



# FIRST OF THE NORTHERN TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROADS

Brief History of the  
Northern Pacific



# Brief History of the Northern Pacific Railway

**T**HE HISTORY of the Northern Pacific is a story colorful in adventure, rich in romance, and inspiring in achievement. It is the story of the opening and development of a vast wilderness and great public domain, stretching from Lake Superior to the Columbia River and Puget Sound.

The story of the Northern Pacific might properly begin with the explorations of Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in their notable expedition to the Pacific, which started up the Missouri River on May 14, 1804. The route finally selected by the locating engineers of the Northern Pacific closely followed the explorations of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, by way of the valleys of the Yellowstone and Columbia Rivers. This route not only was one of the most discussed but



one of the first advocated for the location of a railroad connecting the Middle West with the Pacific Coast. It was known to be a favored route, following the fertile river valleys and over the broad Plains for most of the distance, and thence across the great barrier of the Rocky Mountains at low elevations.

The Northern Pacific was the first of the northern transcontinentals. Its history is a fascinating story of the opening of the West, because, with the progress of construction from Duluth, Minneapolis, and Superior, Wisconsin, to Puget Sound in Washington, and the lower Columbia River in Washington and Oregon, the vast natural resources of the great States of Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington for the first time became an important part of our national economy. Only an early settler can remember how slowly our frontier settlements progressed before the railroad linked them with



every other city and town in the country. Importance of the new railroad from an economic standpoint was, of course, obvious; but a second important factor was pointed out by General William T. Sherman, when he said:

"The Northern Pacific must be built, both as an economic and military necessity. The West can never be settled, nor protected, without the railroad."

## Early Plans and Surveys

Long before the Northern Pacific was chartered there were many who had worked hard in an effort to initiate this important railroad venture. One of the first was Dr. Samuel Bancroft Barlow of Massachusetts, who advocated a northern transcontinental line as early as 1834. Another was Asa Whitney, who conducted explorations for about fifteen hundred miles up the Missouri River in 1845, and earnestly importuned Congress to charter and authorize the construction of a railroad along the northern route. Much credit also is due Edwin F. Johnson, an eminent engineer who made intensive studies in the early 1850's with respect



to a northern transcontinental line, which were published in book form and widely circulated.

The subject of a railroad to the Pacific commanded the intermittent attention of the U.S. Congress, beginning about 1840, for nearly a quarter century. Competing routes were debated and considered and, in 1853, an appropriation was made to cover surveys for five different routes. The northernmost route, the route of the Northern Pacific, was placed in charge of Isaac I. Stevens, an experienced Army officer who then was serving as Governor of Washington Territory. An important member of his party was Lieutenant John Mullan, who later was to build the first wagon road across the Rocky Mountains and whose memory is perpetuated by the Mullan Tunnel of the Northern Pacific. Still another member of the party who was to become widely known was Captain George B. McClellan, later Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the Potomac, during the Civil War. Stevens' report, printed in two huge volumes, showed the northern route to be a very favorable one, describing the country which would be served as rich in natural resources and potentially of great economic importance.

As a result of these several alternate surveys, sectional strife developed over the selection of a route, and it was not until 1862 that Congress passed a bill in aid of railroad construction along



*In 1869 this NP exploring party was photographed on Washington Ave., Minneapolis, leaving for the west.*

the middle route, thus temporarily settling the controversy.

This, however, did not discourage the advocates of the northern route. Josiah Perham of Massa-

chusetts, who was to become first President of the Northern Pacific, continued intensive efforts, seeking a charter first from the Massachusetts legislature and later from the Maine legislature, using this latter charter in an effort to persuade Congress to support his project. Finally, Congress passed an act creating the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, providing for a land grant, and naming as incorporators Mr. Perham and his friends, civic leaders, railroad men, and politicians. The act was signed by President Abraham Lincoln on July 2, 1864,—and thus began the Northern Pacific.

These pioneer incorporators, with all their enthusiasm and energy, were faced with almost insurmountable obstacles and difficulties in their efforts to carry forward this ambitious project, calling for the construction of a railroad across nearly two thousand miles of wilderness, from Lake Superior to the North Pacific Coast. Even with the aid of the land grant, construction funds could not be raised for some years; and it was not until 1870 that the project really was launched, when money was provided by Jay Cooke, notable financier of the time.

