

Artist Statement

While construction of the Pacific Railroad ostensibly began during the Civil War, it was not until that great conflict was over that it really got rolling. In a race for government subsidies and land grants, the Central Pacific built eastward from Sacramento, California, while the Union Pacific built westward from Omaha, Nebraska. The two railroads met at Promontory Summit, just north of Great Salt Lake, Utah Territory, on May 10th 1869. It was a watershed moment.

I follow in the footsteps of photographers Alfred A. Hart and A. J. Russell who expertly recorded the construction of the road. But this is not a re-photography project—it is, rather, photography as archaeology. In making a comprehensive series of photographs along the original route, my goal is to give the viewer as strong of a connection as possible to this 19th century engineering marvel through the remaining visual evidence of the human-altered landscape. And while not visible, I also hope to evoke the various peoples involved with the railroad, as well as those affected by it.

I have always been drawn to western landscape photographs, particularly the work of Carleton Watkins and Timothy O’Sullivan. I tend to see their imagery as existing on opposite sides of an aesthetic coin—with the former rendering the beautiful and the latter portraying the sublime. These two 18th century linguistic terms, *beautiful* and *sublime* (usually considered in relation to one another), were used to categorize one’s emotional response when viewing artwork. Imagery that promoted pleasurable and familiar feelings was referred to as beautiful, while pictures that evoked feelings of awe or terror, often brought on by the immense scale of nature, were referred to as sublime.

The story of the first transcontinental railroad is one of contradictions and oppositional forces not unlike the conceptual interrelatedness of those two aesthetic terms. The surveyors explored an Eden, but initiated its destruction. The road was a crown jewel of the industrial age, but the actual building, the grading and tunneling, was done almost completely without machines. The railroad conquered time and space, but this led quickly to the decimation of the buffalo which pushed the people who depended upon them to the brink. This was the first transcontinental railroad in North America, or anywhere for that matter. The pounding of the Golden Spike signaled the completion of a great human achievement, but it must have sounded like a death knell to Native Americans. It put a bow on Manifest Destiny and served as a primer for the questionable business practices that would follow in the Gilded Age.

In the end, I want these images to be a pictorial accompaniment to well-established textual histories of the building of the railroad, the foremost being David Haward Bain’s *Empire Express*. His book tells the complete tale, but when I’m in the field I most often think of the people who built the line with their hands and their backs—primarily the Chinese, who performed so well for the Central Pacific, and the Irish, who toiled proudly for the Union Pacific.

The railroad is still active over much of the route—which was preceded by pioneer trails, joined by the Lincoln Highway, and eventually succeeded by Interstate 80 and air travel. While I have photographed along much of the line, I tend to linger where the steel has been pulled up, those portions of the line that has been abandoned for a less steep or curvy alignment. I enjoy the calm of those deserted areas most—through modern absence, I find it most easy to imagine a 19th century presence.

Richard Koenig

Portfolio Images—West to East, with Captions



Judah Monument, Sacramento (1)

This monument was built in the honor of an extraordinary young man—one who was both dreamer and pragmatist. A promising young engineer, Theodore Judah was a tireless promoter for the Pacific Railroad in the halls of Congress. Perhaps more importantly he plotted the twisting line that would get the Central Pacific through the Sierra Nevada mountain range, which many thought was impossible. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to see much of the railroad completed. (5-15_4)



Storefronts at Colfax (2)

Originally called Illinoistown, this town was renamed for Schuyler Colfax, Representative from Indiana and later Vice President under Grant. Both railroads used the naming of towns for political advantage—there is a small town in eastern Nebraska on the Union Pacific called *Schuyler*—as well as for vanity. (10-7_3)



Tunnel Six, Donner Summit (3)

This is where the Central Pacific reaches its highest point—at the cusp of the Great Basin. From here the railroad will begin its decent out of the Sierra Nevada Range, though the Chinese workers hired by the railroad still had ten tunnels to blast their way through. From Tunnel Six, or Summit Tunnel, the line curves and loses altitude, passing Donner Lake and reaching Truckee. From there it will follow the Truckee River until it reaches Wadsworth, Nevada. (10-7_DSC_1574)



China Wall and Tunnel Eight (4)

