

Lincoln Signed Land Grant Act 100 Years Ago

By JAMES R. QUINN
Omaha, Neb. — 100 — One hundred years ago on July 1, Abraham Lincoln scratched his signature on a document known as the Railroad Land Grant act.

Less than seven years later, the new law had made possible two ribbons of steel track stretching 1,775 miles from Omaha to Sacramento, Calif. The law opened the way to the west.

The Land Grant act provided that large tracts of land be given several railroad corporations. In return, the railroads agreed to lay tracks.

The Union Pacific Railroad company was the first to be commissioned. The company was granted nearly 19 million acres of public domain, most of it territory known only to the Indians, stagecoach drivers and pony express riders. Central Pacific's commissioning followed a short time later.

In what the government called "one of the marvels of the age," the Union Pacific and Central Pacific laid the track from Omaha to Sacramento in less than seven calendar years.

The final "golden spike" was hammered into place at Promontory, Utah, May 10, 1869. The line to the west was complete.

The transcontinental telegraph wire, finished only 7½ years earlier, chattered out to the nation the single word: "Done."

The road, based on millions of heavy wood ties, was built by Union Pacific forces working west from Omaha and Central Pacific crews working east from Sacramento.

From Omaha the Union Pacific branch laid down 1,086 miles of track, despite bitter weather and the raids of the great plains Indian tribes who were becoming alarmed over the increasing migration of whites. The men who did it were mostly Irish immigrants.

From Sacramento, more than 12,000 Chinese coolies shouldered an even tougher job. There was heavy blasting through the Sierra Nevada and Rocky mountains. There were the same fierce weather and Indian raids.

On one 60-mile stretch alone, 15 tunnels had to be blasted through the mountains.

The Union Pacific, the only rail link to the west until completion of the Northern Pacific in the middle 1880s, triggered the first stage of a trans-Mississippi population explosion.

In 1860, the population of the entire west was just over a million persons. Most of these lived within a day's travel of the Mississippi river.

Just 30 years later, the U.S. census bureau counted more than 25 million persons west of the Mississippi. They included miners, trappers, businessmen and farmers — farmers who flooded in by the thousands to take advantage of provisions of the Homestead act, signed only 40 days before the Railroad Land Grant act.

The "iron horse" of the late 1800s proved quickly it could conquer the great American desert, the Rockies, Sierras and the weather.

Where a stagecoach trip from Omaha to Virginia City, Nev., had required 17 days and nights of travel before 1862, a rail trip from Omaha to Sacramento now took less than a week.

The railroad speeded the industrial revolution of the late 19th century, putting agriculture and timber deposits of the west within reaching distance of the industrial east.

The railroad also brought the security needed by the growing population. Gen. William T. Sherman, army commander of the west after the Civil war, said the railroad was "positively essential to the binding together of the republic."

Private Electric Energy Sales Dip

Salem — 470 — Jonel C. Hill, State Public Utility Commissioner, said Tuesday that private electric energy sales in Oregon dropped slightly in May, compared to May, 1961.

During May, 462,000 residential customers consumed more than 363 million kilowatt hours — 25 of a per cent below May of last year.

This is the first month since March, 1958, when electric energy sales have not increased over the previous year.

Hill quoted a spokesman for the biggest electric utility in Oregon — Pacific Power & Light Co. — as saying a combination of weather, billing lag, and loss of revenue due to a sale of an operating area accounted for the leveling off.

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