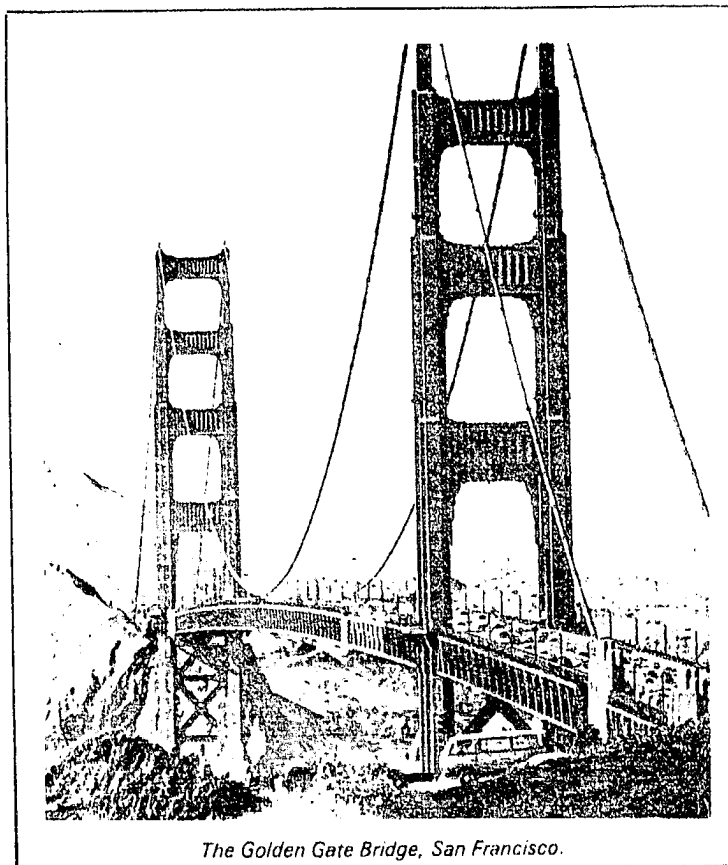


# From the Narrow Gauge to the Southern Pacific Railroad

The author, James McTernan, left  
Clenaghoo, in 1929 and arrived in San  
Francisco at the beginning of the great  
depression. He worked on the railroad  
there for forty-eight years.



*The Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco.*

## Growing Up At Ballinamore

I first saw the light of day December 5, 1911, on twenty two acres of unyielding land a mile and a half from Ballinamore. The land was simply incapable of supporting a family which included four boys and four girls. But, like Irishmen everywhere, we did our best. We tried, but we knew it could not last. We knew that tomorrow must be elsewhere.

I did not relish going to school. I was a bit slow and it was rough. At the boys' school in Ballinamore there were two teachers, Mrs. Travers, who taught 1st, 2nd and 3rd classes, and Mr. McGuire, who taught classes four through seven. I did not get beyond fourth class.

I set my sights for America, the "Land of Opportunity."

A great bard once wrote, "Parting is such sweet sorrow." He was right. Saying goodbye to mother, father, brothers and sisters, wondering if you would ever see them again, wondering if you would ever have the opportunity to return, and if you did, wondering further who might by then have gone to their eternal reward, was not an easy task. But the wonderment about the unknowable tomorrow, the ocean I had never crossed, the continent I had never met, the unknown hurdles that must be overcome, the success that could be realized **there**, not here, the hoped-for return to my beloved Leitrim that **might** be realized, tended to add sweetness to the sharpness of my sorrow. My tears parted, and I looked forward to my scheduled encounter with The Great Unknown.

## The Leavetaking

It was at the docks of Belfast that I boarded the British Cunard liner H.M.S. **Cameronian**. With my £45 ticket in hand, then about \$200 American, I was quickly herded to the "steerage" section of the ship. Well, there's 1st class, 2nd class — and steerage. The well-to-do and the better off-than-I were quickly segregated. There were about 350 souls in the steerage, more than all others aboard, including crew, combined. One might think of "mutiny" — but that was an idea furthestmost from our minds. In spite of unbelievably crowded conditions — you could not roll over in your bunk without elbowing the person above you and virtually digging into the person beneath you — in spite of cold salt water showers with soap that really did not "work"; in spite of an inability to eat because of the inevitable seasickness (many did not eat after departure for fully half the trip), we settled down for what was to become a rather speedy, uneventful, yet interesting (the ocean always has its surprises and charms) voyage across the Atlantic.

