

UNITING THE COUNTRY WITH THE RAILROAD- PROMONTORY POINT, UTAH



Leland Stanford, President of the Central Pacific Railroad, hammers in the golden spike connecting the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads at Promontory Point, Utah.

Six years after work began, laborers of the Central Pacific Railroad from the west and the Union Pacific Railroad from the east met at **Promontory Summit, Utah**. It was here on May 10, 1869 that Governor Stanford drove the Golden Spike (or the Last Spike), that symbolized the completion of the transcontinental railroad. Few were aware that the spike was merely gold plated, gold being much too soft for the purpose, and probably not billable.

In perhaps the world's first live mass-media event, the hammer and spike were wired to the telegraph line so that each hammer stroke would be heard as a click at telegraph stations nationwide. Technical problems occurred, so clicks were actually sent by the telegraph operator, which makes this, most likely, the world's first fake mass media event.

Indeed, there were four spikes driven that afternoon. A message was then transmitted over the new telegraph lines that read: "DONE." Those spikes, along with the special polished California Laurel tie, were replaced with ordinary ones as soon as the celebrities went off to their gala parties.

There was great celebration around the country, travel time from coast to coast had been reduced from six months to one week.

THE BENEFITS OF THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

The transcontinental railroad connected the nation as never before: A trip from New York to San Francisco that once took months by wagon or ship now took a week at a tenth of the cost. Efficient travel helped knit the nation together -- Americans began to view the entire expanse, from coast to coast, as their nation, united by a common culture. Books written on one coast were read on the other; inventions created on the Great Plains were discussed in Boston.

Ambitious Americans had always looked West for new opportunities, particularly after the Homestead Act in 1862 offered the prospect of free land. Now thousands more took advantage of the easier journey by rail and rushed to settle the vast expanse of the nation. Towns and cities grew up around the railroads, providing transportation and trade hubs, and bringing people to what was once nothing but prairie and desert. The 1890 census declared the end of the American "frontier" -- the nation was settled from coast to coast.

The transcontinental railroad transformed the American economy. The railroad rapidly shipped resources such as coal, timber, precious metals and even cattle from west to east and opened up new markets for the goods produced in eastern factories. Huge cities like Chicago emerged as industrial hubs from which to send western raw materials east, and eastern products to the west. By 1880, the railroad shipped \$50 million worth of products from coast to coast every year. Finally, one railroad sparked the growth of dozens of other lines, many of them competing with each other for customers.

Finally, the railroad encouraged innovation. As competing railroad enterprises emerged, each strove to outdo the others. This led to improvements in every part of the railroad, from the engines to the rails themselves -- switching from iron to stronger, more durable steel. Determined to make a larger profit with his cattle business, Gustavus Swift hired someone to invent the first refrigerated rail car to ship slaughtered cattle to eastern markets. For safety and efficiency, railroads improved their braking and suspension systems. Such innovations changed not only the railroad but also many other industries.

THE RAILROAD RACE



The Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads vied to establish routes across the territory from western Iowa to northern California in a bitter contest.

In 1862, Congress passed the Pacific Railroad Act. This act led to the creation of the Union Pacific, which would lay rails west from Omaha, and the Central Pacific, which would start in Sacramento and build east. Since congressmen wanted the road built quickly, they made two key decisions. First, they gave each line twenty alternate sections of land for each mile of track completed. Second, they gave loans: \$16,000 for each mile of track of flat prairie land, \$32,000 per mile for hilly terrain, and \$48,000 per mile in the mountains.

The UP and CP, then, would compete for government generosity (subsidies- \$ or land given), and the line that built the most miles would get the most cash and land.

The Union Pacific nor the Central Pacific did not win the race into Utah without enormous costs - in money, materials, and lives. As in war, the longer the contest continued, the more ruthless the leaders of the competing railroads became toward their common laborers. Although deaths by accidents were higher among the CP's Chinese (between five hundred and a thousand), the UP lost the most workmen from exposure and from diseases contracted in the "squalid dens of prostitution" that followed the crews westward. More UP workmen were murdered in the Hell on Wheels towns than were killed in accidents, a ratio of about four to one. Neither railroad company provided adequate medical facilities. Yet, with the help of the national press, the railroad owners released a steady propaganda upon the public that was designed to inspire their sweating workmen to "win" at any price

A Chinese Immigrant Recalls the Dangers of Railroad Work

From the 1860s to the 1880s, thousands of Chinese immigrants found work in railroad construction in the West, notably on the Central Pacific line of the First Transcontinental Railroad, which was built primarily by Chinese. The extreme danger of this work is suggested by this excerpt from Chinese American Voices, in which a railroad worker recalls some of the life-threatening hazards Chinese workers faced, often under worse conditions and for lower pay than their white counterparts.

