

A History of the Western Pacific Railroad

I. Introduction

The Western Pacific Railroad holds a notable place in the annals of American railroading, often operating in the shadow of larger, more established entities yet carving out its own distinct history. This report examines the trajectory of the Western Pacific, acknowledging that the name was borne by two separate railroad companies. While both contributed to the development of rail transport in the Western United States, this analysis will primarily focus on the later and more substantial of the two, which played a significant role in challenging the Southern Pacific Railroad's dominance and fostering the growth of transcontinental rail travel. The story of the second Western Pacific is one of ambition, innovation, and persistent competition in a rapidly evolving industry.

II. The Original Western Pacific Railroad (1862-1870)

The genesis of the name "Western Pacific Railroad" can be traced back to December 1862 with the formation of a company by Timothy Dame, Charles McLaughlin, and Peter Donahue ¹. These individuals were associated with the San Francisco and San Jose Railroad (SF&SJ), and their aim was to construct a railway connecting San Jose northward to Niles (then known as Vallejo Mills), and then eastward through Niles ¹. This endeavor was part of a larger vision to complete the westernmost segment of the First Transcontinental Railroad, linking Sacramento to the San Francisco Bay ². Recognizing the importance of this connection, the Central Pacific Railroad, on October 31, 1864, assigned its rights under the Pacific Railway Acts of 1862 and 1864 to the Western Pacific for the route between Sacramento and San Jose, which included valuable land grants ². This assignment was subsequently ratified and confirmed by the amending Act of March 3, 1865, officially recognizing the Western Pacific as one of the charter companies involved in the transcontinental project ².

Construction commenced in February 1865 near San Jose, with J.B. Cox & Myers undertaking the initial contract ². Leveraging the experience gained from the completion of the San Francisco and San Jose Railroad in 1864, a workforce of 500 Chinese laborers was employed to grade the roadbed and lay tracks for the Western Pacific ². By October 1866, the railroad had completed 20 miles of track extending north and east from San Jose, reaching halfway into Alameda Cañon, now known as Niles Canyon, to a point just beyond Farwell ². The first trains began operating from San Jose to Vallejo Canyon (Alameda Cañon) on October 2nd of that year ². The construction efforts continued, and by early 1868, contractors Turton, Knox & Ryan

began work on the Western Pacific line extending southward from Sacramento towards Stockton and beyond, including the challenging Livermore Pass ². A pivotal decision regarding the western terminus was finalized in April 1868 under the direction of Governor Stanford, establishing Oakland as the key point through a series of complex transactions and legislative compromises ². By mid-August 1869, the railroad had reached through Alameda Cañon eastward into Livermore Valley, and by the end of August, the tunnel at Livermore Pass was completed ². The line was completed to Alameda Terminal on September 6, 1869, and subsequently extended to the Oakland Pier on November 8, 1869, marking the Pacific coast terminus of the transcontinental railroad ². The completion of this link allowed passengers to travel from the East Coast to Oakland, with some continuing to San Francisco via the SF&A RR ferryboat Alameda ². On the morning of November 8, 1869, the first transcontinental train utilized the expanded ferry terminal at Oakland Pier, traversing the SF&O and the Western Pacific Railroad to reach Sacramento and continue eastward on the Central Pacific Railroad ².

