

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY (MARKS 150th ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIRST TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD WITH TWO CONCURRENT EXHIBITIONS OPENING MARCH 21ST)

- **Mark Ruwedel: *Westward the Course of Empire*** captures photographer Mark Ruwedel's workseries where he documents the physical traces of abandoned or never completed railroads throughout the American and Canadian West
- **Overland to California: Commemorating the Transcontinental Railroad** draws from the California Historical Society's vast archive to consider the railroad's impact on the industry and culture of the state

SAN FRANCISCO, California, February 26, 2019 – One hundred and fifty years ago, the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in North America signaled the closing of the American frontier and the ability to travel from coast to coast quickly and with more ease than ever before. In recognition of this anniversary, the California Historical Society (CHS) presents two simultaneous exhibitions that examine the history of the railroad in California and beyond.

The exhibitions, ***Mark Ruwedel: Westward the Course of Empire*** and ***Overland to California: Commemorating the Transcontinental Railroad***, will be on view at the California Historical Society, located at 678 Mission Street in San Francisco from March 21, 2019 through September 8, 2019. The galleries are open Tuesday through Sunday, 11 am–5 pm. Special events and programming will accompany the exhibitions, including a rarely seen gold spike, which was the last to be driven into the railroad connecting Los Angeles and San Francisco to the East Coast.

In his series ***Westward the Course of Empire*** (1994–2008), photographer Mark Ruwedel documents the physical traces of abandoned or never completed railroads throughout the American and Canadian West. Built in the name of progress as early as one hundred and fifty years ago, these now defunct rail lines are marked by visible alterations to the landscape. Ruwedel catalogues eroding cuts, disconnected wooden trestles, decaying tunnels, and lonely water towers in quietly powerful images that point to the contest between technology and the natural world. Using a large-format view camera, Ruwedel treads the same territory as nineteenth century survey photographers, but his contemporary perspective brings a sense of loss to landscapes once viewed as exploitable resources.

"It is an honor to have my work shown as part of the California Historical Society's exhibition about the first transcontinental railroad and its lasting impact," said Ruwedel. "This will be the largest exhibition of the Westward series which catalogs the remains of the hundreds of railroads built in the West following the completion of the first transcontinental line."

Mark Ruwedel is an artist based in California, currently living in Long Beach. He is represented in museums throughout the world including the J. Paul Getty Museum; Los Angeles County Art Museum; Metropolitan Museum, New York; Yale Art Gallery; National Gallery of Art, Washington; National Gallery of Australia; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Ruwedel recently had a solo show at the Tate Modern in London as well as published his seventh art book. In 2014 he was awarded both a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Scotiabank Photography Award and has been short listed for the Deutsche Borse Prize for 2019.

“Ruwedel’s photographs ask us to consider the imprint of history on the land, even as nature takes its course, gradually erasing human alterations,” says Erin Garcia California Historical Society’s Managing Curator. “Where nineteenth century railroad photographers celebrated the triumph of civilization over what was perceived as hostile land, Ruwedel’s work suggests that the path forward for people and the land we live on is much less certain.”

Overland to California: Commemorating the Transcontinental Railroad draws from the California Historical Society’s vast archival and photographic collections to consider the railroad’s impact on the industry and culture of California. Featuring photographs, stereocards, historical objects, and ephemera, this exhibition explores how the major railroad companies used marketing images to bolster their reputations and promote their lines in a period of rapid growth and social unrest. *Overland to California* will also examine the railroad’s complex labor history, taking into consideration the immigrant populations who built its infrastructure, as well as the scandals surrounding the monopolistic practices of the so-called “Big Four” railroad executives: Leland Stanford, Collis Huntington, Charles Crocker, and Mark Hopkins.

“We might assume that the expansion of the railroads into California was inevitable, or that it was an overwhelmingly popular decision,” says Natalie Pellolio, Assistant Curator at the California Historical Society. “But its construction was highly contentious at the time, and the major railroad companies relied on promotional materials and publicity stunts to help sway public opinion in their favor.”

The exhibition features important archival material from CHS’s permanent collection including a mammoth plate photograph by Carleton Watkins of a helix-shaped stretch of track known as the Tehachapi Loop, as well as a first edition copy of Frank Norris’ 1901 novel, *The Octopus*. Also being exhibited on select viewing days is a 9.25 ounce gold spike, the last to be driven into the railroad that connected Los Angeles and San Francisco on September 5th, 1876, thereby joining Los Angeles to the East Coast. The spike was donated to CHS by an heir of railroad magnate Charles Crocker in 1956. It will be on view during special events throughout the exhibition.

About the California Historical Society

Founded in 1871, the California Historical Society (CHS) is a nonprofit organization with a mission to inspire and empower people to make California’s richly diverse past a meaningful part of their contemporary lives. In 1979 Governor Jerry Brown designated CHS the official historical society of the State of California. Today, CHS enacts its mission with a wide range of library, exhibition, publication, education, and public outreach programs that explore the complex and continuing history of the state and represent the diversity of the California experience, past and present. Our treasured collection—documenting the history of the entire state from the Spanish Era to the present day—is brought to life through these innovative public history projects that expand and diversify our audience and broaden our public impact. Learn more at californiahistoricalsociety.org.

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