

RAILCAR STUDIOS

IN THIS EDITION OF OTA, we're taking a dive into the latest addition to the John Gruber Collection: 228 19th century photographs that Gruber collected over the course of his life. What drew John to these images wasn't necessarily their provenance nor what they depict—locomotives and other typical rail subjects aren't really featured in any of the photographs. Instead, Gruber collected these images because they were taken by a very particular type of photographer: the kind that worked out of railcars.

Railcar studios: information and works

Active from 1858 through 1920, traveling railroad photographers took their cameras, chemicals, and backdrops on the road, set up shop in specially outfitted railcars, and brought photography to the masses along the nascent U.S. rail network. In 1885, the *St. Louis Photographer Journal* introduced this phenomenon to its readers by proclaiming, "We have our palace, dining, sleeping, and parlor cars. Now we have our Palace Studio Car." Railcar studios weren't just a novelty—they were a business, a mobile solution for photographers to meet demand in rapidly growing railroad towns, frontier settlements, and anywhere else a train could take them.

Trading frequently in portraiture, traveling rail photographers offered customers their pick of the popular photographic formats of the period. Depending on the decade, portrait formats would have typically included tintypes, cartes de visite (CdV), and cabinet cards. These were valuable keepsakes for customers—and, for the most rural, a rare chance to have their photograph taken. But portraits were also great publicity for the studios, as the verso of each featured their logo. As studio imprints varied over time and by proprietor, they provide today's researchers with vital clues to help date photographs and identify their makers.

Studio car photographers also vended landscapes and other pictorial scenes in the form of stereographs. This format consists of two nearly identical photographs or photomechanical prints mounted side-by-side to produce the illusion of a single three-dimensional image when viewed through a stereoscope or viewer. Disseminated to the public by individual photographers as well as large publishing firms, stereographs were collected by many middle-class families in the late 19th century. In a time when casual travel was less common, many could only experience new locales through the wonder of the stereoscope. For photographers who

traveled by rail, this was the perfect scenario; they could shoot stereographs along various routes and market them to isolated communities along the railroad.

Gruber's interest and expertise

All of these formats are represented at the Center thanks to John Gruber's curatorial acumen and intellectual curiosity. According to John's records, he built the small collection piece-by-piece, purchasing most of the images on eBay. While we don't know the specifics about when he first became interested in railcar studios, we do know that they were a continuing preoccupation for many years. Gruber published five articles about the topic between 1990 and 2009, often drawing on his personal collection for examples and images. Further, metadata from Gruber's electronic files indicate that he continued his research long after his last publication on the topic; several documents from John's computer have a last modified date of 2017, just a year before he passed away.

A further examination of Gruber's computer documents reveals what Jordan Craig (the collection's processing archivist) and I first suspected when we tried and failed to find research sources on railcar studios: John was pretty much the authority on the topic, and he had the research files to prove it. Over his years of collecting, he maintained files dedicated to each studio neatly arranged by topic and railroad. From what I know of John's organizational habits from working with his negatives, I suspect Bonnie Gruber, his widow, had a hand in the arrangement of his electronic files. Nevertheless, the sheer volume of digitized newspaper clippings; research inquiries to collecting institutions; and correspondence with scholars, image vendors, and photographers' descendants that accumulated on John's computer is impressive. A journalist at heart, John chased every lead and followed every thread; he was relentless in piecing together the stories of railroad studio cars.

