

# 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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**W**ITH 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.

**S**UCH 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

each mile of track laid. Two years later, the amount was raised to 12,000 acres per mile. All of this land was to be within twenty miles of the railroad line. Since settlements would begin first near the rail line, this land became extremely valuable – in time worth more than the railroad itself.

As with all assistance from government, some strings were attached to the funds and land. The government gave the aid only on “. . . the condition that said companies shall keep said railroad and telegraph line in repair and use, and shall at all times, transmit dispatches over said telegraph line; and transport mails, troops, and munitions of war, supplies and public stores upon said railroad for the Government; and that the Government shall at all times have preference in the use of the same for all the purposes aforesaid, – at fair and reasonable prices, not to exceed the amounts paid by private parties for the same kind of service.”

Both companies willingly agreed to the terms of the contract. And on January 18, 1863, the Central Pacific broke ground near Sacramento to begin construction. It was almost a year later, on December 2, 1863, that the Union Pacific Railroad started laying rails at Council Bluffs.

But no sooner had the first spadeful of dirt been shovelled when both companies ran into a variety of difficulties. The Central Pacific had a great deal of trouble finding Americans willing to join the work gangs. Many able-bodied Americans had marched off to fight in the Civil War; many others had headed to the hills looking for gold. The few who remained behind had little desire to leave their homes and jobs to build a railroad.

Unable to hire enough Americans for the task, the Central Pacific decided to hire Chinese laborers to build the railroad. A few American workers expressed bitterness about working with the Chinese, but the Chinese laborers proved to be so fearless and such diligent workers, that such resentment soon passed. Charles Crocker, the man in charge of personnel for the Central Pacific complimented the Chinese immigrants on their dedication to duty when he remarked: “Wherever we put them, we found them good and they worked themselves into our favor to such an extent that if we found we were in a hurry for a job of work, it was better to put the Chinese on at once.”

In fact, the company was so pleased with the several hundred Chinese initially hired, that within a year, it sent representatives to China to hire more men. Eventually, over 10,000 Chinese were working on the railroad as it crept gradually up into the Sierra Nevadas. Why do you think so many Chinese were willing to risk a long and dangerous ocean voyage and then face hardships, long hours of hard work, and the very real possibility of death, for only a few dollars a week in pay? What was there about America that attracted them so much? [*Ask each family member for an opinion.*]

With the manpower shortage solved, the weather was the next challenge facing the Central Pacific crews. The men were soon to learn what it was like to suffer and die in one of the worst winters in America’s history.

**O**N THE UNION Pacific side, the main difficulty was Indians. It began in August of 1866 when the sweaty laborers who were laying track and pounding spikes saw eighteen Sioux warriors gallop toward them. After the Indians rode into the railroad camp, Chief Spotted Tail introduced himself and told the foreman he and his warriors had just come to watch the laying of the tracks. Everyone was much relieved, especially the foreman, who showed his hospitality by taking the Indians on a grand tour through the train. Tagging along out of curiosity was E.C. Lockwood, one of the laborers, who commented: “I was following them, and noticed one Indian put his hand out of the window and measure the thickness of the wall of the car. As he looked to another Indian, I could imagine hearing him say ‘I wonder if a bullet could go through.’”

#### FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Completion of the transcontinental railroad opened up vast new areas of the United States for settlement. It meant new homes and new opportunities for thousands of freedom-loving pioneers and immigrants, but it also meant an end of the Indian’s traditional way of life. For a discussion of how this happened see Chapter 18 of *Quest Of A Hemisphere* by Donzella Cross Boyle. This outstanding study of America’s history is available for \$9.00 hardbound or \$5.00 paperbound from your nearest American Opinion Bookstore, or from American Opinion, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178.

After the tour, the construction crew put on a feast for the Indians; but then, at dusk, things got difficult. Chief Spotted Tail demanded that he and his braves be given all the flour and beef they could carry. The foreman refused. The Chief then threatened to send 3000 braves to wipe out the railroad's crew. Still, the foreman wouldn't budge. Finally, the Chief and his warriors rode off in the dark without the flour or beef. This time the Indians did not return. But there would be more threats and attacks; and death would claim the lives of many men who worked on the Union Pacific.

While the main crew lay the track, surveyors would range back and forth a hundred miles ahead, searching for the best route. At first, those isolated parties were often ambushed and killed. Soon, each surveying party was given a military escort, and their fears were eased. One surveyor described the military escort in these words in his diary, "Their campfires burn brightly after nightfall and the solemn tread of the sentinel, with bright, gleaming carbine, assures one if, in the still hours of night, we are attacked, the enemy will receive a warm reception."

All along the railroad route, the construction crews built depots at twenty-mile intervals. Soon their usefulness was very apparent. As one construction foreman happily reported, each depot "... has now a town attached, giving all opportunity to purchase and settle at very reasonable rates." The rail line and the railroad stations encouraged settlers to purchase land in the West from the railroad companies. Laramie, Wyoming, is just one of many towns which sprang up when its site was chosen as a supply center for the Union Pacific.

**T**HE CENTRAL Pacific faced no Indian problems because the officials of the company had made treaties with most of the tribes. But freezing snow and deadly avalanches posed an even greater hazard to the construction crews.

