

Chapter Six- California or Bust!



Overland trails were not the only route to the West. When gold was discovered in California, the forty-niners or fortune seekers wanted to get there as quickly as possible. There were three main routes to California from the eastern United States. The fastest was by clipper ship and coastal steamer which took travelers across Nicaragua or the Isthmus of Panama. The greatest danger of this route was diseases such as yellow fever and malaria in the jungles of Central America. The second route was by ship around the tip of South America, which could take from five to eight months and was 18,000 miles long! The third route was the overland trail, of which there were several. About twice as many traveled overland as traveled by sea. Each route had dangers and challenges.

In Oscar Lewis's book Sea Routes to the Gold Fields, the route through Nicaragua is explained.

"Five hundred miles north of Panama, the extremity of the continent again narrowed, bringing the two oceans close together and presenting no serious physical obstacles to travel between the two coasts. To be sure, the isthmus at Nicaragua was much wider than at Panama, but balancing this were certain advantages. For one thing, it shortened the distance from New York to San Francisco by almost 1000 miles. Second, the crossing was broken by Lake Nicaragua, more than a hundred miles long, which lay near the western side of the isthmus and was separated from the Pacific by a ridge of hills less than a dozen miles across. Lake Nicaragua's outlet was to the east, through the meandering 120 mile long San Juan River, which emptied into the Caribbean at San Juan del Norte. "

Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt became interested in this route and proposed building a canal. He thought it would be a brilliant addition to his fortune if he could control a canal across Nicaragua.



He had to give up that plan, but did set his ships in motion to transport the pioneers in both east-west and west-east travels with clipper ships based in San Francisco in the west and New York City in the east. He also controlled the route across Nicaragua- the mule trains and the boat traffic across Lake Nicaragua and down the San Juan River. The fastest boats were clipper ships. They were able to move at top speed because they had long, narrow hulls, flat bottoms, and three masts with up to five sails on each.

I.J. Harvey took this route home from San Francisco to New York. According to family tradition, he boarded a coastal steamer in San

Francisco, then the lake steamer in Nicaragua. On the steamer that took I. J. across Lake Nicaragua and down the San Juan River to the Caribbean, he found himself on board with the Commodore himself - Cornelius Vanderbilt. He took the S.S. *Prometheus* from San Juan del Norte to New York City, then boarded a train for Illinois and his family.

While on board, he had a lot of time to think about what he would do differently on his second trip across the continent. He had noticed that there was a shortage of dairy cows, so he decided to sell all his holdings in Illinois and drive a herd of cows back to California. His plan called for four wagons, a dozen young men to drive the wagons and herd the cattle and other improvements that he could see would make the trip easier on his wife and children.

White Americans from the East Coast were not the only people attracted to California. As many as 1000 African Americans also joined the gold rush. Some were freed men, but others were brought from the South to mine gold for their owners. Sometimes an owner would agree to give a slave his freedom when he had mined \$2000 worth of gold. In 1852, thousands of Chinese joined the gold rush as they tried to escape the wars and other hardships of their homeland. Immigrants from Mexico and native Californians were mining gold and silver and providing services to the miners from the beginning. As the gold rush came to a close, all these former miners and businessmen turned to other ventures such as helping build the transcontinental railroad.

A Birth and a Death

Railroads had sprung up throughout the eastern United States starting in the 1830s. They linked the major cities with each other and allowed farmers to send their crops to factories and markets quickly and easily. Building tracks to California was an early goal. Nevertheless, where the tracks should go was debated for 20 years. The Southern Route would have to go through land owned by Mexico. The Central Route might be impassable in winter due to snow. In 1861, Theodore Judah, a construction engineer, surveyed a route through the Sierra Nevadas that followed much of the original California Trail through Emigrant Gap and Donner Pass. The success of the Pony Express convinced

possible investors that the Central Route could be used even in winter. Judah inspired Collis Huntington and three others (including Leland Stanford) to invest \$1500 each to get the project started.

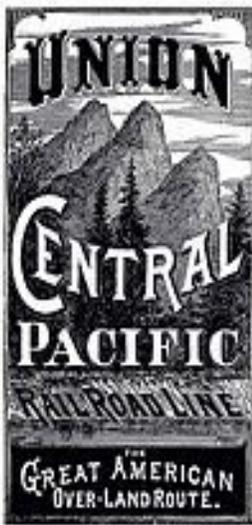
The United States House of Representatives voted to construct the Central Route line on May 6, 1862. Two companies were hired. The Central Pacific would build from the west and the Union Pacific would build from the east. The railroads were paid \$16,000 per mile over easy grades, \$32,000 per mile in the high plains, and \$48,000 per mile in the mountains. Because they were paid by the mile, the companies constructed many miles of unnecessary track.

Most of the Union Pacific track was built by Irish laborers, by Mormons who constructed much of the track in Utah, and, after the end of the Civil War, veterans of both armies. Chinese immigrants did most of the work on the Central Pacific tracks. Most white workers received between two and three dollars per day. Chinese workers received less and eventually they went on strike until their daily rate was raised.



Laying rail tracks took a lot of labor. At times, there were over 24,000 people working at the two sites. In addition to the men who actually laid the rails, there were blacksmiths, carpenters, engineers, masons, surveyors, teamsters, and cooks. The mountains were particularly difficult to cross. Tunnels were built by pounding ¾ inch holes into the rock face, then filling them with explosives. In all 15 tunnels were built in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

As the tracks began to move westward, the Native Americans grew increasingly concerned. They saw the railroad as a violation of their treaties. Some groups raided labor camps along the line. The Union Pacific reacted by increasing security and hiring marksmen to kill the bison (buffalo) which were the primary food source of the Plains tribe. Within 40 years, the bison herd was reduced from 100,000,000 to a few hundred and the tribes had lost their hunting grounds and chief food source.



It took six years to build the entire track from Council Bluffs, Iowa to Sacramento, California. A one way ticket in a third class sleeping car cost about \$65, but the journey that had previously taken four to six months was now reduced to one week!

The completion of the Transcontinental Railroad marked the end of the wagon train era. It also greatly decreased travel by clipper ship. The era of the vast and

open Great Plains and the isolation of the West was over. Towns soon sprang up along the railroad, the Plains were turned into farmland, the bison were gone and the Native Americans were confined to reservations. The United States was still less than 100 years old, but had grown from a collection of dissimilar colonies along the Atlantic to a bustling, industrial nation that stretched from sea to sea.