

# Chinese Workers on the Railroad

Before 1869, travel across the country took a long time. To go from the East Coast to the West Coast, you had to spend weeks on a ship, or months traveling overland. The first *transcontinental railroad* changed everything for the United States.



The railroad was an *extremely* difficult project. It was 1,800 miles long. One railroad company hired immigrants from Ireland and China to lay the track. The company thought the Chinese workers were too weak for the job. But they quickly showed they could do the work.



Chinese workers in the snow

The slowest and most difficult job was laying track through the Sierra Nevada mountains. This was the Chinese workers' job. It took a long time to dig tunnels. The railroad company made them use dangerous explosives for the tunnels. The explosives made the work go faster – and killed many workers. Cold weather and deep snow killed more. The company paid the Chinese workers the *least* amount of money. The Irish workers made \$35 a month. Chinese workers made \$30 a month.

The railroad company thought that Chinese workers would never strike. They were wrong. In June of 1867, the Chinese workers walked off the job. It was the biggest strike of Chinese-Americans in the 1800s. They *demand*ed a raise and less hours working on the tunnels. The company said no. They said they would fire everyone and shut down the railroad. They also stopped food from going to the Chinese workers, and put men with guns around them.

After two weeks, the Chinese workers started work again. They didn't get a raise. But they showed everyone that they would fight for fair pay and safe work.

## Vocabulary

1. *transcontinental* – adjective – Going across the continent, a large body of land. “We live on the continent of North America.”
2. *railroad* – noun – Trains and the tracks they run on.
3. *extremely* – adverb – Very much. “This class is extremely boring.”
4. *least* – adverb – The smallest amount. “I buy the least expensive clothes I can find.”
5. *demand* – verb – When you strongly ask for something.



## Questions

1. Who built the transcontinental railroad? Why?
2. Why did the Chinese workers go on strike? Why did the strike surprise the company?
3. The Chinese workers didn't get what they wanted. Was the strike still important?



4. This is a famous photograph from May 10, 1869, when the transcontinental railroad was finished. What do you notice about the photo?

## After the Work Was Over

The railroad companies promised to send the workers home after the transcontinental railroad was finished. But they broke their promise to the Chinese workers. When the railroad was completed, they fired almost all the Chinese workers. The workers could not pay for a ticket back to where they came from. These people had to find jobs in the middle of America, far from where they started.

The railroads hurt the American Indians. The US government promised to let them live in the middle of the US. When they built the railroads, the US broke its promise to the Indians. Many white people moved to their land and built new cities. The Indians fought and tried to stop the railroad. The US military killed many of them, and also killed the animals they ate.