

The Geography of *The U. P. Trail*

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Zane Grey's epic romance about the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad was published in 1918 to mixed reviews. While it rated the top selling book of the year, one critic said it was bogged down in the "outworn machinery of movie romance" with "preposterous" adventures "strung together so mechanically upon so obvious a thread" (Boynton, 1918, p. 179). To most Zane Grey fans, though, this is one of his best books. Dr. Joe Wheeler wrote: "*The U. P. Trail* is generally considered to be one of the finest Westerns ever written; it is probably Grey's most successful epic. It would be difficult to capture more effectively the spirit of the great Union Pacific project . . ." (1975, p. 165). Dr. Carlton Jackson not only saw the public reception of *The U. P. Trail* as a great success for Grey, but also as a turning point in his life: "Before 1918, Grey had regarded his western novels and short stories as 'stepping stones to a higher plane of literature.' . . . The success of *The U. P. Trail*, however, led to his decision to stay solely in westerns and adventure stories . . ." (1989, p. 54). Dr. Arthur Kimball had a higher opinion of the book's romance than the critic mentioned above and called the heroine, Allie Lee, Grey's champion of "love's transcendent power" (1993, p. 99). The book also gained praise from a civil engineer who said Grey "wrote the truth . . ." (Doty, 1930, p. 52).

The U. P. Trail was one of Chuck Pfeiffer's favorites for several reasons – its fine cast of unforgettable characters, its presentation of the conflict in Grey's thinking between progress and tradition, and for how it caught the spirit of the Robert Louis Stevenson quotation at the beginning of the book. Stevenson wrote that the construction of the Union Pacific was an "achievement of the age in which we live [that] brought together into one plot all the ends of the world and all the degrees of social rank . . ."

The number of geographical references in *The U. P. Trail* differs from Grey's other trail books. *Western Union* and *West of the Pecos*, for example, both use over thirty place names, and most can be found. *Wyoming* names nearly forty places, and though some are altered the majority are recognizable and can be visited. Nearly fifty names are given in *The Trail Driver* and nearly all can be located. In *The U. P. Trail*, however, less than twenty-five places are named in total in Nebraska, Wyoming, and Utah, but many of these cannot be positively located.

Given the relatively small number of places mentioned in *The U. P. Trail*, we supplemented this geographical essay with some plot details and historical background. We gathered some historical background for this essay while at the Zane Grey's West Society convention in Ogden, Utah, in June 2004. The convention field trip to Golden Spike National Historic Site at Promontory Summit, Utah and to the Union Station in Ogden were quite valuable, especially when we sat together on the bus and had long discussions about geography.

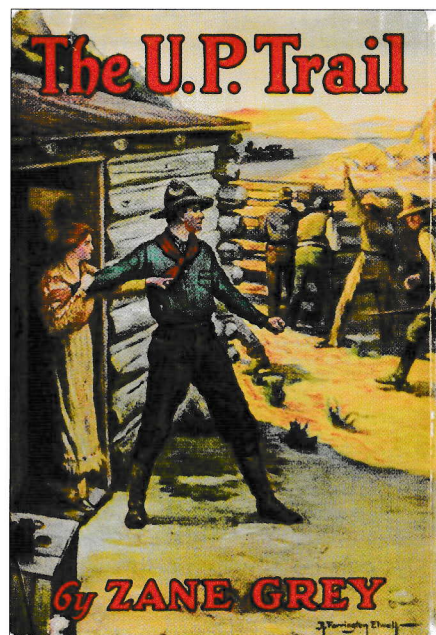


Figure 1.
Dustjacket
illustration by
R. Farrington
Elwell from a
Grosset &
Dunlap edition.
This is the
scene portrayed
in Chapter 19,
page 223.
Courtesy of
Kevin Blake.