While every one of the fifteen tunnels cut through the Sierra Nevada Range could be considered monuments to the Chinese workers who toiled for the Central Pacific, there is a stone retaining wall near Donner Summit that is actually named for the people who were so instrumental in its successful construction. Initially discriminated against by the Central Pacific, the Chinese worked so well that they were given increasing amounts of responsibility very quickly. This view was made from the Lincoln Highway just east of Donner Summit; China Wall is visible in the center-right of the composition. (5-15_10)



Truckee River, East of Truckee (5)

The tracks of the Central Pacific Railroad follow this river, down out of the Sierra, from Truckee, California, to Wadsworth, Nevada. A faint remnant of the original roadbed can be seen in the center/right portion of the frame where it continues to follow the stream instead of curving to the right. This view was made from Glenshire Drive Bridge, just east of the town of Truckee itself. (11-7_2)



Crossing of the Truckee, Wadsworth (6)

While this bridge dates from the early part of the 20th century, I believe it lies on the original route of the Central Pacific. The active railroad now lies a bit to the south, avoiding the town of Wadsworth completely. Like the Union Pacific, much of the original line was upgraded heavily after the turn of the last century. (11-6_21)



Abandoned Roadbed, Forty-Mile Desert (7)

This image of abandoned Central Pacific roadbed was made along the south edge of Interstate 80 between exits 65 and 78. This spot is in the middle of the Forty-Mile desert in western Nevada—that stretch between the clear waters of the Truckee River and the murky end of the Humboldt River, at Humboldt Sink. (11-6_3)



Former Roadbed, East of Midas Road (8)

This is fine section of drivable former roadbed that I somehow overlooked the first few times I ventured out west for this project. When I did finally make it here in the spring of 2013, rain had fallen the previous night and the sage was incredibly and pleasantly pungent. Rain, however, will make travel over these out of the way roads even more treacherous than normal. (5-17_6)



Ten-Mile Canyon at Frenchie Road (9)

Ten-Mile Canyon, sometimes called Palisade Canyon, is yet another fabled stretch along the original route of the Central Pacific. The canyon contains some of the more dramatic views in central Nevada and runs roughly from Beowawe on the west to just past the former site of Palisade on the east. The dirt road in the right side of the frame was the original roadbed of the Central Pacific. (9-8_11)



Business Establishments, Wells (10)

Rising early one day to catch the rising sun, I made this view of a couple of the business establishments in Wells, Nevada. Perhaps this is a small, current-day remnant of what one portion of the hell-on-wheels experience might have been like during the construction of the Pacific Railroad during the late 1860s. (10-28_7)



Nevada/Utah State Line (11)

This view was made looking due south from Highway 233/30 on the Nevada-Utah state line. The route of the Central Pacific lies between the photographer and Rhyolite Butte in the center of the photograph—which is two and one half miles distant. Also visible, toward the right-hand side of the frame, is Pilot Peak, the name of which refers to the mountain’s function as a guiding landmark. Pioneers crossing the desolate Great Salt Lake Desert would look for this peak which in turn would lead them to the headwaters of the Humboldt River and from there a clear route across Nevada toward California. (7-5_13)



Former Roadbed with Newfoundland Mountains in Distance (12)

This view was made from a point just west of Red Dome Siding, along the former Central Pacific roadbed. Running for 94 miles within the state of Utah, between Lucin and Promontory Summit, this former roadbed is now a “Back Country Byway” maintained by the Bureau of Land Management. It can be wonderful to drive along this outdoor museum, but one must be very vigilant not to run over a spike—many of which have migrated to the surface and wait patiently to blow one’s tires. (9-7_31)



Kelton Cemetery (13)

On the northwest corner of the Great Salt Lake is the former site of Kelton. There one will find a fairly large cemetery as well as an historic marker for the Wheeler Survey—one of the four historic U.S. governmental surveys conducted in the 19th century. The town of Kelton existed only as long as the railroad did, from 1869 when it came through this area until 1942 when it was dismantled for the war effort. Standing there today, one can be overcome by the utter silence, it being one of the most remote places along the line. (10-28_33)



Lone Rock at Monument Point (14)

