The Impact of the Railroad:
The Iron Horse and the Octopus

The completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 was a major event in California history. The iron horse linked California with the rest of the nation and ushered in an era of economic consolidation.

The Californians who controlled this new technology became the wealthiest and most powerful men of their generation. The railroad also stirred intense controversy. It was denounced by its opponents as a grasping and greedy octopus.

Early Transportation and Communication

The admission of California to the union in 1850 linked the state politically with the rest of the nation, but California remained geographically isolated.

Several early attempts were made to solve the problem of isolation. Stagecoaches carrying the overland mail began crossing the continent to California in 1858. Writer Mark Twain chronicled the plight of one group of hapless passengers who accompanied the west-bound mail. Among the more colorful stagecoach drivers in California was Charlotte Parkhurst, a tough character also known as "Cock-eyed Charley." The Pony Express began providing transcontinental mail service to California in 1860, but its impact was minimal. Perhaps the most ingenious attempt to solve the problem of California's isolation was the introduction of camel caravans across the deserts of the southwest. Meanwhile, river boats carried passengers and cargo on the inland rivers of the state. The wires of the telegraph established instant communication between California and the rest of the nation in 1861, but the larger challenge of providing a system of transcontinental transportation remained unmet.

Overland Mail

The United States Congress in 1857 passed the Overland California Mail Act. This act offered government aid in the form of mail contracts to any company that could provide stagecoach service from the eastern United States to California. Soon the postmaster general awarded the first contract to the Overland Mail Company, headed by John Butterfield of New York.

Butterfield's stagecoaches began carrying passengers and mail across the continent from St. Louis to San Francisco in 1858. The coaches crossed 2,800 miles of roads that were little more than rutted dirt trails. The trip lasted about three weeks.

As Mark Twain once discovered, riding in a stagecoach was not nearly as much fun as one might imagine. Meals along the way usually were a combination of beans, stale bacon, and crusty bread. Overnight accommodations were dirty and uncomfortable. The ride itself was a bone-jarring, teeth-rattling, muscle-straining experience.

Mark Twain

One of the many young Americans to cross the continent in a stagecoach carrying the overland mail was the writer Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain. He came to Nevada in 1861 and worked on the Territorial Enterprise newspaper. Later in 1864 he moved to San Francisco and began writing for the Golden Era.

"Whenever the stage stopped to change horses, we would wake up, and try to recollect where we were.... We began to get into country, now, threaded here and there with little streams. These had high, steep banks on each side, and every time we flew down one bank and scrambled up the other, our party inside got mixed somewhat.

First we would all be down in a pile at the forward end of the stage, nearly in a sitting posture, and in a second we would shoot to the other end, and stand on our heads. And we would sprawl and kick, too, and ward off ends and corners of mailbags that came lumbering after us and about us; and as the dust rose from the tumult, we would all sneeze in chorus, and the majority of us would grumble, and probably say some hasty thing, like: 'Take your elbow out of my ribs! --Can't you quit crowding.'"

Charlotte Parkhurst

Charlotte Parkhurst was a stagecoach driver in the 1850s and '60s. She drove a four-horse team for Wells, Fargo and Company on the road from Santa Cruz to San Jose. Since the stagecoach companies in those days hired only men as drivers, she dressed in men's clothing and applied for the job as "Charley Parkhurst." She wore gloves (in both summer and winter) to hide her small hands and pleated shirts to hide her figure.

Apparently no one suspected Parkhurst's true identity. One of her unknowing companions later said that Charley Parkhurst "out-swore, out-drank, and out-chewed even the Monterey whalers." Parkhurst was a tough-looking hombre with a patch over one eye, blinded by the kick of a horse. In later years, this colorful character was known as "Cock-eyed Charley."

When Parkhurst died in 1879, the San Francisco Morning Call mourned the passing of "the most dexterous and celebrated of the California drivers, and it was an honor to occupy the spare end of the driver's seat when the fearless Charley Parkhurst held the reins."

Pony Express

The Pony Express began carrying mail between California and St. Joseph, Missouri, on April 3, 1860. The route was nearly 2,000 miles long and service was provided semi-weekly. In summer, the trip took ten and a half days.

freighting firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell hired eighty young riders to carry s the continent aboard fleet-footed ponies. The average age of the riders was just company outfitted them with revolvers and knives to defend themselves against hey might meet along the trail, critters like wolves and mountain lions. The supplied the riders with bibles and prohibited them from engaging in any "drinking or swearing." The riders wore close-fitting clothes to reduce wind resistance and on their ponies were light racing saddles. They carried leather pouches filled with twenty pounds of mail wrapped in oiled silk to keep out the moisture.

