



## The Transcontinental Railroad featuring Work Songs Collected by John Lomax

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

In what ways did the Transcontinental Railroad contribute to the physical, cultural, and musical growth of the American West in the late 19th Century?

#### OVERVIEW

“Done”

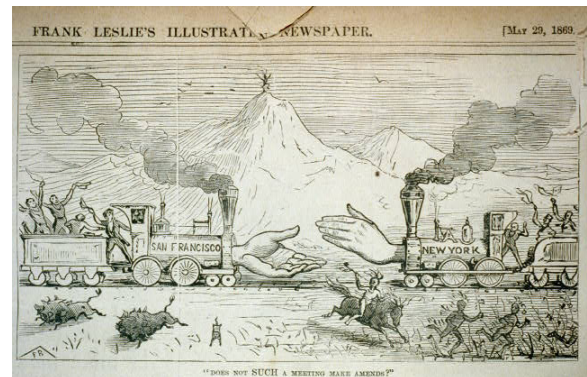
**-Telegraph message announcing the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, May 10, 1869**

*In this lesson, students will examine the role the railroads played in the growth of cities and towns in the American West through the analysis of songs, images, and artifacts. Students will also explore the impact of the railroads on the cultural diffusion of art, literature, and music of the diverse populations settling in the west.*

“Done.” One word that forever changed the country. The Transcontinental Railroad was a home on the range game changer. With the federal government fully on board, land was the reward. Work was plenty, workers were many, and the end result was extraordinary. The railroad adjusted time and space, and the result was a whole new pace. By connecting the existing eastern U.S. rail networks to the west coast, the Transcontinental Railroad (known originally as the “Pacific Railroad”) became the first continuous railroad line across the United States.

Constructed between 1863 and 1869, this enormously challenging and unprecedented project was a profitable partnership between corporations and the federal government. And while financed by the federal government and organized by private enterprise, this feat of engineering was built by workers, laboring in life-threatening conditions for little pay. These railroad workers, many of whom were immigrants from countries such as Ireland and China, often sang songs to accompany their work and to make their days labor more tolerable. The lyrics to these songs often detailed the work itself, with titles such as “Take This Hammer,” “Steel-driving Song,” and, of course “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” Thanks to song collectors such as John Lomax, these Railroad songs were recorded, becoming both a historical record and an indelible contribution to American music and culture.

Once finished, the Transcontinental Railroad supported and transported rapid western migration and facilitated a remarkable expansion of economic development, economic opportunity, and



Beard, Frank, Artist. “Does not such a meeting make amends?” / FB. Utah, 1869. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2002720304/>.

prosperity. One outcome of this rail-based retail revolution and a residual benefit to consumers of this rail-based economy was the birth of mail order shopping. For that we have the Sears catalog to thank.

The Sears catalog changed everything, and it rode on the rails to build, supply, and entertain this country. It began in 1886 by railroad agent Richard Sears, who was trying to sell watches. This blossomed into a remarkable general mail order business where suddenly settlers, rural folks, city dwellers, and anyone could order by phone or mail and have their goods delivered by rail to their town, no matter where it was. This great grandparent of Amazon could sell you just about anything, and it was all there in the Sears catalog. Among the many items available were houses that arrived in a kit on rail cars, and musical instruments to entertain and delight the diverse population of Americans making their way in the American West. This cross pollination of music and culture now had instruments to amplify and contribute to what it meant to be an American. Settlers could share their songs from the “old country” in the “new country.” The availability of musical instruments played a role by providing entertainment and preserving cultural traditions. This fostered and allowed for the creation of new musical styles and reflected the multiculturalism of the region by providing a shared experience.

One perhaps unintended result, is that this new mail order opportunity brought marginalized communities into the world of consumerism. The anonymity afforded by mail order buying removed the struggles and blatant racism often associated with in-store shopping during the Jim Crow era. The iconic and influential blues artist, Muddy Waters purchased a used Sears guitar as a young boy. It is often said that there would be no Delta Blues without the availability of cheap, steel string guitars that Sears began to sell in 1894. In many ways, this colorful catalog of consumerism provided freedom and a small measure of equality in the face of white supremacy and systemic inequality.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- How the Railroad Act of 1862 provided the framework for the partnership between government and private business in the effort to build the First Transcontinental railroad
- The economic and social impacts of the railroad on life in the American West
- The experiences of different groups of people working on the railroads and the role music played for the workers
- How the Sears catalog, made possible by the Transcontinental railroad, provided the instruments to entertain and preserve cultural traditions

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to assess the significance of the Transcontinental Railroad on the development of the United States by analyzing texts, examining media, and interpreting primary source documents.

