

“I CAN COMPARE AND CONTRAST SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE STEAMBOAT AND THE LOCOMOTIVE.”

- My name is Michael, and this is a photo of my great-great great-great-great-grandfather Ling Wei. He helped to build the transcontinental railroad. That's a pretty long word, but it's easy to understand if you split it into two parts. The first part of the word is trans—, which means across, and the second part is the word continental. I So, my ancestor Ling Wei helped build a part of the railroad that goes across the continental United States, or from the East Coast to the West Coast



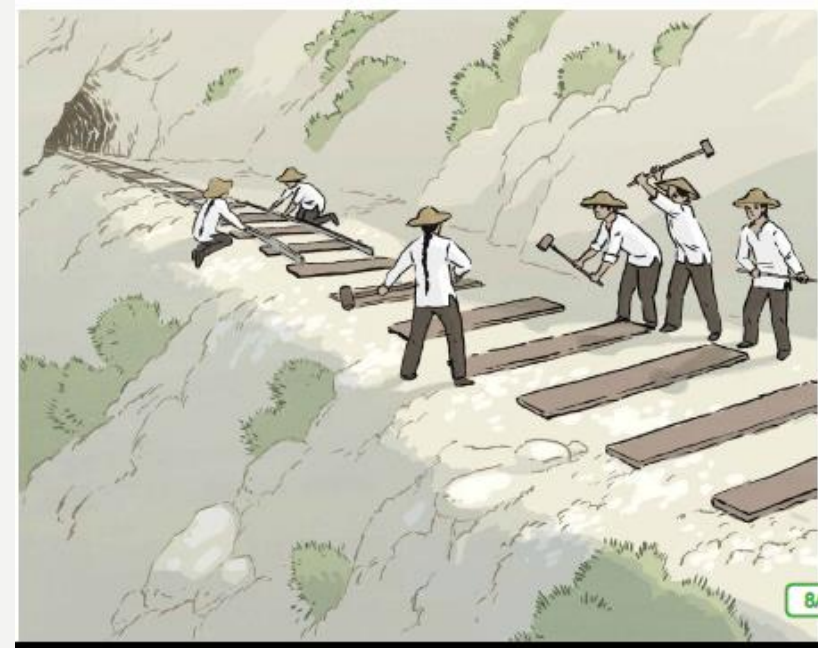
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- Ling Wei began working on the railroad in 1863. By that time, there were many railroads in the United States. But they mostly went from the Northeast to the Southeast or from eastern cities like Baltimore to cities in the Midwest like Omaha, Nebraska. 3 It was cheaper, more comfortable, and more convenient for people to travel by rail than to travel by canal or wagon. It was faster, too. 4 Before the transcontinental railroad, people could only travel to the West by wagon or horse, or by boat on a river or canal, and the going was slow.



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- Because the “iron horse” 5 was faster, cheaper, more comfortable, and more convenient, many people thought it would be a great idea to have a railroad track that spanned the entire United States. 6 My great-great-great-great-great-grandfather Ling Wei helped to lay those tracks that connected settlers in the Midwest near the Missouri River to settlers in Sacramento, California—all the way to the West Coast. How many people can say that about one of their ancestors?



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- It took two separate rail companies to build the transcontinental railroad—the Union Pacific Railroad and the Central Pacific Railroad. The Union Pacific Railroad company started building from Omaha, Nebraska, and laid its tracks going west. 8 The Central Pacific Railroad company started building from San Francisco, California, and laid its tracks going east. 9 At first the two companies were competing against each other to see who could lay the most track. The U.S. government paid each company for every mile of track it laid, and both companies wanted to make lots of money. In the end, the government told them they had to work together and join their tracks.



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- Most of the laborers who laid the track for the Union Pacific Railroad were Irish immigrants. 10 My ancestor, Ling Wei, worked for the Central Pacific Railroad. Like many other Chinese immigrants during the 1800s, Ling Wei had settled in California. He and other Chinese immigrants—as well as other immigrants from all over the world—came to the United States because of the promise of gold and a better life. When people realized that the mountains of gold they had heard about were a myth, they had to find some other way to survive. 11 So, many Chinese immigrants worked on the western portion of the railroad while Irish immigrants worked on the eastern section. These workers laid tracks through the mountains and across rivers and deserts in the United States.



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- The transcontinental railroad took six years to build. And my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather Ling Wei kept journals for all of those years! Here's my favorite journal entry: May 10, 1869. Promontory Point, Utah 12—Only one hundred feet left to lay—that's what I thought of first thing this morning. After several years of hard work, long hours, and little wages, 13 one hundred feet of track is all there is left to complete the transcontinental railroad today. Now, it is hard to believe the work is complete. Despite the hardship I endured, I feel proud of my work. I think everyone today wanted to share in that sentiment. Wherever I looked, people tried to lend a hand in finishing the track. Men that were just passing through Utah to deliver goods stopped to throw dirt on the ties, 14 or to drive a spike into the ground. 15 Even the presidents of the Central Pacific Railroad and the Union Pacific Railroad took turns driving the last spike into the rails. It was a spike made of gold to mark the special occasion. They both missed on their first try, and all of us workers laughed. It's not as easy as we made it look. In fact, it was very difficult.



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- Day in and day out we swung those heavy hammers, driving the sharp spikes that held the wooden ties together into the solid ground. We carried heavy wooden ties in the hottest weather you can imagine. The worst days, by far, were those spent drilling tunnels into the Sierra Nevada mountains. These tunnels had to be big enough for locomotive trains to pass through. First, the stone had to be blasted with dynamite. Then we went in and worked on shaping the tunnel. No matter how hard we worked to cut into the stone, we would only move a few inches a day. I can still remember how tired my arms felt at the end of those days. It seemed like there was no end in sight, and we'd never reach the other side of the mountains.



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- Other days were filled with worry as we worked through land where Indian tribes were still powerful. They did not like us building through land that had been their home for many hundreds of years. I do not know how the railroad will change life for them. For settlers and their families on the West Coast, I think the transcontinental railroad will change lives a great deal. Trains will provide a faster and cheaper method of transportation for goods and foodstuffs. People on the East Coast will now be able to get goods from the West, and people in the West can now get goods from the East more easily. Travel for people who can afford the train will be more comfortable and convenient, too. Of course, many people who cannot afford train tickets will still have to use their wagons for travel.



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- As for us workers, we felt as much excitement as we did fatigue. 19 We set the record for laying the most miles of track in one day. On that day, we worked from sunrise to sunset and laid ten miles of track! 20 Today we’ve finally finished our work: we’ve built a railroad that connects the East and West Coasts of the United States. One day people will talk about all of the business men who dreamed of this and started the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroad companies. I hope they talk about my fellow workers and me, too—the men who built the railroad.



COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Evaluative What is the main topic of the read-aloud?
2. Literal What was the first transcontinental railroad in the United States?
3. Inferential Before the transcontinental railroad, how did people travel to the West? Why did people decide to build a transcontinental railroad?
4. Inferential What was a nickname for the locomotive train? Why was the locomotive called the “iron horse”?
5. Evaluative In what ways are the steamboat and the locomotive train similar?
6. Inferential What were some of the hardships that workers faced in building the transcontinental railroad?
7. Inferential What changes did the transcontinental railroad bring?
8. 8. Evaluative Think Pair Share: Why do you think the Union Pacific Railroad and the Central Pacific Railroad were forced to join their tracks rather than be allowed to build their own separate transcontinental railroads?