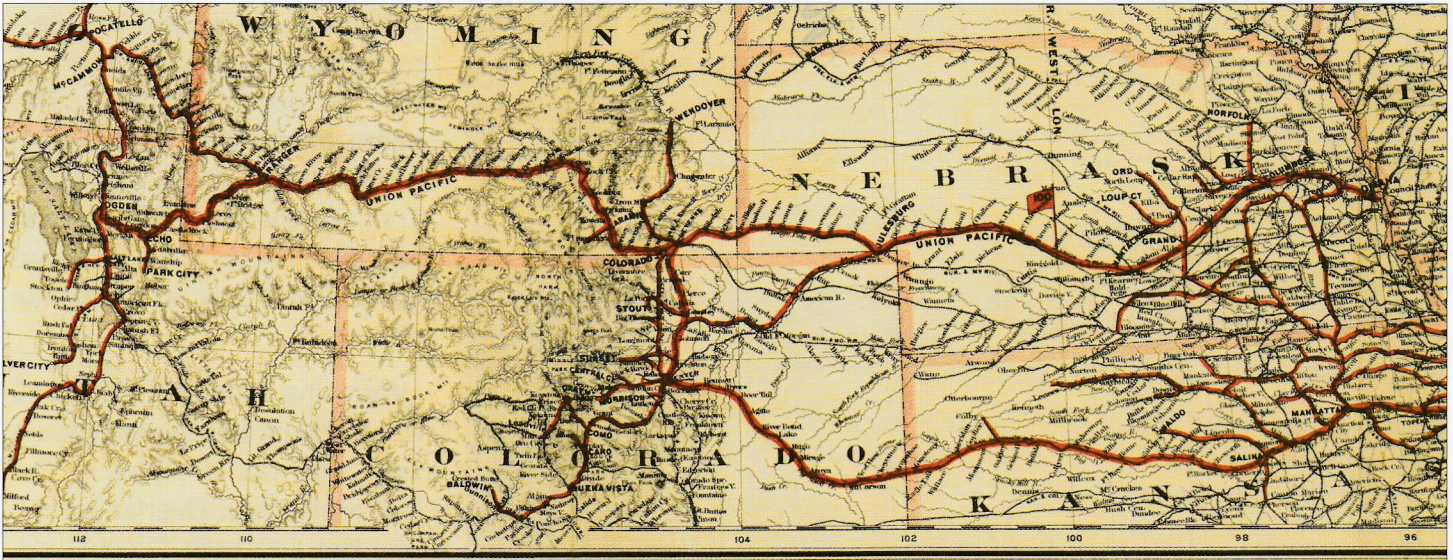


Figure 2. Detail of an 1888 map of the Union Pacific Railway system by G.W. & C.B. Colton & Co. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Much of this text is an adaptation by Kevin Blake of Chuck Pfeiffer's slide presentation at the Ogden convention. Kevin has drawn upon some research notes from Chuck's camping trip along the Union Pacific route in summer 1983, and from Chuck's notes made while he was driving home from the Ogden, Utah, convention in 2004. Chuck's visit to the Union Pacific Railroad Museum in 1983 was notable, as there he collected the Andrew J. Russell photographs used in this essay. Other material for this essay was gathered by Kevin while he lived in Laramie, Wyoming (1992 - 1996), and during his research while adapting Chuck's presentation notes.

The hero of *The U. P. Trail* is Warren Neale from New England; he was a husky, six-footer from a "poor family, self-educated, wild for adventure . . . with strong latent possibilities of character" (pp. 16-17; pagination is from the Harpers / Grosset & Dunlap / Walter J. Black editions). Neale was hired in Omaha as an engineer and helped survey the right-of-way across Nebraska and into Wyoming. Allie Lee is the heroine (Figure 1). Allie's mother had left her husband, Allison Lee, before Allie's birth, and had run off to California with the gambler, Durade. Allie was reared to believe that Durade was her father, and had grown up near gambling establishments where her attractive mother was used as bait to attract patrons. When Allie was fifteen, her mother decided this was no life for either of them, and had

run away from Durade, hoping to take Allie to her real father. Allie learned of her real father the night before her mother was killed in the Sioux raid that opens the book.

The Union Pacific Railway was chartered in 1862. The first rails were laid westward from Omaha in 1865, and on May 10, 1869 the Union Pacific joined the Central Pacific at Promontory Summit, Utah, located just northwest of Ogden, Utah (Figure 2). Supply deliveries to Omaha were difficult due to the lack of a railroad reaching all the way across Iowa. Materials from the East had to be freighted by wagons the last hundred miles and then ferried across the Missouri, or they had to be shipped from St. Louis to Omaha by way of the Missouri River. The first permanent bridge across the Missouri River at Omaha opened to traffic in 1872, three years too late to help in the construction of the railroad.