A well-known landmark along the route of the Central Pacific, Lone Rock stands silent sentinel along the edge of the Great Salt Lake. As when I visit Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, which is also located along the shore of this great body of water, I am nearly overcome with a profound sense of loneliness and quiet while standing at this spot. (10-28_39)



Double Cut with Great Salt Lake in the Distance (15)

Competing roadbeds of both the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads can be seen here—in their zeal for land grants and government subsidies, the two roads graded past each other, at times arguing over the very same turf. The Union Pacific grade here, toward the right of the image, was never completed—as we know they would have to end their laying of track at Promontory Summit, about five miles to the east of this spot. The northern edge of the Great Salt Lake can be seen toward the upper right side of the frame, about six miles distant. (7-4_8)



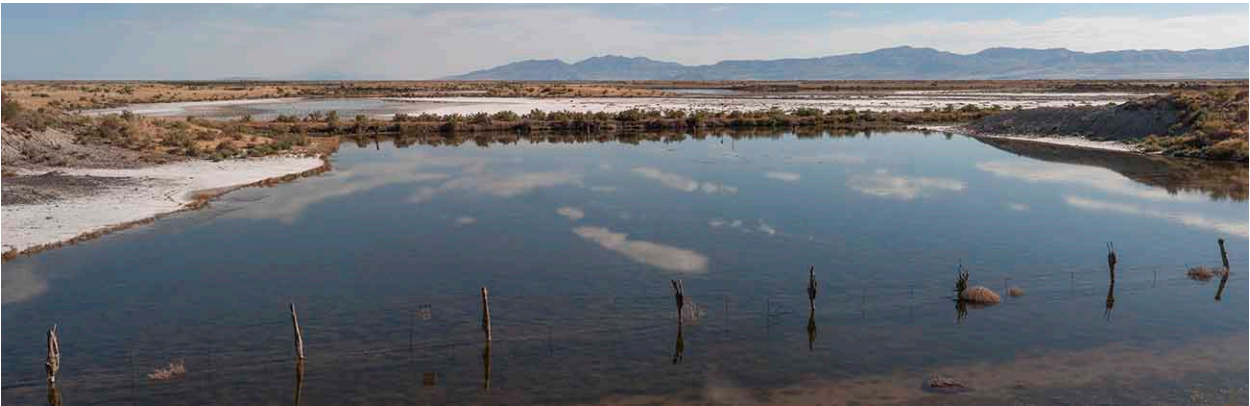
Golden Spike National Historic Site (16)

Promontory Summit lasted as a settlement only for a short time—the exchange point between the two railroads was quickly moved eastward to Ogden. In the oft-quoted words of Albert D. Richardson, Promontory Summit was “sans trees, sans water, sans comfort, sans everything.” Today, however, the site boasts a fine visitor center with knowledge-able staff and wonderful interpretive displays. (10-30_22)



Big Trestle/Big Fill Site (17)

Just east of Promontory Summit is the site of Central Pacific's Big Fill and Union Pacific's Big Trestle. On the right side of the frame, in the middle background, one can see two levels of borrow pits where soil was taken from the hillside to create the Big Fill. The large mound of earth on the left side of the frame shows the location of the Big Trestle. Please also note the false cut which lies between the Central Pacific and Union Pacific alignments—this is where the Union Pacific began a cut, checked their figures, and moved to the left where the line was eventually built. (10-30_14)



