



In 1867, during the westward push of the Union Pacific Railroad, the construction crews completed their relatively easy crossing of the Great Plains and faced UP's the first and most formidable topographic obstacle, the Laramie Mountains. The Laramie Mountains are a geomorphologic "chimney" sticking up out of the east-sloping side of the continental "roof." In 1868, the UP pushed its way over the Laramie Mountains at 8,247-foot Evans Pass (also called Sherman Pass) and then over not one but two crossings of the continental divide. Once over the divide, the UP was in the Colorado River drainage, but needed to get to the Great Basin internal drainage to meet the Central Pacific. The crossing of the divide between the Colorado River drainage and the Great Basin was at a broad highland south of Aspen Mountain, Wyoming, and was the fourth and final summit the UP crossed in 1868. This would be the last summit on the route before meeting the CP at Promontory Summit, Utah, in 1869.

In 1901, the UP rerouted about 20 miles of the route over the summit. The new route runs 3 miles north of the 1868 route and crosses under the Colorado River-Great Basin drainage divide via the first Aspen tunnel. The 20 miles or so of track on the 1868 grade that was circumvented by the 1901 rerouting was subsequently removed. The second Aspen tunnel, also known as the Altamont Tunnel and like the first tunnel a single-track tunnel, was opened in 1949, completing double-tracking of the UP mainline. The tunnels are in a remote location and I could not find a drivable road to the tunnels.

The 1868 grade in low cuts near Aspen summit. The topography is so subdued that I'm not exactly sure where the high point is. The gravel road to the right is Piedmont Road, which in many places uses the 1868 grade. The elevation is about 7,600 feet and the vegetation is sagebrush.



The 1868 grade in low cuts near Aspen summit, where Piedmont Road joins the old grade.



A substantial fill grade on the abandoned 1868 UP route over Aspen summit, where the grade is used by modern Piedmont Road.



Another fill grade on the abandoned UP route over Aspen summit, taken from Piedmont Road on a section that does not use the old grade.



Piedmont Road uses the abandoned UP grade a few miles east of Aspen summit in the Colorado River Drainage.



The abandoned UP route about 5 miles east of Aspen summit, where it follows a small tributary of Muddy Creek, which the UP route follows for 80 miles down to its confluence with Blacks Fork and then the Green River. Damming of the tributary inundated the grade, which re-emerges downstream of the dam, visible at the far end of the reservoir on the far right of the photo. American White Pelicans use the small spit formed where the raised 1868 grade enters the water.



In 1867, the UP established the town of Piedmont, about 6 miles east of Aspen summit, to supply ties and to maintain helper engines to make the steep grade up to the summit. The town declined following the 1901 rerouting of the line and is now a ghost town. The 1868 UP grade through Piedmont required a few feet of fill, as seen here; the fill was produced by digging a ditch next to the grade and the ditch encountered the water table and created a spring. Besides the deteriorating buildings seen in the photo, the main structures in Piedmont today are charcoal kilns located just out of view on the left.



In 1877, Moses Byrne constructed five charcoal kilns in Piedmont, of which three survive and are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Quaking aspen and pine logs were hauled by ox teams to the kilns where they were burned into charcoal. The UP used the charcoal as fuel for the passenger cars.