

The Transcontinental Railways Bring Opportunity

by Sarah Collinge

Aurore's mother dreamed of a better life for her family in the Yukon Territory. The opportunity to board a train and cross the entire continent of North America in just under one week made Maman's dream a reality. The transcontinental railroad in Canada was completed in 1885, just thirteen years before the story *Aurore of the Yukon* begins. Without this advancement in transportation, Aurore and her family might never have made it to the Yukon Territory. Throughout history, new inventions and advancements have made it possible for people to create a better life for themselves.

Before the Railroad

Before the construction of a transcontinental railroad in both the United States and Canada, the landscape of North America was wild and unsettled. Many people settled along the coasts and along major rivers, but the wide-open prairie separated the East from the West. Few roads connected towns and cities.

During the time before the transcontinental railroads, people traveled mainly by foot, horse, or boat. The journey from one coast to the other was dangerous, and took almost seven months.

As people began to move west, roads were built between major settlements. Wagons and stagecoaches became the passenger vehicles of the mid-1800s. A stagecoach carried up to nine people in a small, two-bench coach. Traveling only about five miles per hour, it took 25 days to travel from St. Louis to San Francisco. Roads were bumpy and muddy. Travelers braved harsh weather, treacherous terrain, and attacks by Indians and bandits.

Traveling by boat was not much better. In winter, rivers and lakes froze, leaving communities isolated.

The U. S. Transcontinental Railroad

The gold rush in California, in 1850, caused over 55,000 Americans to risk their lives traveling by wagon to California. Visionaries of the 1800s believed a transcontinental railroad would allow for quick movement of people and products over large distances. They believed that a transcontinental railroad had the power to unite a nation, increase communication, and create a prospering economy. The United States Congress began planning for the building of a U.S. transcontinental railroad that would connect Omaha, Nebraska to Sacramento, California.

To lay the railroad, the United States passed laws that would allow railroad companies to take over Native American land. Workers from China were hired to build the railroad. Railroad workers earned a dollar a day and often worked into the night. Trees were cut, rock was blasted, and bridges were built. Construction took seven years to complete.

On May 10, 1869, the last spike, the "Golden Spike," was hammered into the rails in Utah. The U.S. transcontinental railroad now connected the eastern states to California.

The Canadian Transcontinental Railroad

When the U.S. transcontinental railway was built, Canada had trains only along its east coast. There was no quick mode of travel from one coast to the other. Canadians who wanted to cross the continent traveled to the United States and boarded the U.S. railway. Then, they traveled by riverboat north to Canada. Politicians feared that unsettled land in the west would be claimed by the United States. Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, wanted to expand Canada from sea to sea. He knew that he needed a way to link the east to the west. Macdonald was determined to build Canada's own transcontinental railway.

Sixteen years after the completion of the U.S. transcontinental railroad, Canada completed building the longest, most challenging railway in the world. Canada broke the speed record for railway building—the track was completed in just five years. The Canadian railroad now stretched from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Vancouver, British Columbia. Along the route were 80 tunnels and 3,000 bridges. The Dominion of Canada was now joined from ocean to ocean, and the railway would “allow people to travel, trade and communicate as never before” (Hodge, 2000, p. 20).

Growing Nations

Both the United States and Canada prospered as a result of the new transcontinental railroad lines. Towns grew along the railroad tracks as trains brought in people, lumber, tools, machinery, and other goods. Factories and industry sprang up across the continent, increasing farming, ranching, and mining activity.

In addition to creating economic growth, train transportation allowed people to travel more easily and quickly from one place to another. The trip that once took seven months on foot was now a nine-day journey. Immigrants came from Europe and other regions to settle the open prairie. The population of both the United States and Canada increased drastically, increasing the strength of both nations. The people of North America had an enlivened spirit of optimism—they believed that anything was possible, and it was!

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