**Lesson Plan**

**Grade:** Fifth  
**Creators:** Stacy Trentham & Jessica Everitt

**Objectives:**
- Students will begin to understand the geographic difficulty in forming the Transcontinental Railroad.
- Students will begin to understand the workforce that created and built the Transcontinental Railroad.

**Standards:**
5.02: Examine the appeal and challenges of settling the Great Plains from various cultural perspectives, including: settlers, immigrants, Buffalo Soldiers, and American Indians.
5.06: Examine the impact of important entrepreneurs on American society, including: Andrew Carnegie, Henry T. Ford, and Cornelius Vanderbilt.

**Materials:**
- ArcGIS Online Map: [https://arcg.is/1Gzumi](https://arcg.is/1Gzumi)
- Hand-out Packet (See attached)

**Procedure:**
- Open the lesson with handing out the student packets. Ask students to work as a group to examine what they see in the first two pictures.

- After a healthy amount of discussion, ask students to answer the question in their packet of: “What do the photos above have to do with westward expansion, specifically the Transcontinental Railroad?”

- When teams have discussed and responded, ask them to share out some of their ideas and provide evidence for their reasoning. As students wrap up, tell them of the problems in China in the 1840s-50s with the Opium War (Britain defeated China causing economic hardships for families in the country). In Ireland during the 1850s they were struggling to survive the Irish Potato Famine, caused by a fungus-like organism that wiped out all of their crops leaving them starving. Both groups fled to America because of the promise of the American Dream.

- Ask students to read the passage in their packet next and underline information they feel is important in understanding the construction of the railroad. Ask groups to point out to the group what they think was important from the passage.

- After share-outs and justifications, ask student groups to head to the link for the map, if able. If not, pull up the map on the board. [https://arcg.is/1Gzumi](https://arcg.is/1Gzumi)
- When students open up the map, ask them to click “Bookmarks.” Have students select “Central Pacific.” Using the zoom in feature, ask students to discuss in groups what the geographic hardships would have been on this end of the railroad. Ask students to share out their thinking and require them to provide geographic evidence.

- Following that discussion, ask students to now go to “Bookmarks” again and head to “Union Pacific.” Zooming in again, ask students to now examine the Union Pacific route of the railroad looking for geographic hardships. After groups have shared out, it would be great to ask why the Union Pacific was asked to go a farther distance than the Central Pacific group.

- Now students will go to “Bookmarks” again but this time select “Promontory Summit.” They will then click on the green thumbtack. At this point they will see an actual photograph that was taken on the occasion of the railroads joining. Ask students to answer the question in their group, “Why was this location chosen to be the meeting point?” Discussion on this question should take place as well, encourage students to examine the map and really think critically about what features they are seeing.

- To close out the lesson, students should answer the following question: “How would the story of the Transcontinental Railroad be different had the Irish Potato Famine not occurred from 1845-1869?”

For further examination on this topic with students the below resources are excellent:

Camera and Locomotive: Investigate the documentation of the Transcontinental Railroad through photographs taken at the time.

North American Buffalo: Learn more about how bison played a crucial role in the history of the west and westward expansion.
Westward Expansion

Team Members’ Names:

___________________________________________

Take a close look at the 2 pictures below. Discuss as a group what you see and what you think it is depicting.
1. What do the previous pictures have to do with westward expansion, specifically the Transcontinental Railroad? Be sure to provide evidence from the pictures or background knowledge in your response.

As a team read the following passage about the Transcontinental Railroad.

**Immigration, Railroads, and the West**

The history of immigration and emigration in the United States is closely linked to the history of railroads. Immigrants were not only integral to the construction of the transcontinental railroads that facilitated western expansion, but they also used the railroad to migrate west and to form new immigrant settlements in western states and territories.

Work on the first transcontinental railroad began after President Abraham Lincoln approved the Pacific Railway Act of 1862, a landmark law that authorized the federal government to financially back the construction of a transcontinental railroad. Due to the American Civil War, work was delayed for several years. By 1866, however, the great race was on between the Central Pacific Railroad, which was charged with laying track eastward from Sacramento, and the Union Pacific Railroad, which started laying track westward from Omaha, to see which railroad company could lay the most miles of railroad track before the two railroad lines joined up. Because the federal government subsidized at least $16,000 for each mile of railroad laid as well as generous land grants along the track, each company...
had a strong financial incentive to lay track as quickly as possible.

This massive work could never have been completed without Chinese and Irish laborers, who comprised the bulk of the workforce. Chinese laborers were brought in by the Central Pacific Railroad in large numbers. Indeed, by the height of the construction effort in 1868, over 12,000 Chinese immigrants were employed, comprising about 80 percent of the Central Pacific's workforce.

The work ethic of the Chinese impressed James Strobridge, the foreman of construction, as did their willingness to do the dangerous work of blasting areas for track in the treacherous Sierra Nevada, an effort that cost some Chinese laborers their lives. Chinese workers even helped lay a record ten miles of track in just twelve hours, shortly before the railroad was completed. The Chinese dedication to the Central Pacific was even more impressive in light of the racial discrimination they experienced. California law prevented them from obtaining full citizenship, but still mandated that they pay taxes to the state of California. In addition, the Chinese were paid only $27 a month (later rising to $30 a month), significantly less than the $35 a month that Irish laborers on the Central Pacific earned for doing the same work.

The Union Pacific was built primarily by Irish laborers from the Eastern Seaboard who were veterans of the Union and Confederate armies during the Civil War. Mormons also supplied labor, due to their desire to see the railroad pass near to Salt Lake City, and thereby to incorporate heavily Mormon Utah into the rest of the country. Although the Irish did not suffer from the same kind of racial discrimination as the Chinese did on the Central Pacific, they were still paid relatively little for hard work in dangerous territory. Irish laborers were killed by Native American war parties, who attacked laborers and construction parties for their efforts to build a railroad that Native Americans believed threatened the continued existence of their culture and violated treaties granted by the US government.

Between 1865 and 1869, the Central Pacific had laid 690 miles of track and the Union Pacific 1,087 miles of track. The meeting of the two railroads and the completion of the first transcontinental railroad at Promontory Summit, Utah, on May 10, 1869, was a major national achievement that could not have occurred without immigrant laborers.

After the first transcontinental railroad was completed, immigrants who entered the US at immigration checkpoints on the Eastern Seaboard such as Ellis Island began using the train system to migrate west. In fact, the railroad companies themselves promoted such plans, because increased population in the west meant more business for railroads. One vivid example of this phenomenon is in Kansas, where the marketing campaign of railroads led to the influx of European, Russian, Mexican, and African immigrants only a decade after murderous conflicts in "bloody Kansas" had presaged the American Civil War. Railroads, then, were the means by which the
population of western states increased dramatically due to the creation of new immigrant settlements and the westward migration of native-born Americans.

Discuss points from the article that you found important or interesting regarding the railroad.

Head to the map at [https://bit.ly/2Xw7s7H](https://bit.ly/2Xw7s7H).

2. What are some of the geographic hardships that the crew of the Union Pacific route would struggle to build around? Be sure to use geographic evidence in your response.
3. **What are some of the geographic hardships that the crew of the Central Pacific route would struggle to build around?** Be sure to use geographic evidence in your response.

4. **Using your map, why was the location chosen for Promontory Summit?**
5. How would the story of the Transcontinental Railroad be different had the Irish Potato Famine not occurred from 1845-1849?