

## 2. Transcontinental Railroad (1869)

*Jane stops by her friend Jim's house and sees clothes and suitcases scattered everywhere.*

Jane: Hey Jim! Looks like you're packing for quite a trip.

Jim: Ugh, yeah. I'm going to visit my grandparents in San Francisco. We're going to be gone for almost two weeks.

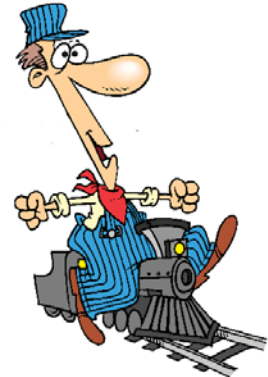
Jane: Cool! I would love to go to California. My dad's idea of a vacation is spending the night at a hotel with a pool and an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Jim: San Francisco will be alright, I guess, but the trip is going to take two days each way because we're taking the train! My parents are so lame. Why can't we just fly there? That would take, like, five hours.

Jane: That is weird. Didn't your family fly there last summer?

Jim: Yeah!! My dad said something stupid about some "Transcontinental Railroad" and "seeing the country."

Jane: Ahh, it's another one of your dad's "U.S. History" trips, like the time you guys tried to travel to Hawaii by boat through the Panama Canal to see what it was like and your mom got malaria. Didn't your dad dress up like Teddy Roosevelt on that one?



Jim: I think I racked up several thousand dollars in bills from my future therapist thanks to that.

Jane: Well, for what it's worth, I think this trip sounds like a great idea. The Transcontinental Railroad was certainly a difficult and dangerous project for workers, but traveling across the West by rail doesn't contain the disease risk that some of your dad's other ventures have offered.

Jim: Here's the thing: I don't even know what the "Transcontinental Railroad" is. I think my dad had us lost in the Everglades trying to recreate Ponce de León's journey through Florida when you guys studied that in history class.

Jane: The Transcontinental Railroad was a six year project that was started in 1863 by the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific Railroad Companies to complete a route from a station shared by Omaha and Council Bluffs to one located in Sacramento. Once finished, it would then be possible to travel from coast to coast by train for the first time.

Jim: That's it? I mean, I understand the usefulness of it, but building railroad tracks halfway across the country? Sounds boring.

Jane: Do you have any idea how difficult this project was? First, there's the political problem. The federal government had to give out tons of money in the form of loans and land grants to the railroad companies so they could finish the project. This is why it took so long for the work to get started. They argued for years in Congress about where the route would go because there were so many conflicting interests. The route meant big money for the places that it went through. It wasn't until the Civil War, when the South wasn't at the bargaining table anymore, that Congress finally agreed to a plan.

Jim: Wait, so who actually built it? The government or those railroad companies?

Jane: The companies built and owned the lines, but they did it using land granted to them by the government and through government loans. The Congress wanted it to be privately owned and run, but knew that it would never be built without government assistance.

Jim: OK, so once they got things started, was it smooth sailing from there?

Jane: Now I can see why your dad wants to take you on this trip. Think about the geography of the American West!

Jim: Well . . . it's all beaches right?

Jane: Just wait until you see the massive snow-covered mountains that they needed to blast through in the Rockies to build tunnels and the blazing heat they had to withstand in the deserts of Nevada! That doesn't even take into account workplace accidents and attacks by Native Americans, who were seeing their land continually stripped away.

Jim: Who would be crazy enough to take a job working on something like this?

Jane: Easy for you to say! For a lot of immigrants, this was the only kind of job they could find and represented a real opportunity. The Union Pacific found desperate men and put them to work. Many of them were Irish immigrants or Civil War veterans who couldn't find a job at home. The Central Pacific Railroad started the project from California and hired thousands of Chinese immigrants. They paid them significantly less than their white workers and refused to provide them with meals.

Jim: That's horrible.

Jane: They also gave them the most dangerous jobs. There are stories of Chinese workers hanging over cliffs in baskets to plant dynamite or others being buried in avalanches. As far as the company was concerned, they were all easily replaceable.

Jim: How many died by the end of the project?

Jane: By the time a final gold spike joined the two tracks in Promontory, Utah, about 2,000 workers died and over 20,000 were injured working on the Transcontinental Railroad. A lot of blood was spilled and many families lost fathers, but this route caused the population of the West to explode.

Jim: Sounds like a classic American story. Amazing progress, but a dark side too.

Jane: Exactly! Now you'll have plenty to think about during your trip!

Jim: You're right, as usual.