







Migrant Chinese Workers Were Key in Building the Transcontinental Railroad During the 1860's

Overview:

Students will learn that during the 1860's the Transcontinental Railroad was built to transport people and products overland across the U.S., instead of around Cape Horn. Migrant Chinese laborers played a critical role in building the western half (California to Utah) of this railroad between 1864-69. These 20,000+ migrants faced dangers every day when they: (1) cleared the land of trees, (2) laid down the road bed, (3) shoveled snow in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, (4) blasted tunnels through granite rock, and (5) laid down track over the mountains in winter and across the deserts and plateaus of Nevada and Utah in the summer. Even though many of them were literate, none of their writings about this experience have been found. As a result, some historians have called them "silent spikes" or "nameless builders."

Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

-  **Describe** at least three hazards they might have faced when working on the railroad.
-  **Hypothesize** what sources of information historians may have used when they write about the Chinese railroad workers.
-  **Analyze** why no journals, diaries, or letters have been found.
-  **Differentiate** between the pay the Chinese received compared with what white workers who did the same kind of work received.

Materials:

- γ Handout: "Migrant Chinese Workers Were Key..."
- γ Visual Aid: "Map of the Western Portion of the Transcontinental Railroad"
- γ Visual Aid: "Map of the Western Hemisphere"
- γ Photo of three migrant Chinese workers who helped build the railroad
- γ Photo of the cover of a recent book entitled *Ghosts of Gold Mountain* by Gordon H. Chang
- γ Video: "A Look at the New Monument to Honor Chinese Railroad Workers" available at <https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/A-Look-at-the-New-Monument-to-Honor-Chinese-Railroad-Workers-510992961.html>

On the board:




- γ Vocabulary words
- γ Project attached photos

Suggested Snack:
















- γ Stir-fry of Chinese vegetables with soy sauce

-  **Analyze** how the Transcontinental Railroad changed the way products and people moved across the United States and who benefited from these changes.

Preparation:

-  Write the vocabulary words on the board.
-  Get materials together for the students to plant bok choy or some other Chinese vegetable.
-  Prepare items for students to make and eat a stir-fry of Chinese vegetables with soy sauce for the class.

Vocabulary:

 migrant	 Gold Mountain	 railroad spike
 ravines	 transcontinental	 sheer drops
 trestle	 wicker baskets	 overhangs
 granite rock	 Sierra Nevada	 categories
 cliffs	 Mountains	 terrain

Learning Activities:

1. Classroom Activity (35 min.)
 - A. Tell students that today they will learn about how the Transcontinental Railroad was built and the critical role the migrant Chinese— who originally came to the U.S. hoping to find gold— played in building the western portion of the railroad over very dangerous terrain during the mid 1800's.
 - B. Show the video “A Look at the New Monument to Honor Chinese Railroad Workers.”
 - C. Distribute the Handout: “Migrant Chinese Workers Were Key...”
 - Read passages 1 and 2 from the Handout aloud to the class, and highlight the vocabulary words.
 - Direct students to choose one of the four writing prompts on their Handout to respond to.
 - Bring students back together and discuss their answers, highlighting the points in the objectives for this lesson.
2. Snack: Have students prepare and eat a stir-fry of Chinese vegetables with soy sauce. (10 min.)
3. Have students answer the Reflection Questions in their garden journals. (5 min.)

Student Reflection Questions:

1. Imagine what the railroad workers ate when they were working high up in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and then in the deserts in Nevada and Utah. Are there any context clues in the Handout you can use to answer this question?
2. If you were to work on building the railroad, what would you have liked your job to be and why?

Assessment Questions:

1. Why was the Transcontinental Railroad built?
 - A. It would take less time to get from the Atlantic Coast to the Pacific Coast than going around Cape Horn in South America on a ship.
 - B. Vegetables and fruits from the West Coast could be transported more quickly across the US.
 - C. **Both A and B. (At that time it took about six months to go around Cape Horn, but only about six weeks to go across land by train.)**
2. Why were these migrant Chinese laborers called “silent spikes” or “nameless builders”?
 - A. They did not have American names.
 - B. **None of their writings about this experience have been found.**
 - C. They were very quiet when they worked.

Standards:

Common Core State Standards

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1B

Support claim(s) with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using credible sources and demonstrating and understanding of the topic or text.



Migrant Chinese Workers Were Key in Building the Transcontinental Railroad During the 1860's

