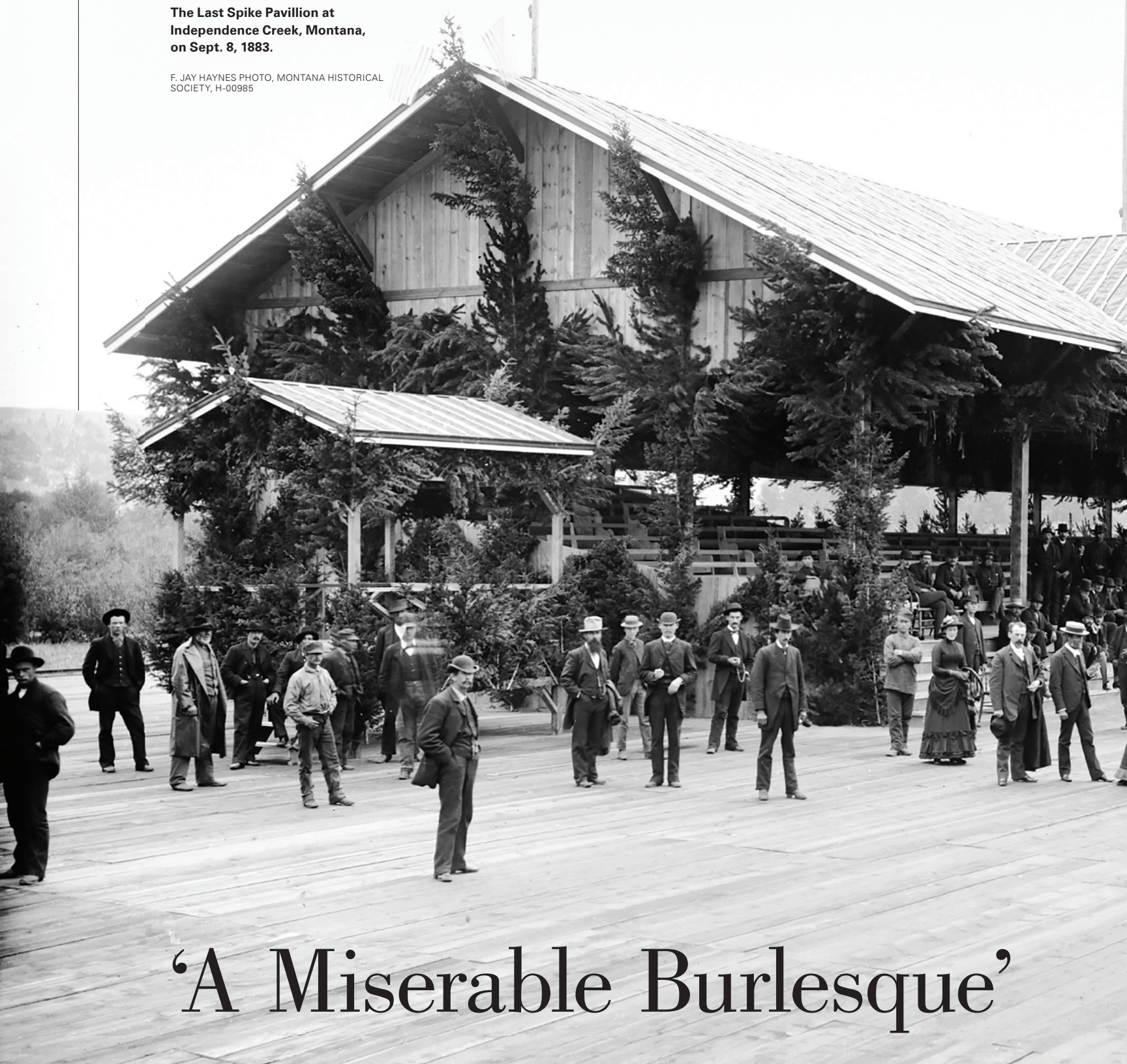


HISTORY

**The Last Spike Pavillion at
Independence Creek, Montana,
on Sept. 8, 1883.**

F. JAY HAYNES PHOTO, MONTANA HISTORICAL
SOCIETY, H-00985



‘A Miserable Burlesque’



The fiasco of Montana's 'golden spike' left the crowds hungry and angry, dignitaries yawning, and railroad stock prices tanking



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Henry Villard's efforts to "boom up" Northern Pacific stock led to his being satirized as a carnival huckster in *Puck* on Sept. 5, 1883.

