang to receive all wages and buy all provisions” wrote the *Alta California*.<sup>63</sup> Because the Chinese were purchasing their own provisions, their menu was much more varied than their Irish counterparts and included such items as abalone, bamboo sprouts, cuttlefish, dried oysters, dried seaweed, mushrooms, pork, rice, salted cabbage, five kinds of vegetables, four kinds of dried fruit, as well as peanut oil, sugar, and tea.<sup>64</sup> Tea was a staple among the Chinese laborers, as is evident in Hart’s photograph *Heading of East Tunnel Portal No. 8* (Appendix III). The Chinese would place tea in used black powder barrels which would be suspended from a bamboo pole, as evidenced in the photograph, which would then be brought to the laborers several times throughout the day. Many of their Caucasian counterparts would

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<sup>60</sup> Norris, 11.

<sup>61</sup> Collins, 72, Kindle.

<sup>62</sup> Norris, 11.

<sup>63</sup> *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco), November 9, 1868.

<sup>64</sup> Kraus, 46.

quench their thirst by drinking stagnant water from a common dipping pail which often lead to disease.<sup>65</sup> By comparison, the boiled tea, and well-rounded diet of the Chinese lead to a hearty constitution among the Chinese laborers.<sup>66</sup> Through an unintended set of circumstances, the conditions the Chinese found themselves in because of their race actually led to an improvement in their health and well-being when compared to their European counterparts.

While the Union Pacific provided large boarding trains for their workers, the Central Pacific provided no such luxury for their Chinese workers. Appendix VI depicts a scene of a typical Central Pacific camp. A work train would be placed upon a siding containing Strobridge's office, blacksmiths and equipment for construction. The Chinese would find their evenings spent in ten by two foot tents, pictured on the right hand side of the photograph, with six men to a tent. Unlike the unbathed men which McGlinchey wrote about on the Union Pacific, the Chinese bathed nightly, which in addition to making conditions more bearable, was another contributing factor toward the good health of the Chinese.<sup>67</sup> The camps were designed to be portable, keep pace with the end of track. The *Alta California* wrote, "The big settlement literally took up its bed and walked. The place that knew it in the morning was no more at night... and where was a busy town of 5,000 inhabitants in the morning, was a deserted village site at night."<sup>68</sup> Whereas McGlinchey spoke of the squalor of the Union Pacific boarding trains, here the Chinese had open aired tents, with less cramped conditions, which again created a cleaner and less hostile living environment.

Unlike the hell towns of the Union Pacific, the camps the Chinese lived in were the same camps where the Chinese found their pleasure during their day of rest. "They spend their Sunday washing and mending, gambling, and smoking" the *Alta California* described.<sup>69</sup> The smoking referred to the smoking

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Williams, 98.

<sup>67</sup> Chang, 60.

<sup>68</sup> Special Correspondent, "Across the Sierra Nevadas," *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco), June 20, 1868.

<sup>69</sup> *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco), November 9, 1868.

of opium, which shipping receipts confirm was transported to the end of track.<sup>70</sup> Unlike the whites, “You do not see them become intoxicated with it... rolling in the gutters like swine” wrote M.S. Brooks, an observer of the Chinese in California.<sup>71</sup> Unlike the rowdy towns of the Union Pacific, the Chinese remained peacefully in their tents, passing the day causing no problems to their fellow man.

When one takes a close look at the Central and Union Pacific Railroads and compares the working and living conditions of the immigrant laborers, one must conclude that the Irish laborers faced harsher conditions. The Irish faced hard, grueling physical labor, doing many of the same tasks as Chinese laborers on the Central Pacific, and more. Both labored strenuously for meager wages, through scorching summers and freezing winters. The Irishmen had to face Sioux and Cheyenne war parties, dangers the Chinese never encountered. The Irish crammed into boarding trains, rarely bathed, and drank from untrustworthy, often contaminated water sources. Both found relief from the tedious jobs they performed through their weekend activities in camps and hell towns, but while the Chinese found peace, Irish workers turned to vices such as whiskey and prostitution to help ease their time on the railroad which lead to violence, disease, and death. Given the similarities in the struggles immigrant laborers faced while constructing the Pacific Railroad, one may find it difficult to say one group had it worse than another, however when one considers the variety of jobs the Irish were tasked with completing combined with the poor living conditions and the dangers that followed the railroad, one must conclude the Irish immigrants on the Pacific Railroad had it the worst.

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<sup>70</sup> Williams, 99.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

## Appendix I



72

<sup>72</sup> Unknown, *Union Pacific Workers Laying Track at the 100<sup>th</sup> Meridian*, October 1866

## Appendix II



73

<sup>73</sup> Lawrence & Houseworth, *Grading the Central Pacific Railroad, Sailors Spur and Fill, 12 miles above Alta. Placer County, circa 1865*, Society of California Pioneers Photography Collection, San Francisco, CA.

