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### Genre Comprehension Skills and Strategy

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By Myka-Lynne Sokoloff

The Golden Spike

Scott Foresman Reading Street 5.1.5
Vocabulary

barren
deafening
lurched
previous
prying
surveying

Word count: 2,083
In the 1800s, the United States was very different from today. Millions of new immigrants from Europe were crowding into eastern U.S. cities. Yet out west, there was plenty of open land waiting for owners.

In 1848 gold was discovered in California. Now, more than ever, people were eager to travel out west. They hoped they'd strike it rich.

But how would they get there? By the 1840s, train lines crisscrossed the eastern United States. They connected most major cities to each other. However, there was no train that could take a passenger all the way across the country to the west coast. Instead, all trains stopped before they reached the barren plains, tall mountains, and rushing rivers. They couldn’t help travelers reach the rich land of California or the promise of gold.
There were few options for desperate travelers eager to travel west. Most traveled by covered wagon. Wagon trains **lurched** across the plains as pioneers braved this difficult and dangerous way to travel. These travelers faced hunger, disease, attacks by Native Americans, and many times, even death.

Some travelers took an even longer route. They sailed from eastern cities all the way south around the tip of South America. From there, they sailed north onto California. Others took a different route. They sailed to Panama in Central America, crossed to the Pacific by land, and then took a different boat to California. Of the many dangers, huge waves made the travelers seasick, and bad weather would sometimes slow ships for weeks on end.

All of these trips could take six painful months or more. There **had** to be a better way. Some people dreamed of a transcontinental railroad. They dreamed of a day when passengers could take trains from one coast to the other.

Theodore Judah was a railroad engineer who dreamed of such a railroad. He went to California to figure out how and where train tracks could be built across the mountains. After **surveying** the land, Judah was confident that he’d found the perfect place.
Judah had to persuade the U.S. government that the railroad was a good idea. After much debate, the government finally agreed that a transcontinental railroad should be built.

Two railroad companies were chosen to build the tracks. Workers for the Union Pacific Railroad would start on one end in Omaha, Nebraska. They would head west, building the train tracks towards the mountains. The other company, the Central Pacific Railroad, would start in California. The workers of this company would build tracks going east. At some point, the two sets of tracks would meet.

The government decided to have a contest. The company that laid more track would be given land and money.

There were many obstacles that lay ahead of both companies. Workers of the Union Pacific Railroad had to deal with attacks by Native Americans. However, in general, workers of the Central Pacific Railroad had a much tougher job.

Among many problems, one of the main ones was their supply shipment. All of the supplies that the workers needed were made in a factory on the East Coast. The supplies from the factories had to be put on a boat, which sailed around South America to California. Finally, they would have to be carried over land to wherever the supplies were needed.

The Central Pacific Railroad had other problems too. Workers had to build the tracks over the mountains. That was not an easy task to do in itself, but when the company couldn’t hire enough workers to do the work assigned, the task grew to be especially difficult.
Charles Crocker worked for the Central Pacific Railroad as the supervisor of construction. After thinking about the problem, Crocker came up with a solution.

During those times, thousands of Chinese people lived in California. They’d mainly left China because of war and a general lack of food. Once in the United States, they’d taken jobs that others did not want. They opened laundries and restaurants. They worked as cooks and shopkeepers. They worked as servants in private homes, sweeping and dusting, washing and ironing. They also worked as miners looking for gold.

It was hard not to notice these immigrants because they looked so different and dressed so differently from the other people around them. The men wore their hair in a long braid down their back. They spoke a unique language. They had different holidays and different customs.

When gold was discovered in the West, many Chinese people became miners. They had their own methods of looking for gold and worked hard, often finding it in places where others had found nothing. People were jealous of their success.

People were not kind to the Chinese. Around 1860, many Americans had no jobs. Some blamed the Chinese workers, believing that they had taken jobs away from others. As a result, Chinese businesses were burned. Chinese miners were chased from the gold mines. Politicians also made life hard for Chinese immigrants. New laws forced Chinese miners to pay special taxes.
Charles Crocker knew that the Chinese were great workers. But the boss of the workers, James Strobridge, thought differently. He believed that Chinese workers were too small and, therefore, too weak to build the railroad. Crocker, however, pointed out that the Chinese had built the Great Wall of China. It had taken more than a thousand years of work to build the 4,000-mile-long wall, but they had completed what they had set out to do! Strobridge changed his mind.

Once Strobridge saw how hard the Chinese worked, he began to hire more and more of them. By 1865, 6,000 Chinese workers made up the railroad company’s work force. Irish men also worked for the railroads—especially for the Union Pacific—making up most of the rest of the work force.

Life wasn’t easy for any of the workers. Days were long. They lasted from sunup till sundown, six days a week. But life was easier for the Irish workers than for the Chinese workers. They were treated more fairly than the Chinese in a few ways. They earned more money, during the hard winters they were given wooden shacks to sleep in, and their meals were provided free of charge.

The Chinese workers earned less than their white counterparts. They had to hire cooks to come and cook for them. Sometimes six Chinese men would have to share a tent that was only 10 feet by 12 feet in size. They did, however, eat healthful foods and drank tea with their meals rather than the stream water. This small fact made a large difference in the health of the workers. Since tea is made from boiled water, it never made the Chinese workers sick. The Irish, on the other hand, often got sick from the water they drank.

