9 Railroads Link Montana to the Nation – 1881-1915

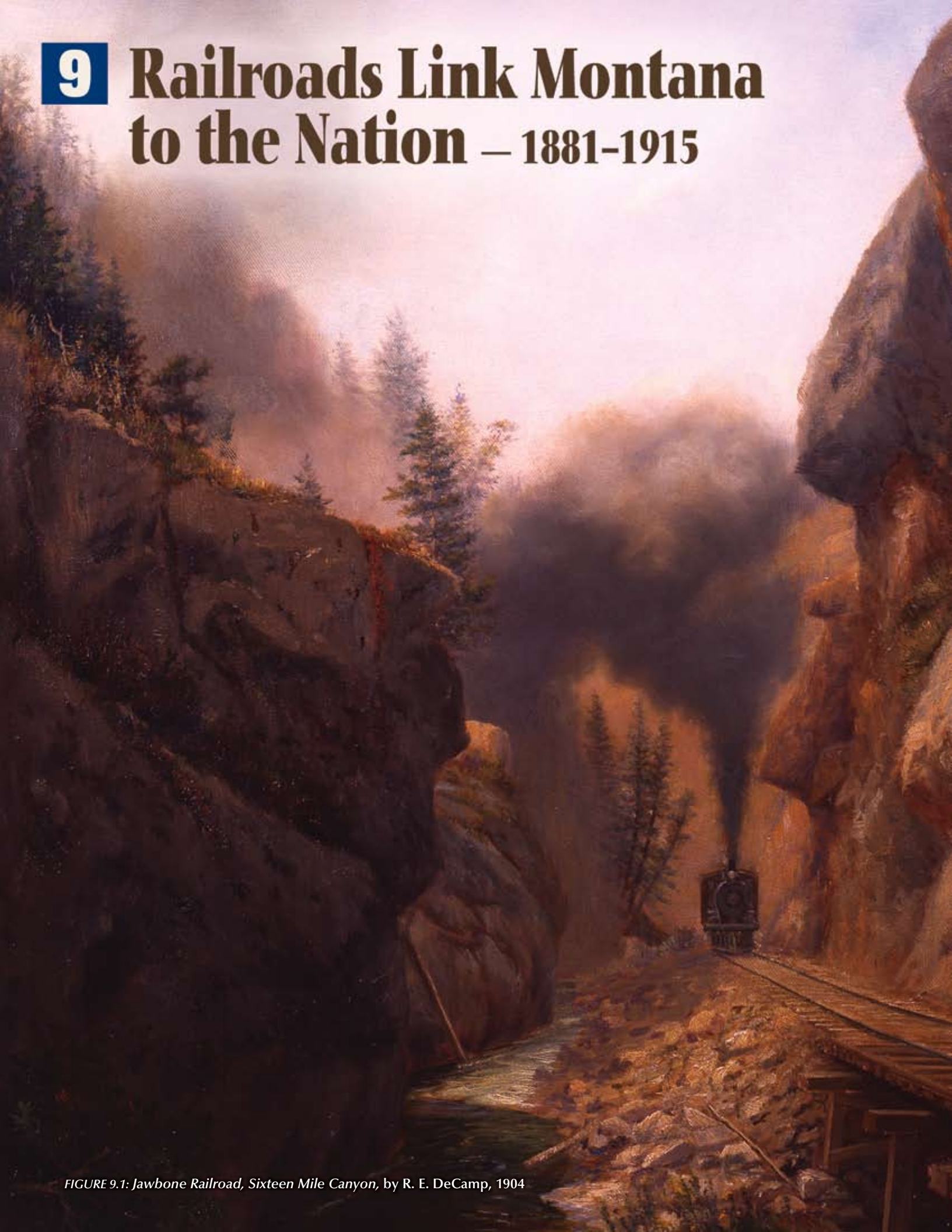
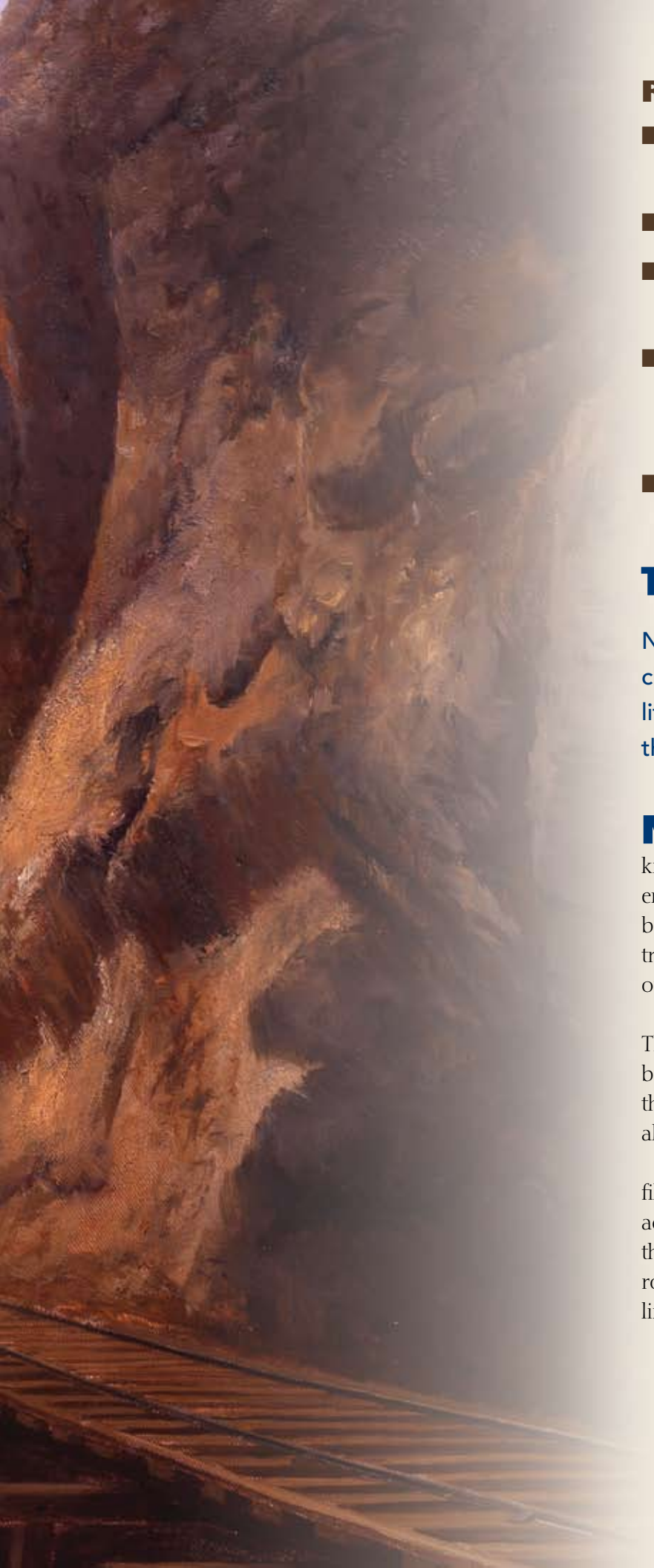