BY BRENDA WAHLER

AS DRIVERS ZIP ALONG INTERSTATE 90 between Garrison and Phosphate, on their way between Butte and Missoula, few notice a white sign by the railroad tracks. But where Independence Creek meets the Clark Fork, on September 8, 1883, Ulysses S. Grant, Civil War general and former U.S. President, hammered a spike that officially completed the Northern Pacific Railroad's transcontinental line.

Long gone is the 1,000-seat pavilion; the roar of semi-trucks and rattle of freight trains has replaced cannon salvos, band music, and cheers from 3,000 spectators. What remains are news clippings, a few photographs—and a painting completed 20 years later.

At the top of the Montana Capitol's grand staircase is Amédée Joullin's *Driving the Golden Spike*. There, Grant stands nobly, holding a sledgehammer. Near his feet is a rail spike edged with gold. To the right is Henry Villard, president of the railroad. To the left stand former Secretary of State William Evarts and Secretary of the Interior Henry Teller.



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A fanciful and mythic Amédée Joullin painting called *Driving the Golden Spike* hangs in the Montana State Capitol in Helena.

Behind these luminaries are a host of celebrants, with a contingent of Apsáalooke people from the Crow Reservation alongside.

The Northern Pacific (NP) financed the 1903 painting, but corporate propaganda contrasts with reality. The actual event was a fiasco that left a sour taste in the mouth of Montanans. The Virginia City *Madisonian* wrote an extensive account on September 22, 1883, describing it as “a Combination of Triumph and Humiliation.”

For starters, the “golden spike” wasn’t gold. The official “last spike” was rusty iron, claimed to be the first spike driven at Carleton, Minnesota, in 1872. At least 14 people took symbolic swings. As the restless crowd grew weary of watching soft-handed VIPs miss the target to the sound of celebratory cannon fire, they called for Grant. When their hero stepped up, they chanted, “Drive the spike home!” He raised the sledge above his head and, as the *Madisonian* reporter explained, “drove it home like a well-trained hammerman.”

In addition, the railroad was actually completed on August 22, not September 8. Prior to the ceremony, 1,000 feet of track were pulled up then laid back down during the festivities.

Henry Villard was responsible for the event. He took over the NP in 1881 and spared no expense pushing rails from east and west. At the finish, nothing but the grandest celebration would do. To reassure investors and promote the railroad, Villard organized four passenger trains to bring 300 “distinguished” guests west from St. Paul, Minnesota. A fifth train came from Portland, Oregon.

National journalists, embedded with the scrum of railroad executives and foreign

After four planned speakers, Villard opened the floor. Ten more talkers stepped up. The distinguished guests soon were beyond caring, as many were sipping from hip flasks.



F. JAY HAYNES PHOTO, NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY NPG.77.62

Henry Villard, who was behind the last spike fiasco, is pictured at Yellowstone National Park in 1883.

diplomats, rubbed elbows with bankers, minor European nobility, politicians, and scientists. Everyone tired of hearing the same speeches repeated in towns along the line but comforted themselves with the free food and beverages. The *Daily Yellowstone Journal* of Miles City commented on September 23, “Judging from the number of empty beer and champagne bottles lying along the line ... [Villard’s] party must have bought the entire stock of several wholesale establishments.”

It had belatedly dawned on the organizers that some Montanans should attend the completion ceremony. Invitations hastily went out. On September 8, Missoulians caught seats on the Portland train and reached Gold

Creek station at 8:30 a.m., where they were forced to wait before proceeding to Independence Creek—Villard’s train had to arrive first.

Butte, miffed that the NP main line had bypassed them in favor of Helena, still sent 200 people. Many left at 6:30 a.m. on a special train provided by the Utah and Northern, which had a branch line from Butte to the confluence of the Little Blackfoot and the Clark Fork rivers. The junction of the two railroads was named Garrison in honor of Villard’s father-in-law, abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison.

Helena’s finest citizens were summarily ordered to be at the NP depot by 9 a.m. However, they had to follow the special trains. It was a slow process. With the massive tunnel under Mullan Pass unfinished, a temporary bypass required trains to be sent over in four-car segments.

To the dismay of the Helenans, deposited at Independence Creek at 3 p.m., there was no dining car on their train—food and drink enjoyed by the “distinguished” guests of the Villard expedition was not provided to the less distinguished Montanans. Additional spectators arrived via wagons and buggies, but there were no concessions available. Though entertained by the 5th Infantry band from Fort Keogh near Miles City, the hungry crowd grew restless.