Eight days after the Emerald Isle had sunk beneath the horizon, the deservedly world-renowned Statue of Liberty hove into view, backgrounded by skyscrapers of an immensity I could never have imagined. I could not then make out the caption beneath the Statue of Liberty, but have learned since that it says (to the immigrant from other lands): "Give us your tired, your poor . . . the wretched refuse from your teeming shores . . ." To this day I take exception to that Emma Lazarus verse. True, we were tired, we were poor, and indeed we had come from a "teeming" land . . . but wretched refuse??? Never!!! The



*Michael McTernan, the author's brother, stands in the door of the old homestead which James left to depart for The Great Unknown*

immigrant built America, and the Irish were a tall part of it, and I am happy and proud to say that I helped America function. America got refugees from poverty and hunger, from religious and political persecution.

I arrived at New York City. Ellis Island was probably too crowded at the time, so instead of being inspected on "The Island," - a fearsome experience for so many Europeans - our ship was simply visited by immigration authorities and their accompanying doctors while we were anchored in quarantine. Doctors aboard simply "Xd" out those who by reasons of health were unfit to enter the United States of America by virtue of real or suspected illnesses. Those with the "X" on their naked backs were never to set foot on American soil. Home-fare was a real problem.

Then, after passing inspection, a young and healthy eighteen, I stepped ashore. Virtually blinded by the bright lights of this "sinful" city, I immediately boarded a train headed for the West Coast, a trip financed by my aunt and sister, both of San Francisco

#### **Ever West -- By Rail**

It took five days and five nights to reach from one shining sea to the other. Accommodation? Nonexistent unless you enjoy sitting straight up for five days! I cannot help but admit I was entranced, hypnotized, mesmerized, for those five days. America is a vast continent, and its unbelievable vastness I encountered. It was simply unquitting. I proceeded westward through valleys, foothills, mountains, more valleys, then through mountains that seemed to defy other than man's trail, on through what people refer to as "God's country," and I suspect that God Himself would be pleased to call it that. And on farther still America seemed to go on forever! Now past the Rockies, through the Great Basin, and on to the Sierra Nevada (Spanish for "snowy covered mountain range") From the incredible summit of the Sierra Nevada, it was downslope all the way to Sacramento, California. On from there through the Coast Range to San Francisco,

my new home. The greater portion of this trip carried me over the rails built by Indian fighting Irish from the east and by terrain-defying Chinese from the west. To me these 3 000 miles of rails represented the achievement of the unbelievable.

I arrived at a bad time. In September of 1929 the "Roaring Twenties" had just ceased to roar, and the Great Depression was about to settle over my adopted country. I settled with my sister Teresa.

#### **On The Railroad**

Jobs were virtually unobtainable, but I was lucky. It was pure luck, but I got a job within the week as an apprentice Car Inspector for the Southern Pacific Railroad. I was further lucky in that it took me only four years to complete my five year apprenticeship. Lucky indeed was the man who worked every day! Anyone who had any job during the Depression was very well off. Even though I was paid only twenty nine cents per hour, a dollar went a long way. Thirty-three pounds of potatoes, for example, for twenty-five cents.

Since then, I have worked my entire life for the Southern Pacific Railroad, retiring just late last year after forty-eight years of service. During World War II I "doubled-over," that is, worked two eight-hour shifts per day almost every day of the year. Financially, I never had it so good. At nine dollars for the first shift and time and one half for the second, these were, truly, the best days of my life. Railroad men were indispensable to the war effort, and experienced railroad men could not be replaced overnight. At sixteen work hours per day, I certainly do insist that I contributed my share to the defeat of the Axis powers.

### *FIGHT FOR FREEDOM*

*Free*

*fallen : unfurled as a flag  
the sky's surrender .*

*heaven scent snowflakes. Waiting for  
death under a hedge in April  
the sun celebrates slaughter  
with casted shadow of a mass rock  
nearby :*

*re enacting rituals of our  
forefathers and their foe.*

*Prisoners  
in a rein, within a reign  
of bondage.*

*EUGENE McGLOIN*