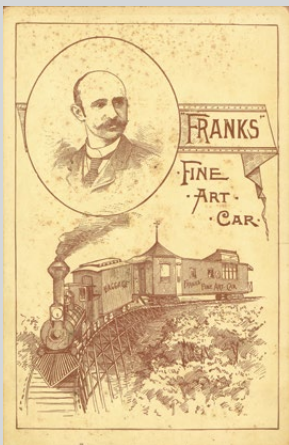
As Gruber's research files grew, he also became a resource for others interested in the topic. One prime example: in the early 2000s, he corresponded with author Beverly Adam who wrote one of the few existing books to feature a traveling railroad photographer. Published in 2005, *She Rode the Rails* tells the story of Mary Jane Wyatt, a woman who operated her own traveling studio across Nebraska on the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad. It's a neat story and based on historical research and events—however, it's a work of fiction. It really only

ARTICLE

Adrienne Evans

PHOTOGRAPHS

CRP&A Collection of
John E. Gruber





underscores the fact that if one is looking for a reliable, nonfiction deep dive into traveling studio cars, the best source is John Gruber and his research.

Types of Railcar Studio Operators

Throughout his years of publishing about traveling railroad photographers, Gruber was evasive about strictly defining their practices and main characteristics as a group. His writing would instead focus on specific studios and photographers. That's likely because an authoritative reference that specifically addresses these railroad photographers hasn't been written; info is sparse, the photographs are hard to find, and documentation is idiosyncratic to the photographers and railroads involved in each operation.

The exact details of how most studio railcars operated have been lost to history, however, some were certainly privately owned cars that housed independent and/or family-run studios. One such operation was the Jorns & Harrod Palace Car, which traveled between towns in Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky—or Arkansas (sources differ on that detail)—in the 1890s. Beyond Gruber's research files, the best source of information for this studio is the Indiana Historical Society, which holds around sixty photographs produced by Fredrick W. Jorns and William L. Harrod, who ran the photo car as well as a stationary studio headquartered in Girard, Illinois.

We actually have two Jorns & Harrod images in the collection, one of which accompanies this article. In a 2006 story for *Trains* magazine, Gruber estimated that at least 200 operators like Jorns & Harrod ran on North American railroads from 1860 to 1910.

In addition to these family-managed businesses, traveling photographers working directly for the railroads were also active during this period. In these operations, it seems that transportation as well as a photo car was often provided by the railroad, and the images shot during the photographer's travels generally benefitted the railroads' publicity efforts. There are numerous examples of these company men, many of whom probably sound familiar: William H. Rau with the Pennsylvania and Lehigh Valley, and Henry B. Peabody for the Boston & Maine, for instance.

One represented in this collection is Wisconsin's own Henry Hamilton "H.H." Bennett of Kilbourn City (now Wisconsin Dells). Bennett was, for a time, considered the official photographer of the Milwaukee Road (then the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul), photographing several points of interest in Wisconsin and along the Upper Mississippi River on behalf of the railroad in the 1880s. Then in 1889, the Wisconsin Central Railroad commissioned him, along with Charles Brainard of Milwaukee, to produce a tourist guide for the line. Wisconsin Central provided the pair with a

J. A. Ennor's Palace Car, a.k.a. Ennor's Electric Tassergraph Railway Studio, circa 1890. This is the only photograph in the collection that depicts a railcar studio. Ennor is visible on the sled wearing a big fur coat. Gruber-SC-02-42-01

Opposite: Many cabinet cards from the collection feature wonderfully illustrated versos, such as this one from Frank's Fine Art Car. Gruber-SC-02-11-01

specially outfitted private car, which, as Gruber noted in a 1990 article for the *Mid-Continent Railway Gazette*, was really just a coach with some seats removed.

Then there's kind of a third, potentially debatable category of traveling railroad photographer that I've conceptualized on my own: photographers who were somewhat in-between the more independent, family-based businessmen and the company men. F. Jay Haynes, for instance, styled himself as the "official photographer" of the Northern Pacific, but he was not a salaried employee nor did the railroad provide him with a photo car. Rather, Haynes privately owned his car, and the Northern Pacific transported it on their tracks at a favorable mileage fee in exchange for publicity photographs. Haynes cleverly retained the negatives for all of his images, so whenever the Palace Studio Car would visit a town, he or his employees could sell the duplicate stereographs alongside their portrait services.

