TEN MILE DAY
AND THE BUILDING OF THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD
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Question of the Week
What challenges do immigrants encounter?

Genre
Expository texts tell the story of an event or a series of events that really happened. As you read, think about how the author arranges the information about the event.
Before the 1860s, no railway ran all the way across the United States. In fact, there weren’t any tracks at all west of Omaha, Nebraska. But in 1862, Congress passed the Pacific Railroad Act, and the task of joining the coasts by rail began. The Union Pacific team started out building west from Omaha, and the Central Pacific team began in Sacramento, California, and built east. Promontory Summit, Utah, was chosen as their meeting place.

When Charles Crocker, the construction boss for the Central Pacific, learned that the Union Pacific had set a record of a little more than seven miles of track laid in one day, he claimed that his men could lay ten miles. The president of the Union Pacific said it couldn’t be done, and offered ten thousand extra dollars to the team if they could succeed.

Early in the morning of April 28, 1869, Crocker and James Strobridge, his right-hand man, called for volunteers for the difficult task ahead. Each crew was promised four times its normal wages if it could meet the challenge. Nearly all of the team leaders stepped forward. Fourteen hundred of the Central Pacific’s best laborers, both Irish and Chinese, were selected out of the almost five thousand volunteers.

At 7 A.M., all eyes rested on Charles Crocker as he steadied his horse beside the grade. The crews knew it would take sixteen railroad flatcars to carry everything they needed to lay two miles of track. Five trains, each made up of an engine and sixteen flatcars, now waited. Some stood at the end of the rails and others were parked on the sidings, the tracks built beside the main road. Wooden ties had already been placed along the entire ten mile route. Everything was set to go.

With a sharp command to the bosses, Crocker’s arm rose and fell. The hogger, or engineer, on the first train pulled hard on the whistle cord, and a shrill blast pierced the cold, damp morning air. The race had begun.
Chinese laborers leaped onto the flatcars of the lead train. The noise was deafening as sledgehammers knocked out the side stakes and rails tumbled to the ground. The clanging of falling iron continued for eight minutes, until the first sixteen flatcars were empty.

As the supply train was unloaded, three men rushed to the end of the rails, what they called the end o’ track. The three pioneers scrambled ahead to the first loose ties. Then they began lifting, prying, and shoving to center the bare ties on the grade.

The emptied train steamed back to the siding, and men hurried to load iron cars with exactly sixteen rails and thirty-two rail joiners, or fishplates, each. A crew of six Chinese workers and an Irish boss hopped aboard.

To the right of the track two horses were hitched by a long rope to an iron car. With a yell from the boss, the horses lurched against their harnesses and the cars rolled forward on the track. When the iron car reached the end o’ track, a wooden keg was smashed over the rails. The iron car rambled ahead as new track was laid, spilling spikes through the open bottom and onto the ground where they could be used. Dust clouds choked the air.

With the iron car moving steadily along, eight Irishmen lay rails just ahead of its rolling wheels. These “ironmen” were Michael Shay, Thomas Daley, George Elliot, Michael Sullivan, Edward Killeen, Patrick Joice, Michael Kenedy, and Fred McNamare. The four forward men seized the 560-pound, thirty-foot-long rails, while the four rear men slid the rails to the rollers on each side of the iron car. The lead ironmen ran forward. “Down,” shouted the foreman. With a loud thud the iron hit the ties within inches of the previous rail. Without a moment to rest, the eight ironmen went back for more. On average, two rails were laid every twenty seconds.

While rails clanked to the ground, the Chinese crew from the iron car loaded fishplates, nuts, and bolts into baskets attached to poles slung over their shoulders. Then they sped up the line, tossing out ironware every ten yards. Where rail ends met, another team fastened the fishplates loosely with nuts and thrusting bolts.
When each handcar was unloaded, the horses were detached from the front and hitched to the back. At a gallop they hauled the empty iron car back to the supply dump. If a returning car got in the way of a full iron car, the empty one was flipped off the track until the full car passed. Nothing slowed the flow of supplies to the end o’ track.

After a track-gauge team measured the rails to insure they were exactly four feet, eight and one-half inches apart, the new American and British standard, the rail ends were loosely fastened with fishplates.

Next came the spike setters. Each man picked up one of the spikes lying scattered beside the roadbed, then quickly set it in position with two hits. Another gang of Chinese followed. With three blows from the maul each spike was driven home, securing the rails to the ties.

