

# **CITY-MAKERS**

**The men who**

**transformed Los Angeles**

**from village to metropolis**

**during the first great boom, 1868-76**

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**CELEBRATION AT LANG'S STATION** Meanwhile the tracklayers from the Tehachapi were pressing southward at a furious pace, laying two and one half miles of iron per day over the smooth desert floor. Below Mojave they swung through a low saddle east of Willow Springs and hurried past the site of Lancaster Station. At the foot of Soledad Pass they were forced to halt for lack of rails but on August 12 resumed their advance toward the southern crew which, that very morning, had laid tracks through San Fernando Tunnel. Along the brush-lined turns of Soledad Canyon the approaching armies, four thousand strong, moved at the rate of three miles per day to close the forty-mile gap remaining between them.

A week later the southern tracklayers reached Newhall Station (now Saugus) on the Santa Clara River five miles north of the San Fernando Tunnel. Named in honor of Henry M. Newhall, the noted San Francisco auctioneer who owned the surrounding rancho, the station became the new terminus for the stagecoaches covering the sixty-two-mile gap to Mojave via San Francisquito Canyon, Elizabeth Lake, and Willow Springs.

By the last of August only ten miles remained between the ends of track, the southern forces passing the mouth of Mint Canyon and the northern group standing north of John Lang's hotel in the narrow throat of Soledad Canyon, where the graders were completing a long fill. Facing each other across a river bottom which slashed through the right of way, the two Chinese grading parties pushed out breastworks of earth from either end, hurrying to fill the breach before the tracklayers reached them from the south. On the night of September 3, while the rails stood two miles apart, the graders met across the earth-filled gap.

The following morning the Southern Pacific's president, Charles Crocker, overseeing the last of the construction near Lang's hotel, telegraphed a message to John G. Downey in Los Angeles; another had already been sent to a Southern Pacific party waiting at San Francisco Bay. All was ready, he announced, for a "last spike" ceremony on the following day.

Early on Tuesday morning, September 5, 1876, El Pueblo was tense with excitement. A restless crowd roamed the streets,

"hardly knowing what to do with themselves, but evidently desiring to celebrate the event of the day." On a platform in front of Wood's Opera House on Main Street a ponderous cannon was mounted, its powder charge connected by wire with the ceremonial spot in Soledad Canyon, so that when Charles Crocker pounded the last spike the event would be announced with a booming report.

Farther down Main Street flowers and fruit blossoms decorated the interior of Union Hall, where the Southern Pacific dignitaries were to be entertained that night in a grand celebration banquet. Up and down the streets the principal buildings were decorated with American flags. On the street corners many were reading the *Star's* outline of the day's ceremony and agreeing with pride that the connection would make Los Angeles "part of the nation, instead, as formerly, only an isolated fragment of a State."

Promptly at 9 A.M., Engine Number Twenty-five, decked with flowers, fruit branches, and American flags, chugged out of the Southern Pacific depot at Main and Alameda streets. Aside from the 355 gaily dressed passengers, its most precious cargo was the golden spike and a silver hammer with which Charles Crocker would complete the great connection. Fashioned with care by a local jeweler, the spike was engraved with the words "Last spike connecting Los Angeles and San Francisco by rail" on the four sides, and "September 5th, 1876" on the head.

Through the new San Fernando Tunnel puffed the train, and a few minutes before noon, with much tooting of whistles and blowing of steam, it rolled to a stop at Lang's Station on the desolate floor of Soledad Canyon. A strong wind was raising dust up the river bottom as the gay crowd alighted to gaze at yellow cliffs and greasewood slopes, and B. D. Wilson drew a laugh with the remark that the region was fit only "for the production of horned toads and scorpions."

