



The story of America's first transcontinental railroad is legend, and even Americans who are not railfans know that the Union Pacific Railroad met the Central Pacific Railroad on May 10, 1869, at Promontory Summit, Utah, henceforth binding the nation. The CP was absorbed into the Southern Pacific over time, starting with a lease in 1885 and finally a full merger in 1959, and in 1996 the SP was absorbed into the UP. In 1902 the SP, as part of a larger program of upgrading the CP (1869) route, re-aligned the CP from just east of Reno eastward through this location at Desert, Nevada, to Browns on the original CP alignment.

During the Pleistocene ice ages, the Great Basin was wetter and large lakes occupied its sub-basins. The two largest lakes were Lake Bonneville, of which the Great Salt Lake, Utah Lake, and the Bonneville Salt Flats are remnants, and 8,500-square-mile Lake Lahontan (this location), of which Pyramid Lake, Walker Lake, the Black Rock Desert, Humboldt Sink, and Carson Sink (this location) are remnants. About 13,000 years ago, during the lake's last high stand, the depth of the lake was about 900 feet at this location in Carson Sink. Lake Lahontan was fed by four major streams: the Truckee, Carson, and Walker rivers, which originate in the Sierra Nevada to the west, and the Humboldt River, which originates in highlands to the east in eastern Nevada (on the drainage divide between Lake Bonneville and Lake Lahontan).

From Donner Pass on the Pacific Crest (west boundary of the Great Basin and of the Lake Lahontan sub-basin), the CP (1869) route follows the Truckee River eastward to Wadsworth, Nevada, where the Truckee River turns north toward Pyramid Lake, then northeast across several small basins and intervening passes to the Humboldt Sink and then the Humboldt River, which the CP follows all the way to Wells, Nevada, on the Lake Bonneville-Lake Lahontan drainage divide (at the junction with the OSL [1926]). Although the SP (1902) re-alignment is longer than the CP original route, the new route circumvents the passes and associated grades between the Truckee and Humboldt drainages by re-routing south into the Carson Sink (this location).

Northwestward view of the SP (1902) at Desert, Nevada, as it carries a UP consist over salt flats of the Carson Sink. The distant hills were once islands in the vast Lake Lahontan.



Southward view of the SP (1902) at Desert, Nevada, with the flat Carson Sink in the distance.





Don't worry, there are two tracks!