These dashing young riders sped across the continent at twenty-five miles an hour, stopping every ten to fifteen miles for a fresh horse at one of the hundreds of relay stations along the way. As the rider approached each station, his replacement mount would be saddled and ready to go. The rider would transfer his mail pouch and be on his way again in less than two minutes.

The Pony Express delivered the mail to California far faster than other means. But the cost was much higher. After only about eighteen months, the Pony Express went out of business. It ended on October 24, 1861, the day the transcontinental telegraph began providing instant communication across the continent.

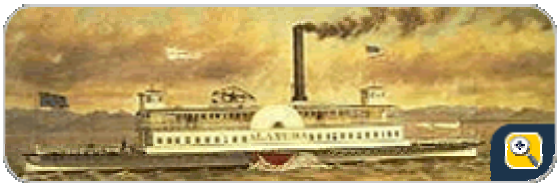
Camel Caravans

The United States Congress in 1855 approved a plan to use camels to carry goods across the deserts of the southwest to California.

The plan was the bright idea of Jefferson Davis, an imaginative young senator from Mississippi at the time. Davis was convinced that camels--famous for their sure-footedness in shifting sands and their ability to endure intense heat--would be an ideal means of transporting military supplies to California. After Davis became United States Secretary of War, he dispatched government agents to north Africa to purchase a small herd of camels. The camels eventually arrived in New Mexico where they were assigned the task of transporting goods over a twelve-hundred-mile desert trail to southern California.

Although the camels did well, the government soon lost interest. In the early 1860s, some thirty-five decommissioned camels were driven north from Los Angeles to the army's Benicia Arsenal in Solano County. There they were auctioned off as government surplus to the highest bidder.

River Boats

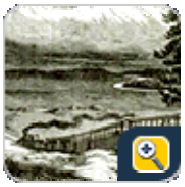


In the years before the advent of the railroad, the major arteries of inland trade and transportation in California were the routes of the great paddlewheel steamers on San Francisco Bay and on the larger rivers of the Central Valley.

The magnificent river boats that plied the waters of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers were every bit as elegant as any that ever paddled their way along the mighty Mississippi. They were dripping with Victorian gingerbread, and their staterooms were decked out with lace and cut velvet. One New Englander was delighted with the luxury and comfort he found aboard The Senator in 1850: "It was a strong, spacious, and elegant boat. After my recent barbaric life, her long upper saloon, with its sofas and faded carpet, seemed splendid enough for a palace."

Huge profits were to be made, and the competition for customers between San Francisco and Sacramento was particularly intense. Rival crews got into fist fights over who would carry a particular passenger or load of freight, while captains pushed their boats to the limit, trying to make the best time. The record from San Francisco was set in 1861: five hours and nineteen minutes. Price wars drove passenger fares down from $30 to $5. One desperate captain even offered to carry folks for free--just to get their business!

Telegraph



The overland mail reached California by stagecoach in about three weeks. The fleet-footed ponies of the Pony Express reduced delivery time to around ten days. But a new technology, the telegraph, promised instant communication across the continent.

The telegraph is a simple device that sends messages by electricity. It was developed by an American inventor named Samuel F. B. Morse. He also developed the Morse code, an ingenious code that uses dots and dashes to stand for the letters of the alphabet. Morse sent his first message from Washington, D.C., to Baltimore, Maryland, in 1844. Telegraph lines soon connected cities throughout the eastern United States.

Workers began building a telegraph line across the country in the summer of 1861. It was completed on October 24, 1861. On that historic day, the first telegram was sent from California to the east. The chief justice of the California Supreme Court telegraphed President Abraham Lincoln to declare California's loyalty to the union. Also on that day the Pony Express went out of business. The telegraph had rendered its services obsolete.

The Iron Horse

The problem of California's isolation from the rest of the nation was solved with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. The person most responsible for launching that massive enterprise was a young civil engineer named Theodore Judah. Judah tirelessly pursued financial backers for the project and found them in four ambitious Sacramento merchants, known in the annals of California history as the Big Four. Judah also was instrumental in securing government aid for the construction of the railroad.

