

# This Train Is Bound for Glory The Story of America's Chapel Cars

## INTRODUCTION



Chapel Car *Emmanuel*, one of thirteen American chapel cars that followed the transcontinental railroad lines westward, brought the gospel and the sacraments to thousands of new towns along the tracks from 1890 to 1946. *Photo: American Baptist Historical Society, Mercer University, Atlanta*

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In Memory of my husband and co-author  
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## INTRODUCTION

### Hell on Wheels or Heaven Along the Rails



**Union Pacific railroad workers gather around a pay car at Blue Creek, Utah, during the construction of the Trans-Continental Railroad. The influx of so many men without the stability of families and the moral influences of the church created havoc in the Hell-On-Wheels towns provided by the railroad companies.**

*Photo: Union Pacific Museum Collection*

A rather plain brick church stands on a corner in a quiet neighborhood in Rawlins, Wyoming—a railroad town. The church has a simple white cross on its front door, no ornate stained-glass windows, and no towering spires, except for the peaks of the surrounding Sierra Madres that straddle both sides of the Continental Divide. But inside the heart of the First Baptist Church of Rawlins, literally, is a wooden symbol of a unique era of rail and church history. This church was built around a rail chapel car, one of thirteen that followed the railroads west in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Those churches on rails carried men and women of God who were willing to suffer hardships to bring faith and stability to the multiplying rail towns where faith and civilized life struggled to survive.

To understand why and how those cars came to be and what they accomplished, we must look back to a Rawlins of another time—a wilder, more violent time.

Rawlins, Wyoming, 1867: The flap of the muddy canvas tent swung open. Through its smoky hole flew the drunken form of a young man, little more than twenty years of age—a Union Pacific Railroad rail hand, blood spurting from his nostrils, face battered by someone’s fist. A farm boy perhaps from Indiana or Ohio, raised on his pa’s corn-fed bacon and his ma’s biscuits an’ gravy and worn family Bible. As a Union recruit at sixteen, he might have fought valiantly at Antietam, Gettysburg, the Wilderness and Spotsylvania. Surviving the Civil War that made him a man, he, like so many others, thought workin’ on the railroad would bring him fame and fortune. Instead it had brought him to the vices of this hell-on-wheels town—eating blood-splattered dust and tasting the bitter bile of shame and liquor that burned through his esophagus.

What brought young men like this one to Rawlins was the construction of the first transcontinental railroad. In 1862 the controllers of the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific railroads began their own race to achieve fame and fortune. Congress and President Abraham Lincoln had finally agreed to grant them right of way over federal lands and to cede 6,400 acres of public lands and a considerable subsidy for each track mile toward the completion of a transcontinental route.

The Central Pacific was to begin in Sacramento, California, and head east; the Union Pacific was to begin in Nebraska Territory and head west. The railroad that laid the most miles of track would reap the greatest wealth. Speed was the name of the game, and the stakes were high. Men were needed for the race. Thousands of men.

So they came to work on the railroad. Not just veterans and farmhands came to these newly platted towns along the rails, but also former slaves, failed eastern businessmen, and immigrants who had fled to the promised land by the ship loads. Payday brought them by the droves to the tent saloons, poker games, and brothels of railheads like Truckee, Dutch Flat, Winnemucca, Julesburg, North Platte, Cheyenne, and Rawlins.

### End of Track Towns Become “Hell-on-Wheels”

To rack up the most miles and profit expediently, the Central Pacific and Union Pacific established end of track points to provide food, lodging, and supplies for the companies’ growing stables of workers. Along with these basics, other “necessities” were generally allowed if not actually promoted by the railroads—gambling, women, and alcohol. These needs, real and desired, stacked on rail cars, moved from place to place, and soon gained the name “Hell-on-Wheels.”

Many of those early boom towns vanished as the rails reached beyond them. Like Gold Run, on the California side of Donner Pass, where now there is almost nothing. No saloon rows, no raucous crowds, no gold coins clanking, no gunshots echoing—just a few houses, a convenience store, the old Union church built by miners, and the silence of the nearby cemetery. Other towns like Julesburg, Cheyenne, North Platte, and Rawlins remained and are stable communities with generally law-abiding citizens.

