

The Celestials' Railroad

On the Utah prairie where a thousand workers had gathered for the ceremony, four Chinese men carried an iron rail toward the track. It was the last link in the railroad that within moments would span the continent.

From Gold Fields to Railroads

The date was May 10, 1869. The Union Pacific locomotive stood to one side and the Central Pacific to the other. The Chinese workers were known as “coolies,” “heathens,” and, because they called China the Celestial Kingdom, “Celestials.” Few of their fellow railroad workers bothered to learn their names. On the job, they were all called “John Chinaman.” No one knows their

names today. But it was on the backs of the Chinese workers that the first transcontinental railroad was built.

For the Chinese, the work began as an experiment. Many Chinese men had come to America during the first California gold rush. When they did not strike it rich in the goldfields, they sought other work—but faced discrimination instead.

Then in 1863, Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroad tycoons agreed to build a coast-to-coast link. The Union Pacific would head west from Omaha, Nebraska, while the Central Pacific would extend east from Sacramento, California. The two companies mapped the routes, raised the money, and hired the workers.

Despite all their hard labor, not one Chinese worker was present for this photo taken at the joining of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads.



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Within a year, the Union Pacific was well into Nebraska, but the Central Pacific had bogged down at the edge of the Sierra Nevada mountains. In California, most men were busy searching for gold or silver. To complete his contract, railroad magnate Charles Crocker needed help. Over the protests of his workers, Crocker turned to Chinese workers.

Impressive Workers

In February 1865, 50 Chinese men were transported by flatcar to the rail's end in the Sierra foothills. While other workers jeered and threatened to strike, these laborers calmly set up camp, boiled rice provided by the company, and went to sleep. Up at dawn, with picks and shovels in hand, they worked 12 hours straight without complaint. Crocker was impressed by their work ethic. By sundown, Crocker had telegraphed his office in Sacramento: "Send more Chinese." Within a few months, 3,000 Chinese workers were pushing the Central Pacific eastward. By the end of 1865, more than 6,000 Chinese were working on the railroad.



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As the Central Pacific soared toward Donner Summit at the top of the Sierras, the Chinese took jobs no one else would touch. They hung like dolls from ropes draped over the edges of cliffs and tapped holes into the sides of mountains. After inserting dynamite, they jerked the ropes and were yanked upward. If they were lucky, they cleared the explosion and lived to tap

Wearing wide-brimmed hats, Chinese workers labored on the tracks as the Central Pacific pushed eastward from Sacramento.



This tea carrier brings refreshment to Chinese workers.

A Temporary Stay

The Chinese were unique in America's westward expansion because they were one of the few immigrant groups that did not come to settle permanently. Drawn for many of the same reasons as Americans who were looking for a better life or religious freedom, immigrant groups from around the world established small communities throughout the West. Most Chinese migrants, however, were men who had left their families behind in China. Their intention was to work hard, save their money, and return to their homeland.

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Snow didn't stop work on the railroad. Here, Chinese laborers dig a train out of a drift near Ogden, Utah.

more holes. If not, they fell into the gorge below.

Chinese workers blasted tunnels with nitroglycerin when other workers would not touch the explosive liquid. They graded hillsides. They chopped trees. They carried dirt in wheelbarrows, filled huge gorges with it, leveled it, and laid railroad ties evenly across it. Other workers then laid the iron rails and hammered them down while the Chinese went ahead to prepare the next mile.

Healthier Habits

Most other workers ate stale meat and drank brackish water or whiskey. But even high in the mountains,

Chinese workers dined on oysters and cuttlefish brought in by rail from San Francisco. They ate vegetables and rice and drank only tea. Crossing Donner Summit at 7,000 feet, many other workers took sick or quit, but the Chinese kept going.

Mobs of white workers tormented the Chinese at every camp along the way. But across Nevada and into Utah, the Central Pacific inched toward the Union Pacific. And on April 27, 1869, Central Pacific crews, by then 90 percent Chinese, laid 10 miles of track in a single day—a new record.

Left Out of History

By the time the two railroads met at Promontory, Utah, the Central Pacific employed 12,000 Chinese workers. Together with the Union Pacific crews, they watched as railroad tycoons drove in their golden spikes. But when the cameras recorded the event, the Chinese workers were left out of the picture.

On May 10, 1869, the single word "Done!" was telegraphed across the continent. Finished with their monumental task, the Chinese laborers rode the Central Pacific back across the track they had laid. Some went back to "Chinatown" communities in Sacramento, San Francisco, and other cities. Others went to Canada, where they helped build the Canadian Pacific Railroad, or worked on routes in California. Many spread out across the West, finding work or staking claims in mining towns such as Deadwood, South Dakota, and Tombstone, Arizona. Their labor and sacrifice had connected the east and west coasts of the growing nation.