## ACTIVITIES

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- A device with internet access

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students to raise their hand if they have ever moved to a new country, state, city, or school. (*Explain to students that this includes moving from elementary school to middle school, or middle school to high school, ensuring that likely all students will raise their hand.*)
2. Instruct students to form groups of two and then ask students to share their experiences moving with their partner.
3. Instruct pair groups to join another pair group creating groups of four and ask them to share their experiences with their new group members.
4. Bring the class back together for a whole group conversation using the guiding questions below:
  - Why do people move away and change locations?
  - Have you ever moved to a new country, new state, new community, new house?
  - Where did you move from?
  - Where did you move to?
  - Was it your choice to move?
  - What do you remember about the process?
  - How did moving make you feel?
  - What do you miss most about where you came from?
  - What keywords would you use to describe this experience?

## PROCEDURE

1. Display **Image 1, American Progress**. Assess familiarity with the painting and the concept by asking the class informally if they have ever seen the painting and if they have ever heard of the concept, Manifest Destiny. Using the **Teacher’s Guide for Analyzing Photographs and Prints from the Library of Congress** as a guide, have students examine the painting closely and assess its message, its symbolism, and its inherent bias. Focus on the following questions from the Teacher’s Guide: Analyzing Photographs & Prints:

- Describe what you see.
- What did you notice first?
- What is the physical setting?
- What are the modes of transportation in the image?
- Why do you think this image was made?
- What can you learn from examining this image?
- What do you wonder about while viewing the image?
- What do you think the message of this image is?

2. Display **Image 2, Map of land-grant and bond-aided railroads of the United States (1892)**, or allow students to examine the image from their devices. Instruct students to partner with a classmate. Using the **Teacher’s Guide for Analyzing Maps from the Library of Congress** as a guide, have students analyze the map. Focus on the following questions from the Teacher’s Guide: Analyzing Maps:

- What is the first thing you notice about this map? Find something unique and

interesting.

- What do you notice that you can’t explain?
- Can you locate your location on the map?
- Is your hometown on or near a railroad line?
- Do any of your extended family and friends live on or near a railroad line?
- Have you ever been to any towns or cities that have a rail line running through it?
- Have you ever been on a train? If not, do you want to?
- Do you have an opinion about trains one way or another?

3. Play the video “The Great Pacific Railway” from PBS Learning Media. Then, ask students:

- How did the U.S. Government contribute to the planning and building of the railroad? (*The US Government passed the Pacific Railway Act in 1862, designated the route, and provided bonds to fund the project and large land grants to clear the route.*)
- In what ways did the business and government partnership mutually benefit each other? (*The government promised bonds to fund the construction and awarded companies 6,400 acres of land and \$48,000 for every 10 miles of track completed. Railroad companies accumulated enormous wealth as a result of this partnership and the railroad was completed.*)
- In your opinion, did the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad elevate the

status of the United States in the world view at the start of the 20th Century? (*The completed railroad elevated confidence in America, changed the way the world viewed the US as this transformative project became a symbol of America's industrial power and potential.*)

4. Play the audio, "I've Been Working on the Railroad" by the Sandhill 16. Then ask students:
  - Have you heard this song before? Where?
  - Why might have people written songs about the railroad?
  - What type of people might sing this song at the end of the 19th century?
5. Explain to students that the construction of the railroads relied on workers who were often paid very little. To pass the time railroad workers would often sing work songs, many of which were about the railroad. Tell students that they will be listening to some railroad songs recorded by American folklorist and "song collector" John Lomax.
6. Divide students into groups and distribute **Handout - Railroad Song Analysis**. Instruct groups to complete Part 1 of the handout using their devices, then ask students to share the song they chose and the answers to the questions with the class.
7. Instruct students to complete Part 2 of the handout, and then share their answers with the class.
8. Display **Image 3, Traveling Across the Country**. Ask students to divide into groups and discuss the following question:
  - What are some ways the rapid decrease in travel time across the country might have changed American society and culture?
9. Remind students that the Transcontinental Railroad didn't just transport people, it transported goods. It allowed customers to order goods by mail, and have their purchases delivered without having to travel long distances. The Sears company was one of the first businesses to capitalize on this new form of shopping through its mail-order catalog.
10. Distribute **Handout - Musical Instrument Pages from 1927 Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalogue**. Ask students:
  - What do you notice at first from the musical instrument pages?
  - What did you learn from viewing these pages?
  - What do these pages reveal about musical instrument preferences?
  - What factors might influence a buyer looking for a musical instrument?
11. Play the NPR audio clip, "How The Sears Catalog Was Revolutionary In The Jim Crow Era" (<https://www.npr.org/2018/10/16/657923126/how-the-sears-catalog-was-revolutionary-in-the-jim-crow-era>) Then ask students:
  - How was the Sears catalog considered "radical" in its approach to shopping?
  - What obstacles did black shoppers face in the Jim Crow Era?
  - What was the role of the Sears catalog in helping marginalized communities?

