

Aftermath Of The Railroad

HENRY GEORGE



In 1868, a year before the overland railroad was completed, this article, under the title "What the Railroad Will Bring Us," appeared in the OVERLAND MONTHLY. It was reprinted twenty-five years later in the San Francisco EXAMINER with the heading "A Remarkable Prophecy."

Upon the plains this season railroad building is progressing with a rapidity never known before. Two companies, in their struggle for the enormous bounty offered by the Government, are shortening the distance between the lines of rail at the rate of from seven to nine miles per day—almost as fast as the ox teams which furnished the primitive method of conveyance across the continent could travel.

Though as a piece of engineering the building of this road may not deserve the superlative terms in which, with American proneness to exaggerate, it is frequently spoken of, yet, when the full effects of its completion are considered, it seems the "greatest work of the age," indeed. Even the Suez canal, which will almost change the front of Europe and divert the course of commerce of half the world, is, in this view, not to be compared with it, for this railroad will not merely open a new route across the continent, but it will be the means of converting a wilderness into a populous empire in less time than many of the cathedrals and palaces in Europe were built, and in unlocking treasure vaults which will flood the world with the precious metals.

* * * *

What is the railroad to do for us—this railroad that we have looked for, hoped for, prayed for so long?

The sharpest sense of Americans—the keen sense of gain which certainly does not lose its keenness in our bracing air—is the first to realize what is coming with our railroads. All over the state land is appreciated; fortunes are being made in a day by buying and parceling out Spanish ranches; the government surveyors and reg-

istrar are busy; speculators are grappling the public domain by the hundreds of thousands of acres, while for miles in every direction around San Francisco ground is being laid off into homestead lots. The spirit of speculation doubles, trebles, quadruples the past growth of the city in its calculations, and then discounts the results, confident that there still remains a margin. And it is not far wrong. The new era will be one of great material prosperity, if material prosperity means more people, more houses, more farms and mines, more factories and ships. Calculations based on the future growth of San Francisco can hardly be wild.

* * * *

The new era into which our state is about entering—or, perhaps, to speak more correctly, has already entered—is, without doubt, an era of steady, rapid and substantial growth. Yet we cannot hope to escape the great law of compensation which exacts some loss for every gain. And as there are but few of us who, could we but retrace our lives, retaining the knowledge that we have gained would pass from childhood into youth and from youth into manhood, with unmixed feelings, so we imagine that if the genius of California, whom we picture on the shield of our state, were really a sentient being, she would not look forward now entirely without regret. The California of the new era will be greater, richer, more powerful than the California of the past; but will she be still the same California whom her adopted children, gathered from all climes, love better than their own motherlands; from which all who have lived within her bounds are proud to hail; to which all who have known her long to return? She will have more people; but among those people will there be so large a proportion of full, true men? She will have more wealth; but will it be so evenly distributed?

The California of the future, the California of the new era, will be a better country for some classes than the California of the present, and so, too, it must be a worse country for others.

Which of these classes will be the largest? Are there more mill owners or factory operators in Lancashire? More brown-stone mansions than tenement-rooms in New York?

It is certain that the tendency of the new era, of the more dense population and more thorough development of the wealth of the state, will be to reduction both of the rate of interest and the rate of wages, particularly the latter. This tendency may not, probably will not, be shown immediately, but it will be before long, and that powerfully, unless balanced and counteracted by other influences which we are not now considering, which do not yet appear, and which it is probable will not appear for some time.

As a general rule, for those who have not, it will make it more difficult to get. What, for instance, does the rise in land mean? Several things, but certainly and prominently this, that it will be harder in future for a poor man to get a homestead lot. And so in San Francisco the rise in building lots means it will be harder for a poor man to get a house and lot for himself, or that he will have to yield more of his earnings for rent; means a crowding of the poorer classes together; and signifies courts, slums, tenement-houses, squalor and vice.

The locomotive is a great centralizer; it kills little towns and builds up cities, and in the same way kills little businesses and builds up great ones. We have had comparatively but few rich men, but the process is going on; nor is it worth while to shut our eyes to the effect of this concentration of wealth. One millionaire involves the existence of just so many poor men. It is the great tree and the saplings over again. We need not look far from the palace to find the hovel. When liveries appear look out for barefooted children.

* * * *

While we have had no very rich class, we have had no really poor class. There have been enough "dead brokes," and how many Californians are there who have not gone through that experience? But there never was a better country to be "broke" in, and where almost every man, even the most successful, had been in the same position, it did not involve the humiliation and loss of hope which attaches to utter poverty in older and more settled communities.

However, we shall have some real social gains with some that are only apparent. We shall

have fewer shooting and stabbing affrays but we will probably have something worse from which hitherto we have been exempt, thank God—the low, brutal, cowardly rowdyism of Eastern cities. We shall hear less of highway robberies in the mountains, but more, perhaps of pick-pockets, burglars and sneak-thieves.

That we can look forward to any political improvement is, to say the least, doubtful. In the growth of large corporations and other special interests there is an element of great danger. Of these great corporations and interests we shall have many. Look, for instance, at the Central Pacific railway as it will be, with a line running to Salt Lake, controlling more capital and employing more men than any of the great Eastern railroads, who manage legislatures as they manage their workshops, and name governors, senators and judges almost as they name their own engineers and clerks! Can we rely upon sufficient intelligence, independence and virtue among the many to resist the political effects of the concentration of great wealth in the hands of a few?

* * *

A great change is coming over our state. We should not prevent it if we could, and could not if we would, but we can view it in all its bearings—look at the dark as well as the bright side and endeavor to hasten that which is good and retard or prevent that which is bad. A great state is forming; let us see to it that its foundations are laid firm and true.

And as California becomes populous and rich, let us not forget that the character of the people counts for more than their numbers; that the distribution of wealth is even a more important matter than its production. Let us not imagine ourselves in a fool's paradise, where the golden apples will drop into our mouths; let us not think that after the stormy seas and head gales of all the ages our ship has at last struck the trade winds of time. The future of our state, of our nation, of our race, looks fair and bright; perhaps the future looked so to the philosophers who once sat in the porches of Athens—to the unremembered men who raised the cities whose ruins lie south of us. Our modern civilization strikes broad and deep and looks high. So did the tower which men once built almost unto heaven.