Julesburg does not want to remember its hell-on-wheels reputation but chooses instead to accent its Pony Express and Oregon/California Trail heritage. However, historian Dallas Williams values that part of the town’s history and preserved it in *Hell Hole on the Platte*. The rails reached Julesburg June 25, 1867, and the sporting houses were open for business the next day. Williams characterizes the scene: “Arriving with the

Union Pacific Railroad were various pimps, gamblers, pickpockets, bunco artists, thieves, shills, and other assorted nasty types. And women: not the marrying kind but rather several hundred prostitutes. This mobile “Hell on Wheels” was controlled by Eastern syndicates who had staked the madams, saloon proprietors, and gambling hall operators and employed gunmen, thieves, and whores on a commission basis . . . .”

Williams reported that booming new Julesburg, the third town by that name, did not last long. The settlement, which contained twelve hundred wood-framed canvas buildings or prefabs, of which at least nine hundred were dedicated to some sort of vice, lasted long enough to brand the thousands of men and women who passed through. Williams added, “When end-of-track had moved on to Cheyenne a few months later, Julesburg was little more than a ghost town with a very large garbage dump.”<sup>1</sup>

Something other than the towns themselves remained in those settlements mainly west of the Mississippi. Remaining were the lawless attitudes and life-strangling addictions adopted in those early towns, attitudes that created loss of life and limb on the railroads and stifled the establishment of law and order and religion for years to come. It was not just the Central Pacific and Union Pacific routes that supported hell towns. They were everywhere along the steel ribbons west.

The railroad companies advanced America’s so called Manifest Destiny, jump-started its post-Civil War economy, and provided mobility and undreamed of opportunities for many. But in their greedy rush to crisscross the nation, they had, although probably without malice and perhaps unwittingly, fostered a moral wasteland.

Who could have foreseen that such a great technological accomplishment would leave in its wake such an ungodly wilderness? The eastern public, for the most part, had welcomed and marveled at the speed and improved comfort of rail travel. Railroads had proven that they were better than turnpikes, canals, and steamboats for passenger and shipping purposes. The opening of the West via rail, with all its possibilities for progress, would be a boon to many, with the exception of those Indian tribes who called those vast territories home.

Certainly Congressman Charles W. Cathcart of Indiana, speaking on the floor of the House of Representatives on February 6, 1846, voiced the view of most Americans. “The Iron Horse [the steam car] with the wings of the wind, his nostrils distended with flame, salamander-like vomiting fire and smoke, trembling with power, but submissive to the steel curb imposed upon him by the hand of man, flies from one end of the continent to the other in less time than our ancestry required to visit a neighboring city . . . .” The majority of citizens saw the railroad as “the wings of the wind,” which would take them where they desired to go.<sup>2</sup>

### Little Godlings Between Planned Prayers

By a combination of motives and methods, the race for rails finally began from the west January 8, 1863, in Sacramento, California. Crowds on the levee on Front Street near

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Williams, *Fort Sedgwick: Colorado Territory, Hell Hole on the Platte* (Julesburg, Colo.: Fort Sedgwick Historical Society, 1996) 49 – 50.

<sup>2</sup> *Congressional Globe*, February 6, 1846, 323; as quoted in Dee Brown, *Hear That Lonesome Whistle Blow* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), 26.

“K,” dampened by steady drizzle and sprinkled with the top hats of state and local dignitaries, were warmed by the music of the brass bands and the sight of bright flags hanging from the speakers’ platform and nearby buildings. Well-to-do women, wrapped against the chill, looked on from behind wooden balustrades of hotel balconies. They no doubt gossiped a bit about roly-poly wholesale grocer-turned Governor, Leland Sanford, the newly elected president of the Central Pacific Railroad, and former dry-goods merchant Charlie Crocker, now superintendent of the Central Pacific, who bustled about below preparing to start the ceremonies.

After many delays, Sanford finally broke ground around noon. To add sanctity to the ceremony, a prominent preacher called for divine blessing on the venture, and, according to accounts, it was a very, very long blessing.

Now the race was on. With the fidelity of gangs of Chinese coolies on the Central Pacific and the doggedness of Irish, British and European immigrants and ex-Civil War soldiers on the Union Pacific Railroad, tracks were laid across the mountains, plains, and rivers, even through the winter storms of 1866-67. Central Pacific Vice President Collis Huntington wrote to construction supervisor Crocker July 1, 1868, “So work on as though Heaven were before you and Hell behind you.” By October a note was even stronger. “By God, Charley, you must work as man never worked before. Our salvation is you.”<sup>3</sup>

In early 1869, the Central Pacific finally made summit and dragged its construction cars over the Donner Pass to Truckee. The crews then sped across the Nevada desert toward the tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad, the object of devious destruction tactics



by Northern Cheyenne and Sioux war parties that did not appreciate being crowded out of their hunting grounds. After many months of grading, blasting, and laying track in the midst of heat, blizzards, and Indian attacks, the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific Railroad first bridged the continent May 10, 1869, at Promontory Point, Utah.