### Appendix III



74

<sup>74</sup> Alfred A. Hart, *Heading of East Portal, Tunnel No. 8.*, 1866, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkley.

## Appendix IV



75

<sup>75</sup> Unknown, *19<sup>th</sup> Century Dormitory Car*, <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/19-century/dormitory-car.jpg>

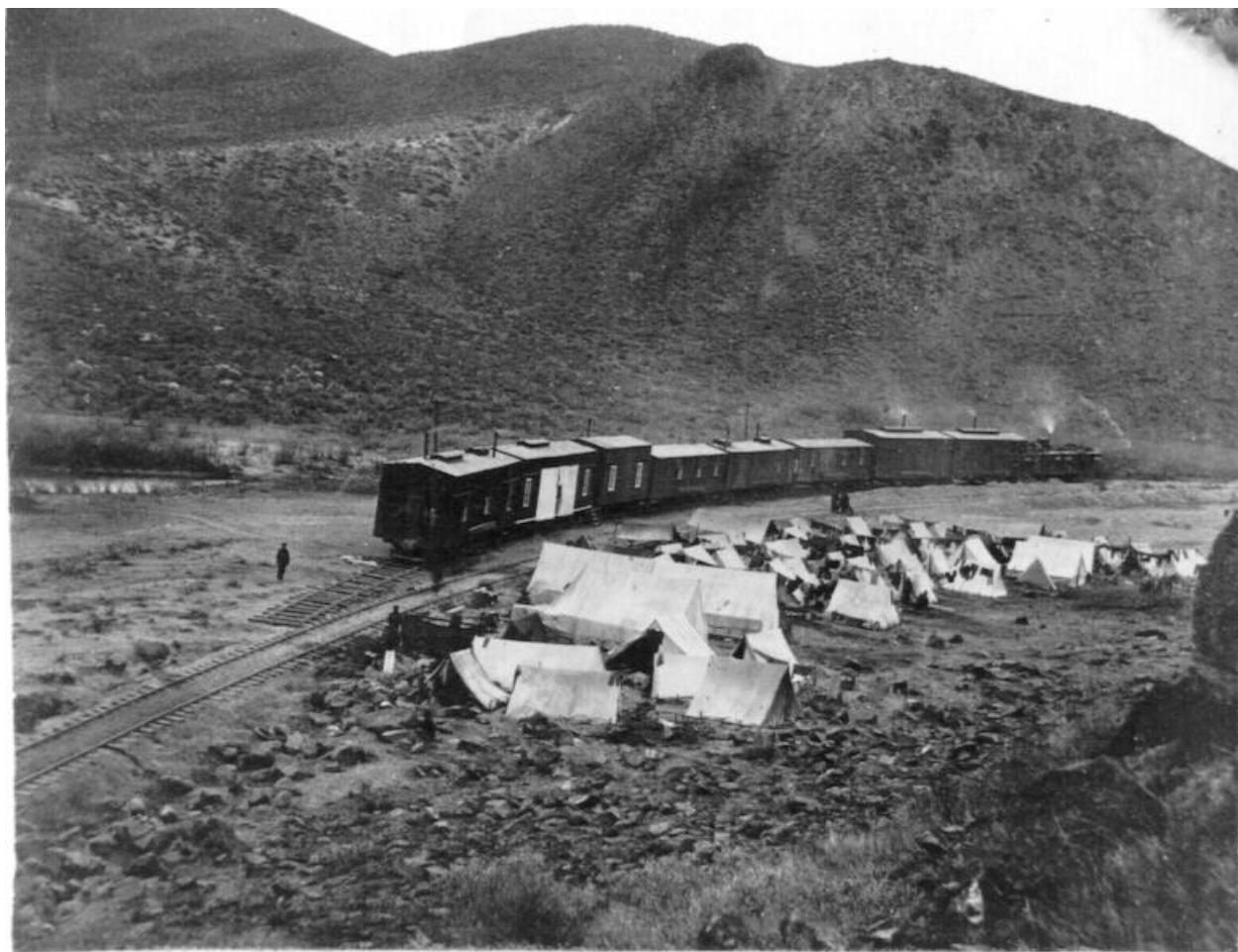
## Appendix V



76

<sup>76</sup> Unknown. *Benton, Wyoming, along the Union Pacific line 672 miles west of Omaha.* 1868. Linda Hall Library, Kansas City, MO.

## Appendix VI



77

<sup>77</sup> Alfred A. Hart, *Central Pacific Crews at Camp Victory, West of Promontory Summit, Utah*. 1869. Linda Hall Library, Kansas City, MO.

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