The initial Western Pacific Railroad, therefore, served as a crucial component in the realization of the First Transcontinental Railroad. Its primary objective was to connect Sacramento with the San Francisco Bay Area, thereby fulfilling the westernmost requirements of this monumental project. The involvement of figures like Timothy Dame, Charles McLaughlin, and Peter Donahue in its formation, along with the later influence of the Central Pacific's "Big Four" (Leland Stanford, Collis P. Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker) ², highlights the interconnectedness of the early railroad ventures in California. However, the independent existence of this first Western Pacific was relatively brief. In 1870, it was absorbed into the Central Pacific Railroad ². This consolidation reflected the broader trend of larger railroad companies absorbing smaller ones to create more integrated networks. In 1879, the Central Pacific opted to shorten its route from Sacramento to Oakland Pier by constructing a line from Sacramento to Benicia, utilizing a large train ferry across the Sacramento River to Port Costa, and then continuing along the south shore of Carquinez Strait and San Pablo Bay to Richmond ². Consequently, the original 1862-1869 Western Pacific route through Altamont Pass and Niles Canyon transitioned into a secondary route connecting the East Bay with the San Joaquin Valley ². Despite its relatively short lifespan, a section of this original route between Pleasanton, California, through Niles Canyon, to the Niles District in Fremont, California, continues to operate today as a tourist railroad, the Niles Canyon Railway, preserving the history of the line that completed the first transcontinental link to the Pacific coast ².

III. The Formation of the Second Western Pacific Railroad (1903)

In 1903, a new entity, the Western Pacific Railway Company, was established with the express purpose of challenging the near-monopoly held by the Southern Pacific Railroad on rail service into northern California². This initiative was a key part of George Jay Gould I's ambitious plan to create a comprehensive transcontinental railroad system³. Gould's existing railroad network, which included the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad, had lost its access to California due to the Union Pacific Railroad's attempted acquisition of the Southern Pacific, a major rival of the Rio Grande³. This strategic disadvantage compelled Gould to seek an alternative route to the Pacific Coast. The construction of this new Western Pacific line was largely financed by the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad³.

The vision for this competitive route was also deeply rooted in the long-held aspirations of Arthur Ketty, a Plumas County surveyor and engineer⁴. Since 1869, Ketty had persistently advocated for a second rail connection to Salt Lake City, aiming to break the Southern Pacific's control over this vital transportation corridor⁴. His early attempts, such as the Oroville and Virginia City Railroad and the San Francisco and Great Salt Lake Railroad, faced significant opposition and ultimately failed due to lobbying efforts by larger railway interests to deny them crucial land grants⁴. However, Ketty's enthusiasm and belief in the potential of his idea remained undeterred⁴. In 1902, he incorporated the Stockton and Beckwith Pass Railway, planning a route linking Stockton with Oroville via Sacramento, and then continuing northeast through Beckwourth Pass, largely following the Feather River⁴. This endeavor gained crucial momentum when Ketty formed a partnership with George Gould⁴. Gould, inheriting his father Jay Gould's railroad ambitions and financial resources⁴, recognized the strategic value of Ketty's proposed route. He brought significant business acumen and financial backing to the table, complementing Ketty's engineering vision and determination⁴. This collaboration led to the creation of the Western Pacific Railway on March 3, 1903⁴. The initial president of the newly formed company was Walter J. Bartnett⁹. A crucial early step in establishing the new Western Pacific's infrastructure was the acquisition of the Alameda and San Joaquin Railroad in 1903 from Bartnett². This existing, albeit small, line provided an initial foothold for the ambitious construction of the Feather River Route.

IV. Construction of the Feather River Route (1906-1909)

The realization of the Feather River Route was the culmination of Arthur Ketty's decades-long vision. As early as the 1860s, while surveying for a new mountain wagon road through the Feather River valley, Ketty identified a potential rail route with a significantly lower grade that crossed the Sierra Nevada via Beckwourth Pass⁹. This crossing, at an elevation of approximately 5,000 feet⁷, was more than 2,000 feet

lower than the Southern Pacific's Donner Pass route, which reached 7,200 feet ⁷. This lower elevation offered substantial advantages in terms of reduced snow accumulation and a gentler ruling grade, which was designed not to exceed 1% ⁷.

