

**Golden Spike Oral History Project-Lay Report**  
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The Golden Spike Oral History Project was organized to gather significant historical information pertinent to the management and interpretation of Golden Spike National Historic Site. Three informants were chosen because they had important knowledge of life at Promontory Station when it was an active community. Three others had special knowledge of the early efforts to commemorate the Golden Spike Ceremony, the establishment of the national historic site, and the centennial celebration of 1969. Historians Michael Johnson and Robert Sidford conducted the interviews from late May through the end of September, 2003.

Arnold Whitaker, Merlin Larsen, and Doris Larsen all grew up near Promontory Station in the early decades of the twentieth century. Though their relatives in town might have had electricity and running water, life on the dryfarms (unirrigated farms) around Promontory harkened back to the frontier of the 1800s. Children attended a one-room school, transportation and farm work was done with horses, and a round-trip to the store in Brigham City could take as long as a week. While the farms specialized in growing wheat or other small grains, families raised much of their own food. The informants recalled feeding pigs and chickens, collecting eggs, and taking care of milk cows. Promontory farmers raised many horses. Large draft varieties provided power to pull wagons, plows, and farm machinery, and good saddle horses were always marketable. Whitakers raised and sold saddle horses to a buyer for the New York City Police Department, and Larsens often sold horses to traveling sheep outfits and nearby ranchers.

It was a place where very little money was spent and people made their own fun. School programs, ball games, and wild rides on calves and colts provided entertainment. Young people

would do almost anything to scrape together fifty cents to go to a local dance at the schoolhouse. Sometimes there was a band, but often people danced to recorded music from a Victrola. On July 4<sup>th</sup> or July 24<sup>th</sup>, the community got together and might hold a rodeo, have horse races, and roast a steer in a pit bar-b-que. Merlin Larsen recalled that the dances became fewer once people started to buy radios, and they disappeared entirely when television came.

Despite the long distances between farms and the long way to town, Doris Larsen never remembered feeling isolated. She had friends, plenty of food, and plenty of work to do. As a child she dug postholes and hoed weeds in the fields. Her mother prepared big meals for the family and farmhands, often cooking roasts, potatoes and gravy, and some kind of vegetable in season. In addition, it was not unusual for Promontory women to help with the farm work, sometimes driving teams and, in later years, tractors.

John Stewart and Delone Glover were involved with the Golden Spike Association of Box Elder County, its early re-enactments of the Golden Spike Ceremony, and its efforts to get Promontory recognized as a national historic site. Both were personal friends of Berniece Gibbs Anderson, a Corinne newspaper correspondent who made the Golden Spike Ceremony her personal crusade. Stewart took over the annual May 10 celebration for two years in the 1960s when Anderson became despondent, but when momentum increased to have the site designated by Congress, she resumed control.

Congress authorized the funding of the 1969 centennial celebration through sales of a Golden Spike commemorative medallion, and Nathan Mazer of Ogden was placed in charge of the event. Mazer reminisced that one of his most difficult decisions was choosing the cast to re-enact the ceremony. Many people, including some National Park Service personnel, urged Mazer to bring in professional actors. This angered the local association whose members had

been playing the roles for years. To the delight of Stewart, Glover, and the people of Box Elder County, Mazer chose the local re-enactment group. Glover recalled that NPS personnel also criticized the original script by Brigham City native Marie Thorne Jeppson as not being historically accurate. It was revised by NPS historian Andrew Ketterson, but these issues drove a wedge between the local association and the federal employees at the new national historic site. Glover stated that members of the local group were made to feel like we were just a bunch of hicks, at times. The 1969 centennial was remembered as a great success. Johnny Cash, John Wayne, and Utah Governor Calvin Rampton were among the thousands who attended, and the event garnered international publicity.

These interviews provide many other fascinating insights into life at old Promontory, efforts to commemorate the Golden Spike Ceremony, and relationships between the people of Box Elder County and the National Park Service. They document events and issues that were never recorded except in the minds of the participants, and they are an important contribution to the history of Promontory and Golden Spike National Historic Site.