Building the railroad was a monumental undertaking. The greatest challenge was laying rails through the heart of the Sierra Nevada. After six years of toil, the railroad was completed with the Gold Spike ceremony at Promontory, Utah, on May 10, 1869. Most of the construction work on the western portion of the line was performed by Chinese labor.

The railroad's economic impact on the state was far-reaching, although not quite what was expected. California agriculture was among those industries that prospered with the opening of eastern markets. Perishable farm products now could swiftly be shipped across the country in refrigerated rail cars. The completion of rival rail lines contributed to the boom of the eighties, a rapid expansion of the population and economy of southern California.

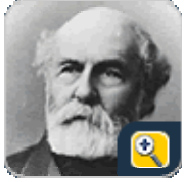
The great wealth produced by the railroad enabled its owners to become some of California's leading philanthropic benefactors. The wife of the first president of the Central Pacific Railroad, for example, became the mother of a university. Such benefactions were not always appreciated by those who condemned the railroad as an octopus strangling California.

Theodore Judah

Interest in building a transcontinental railroad was strong throughout the 1850s. The United States Congress authorized surveys of several potential routes but was unable to agree on which route to choose.

Civil engineer Theodore Judah deserves much of the credit for developing the specific plan that eventually won Congressional approval. A native of Connecticut, Judah came west in 1854 to build the first railroad on the Pacific Coast, a short line from Sacramento to Folsom. Having



completed this modest task, Judah became entranced--some would say "bewitched"--by a grand vision: building a railroad across the continent.

In 1860 Judah made an intensive search for the best crossing of the Sierra Nevada. He located and surveyed a feasible route, making detailed notes on the grade and terrain. Encouraged by his discovery, he drew up articles of association for the Central Pacific Railroad of California. After several rejections, Judah in 1860 turned to four Sacramento merchants for financial backing.

Judah's association with the Big Four proved to be deeply troubling. He wanted the railroad to be built well; they wanted it to be built cheaply so that profits would be high. In October 1863 Judah sailed for New York where he hoped to find other financial backers who might buy out the Big Four. During his trip eastward, Judah became deathly ill with yellow fever. He died shortly after his arrival in New York. Today a simple monument to Theodore Judah stands in the Old Town area of Sacramento. Surely his real monument is the ribbon of iron rails that tied California to the rest of the nation.

The Big Four

The Big Four were the chief entrepreneurs in the building of the first transcontinental railroad. They provided the initial financial backing for the plan proposed by civil engineer Theodore Judah. As directors of the Central Pacific and later the Southern Pacific, they became the wealthiest and most powerful Californians of their generation.

Elected president of the Central Pacific was a Sacramento grocer named Leland Stanford. His gregarious personality suited him perfectly for this position of leadership. He was active in the formation of the state Republican party, and in 1862 he ran successfully for the governorship of California. Later he served as a United States Senator from California.

Vice President of the newly formed corporation was Collis P. Huntington, a successful Sacramento hardware merchant. Huntington's business practices became legendary. His favorite maxim for setting prices was "How badly does the customer want it?" Within the inner circle of the railroad, Huntington was clearly the dominant personality. In later years he would serve as president of the Southern Pacific.

Huntington's partner in the hardware business was Mark Hopkins, elevated to the position of treasurer of the Central Pacific. Several years older than the other partners, Hopkins lacked their driving ambition. His greatest strength was his eye for detail, keeping meticulous accounts of all financial transactions.

Charles Crocker, the fourth member of the group, began his career in California as a seller of dry goods in Sacramento. As a director of the railroad, his greatest contribution was his unflagging energy and enthusiasm. He would serve as overseer of the actual building of the railroad.

Government Aid

The building of the transcontinental railroad depended upon the entrepreneurial skills of the Big Four, the hard work of thousands of laborers, and the generous financial aid of the federal government.

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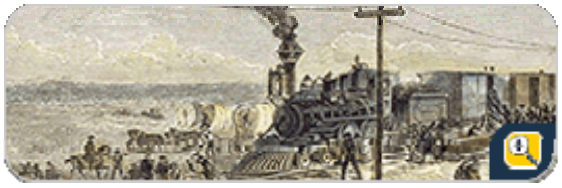
Congress in 1862 and 1864 passed the Pacific Railroad Acts. Signed into law by President Lincoln, these acts provided enormous gifts of land and low-interest loans to the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads.

