

# PBS - THE WEST - A Grand Anvil Chorus

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## A Grand Anvil Chorus

Railroads had already transformed life in the East, but at the end of the Civil War they still stopped at the Missouri River. For a quarter of a century, men had dreamed of building a line from coast to coast. Now they would attempt it -- one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five miles of track from Omaha to Sacramento.



**THE WEST**  
Episode Five (1868 - 1874)

THE GRANDEST ENTERPRISE UNDER GOD

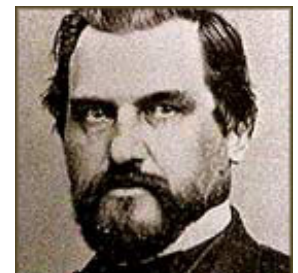
In the ripeness of time the hope of humanity is realized... This continental railway... will bind the two seaboards to this one continental union like ears to the human head; to plant the foundations of the Union so broad and deep... that no possible force or stratagem can shake its permanence. [William Gilpin](#)

The West couldn't be settled without railroads. And a railroad across the West couldn't be built without the government. The distances were too great, the costs too staggering, the risks too high for any group of businessmen.

"It was only through the Government's help that anything this gargantuan in size could be accomplished, much as landing on the Moon. It was not rugged individualists who built the railroad, it was rugged corporations who formed and financed themselves as entities. It was the rugged federal government that came up with the federal loans, and the land grants, that enabled it to be built. Amid all the romance of building the railroad we tend to forget that it was one of the major industrial enterprises of its age." T. H. Watkins

In [1862](#), Congress gave charters to two companies to build it. The Central Pacific was to push eastward from Sacramento, over the Sierra Nevada mountains. The Union Pacific was to start from the Missouri, cross the great plains and cut through the Rockies. Both companies were to receive vast loans from the treasury as they went along -- \$16,000 per mile of level track, \$32,000 in the plateaus, and \$48,000 in the mountains. Lobbyists got the rates doubled within a year.

[Leland Stanford](#), governor of California and president of the Central Pacific Railroad, persuaded a malleable geologist, Professor Josiah Whitney, to declare the gently sloping Sacramento Valley a mountainous region so that the Central Pacific could collect the highest possible rate for laying track across it. A grateful California legislature later named its highest peak Mount Whitney in the professor's honor.



Congress also promised each company 6,400 acres of federal land for every mile of track it laid.

"The railroads got the right of way and along the right of way miles and miles of what was then the government's land. When you added it all together it was a gift of roughly the size of California plus most of Montana. It was incredible.  
Marc Reisner



The Union Pacific and Central Pacific were soon locked in a race to see who could

lay the most track -- and therefore get the most land and money. Somewhere in the West -- no one knew exactly where -- the two lines were supposed to meet.

It is a Grand Anvil Chorus that these sturdy sledges are playing across the plains. It is in triple time, three strokes to a spike... Twenty-one million times are they to come down with their sharp punctuation before the great work of modern America is complete. Dr. William A. Bell