## Construction of the Main Line

In June, 1870, a contract was made for construction of the Minnesota Division of the road, and work began in July. However, the groundbreaking ceremony, which signaled the launching of the first of the northern transcontinental railroads, took place on February 15 of that year, near the present town of Carlton, Minnesota, which is a few miles west of Duluth. People of Duluth and Superior were informed of the impending ceremony by Ira Spalding, the engineer in charge of construction. A very considerable number drove to the scene in sleighs, in order to be present. J. B. Culver of Minnesota and Hiram Hays of Wisconsin were appointed to fill and deliver the first wheelbarrow of earth handled in the construction work, and this they did amid cheers of those present. It was for this construction work that the *Minnetonka*, the first locomotive of the Northern Pacific, was purchased on July 18, 1870. From this small but significant beginning, the work of construction proceeded ever westward across rivers,



*Northern Pacific's first locomotive.*

over the plains and mountains, and through the wilderness of the West.

At the same time that these historic events were taking place near Duluth similar work was undertaken on the Pacific Coast. It was intended that the Northern Pacific not only should build westward over the Cascade Mountains in Washington to Puget Sound, but also between Puget Sound and Portland on the Columbia River. Surveys of the line between Portland, Oregon, and Tacoma, Washington, were made during the summer of 1868 and the spring of 1869. The line between Portland and Tacoma was built in two sections. The first, from Kalama, a convenient point on the north bank of the Columbia River, to Tacoma, was commenced in 1870, and completed in 1873. Much of the material and equipment for the construction of this first standard-gauge railroad in the State of Washington was carried by boats from Atlantic seaports around Cape Horn. Construction started on the line from Tacoma to Seattle in November, 1882; and operation began on July 6, 1884.

The second section of the Pacific Coast line, extending from Goble, on the south bank of the Columbia River opposite Kalama, to Portland, was commenced in May, 1883; and completed in September of that year, the cars being handled between Kalama and Goble by a large car ferry.

While the first section of the Pacific Coast construction was going forward, work continued from the East, and, by 1873, track had been completed as far west as Bismarck, North Dakota, and the Missouri River. In the meantime, on May 1, 1872, the company leased the Lake Superior & Missis-



issippi River Railroad, which owned and operated a line from Duluth to St. Paul. Years later, this line was acquired by purchase.

In 1877, the Northern Pacific completed construction of the line from Brainerd to Sauk Rapids, Minnesota, and made an agreement with the St. Paul & Pacific Railroad Company to use its line from Sauk Rapids to Minneapolis and St. Paul. In 1883, the Northern Pacific bought half of the right-of-way from St. Paul & Pacific, from Sauk Rapids to Minneapolis and St. Paul, and built its own line paralleling the St. Paul & Pacific.

To return now to the construction of the Northern Pacific, it is necessary to go back to 1873, because that was the year of the Great Panic, resulting in the failure of Jay Cooke & Company and the bankruptcy of the railroad. Construction work practically ceased for five years, until further financing could be arranged. Under the presidency of Frederick Billings, for whom the Montana city is named, the westward march of the construction crews was resumed. The eastern boundary of Montana was reached in 1881, and the railhead was at Glendive on July 5th of that year.



*Trains were ferried across the Missouri River in summer and on tracks laid on the ice in winter, prior to the completion of the bridge just west of Bismarck.*

During this construction period the Company was faced with acute shortages of both labor and material. The shortage of labor was solved by importing from China 15,000 of the required 25,000 laborers. Shortage of steel required the importa-

# LAST SPIKE CELEBRATION—GOLD CR





# REEK, MONTANA—SEPTEMBER 8, 1883



One of the "Last Spike Specials" which carried officials and dignitaries to the 1883 ceremony.

Famous horse, Nig and the "iron car" he pulled during main line construction.



Above: General Grant and NP President Henry Villard drive last spike.

Circle: A delegation of Crow Indians, Montana Territory's first citizens, at the ceremony.