General John S. (Jack) Casement was one of the key individuals for building the Union Pacific in just over four years. General Grenville Dodge (spelled Lodge in Grey's book), chief engineer of the Union Pacific, hired Casement to actually construct the railroad. Casement's work train was a marvel of ingenuity – a construction town on wheels (Figure 3). The buggy beside the train was used by the photographer, Andrew J. Russell, for the preparation and development of his photographic plates.



Figure 3. General Jack Casement's construction train in Wyoming. Casement is in the foreground. Photograph by Andrew J. Russell, 1869. Courtesy of the Union Pacific Railroad Museum.

The Union Pacific followed the Great Platte River Road westward from Omaha. The wide valley, with its water and vegetation, was also the route used by fur traders, Mormon emigrants, Oregon Trail travelers, hopeful Forty-Niners heading for the California Gold Rush, the Pony Express, and the Western Union telegraph company. Most of the action of *The U. P. Trail* takes place, however, in Wyoming.

The book opens in the Laramie Mountains (also called the Black Hills, p. 113) between Cheyenne and Laramie, and the geographic problems begin at once. The first event involving the major characters was the massacre of a small wagon train going back east from the California gold fields, on a trail identified by Grey as the St. Vrain and Laramie Trail (p. 3). Allie Lee was the only survivor of the massacre.

There is no problem identifying the general area in which the massacre took place, because the Indian scouts were at Cheyenne Pass (p. 2), located in the Laramie Mountains northwest of where Cheyenne, the capital city of Wyoming, is located today. The stream that ran east down from the pass was a branch of

Lodgepole Creek, and the massacre took place somewhere in the Lodgepole valley. The name of the trail, however, is problematic. The Lodgepole Trail was the best-known name for the route that followed Lodgepole Creek to Cheyenne Pass.

Wyoming State Route 210 roughly parallels the Lodgepole Trail and was also part of the California Trail, Overland Trail, and the Salt Lake Stage Road, but we found no record of it being called the St. Vrain and Laramie Trail.

Far to the south in Colorado, Fort St. Vrain provided a clue to the name of the trail used by Grey. Ceran St. Vrain, an important fur trader and partner of the Bent Brothers, built a trading fort in 1837 at the confluence of St. Vrain Creek and the South Platte River, a few miles from where Longmont, Colorado is located today. A trail connected Fort St. Vrain with Fort Laramie, Wyoming, sometimes called the Trappers Trail, and this is perhaps the trail Grey referred to, though its north-south orientation does not fit with the narrative.



Figure 4. Sherman, Wyoming, looking west. Photograph by Andrew J. Russell, 1868. Courtesy of the Union Pacific Railroad Museum.

The geographic problems get worse with the second episode of the book. On the eastern slope of the Rockies, the older railway engineers were confronted by “a gorge too deep to fill, and too wide to bridge” (p. 15), and the young engineer, Warren Neale, was called. He and his lineman, Larry Red King, nearly lost their lives solving the problem, only to have this part of the line abandoned because of the rugged terrain beyond the gorge. No name nor hint of the whereabouts of the gorge name is given in the book.

Searching for another possible route, the surveying party, including Neale and King, was chased by Indians and discovered a natural “gangplank,” or sloping geologic formation, that led from the plains up to the mountains and onto what came to be known as Sherman Pass. The gangplank is about sixteen miles west of Cheyenne on I-80, and the event as described in the book is historical, not fictional. On the morning after finding the gangplank Neale and King joined a detachment of soldiers hurrying to protect a wagon train from Sioux attack. They found a massacre, but Neale found Allie hiding in some rocks and took her to the cabin of a fur trapper, Slingerland, who lived about ten miles from the massacre area.

We were unable to locate Slingerland’s cabin precisely. It would have been on the east side of the southern part of the Laramie Mountains, to the north of the railroad, perhaps on another branch of Lodgepole Creek. Allie recuperated at Slingerland’s cabin from the trauma of surviving a massacre and became as “lovely as a wild rose” (p. 81). Neale stayed at Slingerland’s cabin that first winter of 1865 - 1866 when he measured the snowfall on the rail line five miles away at Sherman Pass (p. 93).