The Central Pacific was authorized to build the western portion of the transcontinental railroad beginning in Sacramento, and the Union Pacific was to build the eastern portion starting in Omaha. The loans were paid out at varying rates, from $16,000 to $48,000 per mile of track. The land was doled out in a checkerboard pattern of ten alternate sections (square miles) on each side of the track--half the land in a strip totaling forty miles in width. The railroad thus received from the federal government a total of 11,588,000 acres in California, about 11 1/2 percent of the entire land area of the state. This vast transfer of the public domain made the railroad, by far, the largest private landowner in California.

Building the Railroad



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The Gold Spike

After more than six years of construction, the tracks of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads approached each other just to the north of the Great Salt Lake. It was there, at a place called Promontory, that the lines were officially joined in a famous and colorful ceremony.

Witnessing the ceremony was a crowd of five hundred laborers, mostly Chinese and Irish immigrants. Workers carefully placed a final polished laurel tie on a bed of gravel. Company officials presented several commemorative spikes, including one of silver and two of gold. Central Pacific president Leland Stanford attempted to drive home the final spike with a mighty swing of his silver-headed sledgehammer. (Unfortunately he missed on the first attempt!)

Telegraphers reported the ceremony to an awaiting nation. A. J. Russell captured the significance of the moment in his carefully staged photograph, "East Meets West." Exactly a century after the founding of the first Spanish settlements in Alta California in 1769, iron rails now linked American California to its kindred states.

Economic Impact

Californians expected that the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 would usher in a new era of prosperity. Those expectations were not immediately realized. By a cruel paradox, the completion of the railroad not only failed to bring the expected good times, it also marked the beginning of a deep and general depression that continued through the next decade.

California merchants and manufacturers found themselves suddenly exposed to intense competition from those of eastern cities. Local merchants had overstocked merchandise in

anticipation of increased demand. Now, after 1869, they found the market glutted with goods shipped to California by rail. Nor did land prices rise as expected. Land values had become overinflated in anticipation of the completion of the railroad. When the road was completed, land prices in California actually fell.

The completion of the railroad released thousands of workers, most of whom drifted back to the California labor market. The oversupply of workers depressed wages and contributed to widespread unemployment.

On the positive side, the railroad did help California farmers and other producers transport their products to distant markets. Fruit growers benefited especially from the development of the refrigerated railroad car that kept fruit cool and ripe during shipment across the country.

The Boom of the Eighties

Southern California experienced tremendous growth in the 1880s, stimulated in part by the railroad. The Southern Pacific was the largest landowner in the state and it took a leading role in the advertising of California. The railroad's publicity department flooded the nation with articles and stories extolling the charms of California's natural beauty, climate, and romantic heritage.

The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad reached Los Angeles in the mid- 1880s and began a rate war with the Southern Pacific. Passenger fares from the Midwest to southern California dropped from $125 to as little as $1. More than 200,000 newcomers arrived in southern California in 1887, the peak year of "the boom of the eighties." Real estate sales in Los Angeles County exceeded $200 million during a single year. Dozens of towns sprang up. A hundred new communities with 500,000 homesites were established.

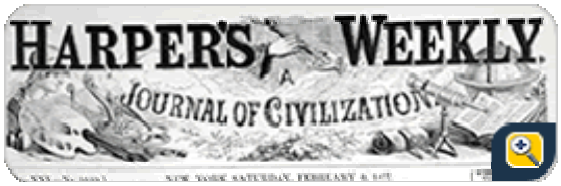
Mother of a University

The great wealth produced by the railroad enabled the Big Four and their families to become some of California's leading philanthropic benefactors. Leland Stanford and his wife Jane founded Stanford University in 1885 as a memorial to their only son who had died the year before at age fifteen.

After her husband died in 1893, Jane Stanford played a major role in the governance and support of the university. Stanford was one of the few universities in the world to admit women, and Jane Stanford paid close attention to the conduct of the coeds on campus. She was alarmed to learn that some of them were becoming "quite lawless and free in their social relations with young men." She instructed the college president to place Stanford coeds under "strict surveillance."

