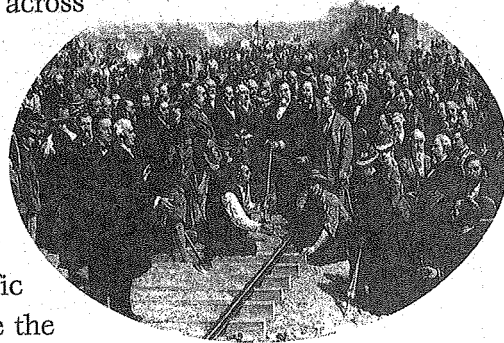


# The Transcontinental Railroad

Abraham Lincoln believed that building a railroad across the undeveloped lands of the West would be of great benefit to the country. In 1862 he signed the Pacific Railroad Act, which provided land and government loans for the construction of a **transcontinental** railroad stretching from California to the Missouri River. The act gave responsibility for building the line to two companies. The Union Pacific was to build westward from Omaha, Nebraska, while the Central Pacific was to build eastward from Sacramento, California.



In 1863 the companies set to work, each one hoping to construct more miles of track than the other. Surveyors began to map the best routes. In time they were followed by graders who prepared and leveled the road beds. As the graders moved forward, other workers laid down tracks, fastening the rails to the wooden ties with spikes. Little progress was made, though. Both companies had trouble finding laborers, and the Civil War caused shortages of materials.

The war ended in April 1865. By the following spring the Union Pacific had hired thousands of former soldiers, a majority of whom were Irish immigrants. Mile after mile, these workers pushed west across the Great Plains. At night they slept in boxcars that contained bunks three tiers high. During the day they worked from sunup to sundown, often braving harsh weather and attacks by Plains Indians who were angered by this **intrusion** on their buffalo hunting grounds.

The Central Pacific solved its labor problems in 1865 by adding thousands of Chinese immigrants to its crew of workers. This workforce, now about 80 percent Chinese, headed east through California's soaring Sierra Nevada Mountains. Using drills and explosives, blasting crews labored underground night and day to make 15 tunnels through the hard granite mountains. It was slow, dangerous work. There were avalanches, many blasting-powder accidents, and winter storms that sometimes dropped over ten feet of snow. Finally, in June 1868, the Central Pacific's road beds and rails through the Sierras were finished. Its track layers could now press forward at full speed across Nevada's flat desert.

By 1869 workers for both the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific were spiking down rails in the Utah Territory. On May 10, 1869, the tracks of these two companies were finally joined in a ceremony at Promontory Point, north of the Great Salt Lake. The Union Pacific had laid 1,086 miles of track. The Central Pacific had laid 690 miles of track. To mark the transcontinental railroad's completion, a gold spike was hammered into the last rail. As word spread that the tracks had been linked, people across the nation celebrated this great feat of engineering, made possible by the **grueling** labor of thousands of tough, brave men.

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