FIGURE 9.1: Jawbone Railroad, Sixteen Mile Canyon, by R. E. DeCamp, 1904



READ TO FIND OUT:

- Why railroads wanted to come to Montana
- Why Montana needed railroads
- Why the railroads shrank Indian reservations even further
- Why the Northern Pacific Railroad became Montana's biggest landowner
- How railroads changed life here

The Big Picture

New methods of transportation always change life and society. Railroads changed life in Montana in the 1880s just as much as the coming of the horse did in the 1700s.

Nothing changes people's lives as much as a new kind of transportation. When the whistle of a steam engine first blasted across Montana's skyline, everybody knew that change was on the way. Railroads transformed life here in the 1880s just as the coming of horses did in the 1700s (see Chapter 3).

Trains made travel to Montana fast and affordable. They shipped Montana's resources out to market and brought in farming equipment, consumer goods, and the machines needed to develop the mines. Trains also made travel within Montana much easier.

The major railroads opened up the frontier and filled it with new people, towns, farms, and economic activities. Then short lines and branch lines stitched those communities together. By the time all the railroads were built in Montana, the entire nation was linked by rail. The frontier was no more.

FIGURE 9.2: Before trains, people built and maintained their own roads and bridges, then charged stagecoaches and wagon trains to use them. A loaded wagon paid $40 (about $460 today) in tolls between Corinne, Utah, and Helena. This 1884 photo shows Yankee Jim's toll gate, in southwest Montana's Paradise Valley.

