

construction engineer). Just before completion of the railroad, with his wife in the final days of pregnancy, Earl found a large Promontory cave and moved Anna to their new “home.” (Their daughter) Ella was born in the cave on April 13, 1869 and was in her mother’s arms during the Golden Spike Ceremony on May 10th (GOSP n.d.b 7).

These are a few of the stories of women who worked for the railroad or were married to railroad workers. Each story is different, but each illustrates the many ways that women played a role in the construction of the transcontinental railroad.

Women Associated with the Military

Although numerous photographs of the joining of the rails shows military members present, they inadvertently participated in the Last Spike Ceremony because they happened to be on the train preceding Durant’s. Captain John Charles Currier kept a detailed journal of his travels from the East to the West. Captain Currier was newly married to Nataline B. Smith and they were to be stationed at the Presidio in San Francisco. The original plan was for Captain Currier and his new wife to travel by sea to San Francisco, but then the Army realized that the transcontinental railroad would soon be completed. So Currier received orders to go to Omaha, Nebraska to await the completion of the railroad (Mullaly 2007). The Army had assembled several companies of the 21st Infantry in Omaha for transport across the country on the soon to be completed transcontinental railroad.

On Sunday, May 2, 1869, the 21st Infantry received orders to travel to San Francisco. The detachment consisted of “Cols F, G, H, I & K” and Currier noted three ladies traveling with the group. These women included his wife, Nataline Currier; Mrs. Henry R. Putnam, wife of Captain Putnam; Mrs. John F. Cluley, wife of 2nd Lieutenant Cluley; and Mrs. Ross, wife of 2nd Lieutenant W. J. Ross (Mullaly 2007; History.army 2007). On Friday, May 7th, the party arrived at Echo City where they were told they had to wait, due to a bridge being washed out ahead of them (Mullaly 2007). The following day at noon, Mr. Durant, Vice President of the UP, and officers pulled up alongside the 21st Infantry train. Durant insisted on “taking care of all the ladies” with the 21st Infantry (Mullaly 2007). The officers and their ladies arrived at Promontory on Durrant’s train and witnessed the laying of the last rail. The enlisted soldiers were behind them on a different train. Currier wrote in his journal of the experience. He reported that there were several thousand present and that he and his wife Nattie were:

... permitted to give a stroke upon the hammer. I drove my spike with my sword hilt. The engines then backed about two rods. Our regiment marched up, stood at parade rest while our pictures were being taken (Mullaly 2007).

Military camps of this time period had camp followers including wives of enlisted men, cooks, and laundresses, as well as prostitutes. It could therefore be assumed that there were other women present with the 21st Infantry; however, since this military unit traveled across the