

**Assignment:** Standard History Journal (minimum 1.5 pages written, double spaced, size 12 font, one inch margins) which includes visuals

**Topic:** "History Through Different Eyes" -- The Building of the Transcontinental Railroad

As we know, each event in history does not always have the same meaning to different groups of people. It is important when learning about history to consider how different types of people felt about a particular event. If you can learn to "put yourself in another's shoes" as you analyze a historical event from multiple perspectives, hopefully you can also become a more accepting person in general, who is willing to listen to and feel empathy toward the views of others, even if they are different from the views you, yourself hold.

You will use the notes you from the [PBS website \("The Iron Road"\)](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/tcrr/sfeature/sf_map.html) to write three first person journal entries (about 1/2 to 3/4 page long each) They should explain your feelings about the "moment in time" depicted below from each of the following perspectives:

**A) A Chinese laborer (C.P.) or Irish laborer (U.P.)** who worked to build the "Iron Road". This entry should focus on detailing the hardships, difficulties, and dangers (Nitro and baskets!) you faced as a worker in making this "moment in time" a reality. Are you proud? Was the sacrifice worth it? What were the greatest obstacles which had to be overcome in order to finish the job? What did the completion of the railroad mean to you? What did you do once your work on the railroad was completed?

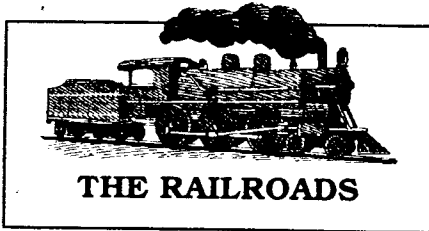
**B) A Native American of the Plains** who has been placed on a reservation as a result of the events which took place after the completion of the transcontinental railroad. This entry should focus on describing why this "moment in time" meant the beginning of "How the West Was Lost" for you and your people and how that end eventually came about. Are you angry that these men built the "Iron Road"? Could your way of life been protected after the railroad was completed if only different steps had been taken? What did the completion of the railroad mean to you?...Native Americans called the transcontinental railroad "Muzuchuku" for "iron road".

**C) A businessman back East (New York City maybe!) or from the West (San Francisco maybe!)** who has made his fortune in the West as either as a builder / owner of a transcontinental railroad, a mining "bonanza king", a "cattle baron", or as an owner of a "bonanza farm". Focus on how this "moment in time" made your later economic success possible. How does the railroad help you to made money? Why would this economic success have been impossible without the railroad having been built? Why was this "moment in time" such a modern marvel and positive achievement for our nation as we "Won the West". Make sure you mention some of the businessmen who made the TCRR possible (Theodore Judah, Thomas Durrant, Grenville Dodge, etc.)

**EACH JOURNAL ENTRY SHOULD START WITH THE FOLLOWING..."AS I LOOK AT THIS PHOTOGRAPH..."**



*The celebration after the last spike was driven at Promontory, Utah, on May 10, 1869, completing the first transcontinental railroad.*



# Geography

## in American History

### Geography and Movement: The First Transcontinental Link

As late as the 1860s, the only coast-to-coast transportation link was a long, tortuous wagon or stagecoach ride or a dangerous voyage down the entire east coast to Panama, across Panama by stage, rail, or ship, and then up the west coast. The third option was to sail entirely around South America via Cape Horn. The first transcontinental rail route, completed in 1869, immediately introduced swift service across the heart of the nation (see map on page 12).

*This reading relates how the builders of the first railroads across the continent overcame the geographic barriers blocking the route.*

### A Few Contradictions

Contrary to the notion suggested by the term *transcontinental railroad*, the first railroad link across the nation ran not from the Pacific Ocean but from the American River near Sacramento, California. From the east, it began not at the Atlantic Ocean but at the Missouri River near Omaha, Nebraska. Nor was it one railroad at all, it was **really two**: the Central Pacific, built east from California; and the Union Pacific, built west from Nebraska as the map on page 12 shows. From 1863 to 1869, these two railroad companies raced toward Utah, spurred on by the cash and land bonuses offered by Congress.

### Locating the Central Pacific

Before a single piece of track could be laid, however, the **best routes had to be found** through the mountains, valleys, and deserts between the two ends of the line. Although Native Americans had made these lands their home for thousands of years, from the point of view of the surveyors, the region was largely wilderness, little of it mapped.

Surveyors decided that from Sacramento the Central Pacific line would run an easy 15 miles (24 km) along the level floor of the American River Valley. (Follow this route on the map on page 12.) Then, in a distance of only 90 miles (145 km), it would leap to an elevation of over 7,000 feet (2,134 m).

