Introduction:
The Varieties of Railroad Antagonism

We live, as it were, in the dawn and blush of the era of railroads; and it may take centuries to round out the full interpretation of them to the slow intelligence of man.

—Reverend Israel Dwinell

... A Highway for Our God, 1869

Think about the iron horse: that marvelous technological triumph that forever changed the American landscape, that "prodigy of labour, wealth, and skill," as Lord Bryce put it.¹ Growing up together in the first decades of the nineteenth century, America and the railroad developed a remarkable friendship. As the nation grew, adding territory and population at a fantastic rate, so did the iron web spun of railroad track. More mileage, trains, and rail companies meant economic growth, commercial diversification, and the capability to tie far-flung American frontiers to commercial and political centers.

Antebellum America, in particular, cannot be fully understood without reference to railroads and the highly charged atmosphere surrounding their construction and operation. Americans clamored for the progress and prosperity that railroads would surely bring—to them and to their communities, regions, and states. Promoters of small lines promised that a ten- or twelve-mile track would revolutionize the commercial fortunes of tiny villages on the outskirts of only slightly larger towns. Others argued that railroads could accomplish what the fragile bonds of nationalism or paper assurances of the Constitution could not; that is, the ever-widening network of railroad tracks would bind North with South, East with West. Thus convinced, villagers pledged support and money to ensure that the railroad would not pass them by. Corporate growth kept pace with the increase in rail mileage: medium-sized rail companies gobbled up smaller lines and were in turn swallowed by emerging business giants.

Such expansion in both the physical and the corporate realm astonished foreign visitors and thrilled Americans.² The exuberance for railroad growth seemed to epitomize the country's youthful and acquisitive spirit. By 1850,
nearly ten thousand miles of railroad track had been laid, and a great transcontinental railroad was being planned. This audacious scheme would push the railroad west to California. Across the Great Plains, through hellish deserts, and over the Rockies and Sierras, the “twin bands of iron” would come to the far western frontier. The nation would gloriously stretch itself full length.

Of course the transcontinental railway fascinated Californians. It was that second of imperial Spanish dreams that nineteenth-century Anglos had “discovered.” First, James Marshall had spied gold in John Sutter’s millrace in 1848; now the famed Northwest Passage had been found, not in some fog-enshrouded seaway but in the parallel lines of railroad tracks. The transcontinental railroad was, as Henry George described it, that “looked for, hoped for, prayed for” development which promised to transform the raw mining and farming society of the Far West into a mature civilization. Californians enthusiastically supported the project and made heroes, if but temporarily, out of the men who masterminded the “progress of the rails” across mountain and desert. And after the railroad’s famed completion in 1869, Californians greeted its arrival with unprecedented celebration.

But excitement about the railroad and accommodation to it were often two very different phenomena. Adaptation to its presence was one of the attendant costs of the transcontinental, indeed any, railroad. The railroad forced individuals to make room for it in their lives. It was more visible and accessible than other technological innovations of the age; it also exuded a certain permanency, demanding that individuals accept the consequences of its fixed existence. Once laid, tracks virtually became part of the landscape. With use and the effects of environment, ties rubbed and scraped their way into ruts, rails dropped down further onto ties, and the earthen bed held fast the track. In the language of railroad engineers, the track became “traffic-tamped.” A corresponding social process occurred as the railroad settled into the everyday rhythms of American communities everywhere. In both subtle and abrupt ways, the railroad changed people’s lives just as surely as it affected the growth and development of their villages and towns. With the railroad’s arrival, the sights and sounds of American life were forever altered.³

Americans—Californian or otherwise—did not adjust to railroads casually, inevitably acquiescing to the changes imparted by invention and innovation. How could they? Instead, the adjustment process was slow, troubling, and often complex. And that difficult process of coming to terms with the railroad—specifically, one massive railroad corporation—is the major concern of this book. For even a brief glimpse back at nine-
teenth-century California reveals the astonishing degree of antagonism directed at the railroad and the railroad corporation. *Railroad Crossing* is about that opposition, about its forms and shapes and meanings.

Why were railroads opposed? An easy answer would be that railroads were fought for every conceivable reason, from the singularly personal to the immensely political and everywhere in between. In fact, the sheer range of what I call railroad opposition is startling. Think about the process of laying railroad tracks across the local landscape of a tiny western village. Many villagers would regard the newly constructed railroad as a rude intruder into once-peaceful surroundings. Like Americans everywhere, nineteenth-century Californians expressed dislike for railroads simply because of such intrusiveness. First came the work crews—ethnic and racial invaders loudly disrupting the local peace in a myriad of fashions. Then came the trains themselves. Giant locomotives belching steam and smoke created an overwhelming physical and sensory presence. Sparks shooting from the rails and trains sometimes started grass fires or burned crops. Roaring, whistling, steaming railroads spoiled the pastoral calm of the countryside and disrupted the routines of walking cities and quiet neighborhoods.  

