

# 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

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.

