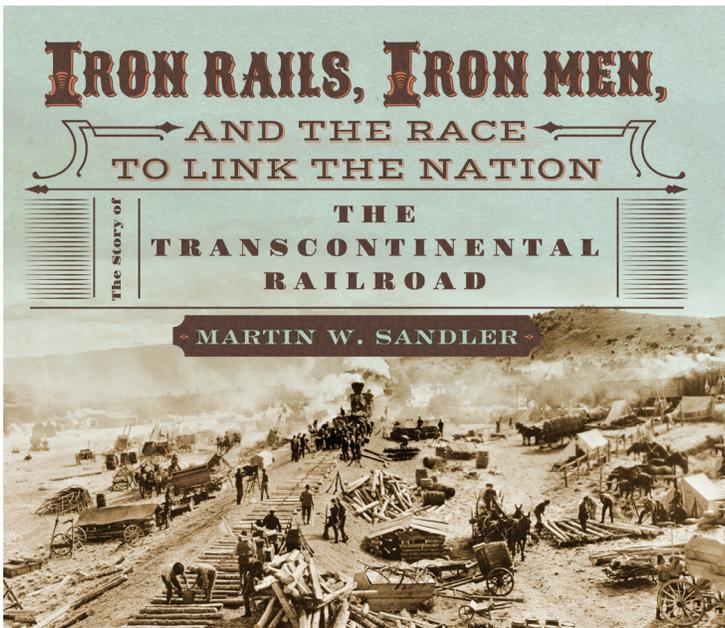


IRON RAILS, IRON MEN, AND THE RACE TO LINK THE NATION

THE STORY OF THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

MARTIN W. SANDLER



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Common Core Connections

The building of the transcontinental railroad was one of America's greatest accomplishments. This gripping nonfiction book tells that story in powerful prose that draws from newspapers and magazines of the time. In doing so, it models the principles of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and their emphasis on primary sources. The standards require students to read nonfiction deeply and learn to analyze both text and visual elements, such as the book's many historical photographs. To assist educators with using this curriculum-related book with classes, discussion questions in this guide are aligned with the Reading Informational Text standards as well as the Speaking & Listening standards. The writing and research activities, designed to give students a variety of response choices, are aligned with the English Language Arts Writing standards, Reading Informational Text standards, and Speaking & Listening standards. For more information on specific standards for your grade level, visit the Common Core website at www.corestandards.org.

ABOUT THE BOOK

In the 1860s, thousands of workers toiled to lay tracks over 1,800 miles of seemingly impenetrable mountains, searing deserts, and endless plains between the Missouri River and San Francisco to create a transcontinental railroad. Two companies raced to reach the designated spot for uniting the rails in Utah Territory: the Central Pacific, which worked eastward from Sacramento and the Union Pacific, which moved west from Nebraska. When the competition was over and the tracks were finally linked, what had been a grueling journey of six months to cross the country by wagon now took less than a week by train. Award-winning author Martin W. Sandler's sweeping account of the creation of the railroad, graced with historical photographs, conveys the challenges and triumphs of the race, its cast of colorful characters, and the transformative effect of what reporters called America's greatest work.

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 This guide was prepared by Kathleen Odean. She was a school librarian for more than fifteen years and now presents all-day workshops on new books for young people, including one that focuses on Common Core nonfiction. She served as chairperson of the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and is the author of several guides to children's books, including *Great Books for Girls*, *Great Books for Boys*, and *Great Books About Things Kids Love*.



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COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

Correlates to Common Core ELA Reading Standards for Information: Key Ideas and Details RI.5-8.1, 5-8.2, 5-8.3; Craft and Structure RI.5-8.5; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RI.5-8.7, 5-8.8. ELA Speaking & Listening Standards: Comprehension and Collaboration SL.5-8.1.



Photo credit: American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. One magazine described the enterprise of building the transcontinental railroad as “rivaling in grandeur and surpassing in usefulness any work” previously undertaken (page 7). What made it so important to the country? Discuss how the railroad was both grand and useful. Do you agree that it was the greatest project in history up to that time? Why or why not? What else could fall into that category?
2. Compare and contrast the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific in a variety of aspects, including their owners, their workers, and their accomplishments. Describe the formation of each railroad company and the part the company’s owners played in completing the project.
3. The rivalry between the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific railroads shaped the way their owners acted and how they made certain decisions. Even near the very end, Charles Crocker, Central Pacific’s construction supervisor, bet Thomas Durant of Union Pacific that his men could lay ten miles of rail in a day. What were the causes of the rivalry, and what were its effects? Give specific examples, both positive and negative.
4. Describe how the railroad was built, from surveying and grading the land to giving the step-by-step process of laying rail. Discuss examples in the text of how project supervisors increased efficiency and overall progress. What were the advantages and drawbacks of making the process faster?
5. Workers for both companies faced danger and hardships posed by weather, geography, and other sources. Use examples from the book to describe some of these trials. In addition to physical dangers, what challenges did each side overcome—such as the difficulty of transporting supplies—in completing the project?
6. Explain various connections between the Civil War and the building of the railroad. What roles did the federal government play in the project, including President Lincoln, President Grant, and the U.S. Congress?
7. Corruption permeated the transcontinental railroad from beginning to end. Author Martin Sandler says that the Central Pacific’s Big Four were “willing to use any means . . . to enrich themselves” (page 15). Trace the instances of corruption throughout the book, identifying who participated in them, and analyzing their effect on the building of the railroad. Debate whether the railroad owners would have pursued the project if they couldn’t have benefited from it illegally.
8. Sandler calls hiring Chinese workers “the most important decision the Central Pacific made in meeting the challenges of building” the railroad (page 20). Explain why you agree or disagree with his statement. Discuss why the Chinese were recruited and their strong points as workers. How were Chinese treated before and after working for the Central Pacific? Describe Leland Stanford’s interaction with the Chinese as a group.



