

Historic Railroads in the National Park System and Beyond

Railroads and national parks have rolled through history hand in hand since 1883, when the first national park, Yellowstone, was a decade old. In that year, the Northern Pacific Railroad completed a spur line from Livingston to Cinnabar, Montana, near the northern edge of the park. Eventually, four other railroads would bring the “dudes” to the park’s other entrances or nearby gateway communities.

The close, often interdependent, relationship between parks and railroads began even before the first train arrived at Cinnabar; indeed, it started before the national park idea had fully taken shape. Agents of the Northern Pacific warmed to the notion of setting Yellowstone aside as a public park, seeing in this historic development a clear opportunity for profit. Once the park was established, the railroad went about promoting and facilitating travel to and through the legendary but little-visited destination. The results of their efforts included fleets of deluxe

vehicles and luxurious park lodging, most notably, perhaps, the Old Faithful Inn.

This story was repeated, with different casts of characters, at existing and future national park areas throughout the West. And, as in Yellowstone, marketing by railroads would play a key—some would argue overpowering—role in the early history of visitation to the parks. The Great Northern Railway built its main line

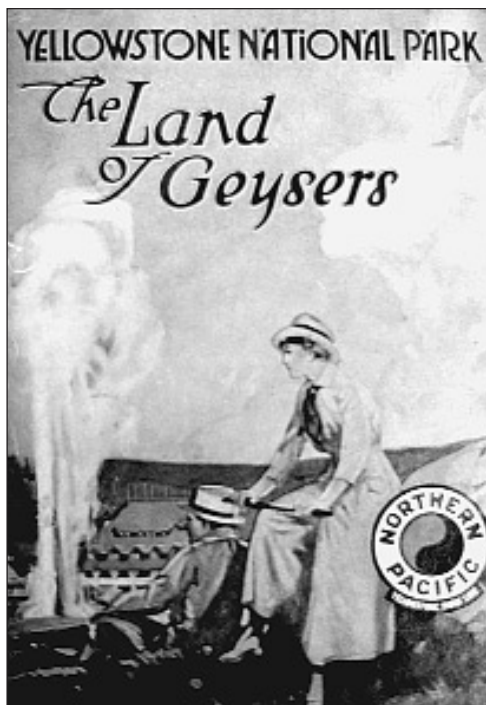
from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Coast just south of Glacier National Park in 1893. The Great Northern also undertook development of an impressive array of lodging in and near Glacier, including the magnificent Many Glacier Hotel.

Far to the south, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway and its Arizona subsidiary, the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad, Western Division, had just recently emerged from bankruptcy. Nevertheless, an enterprising Arizona businessman proposed a branch line to the Grand Canyon. His efforts paved the way—literally laying much of the track—for the Grand Canyon Railway. Development of the South Rim of the Grand Canyon as a destination resort for tourists quickly followed. The Santa Fe System erected a large, rustic hotel, El Tovar, virtually on the rim; a reproduction of a Hopi Indian pueblo, Hopi House, as a sales outlet for southwestern Indian arts and crafts; and sundry other facilities, roads and trails. Then the railway—through its allied Fred Harvey Company, which operated the tourist facilities—successfully lobbied for the establishment of Grand Canyon National Park.

There were other motives for railroad building that had little to do with tourism. The Southern Pacific Railroad lobbied Congress for the creation in 1890 of Sequoia National Park, but its main goal was to deny the timber in the park to local markets, forcing them to import from railroad timberlands in Oregon over a much longer—and more profitable—haul for the railroad.

That same year, Congress created Yosemite National Park, surrounding the vaunted Yosemite Valley, which had been granted to the State of California for park purposes in 1864. Some years later, the Yosemite Valley Railroad would construct a line from Merced to El Portal (literally, “The Gateway,”) a settlement just west of Yosemite’s main entrance. The Yosemite Valley Railroad would haul many a trainload of visitors

Northern Pacific Railroad promotional booklet courtesy Yellowstone National Park.



Union Pacific Railroad promotional booklet. Courtesy Yellowstone National Park.

to the park until torn up for scrap following World War II.

Still other railroad projects came at the urging of the National Park Service itself. A direct request from NPS Director Stephen T. Mather led the Union Pacific Railroad, during the 1920s, to develop tourism to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, Zion, and several other Utah parks. A Union Pacific subsidiary, the Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad, constructed a branch line from Lund to Cedar City, Utah, where its motor coaches collected and hauled tourists to the North Rim, Bryce Canyon and Zion National Parks, and Cedar Breaks National Monument. Another Union Pacific subsidiary, the Utah Parks Company, built lodges, inns, and other facilities at these parks.

