



Primary Sources

in American History

Controversial and Exciting Times

The prospect of railroads linking the nation was not always met with enthusiasm, especially in the early days. In 1827, the *Boston Courier* ran an editorial that asserted: "The project of a railroad from Boston to Albany is impracticable, as every one knows who knows the simplest rule of arithmetic, and the expense would be little less than the market value of the whole of Massachusetts; and which, if practicable, every person of common sense knows would be as useless as a railroad from Boston to the moon." In a similar vein, the first excerpt, taken from a popular paperback pamphlet of jokes and stories aimed at making fun of the railroads, laments the coming of the iron horse. But there was no stopping progress, as the second selection demonstrates. This piece describes the activity as the Central Pacific railroad crew attempted to break the Union Pacific crew's record of laying 8 miles of track in one day. The Central Pacific did break the record—they laid 10 miles of track in one day. The final selection is an eyewitness account by Alexander Toponce of the historic occasion when the rails of the transcontinental railroad were joined to unite America's east and west.

As you read the selections, notice how attitudes shifted in the years from the building of the first railroads to the final linking of the east and west coasts by rail.

Why the Railroads Ain't No Good

One time there was a bunch of surveyors come down here, and the word got around that they was going to build a railroad. Some of the town people thought it would be a fine thing, but us country folks was against railroads. There was a fellow name of Bib Tarkey run the blacksmith shop in them days, and we listened to him because he knowed all about machinery. "Them heavy trains shakes the ground," says Bib, "and the acorns will be jarred off'n the trees. The razorbacks [hogs] can't fatten without mast [acorns as food for hogs], and we won't have no hog-meat."

"There's a lot of steam comes out of them contraptions," says old man Ledbetter. "Live steam wilts grass and spoils the pasture. The stink off a train will poison every fish in the creek. Them steam whistles scares the deer and turkeys plumb out of the country. Some say it makes the cattle so jumpy they won't eat." Bib just nodded his head, and he says the engine throws so many sparks it is bound to

set the woods afire, and burn up the crops anyhow.

Bud Standlee says it is bad enough when the train kills pigs and cows and horses, but if little children get on the track accidental it will run over them too, and even old folks going to church in their buggy. It's enough to make your blood run cold, he says. And also them steel rails draw lightning like a dog's tail, and they always string telegraph wires along the track besides. And who knows what will happen with all that electricity running loose in the ground? Some say it is magnetism that causes dry weather, or maybe brings on chills and fever, too.

There was a jackleg [unprofessional] preacher come along while the boys was a-talking, and he says railroads is wrong on principle, because there ain't no Bible for it. Oxen and horses and wagons and boats is mentioned in the Book, but the Lord don't say nothing about railroads. It is natural for

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wagons to run and boats to float. But a iron machine that goes a-screaming through the woods with fire in its belly is against nature, and there won't no good come of it.

Well, the city people had the money, so they went ahead and built the railroad anyhow. They fetched in gangs of foreigners to lay the tracks, and there wasn't nothing we could do about it. The first passenger train come through in nineteen-and-six [1906]. They've been a-running regular ever since, except the time the bridge washed out. Lots of old-timers just sold their farms, and moved somewheres

else. But most of us have got used to the steam cars by now, and don't pay no attention to 'em.

Maybe the railroad ain't so bad as the boys figured, but it sure did bring a lot of no-good people into the country. We had to put locks on our doors, and even the smokehouse. There was a long time that the folks slept with one eye open, and the shotgun handy.

"Railroads Ain't No Good," from *Sticks in the Knapsack and Other Folk Tales*, collected by Vance Randolph (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 84.

Laying the Rails

Each of the four front men ran thirty feet with one hundred and twenty-five tons [the rail]. Each of the other four men lifted and placed one hundred and twenty tons at their end of the rails. The distance traveled was over ten miles, besides extra walking. . . . Those eight men would not consent to shift [being relieved by the next shift], and are proud of their work. . . .

Immediately in front of the eight are three pioneers, who, with shovel and by hand, set the ties thrown by the front teams in position; while this is doing, another party are distributing spikes and fresh bolts at each end of the rail, while some of the party are regulat-

ing the gauge [the space between the rails]. These tracklayers are a splendid force, and have been settled and drilled until they move like machinery. . . .