Construction on the Feather River Route commenced in 1906 and was completed in 1909 ³. The project faced considerable opposition from the Southern Pacific, which attempted to thwart the construction through legal challenges ⁴. Despite these obstacles, the Western Pacific persevered, undertaking significant engineering feats. The construction involved the creation of 41 steel bridges and 44 tunnels along the 924-mile route ⁴. A particularly notable engineering accomplishment was the Keddie Wye, an unusual three-way rail interchange that connected the Western Pacific with the Great Northern Railway ³. The final spike ceremony, marking the completion of the line, took place on the Spanish Creek bridge on November 1, 1909 ⁴. Interestingly, this momentous occasion was not accompanied by grand ceremonies, perhaps reflecting the changing era of railroad construction ⁸. The immense scale of the project came at a significant financial cost, nearly leading to the bankruptcy of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad, which heavily financed the construction ⁷.

The completion of the Feather River Route marked a crucial milestone in Western American railway history. It established a direct rail link between Oakland, California, and Salt Lake City, Utah ³, providing a direct competitor to the Southern Pacific's Overland Route for nearly eight decades ³. This new line was the last major rail line to be constructed connecting to California ³. The strategic advantage offered by the Feather River Route's favorable grade and lower elevation presented a significant challenge to the Southern Pacific, which had to contend with steeper inclines and more severe weather conditions on its Donner Pass line ⁷.

V. Expansion and Development of the Western Pacific Network

Beyond the construction of the Feather River Route, the Western Pacific pursued a strategy of expansion through the acquisition of existing railroad lines and the development of new branches. The initial acquisition of the Alameda and San Joaquin Railroad in 1903 provided a crucial starting point for the Feather River Route ². The A&SJ, incorporated on May 1, 1895, was a 36.6-mile line primarily built to transport coal from mines in Corral Hollow to the Stockton waterfront ⁹. The Western Pacific utilized the section of this line between Carbona and Stockton as an integral part of its main line ⁹.

A significant expansion of the Western Pacific network was the development of the "Inside Gateway." In 1931, the company opened a main line extending north from the

Feather River Canyon to connect with the Great Northern Railway at Bieber in northern California³. This route, running from Keddie to Bieber³, created a through route that connected with the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway at Stockton¹⁴. This strategic connection provided a competitive north-south route from the Pacific Northwest down to Southern California, directly challenging a similar route operated by the Southern Pacific¹⁴. The Keddie Wye, already mentioned for its connection to the Great Northern, was a vital component of this expanded network³.

In addition to these major developments, the Western Pacific also acquired several other smaller railroad lines and constructed branch lines to further expand its reach. In 1917, the company obtained a 75% stake in the Tidewater Southern Railway, an electric interurban line operating between Stockton and Turlock, which later expanded to Modesto and Hilmar³. Also in 1917, the Western Pacific acquired the Indian Valley Railroad, a 21.6-mile line running from Paxton to Engles, primarily serving the Engles Copper Mining Company⁹. The San Jose Branch was completed in 1922, further extending the Western Pacific's network¹⁴. A significant acquisition occurred in 1928 with the purchase of the San Francisco-Sacramento Railroad, which was then merged with the Sacramento Northern Railway. This created a substantial continuous electric interurban railway system stretching from San Francisco and Oakland to Chico³. Another short line, the Deep Creek Railroad, operating from Wendover south to Gold Hill, Utah, was also acquired in 1917 to serve the gold mining region³. Furthermore, the Western Pacific held joint ownership in several other railway companies, including the Central California Traction Company (jointly owned with Southern Pacific and Santa Fe, operating between Sacramento, Lodi, and Stockton)³, the Alameda Belt Line (jointly owned with Santa Fe, serving industries in Alameda)¹³, and the Oakland Terminal Railway (jointly owned with Santa Fe, operating in Emeryville)¹³. These acquisitions and expansions demonstrate a strategic effort to build a more comprehensive and competitive rail network throughout its operating region.

VI. Key Events and Challenges in Western Pacific History

The history of the Western Pacific Railroad was marked by several significant events and challenges, reflecting the dynamic and often volatile nature of the railroad industry. Financial instability was a recurring theme. The initial Western Pacific Railway Company, founded in 1903, faced financial difficulties and went bankrupt in 1916, leading to its dissolution². Its assets were subsequently acquired by a newly formed entity, The Western Pacific Railroad Company². This new company also experienced financial hardship, succumbing to bankruptcy in 1935 during the depths of the Great Depression due to a significant decline in both freight and passenger traffic³. The considerable expense associated with the construction of the Feather River Route

also contributed to the early financial struggles of the company ⁹.

