



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 Wells, 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). Once over Beckwourth Pass the WP, like the CP 40 years earlier, had relatively clear sailing across northern Nevada and into Utah.

The town of Wells, Nevada (this location), is at the headwaters of the west-flowing Humboldt River and is on the drainage divide, within the Great Basin, between the Lahontan sub-basin (Humboldt River and Carson Sink) to the west and the Bonneville sub-basin (Great Salt Lake) to the east. West of Wells, both the CP and WP follow the Humboldt River, but east of Wells the CP route heads east and north to circumvent Great Salt Lake to the north and the WP route heads east and south to circumvent Great Salt Lake to the south. In the age of steam, Wells was used to turn helper engines at the top of the grade.

In 1926, the UP-controlled Oregon Short Line completed a line from the end-of-track of the Idaho Central Rogerson Branch (1910), which by 1926 was an OSL property, southward to the UP-controlled WP (1909) at Wells, Nevada (this location). The OSL Wells Branch interchanged only with the SP (CP [1869]) for two years until 1928, when the WP built a grade crossing and enough track to join the WP (1909) south of the CP/SP. The OSL Wells Branch (1926) was abandoned in 1979-1980.

Westward view of the CP (1869)/SP/UP, barely visible to the right of and behind the pile of ties. The berm just below the power pole is 1928 OSL construction, which raises the Wells Branch grade over the CP tracks to reach the WP a half mile to the southwest (left). These plates, spikes, and ties are all that was left of the OSL tracks in 2013.





Southward view 2,200 feet southwest of the CP (1869)-OSL Wells Branch grade crossing (previous photo). The trackage that runs across the photo is the WP (1909) and the curved grade in the foreground is the abandoned OSL Wells Branch (1926) connection built in 1928. Note that signals for this connection are still in place at the far left, where a single switch once connected the lines (no wye). The 11,000+ foot East Humboldt Range in the background was capped by glaciers during the Pleistocene epoch, as indicated by U-shaped valleys evident in this view. Glacial melt waters drained westward to Pleistocene Lake Lahontan and eastward to Pleistocene Lake Bonneville.





Westward view of the WP (1909) about 10 miles south of Wells, with the once-glaciated East Humboldt Range in the background.