

Last Spikes

The Milwaukee Road, being constructed in as many segments as available transportation would allow, only had one point at which the rails were joined, with uninterrupted rails east to Chicago, and uninterrupted rails west to Seattle. This was in the Hellgate canyon, approximately one and three-quarters mile east of the Higgins Avenue bridge in Missoula. At 5:45 p.m., March 29, 1909, the last rail was swung into place, and spiked into position. At six p.m., a last spike was driven and the whistle blast of a steam locomotive was the only announcement. The special party of observers and the rail crew were then ferried into Missoula at 6:15 p.m. as the first Milwaukee road train to enter Missoula from the east. The actual spike was reported to be an ordinary spike.¹



May 19, 1909, four miles west of Garrison, Montana, the final “last spike” is ready to drive. Chief Engineer E.J. Pearson, with the pot-belly, stands between two Japanese workers looking directly at the camera.. Montana Historical Society Collection.

Final adjustments were made along the line. The Milwaukee had been running on the Northern Pacific east of Bearmouth since the washouts of the previous spring, and the Milwaukee worked to finish its own line. Finally, on May 19, 1909, the last rail was laid and the company decided to have a somewhat more formal ceremony. The site of the second last spike ceremony is near Gold Creek, Montana, overlooking the Clark Fork River, a quarter mile east of Milwaukee mile post 1578, approximately one mile west of the current Northern Pacific display at the Gold Creek rest area on Interstate Highway 90.

There was a surprising lack of high officials at this “official” last spike ceremony. The highest ranking officials were Chief Engineer Pearson, and Vice President C.F. Loweth.² A few Japanese workers had been rounded up, told to put on their “best” work clothes,

¹ Missoulian, March 30, 1909.

² Helena (Mont.) Independent, May 19, 1909.

and posted at the official site. There, since the rail was already laid, they loosened it up, then nailed it back down after the ceremony.³

It is not clear why that particular spot was chosen. That part of the line had already been technically completed, and trains running past it. The site, formerly commemorated by a monument, is no more significant than the Northern Pacific's, a couple of miles to the east. It sits in the quiet shade of a few cottonwood trees overlooking the abandoned right-of-way which, for 49 years, carried the flashy varnish of the Olympian Hiawatha, for 60 years saw powerful electrics hauling heavy freights, and for 72 years, was a railroad.

All that remains of Henry Villard's big splash are two small sign boards surrounded by sagebrush, and, significantly enough, a railroad, but it is no longer the Northern Pacific. Nothing remains of the "St. Paul's" more conservative celebration, although a couple of miles to the west, a large brick electric substation building -- abandoned -- commemorates another part of the Milwaukee Road's ingenuity, and memorializes another part of its failure.

Interestingly, a silver spike was handed down in the family of Milwaukee president Albert Earling as the Milwaukee Road's "last spike." It had been used, the family legend had it, along with a golden spike at the completion of the Union Pacific transcontinental line. The spike had ended up in the possession of John D. Rockefeller, and was given "for sentimental reasons," to Albert



At the "final" last spike ceremony, near Garrison, Montana: 1. Conductor, 2. W. R. Lanning, 3. Copland, 4. J.W.Fry, 5. U.J.Fry, 6. R.F. Weeks, 7. J.F. Pinson, 8. C.H. Marshall, 9. Dr. Spottswood, 10. E.J. Pearson, Chief Engineer, CMPS, 11. J.H. Ellison, Supt. of Contractors, 12. C.H. McLeod, Missoula Mercantile Co., 13. C.F. Loweth, Chief Engineer, CMStP, 14. W.O. Winston contractor, 15. F. Conley, Warden, state prison, 16. F. Steling, Missoula Mercantile, 17. G. Nick, 18. M. Sawyer, 19. W.H. Davidson, 20. H.E. Stevens, 21. J.D. McVicar, 22. J.J. Harding, 23. A.L. Stone, Missoulian editor, 24. W.P. Warner, 25. E. Greenwald. Montana Historical Society Collection.

³ Personal Communication August 1, 1999, with Jim Satake. Mr. Satake's father had been one of the Japanese workers photographed at the celebration.

Earling for use as the last spike of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul, and kept in the family as a memento.⁴ We can find no other record about this spike.

However, its possible existence suggests that the Milwaukee Road had planned a more elaborate ceremony. The “last spike” at Missoula, in March, had been highly informal. It hardly befitted the stupendous effort. The photograph of local dignitaries at the second ceremony suggests that some effort had been made to invite them and get them to the spot. An “official” last spike from the Union Pacific ceremony would have been a fitting gesture. What happened? If Albert Earling accepted an historic “spike” after John D. Rockefeller had gone to the trouble to obtain it to give to Earling for the Milwaukee’s official ceremony, in such a case, you would have a ceremony whether you had previously intended one or not.

The excuse would have to be a big one, for a man of Earling’s sensibility to betray the personal attention and efforts of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.. The excuse was indeed a big one, the unexpected death of Henry Rogers, from a stroke.

Rogers had been an important Director of the Milwaukee, the chairman of the right-of-way committee for the Pacific Extension, and the powerful President of the Anaconda Copper Mining Co.. He had been William Rockefeller’s closest ally and friend for years, in the management of the Standard Oil, and innumerable investments. Albert Earling had relied on Rogers’ for key advice. All of the important dignitaries that might have been expected at the ceremony were Rogers’ closest circle of friends and business associates. He was one of the best known financial titans of the gilded age. It appears as though a last spike ceremony had been planned, but upon Rogers’ untimely death, simply forgotten about. The Milwaukee Road Executive Committee minutes the day after the spike ceremony remark on the tragic loss of Rogers, but do not mention the last spike at all. The owners of the Milwaukee Road were distracted by their incredible loss.

Perhaps, this was symbolic. The completion of the Milwaukee Road’s Pacific Extension was, in some ways, the last roar of the Gilded Age. If railroads were uniquely the creature of the 19th century, the Milwaukee Road’s last spike, wherever it was, was, in the 20th century, an echo of a distinctly 19th century drama; the railroad era. With the ebbing of the power of individual capitalists to regulation, democracy, and dilution, the Pacific Extension was a last powerful, defiant symbol of an age that had built an industrial America and poised it on the doorstep of world economic domination. It cost more than any of Morgan’s combinations, and opened up as much or more country than any other railroad. In the clang of hammers and roar of steam-powered Bucyrus shovels, one of the most powerful of the Robber Barons directed one of the most magnificent construction efforts in the history of the land and even as his old enemies died or retired around him, pushed rails and electrification with unbridled enthusiasm and unbounded energy. William Rockefeller had no apologies to make to the new century. That Rockefeller’s great friend, Rogers, died the same week underscored the poignancy of this last great project of William Rockefeller. Mortality was upon them and their era. In a way, the 19th century only finally ended, in Montana, in 1909, with the driving of a plain iron railroad spike.

⁴ Essay by a great-granddaughter of Earling, March 1, 1938, “Building of Railroads,” located in the Albert Earling papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Urban Archives, Golda Meir Library. Spike then in the possession of Mrs. Frederick C. Thwaites, a daughter of Earling.