

Transcontinental Railroad

The completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad, a railway network that ran from the Atlantic Coast to the Pacific Coast, simplified the means of transporting people, goods, and services across the United States. By the time of the Civil War, the rail service reached the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. The task of completing the westward extension was assigned to the Central Pacific Railroad Company and Union Pacific Railroad Company. Chartered by the Pacific Railroad Act, both companies successfully won contracts to complete the Transcontinental Railroad, with the Central Pacific going east from Sacramento, and the Union Pacific working west from the Missouri River. With the help of many laborers, domestic and immigrant, the two companies converged and joined their tracks in Utah on May 10th, 1869.

The Transcontinental Railroad is the result of an American ideology, Manifest Destiny, the ambition to possess land from the Atlantic to Pacific Ocean.¹ Due to the acquisition of Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Wyoming under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, the United States completed their goal of expansion from coast to coast. Not having a solidified path from one coast to another, however, made it expensive to travel across the country. During this period, it cost a citizen approximately 1,000 dollars to go from coast to coast.² In 1862, Theodore Judah, a railroad engineer, convinced businessmen Charles Crocker, Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, and Collis Huntington to invest in a business that became the Central Pacific Railroad Company.³ President Abraham Lincoln was an advocate for the construction of a Pacific railroad, which led to the Pacific Railroad Acts being passed by Congress. This Congressional bill authorized the government to issue government bonds and give grants of land to railroad companies, who would build across previously inaccessible land.⁴ The Central Pacific Railroad Company was assigned to start laying tracks in Sacramento and worked eastward, while the Union Pacific Railroad Company initiated its construction around the Missouri River and headed westward. The CPRR and UPRR Companies commenced the construction in 1863, but the Civil War, financial difficulties, and the scarcity of reliable workers stagnated progress of the railway.⁵

While America was developing its ambitions to become a unified country through the abolition of slavery and the establishment of the Transcontinental, China experienced its own

¹ Chew, William F. *Nameless Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad: The Chinese Workers of the Central Pacific Railroad*. Victoria, British Columbia: Trafford, 2004.

² History.com Staff. "Transcontinental Railroad." History.com. 2010. Accessed May 24, 2016. <http://www.history.com/topics/inventions/transcontinental-railroad>.

³ Chew, William F. *Nameless Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad: The Chinese Workers of the Central Pacific Railroad*. Victoria, British Columbia: Trafford, 2004.

⁴ History.com Staff. "Transcontinental Railroad." History.com. 2010. Accessed May 24, 2016. <http://www.history.com/topics/inventions/transcontinental-railroad>.

⁵ "FAQs." Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project. Accessed May 24, 2016. <http://web.stanford.edu/group/chineserailroad/cgi-bin/wordpress/faqs/>.

turmoil, when Britain attacked Canton in 1839 for China's attempt to regulate and eliminate the opium trade.⁶ The economy and political instability influenced Chinese citizens to emigrate toward California, with the mythicized "Gold Mountain", due to the Gold Rush. The Chinese saw San Francisco as an avenue to get rich quickly and they'd go back to their homeland, after a sojourn in California. The promise of "Gold Mountain" proved to be hyperbolized, as Chinese miners were commonly only permitted to excavate areas previously dug up by Caucasians.

Throughout the 1860's, the Civil War, floods, and famines drove many Chinese to America and other parts of the world. By January of 1864, 21 Chinese workers were hired, as an experiment to see if they were productive enough to assist the establishment of the Transcontinental. In the year of 1865, once he realized that the Chinese were diligent and were willing to be paid less than the average American laborer, Charles Crocker, one of the investors of the Central Pacific Railroad Company, contacted James Strobridge, who was initially reluctant to hire the Chinese, to import Chinese laborers to work on the Transcontinental. Through these connections, Strobridge gained approximately 3300 Chinese laborers, from Guangdong to work on the railroad. Guangdong became a major departing point, due to the instability of China, along with it being a neighboring city to Hong Kong, a departing point for the Chinese. Historians estimate between 10,000 to 15,000 Chinese laborers contributed to the railway.

The wages for Central Pacific Chinese workers, varied from 24 to 31 dollars per month, depending on how dangerous the work was. If the laborers worked in the tunnels, they were compensated with an extra dollar in pay. Eventually, pay rose to 35 dollars, which was the same amount that American laborers were being paid. That being said, Chinese immigrants worked longer hours and additionally were required to pay for their own food and services, while American laborers were subsidized by Central Pacific Railroad and Union Pacific Railroad Companies. The Central Pacific payroll records disclose almost all Chinese railroad workers worked under "gang bosses", subcontractors to the CPRR and held the responsibility for food and housing needs of individual workers. The gang bosses would be responsible for the distribution of pay, as well. In a highly competitive environment, 5,000 Chinese workers, on June 25, 1867, went on strike, demanding 40 dollars per month, work hours reduced from eleven to ten, and shorter shifts in tunnels. Rather than protesting violently, the Chinese walked around in the camps, but refused to talk to their employers. This created a dilemma because the Chinese accounted for a majority of the Central Pacific workers, but rather than negotiating, Crocker cut off their food supply. Crocker and Strobridge also extorted the workers through violence, if they didn't return to their jobs. After being deprived of food and intimidated, the laborers returned to work. Crocker never considered conceding to the laborers' demands, because he believed the strike was a ploy by Union Pacific, in an attempt to lay more miles and in the process, being compensated for more miles.

⁶ Chew, William F. *Nameless Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad: The Chinese Workers of the Central Pacific Railroad*. Victoria, British Columbia: Trafford, 2004.

The Chinese workers often put their life on the lines to complete the Transcontinental Railroad. Accounts have been told that the Chinese were lowered by ropes off cliffs, chipped away at granite, and planted explosives, which were used to blast ledges on the side of a mountain slope, on which tracks were later laid.⁷ On April 28th, 1869, workers from the Central Pacific Railroad Company successfully graded and laid 10 miles of track in one day. Charles Crocker wagered 10,000 dollars to rival investor of the Union Pacific, Thomas Durant, that his men were capable of accomplishing the aforementioned feat. Eight Irish rail handlers and an estimated 4000 workers, mostly Chinese, set 10 miles and fifty six feet of tracks, by working from 5:00 AM to 7:00 PM. The eight Irish rail handlers were celebrated in a parade in Sacramento, but the Chinese workers weren't acknowledged and their names were forgotten.

A couple of weeks later, the two railroad companies met in Utah. After six years of working, the two tracks finally merged on May 10th, 1869. To commemorate this event, four monumental spikes were struck into the tracks: a blended iron, silver, and gold spike, a silver spike with 780 grams of silver, a low quality gold spike, made with 200 dollars worth of gold, and finally, the golden spike with 17.6 karats of gold, weighing 436 grams.

⁷ "Chinese-American Contribution to Transcontinental Railroad." Chinese-American Contribution to Transcontinental Railroad. Accessed May 24, 2016