

I Hear the Locomotives: The Impact of the Transcontinental Railroad

Relevant Entries from Timeline of Events in the West

GROUP 1

1860	Lincoln is elected President, pledging to pass homestead legislation and to oppose the spread of slavery. His victory provokes South Carolina to secede.
1861	Congress passes the Pacific Railroad Act, which authorizes the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Companies to build a transcontinental rail line along the 42nd parallel and provides public lands and subsidies for every mile of track laid.
1862	Congress passes the Homestead Act, which allows citizens to settle on up to 160 acres of surveyed but unclaimed public land and receive title to it after making improvements and residing there for five years.
1864	Second Pacific Railroad Act is passed by Congress, one that aims to stimulate investment in the enterprise by doubling the size of the land grants and improving the subsidies offered for every mile of track laid.
1865	<p>The Confederate surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, brings an end to the Civil War.</p> <p>The Union Pacific Railroad begins moving westward, laying track at an average rate of one mile per day. In California, Chinese laborers join the Central Pacific work gangs, providing the strength, organization and persistence needed to break through the mountains.</p>

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GROUP 2

1867	<p>The U.S. and representatives of the Comanche, Kiowa, Cheyenne, Arapaho and other southern Plains tribes sign the Medicine Lodge Treaty, intended to remove Indians from the path of white settlement. The treaty marks the end of the era in which federal policymakers saw the Plains as “one big reservation” to be divided up among various tribes. Instead, the treaty establishes reservations for each tribe in the western part of present-day Oklahoma and requires them to give up their traditional lands elsewhere. In exchange, the government pledges to establish reservation schools and to provide resident farmers who will teach the Indians agriculture. The tribes’ refusal to give up their free-ranging traditions and remain confined within the territory assigned to them leads to devastating warfare.</p>
1868	<p>The Senate approves a treaty permitting unrestricted immigration from China. Chinese rail builders of the Central Pacific finally break out of the High Sierras.</p>
1869	<p>John Wesley Powell, a self-taught expert on mountain geology and a veteran of the Civil War who lost part of his right arm at Shiloh, leads the first recorded voyage through the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, winning national acclaim and setting the stage for government-funded scientific study of the West.</p>
1870	<p>A Golden Spike completes the transcontinental railroad at Promontory Point, Utah.</p> <p>Buffalo hunters begin moving onto the plains, brought there by the expanding railroads and the growing market for hides and meat back east. In little more than a decade, they reduce the once numberless herd to an endangered species.</p> <p>Railroad companies begin massive advertising campaigns to attract settlers to their land grants in the West, sending agents to rural areas in the eastern states and throughout Europe to distribute handbills, posters and pamphlets that tout the rich soil and favorable climate of the region. But the higher costs of railroad land compared to public lands, and the fact that railroads pay no taxes on their lands, soon stirs charges of extortion, leading to state laws controlling railroad rates and land sale practices by the decade’s end.</p> <p>The Union Pacific in Wyoming hires Chinese laborers for \$32.50 a month rather than pay \$52.00 a month to whites. From incidents like this one, white laborers across the West develop the opinion that Chinese immigrants are competing unfairly for jobs, a feeling that will lead to violent racial conflict and labor unrest in years to come.</p>

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1871	Congress approves the Indian Appropriations Act, directing that all Indians be treated as individuals and legally designated "wards" of the federal government. The act is another step toward dismantling the tribal structure of Native American life.
1871	A quarrel over a woman between two Chinese men in Los Angeles escalates into a city-wide anti-Chinese riot, ending in the murder of at least 23 of the city's 200 Chinese residents.
1871	Cochise, the Apache chief who led a decade-long guerilla war against whites in Arizona, surrenders to General George Crook but escapes back to his mountain stronghold rather than let his people be sent to a New Mexico reservation. General Otis Howard finally makes peace with Cochise the next year, agreeing to establish a Apache reservation in Arizona.
1872	The Yellowstone Act sets aside more than two million acres in northwest Wyoming as a public "pleasuring-ground" for the "preservation ... of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities or wonders ... and their retention in their natural condition." It marks the first time any national government has set aside public lands.
1872	"Buffalo Bill" Cody is awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his service as a scout in General Philip Sheridan's four-year campaign against the Cheyenne. The same year Cody begins his theatrical career, appearing as "Buffalo Bill" in Ned Buntline's <i>The Scouts of the Plains</i> .
1873	Although federal authorities estimate that hunters are killing buffalo at a rate of three million per year, President Grant vetoes a law protecting the herd from extermination.
1874	Mennonite immigrants from Russia arrive in Kansas with drought-resistant "Turkey Red" wheat, which will help turn the one-time "Great American Desert" into the nation's breadbasket.
1874	Joseph Glidden receives a patent for barbed wire, an inexpensive, durable and effective fencing material which, with the destruction of the buffalo, will open the plains to more efficient agriculture and ranching. George Armstrong Custer announces the discovery of gold in the Black Hills of Dakota, setting off a stampede of fortune-hunters into this most sacred part of Lakota territory. Although the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty requires the government to protect Lakota lands from white intruders, federal authorities work instead to protect the miners already crowding along the path Custer blazed for them, which they call "Freedom's Trail" and the Lakota call "Thieves' Road."