Collection highlights

With more than 100 creators represented in the collection, it's impossible to feature them all in this brief article. However, Gruber, the savvy collector that he was, did scoop up pieces by some rather big names as he built the collection, and we can't resist sharing some of them here. For instance, the collection includes two by photographers noted for their documentation of the first transcontinental railroad: Andrew J. Russell and Charles R. Savage. Arguably the most well-known photographer of the first transcon, Russell was the official photographer for the UP throughout 1868 and is credited with the famous "Champagne Photo" from the Golden Spike Ceremony. Savage also photographed the ceremony, although his image is considered less iconic than the Russell photograph.

The collection also includes a curiosity that involves the third photographer present at the golden spike ceremony, Alfred A. Hart, as well as photography luminary Carleton Watkins. When I first encountered a stereograph published under Watkins's imprint in the collection, I initially thought it was one of the famed western photographer's images. After some research, I learned that Watkins actually acquired Hart's Central Pacific negatives in 1870 and then published them under his own imprint and name. One can actually find an exact duplicate of our Watkins stereograph published under Hart's imprint on the Huntington Library's digital collections portal.

The Gruber Collection also contains cabinet cards and CdVs produced by one of the most storied railcar studios: the Union Pacific Railroad Photograph Car. With photographer John B. Silvis at the helm from 1870 to 1892, the UP Photo Car—a colorfully painted caboose crowned by a pair of antlers—traveled all along the UP with occasional excursions on the Central Pacific, Utah Central, and Denver Pacific Railroads. After Silvis retired from the car, it was briefly in the hands of Charles Tate before W.A. Bradley took over around 1893. He continued as the proprietor of the car until at least 1898.

To my knowledge, there are relatively few surviving examples of J.B. Silvis' work that are available for viewing at public archives and libraries today. The Denver Public Library holds a dozen stereoviews, and the Central Pacific Railroad Museum displays several examples on its website, though the physical photographs are mostly owned by private collectors. It's to Gruber's credit that we have four Silvis portraits as well as four cabinet cards by Bradley, one of Silvis's successors, in the collection.

Further Information

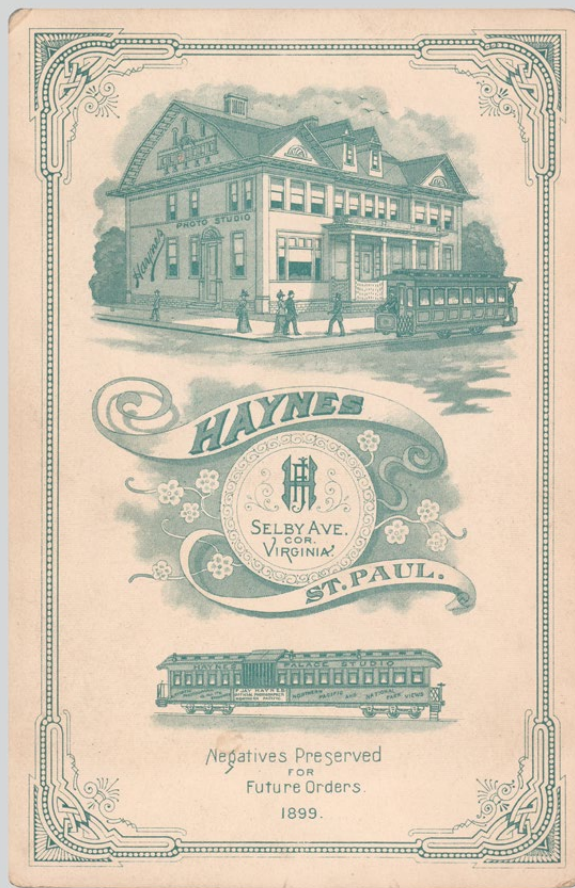
As John wrote in *Railroad History* in 2001, "Railroad photo cars, and the people who staffed them, are elusive creatures." With that said, we've still been able to string together a few details based on John's research and a few outside sources. So, for anyone interested in further reading and research on the topic, I have some recommendations.