But the Chinese faced other types of hardships. During the winter, heavy snows covered their tent camps, and the men had to be dug out. Others died of smallpox. Possibly 1,000 Chinese workers or more died during this time.
The work was difficult and very dangerous as well. For example, at a place called Cape Horn, California, it was too steep to simply lay down track. Workers needed to blast some of the cliffs in order to make room for the tracks, but sometimes the cliffs plunged more than 2,000 feet down to a river below!

So their solution was to use ropes to hold the workers as they were hung over the cliffs. There, they chipped holes in the rock walls. Instead of prying the rocks apart, they poured gunpowder into the holes. Then in a deafening explosion, the rocks would be blasted apart, and they would be left with space to lay the tracks. Many were injured as they blasted rock with dynamite.

Finally, in protest of the long hours and low pay, the Chinese workers went on strike. They demanded that they work only ten hours a day. They also wanted five dollars more a month. But Strobridge was tough and instead of listening to them, cut off food and supplies to the workers.

Finally, a week later, Strobridge’s boss, Charles Crocker, went to the Chinese camp. He told the workers they’d lose a month’s pay if they did not return. The hungry men quietly gave up their strike. They went back to work at their previous wages. Though it was unfair, there were no unions to help them win their strike.
Even with the whole crew back on the job, workers of the Central Pacific Railroad made slow progress as they tunneled through the mountains. Sometimes they moved only one foot a day! Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months. Soon, a few years had passed, and it was 1869.

Charles Crocker was tired of Union Pacific’s bragging. “We have got to beat them,” he told Strobridge. Then, Crocker had an idea. “We must not beat them until we get so close that there is not enough room for them to...outdo us,” he told Strobridge.

They had finally crossed over the mountains, and the Central Pacific Railroad company began to move faster. Workers of the Union Pacific Railroad, too, began to work faster and faster. Once, they set more than seven miles of track in one day!

Soon the two companies were just 14 miles apart. If Crocker’s team could quickly lay 10 miles, they would not only beat the Union Pacific company, but they’d also hold a record never to be broken!

Crocker came up with a plan. He filled trains so that each carried enough supplies to lay two miles of track.

Then he went to Durant, the boss of the Union Pacific and made a ten thousand dollar bet on which was the faster team! This is a fool’s bet, thought Durant. He was sure there was no way the sluggish Central Pacific workers could succeed.

Crocker chose his team with care. At 7:15 a.m. on April 28, 1869, Crocker gave the signal to begin. The line of men working to lay rails stretched for two miles. The Chinese workers moved as a single machine, each man doing his job at exactly the right moment. They moved and worked so smoothly that it was almost like watching a ballet!
Two miles of men had fallen into a single rhythm. With a huge clatter, the supply cars were emptied – boom! Down went the rails – smash! Ties were placed – clunk! Workers lined up the rails and attached the fishplates. As they pounded each spike three times, others raced back for more supplies, and the cycle began again!

After 12 hours of intense labor, the job was done. Crocker's men had laid 10 miles of track in one day! The Central Pacific team had won the bet.

On May 10, 1869, crowds gathered in Promontory, Utah. After years of labor, this was to be the meeting point of the two sets of tracks. Bands played and officials made long speeches.

To emphasize the importance of the event, a golden spike was used to join together the two separate tracks into one long cross-country track. Telegraph wires sent messages zipping across the country carrying the magical word: “DONE”!

Each mile of track used

- 350 rails
- 700 fishplates
- 2,500 ties
- 10,000 spikes

At last the railroad was finished!
The entire country celebrated that day when the last spike was pounded into the ground. All around the country, church bells rang. Fireworks exploded. It had taken six years to complete, but finally, travelers could cross the country in six short days!

Today the golden spike that was used in Promontory, Utah, to join the country coast to coast sits in a museum in California. Several names are etched into the sides of the spike. They name a group of men who helped build the railroad that joined the country together. None of the names on the spike are Chinese.

After all their hard work on the railroad, did the Chinese workers receive a generous “thank you” from the government? No. In fact, the opposite took place!

Congress passed a law that blocked any new Chinese immigrants from entering the country. It was not until the 1940s that Chinese immigrants were permitted to enter the United States freely.

Over time, many Chinese people became American citizens and even began to vote. Today, many have made their mark in science and sports. Others have added to the arts and to government. Some have won top prizes in medicine. Chinese Americans have added greatly, and will continue to add greatly, to the culture of our country.

Vera Wang, award-winning fashion designer
Yo-Yo Ma, Grammy-winning cello player
Michelle Kwan, world champion figure skater
Michael Chang, tennis champion
Reader Response

1. Building the transcontinental railroad was difficult for many reasons. What was one of the main difficulties the companies faced? How did it affect building the railroad?

2. What were the main events in the story of the building of the railroad? Use a flow chart like the one below to write your answers. Be sure to write the events in the order they happened.

   -
   -
   -
   -
   -

3. Find the word *deafening* in the book. How do you think this word came to be used?

4. How do you think people’s opinions about Chinese people might have been affected by the Chinese workers’ role in the building of the railroad?