Photo credit: Library of Congress

9. A poet said of the Irish railroad workers that they loved “the strength and wildness” of working on the railroad (page 31). Discuss the reasons that the Irish worked on the project and describe the strengths that they brought to it. Both the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific also employed Mormons. Why did they want the work? What made them good workers?
10. Native American tribes had the most to lose from the coming of the railroad. Analyze the effect the railroad had on their way of life and how they reacted to it, citing specifics from the book.
11. How did magazine and newspaper writers cover the transcontinental railroad before and during its building? Find quotations in the text from different writers and compare their content and tone.
12. What was the role of photographers, and what were some of the difficulties they faced in documenting the project? Analyze how the photographs in the book supplement the text.
13. The first transcontinental telegraph was erected alongside the railroad. Explain the process by which it was built. What was the relationship between the telegraph and the railroad, and how did each benefit the other? How did the telegraph help unite the country at the same time the railroad did?
14. Describe the book’s structure and how the author balances the two sides of the race. What are some other ways in which the text could have been organized? Analyze the topics of the sidebars and epilogue, and what they add to the overall story.

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

Correlates to Common Core ELA Reading Standards for Information: Key Ideas and Details RI.5-8.1, 5-8.2, 5-8.3; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RI.5-8.7. ELA Speaking & Listening Standards: Comprehension and Collaboration SL.5-8.1, 5-8.2, 5-8.3. Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas SL.5-8.4, 5-8.5. ELA Writing Standards: Text Types and Purposes W.5-8.1, 5-8.2, 5-8.3. Production and Distribution of Writing W.5-8.4. Research to Build and Present Knowledge W.5-8.7, 5-8.8, 5-8.9.

CURRICULUM CONNECTING ACTIVITIES

1. Newspaper coverage made the race a national story. Have each student choose an exciting event related to building the railroad and supplement the book’s account with further research. Students should then write a newspaper article about the event, naming their newspaper and adding a headline and sub-heads. Students can organize the article with the 5Ws—who, what, where, when, and why—using the W’s graphic organizer from thinkport.org/technology/template.tp. Have them search online for a free historic newspaper template for printing out their article to post on a bulletin board.
2. The epilogue sums up the later fates of some important men connected to the railroads. Working with a partner, students should choose one of the figures, find more details on him in the book, and research him in other print and online sources. Have the partners create a question-and-answer interview and record it, with one as the interviewer and the other as the historical figure. The recorded interviews can be shared with the rest of the class.



Photo credit: American Heritage Center,
University of Wyoming

3. Which railroad company—the Central Pacific or the Union Pacific—overcame more challenges? Which one accomplished more? Assign each student one of the companies and have them gather details from the book about that company’s accomplishments. Students will then debate the topic in pairs, presenting their arguments and examples of their assigned company’s successes.
4. Thanks to photographers, we have a remarkable visual record of the building of the railroad. Have students choose two or three photographs in the book, study them closely, and write about how the visual images connect to the text and what they add beyond the text in terms of information and emotion. Students should also discuss how the captions help explain the photographs.
5. The railroad companies wanted to attract as many passengers as possible once the trains were running. Have students design a colorful brochure that uses text and visual images to advertise the transcontinental railroad journey, drawing ideas from the book. They can create it by hand or using a printable online template such as the Printing Press listed under “Student Interactives” at readwritethink.org.
6. The sidebars in *Iron Rails, Iron Men* explore topics related to the railroad, from skiing to the founding of Reno, Nevada. Have students choose a sidebar that isn’t about a person in the epilogue and do research that extends beyond the sidebar’s information. Have them write a short research paper on the topic, using and citing at least three online and print sources.
7. What was it like for a Chinese or Irish worker, laboring hard all day and living in uncomfortable conditions for months on end? Using facts from the book and additional research, have students write a series of diary entries by one such worker, describing his job, his living and working situation, and his feelings about the experience.
8. Trains or planes? Have students write a persuasive essay arguing that either trains or airplanes changed the United States the most. They should draw from the book’s arguments about the importance of trains, then add their own thoughts about the impact of airplanes. Have them share their essays in small groups and compare their arguments and examples.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



photo by Jack McGrath

Martin W. Sandler is the author of *The Impossible Rescue* as well as more than seventy other books for children and adults. He has written and produced seven television series, including the acclaimed *This Was America* series hosted by William Shatner, has twice been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, and has won multiple Emmy Awards. He taught American history and American studies at the University of Massachusetts and Smith College. About *Iron Rails, Iron Men, and the Race to Link the Nation*, he says, “I have always believed that truth can be far more exciting than fiction. I love writing true stories about people who have overcome enormous odds and have accomplished great things. The building of the transcontinental railroad is not only such a story; it is, I believe, America’s greatest adventure.” Martin W. Sandler lives on Cape Cod, Massachusetts.