

One hundred years ago July 2, President Abraham Lincoln approved an Act of Congress which both created the Northern Pacific Railroad and climaxed more than 75 years of efforts to open the Northwest to settlement and economic development.

Thomas Jefferson, who originated the Lewis and Clark Expedition, was the earliest advocate of expansion to the Pacific Northwest, but the means of accomplishing it was not realized until Lincoln signed the Northern Pacific charter act in 1864. Thus, the railroad became both an end and the means to a greater end.

Actual construction of the road was begun in 1870 at Thomson Junction, some 30 miles from Duluth, Minn. A mid-February groundbreaking ceremony satisfied the terms of the charter, and early that June grading crews were put to work shaping the roadbed. Tracks advanced rapidly across Minnesota and Dakota and up the Pacific Coast from the Columbia river to Puget Sound.

By September 18, 1873, more than 530 miles of track had been laid. The end of track lay at Bismarck, on the banks of the Missouri, which defined the line between advancing civilization and a diminishing frontier. For more than five years, civilization and the railroad marked time there, as the East became mired in depression and the West erupted with the last great Indian battles.

After a financial reorganization, wrought by Frederick Billings, fifth NP president, the company resumed construction in 1879. However, by mid-1881, only 230 additional miles of road had been built. The stage was set for the appearance of Henry Villard, the German immigrant who parlayed 20 borrowed dollars into a fortune within 25 years after his arrival from Bavaria in 1853.

Villard's success in two short years with the Northern Pacific borders on the incredible; almost 1,100 miles of main line and 540 miles of branch railroad were built under his aggressive but skillful management. Before the summer of 1883 was over, he had accomplished more than what six previous NP presidents had in almost 17 years.



To witness the triumphant completion of the first northern transcontinental railroad at Gold Creek, Mont. on September 8, 1883, Villard put on the biggest party the country had ever seen. His guest list included the names of ex-President Grant, the British Minister, L. Sackville West, the German Minister, Baron von Eisendecker, U. S. Cabinet officials, senators, congressmen, governors and ex-governors, and numerous generals, politicians, railroad executives and journalists. And virtually every city, village and hamlet on the line participated in festivities which preceded and followed the last Spike ceremonies.

The real significance of the Northern Pacific completion emerged within seven years after the driving of the last spike. By July 3, 1890, the entire tier of northwest territories had sufficient population to join the Union.

In the decade which followed the Gold Creek event, Northern Pacific fulfilled its charter's provisions with the boring of Stampede tunnel through the Cascade range in Washington to bring its line to the shores of Puget Sound. During this period, too, the company's sprawling network of branch lines was expanded, all NP locomotives were converted to coal operation, and many shops and terminal facilities were built. Then, as one of the victims of the panic of 1893, the road went into a receivership that lasted for three years.

In its second major reorganization in 20 years, the system was acquired by the new Northern Pacific Railway company, the same company which serves the still-growing Northwest in 1964. The new management, backed by J. P. Morgan, placed the railroad on a sound financial basis, improved transportation services, and broadened operations through imaginative use of the land grant and its resources. Much of this program is in evidence today.

Northwest travelers were first introduced to the North Coast Limited on April 29, 1900, which makes it the oldest "name train" west of the Mississippi. A year later, the Northern Pacific, jointly with the Great Northern, purchased almost all of the outstanding common stock of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy railroad.



And between 1905 and 1909, the two lines built the Spokane, Portland and Seattle, which serves large areas of Washington and Oregon.

Later developments include the organizing in 1932 of a highway subsidiary, the Northern Pacific Transport company, expansion and refinement of agricultural, industrial, mineral and forestry development programs, the establishment of an oil development department and continuous progress in improvement of roadway, yards, equipment, communications and services.

In 1864, the Northern Pacific set out to conquer a wilderness. Slowly but surely the frontier was pushed back and, with the passing of time, railroad construction camps became the great cities of the Northwest, nearly all of which are along the NP main line. For it was but natural and inevitable that the distribution and marketing centers of this vast territory would develop along the favored route of the first of the northern transcontinentals.

Today, under Robert S. Macfarlane, its twentieth president, the railway's 6,900-mile network of track provides a vital transportation lifeline for the seven Northwest states and two Canadian provinces it serves. The Northern Pacific, which played such a dominant role in the opening and rapid settlement of the Northwest frontier, continues to play an important part in the further development and progress of the American Northwest.