

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Sixty-Two

The Transcontinental Railroad

LESSON IDEA

To see how America's first transcontinental railroad was built by courageous men, and to see why this link between east and west coasts was so important.

PREPARATION

Ask one or two family members to do some research in advance for this lesson, by looking up the story of the first locomotive in an encyclopedia. Also have the map used for last week's lesson available again, to follow the route of the transcontinental railroad.

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WITH THE Gadsden Purchase from Mexico in 1853, the United States added the great Southwest to its territory. The nation now spanned the continent. In less than one hundred years, the infant Republic had grown from thirteen colonies along the east coast, comprising an area of less than one million square miles, to a continental empire more than three times that size.

By the middle of the Nineteenth Century, prosperous communities were well-established along the California coast. But most settlers declined to live in the plains area — that barren and seemingly unproductive land stretching from the western border of Missouri to western Nevada. The settlers were after California gold, or the lumber and minerals of the Pacific Northwest. They wanted comfortable homes and stable jobs, not sod huts on a dusty prairie.

But with the completion of the telegraph line linking east and west, it became obvious to citizens, businessmen, the military, and govern-

ment officials that a faster means of getting people and supplies to and from the West was badly needed — something quicker than steaming around South America and more reliable (and more comfortable) than crossing overland by wagon train. What do you think would be the solution to this transportation problem? Yes, the answer was a transcontinental railroad.

SUCH A RAILROAD would serve several useful purposes: It would enable the military to dispatch troops quickly to the West, it would encourage the settlement of the plains, it would open up vast trading possibilities, and it would enable the coastal communities of the West to ship their products economically to eastern markets.

With these ideas in mind, the United States Congress passed the Pacific Railroad Act in 1862, authorizing two companies to begin construction of the railroad.

The Union Pacific Railroad Company was to begin construction at Council Bluffs, Iowa, stretch across the Wyoming territory and go down through Utah. There it would meet the Central Pacific Railroad Company, which began laying tracks at Sacramento and was to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains into Utah.

Both companies, of course, needed vast sums of money for such a project. They received sizable loans and land from the federal government, which at that time, owned most of the land from Missouri to California. As part of the deal, the government also gave each company 6400 acres of land for