Minister, L. Sackville West and Sir James Hannen of Great Britain and the German Minister, Baron von Eisendecker.

As soon as the last of the guests had taken their places in the pavilion, the ceremonies were opened by President Villard; and he now shall have the privilege of describing in his own words the work which had been done. He said in part:

"Work on the main line was first resumed (after the suspension growing out of the panic in 1873) on the west bank of the Missouri River in the spring of 1879, and at the confluence of the Columbia and Snake Rivers in the fall of the same year. The distance between the two starting points was 1,122 miles. The 217 miles from the Missouri to the Yellowstone were completed in June 1881; the 225 miles from the Columbia to Lake Pend Oreille in November 1881; the completion of the 340 miles of road in the Yellowstone Valley took 17 months; the 194 miles up the gorges of Clark's Fork to Missoula 19 months; from the head of the Yellowstone Valley to Helena and thence to Gold Creek, 9 months.

"Thus the first 442 miles of the total mileage to be completed—that is, the Missouri and Pend Oreille Divisions—were finished in two years and eight months while the other 780 miles were completed in less than two years. In this time, the great structure of the Bismarck bridge over the Missouri River was also constructed. The continuation of the main line down the Columbia for a length of 210 more miles by another company to



Portland and 1,000 additional miles of branch and allied company lines were finished.

"Now figures are easily quoted and apparently speak a very simple language, but their true meaning goes far beyond the mere space of time and mileage of completed road they indicate. They form a great sum of human patience and perseverance, energy and bravery, hardship and privation. They express long and hard tests of the power of human ingenuity and endurance in a mighty struggle of mechanical and manual forces against the direct obstacles of primitive nature. They mean a painful record of bodily suffering and loss of life by disease and accident."

After this brief address by Mr. Villard, he then introduced The Honorable William M. Evarts, former U. S. Secretary of State, who delivered an inspiring oration. Ex-President Billings of the Northern Pacific and U. S. Secretary of the Interior H. M. Teller also spoke. Then General Grant was introduced, and as he came forward to speak there was a mighty cheer. In the course of his remarks he reminded his audience that many years before, as an acting Lieutenant Quartermaster on the Columbia River, he had issued supplies to Isaac I. Stevens, who conducted the original surveys for the northern route under the authorization of Congress.

After the speaking and the taking of photographs, a horse that had hauled rail for building the road from its inception was brought to the platform. Then some three hundred men quickly laid the rail and drove the spikes on the last one thousand feet of track,—all except the last spike which was driven by H. C. Davis, a passenger agent of the Northern Pacific, by General Grant, and Mr. Villard. It was the identical first spike which had been used near Carlton, Minnesota, thirteen years before, when the first rails were laid at that point.

The ceremony ended, and as the sun set behind the western mountains, special trains, which had brought together this distinguished company, simultaneously started, with prolonged whistling, for both the east and the west.

## Over the Cascades

This dramatic and colorful ceremony marked the completion of the first northern through-route



to the Pacific Coast, but not the completion of the Northern Pacific, as it was necessary to utilize the rails of the Oregon Railroad & Navigation Company between Wallula, Washington, and Portland, Oregon. This latter road was under the control and presidency of Henry Villard during these years; nevertheless in order to comply with the charter requirements the construction of the Northern Pacific was continued from Wallula over the Cascade Mountains to Puget Sound and a connection with the Portland-Tacoma line.

This work started in 1883. The last spike, which really constituted the completion of the Northern Pacific, was driven June 1, 1887, on the summit of the Cascades. Much of this line had been laid while the ground was still frozen, and when the spring thaws came it was necessary practically to rebuild it. The crossing of the Cascade Range was a notable engineering achievement. The country is rugged and precipitous. The tracks were built as a great switchback with a ruling grade of 5.6 percent. This is to be compared with the ruling mountain grade now of 2.2 percent. There were three switchbacks on each side of the summit, and a great double horseshoe at the summit. The Stampede Tunnel, approximately one and eight tenths miles in length, now used by the Northern Pacific in lieu of the switchback, was completed in 1888, at an elevation of twenty-eight hundred feet.