Before the turn of the century, more railroads would complete transcontinental routes with aid from the government, among them the Northern Pacific, the Denver & Rio Grande, the Southern Pacific, the Santa Fe, and the Great Northern.

At Promontory Point, the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific engines finally met. In spite of the fact that both Stanford and Thomas

**The celebration of the driving of the golden spike at Promontory Point, Utah, May 10, 1869, symbolized the completion of the first transcontinental route that joined the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads.**  
*[California State Railroad Museum]*

<sup>3</sup> California Railroad Museum exhibit display, California Railroad Museum, Sacramento, California.

Durant, president of the Union Pacific, missed striking the ceremonial spike, the deed was declared done with much fanfare.

The Reverend John Todd of Boston, the correspondent for two eastern religious publications, prayed. His prayer, which could not be heard above the drunken revelry, was short and contained these words: “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.”<sup>4</sup>

Someone remembered John Sharp, the Latter-day Saint “railroad bishop” was there as Brigham Young’s representative, and he was asked to pray too. At 12:40 p.m. the telegraph operator impatiently tapped, “WE HAVE GOT DONE PRAYING. THE SPIKE IS ABOUT TO BE PRESENTED.” Engraved along the side of that golden spike, which was quickly removed for posterity, were these words, “May God continue the unity of our Country as this Railroad unites the two great Oceans of the world.”<sup>5</sup>

The extraordinary enterprise that had started with a prayer ended with a prayer, but there was little godliness in between. Instead, especially on the Union Pacific Railroad portion, were the hell-on-wheels towns scattered along the routes—flimsy tents and dirt-hovels populated by saloon keepers, gamblers, and desperadoes of every kind, plus the “soiled doves” which flocked wherever the men settled. Towns like North Platte, Julesburg, Cheyenne, and Rawlins, where young rail hands from Indiana, New York, South Carolina, Michigan, and Missouri, found and lost themselves, were the beginning of morality run amok along rail right-of-ways.

### The Paradox of the Rush for Rails

Richard O’Connor in *Iron Wheels and Broken Men* presents the paradox. “In less than two generations Americans conquered the West, or possibly savaged it beyond redemption.” That ravaging began, O’Connor goes on to say, the day they drove the famous golden spike to symbolize the linking of the first railroad to the Pacific coast. “The corporate balance sheets of the railroads would not wait upon humane process or orderly planning, or even history.” O’Connor emphasizes, “In their desire to create an active market for their various enterprises, the railroads promoted a hasty and heedless settlement of the lands along their rights-of-way, simultaneously profiting by the sale of lands given them by an overly generous government.” The railroad heralded by many as the grand “Agent of Civilization,” apparently in its heedlessness, had lost sight of any divine design and



Although religion was noticeably absent in the towns along the right of way, the sound of hymns could be heard on board many trains. Services were held to appease religious leaders who objected to trains running on Sunday. [Library of Congress]

<sup>4</sup> Robert West Howard, *The Great Iron Trail: The Story of the First Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1962, 326.

<sup>5</sup> *The Railroaders*, The Old West Series (Time-Life Books, 1973), 116.

instead had cut a deal with the devil.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, if religion was absent in the towns along the right of way, the sound of hymns could be heard on board the trains. To appease religious leaders who were opposed to running trains on the Sabbath, a profitable day for the rail industry, it was customary on Sundays to hold religious services en route. Although it was a Vermont law of 1850 that required conductors to read Sunday scriptures from Bibles, frequently presented to railroads by the American Bible Society, the practice was generally observed on most lines.

On a train rolling through western Wyoming in 1872, John Lester read the Episcopal service, The Reverend Mr. Murray delivered a sermon entitled “To Die Is Gain,” and a choir sang. Lester wrote, “Here in the very midst of the Rocky Mountain wilderness our thanksgivings were offered up; and our music floated out upon the air, and resounded through the deep caverns, and among the towering hills.”<sup>7</sup>

However, debarking brought not the sound of hymns and scriptures but sounds of a different kind. A group of passengers from New England traveling on one of the first trains to the West in 1869 was delayed by bad tracks near Wasatch, Utah, and had to spend the night there. “What a place to stop in! No buildings—nothing but tents or shanties, and all of them ‘whiskey hells’ of the lowest kinds. We worked our way through the most villainous-looking crowd that man ever yet set eyes on, to an old sleeping car on a discontinued sidetrack, which proved to be densely populated with ‘creeping things.’”