Though Grey does not mention it, a town developed in 1868 at near Sherman Pass, and it was also named for General William Tecumseh Sherman (Figure 4). Sherman was located approximately thir-

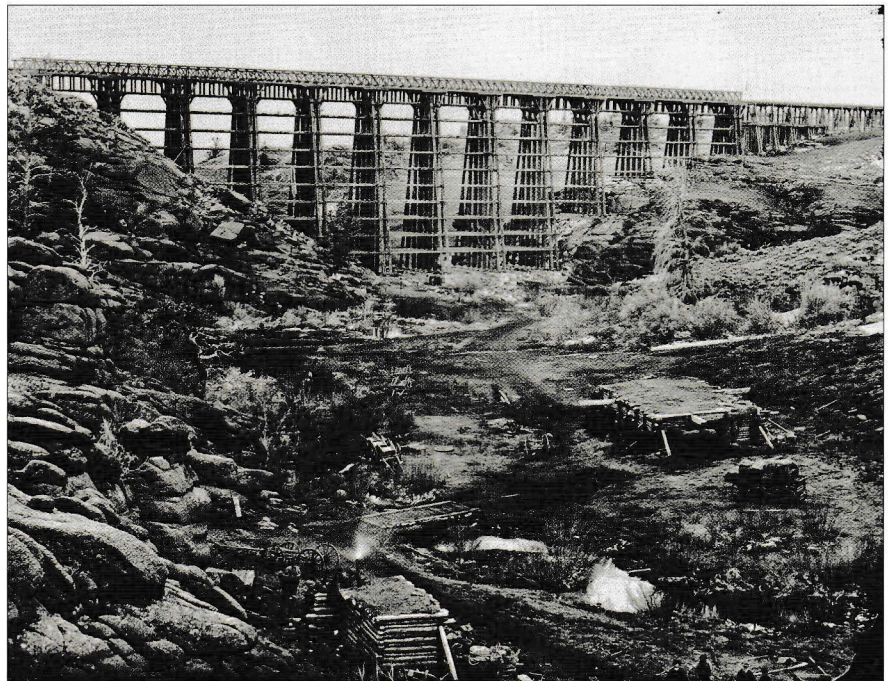


Figure 5. Dale Creek trestle, located between Sherman and Laramie.

Photograph by Andrew J. Russell, 1868.

Courtesy of the Union Pacific Railroad Museum.

ty miles west of Cheyenne. It was the highest town anywhere along the Union Pacific at an elevation of 8,247 feet, the highest railroad in the world at the time. Several decades later the town died, however, when the rails were re-routed a few miles south.

Grey also does not mention an engineering feat in this area that was one of the most impressive sights anywhere along the railroad (Figure 5). The Dale Creek trestle stretched 700 feet across the valley and 126 feet above the stream bed, the highest in the world at the time. A railroad official accompanied Chuck Pfeiffer on a hike to the trestle location in 1983 so they could see the setting of the long-gone bridge. Located two miles west of Sherman, the trestle was built with pre-cut timber from Michigan that had to be guyed with ropes and wires (visible in the photograph) because of train vibrations and ferocious Wyoming winds whipping through the gorge.

After recording the snow depths on the rail line near Slingerland’s cabin, Neale and Larry were sent to North Platte in spring 1866. The only Nebraska settlements, other than Omaha, mentioned in *The U. P. Trail* are Fort Kearney and North Platte, where the Platte River was first bridged by the rails (Figure 6).

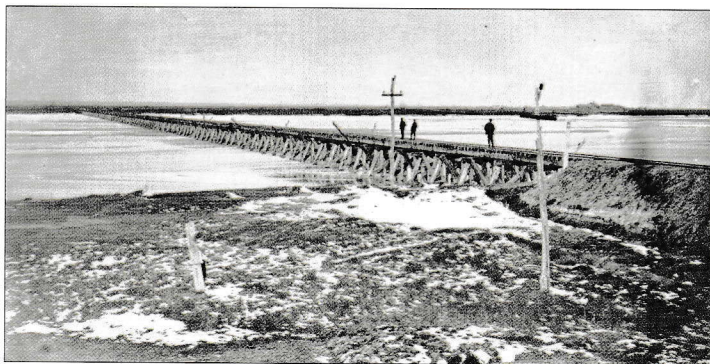


Figure 6. North Platte River bridge at North Platte, Nebraska.
 Photograph by Andrew J. Russell, 1868.
 Courtesy of the Union Pacific Railroad Museum.

