

# Transcontinental Railroad

## Summary

This lesson helps illustrate the importance of the railroad in the settlement of the west.

**Enduring Understanding:** Students will understand the development of the American West following the Civil War.

Essential Questions:

What impact did the railroad have on western development?

What impact did the expansion of the railroad have on American Indian nations?

## Time Frame

3 class periods of 45 minutes each

## Group Size

Large Groups

## Materials

Copies of the The Homestead Act of May 20, 1862 and The Pacific Railway Act July 1, 1862 for each student.

## Background for Teachers

Teachers should be aware of the role the completion of the transcontinental railroads played in the settlement of the American West.

## Student Prior Knowledge

It would be helpful if students had some familiarity with primary documents.

## Instructional Procedures

Adapted from a lesson plan created by Joan Brodsky Schur

**Activity 1** With your class view a political map of the United States in 1860. (see attached)

Step 1 Ask the class to imagine that they are living in 1860 when a political map of the United States looked like this. Ask the class the following questions:

In 1860 did the United States encompass land from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts?

How many states existed in 1860?

Was there any land which was owned by the United States government but which was not yet admitted into the Union as a state?

What is the difference between a state and a territory?

How did a territory become a state? (see attached copy of the Northwest Ordinance)

Why do students think so few Easterners settled in between the states fronting the Mississippi River and the states of California and Oregon? In other words, why did people cross the continent to settle California and Oregon in great enough numbers to entitle them to become states, but bypass settling the Great Plains? (An atlas showing climate and vegetation may be useful here.)

Compare the maps from 1860 & 1870. What accounts for the differences?

Step 2 Ask students to consider the following:

Were there good water sources on the plains?

If there were few trees, with what would settlers build? What would they use for fuel?

What means of transportation existed at this time to either transport settlers and goods onto the plains, or transport the goods they produced to markets elsewhere?

What means of communication existed to connect those settling the plains with people on either the eastern or western seaboard?

What American Indian tribes lived in these areas, and how might they have survived? (see attached map)

Step 3 Now ask students the final two interrelated questions of this part of the lesson:

How could the government play a role in enticing people to settle the Great Plains? While a map of the United States would show many railroads in the North (fewer in the South) in 1860, none reached across the Great Plains or linked the country coast to coast. How could railroad companies be encouraged by the government to build a railroad to service a part of the country where there were as yet no significant numbers of United States citizens? Conversely, why should settlers come when there was no railroad?

## **Activity 2**

Step 1 As a class, answer the following questions about the Homestead Act of 1862:

What is the purpose of this act?

What is meant by the term "public domain"?

Who is entitled to secure a grant of land from the Federal Government? Can women secure such a grant in their own names, and if so, how?

What is the largest amount of land a person can secure from the Federal government through this act?

How would one go about applying for land under the act (filing the affidavit)?

How long would one have to wait in between filing an affidavit and securing final title to the land one settled? What did a settler need to do in the meantime?

How much per acre did land under the Homestead Act cost?

The Homestead Act was meant to insure that United States citizens who actually wanted to farm land were the recipients of the government's largess. Who else might have wanted to profit from this deal, and how? How is the law trying to prevent various abuses?

Step 2 As a class, answer the following questions about the Pacific Railway Act of 1862:

What is the purpose of this act?

What is the Union Pacific Railroad Company empowered by this act to do?

Mark on a map the route that the transcontinental railroad will follow.

What will be the most difficult terrain on which to lay track?

What other difficulties do you foresee in terms of crews of men living and working in a variety of environments as they lay tracks?

Why do you think the government is providing for the building of telegraph poles along the length of the railroad?

The act is giving the railroad the right of way on public lands. How much land on either side of tracks does this include? What does the government promise to do if American Indian tribes claim title to this land?

In Section 3 the act provides the railroad with more land than what is needed to give it a right of way. Why will this land fronting the railroad tracks be even more valuable than land given to homesteaders at a distance from the railway?

What method of financing the railway does the bill propose in Section 5?

Under what terms is the Central Pacific Railroad Company of California authorized to build a railway headed east? Since the bonds will be awarded based on completed mileage of railway track, which company would ultimately be awarded the most money? How does this set up a competition between the two railways?

The Central Pacific Railroad had to lay track in the mountainous region of the Sierra Nevadas, one of the most difficult endeavors of the entire enterprise. This will obviously take much more time than laying tracks on the flat plains. How does the government plan to compensate the

companies for the laying of track over mountainous terrain?

### **Activity 3**

Step 1 Divide the class into three groups and ask each group to do the following:

- **Railway owners**

As railway owners you will want to maximize your profits. Your lawyers are ready to look over both acts to see how your company can make the most money. As a group plan whatever strategies you can to do so. (In your thinking, be sure to include use of the land you will acquire.)

- **Land Speculators**

You are neither settlers nor railway owners, but people who want to buy land as cheaply as possible and then re-sell it at a much higher rate. Your lawyers will look at both these acts to find as many loopholes as possible for ways in which you can purchase land for re-sale.

- **Settlers**

You are people who want to purchase land for farming. The Homestead Act seems like the bonanza you have been waiting for. However, profiting from both these acts may be harder than you imagine. Discuss the various difficulties you may face in terms of staking your claim to land, holding on to it, and making it profitable.

Step 2 Now have each group present their strategies to the class. Each group should answer the following questions in their presentation.

What conflicts are evident?

What problems do students foresee, if any?

### Extensions

PBS video The West Episode 5 "The Grandest Enterprise Under God"

### Assessment Plan

Students will be assessed on active participation in class. Students will also be assigned a multi paragraph essay answering the following questions:

What did the government do to help the railroads?

How did the railroads change the ways settlers came to the West?

How would the perspective of the group you belonged to affect your outlook on the settlement and development of the west?

### Rubrics

[6+1 Trait Writing Rubric](#)

### Bibliography

Joan Brodsky Schur, New Perspectives on the West web site,  
[www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/lesson\\_plans/lesson01.htm](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/lesson_plans/lesson01.htm)

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