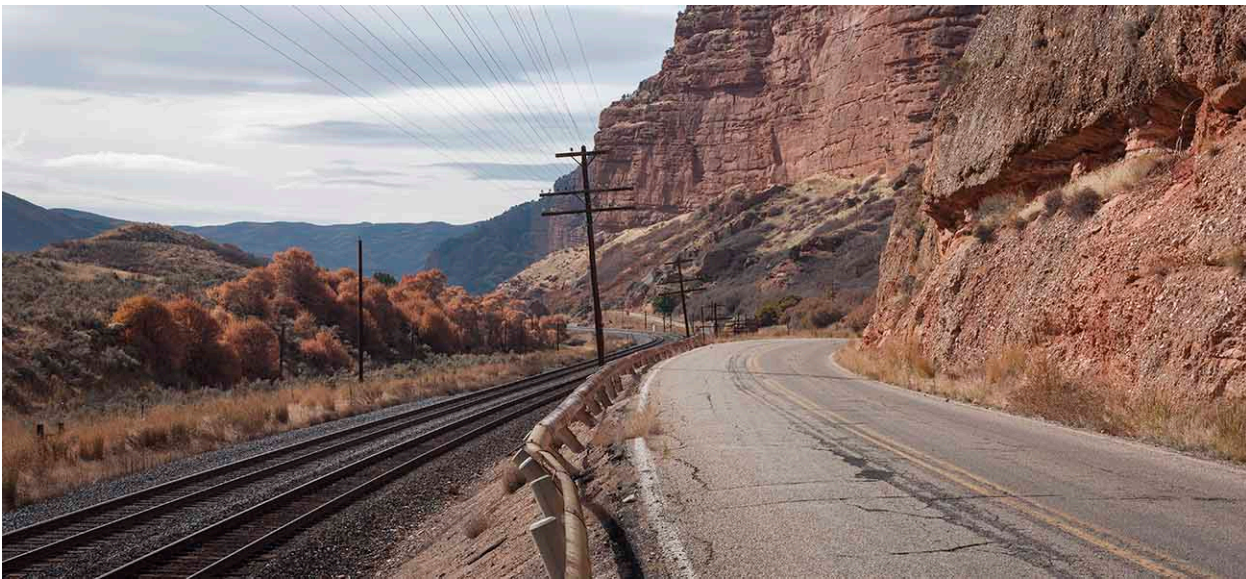
Abandoned Roadbed West of Corinne (18)

Just west of Corinne, Utah, abandoned roadbed of the Union Pacific can be seen running along the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, which adjoins the Great Salt Lake. In the background, the Promontory Mountains can be seen looming. (7-4_11)



Echo City (19)

At the bottom of Echo Canyon, the historical Union Pacific line takes a hard right turn and begins its path down Weber Canyon. At this junction of canyons sits Echo City, seen above. This is where several well-known historical photographs were made—of Pulpit and Hanging Rocks as well as an interesting rock formation called The Witches. Standing in Echo City today I get a feeling of melancholy—it appears as if the place was more or less abandoned due to the newfangled Interstate Highway System that came through in the 1960s. (10-29_23)



Echo Canyon near Death's Rock (20)

Echo Canyon is among the most scenic of spots along the entire route of the Pacific Railroad. David Haward Bain, in his book *The Old Iron Road*, does a wonderful job bringing forth some of the history of this unique and stunningly beautiful area. He covers the origin of the Hastings Cutoff, the trials and tribulations of the Donner-Reed party, as well as anecdotal evidence of others who passed through the canyon—Mormons, the daring young riders of the Pony Express, and Mark Twain. (10-29_18)



The Rim of the Great Basin (21)

Between Evanston and Leroy, Wyoming, the original line of the Union Pacific was relocated for a fairly long stretch—though one can drive along the very roadbed that is now known as Piedmont Road (or Country Road 173). Along that route, one will find a wonderful rock cut, some steep grades, and the ghost town of Piedmont itself. One other interesting point is the one pictured here. Piedmont Road leaves the former roadbed briefly to avoid rather large cut and erosion hazard—this is the spot where the Union Pacific crests the rim of the Great Basin, which encompasses more than 184,000 square miles of our western states. The Pacific Railroad, later known as the Overland Route, will run within the basin from this point to Donner Summit, for a distance of more than 700 miles. (10-29_4)



Structures at Piedmont, Wyoming (22)

These are just some of the remaining structures in the ghost town of Piedmont, which sits upon a beautiful section of drivable former roadbed along the route of the Union Pacific. In addition to the wonderful setting, this town can boast some of the more interesting historical events before, during, and after the building of the line. Brigham Young led his followers through this valley, crossing Muddy Creek a mile or two to the north. Calamity Jane lived here for a time in the 1870s. And this is where Doc Durant, Vice President of the Union Pacific, was allegedly held hostage by his own track workers for back pay in the waning hours of the construction of the line. The area is now looked after by the Guild family, which dates back to the founding of the town. (9-14_6)



Carter, Wyoming (23)

One has to travel north of Interstate 80 several miles to reach this small town, but it is well worth the time involved. Carter is a fine example of a small western town that has somehow survived semi-intact, with its trackside structures and classic example of a schoolhouse, now abandoned. (9-14_13)