Our foreman then ordered us to pack up and return to Yale. So, although already suffering pangs of hunger, we had to start on our way immediately. When we were passing China Bar on the way, many of the Chinese died from an epidemic. As there were no coffins to bury the dead, the bodies were stuffed into rock crevices or beneath the trees to await their arrival. Those whose burials could not wait were buried on the spot in boxes made of crude thin planks hastily fastened together. There were even some who were buried in the ground wrapped only in blankets or grass mats. New graves dotted the landscape and the sight sent chills up and down my spine. . . .

The work at Hope was very dangerous. On one occasion, there was a huge rock on the slope of the mountain that stood in the railroad's path and must be removed by blasting before the tracks could go through. However, the sides of the rock were nearly perpendicular all around and there was no easy way to reach the top. The workers had to scramble to the top by use of timber scaffolding and by ropes fastened to the rock. After they reached the top they drilled holes in the rock to hold the dynamite charges. I was one of the workers who were assigned the task of drilling. Each morning I climbed the rock, and after I had finished the day's work I was lowered again by rope. I remembered that in blasting this rock more than three hundred barrels of explosives were used. . . .

Another incident occurred about ten to fifteen miles west of Yale. Dynamite was used to blast a rock cave. Twenty charges were placed and ignited, but only eighteen blasts went off. However, the white foreman, thinking that all of the dynamite had gone off, ordered the Chinese workers to enter the cave to resume work. Just at that moment the remaining two charges suddenly exploded. Chinese bodies flew from the cave as if shot from a cannon. Blood and flesh were mixed in a horrible mess. On this occasion about ten or twenty workers were killed.

THE DRAWBACKS OF THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

Before the Railroad: The American Buffalo, or bison, provided the many Native American tribes of the Great Plains with a wealth of different raw materials above and beyond the meat. A bison bull in good condition might weigh more than 2,000 pounds and provide about 800 pounds of useable meat. Cows weighed from 700 to 1,200 pounds, and provided an average of 400 pounds of meat. Horns were fashioned into spoons or scoops. The extra thick hide on the top of the head became a bowl. The heart was used as a sack to carry dried meat. The furry hide was tanned and used by the tribe as the walls of their tepees. Later, these hides became a thriving trade item for them. Even the stomach could be used as a cooking vessel. The stomach would be filled with water, meat, herbs and wild onions. Then hot rocks were placed into the mixture to bring it to a boil. A little later, the tribe had stew.



During the construction of the railroad:

Massive hunting parties began to arrive in the West by train, with thousands of men packing .50 caliber rifles, and leaving a trail of buffalo carnage in their wake. Unlike the Native Americans or Buffalo Bill, who killed for food, clothing and shelter, the hunters from the East killed mostly for sport. Native Americans looked on with horror as landscapes and prairies were littered with rotting buffalo carcasses. The railroads began to advertise excursions for “hunting by rail,” where trains encountered massive herds alongside or crossing the tracks. Hundreds of men aboard the trains climbed to the roofs and took aim, or fired from their windows, leaving countless 1,500-pound animals where they died.



A pile of American bison skulls in the mid-1870s

After the railroad was completed: By the end of the 19th century, only 300 buffalo were left in the wild

Name:

Date:

Station1: The Railroad Race

- What were the names of the competing companies in the “race” to lay the transcontinental railroad?

- Explain which direction each company was building.

Activity: In the Space below, answer the question in CRQ format.

- What historical event is the map depicting?

Station 2: A Chinese Immigrant Recalls the Dangers of Railroad Work

- Which railroad did many Chinese Immigrants work for?

Activity: After reading the document, in the space below, identify specific things a Chinese Immigrant would have “sensed” during his time working on the railroad.

What would a Chinese Immigrant....

- See?
- Smell?
- Touch?
- Taste?
- Hear?

Station 3: Uniting the Country with the Railroad

- Imagine you are a reporter gathering information for a news article about the completion of the transcontinental railroad. Gather the important information needed for your article below:
 - Who was there?
 - What did they do?
 - When did this happened?
 - Where did this happen?
 - Why is this important?

Activity: Using the information you gathered, write a possible newspaper headline for your article.

Station 4: The Benefits of the Transcontinental Railroad

For each blank underlined space in the document, identify the benefit being highlighted in the description.

1.) _____

2.) _____

3.) _____

4.) _____

5.) _____

Activity: In the box below, rate the benefits from most important to least important. Give a reason for your most and least important choices.

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Station 5: The Drawbacks of the Transcontinental Railroad

- Fill in the blanks using information from the documents:

Before the construction of the transcontinental railroad_____.

_____.

During the construction of the transcontinental railroad_____.

_____.

After the construction of the transcontinental railroad_____.

_____.

- How do you believe the Native Americans of the Plains viewed the transcontinental railroad?

Activity: In the space below write a haiku that reflects the drawbacks of the construction of the railroad.