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DRIVING THE LAST SPIKE
May 10, 1869

PAINTED BY THOMAS HILL (1828-1903)

Easily the most dramatic and important event in the history of American transportation was the driving together of the Atlantic and Pacific halves of the continent by steel rails. The driving of the Last Spike, linking the Central Pacific Railroad, built eastward from Sacramento, with the Union Pacific of Omaha was also the subject of one of the most historic—and controversial—paintings ever in being in California. Thomas Hill, world-famous for his paintings of Yosemite, was commissioned by Leland Stanford to immortalize the ceremony which took place on May 10, 1869 at Promontory Point, just north of Great Salt Lake.

Windy, Hill chose to focus on the moment of respectful silence when Reverend John Todd pronounced the dedicatory prayer, rather than the culmination of the celebration. Had he tried to capture the actual spike-driving, he would have had to produce a cartoon or, perhaps, an abstract painting, for the ritual was badly bungled. U.P. director Theodore Barnard had a glaring headache; Stanford, one of the Big Four directors of the Central Pacific, quibbled over details of the ceremony with U.P.'s Sidney Dillon. According to historian Robert West Howard, the crowd of 600 pressed so close that only twenty persons could see the action and none of the reporters could hear either prayer or speeches. Perhaps this was a good thing; for Stanford misread what he saw as the slaughterer at the gold spike set in a cross-tie of polished California larch. Darned then wrong and missed. The important telegraph operator, W. N. Shillay, tapped out the three dots which were to have been triggered by the first blow



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|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Stephen J. Ogden | 11. John B. Wainwright | 21. W. E. Brown | 31. S. D. Richards | 41. John W. Wainwright | 51. C. H. Wood |
| 2. J. P. Taylor | 12. John B. Wainwright | 22. Robert F. Campbell | 32. J. P. Taylor | 42. John W. Wainwright | 52. J. P. Taylor |
| 3. J. P. Taylor | 13. John B. Wainwright | 23. Robert F. Campbell | 33. J. P. Taylor | 43. John W. Wainwright | 53. J. P. Taylor |
| 4. J. P. Taylor | 14. John B. Wainwright | 24. Robert F. Campbell | 34. J. P. Taylor | 44. John W. Wainwright | 54. J. P. Taylor |
| 5. J. P. Taylor | 15. John B. Wainwright | 25. Robert F. Campbell | 35. J. P. Taylor | 45. John W. Wainwright | 55. J. P. Taylor |
| 6. J. P. Taylor | 16. John B. Wainwright | 26. Robert F. Campbell | 36. J. P. Taylor | 46. John W. Wainwright | 56. J. P. Taylor |
| 7. J. P. Taylor | 17. John B. Wainwright | 27. Robert F. Campbell | 37. J. P. Taylor | 47. John W. Wainwright | 57. J. P. Taylor |
| 8. J. P. Taylor | 18. John B. Wainwright | 28. Robert F. Campbell | 38. J. P. Taylor | 48. John W. Wainwright | 58. J. P. Taylor |
| 9. J. P. Taylor | 19. John B. Wainwright | 29. Robert F. Campbell | 39. J. P. Taylor | 49. John W. Wainwright | 59. J. P. Taylor |
| 10. J. P. Taylor | 20. John B. Wainwright | 30. Robert F. Campbell | 40. J. P. Taylor | 50. John W. Wainwright | 60. J. P. Taylor |

on the spike, linked to the telegraph key by a wire. The telegrapher's signal set off salutes all over the U.S.A. Sacramento suggested toasting both with a chorus of twenty-three locomotive whistles on the levee while San Francisco had the prospect gate of Fort Point boom out over the Golden Gate.

Hill painted 600 figures and his most famous canvas, representing seventy important men with faithful miniature portraits. With considerable license even for an artist, Hill has falsified history by depicting a number of gentlemen who were nowhere near Promontory Point, like Charles Crocker and C. P. Huntington. The artist went so far as to leave Theodore D. Child of Crocker's show. The C. P. engineer looked remarkably well-proportioned for a man who had been in the grave for five and a half years!

These falsified numbers annoyed Stanford and he refused to accept the painting. It was bought from Hill's estate in 1930 and given to the State thirty years later. Today, it occupies much of a wall in the north corridor of the Capitol in Sacramento.

Some Western historians wish that Thomas Hill had painted, instead, the action of April 29, 1869 when Charles Crocker's Chinese gandy dancers, and eight Irish immigrants set a world's record in answer to a \$10,000 bet by the U.P. that they could not lay ten miles of track in a day. In a twelve-hour and forty-five minute working the Central Pacific's choppers laid 2,520 rails (2,000,000 pounds!), using 25,000 ties and 95,000 spikes to cover exactly ten miles and 200 feet of Utah desert.

Richard Dillon