Wasatch was filled with several hundred discharged railroad workers who had just been paid off after the malicious capture of the private car of Dr. Durant, an official of the Union Pacific Railroad. Drunk and disorderly, they “made the night hideous, of howling, cursing, swearing and pistol shots.”<sup>8</sup>

George Douglas concludes in his study of the darker side of the railroad in American life, “The railroad led away from arcadian America, from the virginal continent, to a new and shadowy nation. It would transform the American people; it would subvert their values. It would make a promise of leading to a city of wonders, to new and gleaming life-styles, but would it really lead to our salvation as a people?”<sup>9</sup>

### Religion an Afterthought of Railroad Companies

Religion, especially salvation, seemed to be an afterthought of the railroad companies in those early years, unless it was in the form of a token prayer at the start or completion of a construction project. After all, the job of the railroad companies was to build railroads and create profit, not churches. What did churches have to do with wise enterprise? What did morality, moderation, and public order have to do with good

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<sup>6</sup> Richard O'Connor, *Iron Wheels and Broken Men: The Railroad Barons and the Plunder of the West* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), 7.

<sup>7</sup> John Erastus Lester, *The Atlantic to the Pacific*, 16; as published in Brown, *Hear That Lonesome Whistle Blow*, 158.

<sup>8</sup> William L. Humason, *From the Atlantic Surf to the Golden Gate*, 19-20; as published in Brown, 161.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas, 92.

business practices? Wasn't it enough that the railroads provided the broad economic base to place American at the forefront of world economy?

After the rashness of the early construction period, many railroad companies would come to realize that completion of churches in a settlement lifted the spirits of the people and improved the climate of the towns. In her book on the early churches of Washington State, Esther Pearson concludes that the church was not only a place for worship but also fellowship; a link between the primitive environment of the present and the more civilized life most people left behind. The church provided a proper setting for religious services and a place for the joyous church rituals of baptism, confirmation, and marriage as well as the services for the dead, for in the frontier community, as Pearson points out, death came early to many.

Even after the hell-on-wheels life-styles had moderated, churches were among the last structures to be built in many railroad towns. Faith in the form of organized religion—the stabilizing center of morality, moderation, and public order in the more judicious establishment of towns in the East—had a much lower priority in the western rail towns. John Hoyt Williams, in *A Great and Shining Road*, wrote that in 1864 Omaha was home to 127 saloons, 25 so-called temples of vice, 10 full-fledged gambling establishments, but only 20 places of worship. Five years later, the number of saloons had shrunk to 38, plus 5 liquor wholesalers, but so had the number of churches: 6 for a population of twenty thousand.

### Towns Churchless Perhaps, but Not Godless

Eldon Ernst, professor of American church history at the American Baptist Seminary of the West at Berkeley, cautions in *Religion and Society in the American West*, that although the image of a godless frontier is an exaggeration, research verifies that, with the exception of Utah, the Far West still has the highest percentage of unchurched persons in America. He concludes that religious institutions did not have a strong impact on the Pacific Northwest, and the large majority of westerners never affiliated with churches.

In some cases western migrants left religion entirely behind amid what seventeenth-century church historian Robert Baird called the “engrossing cares and manifold temptations” of the frontier.<sup>10</sup> In other cases they evolved new, less austere creeds, frequently of a more secular kind. For example, towns were likely to have lodge halls—like the Masons, Red Men, Woodmen, Eagles, Moose, and Elks—than churches. Many prominent men belonged to the Masons, except Catholics, who were forbidden to join, and some evangelicals, including Baptists, who objected to the secret rites. Free masonry demonstrated the appeal of secret and magical beliefs to middle and upper class men, sometimes more so than the rituals of Christian congregations. Between 1790 and 1840 perhaps as many as a hundred thousand men joined Masonic lodges.

Those early rail communities may have been churchless, but they were not “godless,” especially when women began to travel west to join their husbands, fathers, and brothers. It would be the women who became the force behind the organizations of many of the western rail town churches. Small bands of believers, mainly women and children,

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<sup>10</sup> Carl Guarneri, editor, *Religion and Society in the American West* (New York: University Press of America, 1987), x.

frequently met in homes, opera houses, depots, and schoolhouses. When they outgrew their space, they seldom had the money or support to erect a building, even though the ladies' aid societies were known to keep many a church open and active through cake their sales and mission projects.

