

Now Presenting...

The Great Transcontinental Railroad Race

Two railroad companies are in a historic race to see which one can lay the most track in the least amount of time. In the end, teamwork will distinguish the winner from the loser.

7 parts

Program..... page 135

Script.....pages 136–140

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Setting the Stage

Background

Tell students that this play is about the building of the Transcontinental Railroad. Before 1870 there were no railroads west of the Mississippi. Cross-country travel could take weeks or even months. President Lincoln personally promoted the idea of rail construction throughout the western regions, calling it a political necessity. The Pacific Railroad Act was passed in 1862, specifying the Central Pacific Railroad Company and the Union Pacific Railroad Company as contractors. The Act specified that the two companies construct a line connecting Sacramento and Omaha. However, it gave no guidelines on how the work was to be divided. Both companies were spurred to build as much as they could, as quickly as possible, thereby gaining all the glory—and hopefully making lots of money in the process.

Staging

Give students spoons or other metal implements. They may tap them together at appropriate moments in the play to mimic the sound of hammers and spikes.

Encore

After reading this script, students may enjoy learning more about the legendary John Henry. They may read some of the known facts about him, as well as learn about the legend and check out lyrics for the folk ballad on the John Henry Internet site (www.ibiblio.org/john_henry/henry.html).

Vocabulary

Be sure students are familiar with the meanings of the following words. To check comprehension, give students a synonym or a definition for each term and then have them identify the correct vocabulary word.

achieve: to accomplish or succeed in doing something

ambitious: demanding great effort and skill

exhausting: extremely tiring

feat: accomplishment

interval: a space between two things

province: a part of the country distant from the capital



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The Great Transcontinental Railroad Race

Two railroad companies: one working west, and one working east. Which one can lay the most track in the least amount of time?

Characters

Narrator..... _____

James Strobridge..... _____
(construction boss)

Charles Crocker (overseer)..... _____

Michael Shay (laborer)..... _____

Fusang Li (laborer)..... _____

Cato Haywood (laborer)..... _____

Photographer..... _____



The Great Transcontinental Railroad Race

..... Characters

Narrator	Fusang Li
James Strobridge	Cato Haywood
Charles Crocker	Photographer
Michael Shay	

Narrator: In 1863 two railroad companies began the most ambitious railway project to date. The Central Pacific Railroad Company started laying track east of Sacramento. In Omaha, the Union Pacific Railroad Company started laying track in a western direction. The two tracks were to meet somewhere between California and Nebraska. The company that worked fastest would get the most work, and therefore the most money. The race was on to finish the Transcontinental Railroad.

Strobridge: (*entering*) Afternoon, Crocker. I've got news from the tracks, if you can take it.

Crocker: (*motioning to a chair*) That doesn't sound good. Tell it to me, whatever it is.

Strobridge: Well, the Union Pacific is gaining ground. It set a new record of seven miles, eighteen hundred feet today.

Crocker: Blasted! In that case, we'll set a record of our own. Stro', I want you and the men to lay ten miles of track in one day.

Strobridge: Ten miles! In one day? It can't be done.

Crocker: Never say never, my dear fellow.



Strobridge: Miracles don't come cheap. At the rate you're talking, we'll need a lot more men. And another thing—they'll want more money to work like packhorses all day long.

Crocker: Tell them we'll pay four times their normal wages, as long as they break the record.

Narrator: The big day finally arrived. To meet the challenge, Central Pacific hired thousands of men. These workers represented the best laborers that Central Pacific could find. At 7 a.m. on April 28, 1869, a shrill whistle announced the start of the work day. This particular day would be anything but ordinary, however. It was a day that would go down in history.

Strobridge: Harness the horses, crew. They'll pull the flat cars to the end of the track.

Shay: Got it, boss. Here, Fusang. Take these spikes and put them on top of the rails on the flat car.

Fusang: Uuff! Those are heavy. All right, everything's loaded.

Strobridge: Remember, to lay ten miles of track in one day, you'll have to lay more than one mile of track per hour. Now get going!

Narrator: As the flat car moved forward, rails and spikes were spilled onto the ground. Meanwhile, workers prepared a bed of gravel. Wooden ties were placed across the gravel at regular intervals. The rails were laid over the ties and joined with iron plates, one rail in front of the other. Workers pounded spikes into the ties to secure the rails in place. When the rails and spikes were all used up, the flat cars went back for more. It was exhausting work. To keep their spirits up, the workers told jokes and sang songs. They all took different parts in these songs.

(The following lines are chanted in a singsong call-and-response rhythm.)

Strobridge: John Henry was a railroad man; he worked from six 'til five.



Haywood: “Raise up the rails and let ’em drop down; I’ll beat any man alive.”

Strobridge: John Henry said to his captain—

Haywood: “You are nothing but a lazy man; before that steam drill shall beat me down, I’ll die with my hammer in my hand.”

Strobridge: John Henry’s captain said to him—

Shay: “I believe these mountains are caving in.”

Strobridge: John Henry said to his captain—

Haywood: “Oh, Lord! That’s my hammer you hear in the wind.”