As the *Madisonian* explained, Villard made the event “a miserable burlesque.” When the Montanans took what they presumed were their seats in the pavilion, he ordered them out, reserving the entire structure for his 300 special guests, leaving it more than half-empty. Adding insult to injury, a brief light rain prompted him to move the speakers’ stand under the pavilion roof so orators stood with their backs to the majority of the audience, who huddled on the platform, unable to hear most of the speeches.

That said, they didn’t miss much. The *Madisonian*’s reporter explained that the crowd first endured Villard, and then Secretary Evarts, whose “speech wearied most of his hearers.” After four planned speakers, Villard opened the floor. Ten more talkers stepped up. The distinguished guests soon were beyond caring, as many were sipping from hip flasks.

Meanwhile, the hungry and thirsty crowd wanted Grant. Villard declared that the former President would not give a speech, but Grant had better instincts. He took the stand. Turning away from the pavilion and facing the masses on the platform, he gave a speech that the *Madisonian* described as the most enthusiastic “as mortal man never before received on the broad domain of Montana.”



F. JAY HAYNES PHOTO, MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, H-00998

An Apsáalooke delegation from the Crow Indian Reservation attended the last spike ceremony.

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The former general rallied his troops with an impromptu oration, telling them that the railroad would not have been built but for their labor and toil. The crowd cheered every sentence.

Next, 300 workers quickly moved the rails into place and spiked them down. But by then, the sun was dropping, and photographer F. Jay Haynes, assigned to document the proceedings, lacked sufficient light to photograph the main event.

Before driving the last spike, Villard produced a surprise. The Apsáalooke delegation included their second-ranking chief, Itchúua Chíash or Uuwatchiilapish, known to whites as Iron Bull. He handed the last spike to Villard as a “token of surrender of the northwest to the white man and civilization.”

Speaking through an interpreter, Iron Bull said, “There is a meaning in my part of the ceremony, and I understand it. ... The days of my people are almost numbered; already they are dropping off like the rays of sunlight in the western sky.” The translator probably tweaked the speech as it was given, but Iron Bull slipped in an edgy remark: “Who knows,” he said, “but what some race, at present unknown, will make its appearance and ... as the last chief of the pale face nation stands before the conqueror, will he bid him welcome ... with as much sincerity as his red brother welcomes him now?”

Finally, the east and west trains pulled forward in an “Iron Wedding,” touching their cowcatchers in a “kiss” to another roar of cannon fire that concluded the ceremony. But the drama was not over. The distinguished guests retired to their dining cars to celebrate. The other trains were not permitted to leave until the banquet was finished.

Outside, the crowd milled about with no supper. As the sounds and smells of the dining cars echoed into the night, they threatened to burn down the pavilion to stay warm. Villard ordered the soldiers who manned the cannons to stand guard, but they were outnumbered. A quick-thinking railroad official pointed out a pile of unused railroad ties that could be burned. The crowd retreated to campfires, some singing bawdy songs cursing Villard and his distinguished guests.

The festivities concluded about midnight. Villard refused to let the Missoulians hop his trains west so they could go home. But in full rebellion, they hitched rides in the vestibules between cars, on the truss rods underneath, and on top of the coal tenders. The Helena-bound trains left around 1 a.m. The Butte delegation had the Utah and



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The only marker of the Independence Creek site is a weathered sign by the tracks, visible from Interstate 90 if you know where to look.

Northern held for them at Garrison. They reached Deer Lodge at 3 a.m.

Associated Press reports mentioned none of this. Some embedded reporters wrote their accounts ahead of time and telegraphed them out with an embargo date. Two Montana papers flubbed up and released AP stories in the morning papers on September 8—prior to the event they supposedly covered. The sharp-eyed *Butte Miner* noticed and called them out.

Ultimately, Villard’s extravaganza backfired. As bored investors gazed out the windows at endless mountains and prairies, they wired orders to sell NP stock; the price was dropping even as Grant hammered in the final spike. Villard’s cost overruns and financial mismanagement led to his resignation from the Northern Pacific in January 1884.

Today, a wire fence and the Clark Fork River sit between I-90 and the site. Through the underbrush, a white sign pops out, reading “LAST SPIKE” in large letters, “Northern Pacific” in smaller type. But the masses still can’t get there: If one leaves the interstate and crosses a bridge, a locked gate bars access to the right of way. Villard would no doubt approve. A few miles west, an interpretive sign placed by the Montana Department of Transportation behind the toilets at a rest stop describes the event, though with some inaccuracies.

Somehow, it’s the perfect tribute. ■