Bridge Abutments at Cannonball Cut (24)

In this image one can see the bridge abutments that still exist just to the south of Cannonball Cut. One may also notice, in the background, abandoned roadbed on the distant hillside—this was where a shoo-fly was laid down prior to the completion of the large cut and two bridges. The name of the cut comes from cannonball-shaped rocks found in the soil here. (9-4_18)



Abandoned Roadbed, Harper (25)

Near the former site of Harper the Union Pacific line takes a large, rather counter-intuitive curve toward the northeast. This large segment of abandoned roadbed may be another instance where Doc Durant worked to pad his mileage count—and thus profit greatly. But, on the other hand, this turn may have been taken to avoid some heavy rock excavation where the line currently drops down into the Rock River valley. Traveling westward, this long abandoned section of the original line will meet up with the current or active tracks at Medicine Bow. (9-12_13)



Dale Creek Trestle Site (26)

Another fabled locale on the Union Pacific portion of the First Transcontinental Railroad is the Dale Creek Trestle Site. The original wooden structure was quite an engineering feat in itself for the time. Before the line was relocated to the south at the beginning of the 20th century, there were three iterations of the trestle—the first of wood and two later ones made of iron or steel. Footings still exist near the edge of the creek that Grenville Dodge said one “could easily step across.” Access to this site is restricted due to it being on private property. (10-29_DSC_0073)



Ames Monument, Old Sherman (27)

This impressive monument, which stands sixty-five feet high, was built for a pair of brothers who were instrumental in the construction of the Union Pacific. Oliver Ames served as the President of the railroad while Oakes Ames was a Congressman from Massachusetts and a real prime mover of the endeavor. Together they staked their considerable wealth on the building of the road. Oakes would later be censured for selling Union Pacific shares of *Credit Mobilier*, at a deep discount, to his congressional friends. The town of Sherman, by the way, was named for William Tecumseh, and is the highest point on the entire route between Omaha and Sacramento. (9-15_1)



Pine Bluffs, Wyoming (28)

A remnant of the golden age of automobile travel in the United States, these gasoline pumps stand silent vigil at Pine Bluffs, near the Wyoming/Nebraska state line. This town was also a terminus for the Texas Trail, which brought cattle up to the rail line for transport to the East. (9-10_18)



Just East of Bushnell, Nebraska (29)

This view was taken along the Union Pacific as it runs through the Nebraska Panhandle near Bushnell. Chief Engineer Grenville Dodge took the opportunity to name towns for political advantage, geographic features, as well as for vanity—Bushnell was board member of the Union Pacific Railroad. (7-10_DSC_0073)