Beside the tracklayers come the spike-starters, who place all the spikes needed in position; then comes a reverend-looking [someone who looks worthy of respect] old gentleman who packs the rails and uses the line, and, by motion of his hands, directs the track-straighteners. The next men to the spike-drivers are the bolt screwers, quite a large force. Behind them come the tamperers, four hundred strong, with shovels and crow-bars. They level the

track by raising or lowering the ends of the ties [the rails sit atop the ties], and shovel in enough ballast to hold them firm. When they leave it, the line is fit for trains running twenty-five miles an hour. When all the iron thrown on the track has been laid, the handcars run to the extreme front, and the locomotive and iron train come as close to the front as possible; another two miles of iron is thrown off, and the process repeated. Alongside of the moving force are teams hauling

tools, and water-wagons. . . .

The scene is a most animated one. From the first pioneer to the last tamper, perhaps two miles, there is a thin line of 1,000 men

“. . . there is a thin line of 1,000 men advancing a mile an hour. . . .”

advancing a mile an hour; the iron cars with their living and iron freight, running up and down; mounted men galloping backward and forward. Far in the rear are trains of material, with four or five locomotives, and their water-tanks and cars. . . . Keeping pace with the track-layers was the telegraph construction party, hauling out, and hanging, and insulating the wire, and when the train of offices and houses stood still, connection was made with the operator's office, and the business of the road transacted. . . .

San Francisco *Evening Bulletin*, April 29, 1869.

Primary Sources in American History *Continued***An Eyewitness Describes a Historic Occasion**

I saw the Golden Spike driven at Promontory, Utah, on May 10, 1869. I had a beef contract to furnish meat to the construction camps. . . . The Golden Spike could have been driven a couple of weeks earlier than it was. But the two companies had settled on Promontory as the meeting place some days prior to the actual meeting. . . .

If the Union Pacific had crowded their work as hard as the Central Pacific did in the last two weeks the Golden Spike would have been driven a good many miles to the west. The Union Pacific employed white labor, largely Irish, and the Central Pacific had Chinese labor. The Irish and Chinese met on Promontory Hill. . . .

On the last day only about 100 feet of rails were laid, and everybody tried to have a hand in the work. I took a shovel from an Irishman, and threw a shovel full of dirt on the ties just to tell about it afterward. . . .

California furnished the Golden Spike. Governor Tuttle of Nevada furnished one of silver. Governor Stanford . . . presented one of gold, silver, and iron from Arizona. The last tie was of California laurel.

When they came to drive the last spike, Governor Stanford, president of the Central Pacific, took the sledge, and the first time he struck he missed the spike and hit the rail.

What a howl went up! Irish, Chinese, Mexicans, and everybody yelled with delight. Everybody slapped everybody else on the back and yelled, "He missed it. Yee!" The engineers blew the whistles and rang their bells. Then Stanford tried it again and tapped the spike and the telegraph operators had fixed their instruments so that the tap was reported in all the offices, east and west, and set bells to tapping in hundreds of towns and cities. . . .

Then Vice President T. C. Durant of the Union Pacific took up the sledge and he missed the spike the first time. Then everybody slapped everybody else again and yelled, "He missed it, too. Yow!"

It was a great occasion, everyone carried off souvenirs and there are enough splinters of the last tie in museums to make a good bonfire. When the connection was finally made the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific engineers ran their engines up until their pilots [metal frame on locomotive front that removes obstructions from the track] touched. Then the engineers shook hands and had their pictures taken and each broke a bottle of champagne on the pilot of the other's engine and had their pictures taken again. . . .

From Reminiscences of Alexander Toponce, Pioneer by Katie Toponce (Salt Lake City, UT: Century Printing Co., 1923), pp. 177-179.

Questions to Think About

Answer the questions below on a separate sheet of paper.

- 1. Distinguishing Fact from Opinion** What were some of the real concerns of the local people who opposed the railroads expressed in Thomas W. Jackson's excerpt?
- Do you think the opponents of the railroads were justified in their fears? What were some of the actual effects of the railroads on American life?
- The building of the transcontinental railroad was marked by the spirit of competition and cooperation. Find some examples in the newspaper account and Alexander Toponce's eyewitness account of both elements.
- Can you think of some inventions that came after the railroad that have created the same kind of controversy and excitement as the building of the railroads did in the 1800s?

