

# The railroads role in the settling of the west



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One of the largest contributing factors in the settling of the American West was the completion of the transcontinental railroad. Development was a slow process in much of the west, due in large part to how long the journey took. The completion of the railroad made it both a faster and much safer way to travel across the country. In 1862, the Pacific Railroad Act was signed. It promised federal support to build the first transcontinental railroad. Two companies were chosen to take on this enormous project, they were awarded generous land grants and were given millions of dollars in government loans so that they could complete the project.

The Union Pacific Railroad started laying tracks heading west from Iowa, while the Central Pacific Railroad was laying tracks heading east from California. The two sets of tracks finally merged together in Promontory, Utah on May 10, 1869, creating the first transcontinental railroad. Before the completion of the railroad travel to the west was primarily done by horseback or wagon train. This type of travel took several months to complete and was a very strenuous and dangerous journey, especially when travelling through Indian country.

After completion of the railroad the same trip was reduced to a week's time, while making it a far less dangerous trip especially for the women and children. Passengers were offered free trips, along with long term loans from the railroad companies. This was all done in an effort to attract Americans to the newly developing west. Railroad company executives no longer viewed the Great Plains which covered much of the American West as the inhabitable Great American Desert as it had once been described.

The vast native grasslands that are so predominant in Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and the Dakotas that was once thought of as unlivable tracts of land due to the lack of trees to supply lumber that was needed for building homes. There was now an opportunity to ship lumber and building materials into those areas by train, and homes could be built on land that was once considered inhabitable. These native grasslands lands were also considered to be an ideal place for raising cattle. There were already an estimated five million head of longhorn cattle on ranches in Texas.

When railroad tracks reached Missouri, these ranchers started organizing long cattle drives. Cowboys would drive the cattle from Texas to Missouri, where it was then loaded into rail cars to be shipped all over the country. As new tracks were being laid, new towns were being built in the areas that the tracks ran through. Within a few years, Abilene, Wichita, and Dodge City all sprang up in Kansas. These towns were all established due to the cattle trade that was created from the railroads, and thrived off of the business provided by the cowboys and the railroad employees.

So in conclusion, a few of the railroads contributions to the settlement of the American West. Before the railroad, travel to the west was done on horseback, it took months of traveling over dangerous terrain. After the railroad, travel to the by rail was done in a week's time on the safety of a train. Lumber and building supplies were now able to be shipped to the Great Plains, a place once thought inhabitable due to the lack of trees that were needed for building homes. Lastly, the railroad allowed the long cattle drives to take place that were responsible for building many towns where the railroad passed thru.

There were other contributions that contributed to the settlement of the Great West but I believe these are some of the most significant. Why the AFL Prevailed Over the Knights of Labor One of the main reasons that the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was able to prevail over the Knights of labor was due to the fact that they understood the need for power. This power was achieved by a couple of different ways, they limited their membership to skilled workers, and they did not engage in politics. Their goals were simple, above everything else, the union was there to protect the worker's rights.

The AFL was the national labor union for skilled workers, and they restricted their membership to skilled workers, most of whom were in the craft trade. With all of their members being skilled workers, it gave them solidarity, and meant that all of the members were interested in achieving the same goals. Unlike the Knights of Labor, who would allow membership to all wage earners except lawyers and saloon keepers. This made their membership to widespread, a result of this meant that not all the Knights members were interested in the same objectives.

One of the reasons the AFL gained an advantage over the Knights was because of the AFL's member restrictions. Samuel Gompers was appointed president of the AFL in December of 1886. Gompers realized the importance of keeping things simple. He understood that what was most important to the majority of workers was higher wages and better working conditions. Gompers made sure that the union's first priority was to protect the rights of the workers. 1 His refusal to let the AFL delve into the political arena allowed them to maintain the support of both the government, and the public.

One tactic that was used by unions were boycotts, these were able to take place because of the public's support for the workers issues. Unions would hold town meetings explaining the workers grievances with their employers, the public would show their support by refusing to buy products that were produced by the company being boycotted. Of course the most popular tactic used by the union was the strike. Employees would refuse to work and form a picket line if the union was unable to reach a collective bargaining agreement with the employer.

