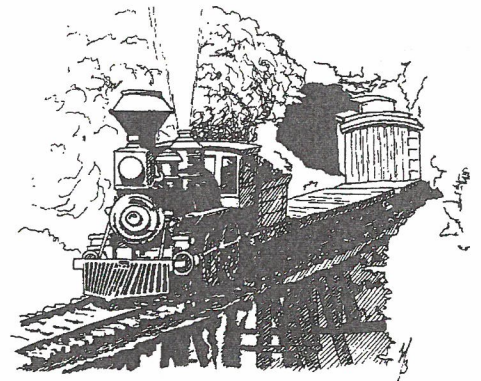


The Transcontinental Railroad

Legend tells of John Henry, “a steel-driving man,” who built railroads with his sledgehammer and his mighty arms. Americans in the mid-nineteenth century admired railroads. Mayors dreamed of the day the railroad would come to their town and bring in trade, industry, and new settlers. After the Civil War, mayors got their wishes. In 1830, the United States had 23 miles of track; in 1850, it had 9,000 miles; and in 1860, over 30,000. However, nearly all of the railroads were east of the Mississippi River, and the West needed them too.

After the Civil War, “John Henrys” were needed everywhere. The South’s railroads were either rusted or Union soldiers had wrapped the rails around trees (called Sherman neckties). During the war, Northern railroads had so much traffic that they now needed new roadbeds, new bridges, and new steel rails. Small railroads were connected into new longer railroads. Commodore Vanderbilt’s New York Central expanded from New York City to Chicago. Jay Gould expanded the Erie Railroad from Cleveland to St. Louis.



Steam Locomotive

The Nation Invests in a Transcontinental Railroad

It was not this railroad expansion that attracted the nation’s attention, however. It was construction across the plains and mountains to California. The idea had been around for many years, and Abraham Lincoln was enthusiastic about it. The Republican platform in 1860 called for a railroad to the Pacific, and in 1862, Congress chartered two companies to build it. The Union Pacific was to build west from Omaha, Nebraska, and the Central Pacific would build east from Sacramento, California. Very little construction took place until after the Civil War, when many ex-soldiers were available. To add manpower, the Central Pacific brought in Chinese laborers, and the Union Pacific imported Irish workers. The two companies were in a race, and whoever laid the most track got the most government subsidies and land.

In charge of building the Union Pacific was Colonel Grenville Dodge, who understood the land they were crossing, the men who worked for him, and the problems of supply and organization. At first, all supplies came by boat up the Missouri River, but building moved quickly across the Great Plains. Construction of the Central Pacific began more slowly because workers had a harder time getting supplies, and they were soon blocked by the snowy Sierra Nevadas. Once past those mountains, however, they moved quickly, and in one day laid ten miles of track. The two rail lines were joined near Ogden, Utah, at Promontory Point on May 10, 1869.

Each used a construction company. The Union Pacific used Credit Mobilier and the Central Pacific used the Contract and Finance Company. Both companies made huge profits at the expense of the railroads and, in effect, were robbing the government and railroad stockholders. When the Credit Mobilier scandal broke, it showed that stock had been sold at a low price to the vice president of the United States and some important members of Congress.

The nation was connected from coast to coast by rails and not just the Union and Central Pacific railroad to California. Congress also chartered the Northern Pacific (1864), Atlantic & Pacific (1866), and Texas & Pacific (1871). Along with state-chartered railroads, they carried cattle and wheat from the West and brought in new settlers.

