

David Lemon—Old Timer

Fired Engine at Golden Spike Driving May 10, 1869

ALTHOUGH he left the service of the Union Pacific Railroad 55 years ago, David Lemon, who was fireman on engine 117, the first engine to use the track after the driving of the golden spike at Promontory, Utah, in 1869 is still living in White Hall, Illinois. This fact was brought out by his recent contribution to the new library at that point, the gift being the original iron spike which had been substituted for the gold spike driven to mark the completion of the first transcontinental railroad line. In a recent interview, Mr. Lemon, who is in his seventy-eighth year, told how he came into possession of the noted iron spike.

"The ceremonies marking the linking of the East with the West in the completion of the Union Pacific Railroad on May 10, 1869, remain vivid in my mind. The line from Sacramento east and the one from Omaha west met on Promontory Summit in Utah and the driving of the golden spike was the last act to mark the finishing of the first transcontinental railroad line to be built in America.

"This gold spike was about the size of a 20-penny wire nail, square, and was placed in the hole already made to accommodate it by Superintendent H. M. Hoxie, of the Utah division. Through the use of the telegraph each stroke of the hammer was heard by President U. S. Grant in Washington. My engine was the first to pass

Stanford University at this time. When the gold spike had been removed and replaced by an ordinary iron spike, I remarked to Superintendent Hoxie that some one would pull that spike, and that I'd like to have it. After some hesitation the superintendent said: 'You saved my life once, and also that of Engineer Ornan Stimpson here. Let's go and get that spike for you.'

"This was done and Superintendent Hoxie erected a notice that the last spike driven at that point had been removed and another substituted. The original iron spike was handed to me and I am now transferring it to the Whiteside-Grissold Memorial Library of White Hall.

"A month after the spike driving, or on June 9, 1869, the first overland train was run. This train carried President Leland Stanford and a party of twenty-five or thirty, enroute from Sacramento to Washington. I fired the engine that pulled the train from Promontory to Wasatch. I saved a serious delay by successfully plugging a bad leak which the engine had developed. For this act President Stanford presented me with a whopping big orange."

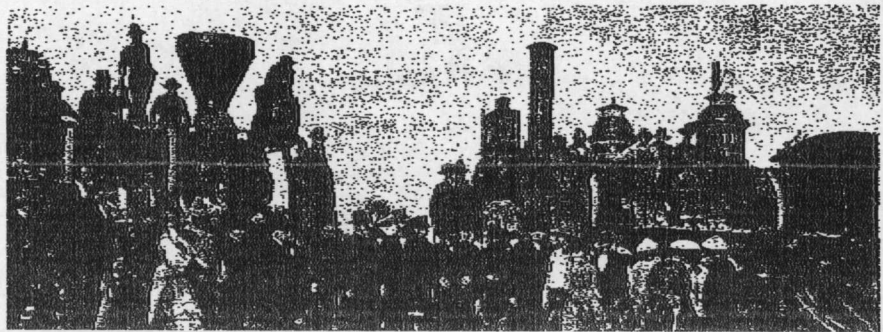
In speaking of his North Platte service Mr. Lemon told of an incident occurring in the spring of 1868 when he was firing an engine hauling a material train at Ogallala, Nebraska.

"Two crews were tied up at that point and Conductors Edmondson and Thomas Calhoun went two miles from camp on horseback to fish in Church Bench Creek. Surprised by Indians, Edmondson received an arrow through the arm which buried itself six inches into his shoulder. Removing the buried arrow from the wound without surgical instruments was accomplished only after terrible suffering on the part of the conductor.

"The Indians gave us much trouble at that time and as a part of the equipment furnished by the government, each engine carried two breech-loading Needle rifles, and each caboose three similar guns. Details of soldiers of both cavalry and infantry numbering as many as five hundred men were stationed according to the needs of the construction forces, moving forward as the work progressed. Even then the Indians committed depredations in the way of tearing up tracks and firing bridges behind the construction



David Lemon.



type, was derailed some 25 or 30 miles out of North Platte. Two box cars of oats and corn followed the engine and behind them came 23 cars of railroad iron. You can well imagine the ugly wreck made by the pressure of those 23 cars of railroad rail. Engineer Stimpson jumped from the engine and was pinioned in a sitting posture under one of the box cars at the edge of a bank. I found him there and was able to raise the car enough to release him, the car having come to rest in a kind of balanced position. The engineer had two or three broken ribs, which I bandaged to the best of my military experience. Fireman Rogers was instantly killed. I saved my own life by crawling out onto the running board of the engine.

"Sioux Indians had caused the wreck by removing bolts and fish plates from the

assist the soldiers, these Indians having enlisted in the U. S. service in exchange for protection against extermination by rival tribes. After the Pawnees had been gone three days they returned to North Platte with seven scalps, Sioux scalps, they said, although one of them had long red hair, which was probably that of an escaped white convict who had taken refuge with the Sioux tribe. There was a celebration war dance staged that night at McPherson, about 16 miles east of North Platte, where the Pawnee military post was located."

Mr. Lemon has had a very interesting and active life. From the spring of 1863 until he was mustered out of service on July 13, 1865, he served in the Twenty-Second Ohio Independent Battery in the Civil War. Two years later he set out for

North Platte in charge of a wood-burning engine which was enroute to Echo City, Utah. The engine was delivered to the construction company for service at the front but was shortly abandoned for the reason that she proved unfit for that heavy work. Upon his arrival in Utah, Mr. Lemon entered the service of the Utah Division as fireman and continued in that capacity until June 25, 1869, when a curtailment of work train service crowded him out of railroad employment. Returning east Mr. Lemon engaged in other business and did not thereafter reenter railroad work. Paralyzed in his lower limbs from an industrial accident some years ago, Mr. Lemon still continues to lead an active life, taking a part in the Armistice Day program at White Hall last November.