

# OUT OF THE ARCHIVES

## Collaborating with many archives on *After Promontory*

IN THE SPRING OF 2019, the Center will roll out the first in a series of exhibits for *After Promontory*, a multi-year, multi-channel examination of how photographers responded to the birth of the U.S. transcontinental railroad system. This exhibit program, which it has been my honor to curate over the past eighteen months, relies heavily on archival materials, both at the Center and in partner institutions throughout the nation. For this installment of “Out of the Archives,” I want to share with you some of the unique ways that curation and the archives interplay in the development of exhibits.

The *After Promontory* exhibit, like the larger project of which it is part, is shaped by a number of key intellectual perspectives. (The companion book of the same title will be published by Indiana University Press in March 2019; read more in our next issue.) First, we argue that we should remember the completion of the nation’s first transcontinental—the joint Union Pacific-Central Pacific route finished on May 10, 1869—as an inflection point in an era of rapid railroad expansion that spanned over forty years and more than half of the continent. The story is thus wider than one moment occurring 150 years ago, and wider than one company or route. Second, the rapid development of transcontinental railroads took place alongside the development of photography. Both technologies were born in the 1820s, both grew rapidly in the wake of the U.S. Civil War, and both were turned towards the task of placing the vastness of the West within the grasp of the more urban portions of the country. Third and finally, the impacts of the transcontinental era still resonate today, and remain a subject of fascination for many photographers.

To tell this story, we set high goals for the exhibit program, goals that had profound impacts on the ways we assembled the exhibit. First and foremost, we wanted reach the widest possible audience, and we knew that demand for the exhibit would be the highest in the sesquicentennial year of 2019. We thus made the decision to stage multiple, simultaneous exhibits rather than one single traveling exhibit. We also decided to accept the broadest possible types of venues, from traditional museums to public event spaces. Resultingly, *After Promontory* would be shown in venues with a variety of climate control, lighting levels, available space, and relationships with public access. This meant that the exhibit would have to be constructed entirely of reproduction prints. At the same time, to underscore the continuing significance

of this period, we wanted to include the work of later photographers, especially those of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

No single archive has a sufficient collection to meet the objectives of *After Promontory*; as a result, we worked with several different institutions and sources. For the photography of the nineteenth century, we relied on materials from major university libraries, historical societies, and museums. For twentieth century materials, the Center’s own archives played an important role. For contemporary work, we relied on living artists. Folding together materials from such diverse sources was a constant challenge. Different institutions follow different preservation practices, digitization standards, and policies towards rights assignment. Managing these involved more spreadsheets than I care to admit. Although processing images from multiple sources was a logistical challenge, it allowed the Center to tell a far broader story than most institutions could on their own.

### Simulating the aura

The decision to rely on reproductions came with a unique challenge. Given that the practice of photography itself is a key part of the exhibit, how could we capture some sense of that practice while relying on reproduction prints? Original nineteenth century photographs—especially large format works—possess a level of detail and tonal range that later works rarely achieve. They thus have a certain presence and impact, and no matter how high quality our reproductions, we would never be able to create exact duplicates.

While we could not maintain the aura of the original prints, we could at least maintain the impact that comes from their scale. We thus set out to make our reproductions the same size as the original prints. Size and scale would at least give viewers a hint at the experiential impact these photographs had in their time. This decision, however, created two distinct problems at both ends of the size spectrum, with the smallest and largest of the prints.

For larger photographs, the difficulty was a familiar one, albeit at greater extremes: having scans with adequate resolution. Because exhibit production followed that of the companion book, we had a very large selection of digital scans to choose from, most of which were a more than suitable resource for print making. Larger images, however, presented difficulties. An emblematic example is *Cape Horn near Celilo*,