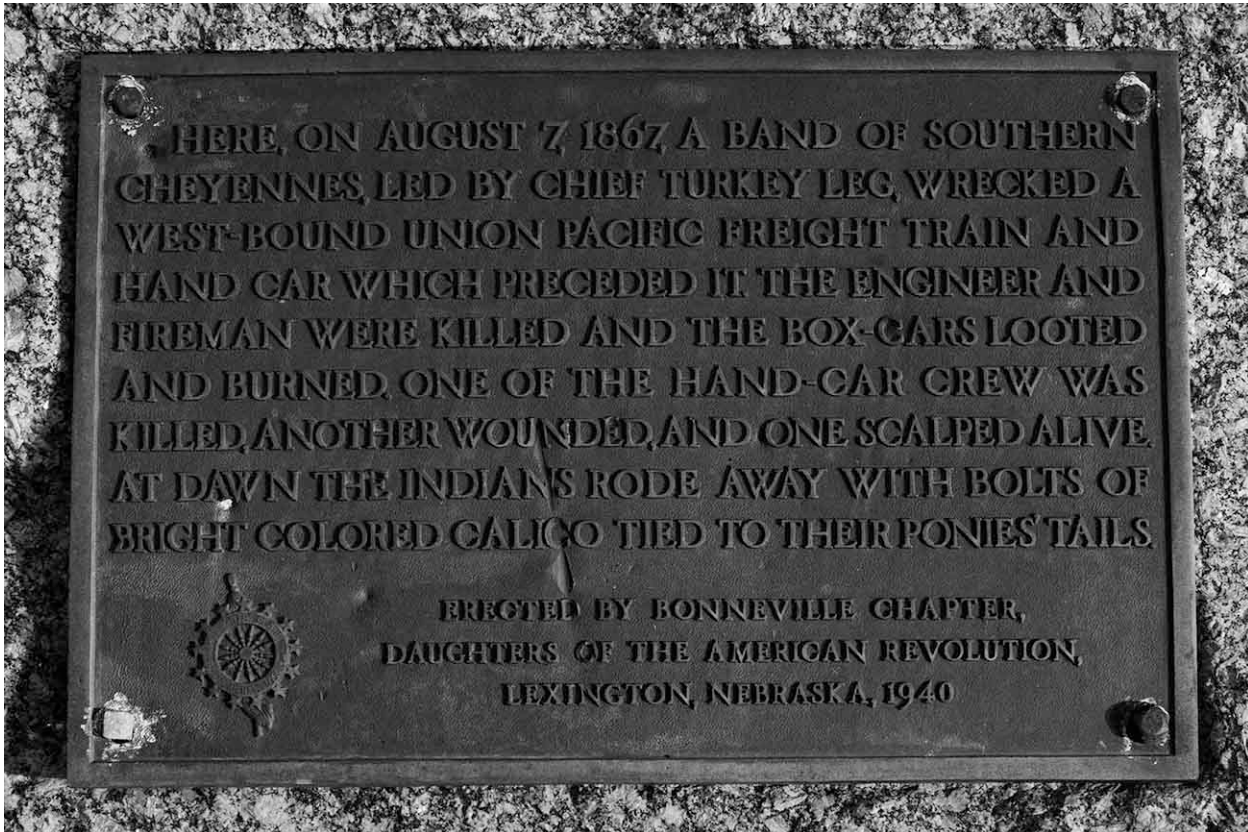
North Platte River (30)

Here the Union Pacific crosses the North Platte River, just east of the town of the same name. This is near where the Platte splits into two—the North, which continues into Wyoming, and the South, which heads southwest toward Denver. The railroad will follow the South Platte until it reaches Julesburg, Colorado. There, the line veers to the northwest, following Lodgepole Creek through Nebraska's Panhandle toward Cheyenne. Interestingly, much further to the west, in central Wyoming, the railroad will once again cross the North Platte River, at Fort Fred Steele. (9-10_4)



Plum Creek Railroad Attack Site (31)

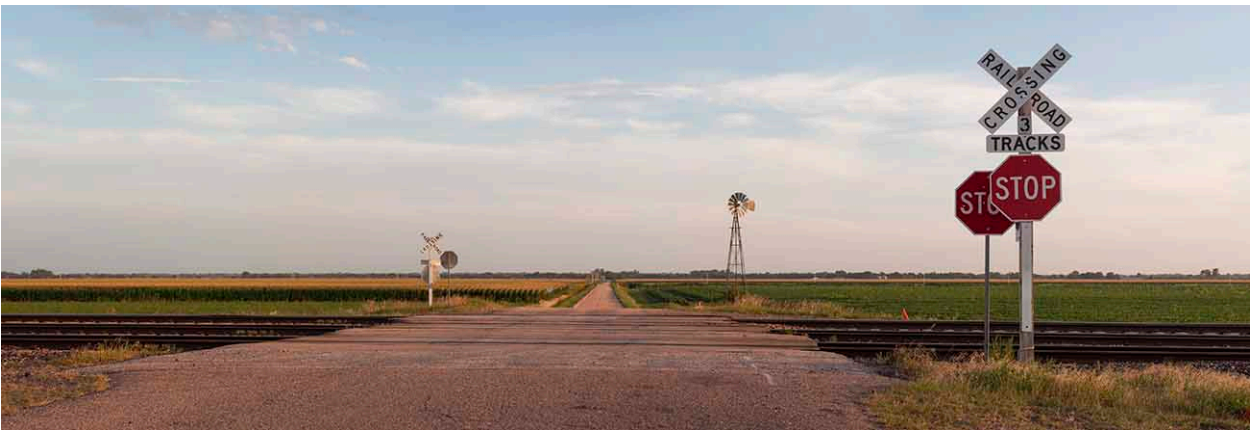
The monument, found near present day Lexington, Nebraska, marks an event that occurred on August 7th 1867 at a place then known as Plum Creek. That night, a band of Cheyenne Indians staged a devastating attack on the fledgling Union Pacific Railroad and some of its workers. The building of this line was the beginning of the end of the wellbeing of the Plains Indians: this monument marks a night when they lashed out at what they must have felt was beyond merely an affront to their way of life—but an existential threat. It is this aspect of the first transcontinental railroad that, in tension with it being one of the greatest engineering feats of the 19th century, causes me to feel very much conflicted and ambivalent about it, as well as its place in history. (DSC_4651)