Some crews had marvelous names. “Fishplate men” tightened the nuts on the thrusting bolts with long-handled wrenches. “Gandy dancers,” or “track liners,” aligned the rails to the ties using massive track bars. A foreman would sing out a simple tune with a strong beat. Like the crew on a rowboat, the gandy dancers would all push together on the final beat, aligning the rails.

Following close on their heels, a surveyor directed a rail gang that lifted the ties and shoveled dirt under them to keep the track level.

The last and largest special work team included four hundred tampers and shovellers. They used crowbars, shovels, and tamping bars to pack the ground around the rails. The crew formed three long lines, one on each side of the track and one down the middle. Each tamper gave two crunching tamps to the gravel, or ballast, before moving on, while shovellers filled in where needed.

From the first pioneer to the last tamper ran a line of men nearly two miles long. Like a mammoth machine with hundreds of well-oiled parts, Crocker’s men moved rhythmically forward. The ribbon of track rose across the plain at the pace of a walking man. Tired workers were pulled from the line and replaced. But many, including the eight iron men, showed no signs of quitting.
Alongside the grade the telegraph construction party worked frantically to keep pace with the track layers. They set the poles; hammered on the crossbars; and hauled out, hung, and insulated the wire.

The track boss stalked up and down the line, barking out commands and encouragement. The steady hammering of spikes, the rhythmic thud of iron rails, and even the men’s labored breathing beat like a drum across the barren plain.

A reporter pulled out his pocket watch and counted the rails as they were laid down. To everyone’s amazement, 240 feet of iron were placed in one minute and twenty seconds.

By 9 A.M. almost two miles of track had been spiked and tamped. Even the Union Pacific men, who had laughed at the Central Pacific crews, had to admit it was quality work.

Water, food, and tool wagons creaked up and down the line as the heat rose with the morning sun. Chinese workers wove in and out of the men, delivering water and tea to quench their thirst.

At the front Crocker and Strobridge oversaw every detail. Now and then when something amusing happened, Crocker’s merry laugh echoed from his carriage.

With the completion of another two miles of track, the second supply train pulled back to the siding and the third train steamed forward, belching thick clouds of black smoke. Next in line, ready to serve the midday meal, was the so-called Pioneer Train — the boarding house for some of the workers, and the office and living quarters of James and Hannah Strobridge.
At 1:30 the whistle sounded, calling a halt for lunch. Whirlwind No. 62, the Pioneer Train locomotive, pushed the kitchen cars up, and the boarding boss served hot boiled beef.

A quick measurement showed that six miles of track had already been laid, spiked, and bolted that morning. Whoops and hollers went up as the news spread among the men. They were now confident they could reach their goal of ten miles in one day, and they named their rest stop Camp Victory.

At 2:30 work began again, but a special crew had to be called in. The tracks were now climbing the west slope of the Promontory Mountains. The climb was steep and full of curves, and the rails had to be bent.

Lacking measuring instruments, this new crew judged the curves by sight. They jammed the rails between blocks and then slowly and carefully hammered them into the right shapes. Every rail now took extra time to mold and fit.

As the afternoon wore on, the foreman continued to ride the line, encouraging the men. Although the horses pulling the iron cars were changed every two hours, they could no longer run up the grade. Now they had to walk slowly up the steep hillside. The rail gang was dripping with sweat, and their muscles must have burned from overuse, but not one man stopped to rest. With each hour another mile of track reached toward Promontory Summit.
By 7 p.m. the sun was dipping behind Monument Point. Strobridge signaled for the final blast from the train whistle. The exhausted men cast down their tools, and the day’s work came to an abrupt end.

How much rail had the men of the Central Pacific laid? Two Union Pacific engineers took out their surveying chains and began to measure. Everyone waited for the final count. Then it came. The railhead was ten miles, fifty-six feet farther east than it had been the previous evening.

The crews flung their hats into the air, cheering and shaking hands all around. They had done the impossible again. The Union Pacific’s record was destroyed, and Thomas Durant lost the bet. A total of 3,520 rails, twice that number of fishplates, 28,160 spikes, and 14,080 nuts and bolts had been placed to complete the job.

The eight track layers were declared heroes and were featured in later histories. Each had lifted over 125 tons of iron. No single crew has ever beaten their record. The Chinese workers had once again proven themselves to their biased rivals. Each team had something to celebrate.