The railroad was also phenomenally dangerous, as hazardous an invention of everyday use as any in American history. Railroad work crippled countless thousands. Shop or yard foremen in the nineteenth century were said to be able to judge a job applicant's experience by the number of fingers he was missing. No missing fingers meant a greenhorn; a couple of fingers clipped off meant a seasoned vet; too many gone, and the man was so experienced as to become worthless. What is more, horrific train wrecks occurred with frightening regularity, maiming and killing pedestrians and travelers alike. There were any number of things that could go wrong, sending trains careening off tracks and bridges. Worse yet, trains could and did run head-on into each other—"telescoping," as it came to be neatly described in the daily papers, where one train swallowed up the other, passengers included. Less catastrophic accidents—livestock smashed by locomotive cowcatchers, pedestrians run over at unmarked crossings, wagons splintered in town streets—became almost routinized as common occurrences. The railroad rapidly became a familiar intruder in everyday lives, but such familiarity could nonetheless come at high expense.

For many people, the machinery portended the arrival of aggressive American acquisitiveness and commerce. Certainly, for well-to-do Californians of Spanish and Mexican heritage, even for those Anglos who had energetically "Hispanicized" themselves, the iron horse contributed to the decline of a particular way of life. The state's "rancho period" could not
long withstand the onslaught of railroads and all that they represented commercially and culturally. And as if they had not been battered enough by missions and friars and Anglo gold seekers, what remained of California’s Native American population would face further ruin in the railroad-sponsored “next chapter” of the state’s history.6

But the railroad could represent a different sort of intrusion as well, something perhaps even more sinister than the arrival of machined “Progress.” Many a nervous Californian looked on railroad depots as dens of iniquity. Classes, races, and complete strangers mingled uncomfortably at rail stations; children and runaways passed the time, pickpockets and confidence men singled out their next victim among the tourists and immigrants. Prostitutes loitered, gamblers lingered. Each arriving train brought outsiders in: black Pullman car porters, Europeans speaking countless tongues, Chinese, the rare Native American. Even the railroad cars themselves could be viewed as inanimate confederates to crime: they supposedly brought sinister influences into previously insulated communities and provided the criminal element with easy escape.7

In addition to expressing wariness and fear over railroads themselves, Americans distrusted railroad corporations. Adjustment to the railroad’s corporate identity presented different—and often more serious—problems from those posed by the technological, nuts-and-bolts expression of a particular transportation technology. In California, native and newcomer alike had already been introduced to the machinery of railroads by the time the great transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869; but massive railroad corporations were themselves new inventions. For a myriad of reasons, the railroad empire born of the massive transcontinental project elicited several generations’ worth of profound antagonism.8

The Central and Southern Pacific railroad companies, the corporate combination that built the overland railway and presided over most rail operations in the state throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, faced seemingly incessant attack over a forty-year period.9 Angry Californians charged that passenger fares were too high, inhibiting their own travels as well as the state’s ability to attract tourists and settlers from the East. Farmers insisted that oppressive freight rates robbed them of hard-earned profits, while manufacturers in San Francisco demanded higher rates on competing goods imported from Chicago or New York. Few opponents failed to note with resentment the near-monopoly status enjoyed by the corporation.

Countless complaints were made about rail service and the skills of railroad personnel. Trains ran too slow. Trains ran too fast. Tracks, hastily thrown down in the frenzy of construction, were dangerous. Many Cali-
fornians, professional and blue collar alike, denounced the railroad company for importing thousands upon thousands of Chinese laborers to build the overland railroad across the Sierras. Corporate executives, bloated by wealth and greed, proved easy targets, accused of jilting their once-adoring California constituency.\textsuperscript{10} The attacks could be harsh. One fervent critic of Leland Stanford, journalist Arthur McEwen, chastised the Central Pacific official for not recognizing California's dislike of the corporation and its officers. According to McEwen, Stanford remained ignorant of public hostility because he paid "large annual salaries to men whose chief task is to tell him that he is great and good." As for the former governor's political aspirations, McEwen added that Stanford was "better qualified to be a candidate for San Quentin than the Senate."\textsuperscript{11} Others remained convinced that railroad political power, reinforced by steel-strong webs of corruption, blackened the state's image and undermined its republican foundations. Rival entrepreneurs decried the unmitigated evils of monopoly; they charged the railroad with stifling free trade and making economic slaves of the state's population.

Californians offered diverse and often unusual explanations for their anger toward the railroad and the railroad company. A humorous but insightful example is a letter written at the end of the nineteenth century from Bay Area resident George Emerson to Collis P. Huntington of the Southern Pacific. Mr. Emerson knew why he and so many fellow Californians hated the rail corporation. After reviewing decades of opposition, Emerson believed that he had discovered the root of the trouble. The reason was simple: the men who worked for the railroad, especially those in the passenger depots, were incompetent, full of "petty meanness and embecility." And just as the problem sprang from an easily identifiable cause, the solution was correspondingly plain. Emerson advised Huntington, by this time president of the Southern Pacific, to send someone to the rail depots "with a club some time and beat some brains into some of your men."\textsuperscript{12} Presumably then opposition to the railroad would melt away. It is doubtful that Collis Huntington ever followed Emerson's advice.

