

A railroad from coast to coast—that was the dream in 1861. That year the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads set out to make it a reality.

The Union Pacific crews moved steadily west over the prairies, fighting Indians all the way. The Central Pacific crews moved east. In their path lay a challenge even greater than Indians—the Sierra Nevada.

“Here I am,” the mountains seemed to say. “There’s a chip of granite on my shoulder. Let’s see you knock it off.”

That job fell to Charley Crocker’s crew. Crocker was the labor boss for the Central Pacific. His crew members were Chinese men brought to the United States by the railroad. In their straw hats, blue shirts, and black pig-tails, they pecked away at the age-old stone. There were no bulldozers or steam drills in those days. Saws, picks, shovels, and charges of black powder were all the tools the Chinese had. They were truly men against mountains.

Every chip of rock and scoop of dirt that they removed was dumped into the canyons to fill them. Otherwise the roadbed would not be flat. Some canyons, however, were too deep to fill, and wooden trestles, or bridges, had to be built across them. If a trestle gave way the first time, another was built. There was plenty of wood in the forests—and there were plenty of workers, too.

Firing the black blasting powder was a risky job. To set off the charge, a worker would light the short fuse and run. Many a man didn’t run fast enough. Up he went with the sticks and rocks—never to run again.

Near the top of the mountains, the slopes became sheer cliffs. There was no place for

the men to stand while working. They couldn’t even pull themselves up by their picks. Often they had to climb the mountain from another side until they were above the place where they wanted to work. Using long ropes, they fastened large wicker baskets to trees. Then, hammer and chisel in hand, two Chinese workers climbed into each basket and were lowered down the cliff. Hanging crazily, they pecked away until they had scratched out a narrow ledge in the face of the mountain. Often a rope would break, sending a basket and its human cargo bumping down the mountainside to certain death.

That was how the first summer went; the first winter was worse. Not even the plows and supply trains could get through the snow. At last Crocker was forced to call a halt. He shipped thousands of shivering Chinese workers back to Sacramento. He kept only a handful—the strongest ones.

During the summer a tunnel had been started through one large mountain. All through the winter the small crew dug away at it. They lived like earthworms. Their bunk-houses were buried deep in snow, and they got to the tunnel by walking through other tunnels carved out of the hard-packed snow. Many men that winter did not draw one breath of fresh air or see one glimpse of day.

Spring brought new troubles—thaws and avalanches. Often a crew that had been swept away by an avalanche was found months later in the valley. Sometimes their picks would still be clutched in their frozen hands.

Summer returned at last. Once more, gangs of men were sent into the mountains. But before they could complete the roadbed,

winter was upon them again. This time, however, Crocker was ready. All through the summer, lumberjacks had been cutting down trees and engineers had been building miles of wooden snowsheds. Inside these drafty sheds the Chinese kept right on working through the hard winter.

With all this effort, by spring only forty miles of track had been laid. But in time these men beat the mountains. At last, many years and many lives later, the two railroads were joined to achieve America's dream. In 1869 the transcontinental railroad linked East and West for the first time.

CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. The biggest challenge faced by the Central Pacific Railroad crews was**
 - A mountains
 - B Indians
 - C prairies
- 2. The men who made up the Central Pacific crew were**
 - A Irish
 - B Indian
 - C Chinese
- 3. Charley Crocker was a**
 - A railroad engineer
 - B union official
 - C labor boss
- 4. When the workers could not fill in a canyon, they would**
 - A build a trestle
 - B blast it open
 - C chop down trees
- 5. On the sheerest cliffs, the men worked from**
 - A ladders
 - B baskets
 - C towers
- 6. When winter came, Crocker sent most of the workers to a**
 - A mine
 - B city
 - C lake
- 7. During the first winter a small crew continued to build a**
 - A tunnel
 - B bridge
 - C cabin
- 8. Many workers died in the spring as the result of**
 - A floods
 - B avalanches
 - C earthquakes
- 9. During the second winter, the men**
 - A went to Sacramento
 - B continued to work
 - C climbed steep cliffs
- 10. The building of the transcontinental railroad took about**
 - A two years
 - B eight years
 - C twenty years