



# The Great American Railroad War: How Ambrose Bierce and Frank Norris Took On the Notorious Central Pacific Railroad

By Dennis Drabelle

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How two of America's greatest authors took on the Central Railroad monopoly

The notorious Central Pacific Railroad riveted the attention of two great American writers: Ambrose Bierce and Frank Norris. In *The Great American Railroad War*, Dennis Drabelle tells a classic story of corporate greed vs. the power of the pen. The Central Pacific Railroad accepted US Government loans; but, when the loans fell due, the last surviving founder of the railroad avoided repayment. Bierce, at the behest of his boss William Randolph Hearst, swung into action writing over sixty stinging articles that became a signal achievement in American journalism. Later, Norris focused the first volume of his trilogy, *The Octopus*, on the freight cars of a thinly disguised version of the Central Pacific. The Great American Railroad War is a lively chapter of US history pitting two of America's greatest writers against one of America's most powerful corporations.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"A nicely crafted portrait of monopolists and muckrakers." *Kirkus Reviews*

"Drabelle has succeeded in the most lively way." *The Washington Post*

#### About the Author

DENNIS DRABELLE is author of *Mile-High Fever*. He has written for multiple publications and is currently a contributing editor and a mysteries editor for *The Washington Post Book World*. In 1996 he won the National Book Critics Circle's award for excellence in reviewing. He lives in Washington, D.C.

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### Working on the Railroad

Trains chuffed into the world in the 1820s and '30s, bridging physical and temporal chasms that had held humans back for millennia. The historian Walter A. McDougall has described the upheaval wrought by this revolutionary technology (with supplemental help from the telegraph): "When [Andrew] Jackson entered the White House in 1829, people, goods, and information—even in the most advanced countries—could not travel overland any faster than they did in the time of Julius Caesar. Then all concepts of space, time, and volume exploded." In the following two decades, chain reactions to the explosion rippled through the Eastern, Southern, and Central United States. By the 1850s, almost half of the world's railroad tracks rested on American soil.

Most of that crisscrossed soil, however, lay east of the Mississippi. As the forty-niners could testify, a trip to the West Coast was still circuitous in the extreme: typically by boat from an Eastern port to the Isthmus of Panama, across that sweltering neck of land by whatever means the traveler could afford, and then by boat again to San Francisco. (For inanimate cargo, the most economical way was even longer: around Cape Horn, at the southern tip of South America.) The solution was plain to see. The whole United States should be tied together by rails.

In addition to stimulating trade, both domestic and international (beyond California shimmered the markets of the Orient), a transcontinental line would round out the process of nation building. To leave the vast American midsection uncrossed by the most efficient mode of transportation yet devised, while the alluring West Coast stayed out of reach except via long, arduous, and costly journeys—to stagnate in this way would be to betray the great, ongoing enterprise of territorial acquisition and conquest. Why, the country's very name seemed to cry out for the project: We must be not merely adjacent, but united. As for the work itself, annihilating distance (a catchphrase of the day) was just the sort of challenge for a people who considered themselves blessed with boundless energy and ingenuity.

By midcentury, railroad building had become not just a mission but a mania. Looking back from the vantage point of the early 1900s, Henry Adams, scion of U.S. presidents but brother of a railroad president, had this

to say about the task:

[it was] so big as to need the energies of a generation, for it required all the new machinery to be created—capital, banks, mines, furnaces, shops, power-houses, technical knowledge, mechanical population, together with a steady remodelling of social and political habits, ideas and institutions to fit the new scale and suit the new conditions. The generation between 1865 and 1895 was already mortgaged to the railways, and no one knew it better than the generation itself.

Adams neglected to add, however, that before it could embark on all this remodeling and mortgaging, the railroad generation had to find start-up capital. But the transcontinental job in particular was so massive and risky—laying tracks and constructing bridges, trestles, culverts, tunnels, snowsheds, and depots over almost eighteen hundred miles of sparsely settled plains, deserts, and mountains, while often under the hostile gaze of Native Americans about to be dispossessed—that private investors tended to shy away from it. Hence the near universal opinion held by people of the time: The federal government would have to step in, either taking the initiative itself or giving ample aid to the private citizens who raised their hands to do so. That much was clear. The railroad's destination, however, was not so manifest. Northerners favored a northern route, from St. Louis or Omaha to somewhere on the West Coast. Southerners advocated a southern route. Behind both preferences stood an ulterior motive: to shape the future of slavery. Northerners hoped to curb the peculiar institution by running the transcontinental line through territory where slavery was unlikely to be welcomed; Southerners wanted to do just the opposite. Jefferson Davis, in his presecession capacity as President Franklin Pierce's secretary of war, ordered a thorough investigation, complete with surveys of five distinct routes. The fieldwork culminated in a report submitted to Congress in 1855 and later published in thirteen quarto volumes. Naturally, it opted for a southern route. (Davis's imprimatur wasn't the only thing the southern option had going for it. Among justifications cited for a major land purchase two years earlier had been the Gadsden strip's potential tie-in with a southern right of way.) While the report assembled scads of information and spurred the growth of local lines, it failed to move Congress to act. A sectional stalemate had developed. It persisted until the outbreak of the Civil War ensured that the Southern Express would not be leaving the station.