First, I'd be remiss (and a poor self-promoter) if I didn't mention the Center's members-only presentation, "Rolling Studios of the John Gruber Collection," that Jordan and I hosted back in February. It's a more detailed look at the Center's railcar studio holdings than I've been able to provide in this article. Center members can reach out to our general info account to request a link to the presentation recording. I should also note that the entire collection has been digitized and is available for viewing on our digital collections portal: <https://railphoto.historyit.com>

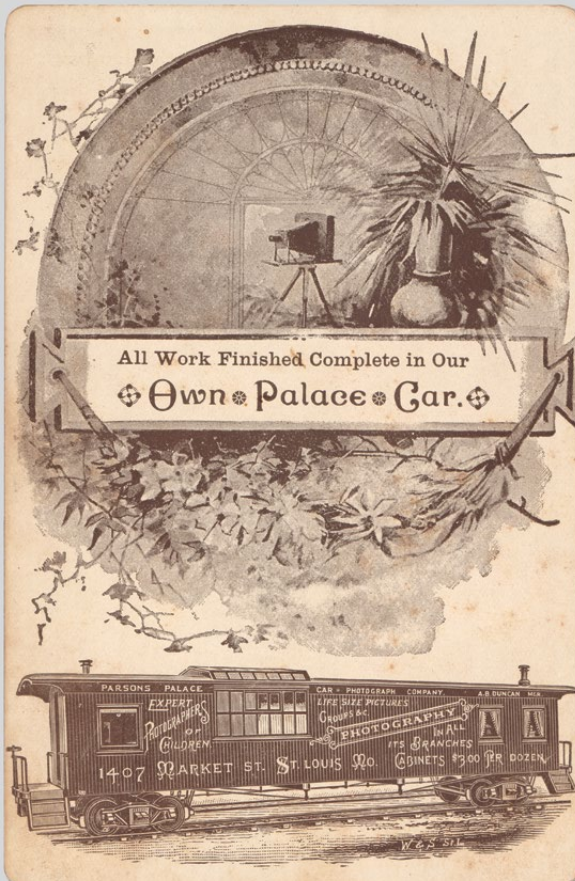
In addition, when published resources are scant, it's helpful to go back to primary sources via an archive. Several collecting institutions hold materials relevant to traveling photographers and rail photo cars. For instance, in preparation for our presentation, Jordan and I consulted information and/or sourced images from the following institutions: Library of Congress, Wisconsin Historical Society, Indiana



A cartes de visite (CdV) created by John Silvis on the Union Pacific Railroad Photo Car. Based on the imprint, we've estimated the creation date of this portrait to be around 1870, at the beginning of Silvis' tenure as proprietor of the photo car. Gruber-SC-02-04-04



This row: A cabinet card by F. Jay Haynes's studio, dated 1899. The imprint on the reverse side includes illustrations of the photography studio building and rail car studio. Gruber-SC-03-04-02



Far left: A cabinet card of a man identified on the verso as Jim Hyden by Jorns & Harrod, circa 1890. Gruber-SC-03-32-01

Left: Another wonderfully illustrated verso of a cabinet card, this one produced by the Parsons Palace Car Photo Company of St. Louis. Gruber-SC-03-34-02B

Historical Society, Montana Historical Society, Denver Public Library Special Collections, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, and Princeton University Special Collections.

Finally, I've found the following sources are great starting points for research inquiries on the topic:

Adam, Beverly S., and M. J. Wyatt. *She Rode the Rails*. New York: iUniverse, 2005.

Brown, Robert O. *Collector's Guide to 19th Century U.S. traveling photographers*. Forest Grove, OR: Brown-Spath & Associates, 2002.

Gruber, John. "All Aboard! Say, 'Cheese!'" *Trains*, June 2006, 40-41.

Gruber, John. "Glass Roofs and Dungeons." *Locomotive & Railway Preservation*, July-August 1996, 22-28.

Gruber, John. "Mystery Photo Cars." *Railroad History*, no. 184 (Spring 2001): 110-3.