Each and every one of these railroads produced, over a period of more than a half century, literally tons of promotional literature. Artistic posters, paintings, folders, brochures, pamphlets, booklets, and even books promoted visits to America's great national parks. Today, such railroad ephemera and art are prized by railroad buffs and national park enthusiasts alike, and comprise some of the more interesting and colorful items

in many a National Park Service museum collection.

The great railroad systems were not the only ones interested in the parks, however; the intermediate regional systems and even short lines jumped on board as well. In

Colorado, the narrow gauge Rio Grande Southern Railroad and the Denver & Rio Grande Western promoted and offered tourist rates to Mancos, Colorado, for those wishing to visit the famed Anasazi ruins at nearby Mesa Verde. The Tonopah and Tidewater Railroad ran north to south through the valley east of California's Death Valley, and the narrow gauge Death Valley Railroad actually reached over the Greenwater Range into Death Valley itself. Beginning in 1927, officers of the mining company that owned these railroads, the Pacific Coast Borax Company, began maneuvering to create a Death Valley National Monument. By the time the monument was established in 1933, the company had orga-



nized the Death Valley Hotel Company, which constructed the Furnace Creek Inn and converted other facilities to hotels. Eventually, the company converted its old Greenland Ranch, which had raised fodder for the famous 20-mule teams, into the resort now called Furnace Creek Ranch.

The connections between railroads and national park areas can seem limitless. The Alaska Railroad, built by the Department of the Interior itself, crosses Denali National Park, while a ride on the White Pass & Yukon Route enriches the visitor experience at Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park in Skagway. A Mammoth Cave Railroad once hauled tourists to that underground wonder, and the little Mount Tamalpais and Muir Woods Railway had a branch line down which a "gravity car" traveled into Muir Woods.

Urban and suburban parks have railroad history in abundance as well. Lowell, Massachusetts, had a street railway, which the National Park Service has partially reconstructed for the benefit of visitors to Lowell National Historical Park. The Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad is an important part of the cultural landscape at Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area in Ohio. The electric railroad at



Chinese coins discovered during archeological excavations in support of stone culvert headwall stabilization at Golden Spike National Historic Site. NPS photo.

Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and the Presidio Railroad at Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco are other examples.

Furthermore, quite a number of parks have within them the abandoned grades of railroads dismantled long ago. These include the narrow gauge mining railroad between Searchlight, Nevada, and the Colorado River, in Lake Mead National Recreation Area, and the Hetch Hetchy Railroad (used for dam building) that once penetrated Yosemite.

In recent decades, the National Park Service has acquired several areas that specifically commemorate and preserve railroad history. Golden Spike National Historic Site in Utah preserves the place where, on May 10, 1869, the first transcontinental railroad was completed by the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads. The rich history of the immigrants who built America's railroads is reflected in archeological remains at the site. Immigrants are also key to the story at Allegheny Portage Railroad National Historic Site in Pennsylvania, where the railroad was part of a canal system. Steamtown National Historic Site, also in Pennsylvania, celebrates the era of the steam locomotive on American railroads.

Still other sites deserve consideration by the NPS. The East Broad Top Railroad in southern Pennsylvania, for example, is a wonderfully preserved slice of narrow gauge railroad, complete with locomotives, cars, track, tunnel, bridges, a shop building complete with all its belt-driven machinery, and other structures.

The stories of many of these railroads are covered in the pages of this issue of CRM. But the history of railroads in the United States extends beyond the areas protected by the NPS, of course. As this special issue demonstrates, railroads are a thread woven throughout the fabric of American life, and their legacy—be it trains which are still operated, long-abandoned tracks, archeological remains, works of art and architecture, or simply the stories of those who remember the ways they changed lives—lives on all around us.

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Railroads as World Heritage Sites

The World Heritage Convention of 1976 allows the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to designate places of outstanding cultural or natural significance around the world as World Heritage Sites. The possibility of designating industrial locations has always been implicit in the Convention but it is only recently that much attention has been given to the task of identifying likely candidates. The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) is responsible for advice on these matters and, in 1997, it commissioned Great Britain's Institute of Railway Studies to recommend guidelines about the kinds of qualities that the World Heritage Committee should look for in railroad sites. The

idea is that the criteria should command broad assent globally.

To understand some of the challenges of coming up with such a list we need to grasp something of the complicated nature of railway history. By the standards of most modern industries, railways have unusually deep historical roots. Railways of a kind arguably existed as far back as the sixth century B.C. Certainly by the 15th-century European miners were making extensive use of lines with wooden rails and vehicles. We can date the mechanically worked railroad to the first two decades of 19th-century Britain. British engineers rapidly gained employment across Europe, building many of the continent's earliest and most important lines. By 1907 there were about 200,000 miles of railways there.