Jane Stanford also was concerned about the growing number of women on campus. When the number of female undergraduates exceeded 40 percent, she feared that the university was developing a reputation as a women's school. In 1899 she issued a strongly worded edict: "Whereas the University was founded in memory of our dear son, Leland, and bears his name, I direct that the number of women attending the University as students shall at no time ever exceed 500.... I mean literally never in the future of the Leland Stanford Junior University can the number of female students at any one time exceed 500." The edict stayed in place until 1933 when university trustees found a loophole that allowed them to lift the limit.

Chinese Labor



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Working on the Railroad

It was Charles Crocker, one of the members of the Big Four, who first experimented with Chinese construction workers on the transcontinental railroad. The experiment was so successful that railroad agents soon were recruiting Chinese workers by the thousands. "Come over and help!" said the recruiting posters in China. "We have money to spend, but no one to earn it.

At the peak of construction, the Central Pacific employed more than 10,000 Chinese laborers. "They are equal to the best white men," Crocker said proudly of his new labor force. "They are very trusty, they are intelligent, and they live up to their contracts."

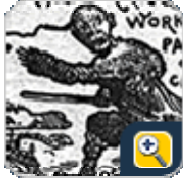
The Chinese worked under incredibly dangerous conditions--for a dollar a day--to overcome some of the world's most extraordinary obstacles to the building of a railroad. Workers were suspended in wicker baskets over nearly vertical cliffs in the Sierra Nevada, chipping away with hammers and chisels to make a ledge for the track. In unknown numbers, Chinese workers were swept away in avalanches and rock slides. "The snowslides carried away our camps and we lost a good many men in these slides," reported one railroad official. "Many of them we did not find until the next season when the snow melted."

Chinese rail workers made one brief attempt to strike. Near Cisco, in Placer County, thirty-five hundred workers in July 1867 demanded forty dollars a month and a ten-hour work day. They gave up even these modest demands when the Central Pacific cut off the food supply and threatened to discharge the strikers.

Anti-Chinese Sentiment

Thousands of Chinese rail workers were laid off following the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. Most drifted back to crowd the already glutted labor market in California. Thousands of additional Chinese immigrants arrived each year during the next decade as California entered a period of hard times. Unemployment rose sharply and many businesses failed during "the terrible seventies."

White Californians often blamed the Chinese for the depressed economic conditions. Anti-Chinese riots broke out in cities and towns throughout the state, in places like Auburn, Petaluma, Roseville, Chico, and Santa Barbara. The worst anti-Chinese riot occurred in Los Angeles. On the evening of October 24, 1871, an angry mob looted and burned the local Chinatown, leaving fifteen Chinese immigrants hanging from makeshift gallows.



Many California cities also passed laws to harass the Chinese. San Francisco, for instance, passed an ordinance in 1870 that prohibited anyone form occupying a sleeping room with less than 500 cubic feet of breathing space per person. This "health law" allowed the police to make raids on crowded tenements in Chinatown and roust out any sleeping Chinese residents who were violating the ordinance while they slept. The law was vigorously enforced and soon the jails of San Francisco were so overcrowded that the city itself was in gross violation of its own ordinance.

The Workingmen's Party

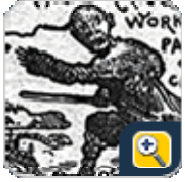
Many white Californians blamed the Chinese immigrants for the hard times of the 1870s. Groups of unemployed whites gathered on the "sand lots" of San Francisco to denounce the Chinese and to castigate the railroad company that had employed so many of them. Such meetings occasionally erupted into violence, leaving Chinese businesses looted and burned.

Unemployed San Franciscans and their allies in 1877 formed a new political party that would represent their views. A fiery young Irish American named Denis Kearney emerged as the leader of the Workingmen's Party of California. Kearney acquired a large following mainly through his emotional and melodramatic style of oratory. On one occasion, he shouted to a crowd that "every workingman should have a musket."

Fearing that Kearney's speeches would lead to more violence, the city government adopted a ordinance that restricted public speaking that advocated violence. Kearney was arrested but acquitted because no violence had actually resulted from his speeches. Whatever his speeches may have advocated, one thing was clear: the leader of the Workingmen's Party won thunderous applause from his followers whenever he shouted "And whatever happens, the Chinese must go!"

A New Constitution

At the peak of anti-Chinese sentiment and the rise of the Workingmen's Party, Californians adopted a new state constitution. Voters in June 1878 elected delegates to a constitutional convention; a third of the delegates were members of the Workingmen's Party. The document the delegates produced was far longer and more complex than the original constitution drafted at the Monterey convention in 1849. It was approved by the voters of California on May 7, 1879.