Life before Trains

Imagine being able to travel only 15 miles per day. How different would your life be? In the 1860s it took three to four months to travel overland to Montana and two months to travel by steamboat. But ice jams, knee-deep mud, snowdrifts, blizzards, and low water on the rivers often brought travel to a halt. Even when all went well, it was hard, slow, and expensive to get to Montana. And you could not transport anything bigger than a wagon could hold.

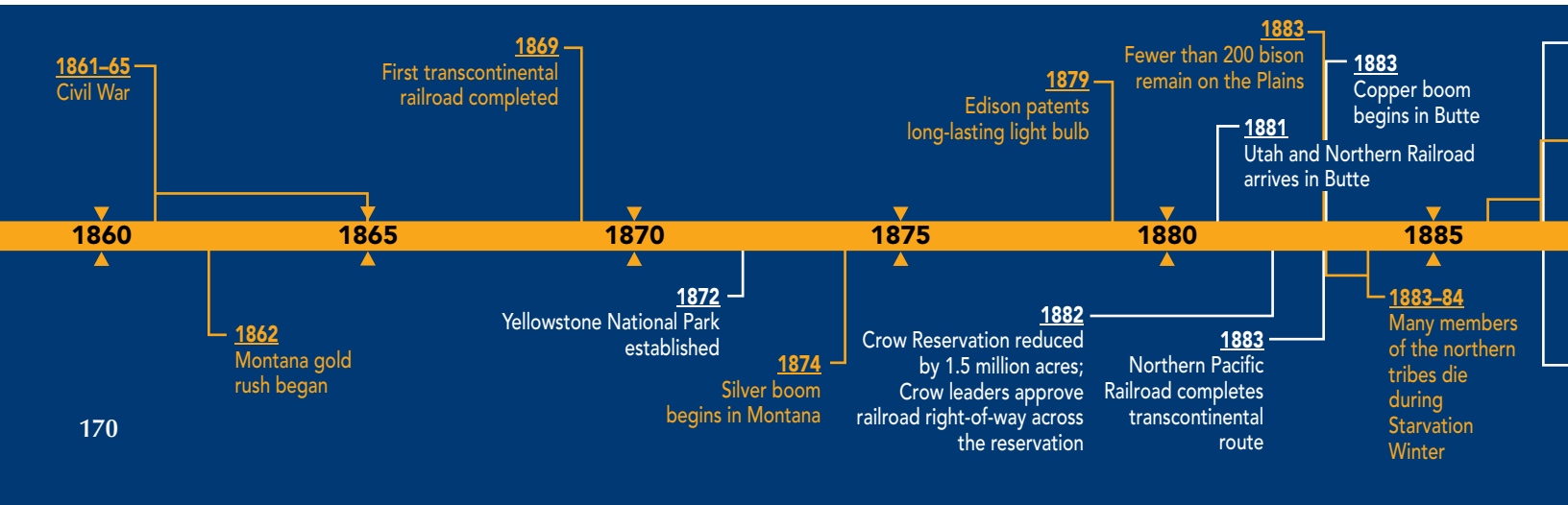
A visit to the next town would be a major expedition. Even on a speedy stagecoach, it took 18 hours to travel the 120 miles from Helena to Virginia City—unless it was rainy or snowy. Then you might have to get out and push.

One Helena merchant in 1867 complained that he had spent over $4,000 (almost $50,000 today) bringing in one shipment of goods—more than he had paid for the goods themselves. When President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, in 1865, it took two weeks for Montanans to learn the news.

Montana Needed Railroads to Grow

Montana's towns and industries needed railroads to grow. Without them mine owners could not easily bring in stamp mills and smelter equipment to develop silver and copper mines. Cattle ranchers could not efficiently ship their livestock to outside markets. Trains were the only way to span the great distances from Montana to faraway cities and markets.

The nation needed what Montana had, too—gold, silver, copper, wool, and cattle. In the late 1860s Montana's gold mines produced more than $2 million worth of gold (equivalent to $26 million today) every month. Montana paid more federal taxes than any other territory—even more than several states. Connecting Montana to the expanding nation-wide rail system would boost the nation's entire economy.



Remote (far away) Montana was the last territory in the continental United States to get railroad service. In the 1880s railroad companies raced one another to get here.