By then a visionary named Theodore Judah was lending his considerable talents to planning the project's western leg. The Connecticut-born son of an Episcopal clergyman, Judah had studied engineering at the upstate New York school that has since evolved into Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. But after the death of his father when the boy was thirteen, his formal education ended, and he went to work for the Schenectady and Troy Railroad. He leapfrogged from project to project and firm to firm, rising so rapidly that while Jefferson Davis's crews were in the field compiling their report, Judah, still in his twenties, was put in charge of a daunting task: threading a railroad through the gorge of the Niagara River. He did so well at that and other assignments that in 1854 he was tapped to go west and help launch the first California railroad, the Sacramento Valley. Already, however, he was daydreaming of a transcontinental line. The necessity for him and his wife, Anna, to reach California the old, halting way (in their case, overland through Nicaragua to reach the Pacific) could only have whetted his appetite.

Judah's Eastern know-how proved adaptable to Western conditions, and on the subject of a continent-spanning railroad he became a zealot, called "Crazy Judah" behind his back. To those with the patience to hear him out, though, he exhibited an impressive mastery of facts and figures. He might be a bit dewy-eyed—in an 1857 pamphlet printed at his own expense, he called for "a people's railroad ... not a stupendous speculation for a few to enrich themselves with ... [but] a clean thing, built and owned by the people, for its actual cost and no more"—but he had an unrivaled knowledge of what the project would entail. He was also adept with the levers of power. In 1859, after traveling to Washington to lobby Congress on behalf of his pet cause, he wangled an office in the heart of the Capitol—the old vice president's room, no less—where he set up maps, charts, and sketches (by Anna) in what became known as the Pacific Railroad Museum. A bill to his liking was introduced, but continued bickering kept it from going anywhere. On returning to California, Judah set out to remedy his plan's chief defect: the lack of a specific, practicable route, especially over its biggest obstacle, the Sierra Nevada, whose granite peaks loomed for hundreds of

miles on a north-south axis. Everywhere he looked, the Sierra refused to be overcome in one push; behind each front range lay a valley and then a second thrust of peaks. But Judah got a lucky break in the form of a tip from Daniel W. “Doc” Strong, a druggist in the foothills town of Dutch Flat: Donner Pass, not far from the site of an infamous tragedy in 1847, offered a much-desired one-shot ascent—after which it was downhill all the way to Utah Territory (to which the future state of Nevada then belonged). Not only that, but the summit stood at a “mere” seven thousand or so feet, and the upgrade never exceeded a manageable hundred feet per mile.

Now that he had a feasible plan, Judah thought, rounding up the financing would be a snap. He hoped to enlist a host of small investors—would-be plutocrats need not apply. He gave the venture a name, the Central Pacific Railroad Company of California, and went proselytizing. He had some success in Sacramento, but very little in much wealthier San Francisco, where the establishment viewed the railroad as a threat to existing modes of transportation: ships, toll roads, wagons, stagecoaches, even lesser railroads. (Way up in Alaska, the Sitka Ice Company opposed the project for an equally parochial reason. Ice freighted to the Bay Area from the Sierra would undercut the price of the Alaskan product, which had to make a long north-to-south journey in the holds of ships.) Back to Sacramento went Judah, bound for a rendezvous with four men who were to prove themselves indifferent, if not outright hostile, to his vision of building and running a “clean thing.”

To appreciate the temper of the time which allowed—even encouraged—Collis Huntington, Mark Hopkins, Leland Stanford, and Charles Crocker to pile up whopping fortunes at public expense, it might help to know how a bellwether of the era characterized the economic order. Henry Ward Beecher, a man of the cloth famous for his charisma and abolitionist sermons (and also for his adultery), traced the Gilded Age economic-might-equals-right ethic to a divine origin. In an 1877 article commenting on a strike, Beecher asked rhetorically:

Are the working men of the world oppressed? Yes, undoubtedly, by governments, by rich men, and by the educated classes—not because of selfishness and injustice but because it *must* be so. Only in the household is it possible for strength and knowledge and power not to oppress weakness and ignorance and helplessness. Not only that, Beecher went on, but the Christian God was a laissez-faire deity, who &#822...

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