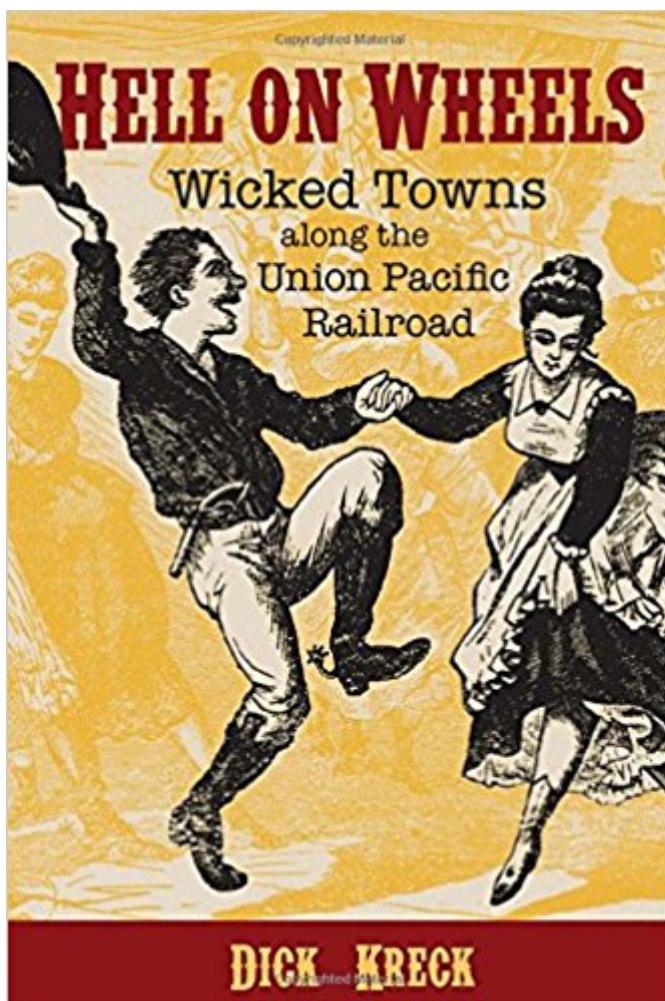


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# Hell On Wheels: Wicked Towns Along The Union Pacific Railroad



## Synopsis

Overnight settlements, better known as "Hell on Wheels," sprang up as the transcontinental railroad crossed Nebraska and Wyoming. They brought opportunity not only for legitimate business but also for gamblers, land speculators, prostitutes, and thugs. Dick Kreck tells their stories along with the heroic individuals who managed, finally, to create permanent towns in the interior West.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this thorough volume, retired Denver Post editor and columnist Kreck (Murder at the Brown Palace) recalls the great westward migration of the mid-1800s and the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad, stretching from Iowa toward Oregon and California. He starts by explaining the travelers' motivations to embark on "a two-thousand-mile, months-long cross-country trudge through unknown land with unknown perils." Then, culling information from personal diaries, Kreck goes deeper into the up and downs of everyday life on audacious journey including overarching narratives of hasty burials and shallow roadside graves. Pioneers, ignorant to the threat of germs, played a noteworthy role in sweeping the cholera pandemic westward of St. Louis. Noteworthy is the way Kreck pays specific attention to contributions made by women on the frontier, who "did almost everything men did, and more." However, the book is strongest when Kreck's veers back to discussing the construction of the transcontinental railroad itself. On a whole, Kreck offers an insightful though straightforward account of his subject. (May)

"Kreck's Hell on Wheels is a tour de force, whose fact-filled narrative is as lively as any television production. And he doesn't let the serious research get in the way of telling an entertaining story." *The Denver Post* "Noteworthy is the way Kreck pays specific attention to contributions made by women on the frontier, who 'did almost everything men did, and more.' However, the book is strongest when Kreck's veers back to discussing the construction of the transcontinental railroad itself." *Publishers Weekly* "With his practiced eye for Western history and the ribald, Dick Kreck has fashioned a romping account of the wicked towns that sprang up and died during the building of the transcontinental railroad in the 1860s." *Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper* "Dick Kreck, a crackerjack storyteller, rail enthusiast and best-selling author, does it here again. No one has better captured those wild railroad construction camps where hard-toiling men reveled in whiskey and women galore." *Tom "Dr. Colorado" Noel* "A refreshing approach. Rather than the ordinary story, Dick Kreck reveals hardships during early methods of overland transportation and how the driving of the Golden Spike improved travel across America." *James L. Ehrnberger*, railroad historian, photographer, and author

