



The Work of Giants

by Ming Chen

The Transcontinental Railroad

Today you can board a plane in St. Louis and arrive in San Francisco about four hours later. You might even sit and enjoy a movie while traveling. However, two hundred years ago, that same trip took many weeks. The journey was uncomfortable and often dangerous. Travelers had to cross mountains, rivers, and canyons. They had to face the blazing heat of the deserts and freezing temperatures as they crossed mountains. Many people dreamed of ways to make the trip easier and faster. Their dream was to build a railroad connecting East and West.

Not everyone shared that dream, however. Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, said, “It is perfect insanity, or the next step to it, for anyone to indulge in further discussion about . . . a railroad from the Mississippi to the Pacific Coast . . .” Many Americans agreed with him. The difficulties in building a transcontinental railroad seemed too great.

The Dream Takes Shape

The dreamers won over those who doubted, and plans were drawn for a railway connecting East and West. This was not an easy task. The first problem was deciding on the route. Senators from the North and the South argued for the railway to pass through their states. When the Civil War began, however, the Southern senators left Congress and the Northerners took charge of the plan.

Getting from Here to There

The next problem was getting materials to California. The process took many months. Everything had to be shipped from New York, around South America, and then to San Francisco. From there all materials had to be put on smaller boats for the 120-mile trip to Sacramento, California.

Once the materials and machines were in place, workers had to be hired. Thousands were needed, yet only hundreds could be found. The Civil War and the California gold rush took most men away from railroad work. If not for workers who came from China, the railroad would never have been built.

The Work Begins

In 1863 work on the railroad finally began. The Union Pacific started building west from the Mississippi River. The Central Pacific moved east from Sacramento. At first construction was slow. Crews had to drill through solid rock in places. They had to build bridges across rivers and ravines.

While some workers finished the track, other workers were building the rail cars. One news reporter wrote from the Union Pacific Railroad shop in Omaha, Nebraska:

The lumber used is of three kinds, oak, ash and pine, all brought from Chicago and cut into proper lengths and thicknesses for the object designed. The material is first run through the planer, which smooths it; from there to the saw and again to the planer;

Answer Questions

then to the . . . machines, till it is at last ready for men employed for framing and bolting the car on the trucks which rest on the rails, extending through the whole length of the building. When the car is finished, it is transferred to the painting department, receives its different coats and stripes, and is then run back to the drying room. In this department there are three hundred and fifty hands employed . . . and the average wages of the men is about \$3.50 each per day

All the problems were finally solved. Six years later the two crews met in Promontory, Utah. Through a great deal of money, the backbreaking work of thousands, and many risks, a railroad linking the East and West coasts of North America became a reality.

Building the Transcontinental Railroad truly was a heroic effort. William Tecumseh Sherman, a famous Civil War general, wrote in a letter to his brother: “If it is ever built, it will be the work of giants.”

Railroad

Engine

Fierce and smoky,

Roaring, belching, slashing

Slicing up the grassy prairie

Wild beast



Tip

You have to think about the entire selection to choose the best answer.

Directions: Answer the questions.**1. What is the theme of the selection?**

- A The Transcontinental Railroad should not have been built.
- B Building the Transcontinental Railroad took tremendous effort.
- C The problems in building the Transcontinental Railroad were minor.
- D Important people with money made the Transcontinental Railroad possible.

2. Which of these BEST describes the viewpoints of the poet and the author of the selection?

- A Both believe that the work on the railroads was a positive influence.
- B The author thinks the railway is great, and the poet does not.
- C Both writers are angry about the hardships of working on the railroad.
- D The poet thinks the work was worthwhile, but the author does not.

3. What does the word *construction* mean on page 635?

- A moving from one place to another
- B taking something apart
- C the act of building something
- D the process of clearing land

4. The news reporter's account of the railroad shop is an example of a primary source. Why do you think it is included here?**5. Why was the building of the railroad called the work of giants? What challenges did the railroad workers face? Use details from the selection to support your answer.****Writing Prompt**

Write a speech to persuade people to work on the railroad. Include the benefits and hardships workers will have to face. Your speech should be at least three paragraphs long.

