

Where East, West became one

1869 Mosssdale span is nation's true transcontinental rail link

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MOSSDALE -- A remote Utah site usually gets the glory for being known as the place where two stretches of railroad first met to create the transcontinental railroad.

Lesser known is a muddy area near the Mosssdale boat launches, where the first coast-to-coast railroad was completed.

The construction of a wooden trestle bridge in 1869 over the San Joaquin River linked railroad lines that were built simultaneously from the Bay Area and Sacramento.

A small plaque near the Mosssdale site on an Interstate 5 frontage road commemorates the bridge. The plaque, which proclaims the site's designation as a California Registered Historical Landmark, was placed on the bridge's 100-year birthday.

"This railroad and this bridge -- it built the West. It's the reason we're all sitting here today," said Arthur Lloyd, a California railroad historian.

Before the bridge was completed, the transcontinental railroad that was created with the final "golden spike" nailed at Promontory Summit, Utah, in May 1869 only went as far as Sacramento. After the bridge, travelers could ride from Oakland to the Atlantic Coast.

"Once that railroad was completed, Bay Area trains could go to Chicago, where people could switch trains and get to New York," Lloyd explained.

The Central Pacific Railroad built the bridge. A number of railroad consolidations and changes have happened over the past 150 years, and Union Pacific now owns the tracks.

The bridge included a wooded tower that rested upon a turntable. That turntable would allow portions of the bridge to swing out so that steamboats could pass.

According to the book "Cities & Towns of San Joaquin County" by Raymond Hillman and Leonard Covello, part of the bridge was covered -- one of only two covered bridges built in the county. The other was on the Mokelumne River near Clements, according to the book.

"Covered bridges were desirable as the roof and siding kept the network of heavy timbers tree from dry rot and extended the life of the span considerably," the book reads.

Still, the bridge didn't last too long. An iron truss bridge replaced the wooden one in 1895. That bridge was replaced again in 1942. It is now welded shut, according to the book.

There is some controversy still surrounding the bridge. The plaque that commemorates the site says the first train crossed on Sept. 8, 1869. The Cities & Towns book says the first train crossed on Nov. 10, 1869. Yet another date -- Nov. 8, 1869 -- is given as the first crossing day by the book "Railroads of San Joaquin County" by Horace Spencer.