The Transcontinental Railroad

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. The first passenger railroads in the United States were built in the 1820s in the Northeast. The railroads connected towns and cities, making it easier to travel, ship goods and spread ideas from one place to another. Soon Americans began to clamor for a transcontinental railroad, one that reached all the way to the West Coast. This demand was rooted in Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny was the belief that Americans had the right to control all the land from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. It was a way to morally justify westward expansion, while at the same time displacing Native Americans, Mexicans and other groups from their land.

Notes

2. Congress discussed plans for a transcontinental railroad in the 1840s and 50s, but these discussions ended in disagreement. Northerners wanted routes built in the North, and Southerners wanted routes in the South. In 1861, 11 Southern states seceded, and the Civil War began. With that secession, the Union states could proceed with the First Transcontinental Railroad.

Notes

In 1862, Congress passed the Homestead Act of 1862. This act encouraged settlers to "go west," claim land and create a homestead. Later that same year, Congress passed the Pacific Railway Act, which promised government bonds and land grants to companies that would build railroads across western lands. The act created fierce competition between the two companies that built the railroad: the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific. The Central Pacific started in Sacramento, California and build eastward. The Union Pacific started in Omaha, Nebraska and built westward. Both companies tried to lay track as fast as possible to get the most money from the government.

3. Both railroad companies faced challenges. The Central Pacific started in Sacramento and had to cross the Sierra Nevada mountain range. The mountains were about 70 miles wide and got a lot of snow, making construction difficult and dangerous. It was also hard for the Central Pacific to find workers. Many people got injured or died while blasting through the rock. The Central Pacific ended up hiring tens of thousands of Chinese immigrant workers, which was controversial at the time.

Another challenge was getting supplies. The Pacific Railway Act stated that the rail materials had to be made in the US. But since there wasn't a reliable rail system yet, supplies had to be shipped from the East Coast by sea. Ships would carry supplies south to Panama and back up to California, or all the way around the southern tip of South America. It took a lot of time and money for these to be delivered.

Notes

4. The Union Pacific had an easier path to travel than the Central Pacific. It laid rails mostly through the flat Great Plains. It also had less trouble finding workers. Many Union Pacific workers were Irish immigrants. The Union Pacific did have trouble with corruption. The vice president of the company, Thomas "Doc" Durant, used his power to concoct a money-making hoax. He and his partner cheated the federal government out of millions of dollars. He and other railroad tycoons became known as robber barons. Durant was later exposed as a fraud and investigated by Congress.

Notes

5. Because the Pacific Railway Act didn't specify a meeting point, the Union Pacific and Central Pacific both raced to work faster than the other. At the beginning of 1869, the two companies were working just miles from each other. In March of that year, the newly inaugurated President Ulysses S. Grant announced that the two companies would have to decide on a meeting point. Otherwise, he would withhold federal funds. The companies agreed on Promontory Summit in northern Utah. On May 10, 1869, the final spike was driven to connect the rails of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific.

Notes

6. The building of the Transcontinental Railroad had both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, it made travel much faster and easier. People could ride from the East Coast to the West Coast in one week instead of six months by wagon. Coal, minerals and other resources from the West Coast were more easily shipped around the country. On the other hand, the railroad began the destruction of natural resources like lumber. Animal populations like buffalo also suffered. It also hastened the migration of white Americans to the West and the displacement of Native Americans from their land. It effectively ended the Native Americans' traditional way of life.

Notes