Incidentally, the best-known citizen of the town of North Platte was Colonel William F. Cody. Cody received the nickname Buffalo Bill when he was hired by the Kansas Pacific Railroad to supply an average of a dozen buffalo a day to feed the crews. Yet there is a connection between Zane Grey and Buffalo Bill. Cody's sister, Helen Cody Wetmore, asked Grey to write the Foreword and Conclusion to *The Last of the Great Scouts*, her biography of her brother. Grey's Conclusion was written the year Buffalo Bill died, 1917, which happens to be the same year *The U. P. Trail* was first serialized as "The Roaring U. P. Trail" in *Bluebook* magazine. That title was later used for British publications of the book (Figure 7).

After spending the summer and early fall of 1866 in North Platte, Neale went to Omaha without King, who refused to go farther east. Part of the trip was by wagon train, but later Neale was able to board a train and ride triumphantly into Omaha, which was fast becoming a "western metropolis" (p. 106).

While in Omaha, Neale learned of the graft involved in the building of the railway. At a meeting of the commissioners, one of them, Allison Lee, condemned five miles of Neale's survey but refused to look at Neale's notes. The track was to be resurveyed, regraded, and relaid; Neale was furious but could do nothing about it (p. 109).

At this moment in the story, Grey made an error with the temporal sequence. He wrote that after wintering in Omaha Neale returned to North Platte in May 1866 (p. 109), but this is impossible given the start of the book in 1865. Neale spent the winter in the Laramie Mountains; then the following summer and fall Neale was in North Platte before heading east to Omaha. Thus, in May 1867 Neale was reunited with Larry Red King in North Platte and by sunset they were riding west to Slingerland's valley and Allie Lee. They arrived at Slingerland's valley to find the cabin burned and Allie gone, and began a frantic, but fruitless, search for her. Neale and Larry returned to North Platte wounded, and Neale almost died. He went back to work, but with the fate of Allie unknown his heart was not in his work. During a visit by the Union Pacific directors and commissioners to North Platte, Neale confronted them with the idiocy of tearing up five miles of track and then re-building it at the same grade to the inch. In the ensuing uproar, Neale resigned (p. 118).

Neale "began to drink and gamble in North Platte, more in bitter defiance to fate than from any real desire; then with Larry King he drifted out to Kearney" (p. 157). Fort Kearney (later called just Kearney) was the first of the Union Pacific "Hell on Wheels" towns (Vollan, 2004). These were end-of-track towns where construction workers mixed with prostitutes, gamblers, saloon keepers, and other railway hangers-on to create "a camp-city where gold and blood were spilled in dusty streets and life roared like a blast from hell" (p. 155).

Figure 7.
 Cover
 illustration
 by Mudge
 Marriott from
 a Hodder &
 Stoughton
 paperback
 edition
 published
 in 1952.
 Courtesy of
 David Leeson.

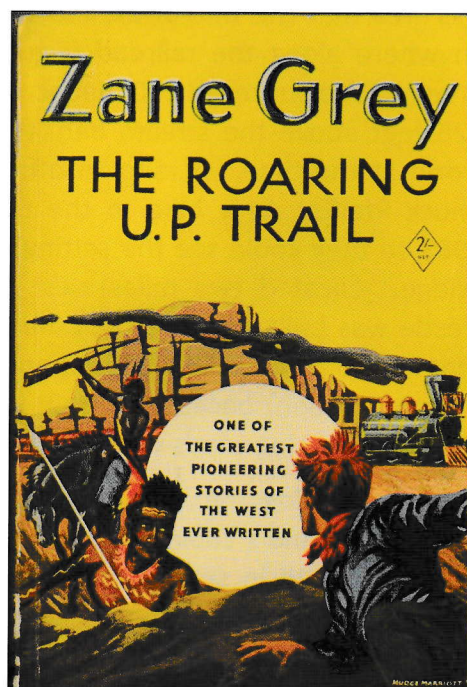




Figure 8. Laramie, Wyoming — windmill, water tank, twenty-stall roundhouse, and machine shops.
Photograph by Andrew J. Russell, 1868.
Courtesy of the Union Pacific Railroad Museum.

When the rails pushed westward from Fort Kearney the Hell on Wheels towns sequentially were North Platte, Julesburg (Colorado), Cheyenne, and Laramie (Wyoming). (Figure 8).

After Laramie, the speculation was that the next terminal town on west would be at the North Platte River crossing, a few miles east of where Rawlins,

Wyoming, is today located. A town was formed on the east bank of the river, and it was variously known as North Platte Crossing, North Platte City, and Brownsville. It turned out this settlement was located on the Fort Steele military reservation, so a new town was built across the river a few miles to the west and named Benton for Senator Thomas Hart Benton (Figure 9).

