

The Transcontinental Railroad

Cross-Curricular Focus: History/Social Sciences



Travel by train is no longer a major mode of transportation for people. However, there was a time in our nation's history when the train was the best, new technology. Up until the railroad was developed, people had to rely on walking in order to travel. Some people could use animals, like horses and oxen, for transportation. They could also travel on ships.

We are accustomed to the fast-moving pace of our society. In our country's early years, however, progress moved at a much slower rate.

Theodore Judah was the engineer who dreamed of building a railroad across the U.S. in the 1850s. There were already railroads between cities on the East Coast. Judah was in the process of constructing railroads in the West. However, there was no service at all across the vast middle of the nation.

Judah was determined to change all that. He recruited some investors to pay for the construction of the railroad. The investors were Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, Charles Crocker and Collis Huntington. They were nicknamed the "Big Four." They provided the money to create the Central Pacific Railroad Company. Construction on the Transcontinental Railroad began in 1863.

It was not an easy task to build a railroad. Many workers were required to lay the tracks. Thousands of railway workers laid tracks from both the west and the east at the same time.

The conditions were often very dangerous. To help clear rocks and make passes through the mountains, railroad builders used unstable nitroglycerin explosives. The glass containers of the explosive liquid had to be kept absolutely still to prevent them from exploding at the wrong time. Often, the job of handling the crates filled with the hazardous fluid was given to Chinese immigrants. Many Chinese came to California seeking their fortunes during the Gold Rush of 1849. Many went on to work on the railroad. Unfortunately, thousands died during its construction.

The east and west sections of track were finally joined on May 10, 1869 in Promontory, Utah. Its completion improved the transportation of goods and people between the East Coast and the West Coast. For the first time, the country felt truly united.

Name: _____

Answer the following questions based on the reading passage. Don't forget to go back to the passage whenever necessary to find or confirm your answers.

1) What were some ways that people traveled before the railroad was developed?

2) What part the "Big Four" play in the building of the Transcontinental Railroad?

3) How was nitroglycerin used to build the railroad?

4) Why had the Chinese immigrants come to California?

5) What do you think is a new technology today?

The Golden Spike - First Transcontinental Railroad 1869

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