As Emerson's letter attests, proposed solutions to the "railroad problem" encompassed a wide variety of options. Much depended on how one defined the problem; nineteenth-century political tracts are full of articles on "The Railway Problem," as if there were only one! Some individuals chose purely personal action (like Emerson's letter writing); others lobbied for increased state or federal railroad legislation or regulation. Constitutional amendments and changes in law were proposed. For the sake of principle, civic obligation, or election-year expediency, a politician might refuse to patronize particular railroads.\textsuperscript{13} Some Californians offered more
radical solutions, destroying railroad tracks or blowing up bridges and trestles. Others wrote anti-railroad novels. A few Californians threatened the lives of railroad employees; assassination threats also were made against high-paid railroad officials. Masked gunmen robbed trains—and sometimes were sheltered from the law in the homes of sympathetic citizens. Workers went out on strike. Women’s organizations attacked the railroad corporation’s influence on public affairs. Newspapers adopted unyielding anti-railroad positions. Political parties with anti-railroad platforms sprang up, flowered, and died. Voters elected candidates who said they were opposed to the railroad power. Rival capitalists, displaying their own railroad-hating credentials, built competing railroads to challenge the monopoly of the Central or Southern Pacific. Other Californians took their frustrations to court, looking for compensation for train-killed livestock or resolution of land and labor disputes. 

Although most anti-railroad actions were directed at a particular corporation and not a particular form of transportation, in a few rare instances railroad opponents attacked the physical components of railroading: ties and tracks most often, occasionally depots and trestles. Because “the railroad” existed as a loosely defined common denominator—embracing technology, transportation, and corporate entity all at once—such actions could in effect be both anti-corporate and anti-technological. In other words, the infrequent instances of industrial sabotage may have been (and in California were more likely to be) prompted by animus toward a particular railroad corporation and not toward railroad technology.

Over the course of half a century, from the days of the transcontinental railroad’s impending arrival to the first decade of this century, Californians grappled with the significant problems that, in their view, were created by the presence of the railroad in their lives. Depending on what those in power would tolerate or could withstand, certain forms of opposition became legitimate at specific points in the state’s growth. This book seeks to chronicle these various forms of opposition and to relate them to changes over time in the California of one hundred years ago. It also questions whether there actually was an all-powerful, monolithic railroad corporation or a cohesive railroad opposition.

From the exuberant years of cross-country railroad building to the construction of an explicitly anti-railroad political base in the Progressive gubernatorial campaign of 1910, the issue of railroad opposition helped define the ways in which Californians saw themselves and their state. Like California society itself, railroad opposition evolved; its methods, techniques, and objectives changed over time. These shifts help illuminate important changes in California from the middle of the nineteenth century
through the first decade of the twentieth. Analysis of such change needs always to be placed against the giant canvas of Gilded Age and early-twentieth-century America. For in their interminable wrestling match with the railroad, Californians proved simply that they were—as Lord Bryce suggested—prototypically American: full of contradictions about the roles that technology and industrial capitalism would play, and be allowed to play, in their lives as they looked to the coming of the new century.¹⁸

Unlike Frank Norris, who wanted his classic novel *The Octopus: A Story of California* to “say the last word on the R.R. [railroad] question in California,” I have a more modest goal in mind. The issue, not to mention the literature, is far too complex for this work to approach comprehensiveness. As Hubert Howe Bancroft, the nineteenth-century dean of California history, admitted regarding his study of the impact of railroads on California: “The constant difficulty has been an excess of matter, rather than a lack of material.”¹⁹ That observation rings with even more truth today. A generation after Bancroft did his work, Stuart Daggett titled his study of the Southern Pacific Corporation *Chapters on the History of the Southern Pacific.*²⁰ *Railroad Crossing* is offered in that same spirit: interpretive, thematic chapters that analyze change through an unusual historical prism. Intrinsically interesting in its own right, the story of railroad antagonism and its endless cycles of rhetoric, action, discourse, and behavior can also tell us a great deal about the coming of age of the nation’s most important western state.

In wandering over this fascinating terrain, this book also encounters the chaos of industrial America. This world is both different and strangely familiar, one in which reform battles tradition, political parties square off in real or mock opposition, and lawmakers fret over the limits and reach of legislative control over giant corporations.

First we look at the excitement (and the hype) surrounding the audacious scheme to build a transcontinental railroad west across the nation. What did such a railroad mean? And, more in line with the purposes of this book, what did it mean in particular to California? From the laying of tracks, we turn in chapters 2, 3, and 4 to the years of the railroad’s troubled honeymoon with anxious Californians, a generation’s worth of debate, struggle, even violence—all of which attempted in different ways to define the precise meaning of the railroad in the lives of Californians. Chapter 5 explores the tricky relationship that the press established with the railroad as well as the railroad with the press. This chapter (“Pens as Swords”) also investigates *The Octopus,* a turn-of-the-century best-selling novel that purported to be the last word on the “railroad question” in California.
The book closes with the success of the insurgents within the state's Republican Party, a group of reformers who recognized the political and sheer rhetorical power of railroad bashing and skillfully used that knowledge to seize the governor's mansion in the 1910 state elections.

Before any of this, though, there was a bold and breathtakingly ambitious idea, and it is to that idea that we turn our attention in the chapter that follows.