But the route could not be too steep, or the number of cars a locomotive could pull up the track would be severely limited. To solve this difficulty, the planners laid out a course that rose diagonally along the face of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. On a perilous ridge above river valleys thousands of feet deep, the railroad would creep to the top of the range at Donner Pass. There it would surmount the final barrier by means of a tunnel bored through 1,659 feet (506 m) of solid granite.

From the summit of the Sierra Nevada, the Central Pacific line would sweep down gentler slopes to the Truckee River. Then it would follow the Truckee River Valley, cross 40 miles (64 km) of the Humboldt Desert, and use the Humboldt River Valley as another natural pathway for nearly 300 miles (483 km). From that point surveyors marked out a route that would climb the Independence Range, skirt the Great Salt Lake Desert, and go on toward Ogden, Utah, the proposed meeting point of the railways.

### Locating the Union Pacific

Although the Union Pacific had to cross the Rocky Mountains, the map on page 12 shows that it had a straight run of 525 miles (845 km)—much of it along the Platte River valley—before it reached the mountain barrier. Once again, the main difficulty lay in finding an approach to the summit that was not too

## Geography in American History *Continued*

steep. Major General Grenville Dodge, the chief engineer of the Union Pacific line, found just such a sloping ridge in 1865, when he was leading a troop of soldiers away from Native Americans.

Once it crested the mountains, the Union Pacific would cross the rolling plains of the Wyoming Basin, follow a course up the Wasatch Range at the far side, and then swoop down toward the Salt Lake Valley, following Echo Creek toward Ogden.

### The Forces Against the Workers

When the building crews began their work, they faced not only the physical obstacles of the land but also hazards posed by the climate. For example, the Central Pacific force was working on the tunnel at the top of the Sierra Nevada in the winter of 1866. That winter, **forty-four blizzards** roared up the mountains from the coast. To bring supplies to the workers, teams with shovels dug access tunnels as long as 500 feet (152 km) through snow drifts. The next winter was equally bad: the total snowfall in the Sierra Nevada was over **44 feet** (13.4 m). Not even a massive snowplow driven by twelve locomotives could keep the tracks open. Finally, the Central Pacific employed 2,500 carpenters to raise 37 miles (60 km) of snow sheds over the rail line.

The Union Pacific, too, struggled against snow. The eastern line, however, was equally troubled by a severe flood in 1867. "The water flowed from the Platte River in a stream about half a mile wide," a railway official reported, "cutting the road its entire width and sweeping with irresistible fury over the country for twenty miles . . . taking off iron, ties, and embankment."

Both crews had deserts to cross. A Central Pacific manager records that "water for men and animals was hauled at one time forty miles." **Alkali**, a harsh mineral, poisoned the available water over the desert portion of the Union Pacific line, and burned the lungs of the crews during fierce windstorms.

### Ethnic Conflicts

For the builders of the Union Pacific there

was another danger more frightening than the hazards of weather and water: the Sioux and Cheyenne who were resisting the intrusion onto their lands. Every crew kept rifles stacked and ready.

The Native Americans were about to lose not only their lands, but their livelihood as well. Hunters shot vast numbers of buffalo to feed the railroad crews. One such hunter, William F. Cody (later known as Buffalo Bill), shot 4,280 buffalo in eight months. This began the slaughter that would make the buffalo nearly extinct—the buffalo the Native Americans depended upon for existence.

The Central Pacific, on the other hand, made peace with the Shoshone and Paiute tribes of Nevada. This rail line faced a different ethnic struggle. Its managers could not lure local workers away from the lucrative silver mining or easier farming in California, so they hired as many as **fifteen thousand Chinese** from San Francisco and from South China itself. Prejudiced observers were pessimistic, but the Chinese showed their spirit and capability at every stage of construction. This is especially noteworthy considering the terrible conditions under which they worked.

On the Union Pacific line, Irish immigrants provided most of the labor. They, too, were the subject of prejudice and deplorable working conditions.

### Moving Material

The combined routes of the two rails stretched **1,776 miles** (2,858 km) from Sacramento to Omaha. Each of those miles required **2,400 ties** made of oak or treated wood, **100 tons of iron rail**, **5,800 spikes**, **1,400 bolts**, **70 poles for the telegraph lines** being run alongside the track, and huge quantities of stone to hold the ties in place. To move material from the ends of the line to the ever-advancing construction site, the two railway companies used a total of **309 locomotives** and over **4,300 freight cars**.

But transporting material along the railway route was the easy part. The Central Pacific had to maintain a fleet of thirty ships to carry iron and locomotives **15,000 miles** (24,140 km)

## Geography in American History *Continued*

from the East Coast via Cape Horn or 6,000 miles (9,656 km) via Panama. The Union Pacific had to bring its supplies by wagon from other railroads in Iowa, or by steamboat up the Missouri River.