Benton was the wickedest Hell on Wheels town of them all, and it was doomed from the beginning. It was “set where no town could ever live . . . in the heart of barrenness, alkali, and desolation, on the face of the windy desert, alive with dust-devils, sweeping along, yellow and funnel-shaped . . . The hell that was reported to abide at Benton was in harmony with its setting” (p. 158). The great institution of Benton was the gambling den called the “Big Tent,” a canvas-covered frame building one hundred feet long and forty feet wide, complete with dance floor (Figure 10). Though it only lasted from July to October 1868, Benton had over twenty saloons and five dance halls. Over a hundred men were rumored to have met violent death during Benton’s short existence. Benton is the primary geographic setting of *The U. P. Trail*, as it was mentioned far more than any other location in the book and was where many of the key (and tragic) events occur.

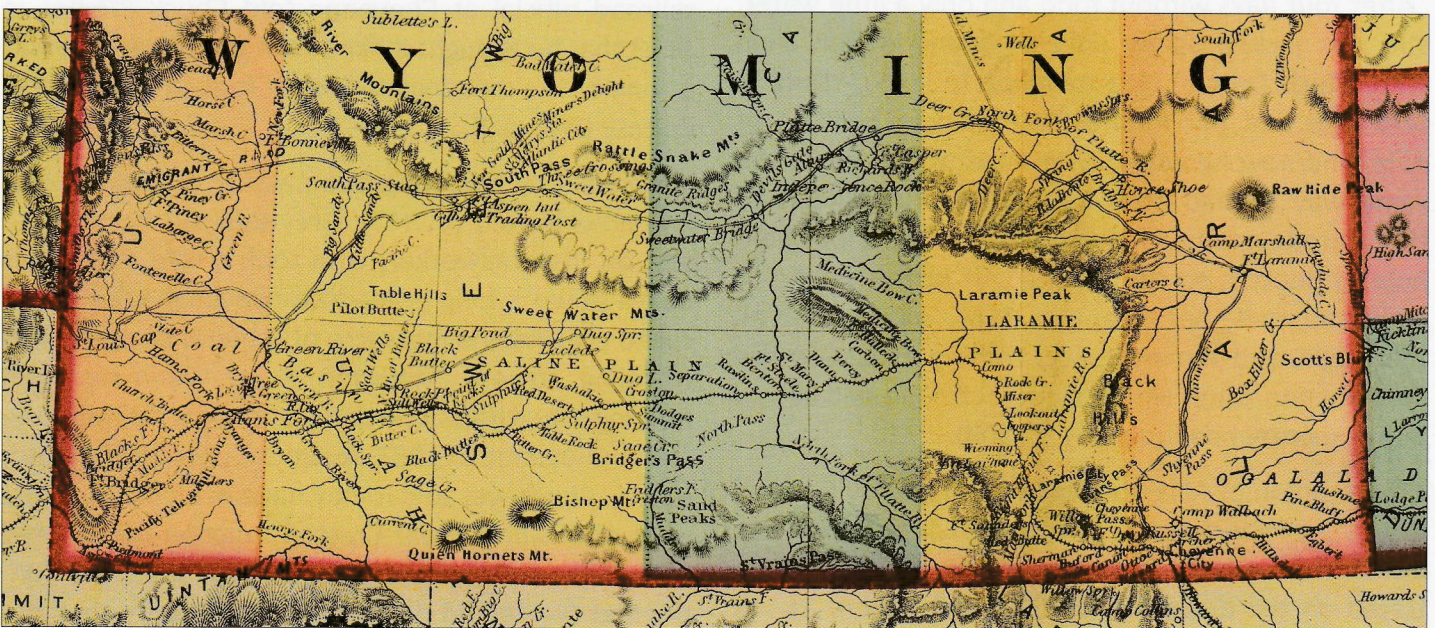


Figure 9. Detail of an 1872 map of Wyoming Territory by H.F. Walling, O.W. Gray, and H.H. Lloyd & Co. In the *Atlas of the United States*, published by Stedman, Brown & Lyon, Cincinnati. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection.

In autumn 1867 General Dodge summoned Neale to a construction camp to solve an engineering "snag" (p. 198). The location is given only as somewhere west of Benton at a deep wash with a bad grade and curves. Dodge asked Neale to return to work for the railroad and after Neale agreed, Dodge called Allie into the room; it is a stunning moment and happy reunion, for it was the first time they had seen each other since Neale left Slingerland's valley for Omaha in spring 1866.