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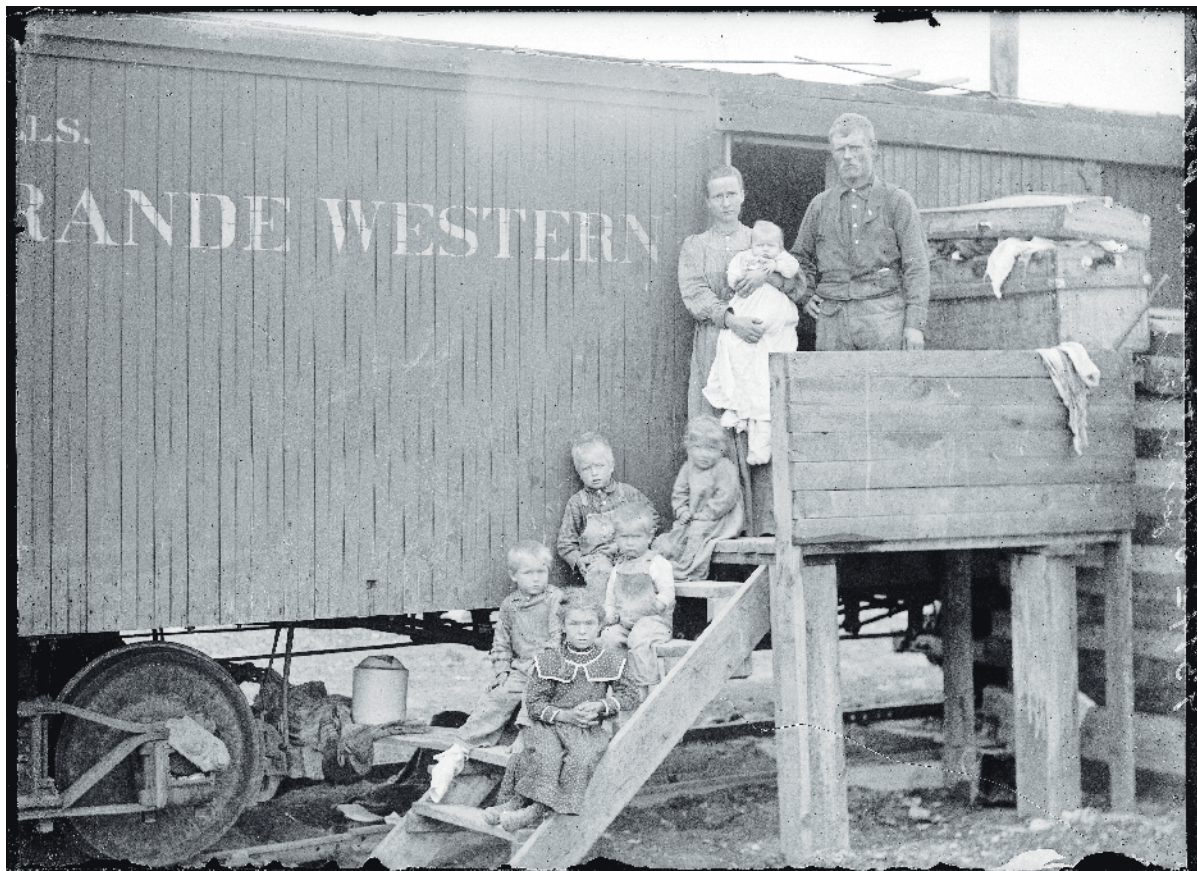
#### GUEST COLUMNIST

Alexander Benjamin  
Craghead

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#### PHOTOGRAPHS

As noted



*Columbia River* by Carleton Watkins, a mammoth print measuring about 16 by 22 inches. For the book, we used an existing scan, 4,734 pixels wide, from the Oregon Historical Society (OHS) digital inventory, but this fell far short of what was needed for a full-size reproduction. While some of the original prints are too delicate to rescan, in this case, OHS was kind enough to go back to the original 1860s print and make a new scan. The result was an astounding 13,436-pixel-wide file that allowed us to present the Watkins view in its mesmerizing, 22-inch wide original size. (See comparison detail samples at right.)

We encountered a different problem at the opposite size extreme, such as with stereographs, magic lantern slides, and small-format prints. For these smaller images, viewing a one-to-one reproduction presents challenges in a gallery setting. (Imagine three or four people trying to gather around a photograph just three and a half inches square and mounted on a wall.) Our solution was to create two versions of most of these photographs, one at the original size and one enlarged that could be more easily examined for content. This is where scan resolution became problematic, as these enlargements are three times the size of the originals. While the files we had were sufficiently large to print at this size, doing so emphasized flaws and defects on the original prints. Mike Froio, our fine arts printer for *After Promontory*, proposed an intriguing solution: printing on a paper with a bit of “tooth” to it. Using a thick, textured paper designed for etching made these artefacts largely disappear. (See example at top right.)

### Archival collaboration

One of the strengths of the Center’s exhibit program comes from its reliance on several image sources. There are two main strengths to this approach. First, we were able to create versions of the exhibit that could be tailored to different regions through collaboration with venue-specific archives. Second, we were able to include a broad array of images, to tell better the expansive story of the transcontinentals.

A prime example of the first case is our upcoming exhibit at the Brigham Young University Museum of Art, from March 29 to October 5, 2019. To accompany this staging, BYU asked if they could include a selection of their own original prints from Utah photographers such as Charles Savage and George Anderson, a request we were overjoyed to accommodate. We created a new section focused on the role of the transcontinentals in Utah, then worked with BYU’s curatorial staff to select images from their collection. The mix of locally-sourced, original prints with the Center’s travelling reproductions creates new opportunities. For venues, it means access to photographs that supply a broader context for their collections, while for the Center, it means the ability to tailor the larger exhibit program to specific regional audiences. The result is an even stronger showing for both the local material and the Center’s travelling exhibition prints. (See above, page 3, and pages 58-59.)