Strobridge: John Henry he said to his captain—

Haywood: “Your money is getting mighty tight. When I hammer in the very last spike, will you pay me what you owe tonight?”

Strobridge: John Henry’s captain came to him with fifty dollars in his hand. He laid his hand on his shoulder and said—

Shay: “This belongs to a steel-driving man.”

Strobridge: John Henry was hammering on the right side; the big steam drill on the left. Before that steam drill could beat him down, he hammered himself to death. John Henry was lying on his death bed; he turned over on his side. And these were the last words John Henry said—

Haywood: *(slowly, in a very deep voice)* “Bring me a cool drink of water before I die.”

(End song.)

Crocker: That was a good one. Speaking of cold water, let’s take a break.



Narrator: While they ate lunch, a photographer walked among them, taking pictures and asking questions.

Photographer: Sit closer together. That's it. Now don't move. (*flashbulb flashes*) Thank you, all.

Haywood: Are we going to be in the papers tomorrow?

Photographer: Could be. The whole country's waiting to see if you can really do this.

Haywood: Well, save yourself some time and print the story. It's as good as done.

Photographer: Where are you from?

Haywood: I was a slave down in South Carolina. But when the Civil War ended a few years back, I came up north looking for work. That's when I heard about the Transcontinental Railroad. This here is my friend, Michael Shay.

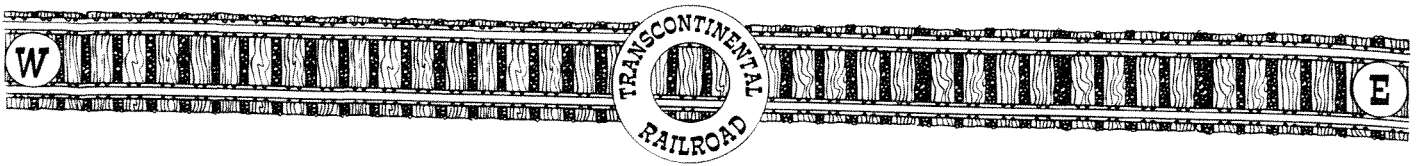
Shay: That's right. Me and Cato worked together on the same plantation. I was a house servant, and mighty glad to get out of there when it was over.

Photographer: (*to Fusang*) And how about you? Where are you from?

Fusang: I'm from Kwantung. It's a province in China on the Canton Delta.

Photographer: You can speak English pretty well for a Chinaman.

Fusang: That's why Mr. Strobridge chose me as the headman for my gang. There's a lot of Chinese working here. The railroad needs interpreters like me to tell them what to do!



Strobridge: All right men, quit your lollygaggin' and head on out! It's after 2 in the afternoon. We've only got four or five hours of sunlight left.

Narrator: Up ahead was the crew's biggest challenge. They had to lay tracks up and over the Promontory Mountains. The slope was steep and full of curves, so the rails had to be bent. The men had to walk over the steep hillside themselves, because the horses had collapsed from exhaustion. The workers kept pounding spikes, with a determination that couldn't be shaken. At sunset, Strobridge signaled for the final blast from the train whistle. They had done it!

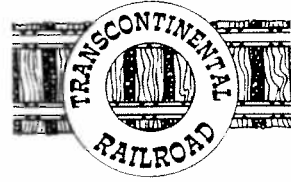
Crocker: Strobridge, I can't believe you did it! The final measurements are in—your men put down ten miles, fifty-seven feet of rail today. John Henry himself would be impressed.

Strobridge: You're darn tootin'. Crew, give yourselves a holler.

Shay, Li, and Haywood: Yeee-haw!

Narrator: On May 10, 1869, the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroad Companies joined tracks. The country was now linked by a transcontinental railroad, and the West would never be the same. Central Pacific's crew had proven that momentous feats of labor *could* be achieved with some good old-fashioned teamwork.

Name _____



10-Mile Math

Study the measurements below. Then answer the questions.

12 inches = 1 foot
3 feet = 1 yard
1,760 yards = 1 mile

1. Central Pacific laid 10 miles, fifty-seven feet of track. How many feet is that in all?

2. How can you express that same measurement in yards?

3. The crew used a total of 3,520 rails. If an iron plate is fastened to both ends of each rail, how many plates did they use?

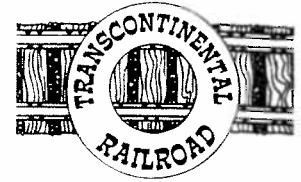
4. A set of two nuts and bolts are used for each iron plate. How many nuts and bolts were used in total?

5. Four spikes are used for each rail. How many spikes is that in all?

6. The crew started at 7:30 a.m. and ended at 7 p.m. If they took a lunch break that lasted one and a half hours, how many hours did they work in all?

7. In that case, how many yards of track did they lay per hour?

Name _____



Map of the West

This map shows the Transcontinental Railroad and state borders as they are today. How well do you know this region? Write the name of each state in its place.

Arizona	California	Colorado	Idaho
Iowa	Kansas	Minnesota	Missouri
Montana	Nebraska	Nevada	New Mexico
North Dakota	Oklahoma	Oregon	South Dakota
Texas	Utah	Washington	Wyoming

