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## The Age of the Railroad

In October 1884, the economist Richard Ely visited the town of Pullman, Illinois, to write about it for Harper's magazine. At first, Ely was impressed with the atmosphere of order, planning, and well-being in the town George M. Pullman had designed for the employees of his railroad-car factory. But after talking at length with a dissatisfied company officer, Ely concluded the town had a fatal flaw: it too greatly restricted its residents. Pullman employees were compelled to obey rules in which they had no say. Ely concluded that "the idea of Pullman is un-American."

"It is benevolent, well-wishing feudalism [a medieval social system], which desires the happiness of the people, but in such way as please the authorities... If free American institutions are to be preserved, we want to race of men reared as underlings" – Richard T. Ely in *Pullman* "A Social Study"

As the railroads grew, they came to influence many facets of American life, including, as in the town of Pullman, the personal lives of the country's citizens. They caused the standard time and time zones to be set and influenced the growth of towns and communities. However, the unchecked power of railroad companies led to widespread abuses that spurred citizens to demand federal regulation of the industry.

**Railroads Span Time and Space** Rails made local transit reliable and westward expansion possible for business as well as for people. Realizing how important railroads were for settling the West and developing the country, the government made huge land grants and loans to the railroad companies.

**A NATIONAL NETWORK** By 1856, the railroads extended west to the Mississippi River, and three years later, they crossed the Missouri. Just over a decade later, crowds across the United States cheered as the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads met at Promontory, Utah, on May 10, 1869. A golden spike marked the spanning of the nation by the first transcontinental railroad. Other transcontinental lines followed, and regional lines multiplied as well. At the start of the Civil War, the nation had had about 30,000 miles of track. By 1890, that figure was nearly six times greater.

<p><b>ROMANCE AND REALITY</b> The railroads brought the dreams of available land, adventure, and a fresh start within the grasp of many Americans. This romance was made possible, however, only by the harsh lives of railroad workers.</p> <p>The Central Pacific Railroad employed thousands of Chinese immigrants. The Union Pacific hired Irish immigrants and desperate, out-of-work Civil War veterans to lay track across treacherous terrain while enduring attacks by Native Americans. Accidents and diseases disabled and killed thousands of men each year. In 1888, when the first railroad statistics were published, the casualties totaled more than 2,000 employees killed and 20,000 injured.</p>	
<p><b>RAILROAD TIME</b> In spite of these difficult working conditions, the railroad laborers helped to transform the diverse regions of the country into a united nation. Though linked in space, each community still operated on its own time, with noon when the sun was directly overhead. Noon in Boston, for example, was almost 12 minutes later than noon in New York. Travelers riding from Maine to California might reset their watches 20 times.</p> <p>In 1869, to remedy this problem, Professor C. F. Dowd proposed that the earth's surface be divided into 24 time zones, one for each hour of the day. Under his plan, the United States would contain four zones: the Eastern, Central, Mountain, and Pacific time zones. The railroad companies endorsed Dowd's plan enthusiastically, and many towns followed suit.</p> <p>Finally, on November 18, 1883, railroad crews and towns across the country synchronized their watches. In 1884, an international conference set worldwide time zones that incorporated railroad time. The U.S. Congress, however, didn't officially adopt railroad time as the standard for the nation until 1918. As strong a unifying force as the railroads were, however, they also opened the way for abuses that led to social and economic unrest.</p>	
<p><b>CHINESE IMMIGRANTS AND THE RAILROADS</b></p> <p>Although the railroads paid all their employees poorly, Asians usually earned less than whites. The average pay for whites working a ten-hour day was \$40 to \$60 a month plus free meals. Chinese immigrants hired by the Central Pacific performed similar tasks from dawn to dusk for about \$35 a month—and they had to supply their own food. The immigrants' working conditions were miserable. In 1866, for example, the railroad hired them to dig a tunnel through a granite mountain. For five months of that year, the Chinese lived and worked in camps surrounded by banks of snow. The total snowfall reached over 40 feet. Hundreds of the men were buried in avalanches or later found frozen, still clutching their shovels or picks.</p>	