While such partnerships with local venues are exciting, the greater strength of using reproductions from multiple sources is that doing so enables us to tell broader stories. The exhibit puts materials from



George Edward Anderson, *Section Foreman at Price [Utah]*; Joe Barton, 1902, gelatin dry plate, 5 x 7 in. L. Tom Perry Special Collections Brigham Young University

Detail views, top to bottom:

Andrew J. Russell  
*Dale Creek Bridge, Ape Rock #104*, circa 1869  
Oakland Museum of California  
Note: image darkened here to emphasize the paper texture

Carleton E. Watkins  
*Cape Horn near Celilo [Oregon], Columbia River (Mammoth 456)*, 1867  
Oregon Historical Society  
The scan made for the exhibit print (upper image) is nearly ten times higher in resolution than the original scan (lower)





partner archives, the Center's holdings, and working artists into conversation with each other, and we are able to present narratives that might not be accessible through the holdings of any single source.

For example, consider the three photographs on these pages. All three depict the West as seen quite literally through the railroad, but each displays a different sensibility towards that landscape. The first image (upper left) is a John Karl Hillers photograph of the Canyon Diablo bridge in Arizona, from the archives of the United States Geological Survey (USGS). Probably made just after 1900 for the USGS, Hillers shows us the ancient, dry ravine spanned by the rectilinear form of a steel viaduct built by the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad. The rhythmic geometry of the structure's deck trusses is almost alien. The second image (opposite), made by Wallace W. Abbey in 1970 and sourced from the Center's archival holdings, shows two freight trains on California's Cajon Pass. Abbey had worked in the marketing department at several railroads, and his photo shows the deceptively easy pictorialism of advertising art. The most up-to-date of diesel locomotives charge through the barren but beautiful landscape, and this picture, in turn, is framed inside the open doors of a boxcar of another train traveling in the opposite direction. The west that we see, quite literally framed through the train, is itself a landscape where industry is aesthetically in harmony with the earth. The last image (lower left) is Mark Ruwedel's *Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific #30*, part of his "Westward the Course of Empire" series. Here, the former Northern Pacific (NP) intersects with the Milwaukee Road in Lind, Washington, yet in this 2005 photograph, the latter railroad is gone. Where the Milwaukee once ran are only the abutments and piers of a now dismantled viaduct, and though the ex-NP route below appears intact, there is no train in the picture, no romantic actor as stage hero.

On their own, each photograph is interesting, even beautiful, but taken together, they show us far more. If Abbey shows us industry in harmony with nature, then at first glance, Ruwedel's image almost returns to the perspective of Hillers, to a framing of the railroad as an imposition upon the landscape. Yet it goes further. We see not the vital new architecture





of the ambitious railroad, but the mixed legacy of the transcontinental era, one which gives us the scars of abandonment and failure, as well as the manicured geometry of active rail infrastructure.

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Beholding Ruwedel's photograph, we might or might not agree with his critique, yet his image is in many ways representative of a larger trend in the photography of the railroad in the west. The photographers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to view the railroad as a vast power, transforming the nation at every scale and constructing the future. By contrast, late twentieth century photographers seem to tap into the narratives of postwar advertising culture, depicting the railroad as natural, beautiful, belonging in the landscape. They recapitulate the visual logic of the illustrations and promotional photographs produced ad infinitum by the railroads when those companies depended upon passenger train ridership. As the twentieth century slipped into

the twenty-first, however, a new photographic aesthetic has emerged, one in which the railroad is out of the past, an anachronism, irrespective of its actual economic vitality.

This shift in perspective is only made visible through combination and comparison. The Hillers, Abbey, and Ruwedel photographs, standing alone, can tell us a great deal, but it is fascinating how much more we can learn by placing them into conversation with each other. This is true of the larger exhibit as well, and is one of the great strengths of our approach to *After Promontory*. By going beyond the confines of any one archival collection, we can explore a narrative that is more encompassing and complex, and that opens up our consideration of the transcontinental project beyond simple celebration or condemnation. Curating this project has been an honor, and I sincerely hope that those of you who visit one of our several exhibits will find in these images, as I do, a prompt for curiosity and wonder. •