The Great Depression had a profound impact on the Western Pacific, as it did on most industries in the United States. The sharp reduction in economic activity led to a substantial decrease in the volume of goods being shipped and the number of people traveling by train, directly impacting the railroad's revenue and contributing to its 1935 bankruptcy ³. However, the onset of World War II brought a dramatic reversal of fortunes. Traffic on the Feather River Route experienced a massive surge, with freight traffic doubling and passenger traffic increasing sixfold in the first year of the war ¹⁵. To manage this increased volume, the Western Pacific implemented Centralized Traffic Control (CTC) between Oroville and Portola, California, during 1944 and 1945, significantly improving operational efficiency ¹⁵.

Throughout its history, the Western Pacific faced constant competition from larger and more established railroad companies, including the Southern Pacific, Santa Fe, and Union Pacific ³. This competitive landscape required the Western Pacific to be innovative and efficient in its operations. In 1979, a notable development occurred when the Southern Pacific obtained trackage rights over the Feather River Route from its long-time rival ². This agreement allowed the two companies to utilize each other's lines for directional running in certain areas, improving efficiency for both.

Several operational milestones marked the Western Pacific's history. The completion of the Feather River Route in 1909 was a pivotal achievement, establishing its main line and competitive position ³. The completion of the "Inside Gateway" in 1931 further expanded its network and competitive reach ³. The Western Pacific also underwent a significant modernization with the completion of its dieselization program in the late 1950s ⁷.

To provide a clearer timeline of these key events, the following table summarizes the major milestones in the history of the Western Pacific Railroad:

| Year | Event |
|------|--|
| 1862 | Formation of the original Western Pacific Railroad |

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| 1869 | Completion of the original Western Pacific as part of the First Transcontinental Railroad |
| 1870 | Absorption of the original Western Pacific by the Central Pacific Railroad |
| 1895 | Incorporation of the Alameda and San Joaquin Railroad |
| 1903 | Formation of the Western Pacific Railway Company |
| 1903 | Acquisition of the Alameda and San Joaquin Railroad |
| 1906-1909 | Construction of the Feather River Route |
| 1909 | Completion of the Feather River Route |
| 1916 | Bankruptcy and reorganization of the Western Pacific Railway Company into The Western Pacific Railroad Company |
| 1917 | Acquisition of Tidewater Southern and Indian Valley Railroads |
| 1921 | Acquisition of Sacramento Northern Railway |
| 1931 | Completion of the "Inside Gateway" |
| 1935 | Bankruptcy and reorganization of The Western Pacific Railroad Company |
| 1944-1945 | Installation of Centralized Traffic Control (CTC) between Oroville and Portola |
| 1949-1970 | Operation of the <i>California Zephyr</i> |
| Late 1950s | Completion of dieselization |

| | |
|------|---|
| 1979 | Southern Pacific obtains trackage rights over the Feather River Route |
| 1982 | Acquisition by Union Pacific Corporation |

VII. Innovations and Contributions to the Railroad Industry

Despite its smaller size compared to its major competitors, the Western Pacific Railroad made several notable innovations and contributions to the railroad industry. The design and construction of the Feather River Route itself represented an innovative approach to crossing the formidable Sierra Nevada mountain range ⁷. Its low-grade design, with a maximum of 1%, offered a more efficient and less challenging passage compared to the Southern Pacific's steeper Donner Pass line. Furthermore, the Keddie Wye, the three-way rail interchange connecting to the Great Northern Railway, was a unique and innovative engineering solution for a complex junction ³.

