



The Transcontinental Railroad: The History and Legacy of the First Rail Line Spanning the United States

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures *Includes accounts written by newspapers, railroad workers and executives *Includes a bibliography for further reading *Includes a table of contents “The necessity that now exists for constructing lines of railroad and telegraphic communication between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of this continent is no longer a question for argument; it is conceded by every one. In order to maintain our present position on the Pacific, we must have some more speedy and direct means of intercourse than is at present afforded by the route through the possessions of a foreign power.” – 1856 report made by the Select Committee on the Pacific Railroad and Telegraph of the U.S. House of Representatives The Transcontinental Railroad, laid across the United States during the 1860s, remains the very epitome of contradiction. On the one hand, it was a triumph of engineering skills over thousands of miles of rough terrain, but on the other hand, it drained the natural resources in those places nearly dry. It “civilized” the American West by making it easier for women and children to travel there, but it dispossessed Native American civilizations that had lived there for generations. It made the careers of many men and destroyed the lives from many others. It was bold and careless, ingenious and cruel, gentle and violent, and it enriched some and bankrupted others. In short, it was the best and worst of 19th century America in action. As settlers pushed west and the Gold Rush brought an influx of Americans to California, the need for something like the Transcontinental Railroad was apparent to the government in the 1850s, and with the help of private companies, government officials conducted all kinds of land surveys in order to plot a course. Of course, even once a route was chosen, the backbreaking work itself had to be done to connect railroad lines across the span of nearly 2,000 miles. This required an incredible amount of manpower, often consisting of unskilled laborers engaging in dangerous work, and the financial resources poured into it were also extreme. J. . O. Wilder, a Central Pacific-Southern Pacific employee, described a typical scene: “The Chinese were as steady, hard-working a set of men as could be found. With the exception of a few whites at the west end of Tunnel No. 6, the laboring force was entirely composed of Chinamen with white foremen and a ‘boss/translator’. A single foreman (often Irish) with a gang of 30 to 40 Chinese men generally constituted the force at work at each end of a tunnel; of these, 12 to 15 men worked on the heading, and the rest on the bottom, removing blasted material. When a gang was small or the men were needed elsewhere, the bottoms were worked with fewer men or stopped so as to keep the headings going.” Ultimately, the project was considered so important that work on it progressed throughout the Civil War, and it took the better part of the 1860s before it was finally completed. Once the railroad was in place, it proved a boon to building up the American West, especially the Southwest and Pacific Northwest in places like Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Oregon and Washington. The Transcontinental Railroad chronicles the construction of the railroad that connected America’s coasts. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the Transcontinental Railroad like never before, in no time at all.

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