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

### 1. Ask students:

- How do people purchase goods today? Is there anything like the Sears catalog, where you can order something to be delivered to you?
- ### 2. Inform students that online shopping requires infrastructure, like the railroads provided for mail order shopping. Display **Image 3, Internet Timeline: The First 10 Years**. Read the timeline together as a class, then ask students:
- When was the internet invented? (*1969*)
  - What sort of organizations, institutions, and groups helped invent the internet and funded its invention? (*The U.S. Department of Defense, universities, private businesses, and individuals.*)
  - What role did the United States government play in the development of the internet? What about nonprofit organizations, businesses, and individual citizens? (*The U.S. Government financed the development of the internet by funding scientists through grants and other programs, which allowed researchers, companies, and individuals to help create the internet.*)
  - In what ways was the development of the internet similar to the development of the railroads? In what ways was it different? (*Both were public-private partnerships in which the Federal Government helped finance an infrastructure project.*)

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Read more about the Transcontinental Railroad on the Library of Congress website: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/railroad-maps-1828-to-1900/articles-and-essays/history-of-railroads-and-maps/the-transcontinental-railroad/>.
2. Read and then summarize this blog post about poet's Henry David Thoreau's view of the railroad: [https://blogs.loc.gov/inside\\_adams/2019/08/thoreaus-view-of-the-railroad-thoreau-the-railroad-and-the-cost-of-industrialization/](https://blogs.loc.gov/inside_adams/2019/08/thoreaus-view-of-the-railroad-thoreau-the-railroad-and-the-cost-of-industrialization/)
3. Read more about railroad workers on the Central and Union Pacific Railroads: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/tcrr-workers-central-union-pacific-railroad/>

## STANDARDS

### COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC LIFE (C3) SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

#### *History*

D2.His.8.9-12. Analyze how current interpretations of the past are limited by the extent to which available historical sources represent perspectives of people at the time.

D2.His.10.9-12. Detect possible limitations in various kinds of historical evidence and differing secondary interpretations.

### MASSACHUSETTS HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE FRAMEWORK STANDARDS

#### *Topic 1. The role of economics in modern United States history [USII.T1]*

9. Analyze the impact of events such as wars and technological developments on business cycles. Examples: the impact of the Civil War; the impact of the expansion of canals and railroads in the 19th century and the invention of space-age technology and the Internet in the 20th century.

#### *Topic 3. Economic growth in the North, South, and West [USI.T3]*

1. Explain the importance of the Transportation Revolution of the 19th century (e.g., the introduction of steamboats, canals, roads, bridges, turnpikes, and railroad networks; the completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad and its stimulus to east/west trade, the growth of Midwestern towns and cities, and the strengthening of a market economy).

#### *Topic 6. Rebuilding the United States: industry and immigration [USI.T6]*

Using primary source images, data, and documents, describe the causes of the immigration of Germans, the Irish, Italians, Eastern Europeans, Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the major roles of these immigrants in industrialization and the building of railroads.

### DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

#### *11.3. Students analyze the social and economic contributions of immigrants to the building of cities and the economy during the Industrial Revolution.*

2. Trace the expansion and development of Western railroads (the Transcontinental Railroad), the Golden Spike event (1869), and the role that Chinese immigrant laborers (Central Pacific track) and Irish immigrant laborers (Union Pacific track) played in its construction. (G, E, S)



## NEW JERSEY STUDENT LEARNING STANDARDS - SOCIAL STUDIES

### *Era 4. Civil War and Reconstruction (1850–1877)*

6.1.12.GeoPP.5.a: Explain how the Homestead Act, the availability of land and natural resources, and the development of transcontinental railroads and waterways promoted the growth of a nationwide economy and the movement of populations.

## SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Theme 8: Science, Technology, and Society

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

### *College and Career Readiness Reading Information Text Standards for Grades 11-12*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing for Grades 9-12*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.





CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 9-12*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.



CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.



## RESOURCES

### HANDOUTS

- Handout - Railroad Song Analysis
- Handout - Musical Instrument Pages from 1927 Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalogue