

A conversation with
Ken Verdoia,
producer of
"Promontory"

Ken Verdoia is the Senior Producer for Public Affairs with KUED-TV. The recipient of more than 100 regional, national and international awards for journalistic and program excellence, his documentaries examining little known chapters of western history have proven to be some of the most popular programs produced locally for public television. The recipient of the Governor's Award from the Utah Humanities Council for career achievement, PROMONTORY is Ken's 20th documentary for public television.

After a year in production, what is your strongest personal reaction to the story of the transcontinental railroad as told in PROMONTORY?

First is the overwhelming sense of how little I knew-how little the average American knows-about one of the most important moments in the development of the West.

For most of us, the transcontinental railroad is little more than two images: A.J. Russell's great photograph of the two locomotives meeting at Promontory Summit on May 10, 1869, and the oft-told story of the driving of the golden spike. But, just beyond those two images is an entirely different saga of an incredible national enterprise and its enormous impact on the Utah Territory. Discovering, unearthing that little-known story is what brought PROMONTORY to life.

The opening scenes of PROMONTORY seem to be a direct reference to statements made about Salt Lake City and Utah hosting the 2002 Winter Olympics. Do you see a parallel between the transcontinental railroad and the Olympics?

Absolutely. Not in the nature of the event, but in the way each of the events was promoted to the general population, the promises that were made by leading figures of Utah and the forecasts of benefits that were going to reach the people of Utah. Back in 1867 and 1868, Brigham Young was a forceful advocate for the railroad. In the Salt Lake Tabernacle he quite literally said, "The World is Welcome Here!" He forecast that people would come to Utah, admire the unique nature of local communities, and want to stay and be part of the culture. He said the railroad would result in a huge financial windfall for Utah, and that the benefits would reach every household. When a few wondered if outside influences would shape or alter local communities, Young assured people that development would be on Utah's terms. Young was confident that Utah would be able to extract all of the benefits of the event, and suffer few consequences.

Strikingly similar statements were made in connection with Utah's bid to host the 2002 Winter Olympic Games. So, by looking at the story of the Golden Spike, we are asking ourselves: "What does history teach us?"

Promontory is the first television documentary to look at these promises and assumptions, and match them against the reality that immediately followed completion of the transcontinental railroad. These are powerful lessons that are still relevant 130 years later.

The completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 is generally considered one of the West's great moments. Do you disagree?

The completion of the railroad from East to West was an extraordinary moment in the development of the western United States. It encouraged the nation's westward migration and solidified ours as "one nation" from coast-to-coast, contributing to the country's political development.

Unfortunately, the sheer scope of the achievement has caused many to forget or lose sight of the cost of the achievement. As a result, the completion of the transcontinental railroad has become something of a mythic event of golden spikes and delirious crowds. Such an image is only partially accurate. If we ignore the human cost of building the railroad and ignore the painful realities that followed the golden promises, we are in danger of building our future on fairy tales of the past.

Our intent in Promontory is not to dismantle the achievement of completing the railroad. Our intent is to help the people of the West understand what took place behind the scenes of construction, and how those acts had a powerful impact on the men and women who called Utah home in the 1860s and '70s.

Help us understand Brigham Young's role in the completion of the railroad.

There have been some terrific histories written of the transcontinental railroad. Virtually every one of them relegates Brigham Young and the "Mormon" people to relative insignificance.

I disagree with that portrayal. The Utah Territory-and by extension, Brigham Young-was the critical meeting place between the competing Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroad companies in 1869. Just by sheer location, Utah would have a central role in the most feverish time of the railroad competition. But, beyond location, both rail lines were looking for additional workers to drive their track forward. Utah offered the only population center in close proximity to the path of the railroad, so it was the sole source of labor for the final stage of construction.

Theoretically, Brigham Young could have frustrated or even done damage to either of the rail lines' interests, if he had chosen to do so. Instead, he worked as an ally to both, and advanced the work of the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific. Without that "Mormon Alliance" the final chapter of construction would have been very, very different.

But that cooperation failed to pay off for Brigham Young.

It is dangerous to ever use the word "naive" in describing Brigham Young. He was a shrewd negotiator and a commanding leader. However, in dealing with the entrepreneurs masterminding the construction of the railroad, Young was trusting of their integrity. This may signal one of Young's rare weaknesses, which was a lack of "big business" acumen. He accepted verbal assurances of payments. He accepted verbal renegotiations of terms. Apart from his original contract with the Union Pacific, he had very little in writing-especially as rail leaders started throwing around figures in the frenetic final months of construction.

While the railroad's side of the business dealings has been very well documented, notably in David Bain's "Empire Express," there has been relatively little written about Utah's perspective. We spent weeks in the LDS Church Archives reviewing Brigham Young's 1869-70 correspondence with the Union Pacific and Central Pacific when it became clear that they had no intention of honoring the payments that Brigham thought had been guaranteed. At first, the tone is almost apologetic as he

inquires about late payments. But, by the line's completion, he sounds positively stunned that "great men of a great enterprise" would not be honoring their promises.

At the same time, Young is barraged with letters from church members demanding payment for their work. The letter writers hold Brigham Young personally responsible for payment. Eventually he must tell these men, who sacrificed so much in his name, that the money is not coming.

It is true that Young's vision of the railroad as bringing economic development to Utah would come to fruition. And it is true that Young negotiated a partial settlement that provided him the hardware to build the Utah Central Railroad, linking Salt Lake City with the transcontinental line. But for more than three years he had to deal with the economic devastation visited upon his people by the refusal of the railroad companies to honor their agreements.

So, in one sense, the transcontinental railroad represents a number of broken promises.

But the betrayal goes much deeper into the American society of the 1860s and 1870s. Substantial acts of bribery and corruption took place as a means of advancing federal financial and land support for construction of the transcontinental railroad. Financial skullduggery enabled rail companies to form shell corporations to add an additional layer of profit for shareholders.

Apologists for the corruption say "that's just the way things were done back then," as if to indicate that soliciting and accepting bribes to betray public trust is a tolerable consequence of the public benefit of a transcontinental railroad. That sort of Machiavellian civics lesson-that a desired end will always justify the means-should never find a tolerant audience in this nation.

Were there impacts on Utah beyond the financial impact of unpaid bills?

Actually, the more lasting impact on Utah had less to do with the unpaid bills than it did with dramatic change in Utah's population and connection to the nation.

Brigham Young forecast that the railroad would do three things. First, it would take Utah products out to the world for sale and economic benefit. Second, it would make it easier for Latter Day Saints to emigrate to their Zion in the Utah Territory. Third, it would allow "reasonable" people to come to Utah and fall in love with the Saints.

In reality, during the first 10 years of the railroad's existence more "products" came in to Utah than were ever shipped out by Utah. That had a profound impact on the control of the local economy, giving a greater share of commerce to "outsiders." What did leave Utah in great quantities was ore, a mineral combination that brought thousands of non-Mormon laborers to Utah.

A large number of Latter Day Saints used the rail lines to make a far less hazardous crossing of the North American continent. But in the first 10 years of the railroad, an equal number of non-Mormon passengers took the rail line to Utah. This influx swells the non-LDS local population from only about two percent in 1860 to approximately 12 percent in 1875. That is a 600 percent increase that begins to have an incredible influence on local society. Competing newspapers, new political parties, outside religious denominations and public expressions of dissent toward LDS authority begin to flourish in the territory.

The railroad ends the isolation that had shielded the Utah Territory for more than 20 years. Before the railroad, Utah visitors were almost exclusively "passing through" on the difficult overland trek to California. But as a trip that once lasted months now took a few days, a stream of observers, politicians and journalists start making their way to the American West, stopping in what is quizzically viewed as a religious utopia managed by Brigham Young. Many of these visitors begin writing articles or making speeches critical of society in the Utah Territory. They attacked the practice of plural marriage and the theocratic nature of Utah. Soon, the 1870s were inundated with stories-many fanciful-about the unique society in Utah. This leads to new, powerful, coercive federal laws aimed at destroying church authority. This climate of "clamping down"-in reality, persecuting-the LDS Church continued well into the 1890s.

Of the three primary 1868 predictions made by Brigham Young about the impact of the railroad, none materialized in a fashion consistent with his optimism. Utah was, in fact, changed forever by the railroad. And not in a fashion that any reading of the words of Brigham Young would indicate was entirely welcome.

Did you visit any locations during the production of the program that were memorable?

There are many places where you get a powerful sense of the commitment and energy it took to build the transcontinental railroad.

A great place to start is at the Golden Spike National Historic Site outside of Brigham City. Their reproductions of steam locomotives of the era are wonderful to watch in action. They also have superb guides and restoration experts who can answer virtually any question about the transcontinental line or locomotives of the 1860s.

From the Utah-Nevada line to the Sierras, Interstate-80 follows the original path of the transcontinental railroad. There are some exceptions that are worth a side trip, like the Pallisades area along the Humboldt River. The State of California has preserved some excellent spots in the Sierras near Lake Tahoe and Donner Lake that allow you to take short hikes to explore tunnels drilled by Chinese laborers.

In Utah, the transcontinental railroad's original track enters from the west approximately 50 miles north of Wendover. You have to take Nevada Road 233 near Ely, if you want to more closely follow the track. You can follow Utah SR 30 to Rosette and Park Valley, then follow the graded roadway south to the north shore of the Great Salt Lake. This leads you to Kelton, Locomotive Springs and Monument-each an important stop in the final chapter of the Central Pacific's construction. Beautiful area, too!

From the east, the transcontinental railroad lines closely parallel contemporary Interstate-80 starting near Green River, Wyoming. The current Union Pacific line runs in the area. If you follow I-80 you can pull out at the Wahsatch exit in Utah. Not much to see now, but once-upon-a-time it was a pretty wild "hell on wheels" town during railroad construction. Take Interstate-84 toward Ogden, and you will continue to follow the old transcontinental line. A fascinating spot along the way is "Devil's Slide", which shows you the type of geology that Mormon rail workers had to deal with as they carved a grade through Echo and Weber Canyons.

Interstate-84 will eventually take you to Interstate-15. If you have time, visit the Utah State Railroad Museum located in the historic Union Pacific railroad depot in Ogden. Back on I-15, follow the highway north until you reach Brigham City, then take SR 13 west. You are right on the original

railroad grade. While the town has changed dramatically, a stop in Corinne will introduce you to a chapter of little-known Utah history. As you head toward Promontory, make sure you check out the "Big Fill" site, and read the descriptive signs provided by the National Park Service.