The Western Pacific also distinguished itself through its proactive approach to freight car development. The company was a leader in designing and implementing special-purpose freight cars to meet the evolving needs of shippers. These innovations included gondolas equipped with cradles specifically designed for transporting steel coils, Compartmentizer Cars to provide flexible loading options, new Car-Pac cars for efficient automobile transport, and a newly designed type of wood chip car ¹⁴. These specialized cars demonstrated the Western Pacific's commitment to providing tailored solutions for its freight customers.

While the precise timing of full dieselization may have some nuances, the Western Pacific was recognized for its modernization efforts. While one source suggests it was the last portion of the WP to be fully dieselized in the late 1950s ¹³, another indicates a rapid modernization of road power with diesel locomotives during World War II ⁷. Regardless of the exact timeline, the transition from steam to diesel power was a significant step towards improved efficiency and reduced operating costs.

Operational efficiency was another area where the Western Pacific demonstrated innovation. The implementation of Centralized Traffic Control (CTC) on the Feather River Route during World War II was a key step in enhancing the capacity and safety of the line by centralizing the control of train movements ¹⁵. Later, under the leadership of President Perlman in the 1970s, the Western Pacific focused on adopting modern operational strategies, including the operation of faster, shorter freight trains and the implementation of just-in-time delivery services to better serve customer needs and

reduce inventory costs ²³. These initiatives highlight the Western Pacific's adaptability and commitment to modernizing its operations in a competitive market.

VIII. The California Zephyr and Other Passenger Services

The Western Pacific Railroad is perhaps best known for its role as one of the original operators of the legendary *California Zephyr* passenger train ³. This iconic train, which ran between Chicago and Oakland from 1949 to 1970, was a joint venture with the Denver & Rio Grande Western and the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad. The Western Pacific was responsible for handling the "Silver Lady" portion of the *Zephyr's* journey between Oakland and Salt Lake City ³. To showcase this prestigious service, the Western Pacific introduced a striking orange and silver paint scheme adorned with an elaborate, stylized red nose feather for its new passenger locomotives ²². The *California Zephyr* not only provided a luxurious and scenic travel experience but also played a significant role in popularizing the Feather River Route as a picturesque passage through the Sierra Nevada.

Beyond the renowned *California Zephyr*, the Western Pacific operated several other notable passenger trains, demonstrating its commitment to serving passenger travel needs. These included the *Exposition Flyer*, which ran between Chicago and Oakland from 1939 to 1949 in conjunction with the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad and the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad ³. This train was named in honor of the Golden Gate International Exposition held in San Francisco in 1939 and 1940. The Western Pacific also operated the *Royal Gorge* and the *Scenic Limited*, both of which provided service between Oakland and Denver via Pueblo, offering alternative routes to the East ³. For regional travel, the *Zephyrette* offered a more localized service between Oakland and Salt Lake City ³. These various passenger services underscored the Western Pacific's role in connecting communities and facilitating travel throughout its operating territory.

IX. The Eventual Fate: Merger with Union Pacific (1982)

The Western Pacific Railroad's independent existence came to an end in 1982 when it was acquired by the Union Pacific Corporation ². Shortly after the acquisition, the Western Pacific was merged into the Union Pacific Railroad, becoming part of a larger combined rail system that also included the Missouri Pacific Railroad ³. This merger was a reflection of broader trends in the railroad industry during the late 20th century, characterized by consolidation and the formation of larger rail networks.

Several factors contributed to the Western Pacific's eventual acquisition. The

company had faced persistent financial challenges throughout much of its history, often attributed to its relatively limited network of feeder branch lines and the intense competition it encountered from larger, more established railroads like the Southern Pacific and the Santa Fe²². The prevailing industry trend towards consolidation also made it increasingly difficult for smaller independent railroads to thrive in the long term²³.