What had happened to Allie? She had been with Slingerland until spring 1867, when one morning Slingerland went to a distant valley to pick up traps.

While he was gone, four ruffians rode up, stole what they wanted, burned the cabin, and carried Allie off to their camp. Allie briefly escaped, only to be recaptured by the Sioux (p. 135). During her third night in the Sioux village, a young Sioux woman helped her escape on foot and pointed her in the direction of the Overland Trail.

After four days without food and only a little water, she was picked up by an east-bound wagon train with which Durade was traveling (p. 145). Durade told Allie that her mother had left him because of Allie, and now he would keep Allie to use her in the same way he had used her mother. Allie learned that Durade meant to take her to the notorious hell-hole of Benton, so she slipped out of her wagon at night and made her escape (p. 156). Allie walked all that night and the next day, coming at last to the construction camp where General Dodge had set up his temporary headquarters (p. 209).

The reunion of Allie and Neale arranged by General Dodge was short-lived. The construction camp was attacked by a large force of Indians, an event illustrated on the dustjacket of the book (Figure 1). In the excitement, one of Durade's men seized Allie and she was taken to Benton (p. 254).



Figure 10. Benton, Wyoming — The "Big Tent."
Courtesy of the University of Wyoming American Heritage Center.

Neale searched every night after work for Allie in Benton, but never found a clue. Neale was then called upon to solve a problem at the site of Number Ten Bridge, another location we were unable to precisely locate. Neale had to ride the work train several hours west to reach the end of the rails, and then ride horseback for another twenty miles (p. 274). A railroad official at Cheyenne told Chuck Pfeiffer in 1983 that he thought it likely that the bridge site was at one of the crossings of Bitter Creek in Sweetwater County (Figure 9).

Immediately following the passing of Benton into infamous history (p. 345), Grey told the story of Casey, an Irish railworker, who took a wild ride to his death down a long grade in a heavily loaded gravel car to prevent the massacre of General Dodge's train traveling toward Medicine Bow, Wyoming from Roaring City, Utah. Chuck questioned a railroad official in Cheyenne in 1983 about the possibility of such a ride. Chuck was told it may have been possible just west of Rawlins. Near Creston Junction (designated as Croston on Figure 9) the railroad crosses the Continental Divide and descends about twenty-six miles to Red Desert.

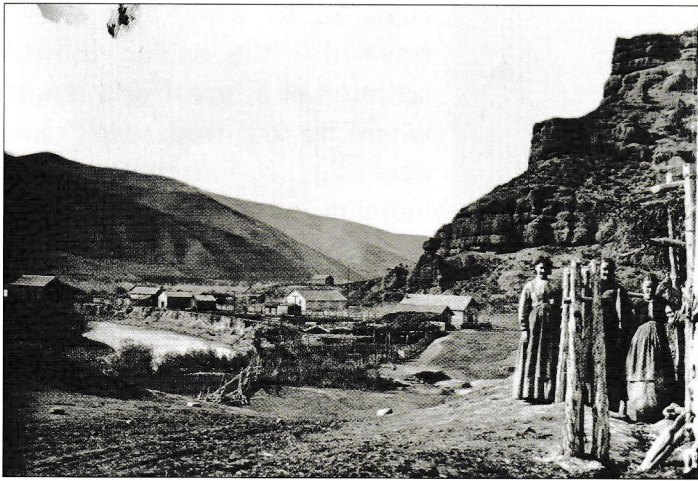


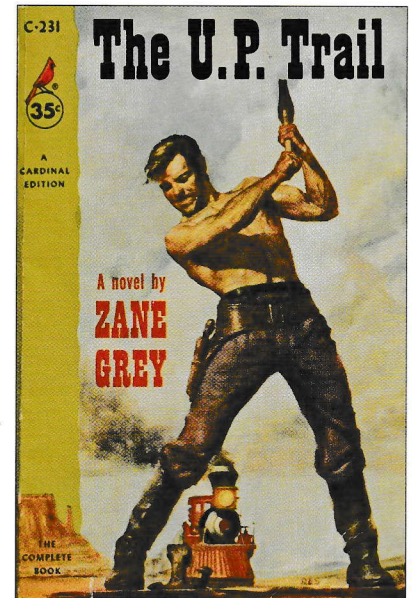
Figure 11. Echo City, Utah, beetling red bluffs, and three Mormon women. Echo City was a Mormon farming village prior to the arrival of the Union Pacific. Photograph by Andrew J. Russell, 1868. Courtesy of the Union Pacific Railroad Museum.