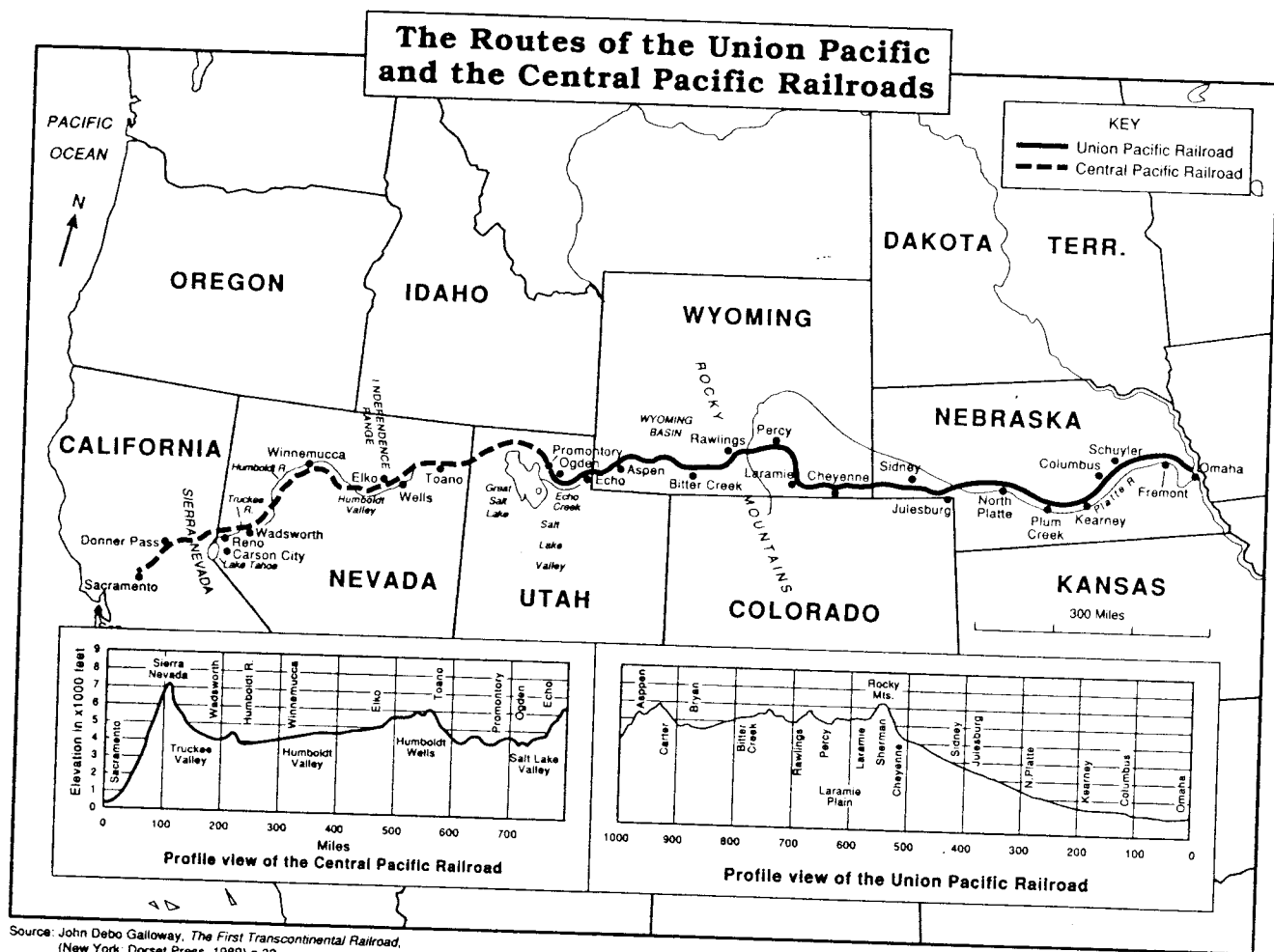
### Regions Linked

As the two railroads raced closer together, the entire nation was caught up in the contest.

On May 10, 1869—seven years ahead of schedule—the two railroads met at Promontory Point, Utah. The Union Pacific had already

reached Ogden, the planned meeting point, and had pressed on to Promontory Point. In a gala ceremony, the final spikes were driven to link the nation. The telegraph operator beside the track tapped out a message to crowds throughout the United States: "Almost ready now. Hats off. Prayer is being offered. . . . Done!"

Within days posters were advertising the journey "through to San Francisco in less than Four Days, avoiding the Dangers of the Sea." The two sides of the nation were now connected and ready to grow as one.



Source: John Debo Galloway, *The First Transcontinental Railroad*, (New York: Dorset Press, 1989) p. 32.