Name: _____

Teacher: _____

Date: _____

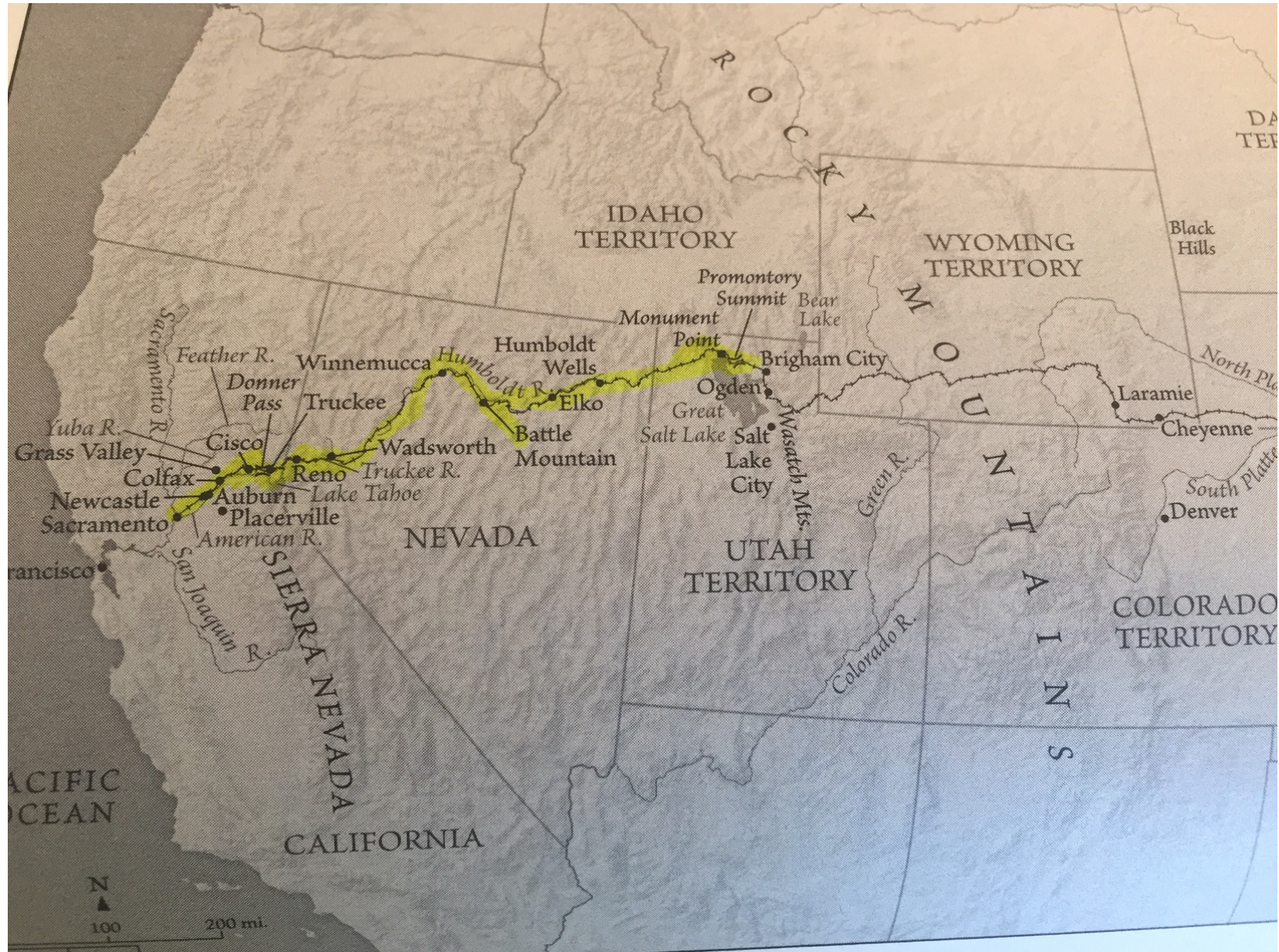
Choose one of the four options below to write about on the back of this handout.

1. “When cliffs, sheer drops under impossible overhangs, ended the road, the workers filled the ravines or built bridges over them. They climbed above the site for tunnel or bridge and lowered one another down in wicker baskets made stronger by the lucky words they had painted on four sides. Ah Goong got to be a basketman because he was thin and light. Some basketmen were fifteen-year-old boys. He rode the basket barefoot, so his boots, the kind to stomp snakes with, would not break through the bottom. The basket swung and twirled, and he saw the world sweep underneath him; it was fun in a way, a cold new feeling of doing what had never been done before” (from Maxine Hong Kingston’s “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains,” in her book *China Men*, 1980).
 - A. Does this sound like something you would like to do? Why or why not?
 - B. What does this mean: “...made stronger by the lucky words they had painted on four sides”?
 - C. With what do you think they filled the ravines?
2. “There is no question that Chinese received significantly lower pay than did white workers in the same job categories and far less than white supervisors, blacksmiths, teamsters, hostlers, and other higher paid positions” (from Gordon H. Chang’s *Ghost of Gold Mountain*, 2019, p. 145).
 - A. Why do you think the Chinese replaced the white workers?
 - B. Why do you think the Chinese agreed to do this work at lower pay?
 - C. What could the Chinese have done to try to get the same pay as the white workers in the same job categories?
3. How do you think very young men were chosen to be “basketmen”? What were the reasons?
4. Imagine you are a teenage railroad worker. Describe a typical day in a short narrative. Be sure to include beginning, middle, and end. Use details from the text to support your narrative, including characters and settings.

A series of horizontal dashed lines for writing.



Map of the Western Portion of the Transcontinental Railroad





Map of the Western Hemisphere



From: <http://goldrush49.weebly.com/around-cape-horn.html>

Seeds to Plate

Migrant Chinese
Workers Were Key

Photo:
Three Migrant Chinese Workers



Wong Fook, Lee Chao, and Ging Cui were among thousands of Chinese workers who built the Central Pacific Railroad, working longer hours for less pay than white workers under dangerous conditions. In 1867, workers staged a strike for equal pay and better conditions. The largest labor action in the country at that time, the strike ended after Central Pacific cut off the workers' food supplies.
(Amon Carter Museum of American Art Archives)



GORDON
H. CHANG

GHOSTS OF GOLD MOUNTAIN

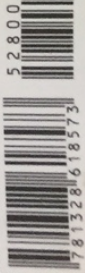
THE EPIC STORY
OF THE CHINESE
WHO BUILT THE
TRANSCONTINENTAL
RAILROAD

GORDON H. CHANG

GHOSTS OF GOLD MOUNTAIN

HMH

28.00 HIGHER IN CANADA
ISBN 978-1-328-61857-3



5 2 8 0 0

1733805