Triple Track Mainline (32)

In the central part of Nebraska, the mainline of the Union Pacific Railroad is three tracks wide and one of the most heavily traveled lines in the world. Here we see the immaculate track work at Arrow Road, just west of Elm Creek, Nebraska. (8-20_8)



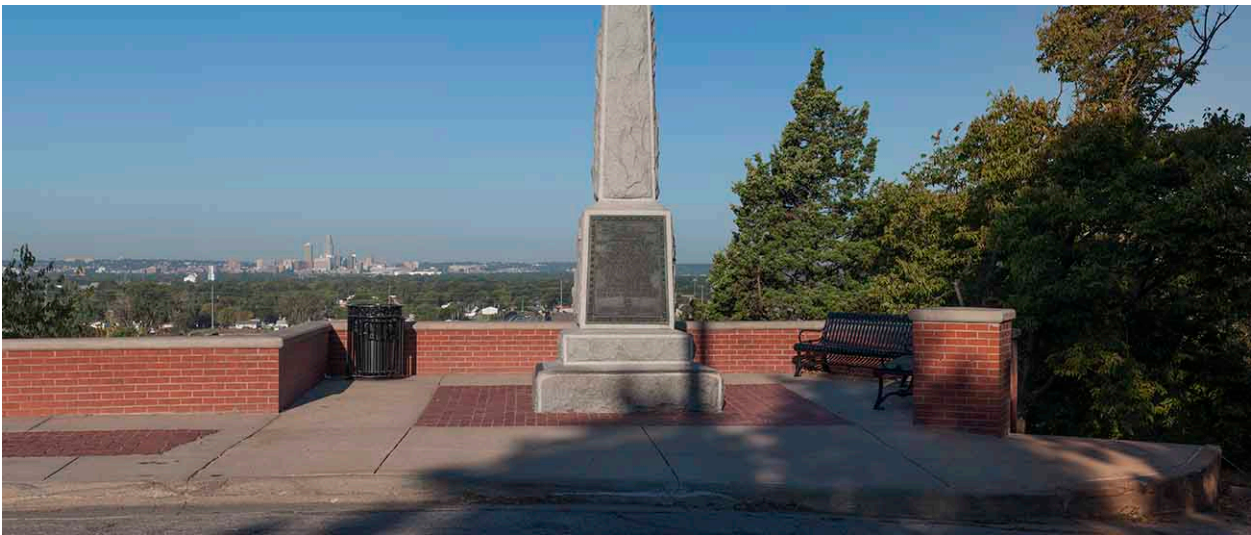
Nebraska Windmill (33)

The route of the Union Pacific, in terms of elevation change, was quite gentle. Following the Platte River and the well-worn paths created by pioneers and Native Americans, the Union Pacific would make a gradual climb toward the Great Divide in central Wyoming. This image was made at Arrow Road, just west of Elm Creek, Nebraska. (8-20_6)



Lincoln Highway, East of Elkhorn, Nebraska (34)

The Lincoln Highway, which dates from 1913, follows the first transcontinental railroad in many places. It is not always a fine brick version such as we see here, however, but can be a simple gravel road, two paved lanes, or even certain segments of Interstate 80. (9-8_17)



Lincoln Monument, Council Bluffs, Iowa (35)

Overlooking Omaha, this monument sits high above the flood plane of the Missouri River. Abraham Lincoln, prior to becoming President, visited this particular site in August of 1859. He later chose Council Bluffs as the eastern terminus for the Pacific Railroad—for which he was a huge proponent. (9-8_9)

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