Thousands of strikes occurred at the end of the nineteenth century. The large and growing size of the AFL was used to support these strikes. Unions only won about half of these strikes, but their demands were either partially or fully met in many cases. The AFL was the dominant national labor union in the United States, until the Great Depression. <sup>2</sup> In conclusion, the AFL was able to prevail over the Knights of labor because of the power and solidarity they gained by limiting their membership to skilled workers.

By realizing that most workers goals were simple ones that included better pay, and working conditions. Also because of public support that allowed them to conduct boycotts and strikes that would better the lives of the workers that were members. The Significance of technological innovation in Building American Cities American cities were significantly affected by technological advances in the later part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. These advances were major contributors to the development of the modern city that we see in America and throughout the world.

They were a crucial part in allowing cities to be able to grow and support the millions of people that reside in them. Generating technology made it possible to use electricity for improvements in the city. In 1878 the electric arc lamp was first used in Wanamaker's department store in Philadelphia. This form of electricity was then used to power city lights, and later, elevators, trolley cars, and subways. Trolley cars were the first forms public transit used in cities that was powered by electricity. Trolleys ran on steel tracks and were powered by an electrical cable that ran above them.

This however was not a viable mode of transportation in some of the larger more populated cities. Railroads had been the principal mode of transportation for the past few decades, but were of little use for transporting people through a crowded city. That is, until 1879, when the creation of the first elevated railroad or " els" took place in New York. Cities were also constructing rail systems that ran underground. Boston was the first to use this transportation method, but in 1904, New York completed construction of the first subway system that ran under the entire length of Manhattan.

Subways used the same electric technology that was used for trolleys, but they turned public, or mass transit into a much more rapid form of transportation. New innovations in the steel and glass industries allowed architects to change their way of thinking in regard to building design. Instead of using just wood or brick for the outside walls that would bear much of the buildings weight, they were now using steel girders. These girders would be used to build a shell that supported the buildings weight,

and the rest of the building was built around them with brick and plate glass windows and other building material.

This new building design allowed the construction to reach much higher into the sky. The first building using this new design was built in Chicago in 1885, the ten story Home Insurance Building. Later New York, which was heavy in population but low on available real estate built the fifty-five story Woolworth Building that was completed in 1913. <sup>3</sup> In conclusion, technological innovations significantly affected the building of American cities. Generated technology allowed the use electricity to power our lights, elevators, and subways.

Creative thinking in the way that we used the railroads spurred the first subway system. While advances in the steel and glass industries gave architects the opportunity to design the skyscrapers that dot the skyline of American cities. Free Silver and the 1896 Election Free silver was a very heated topic during the Presidential election in 1896, due to the economic crisis that the country was in. Because of the governments shrinking gold reserves it was proposed that silver be used at an exchange rate of sixteen ounces of silver, equaling one ounce of gold.

Free silver was the term being used for this concept. It was widely thought, especially among Democrats, that this influx of silver would help to propel the country out of the depression and economic despair of the last three years. Farmers were going bankrupt, thousands of Americans were unemployed, and the economy did not appear to be getting better unless changes were made. These are the issues that brought free silver to the

forefront of politics. This issue gained much of its support from the wheat and grain farmers in the Midwest and by the cotton farmers from the South.

These farmers were being hurt financially due to falling prices for their crops. The economy in the United States was in need of dire repair and many people saw silver as the economic boost that was needed. Free silver had become the most debated topic leading up to the Presidential election. Democrats wanted to go back to a bimetallic policy for the United States Treasury Department. They believed that this was the only solution to end the economic crisis that the country had been in for the last three years.

This was not the first time that silver was a heated topic, this had been an area of debate since it was dropped as a medium of exchange at the treasury in 1873. Democrats had become the party of free silver, but the parties were becoming divided based upon whether members were in support of gold or in support of silver. Free silver however was not just getting support from the Democrats, many Republicans were also in support of silver, and both Democrats and Republicans were switching parties over this debate. Populists, who were also in strong support of the silver were essentially turned into Democrats.

This had become one of the most heavily debated subjects in the later part of the nineteenth century and it made the election of 1896 one of the most hard fought campaigns in nearly since 1860. 4 In conclusion, free silver had become such a hot topic during the election of 1886 due to the economic crisis the country was in. Many people believed that free silver was the solution that would give the economy the boost that it needed. Lastly, the



silver debate was such a hot topic that it caused both Democrats and Republicans to jump parties over the issue.