Gruber, John. "Rolling Studios: Company Photographers Tour in Photo Cars." *Mid-Continent Railway Gazette* 23, no. 1 (1990): 12-13.

Gruber, John. "Traveling Businesses." *Railroad Heritage*, no. 21 (2009): 15.

Mautz, Carl. *Biographies of Western Photographers: A reference guide to photographers working in the 19th century American West*. Nevada City, CA: Carl Mautz Publishing, 2018.

McIntyre, Lee. "A Visit to the Chaudet Photo Car." *Photographs, Pistols & Parasols*, November 25, 2024. <https://p3photographers.net/a-visit-to-the-chaudet-photo-car/>

Nolan, Edward W. *Northern Pacific Views: The Railroad Photography of E. Jay Haynes, 1876-1905*. Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1983.

Rau, William Herman, John C. Van Horne, and Eileen E. Drelick. *Traveling the Pennsylvania Railroad: The photographs of William H. Rau*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press in cooperation with the Library Company of Philadelphia, 2002.

Swackhamer, Barry A. "J. B. Silvis, the Union Pacific's Nomadic Photographer." *Journal of the West* 22, no. 2 (April 1994).

Railroad Heritage Visual Archive updates

In April, most of our collections staff attended the annual Midwest Archives Conference in Minneapolis. Set over the course of three days, the conference gave us the opportunity to connect with old colleagues and new, attend workshops and panel discussions, and visit local repositories. A highlight for me was touring the archives and collections of the Walker Art Center, a modern contemporary art museum and one of the few surviving community art centers established by the Works Progress Administration under the New Deal.

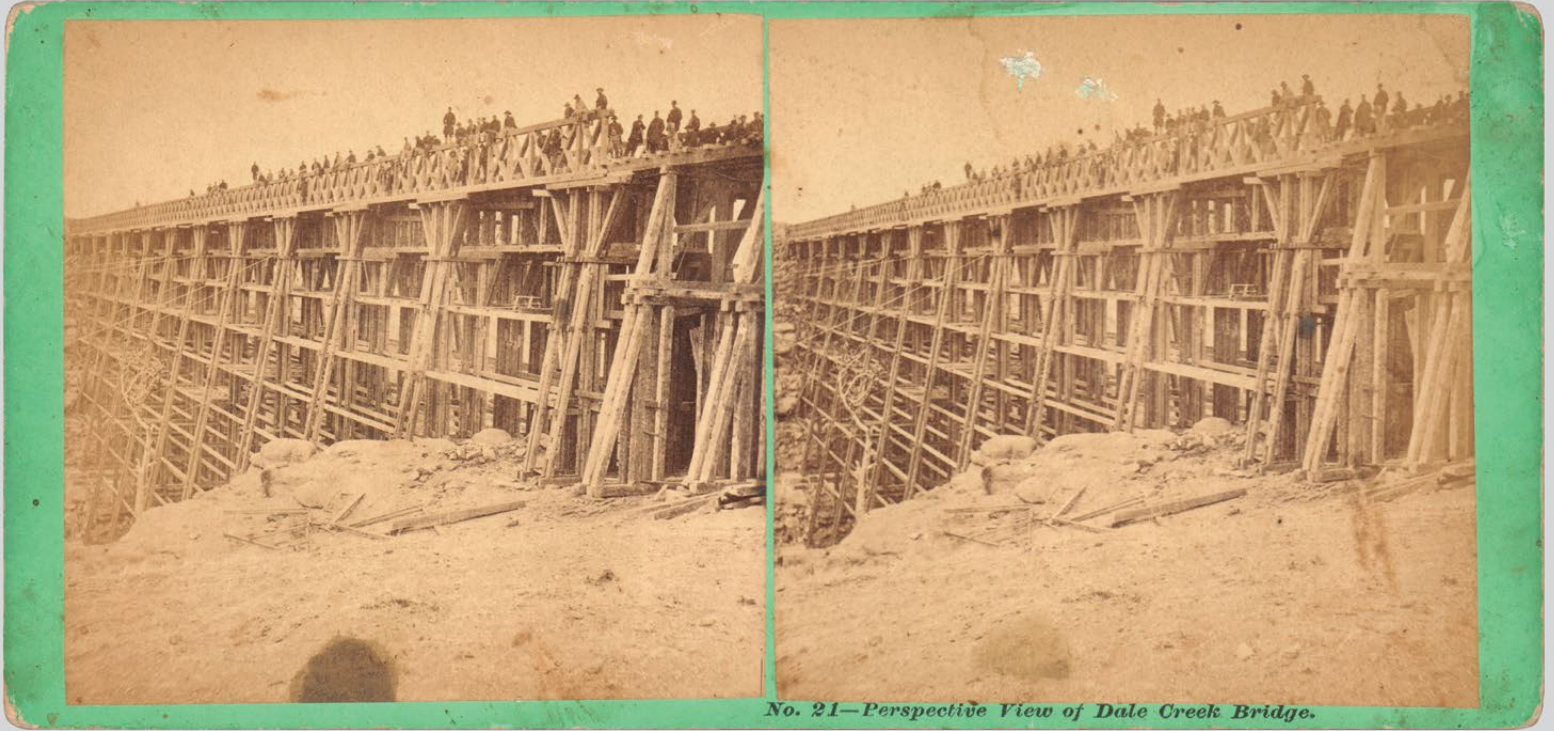
At our Monroe Street office in Madison, processing archivist Natalie Krecek is completing clean-up work on Jim Shaughnessy's Delaware & Hudson images—the largest series of his negatives. She anticipates finishing the negatives in June, when it's on to Shaughnessy's slides in July. Digital projects archivist Jordan Craig continues to shore up the Center's digital infrastructure with an eye toward developing a processing model for born-digital images. Jordan has also begun processing the Karl Zimmerman Collection in earnest—she's currently reviewing previously completed processing work and corresponding with Karl to fill metadata gaps in the collection.