During the time when the switchback was used special mountain engines were necessary and special crews took charge of the trains for the hazardous eight-mile journey over the summit. There was a train limit of five cars, either freight or passenger. One hour and fifteen minutes was necessary to make the crossing, if all went well. There was a brakeman for every two cars, and not only were there air brakes and hand brakes, but special water brakes had been placed on the locomotives. With all its dangers, the switchback never cost a life.

The completion of the switchback was celebrated on a most lavish scale. The first regular westbound passenger train over the switchback arrived in Tacoma at 7:15 p.m., July 3, 1887. A great triumphal arch had been erected over the principal thoroughfare. Over eighteen thousand visitors came from all parts of the Northwest to the city of Tacoma for this colorful celebration. There was a huge parade, with Colonel J. C.



*The first North Coast Limited, inaugurated in April 1900.*

Haines, as Grand Marshal, and a special pavilion was constructed with a seating capacity of sixty-five hundred. Governor Semple was the orator for the occasion; and among the distinguished guests were the President of the railroad, C. B. Wright, and Vice-President Thomas F. Oakes.

Less than seven years after the driving of the last spike in Montana, and within three years of the completion of the railroad over the Cascade Mountains, the entire tier of northwest territories had sufficient population to join the Union. North Dakota entered on November 2, 1889; South Dakota, which derived much of its population through immigration over the Northern Pacific, came in the same day. Six days later, on November 8, 1889, the State of Montana entered. Three days after that, the State of Washington was admitted to the Union; and, on July 3, 1890, Idaho joined the ranks. The growth and ultimate admission of these States into the Union tell a graphic story of the part played by the Northern Pacific in the settlement and development of the Northwest.

In the decade following completion of the trans-continental line, the Northern Pacific turned its energies to constructing branch lines and building and expanding shop and terminal facilities. The west grew and grew rapidly and as the west prospered, so did the Northern Pacific. But the road to progress and prosperity is rarely without obstacles. Like a large number of other railroads, the Northern Pacific was forced into receivership during the general financial crisis which swept the country in 1893. The receivership ended in 1896 when the property of the railroad was sold to a new corporation called the Northern Pacific

Railway Company. Successfully reorganized on a sound financial basis and with business conditions improving, the Northern Pacific now faced the new century with assurance and optimism.

From its earliest days the Northern Pacific provided its passengers with superior equipment and service. It was the first northern transcontinental with dining cars and electrically lighted trains. In April, 1900, Northwest travelers were first introduced to the North Coast Limited. The oldest "name train" in continuous service west of the Mississippi river, the "North Coast" has long been one of the world's finest trains. Since adding dome cars to the train in 1954, it has been known as the *Vista-Dome North Coast Limited*.

## Later Developments

Two important events in NP's development took place in the early 1900's. The Northern Pacific and the Great Northern jointly purchased, in 1901, nearly all of the outstanding common stock of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy, a great railroad system of some 11,000 miles. This afforded direct access and favorable routes to Chicago and the great markets of the Middle West and South. The Northern Pacific, also jointly with the Great Northern, built the Spokane, Portland and Seattle railroad between 1905 and 1909, a system now consisting of almost 1,000 miles of main line, which serves productive areas of Washington and Oregon.



*Luxurious lounge car on the North Coast Limited, 1900—the first electric lighted train in the Northwest.*



To make its transportation service more flexible, the NP in 1932 organized a wholly-owned subsidiary, the Northern Pacific Transport company, to provide highway freight and passenger service as a motor common carrier and to supplement NP rail service. Its operations today are carried out in the states of Washington, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, North Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

A major rehabilitation program was carried out during World War II and the following decade. About 2,000 miles of new and heavier rail was laid and extensive application of heavy ballast was made. More than 300 main line curves were eliminated or reduced, bridges and tunnels replaced and new shops and freight houses built.

First discovery of oil on NP land in the Williston Basin near Richey, Mont., on July 13, 1951, drew national attention to the Northern Pacific because of its extensive holdings of land and mineral rights in the Basin both in Montana and North Dakota. The discovery led to the formation by Northern Pacific in the following year of an oil development department with headquarters at Billings, Mont., to supervise development of this important resource.