After Benton there were several end-of-tracks towns, but the only one Grey named was Roaring City. Its location initially stumped us, as no such place appeared on any map. Chuck's first thought was that it referred to Bear River City, for bears have been known to roar. But when he visited Bear River City he found no clue of it being Roaring City.

The first good lead as to the location of Roaring City came when Chuck drove down Echo Canyon from Wyoming into Echo City, Utah and noted how the cliffs in the narrow canyon augmented the roar of the I-80 traffic. The second lead grew out of a conversation Chuck had with a local historian, who told him that the Mormon town of Echo City had been an end-of-tracks town, and he was certain that Roaring City was indeed Echo City. Further evidence came when we re-read that Grey stated that the new end-of-tracks town was "set under beetling red Utah bluffs" (p. 357), and Chuck verified in person the red color of the bluffs above Echo City (Figure 11).

While in Roaring City, Allie was united with her father and Neale crippled Durade in a brutal fight (p. 367). A series of misunderstandings caused Allie to go to Omaha with her father rather than stay with Neale. With the railroad pushing westward beyond Echo City, Neale began doing manual work; first he carried ties, then rails, and finally became a spiker (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Cover illustration by Robert Schulz from a Pocket Books paperback edition published in 1956. Warren Neale is portrayed as a spiker. Courtesy of Kevin Blake.



As the Central Pacific was being constructed from the west and the Union Pacific from the east, the construction crews were paid by the mile of finished roadbed. Thus, in their race to meet they each tried to outdo the other, and the roadbeds overlapped by 250 miles. The Central Pacific reached nearly to Wyoming and the Union Pacific extended all the way across Utah and into eastern Nevada. Congress finally intervened and set Promontory Summit, Utah, as the place where the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific should ultimately join (Figure 13). During the re-creation of the driving of the commemorative spikes at Golden Spike National Historic Site performed during the Zane Grey's West Society convention field trip, several Society members were asked to play a part in dressing as dignitaries (Figure 14). Dr. Joe Wheeler played the prestigious role of General Dodge.



Figure 13. Replica steam engines representing the Central Pacific (left) and Union Pacific (right) meet at Golden Spike National Historic Site, Utah. Courtesy of Kevin Blake, June 2004.



Figure 14. Re-creation of hitting the golden spike at Golden Spike National Historic Site. Two Zane Grey's West Society members portrayed dignitaries. On the far left is Dr. Charles Schissel; second from the right is Dr. Joe Wheeler.

In the second half of the book Grey provided few temporal clues, but the inclusion of the joining of the rails means the temporal setting of the book extends from 1865 to 1869. Grey wrote about four events in May 1869, and any of these could have served as the book's ending. The first was at Promontory Summit where Neale reveled in the "victory" of spanning a continent with bands of steel (p. 403).

The second was the marriage of Allie and Neale (p. 405). While Neale was working on the railroad westward from Roaring City to Promontory Summit, Slingerland made a trip to Omaha and convinced Allie of Neale's everlasting love. They traveled back to Utah just in time for her to join Neale at the ceremony in Promontory Summit.

The completion of the transcontinental railroad was a monument to progress, but Grey had ambivalent feelings about progress. Though he hailed the building of the railroad, he realized that progress was costly and irreversible. Thus, in the third potential climax, Slingerland lamented the passing of the trappers, buffalo, and wilderness, and he took refuge from the railroad he "hated" (p. 406) in distant mountains. Though Grey provided no directional

clues as to where Slingerland traveled in this ending, the description of a "great wild range" where no foot trod, with "tame deer . . . curious beaver . . . looming, gray, protective peaks," (p. 407) suggests he disappeared into the Uinta Mountains of northeastern Utah, the highest range in the state.

In the fourth ending Grey was true to his Native American heritage, and he closed with a scene of realization that it was the Indian who would ultimately suffer the most with the coming of the railroad. As the old Sioux chief saw the train disappearing into the distance, it became, according to Grey, a symbol of the destiny of his people: "vanishing – vanishing – vanishing" (p. 409).

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