Welcomed to the scene by Charles Crocker, the crowd of Angelenos gathered along the 1050 feet of finished roadbed lying between the north and south construction engines. At each end of the gap they found a crew of white laborers who waited for the coming of the San Francisco party before laying iron over the ties to complete this final span. An army of Chinese coolies, clad

in basket hats, blue denim jackets and trousers, and cotton sandals, stood along either side of the mounded right of way. Four thousand strong, they lined the roadbed in military file, leaning on their long-handled shovels, "like an army at rest after a well-fought battle." Behind them stood the scores of construction wagons and carts, and still farther in the background at the foot of the canyon walls gleamed the countless white tents. Near the spot marked for the driving of the last spike the Atlantic and Pacific Telegraph Company had erected two tents from which to flash details of the event up and down the Pacific Coast and eastward to the Atlantic seaboard.

Shortly after one o'clock the San Francisco locomotive, decked with American flags, steamed around the bend and wheezed to a stop behind the northern construction engine. While the brass band struck up a lively air, the crowd cheered wildly, and even the stoical Chinese raised a shout in the prevailing excitement.

Prominent Angelenos, led by Mayor Prudent Beaudry and ex-Governor John G. Downey, tramped through the sand to the passenger coaches and welcomed some fifty Bay City notables, including the Southern Pacific officials and guests, the San Francisco board of supervisors, and a contingent of newspaper correspondents. Heading the group were Leland Stanford and David D. Colton of the railroad, Darius O. Mills, San Francisco financier and wealthiest man on the Pacific Coast, and A. J. Bryant, mayor of San Francisco.

Quickly the signal was given to "clear the track," and while the officials took their places the crowd pressed around to witness the closing of the final gap. In that anxious throng, as though gathered in a grand finale to the eight-year drama of El Pueblo's first boom, stood the host of city-makers who had created this very scene. Conspicuous by his rotundity was General Phineas Banning, who had brought the first rails to Southern California and who now thrilled at this climax grown from his simple beginning. Present also was Benjamin D. Wilson, the man who had, by his efforts in Washington five years before, secured the insertion of the words "by way of Los Angeles" in the Southern Pacific's charter. Harvey K. S. O'Melveny, who had led the campaign for railroad subsidy, was unable to attend the event.

He was represented, however, by others who had figured in that bitter contest—Benjamin L. Peel, leader of the anti-railroaders, and John G. Downey, who had wavered in the fight and finally joined O'Melveny and the railroad. Also attending were I. W. Hellman, Downey's partner who had saved his bank and a part of El Pueblo's credit, and James F. Burns, whose stanch hand had brought law to Los Angeles County.

None of these men, however, was more entitled to a sense of satisfaction at the event than Judge Robert M. Widney, who had led Los Angeles in the fight to keep the Southern Pacific out of the Cajon and had thus forced its rails through San Fernando Pass and El Pueblo. Sharing with him in this indirect triumph was Joseph U. Crawford, engineer for the Los Angeles and Independence, on hand to observe with professional interest the grades and curves of the Southern Pacific line.

Together with several hundred Angelenos and San Franciscans, these city-builders now waited eagerly for the long-sought connection. Two rival crews of tracklayers, one representing San Francisco and the other Los Angeles, stood ready to race for the last tie, ten rails' distance from each end.

"Fall to!" cried Charles Crocker, and a locomotive whistle echoed his command. At the sound the two parties began their furious advance, followed by the puffing construction engines. Rails were dragged from the flatcars and thrown in place; the foremen applied measuring rods to give the exact width of gauge; the construction cars rolled ahead while fifty hammers pounded spikes in the rails just uncovered. A cloud of dust enveloped the crowd as shoveling parties poured dirt between the ties behind each crew of spike drivers. At five minutes after the starting time, and with a hundred-foot gap remaining, the San Francisco flatcar accidentally ran over the edge of the last rail, creating a delay while its crewmen heaved to replace it.

In that anxious moment the Los Angeles gang, with a triumphant yell, laid its last rail, and a mighty roar went up from the spectators. The brass band blared forth a tune, and even the San Francisco tracklayers joined good-naturedly in the cheering. Then falling back to work with a will, they completed the spiking

of their last rail before their Angeleno rivals and received a special cheer for their own achievement.