At our archives on South Park Street, reference and processing archivist Gil Taylor continues his excellent work with the Stan Kistler Collection. He's completed approximately sixty-five percent of Kistler's slides. The collection is currently arranged chronologically, and he's already progressed as far as Stan's images from the 2000s. Associate archivist Heather Sonntag is about at the half-way point with her processing work on the Richard Steinheimer and Shirley Burman Collection. She's recently unearthed a poignant series on the last days of Southern Pacific's Battle Mountain depot, shot by Steinheimer and Burman in the mid-1980s. •

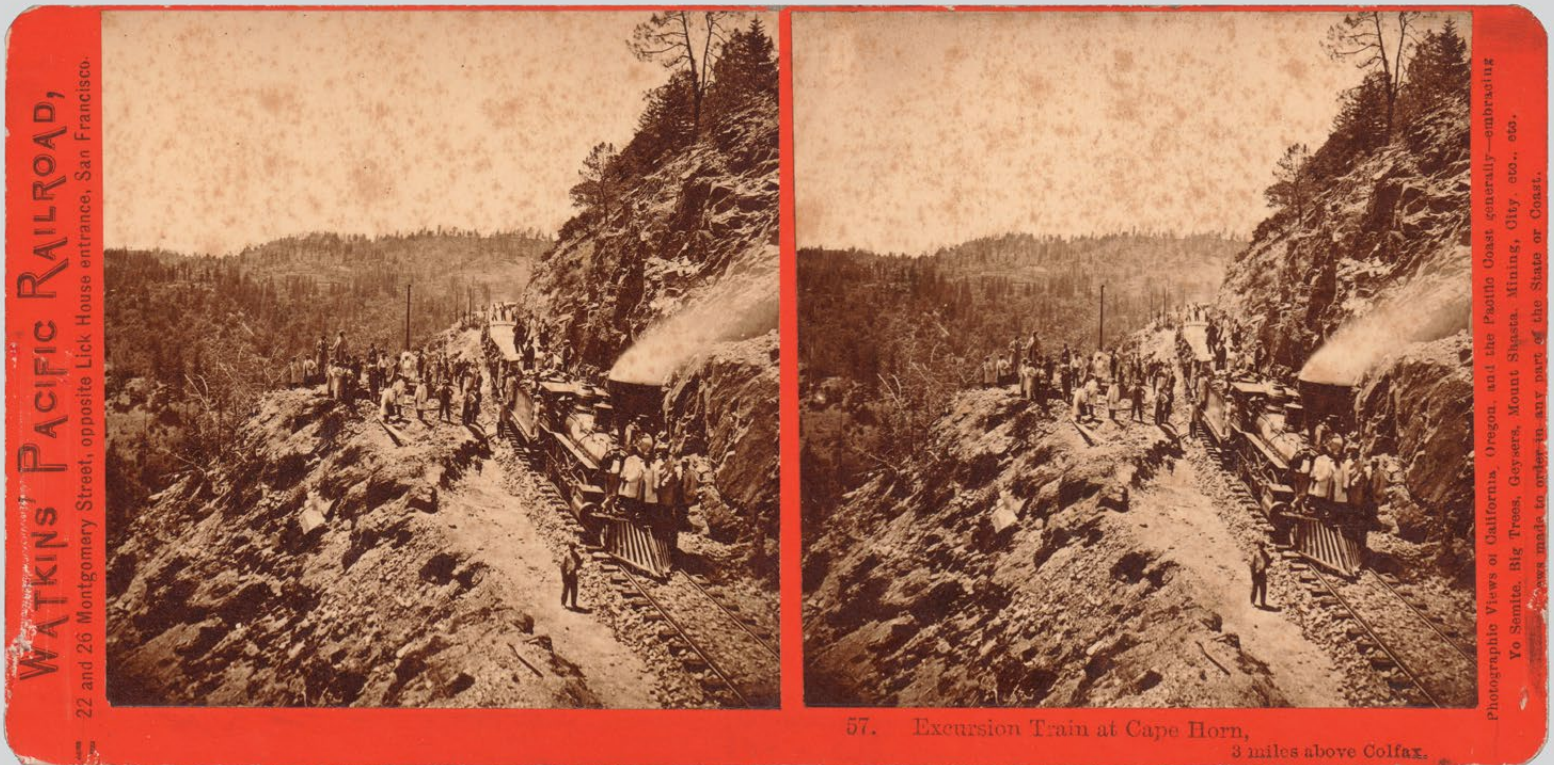
Opposite, above: Andrew J. Russell's stereoview of the construction of Dale Creek Crossing, which was completed in 1868 in what was then southeastern Wyoming Territory. Gruber-SC-01-06-02

Opposite, below: Circa 1865 stereoview of Cape Horn, California, by Alfred A. Hart, but published under Carleton Watkins's imprint. Gruber-SC-01-06-03

Collection	Processing Status
Jim Shaughnessy	Negatives 98% complete; slides begin in July
John Gruber	Negatives complete; slides to commence in 2025
Henry Posner III	Odyssey posting in progress
Steinheimer / Burman	In progress, ~45% complete
Ronald C. Hill	Odyssey posting in progress
Karl Zimmermann	Recommended; 20% of images onsite complete
Stan Kistler	In progress, ~65% complete
Keith Bryant	Estimated start: fall 2025



No. 21—Perspective View of Dale Creek Bridge.



WATKINS' PACIFIC RAILROAD,
22 and 26 Montgomery Street, opposite Lick House entrance, San Francisco.

57. Excursion Train at Cape Horn,
3 miles above Colfax.

Photographic Views of California, Oregon, and the Pacific Coast generally—embracing
Yo Semite, Big Trees, Geysers, Mount Shasta, Mining, City etc., etc.
Views made in order to any part of the State or Coast.