

Review from *Railroad History*, Fall-Winter 2012, by Peter A. Hansen

Peering into the 19th Century

Students of the nation's first transcendental railroad - and students of high school history classes - have seen these images before. Did the world really need another compendium of Alfred Hart's Central Pacific photos?

The answer is a resounding "yes" - because if you haven't seen these images in stereo, as the photographer intended, you haven't really seen them at all. To the original 19th century audience, which viewed them on stereopticon slides, these photos were as close as they could get to being there. For people in the 21st century, they're the closest thing to the experience of our forebears in Victorian parlors. In stereo, these pictures took the original audience to a different place, but they take us to a different time. Suddenly, we are 19th century people ourselves, wanting to see these scenes in real life, just as the first audience did.

We have an advantage, though, because we have Wendell Huffman's insightful commentary. Huffman, the curator of history at the Nevada State Railroad Museum, is a student of both Hart and the Central Pacific. The book contains more than 200 photos: Each spread has a stereo image on the right-hand page, while Huffman's extended captions (and a smaller 2D reproduction of the original stereo card) appear on the left. In a photo depicting Chinese laborers laying track, Huffman tells us how iron rail was shaped into curves, and how the process differed from later steel rails. He points out such details as locomotive saddle tanks and pilots on a Sacramento wharf, awaiting assembly after shipment from the east. The commentary isn't limited to the construction period, either: In a well-known photo depicting a track walker inside a snow shed, Huffman tells us of a 1904 employee who encountered a Bengal tiger, escaped from a circus train, inside a similar structure. If anything could make the cold and gloom of the snow sheds worse, that would be it.

The anaglyphs are the work of Howard Goldbaum, associate professor of journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno. Many of the original stereo cards suffered from improper storage, resulting in mildew, water spots, emulsion tears, or other imperfections. Goldbaum has restored the images digitally, and has even converted them to 3D when his source material was only 2D. Stereo glasses are included with the book, tucked into a pouch inside the front cover.

The book also includes an introductory essay by Mead Kibbey, whose personal collection provided many of the stereo cards for the book. Titled "Alfred A. Hart, Artist," Kibbey's essay provides enough biographical detail to help us understand the photographer's background, and how he came to produce such extraordinary images.

This critic's only complaint is that the stereo images aren't bigger. The book has an 8-by-9-inch format, but the stereo views are reproduced at about 5¾ inches square with a wide black border taking up the rest of each right-hand page. Still,

that's just a quibble, especially in light of the book's \$35 price tag. *Waiting for the Cars* is a rare value for readers with an interest in the first transcontinental railroad, Alfred A. Hart, or 19th-century stereo photography. -Peter A. Hansen is editor of *Railroad History*.