**CROCKER DRIVES THE LAST SPIKE** When the dust had settled, Charles Crocker was seen standing on the last tie, surrounded by Stanford, Colton, and other dignitaries of the railroad. The Los Angeles jeweler who had fashioned the silver-headed maul and golden spike stepped forward and was introduced by John G. Downey. Crocker took the implements, thanked the donor, and, holding the hammer in his right hand and the spike in his left, cleared his throat for a speech.

"It has been deemed best on this occasion that the last spike to be driven should be of gold," he declared, ". . . as indicative of the great wealth which should flow into the coffers of San Francisco and Los Angeles when this connection is made. . . ." After a few more words, as though afraid to depart from his reputation as a man of action, the portly railroader scorned further rhetoric and concluded, "Gentlemen, I am no public speaker, but I can drive a spike."

With that he placed the golden spike in its proper hole and, swinging the silver hammer with expert accuracy, drove it home with six well-directed blows.

A mighty cheer thundered from the crowd, hats were thrown skyward, locomotive whistles shrieked in jubilation, the brass band played furiously, and the Chinese infantry added an Oriental whoop to the pandemonium that shook the Soledad cliffs.

The connection had been made! Los Angeles was at last on the main line! The long-standing gap in the Southern Pacific's tracks, a gap that dated from the laying of General Banning's first rails at Wilmington in '68, was now closed.

After a fitting prayer by a minister from San Francisco, General David D. Colton addressed the multitude, prophesying that Southern Pacific locomotives would reach the banks of the Colorado by the end of the year. Ex-Governor John G. Downey, Mayor Prudent Beaudry of Los Angeles, and Mayor A. J. Bryant of San Francisco followed with short talks, accompanied by much clearing of throats because of the dust-laden wind sweeping down

the canyon. Demands were then made for a speech by ex-Governor Leland Stanford, who with apparent reluctance allowed himself to be brought to the front.

"This ceremony to-day means not only a connection between Los Angeles and San Francisco," the railroad chief told them, "but it means a connection ultimately, of the great Mississippi valley with the State of California by a Southern route."

Finally calls were raised for General Phineas Banning, whom some of the crowd referred to as the "Pathfinder." The proud old warrior, moved by the popular demonstration in his favor, confined his words to simple praise for the Southern Pacific. "The completion of this line to-day," he concluded, "gives Los Angeles a market for surplus productions such as she never before possessed."

At a signal from Crocker that the ceremonies were over, the crowd broke ranks and scattered for the passenger cars. Prominent Southern Californians joined the San Franciscans in their palace cars, and a few minutes after two o'clock the caravan of celebrants was steaming down Soledad Canyon toward San Fernando Valley. At the Los Angeles River bridge the train was hailed by a crowd of Angelenos who had ridden out to greet them, and from there on into the city the people lined the tracks on either side, waving hats and shouting themselves hoarse. The Southern Pacific depot yard and every approaching street were jammed with citizens and carriages, and as Stanford and Crocker alighted from their palace cars they were greeted by an ovation from the excited throng. Bands were playing, whistles were tooting, and Angelenos were hurraing till they were breathless.

This was the day toward which they had hoped and labored throughout the boom—the arrival of the first train from San Francisco. Though they now lay broken in depression, they were hailing the birth of Los Angeles as a true city, the metropolis of Southern California. El Pueblo's citizens had emerged from the eight tumultuous boom years with an everlasting prize that would fix the commerce of the Southwest at their door for all time.

"From the San Gabriel Mountains to the sea, and down over the Santa Monica valley, orchard after orchard, vineyard after

vineyard, will extend for miles; all under one municipal control, making the most extensive and beautiful city this side of the Atlantic." The correspondent of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, caught in the electric enthusiasm of the day, had penned the words. "The panorama which now unfolds itself from the neighboring hilltops, lovely and grand as it is," he declared, "is but a faint picture of what future years will disclose."