

# THE RALSTON RECORDER

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## WRITING THE RAILS

U. P. employee pens novel on Transcontinental Railroad

By Adam Klinker, Ralston Recorder Editor

For the better part of the last 150 years—since the Golden Spike was driven at Promontory Point, Utah, and the nation was linked, New York to California, by the rails—the Transcontinental Railroad has captured the imaginations of historians, artists and writers.

Adding his name to the tradition is local writer Lawson McDowell who was at Ralston's Baright Public Library last Friday to talk about his new historical novel, "Omaha Gold: A Story of the Transcontinental Railroad."

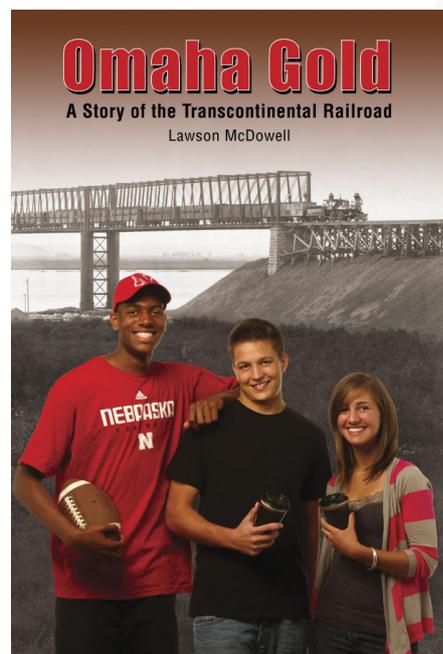
McDowell, a forty-year employee of Union Pacific, the very company created when Lincoln executed the Pacific Railroad Act of 1862, has created a tale surrounding the events of the commencement of the great railroad's construction in July 1865 and the present-day exploits of a teenager who makes a fateful discovery on the banks of the

Missouri River, not far from where the first rails were laid in Omaha.

The book, Lawson said, is meant to commemorate Omaha's role as the launching point of the Transcontinental Railroad.

"The deeper I got into the research for the book, the more I realized how important Omaha was to our country," McDowell said. "The country looked to Omaha as the best hope for the nation. And yet, why are there no historical markers at the site where those first rails went down?"

The site and its environs, just west of Rick's Café Boatyard becomes an important focus for the story, which follow both fictional characters and the imagined prospects of historical figures like U.P.'s tyrannical vice-president, Thomas Clark Durant, Gen. Grenville Dodge, the railroad's chief engineer, and an eccentric promoter



Lawson McDowell's *Omaha Gold*, a novel mixing fact with fiction, history with the present day, in telling a tale of the Transcontinental Railroad.

named, quite serendipitously, George Francis Train.

When the fictional teenager, Steve Brandon, finds the novels titular gold near the site of the first rails, the action begins and weaves a narrative between 2011 and the fictional world McDowell envisions alongside the historical happening of the mid- to late 1860's as Steve tries to get at the root of the discovery.

He is joined by friends from Omaha Central High School and is soon thrown into a tangled web with an unscrupulous set of public officials.

On the other end of the historical spectrum, is Gene Davenport, an honest and mild-mannered assistant to the imperious and greedy Durant.



**McDowell with a historic photograph at Union Pacific Railroad's Dispatching Center in Omaha.**

"I wanted to tell a story that was interesting but also one that shows what a huge event the Transcontinental Railroad was for the nation," McDowell said.

"When I think about the nationwide victory in World War II, that was something that consumed everybody. It was very much the same with the first Transcontinental Railroad. Everyone knew about it.

As McDowell explained, the news of the Union Pacific — working on the railroad from east to west from Omaha—meeting up with the Central Pacific—working west to east out of Sacramento, Calif.—was indeed the first news event carried coast-to-coast as telegraph wire was wound around the Golden Spike and each strike of the hammer driving the final piece into place went out over the Morse code airways.

"It got huge notoriety, to say the least," McDowell said. "This was the event that captured the mind of the nation. People wanted positive news after the Civil War and the Transcontinental Railroad was definitely it."

Several railroad enthusiasts attending McDowell's talk Friday were anxious to hear more about the story told in "Omaha Gold."

Monte Frost of Ralston, who helps his grandson with model railroads, said McDowell has given his readers much to think about in "Omaha Gold".

"It was great," Frost said. "He's very knowledgeable and gave a lot of great information. We follow the railroad and have been to the National Railroad Museum in Wisconsin and Promontory Point. I'm

excited to read the book and see what more he had to say."

Ralstonite Rita Guenette, said she's intrigued by Lincoln's vision. "McDowell has opened a whole new line of study for me. Not only was Lincoln a rail-splitter, but had he lived long enough, he would have been a rail-layer as well.

I thought it was very interesting to see how Abraham Lincoln created the foundations of the Transcontinental Railroad," she said. "I think we forget that in the midst of everything else Lincoln did."



**The Golden Spike Monument located in Council Bluffs, Iowa, just across the Missouri River from Omaha, Nebraska.**