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GROUP 4

1875	THE LAKOTA WAR: A Senate commission meeting with Red Cloud and other Lakota chiefs to negotiate legal access for miners offers to buy the region for \$6 million. But the Lakota refuse to alter the terms of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, and declare they will protect their lands from intruders if the government won't.
1876	Federal authorities order the Lakota chiefs to report to their reservations by January 31. Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse and others refuse. On June 25, George Armstrong Custer, part of General Terry's force, discovers Sitting Bull's encampment on the Little Bighorn River, but when he charges the village, hundreds of Lakota warriors overwhelm his troops, killing them to the last man, in a battle later called Custer's Last Stand. News of the massacre shocks the nation, and troops methodically hunt down the Lakota and force them to surrender. Sitting Bull, however, eludes capture.
1876	Colorado enters the Union.
1877	Crazy Horse finally surrenders to General George Crook at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. By late summer, there are rumors that Crazy Horse is planning a return to battle. On September 5 he is arrested and when he resists being jailed, he is killed.
1877	Congress votes to repeal the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty and take back the Black Hills, along with 40 million more acres of Lakota land.
1877	With the threat of Indian attack removed, mining camps and boom towns -- French Creek, Whitewood Gulch, Black Tail Gulch -- crowd the Black Hills.
1877	Chief Joseph, leader of the Nez Percé, surrenders to General Oliver Howard, bringing to an end one of the most remarkable military feats of the Indian Wars. Eluding or defeating army troops at every turn, Joseph and a band of fewer than 200 warriors bring nearly 500 women and children over 1,500 miles of mountainous terrain to within 40 miles of the border. "I am tired of fighting," he declares as he holds out his rifle to General Howard. "I want to have time to look for my children. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever."
1877	Congress passes the Desert Land Act, which permits settlers to purchase up to 640 acres of public land at 25¢ per acre, provided they irrigate the land.

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GROUP 5

1878	With racial discrimination on the rise in the post-Reconstruction South, an estimated 40,000 African Americans begin to migrate from the former slave states into Kansas.
1879	Congress creates the United States Geological Survey to coordinate the many independent survey projects it has funded since army surveyors first charted potential routes for a transcontinental railroad in the 1850s. The USGS expands its focus beyond mineral resources and geological formations to include study of the potential for irrigating the West's arid lands and the selection of suitable sites for dams and reservoirs.
1879	The first students, a group of 84 Lakota children, arrive at the newly established United States Indian Training and Industrial School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, a boarding school founded to remove young Indians from their native culture and refashion them as members of mainstream American society. Over the next two decades, 24 more schools on the Carlisle model will be established outside the reservations, along with 81 boarding schools and nearly 150 day schools on the Indians' own land.
1880	President Benjamin Hayes signs the Chinese Exclusion Treaty, which reverses the open-door policy set in 1868 and places strict limits both on the number of Chinese immigrants allowed to enter the U.S. and on the number allowed to become naturalized citizens.
1883	<p>The Northern Pacific Railroad, connecting the northwestern states to points east, is finally completed, after a 19-year struggle against treacherous terrain and intermittent financing. Along the line, crews blast a 3,850-foot tunnel through solid granite and construct an 1,800-foot trestle. As a result, the round trip to the Columbia River that took Lewis and Clark two-and-a-half years in 1803 now takes just nine days.</p> <p>Buffalo hunters gather on the northern Plains for the last large buffalo kill. Among them is a Harvard-educated New York assemblyman named Theodore Roosevelt, who hopes to bag a trophy before the species disappears. Hunters have already destroyed the southern herd, and by 1884, except for small domestic herds kept by sentimental ranchers, there are only scattered remnants of the animal that symbolized the American West.</p>

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1886	<p>Geronimo surrenders to General Nelson A. Miles in Skeleton Canyon, Arizona, after more than a decade of guerilla warfare against American and Mexican settlers in the Southwest. The terms of surrender require Geronimo and his tribe to settle in Florida, where the Army hopes he can be contained.</p>
1887	<p>A fare war between competing rail lines and the inducements of eager land speculators bring newcomers to Los Angeles by the trainload; 120,000 arrive in 1887, drawn by the promise of pure air, warm sunshine and prosperity. Within a few years, the city is transformed and the Californians who have lived there for more than a century are suddenly regarded as strangers in their own land.</p> <p>Congress passes the Dawes Severalty Act, imposing a system of private land ownership on Native American tribes. Individual Indians become eligible to receive land allotments of up to 160 acres, together with full U.S. citizenship. Tribal lands remaining after all allotments have been made are to be declared surplus and sold. When the allotment system finally ends, Indian landholdings are reduced from 138 million acres in 1887 to only 48 million acres in 1934. And with their land many Native Americans lose a fundamental structuring principle of tribal life as well.</p>
1889	<p>Washington, Montana and the Dakotas join the Union.</p> <p>President Benjamin Harrison authorizes opening unoccupied lands in the Indian Territory to white settlement, an order put into effect on April 22 at noon, when a gunshot gives settlers the signal to cross the border and stake their claims. Within nine hours, the Oklahoma Land Rush transforms almost two million acres of tribal land into thousands of individual land claims. Many of the most desirable plots are taken by "Sooners," so called because they crossed into the territory sooner than was permitted.</p>