The indifference toward established religion did not help those faithful flocks. Although the Union Pacific Railroad offered free lots to congregations along the line, as did most of the other railroads, lack of funds delayed the construction of buildings. Saloonkeepers, frequently the wealthiest, most influential people in town, knew that religion was bad for their business, although they sometimes permitted their premises to be used for services. They especially feared the temperance societies, supported largely by the Methodists and Baptists, and generally did everything they could to prevent a church from formally organizing and building. In Holbrook, Arizona, on the Santa Fe line, the Bucket of Blood Saloon kept churches out of town until 1913. When a church was finally built, the Bucket of Blood had to shut down.

Men and women of faith had been in the West long before the building of the railroad, starting with the Catholic padres and the Spanish missions of the Southwest and followed by a brave, if somewhat naïve, parade of mainstream Protestant preachers and missionaries. On December 1, 1817, Baptist missionary John Mason Peck and his family arrived at the foot of Elm Street in St. Louis aboard a keelboat. He found a town that was no longer merely a French trading post but a town awaking to its importance as the gateway to the West. Among the village sights he saw were “nightly orgies and scenes of drunkenness and profane revelry, and among the frantic rites observed were the mock celebration of the Lord’s supper and burning of the Bible.”<sup>11</sup> The boast was often made to

Peck that the Sabbath would never cross the Mississippi, but it did.



Camping with his American Baptist Publication Society Colporter wagon, this missionary could hold gospel meetings in rail towns but could not provide a place to start a church. [Norman T. Taylor Collection]

Clergy rushed to the base towns and settlements along the rail lines. Those early voices were like John the Baptist “crying in the wilderness,” but their message was gratefully received by the few who had the rare chance to hear them. It was not unknown for a homesteader to exclaim: “Here’s a Methodist preacher before I get my wagon unloaded.”

### Need Great, Missionaries Few

There were not enough preachers to meet the need. Pleading for help, John F. Spalding, Episcopal Bishop of Colorado and Wyoming, in the March, 1886 issue of *The Spirit of Missions*, wrote, “The country is full of young

<sup>11</sup> Coe Hayne, *Vanguard of the Caravans* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1931) 53-55.

men, on ranches, in mining camps, in railroad shops, in smelting works and manufacturers and stores and offices, to whom the minister of the Church can go . . . to the large extent young men, who can be warned against the dangers around them, led back while going astray, helped up, redeemed, saved to Christianity and to good society, and good citizenship. Nothing, but the Church of Christ, embodying and holding forth the blessed Gospel by loving, sympathizing pastors and people, can help them.”

By 1889 there were only five Catholic priests besides the bishop in Wyoming. Bishop Maurice W. Burke of Cheyenne found conditions so intolerable that he went to Rome to get the Diocese of Cheyenne attached to a neighboring diocese, but he was turned down. He wrote to eastern Catholics for help: “With no prospects for the future, no increase in the Catholic population, with absolutely no support for a bishop, with a large debt on the little church at Cheyenne, and without any possibility of doing anything whatever in the interests of religion, I find the situation insupportable.”<sup>12</sup>

The farther west the traveling preachers and padres rode, the less evidence they found of Christianity, not just in the rail base towns, but in the scattered little frontier settlements a day’s ride from the depots. There was a common saying, “There is no law west of Kansas City, and west of Fort Scott, no God.”

Men and women of faith came, willing to suffer extreme hardships to bring faith and stability to the multiplying rail communities like Rawlins, where faith and civilized life struggled to survive. The distances were great, the rail boom was quick, and the rowdy rail towns were vile. Facilities for organizing congregations were far too limited, and the support for building churches was sadly lacking.

But God was not ticketless as the rails stretched from coast-to-coast. From 1890, through two world wars, and beyond, because of the prayers and actions of God-inspired men and women, thirteen chapel cars—three Episcopal, seven Baptist, and three Catholic—were hauled across many of the same tracks that first carried those hell-on-wheels towns. During the early years of their service, those churches-on-rails were pulled at the expense of and with the permission and invitation of railroad companies that had learned from hard experience that a railroad, or a great nation, cannot be built on speeding iron wheels alone. When Faith prepared the roadbed, then wheels did fly across the rails, “with the wings of the wind.

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<sup>12</sup> T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 221.