

PROMONTORY HILL

North West of Brigham City on past Corinne and into the alkali and slough lands a large promontory protrudes into the north end of the Great Salt Lake. A low mountain range stretches across part of the promontory and is known to the natives as Promontory Hill. It was up in the eastern slope of the mountain that the Union Pacific surveyed the right-of-way and the Irish track crews laid the last portion of the transcontinental railroad from the East, which was joined with the Central Pacific track from the West in a small, circular valley which came to be known as Promontory Summit.

Within a few decades of the "golden spike" union of East and West, the great event was almost forgotten. Little attention was paid to the small monument that was erected to mark the site. When railroad surveyors eventually chose a shorter route across the water and constructed the Lucin Cutoff trestle across the northern part of Great Salt Lake, the old right-of-way was all but abandoned and seldom used except for freighting grain and cattle from the promontory to the markets.

With the introduction of dry land farming, vast parcels of promontory land were put into dry-farm wheat. Clem and his brothers were among the first to homestead several sections of land on the promontory for this purpose. To comply with the provisions of the homestead act, they combined their holdings into one parcel and built a house and outbuildings and dug wells. Over the years the ranch property, as it came to be known in the family, required constant attention which meant frequent and regular trips from Brigham City to the ranch whenever the weather permitted.

A dirt road crossing over and paralleling the old railroad right-of-way at various points wound its way up the slope of Promontory Hill, passing near the sites of one-time tent-town railroad camps with such "awesome names as Last Chance or Dead Man's Gulch. Nothing remained as evidence of the former existence of such places except for an occasional heap of rubble or an unmarked grave hidden in the sage brush.

In the early twenties the trip out and back was usually an all-day project in the old Model-T truck. The road was only partly maintained by the county and frequently found to be in a bad state of disrepair. But, Clem enjoyed getting away for a day, and it was an occasion for the young people to pile in the back with a few sacks of grain and windmill parts.

When they reached the hill they could usually make it all the way up in forward gear, depending on how heavy the load was and how much momentum they could get up on the flat road approach before they started the incline up the slope. On two or three occasions Clem exhausted his supply of "confounds" and "Oh pshaws" and mumbled a few uncomplimentary remarks about Henry Ford. He admitted appreciation for what he called Henry's "hindsight," but couldn't understand the "foresight" of a man who would build a flivver with a more powerful reverse gear than the forward gear. Clem had discovered that when all else failed in trying to get up the hill frontwards, he could turn the Model T around and back it up the rest of the way. He drove in reverse from ~ edge of

doom to the other, but the hand of Providence seemed to be righting the wheel now and then to assure the eventual safe arrival at the top of the dug way. The passengers were actually grateful, under the circumstances, for an excuse to trudge up the hill on their own power during that part of the trip.

The journey back to Brigham City offered more of a challenge to the brakes but required less strain on the engine. After the twists and turns of the dug way had been left behind, there was a straight-road descent off the slope which ended some miles distant at the tracks near the old railroad water tank.

It was widely rumored that old Brother Merrill, founder and owner of a lumber company delighted in driving down the slope in neutral without applying the brakes, to see how often he could coast the entire distance to the tracks. Clem hail disapproved of this and suggested to one of the Merrill boys that if were true it would be the death of the old man for sure. They'd better put a stop to such tom foolery.

During the depression years the small delivery truck used for hauling fruit and general service at the store was sometimes not large enough for some of the loads which had to be hauled to and from the ranch. On one such

occasion Clem and his brother Clarence hired an old truck with its driver to go out for the day to work on the upper windmill. The load out consisted of pipe, and timbers, and the load back of grain and old windmill parts in need of repair.

It was dark before they started back and they moved slowly to the summit under heavy load. At the top of the hill they stopped while Clarence got out of the cab to check the load and to see if Terry, the police dog, was alright riding atop the load. Terry was a noble animal endeared to all the family but especially devoted to Clarence as his constant companion.

As Clarence got back into the cab he said, "it's a beautiful night but I wish we were at the bottom of the hill." After leaving the summit, just beyond the next turn, hidden from sight until the instant of arrival at the spot, the road widened somewhat on the right hand edge of another immediate turn. With the brake shoes hot and smoking the wide curve was negotiated alright, but it was, nonetheless, breathtaking, since there was no barrier of any kind between the outside edge of the dug way and a deep gully.

Beyond that, however, the grande course, skillfully negotiated time and again by Grandpa Merrill with delight and deliberation sans brakes, turned out to be too much for the over laden old truck whose faulty brakes were applied frantically but all to no avail. The truck overturned into a ravine far enough from the road that it was unlikely any passersby would see it in the dark, Indeed, it was unlikely that any cars would even be on such a sparsely traveled road at that time of night.

The three men were trapped in the wreckage, the driver with only painful bruises and minor injuries, but unable to move. The corner support rod of the crumpled cab pinned Clem's wrist into the ground in such a manner that he

could not raise his arm or pull his hand free. His leg 'was like it was on fire near the ankle and the pain was intense to the point of torture, but he remained conscious. Clarence, however, was hurt badly. Part of the load was on top of him and his voice was muffled as he tried to speak to Clem. He drifted in and out of consciousness several times, but in his rational moments was apparently aware of the terminal nature of his injuries.

Clem sensing his brother's despair, kept offering words of encouragement, pleading with him to hold on, assuring him that help would come soon. Twice in the next couple of hours he heard a car pass on the road above. Each time he called out frantically, but no one stopped and the sound of the engine faded away in the distance. Clem prayed out loud so that his words might comfort Clarence.

In the end it was the dog, Terry, who was responsible for bringing the rescuers. He had jumped free of the load as it had overturned. and was not hurt except for a slight limp. At last another car was heard back along the dug way. The dog ran to the road, stood in the middle of it barking and baying until the car stopped. The two trappers, impatient to get back to civilization, were about to ignore the dog and drive on, but out of curiosity they got out and followed Terry to the edge of the road where he was motioning them with his running back and forth. Below in the ravine they could see the faint glimmer of one of the headlights about to expire, but still slightly glowing from out of the wreckage.

At the hospital Doc was able to patch Clem up by tying a severed tendon and casting a badly broken leg. He was carried on a stretcher to his own home by neighbors who had been waiting vigil at the hospital during most of the night. There were weeks of convalescence ahead for him but the greatest pain of all was the loss of his brother Clarence who succumbed in the hospital.

Clem and his younger brother had worked together as partners in business for all of their adult lives. Clarence was more than a brother, he was a dear friend. Aside from the death of his first wife, the loss of Clarence was perhaps the greatest single traumatic experience in a whole lifetime for Clem. When he was informed about the death he wept unashamedly, and after regaining his composure he said, "You know, I feel like David did about Jonathan when he learned of his friend's death, 'thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.' My greatest regret is that "though we've worked side by side all these years, I've let them all slip by without ever telling him that I loved him. My how I wished that I had."