The new constitution included provisions for regulating the railroad and other corporations. It also modified the tax structure to benefit farmers and established a state board of equalization.

The anti-Chinese provisions of the constitution were long, elaborate, and emotional. The ban on the public employment of Chinese was absolute: "No Chinese shall be employed on any state, county, municipal, or other public work, except in punishment for crime." The constitution also instructed the legislature to "delegate all necessary power to the incorporated cities and towns of this state for the removal of Chinese without the limits of such cities and towns, or for their location within prescribed portions of those limits." Thus California cities were empowered to exclude Chinese residents or to require them to live in Chinese ghettos. The presence of Chinese immigrants, ineligible by race to become American citizens, was declared "to be dangerous to the well-being of the state, and the legislature shall discourage their immigration by all means within its power."

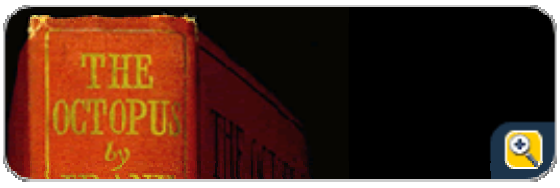
Chinese Exclusion

Anti-Chinese sentiment in California found its ultimate expression in the Chinese Exclusion Act, approved by the United States Congress in 1882. The act prohibited Chinese immigration for ten years. In 1892 the law was extended for another ten years, and in 1902 it became permanent. The law was repealed during World War II, when China and the United States were allied in the struggle against Japan.

The exclusion law contributed to an economic and demographic decline of the Chinese immigrant population. Boycotts of Chinese-produced goods by white consumers reduced significantly the economic opportunities for the immigrants. Most Chinese workers were relegated to the ranks of common laborers or farm workers. Few Chinese women lived in California at the time of exclusion, and thus the immigrant population faced extraordinary difficulties replenishing itself through natural increase. The Chinese population in the United States declined from 107,000 in 1890 to just 75,000 in 1930.

The exclusion law not only made it nearly impossible for additional Chinese to enter California, it also caused great hardships for those who were already here.

The Octopus



Many Californians in the late nineteenth century came to believe that the Big Four had accumulated far too much wealth and power. Angry citizens portrayed the railroad as a monstrous octopus that was strangling other businesses and corrupting the affairs of government.

The Big Four's mansions on Nob Hill were denounced as evidence of their ill-gotten wealth. Political cartoons showed the Big Four under attack by those who wished to free the state from railroad domination. Author Frank Norris criticized the Southern Pacific in his muckraking novel The Octopus (1901). Embarrassing revelations in the press alleged corrupt dealings by railroad officials. Although the railroad suffered a few defeats at the hands of its enemies, its power remained substantial as California entered the new century. Scholars today continue to offer conflicting interpretations of the role of the railroad in the history of California.

Mansions on Nob Hill

Nob Hill in San Francisco has long been a symbol of the city's elegance and grace. Known originally as the California Street Hill, it became the home of San Francisco's wealthiest families in the 1870s. The city's elite were the "nabobs," (referring to the title of prominent governors of the Mogul empire in India) which was later shortened simply to "nobs."

On the crest of the hill sprawled the homes of the Big Four, the wealthiest and most powerful Californians of their generation. The home of Leland Stanford was on California Street where the Stanford Court Hotel stands today. Visitors to the magnificent Stanford home entered through a circular entrance hall, bathed in amber light from a glass dome in the ceiling seventy feet above. The family of Mark Hopkins lived just up the street, where the Mark Hopkins Hotel now stands. Topped by a crown of towers, gables and steeples, it looked like a fanciful medieval castle.

Charles Crocker's home was the grandest of them all, occupying an entire square block where Grace Cathedral stands today. It contained a fully equipped theater, library, and billiard room. An imposing seventy-six-foot tower offered Crocker an uninterrupted view of the entire Bay Area.

But the view was not so grand for Crocker's neighbor, a lowly San Francisco undertaker who refused to sell out when Crocker was buying up the block for his new residence. To spite the uncooperative undertaker, Crocker constructed a fence forty-feet high on three sides of his neighbor's property! The Crocker "spite fence" was denounced by the railroad's opponents as a galling symbol of the unrestrained wealth and power of the Big Four.

