



The story of America's first transcontinental railroad is legend. In 1853, Congress authorized surveys of potential routes for the "Pacific Railroad," which were completed in 1855 and identified a Northern Pacific, a Central Pacific, and two Southern Pacific routes. The 1862 Pacific Railway Act chose the Central Pacific route due to gold in northern California, silver in northern Nevada, and the absence of Southern Congressmen -- due to the Civil War -- to advocate for a Southern Pacific route, which would have been a much easier build. The Act specified two railroad charters: the Union Pacific Railroad would build railroad and telegraph lines west from the eastern shores of the Missouri River at Council Bluffs, Iowa, and would meet the Central Pacific Railroad and telegraph line built eastward from the navigable waters of the Sacramento River in California. On January 8, 1863, grading for the CP commenced at "K" Street at the waterfront of the Sacramento River and the first rails were laid later that year. The CP crossing of the Sierra Nevada required 15 tunnels, the most difficult being the summit tunnel at Donner Pass, and other engineering feats. The first train passed through the Donner Pass summit tunnel on June 18, 1868, and thanks to advance work, the first train arrived in Reno the next day. From Reno, the CP had relatively clear sailing as it wound its way around the normal-fault mountain ranges and across the flat alluvial valleys of northern Nevada, including this location at Winnemucca, Nevada, and then through northwest Utah to meet the UP 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 1909, the Western Pacific Railroad's Feather River Route was completed between Oakland, California, and Salt Lake City, Utah, via Beckwourth Pass, to compete with the Southern Pacific's (original Central Pacific [1869]) route over Donner Pass. While significantly longer and more difficult, the WP's crossing of the Pacific Crest at Beckwourth Pass is about 2,000 feet lower than the SP/CP Donner Pass Route (elevation about 7,000 feet). The engineering key to the WP's Feather River Route was a crossing from the North Fork Feather River watershed to the Middle Fork watershed -- to avoid the lower part of the Middle Fork -- at a location called Spring Garden, which required the longest tunnel on the route as well as a loop. Once over Beckwourth Pass the WP, like the CP 40 years earlier, had relatively clear sailing across northern Nevada and into Utah.

Northeastward view of the CP (1869) in the foreground and the WP (1909) to the left (northwest), both now UP, on the eastern outskirts of Winnemucca. West of Winnemucca, the WP runs well north of the CP, but at Winnemucca the WP crosses the Humboldt River and joins the CP alignment at this location to traverse the Humboldt River water gap that separates the Osgood Mountains to the north from the Sonoma Range to the south.



Westward view of the WP (1909), same location as previous. The hill in the right distance is 6,700-foot Winnemucca Mountain. The green field is irrigated by the Humboldt River, which is just beyond the field (but not visible in this photo).



Southward view of the WP (1909) in the foreground and the CP (1869) on the side of the road. The 9,400-foot Sonoma Range still has snow in late May.