Dick Kreck's *Hell on Wheels: Wicked Towns along the Union Pacific Railroad* is a good introduction to an interesting and important part of American history, specifically the opening and settling of the American West, the construction of the Union Pacific railroad that ultimately, when it joined up with the Central Pacific railroad, tied the east and west coasts of the country together, and the "Hell on Wheels" towns that would spring up almost overnight to serve the railroad crews as the railroad made its way westward. The book starts with the pre-railroad period where people were starting to make their way across the prairies and mountains of the western territories, mainly to get to the Pacific coast destinations of California and Oregon but also to the gold discoveries in Colorado and the Mormon settlements in Utah. At first, beginning in the 1840's, people would make the trek by wagon, or more specifically in wagon trains as there was safety in numbers from everything from Indian attacks (which though feared were actually rare) and accidents where assistance would be needed. But travel by wagon was very slow. By the 1850's, overland stage routes were being established which could transport passengers, goods and, importantly, the mail in better time by switching to fresh teams at stations maintained along the way and reducing the amount of time not spent on the move. But things were changing fast and the era of the stagecoach lines only lasted about eight years when it was rendered obsolete by the arrival of the railroads. Kreck does a good job of giving a feel for this earlier time, in everything from what life was like for the people involved as they traveled by wagon and later by stage, the hardships and problems they faced, illustrated

with drawings and later with photographs. The main part of the book though is the coming of the railroad, specifically the Union Pacific railroad, and the phenomenon of towns that would spring up to serve the railroad crews with each expansion westward. The towns were referred to as "Hell on Wheels" because they were largely transitory, built quickly (springing up in a matter of days to be ready to serve) and then able to be knocked down and moved when the rail crews moved on. Most of these towns had a short life, but that didn't stop expectations of the people involved that their town was going to be "the new Chicago" of the future. A few of these towns did survive and became centers for later immigration, but most are long gone now with only an occasional marker to note their brief existence. There were legitimate businesses of course, selling much needed goods, equipment and services to the railroad crews. But the vast majority of the towns were geared to serve the rough-natured hard-working crews who had money to spend with entertainment and diversions, from saloons and dance-halls to bawdy houses and gambling dens. These were rough, mostly lawless towns and life was often dangerous for the unwary. Several chapters are devoted to a number of these towns, following the progress of the railway, noting the mileage points along the way. The photos in these sections are particularly helpful as they offer a very different perspective on what these places were like, as opposed to the popular images we get from movies and TV shows. The last part of the book deals with what traveling by rail was like once the railway was completed. One's level of comfort was usually related to the cost of one's passage, with customers who had the money getting the luxurious Pullman cars built to accommodate them. The only reason I gave this book four stars instead of five was that it didn't go into as much detail as I would have liked. But as an introductory book I think it is well-written, very readable and a good place to start. Highly recommended as a highly readable introduction and overview of the period.

Excellent review of the early settlers' migration to the west, the wagon trains, and particularly fascinating accounts of the women who traveled among them. In one chapter on the Indians, there are a couple historic incidents that were written into Michener's "Centennial" as part of that book's historic fictional story. Kreck weaves in excellent transcontinental railroad history along with his review of the "Hell on Wheels" rolling locations. I'd just finished Stephen Ambrose's book "Nothing Like It In the World" which was exhaustively repetitive episodes of building the transcontinental railroad and not well edited. This book was much more succinct and enjoyable historic reading that is well resourced.

This is an excellent, well-documented history of the Union Pacific, focusing on the towns set up

along the route and their problems, reputations, politics, and impact on the railroad and its workers. It is very readable in an informal style and deals mostly with the peoples and their lifestyles along the line. Unlike other books on the transcontinental railroad, it does not feature Congressional politics or the scandals of the Credit Mobilier. Most of the study follows the line across Nebraska, Wyoming, and Utah with detailed analysis of the construction towns and their populations, an objective view of a very infamous subject.

Exceptionally well written with good attention to detail. Substantial documentation of one of the more earthy aspects of the transcontinental railroad project and how it affected the future culture of the west. A clear window into the mid 19th century mentality of the workers and how they let off steam (pun intended) during their off time.

It's ok. Quick read with a generalized historical account of the first transcontinental railroad. I found it to be lacking in the accounting of the actual "Hell on whell's" towns described in the title. It probably would have been better told with just a single chapter outlining the history of the Transcontinental railroad. Additionally, there is a lot of "implied" activities in the towns which would have been better served with a frank, honest discussion. It's a good read for an early high school student, but I would not use it as an academic source

I learned so much about the settlers and the first railroad workers in this book. I couldn't put it down! I really learned what life was like in the 1800s. I use to work as a conductor for Burlington Northern and my husband works for Union Pacific, so learning about the beginning of the railroad was very important to me. Railroaders are a different breed. They are half crazy and have great work ethics. You have to work without a day off ever. You work all different hours. It's dangerous work riding the engine of a train going across America. It's a love-hate relationship with your job. I loved the book.

As a Colorado native, I've long been a fan of former Denver Post columnist Dick Kreck. His Post pieces and books are consistently informing and entertaining. Hell on Wheels offers a good history and an interesting approach to lesser known details about the construction of the transcontinental railroad. I appreciate the accuracy of his writings--especially because of my familiarity with the Colorado subjects. While not terribly dry, one needs to have an interest in the history to sustain interest in the book. The title is a bit misleading. Yes, the towns along the route of the railroad construction were wild but Kreck does not resort to salacious details. The book is primarily a

pleasant, informing read about a new era of travel in our country, how it was achieved and the resulting changes it brought to the West's interior..

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