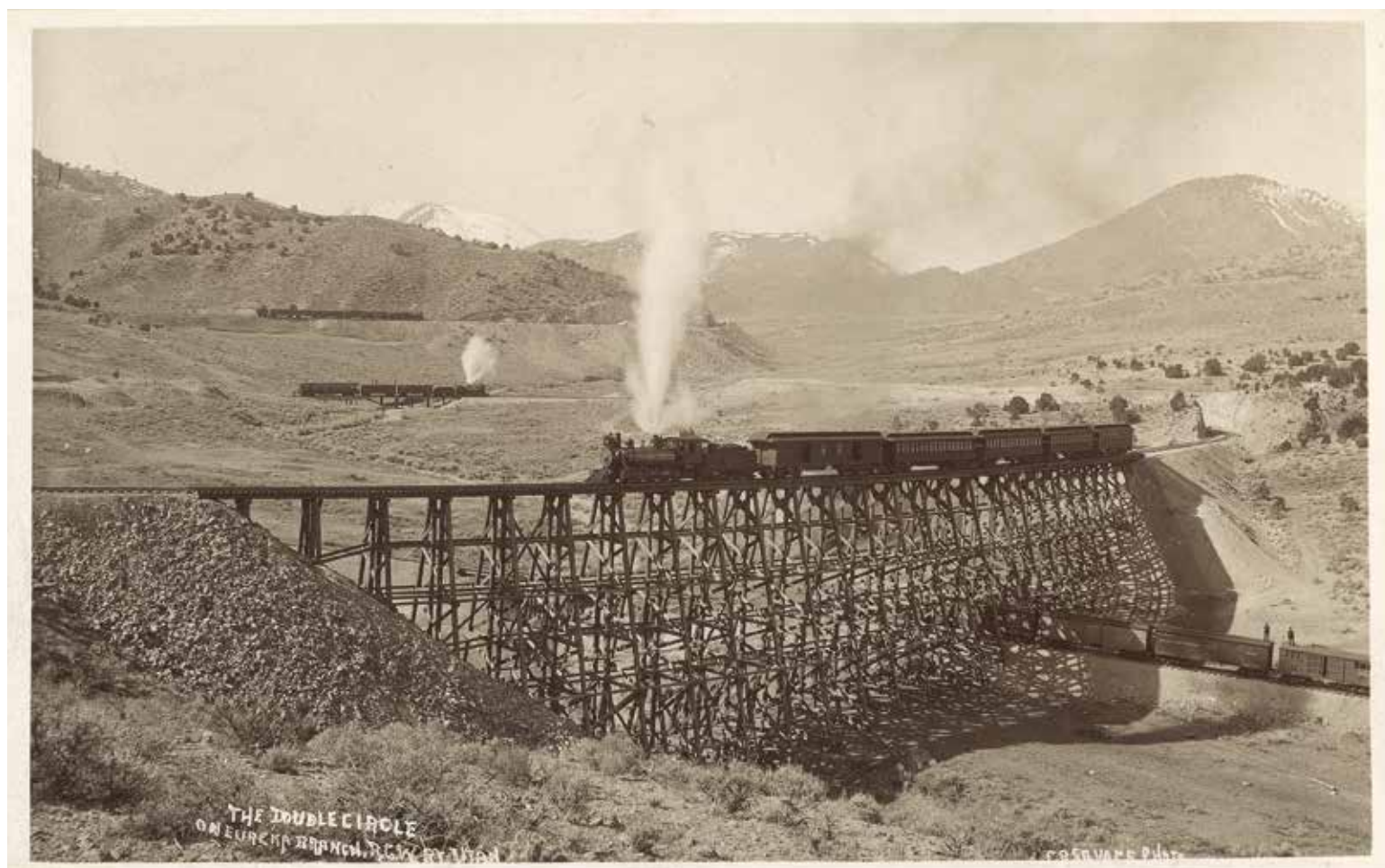
Wallace W. Abbey  
*AT&SF freight train on Cajon Pass, California, 1970*  
Center for Railroad Photography & Art

Opposite:

Mark Ruwedel  
*Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific #30, 2005*  
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Luisotti

John Karl Hillers  
*Santa Fe Railroad bridge over Canyon Diablo, Coconino County, Arizona, circa 1900*  
United States Geological Survey









Opposite, above:  
Charles Roscoe Savage  
*Tunnel Three Weber Canon,*  
*U.P.Ry., circa 1869,*  
*Albumen, 5 5/16 x 8 1/2 in.*  
L. Tom Perry Special Collections  
Brigham Young University

Opposite, below:  
Charles Roscoe Savage  
*The Double Circle on Eureka*  
*Branch, R.G.W.Ry., Utah, circa*  
*1890, Albumen, 5 x 8 1/2 in.*  
L. Tom Perry Special Collections  
Brigham Young University

Above:  
George Edward Anderson  
*Stanley Gardner [Crew],*  
*circa 1900, gelatin dry plate*  
*negative, 8 x 10 in.*  
L. Tom Perry Special Collections  
Brigham Young University