Despite its absorption into the Union Pacific, the legacy of the Western Pacific continues to be recognized. As a tribute to its history and contributions, the Union Pacific maintains one locomotive in its fleet that features a paint scheme inspired by the Western Pacific's iconic colors³. Furthermore, the portion of the Feather River Route that runs from the California Central Valley to Winnemucca, Nevada, is still referred to as the Feather River Route by the Union Pacific, preserving the name of this historically significant rail line¹⁵. The acquisition marked the end of an era for the Western Pacific, but its impact on the development of rail transportation in the Western United States endures.

X. Impact on the Regions Served

The Western Pacific Railroad played a vital role in the economic and social development of the regions it served across California, Nevada, and Utah³. Economically, the railroad facilitated the efficient transportation of a wide range of freight and resources, contributing significantly to the growth of various industries. It served agricultural areas, enabling the movement of crops to markets; mining regions, transporting ore and supplies; and industrial centers, facilitating the distribution of manufactured goods³. The Alameda and San Joaquin Railroad, in particular, was initially established to serve the coal mines in Corral Hollow, highlighting the direct link between the railroad and resource extraction⁹.

Socially, the Western Pacific provided essential passenger travel, connecting communities and enabling personal mobility³. The construction and operation of the railroad also created numerous employment opportunities throughout its history². Furthermore, the Western Pacific's role as a competitor to the dominant Southern Pacific likely had a beneficial impact on freight rates in the region. By offering an alternative transportation option, the Western Pacific exerted pressure on the Southern Pacific, potentially leading to more competitive pricing for shippers and, ultimately, for consumers³. This competitive dynamic fostered a more balanced transportation landscape in the Western United States.

XI. Archival Resources

For those seeking to delve deeper into the history of the Western Pacific Railroad, a variety of valuable archival resources are available. The Western Pacific Railroad Museum in Portola, California, stands as a significant repository of artifacts, documents, and information related to the railroad ¹⁵. The California State Railroad Museum Library and Archives in Sacramento, California, also holds relevant collections, including materials related to the Alameda & San Joaquin Railroad Company ¹⁸. The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, is another potential source for business records and historical documents pertaining to the Western Pacific ¹⁴.

The Western Pacific Railroad Historical Society, accessible online at wplives.org, offers a wealth of resources, archives, and historical information about the railroad ⁹. Their website features digitized materials such as the by-laws of the Western Pacific Railway Company, construction certificates, timetables, and various historical narratives ²¹. Online platforms like the Online Archive of California (oac.cdlib.org) provide finding aids that can assist researchers in locating archival collections related to the Western Pacific and its predecessor companies ¹⁴. Historical maps and posters, such as those found on platforms like Etsy ²⁶, can offer visual insights into the railroad's routes and branding. Additionally, online video platforms like YouTube host documentaries and historical footage that provide valuable context and visual documentation of the Western Pacific's history ⁴. Historical maps ³ and timetables ²⁵ are particularly useful for understanding the geographical scope and operational aspects of the railroad. Photographs, likely available in museum archives and online collections, can offer a compelling visual record of the Western Pacific's locomotives, infrastructure, and the people who worked for it. These diverse archival resources provide ample opportunities for further in-depth research into the fascinating history of the Western Pacific Railroad.

XII. Conclusion

The Western Pacific Railroad, in its two distinct iterations, played a significant role in the development of rail transportation in the Western United States. The original company was instrumental in completing the western leg of the First Transcontinental Railroad. The later Western Pacific Railway and Railroad Company, born out of a desire to foster competition and realize a transcontinental vision, carved its own unique path. The construction of the Feather River Route stands as a testament to ambitious engineering and provided a vital alternative to existing rail lines. The Western Pacific's operation of the *California Zephyr* further cemented its place in American railroad

lore, showcasing the scenic beauty of its route. Despite facing financial challenges and ultimately being absorbed into the Union Pacific system, the Western Pacific left a lasting legacy as a competitor, an innovator in freight transport, and a crucial transportation link that contributed significantly to the economic and social fabric of the regions it served. Its story underscores the dynamic and competitive nature of the railroad industry and the enduring impact of visionaries who sought to connect the nation through steel rails.

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