The winters in the Sierra Nevada Mountains caused unbearable hardships for the Central Pacific's laborers as they burrowed hundreds of feet through solid rock. Snow drifts fifteen and twenty feet high often completely buried the rickety shacks which served as the temporary homes for the laborers. Inside the tunnels, the men averaged

only two feet a day blasting through the mountains with nitroglycerin. Outside of the tunnels, the temperature plummeted to 40 below zero. But day and night the men worked relentlessly chipping and blasting and digging through 150 miles of mountain ranges.

Avalanches were a constant threat. One laborer described what he had witnessed too many times: "... there would be a shout, a rumbling sound that the watchers knew too well, the impending field of snow would rush down the mountain, a great cloud of snow dust would arise with a sullen roar, and when the air was clear, peering down the canyon they would see a wide spreading of tumbled snow on the white expanse and maybe a man's arm sinking or a pickax and the squad was gone..." No one would risk death in trying to recover the dead in the snow. But in the spring a few men would return to recover the bodies. Often the victims would be found still standing, frozen solid, grasping their axes.

The Chinese usually volunteered for the most dangerous jobs, whether it was working with unpredictable nitroglycerin or dangling off the side of cliffs in waist-high wicker baskets, to hammer holes in the rock for explosives. More than once, an unfortunate Chinaman would tumble to his death onto the rocks hundreds of feet below.

The willingness of the Chinese to accept seemingly impossible tasks resulted in the American workers adding a new phrase to the English language. The words "Not a Chinaman's chance" became the standard expression for a hopeless situation.

Despite all of the difficulties and dangers, the men of the Central Pacific worked on through the mountains, mile after mile over the summit, 8000 feet above sea level, on down the eastern slopes into Utah.

**M**EANWHILE THE UNION Pacific Railroad found itself embroiled in battles with marauding Indians. Perhaps the most exciting and curious fight between the railroad and the redskins occurred on August 6, 1867 near Plum Creek — some 59 miles east of North Platte, Nebraska.

A hunting party of Cheyenne spied a locomotive coming toward them across the plain. Puzzled



by this black, smoking monster, they waited a safe distance away until it passed. Then they rode over to examine the tracks it had left in the prairie. But instead of a new kind of hoofprint, to their surprise they found wooden ties and iron rails. It didn't take them long to figure out how to knock one of these noisy monsters off the tracks. They found some discarded railroad ties, placed them on the rails, and lashed them securely with some telegraph wire taken from nearby poles. Then they went off to hide in the bushes to wait for another train.

The telegraph operators knew immediately that the line had been cut, so the Union Pacific sent out a repair crew of six men on a small handcar. They reached the point of the break at dusk, but were travelling so fast they didn't see the timbers on the tracks. The handcar smashed into the barrier, tossing all of the men to the ground. The Cheyenne charged the dazed workmen, shooting wildly. Within minutes five men lay dead.

The sixth man, William Thompson, ran frantically through the bushes trying to escape. A Cheyenne galloped after him, shot him in the arm, then bashed him in the head with a rifle butt. Thompson fell to the ground, stunned. He tried to play dead, even as the Indian whipped out his knife and sliced off his scalp. Through a haze, Thompson watched as the Indian rode off and the scalp slipped from the warrior's belt to the ground. Thompson somehow managed to crawl forward to retrieve it.

Meanwhile, the other Cheyenne used the tools from the handcar to pry up the rails. As they completed their work, they heard a train approaching. When they mounted their ponies and attacked it, the engineer decided to outrun them. But the train ran into the barrier at full speed and five cars leapt from the tracks. The Indians surrounded the crippled train, set it on fire, and shot those on the train. The only survivor of the massacre was Thompson, who watched in horror from some bushes, then crept down the tracks to safety still clutching his own scalp.

Though the hardships were many for the men of the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific, their bravery paid off when the two lines met on May 10, 1869 at Promontory Point, Utah. Officials from both rail lines joined in the celebration. A

Mormon band and an Army band from Fort Douglas arrived to provide music. Settlers came from miles around in buckboards or on horseback to watch the laying of the last rails and the pounding of the last spike.

Politicians and representatives of the railroads spoke for two hours, then the last spikes were tapped into place. With that, four locomotive whistles blew and champagne bottles were broken on the engines.

The officials sent the following telegraph to President Ulysses S. Grant: "The last rail is laid, the last spike driven. The Pacific Railroad is completed. The point of junction is 1086 miles west of the Missouri River and 690 miles east of Sacramento City."

### *Concluding Thought*

At last the transcontinental railroad was a reality. After more than six years of effort, millions of dollars, and the loss of hundreds of lives, America was linked coast to coast by the most advanced form of transportation available.

The railroad opened up the vast plains area to settlement; it contributed greatly to America's economic growth, as thousands of pioneers turned the barren soil into lush fields of wheat, corn and alfalfa and the pasture lands became filled with cattle and sheep.

### DURING THE WEEK

The locomotive played a vital role in the settlement of the Great Plains. During the week ask family members to learn about other inventions which were also important, such as the repeating rifle, barbed wire, the Conestoga wagon. Use the supper hour or other family time, to discuss the character traits of the early settlers.

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**The Family Heritage Series** is for all parents with school-age children. It is sure to be valued by all Americans who participate in its Heritage Hour discussions, and would be especially welcomed as a gift.

**The Family Heritage Series** is published by the Movement To Restore Decency, a project of The John Birch Society. The annual subscription rate is twelve dollars for fifty-two lessons, mailed monthly. Individual lessons may be purchased in any quantity at four copies for one dollar. Address all orders and subscriptions to The John Birch Society, 395 Concord Avenue, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178. Wallis W. Wood, Editor.

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