Since the war, the Northern Pacific has taken advantage of rapid advances in technology to improve and modernize all phases of its operations. The railway pioneered in the use of radio in freight train operations and in the extensive use of continuous welded rail which almost completely eliminates rail joints and reduces maintenance costs. In 1955 the first modern "push-button" freight classification yard in the Pacific Northwest was completed at Pasco, Wash. It is ideally located for expeditious handling of increasing traffic from the Columbia Basin area where 1,000,000 acres will eventually be brought under irrigation by waters of the Columbia River impounded by Grand Coulee dam. NP rails serve 40 percent of this vast new and growing agricultural empire.

Traffic demands of World War II gave rise to the first installation of centralized traffic control in western Montana, completed in 1947. Since then, further installations of CTC help expedite traffic as do modernization in other areas such as mechanization of accounting operations and expansion and improvement of communications.



*Today's Vista-Dome North Coast Limited is truly one of the world's extra fine trains.*

Early in 1958, 20 years after it had acquired its first diesel locomotive, the Northern Pacific had completely dieselized its motive power. Of all the post war changes, the diesel locomotive is the most familiar and dramatic example of the vast changes that have taken place in railroading.

In 1864, the Northern Pacific set out to conquer a wilderness. Slowly but surely the frontier was pushed back, and, with the passing of time, construction camps became great cities. Along the main line are Duluth, Superior, St. Paul, Minneapolis, Fargo, Jamestown, Bismarck, Mandan, Glendive, Miles City, Billings, Livingston, Bozeman, Helena, Butte, Missoula, Spokane, Pasco, Yakima, Seattle, Tacoma, Vancouver and Portland—nearly all the great cities of the Northwest. For it was but natural and inevitable that the distribution and marketing centers of this vast territory would develop along the favored route of the first of the northern transcontinentals.

Today the railway's 6,000-mile network of track still provides a vital transportation lifeline for the seven Northwest states and two Canadian provinces it serves. The Northern Pacific, which played such a dominant role in the opening and rapid settlement of the Northwest frontier, continues to play an important part in the further development and progress of the American Northwest.

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*Additional copies of  
the Brief History of the Northern Pacific  
may be obtained from the  
Advertising and Publicity Department  
Northern Pacific Railway, St. Paul, Minnesota 55101*

# Presidents of the Northern Pacific Railway

*Following is a list of Northern Pacific presidents  
of the road from its beginning:*

JOSIAH PERHAM—

December 7, 1864 to January 5, 1866

JOHN GREGORY SMITH—

January 5, 1866 to November 1, 1872

GEORGE W. CASS—

November 1, 1872 to April 23, 1875

CHARLES B. WRIGHT—

April 23, 1875 to May 24, 1879

FREDERICK BILLINGS—

May 24, 1879 to June 9, 1881

A. H. BARNEY—

June 9, 1881 to September 15, 1881

HENRY VILLARD—

September 15, 1881 to January 4, 1884

ROBERT HARRIS—

January 17, 1884 to September 20, 1888

THOMAS F. OAKES—

September 20, 1888 to October 19, 1893

BRAYTON IVES—

October 20, 1893 to June 30, 1896

EDWARD D. ADAMS—

July 1, 1896 to July 21, 1896

EDWIN W. WINTER—

July 21, 1896 to August 31, 1897

CHARLES S. MELLEN—

September 1, 1897 to October 23, 1903

HOWARD ELLIOTT—

October 23, 1903 to August 27, 1913

JULE M. HANNAFORD—

August 27, 1913 to July 1, 1918

HOWARD ELLIOTT—

July 1, 1918 to February 29, 1920

JULE M. HANNAFORD—

March 1, 1920 to December 1, 1920

CHARLES DONNELLY—

December 1, 1920 to September 4, 1939

CHARLES E. DENNEY—

September 28, 1939 to December 31, 1950

ROBERT S. MACFARLANE—

January 1, 1951 to October 1, 1966

LOUIS W. MENK—

October 1, 1966 —





**MAIN STREET OF THE NORTHWEST**