

Summary: A Railroad to California

A Transcontinental Railroad

Trains were the fastest form of travel in 1861. But there was no railroad connecting California to the rest of the country. Theodore Judah, an engineer who planned railroads, convinced four California investors to build a transcontinental railroad. The “Big Four,” Leland Stanford, Charles Crocker, Collis Huntington, and Mark Hopkins, started the Central Pacific Railroad Company. In 1862, Congress passed the Pacific Railway Act, which set aside money for the railroad. Part of this money was paid to the Central Pacific Company to build track east from California. The Union Pacific Company received the rest of the money to build track west from Nebraska.

Building the Railroad

In 1863, the Central Pacific Company began to build track east from Sacramento, across the rugged Sierra Nevada. Workers cut passes in hills and built tunnels. They filled in low land and built bridges across deep, wide valleys. Laborers used picks, shovels, axes, and wheelbarrows. Work went slowly. The company needed 4,000 more laborers. In 1865, the company hired Chinese immigrants. Meanwhile, the Union Pacific laid track westward from Omaha, using mostly Irish immigrant workers. After six years, the two lines met near Promontory Point, Utah, and were joined with a golden spike. The new railroad increased trade. Towns were built beside the tracks, and thousands of new settlers came to California. Central Pacific earned millions of dollars from its land in California.

Completing the Railroad

After 1865, most people building track for the Central Pacific were Chinese immigrants, who became known for their skill. Chinese laborers used gunpowder to blast rock from cliffs. They dug tunnels through the mountains during winters of heavy snow and dangerous snow slides. They built passages under the snow to reach work. Chinese workers earned less than \$1 per day and worked 12 to 14 hours per day. In 1867, 2,000 Chinese workers went on strike. They wanted about 35 cents a week more and a 10-hour work day. The strike lasted a week. Nothing was changed.



Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

transcontinental *adjective*, describes something that crosses a continent

engineer *noun*, a person who designs and builds things

investor *noun*, someone who puts money into a business

strike *noun*, when workers stop doing their jobs to protest poor conditions at work, or to get higher pay



After You Read

REVIEW What two companies were hired to build the transcontinental railroad? Highlight the sentences that name the two companies and tell what they did.

REVIEW What were two main tasks of laborers for the Central Pacific Company? Draw a box around two sentences that describe what the Central Pacific laborers did.

REVIEW What were two dangers in the work of Chinese immigrants for the Central Pacific? Underline the sentences that tell the dangerous work the Chinese laborers had to do to lay track.