The Big Four under Attack

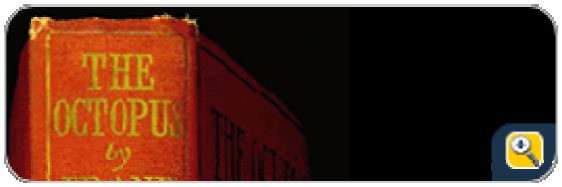
Following the completion of the transcontinental railroad, the Big Four established a virtual transportation monopoly in California and exercised great political power. Many of their fellow Californians came to believe that these four railroad tycoons had amassed too much wealth and power. They complained that the Big Four's transportation monopoly was draining the profit

from other business enterprises in the state and that their political machine was corrupting California government.

Anger against the Big Four was frequently expressed in contemporary editorials and political cartoons. One of the most devastating cartoons appeared in the San Francisco Examiner in 1898. "Highwayman Huntington to the Voters of California" pictured the president of the Southern Pacific Railroad as a vicious gunman, complete with skull cufflinks and a garish diamond stickpin. Collis P. Huntington was not amused.

The following year, several bills aimed at silencing offending journalists were introduced in the railroad-dominated state legislature. One bill effectively banned the future publication of political cartoons. It prohibited the publishing of any drawing which reflected adversely upon the "honor, integrity, manhood, virtue, or reputation" of any individual. This anti-cartoon bill became law in 1899 and remained on the books for fifteen years, a chilling legacy from the era of the Big Four.

Frank Norris



Born in Chicago in 1870, Frank Norris moved with his family to San Francisco when he was fourteen. Three years later, he was sent to Paris to study art, but was soon summoned home by his father who suspected that young Frank was wasting both his time and his money. Norris then enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley, where he studied for four years but failed to graduate. After leaving college, Norris became a professional writer in San Francisco and later in New York. He was much influenced by the works of Émile Zola, and Norris's fiction is an important contribution to American naturalism.

In 1901 Norris published The Octopus, a gripping story of the struggle between California wheat farmers and the Southern Pacific Railroad. The farmers in the novel believe that they have been cheated by the railroad's deceptive land practices. The farmers also complain that the railroad charges extortionate freight rates to ship their products to market.

In one memorable scene, an angry farmer denounces the local railroad agent with these words: "What next? My God, why don't you break into our houses at night? Why don't you steal the watch out of my pocket, steal the horses out of the harness, hold us up with a shotgun; yes, 'stand and deliver; your money or your life.'"

Revelations

Several embarrassing revelations in the late nineteenth century provided powerful evidence for those Californians who believed that the Southern Pacific Railroad had corrupted state politics. Two of the most damaging episodes involved the top leaders of the company.

David Colton was the confidential manager of the railroad's political interests in California. Following Colton's death in 1878, his widow sued the Big Four for cheating her out of part of her inheritance. During the trail, she introduced hundreds of letters between her late husband and other railroad officials. The letters starkly revealed the railroad's activities in influencing elections, reelections, and votes of members of the California Legislature.

Two members of the Big Four, Collis Huntington and Leland Stanford, became involved in a public feud in the early 1890s. Huntington publicly rebuked Stanford for using large amounts of railroad money to secure Stanford's election as a United States senator. Stanford's private secretary later published a series of letters filled with further charges of the wholesale corruption of national, state, and local officials by the railroad.

Anti-railroad candidates, pledging to end the corruption of government, won wide support from their fellow Californians. Adolph Sutro declared himself the defender of the people against the greed of The Octopus and was elected mayor of San Francisco in 1894.

Defeats

Although the Big Four wielded considerable political power in the late nineteenth century, they also suffered several major defeats at the hands of their opponents.

Collis Huntington, president of the Southern Pacific Railroad, supported proposals for federal aid to construct a harbor at Santa Monica where the railroad had exclusive access. Many of the leading citizens of Los Angeles wanted the harbor to be built at San Pedro, at a place that was free of railroad control. Huntington waged his battle throughout the 1890s but eventually had to concede defeat when a board of Army engineers approved the building of the harbor at San Pedro.

Government aid for the building of the transcontinental railroad in the 1860s included federal loans of nearly $28 million payable in thirty years. As the loans became due, Huntington proposed a delay in payment of fifty to a hundred years. Huntington's proposal created a

firestorm of opposition. When the proposal was defeated by the United States Congress in 1897, the governor of California proclaimed a public holiday in celebration.