> **"The iron key has been found to unlock our golden treasures . . . With railroads come population, industry and capital, and with them come the elements of prosperity and greatness to Montana."**
>
> —*EDITORIAL IN THE HELENA INDEPENDENT, JULY 1875*

1881: The Utah and Northern

The first railroad to get anywhere near Montana was the Union Pacific. In 1869 the Union Pacific Railroad completed the first **transcontinental** (all the way across the continent) railroad. It was part of a railroad network that connected cities in the east to Sacramento, California, passing through Corinne, Utah. This railroad brought Montana's gold fields to within 500 miles of railroad service.

Right away the Union Pacific started building a line north from Utah into Montana, which it later named the Utah and Northern Railway. It ran roughly parallel to the Corinne Road.

Construction began in 1872. Slowly the tracks extended north. But building a railroad in such remote country was expensive. It took eight years before the tracks even reached the Montana border.

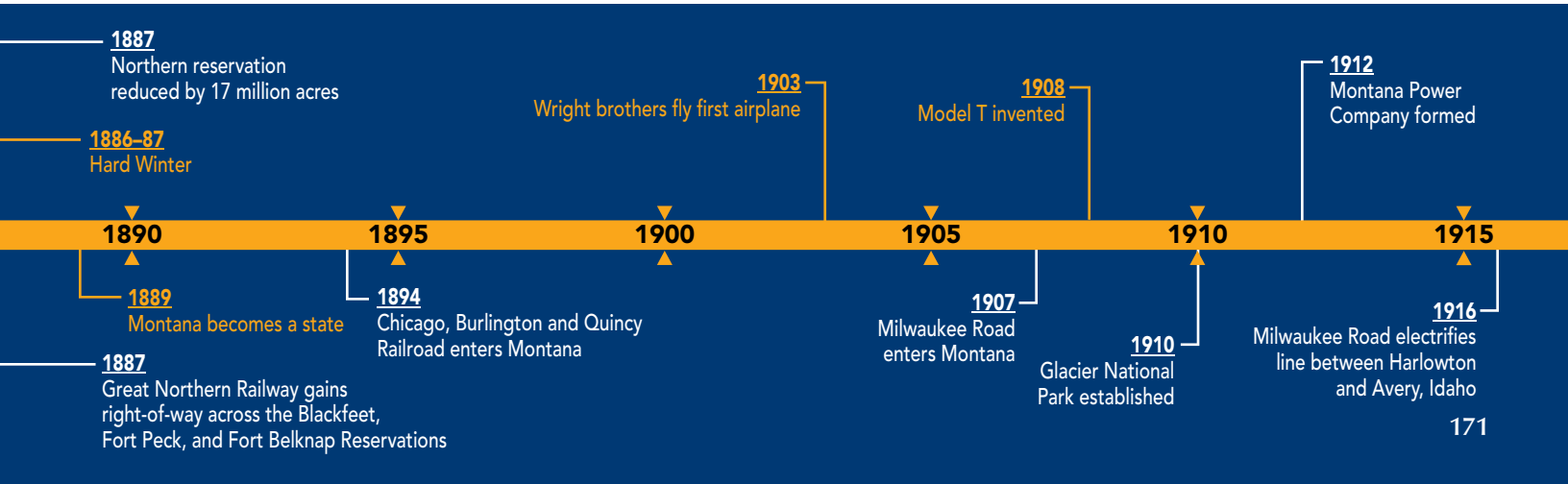
Finally, on a bitterly cold December 26, 1881, the first Utah and Northern train entered Butte, capturing the booming mining city's transportation business.

Though the Utah and Northern helped Montana's economy tremendously, it served only a few communities. Montana and the nation still looked forward to a transcontinental railroad across the northern **tier** (section of the country).

FIGURE 9.3: In the late 1860s and 1870s, it took 2,500 men, 3,000 teams of horses, and 20,000 oxen and mules just to carry freight from the steamboat docks at Fort Benton to Montana's scattered mining centers. An additional 1,000 wagons brought in freight overland from Salt Lake City every year. This wagon train was photographed in Helena in the 1870s.

Railroads Further Reduced Indian Lands

To build all the way across Montana—including tracks, train stations, and maintenance sites along the rail lines—railroad companies had to gain control of Indian lands. So the railroads joined with ranchers and political leaders to



> **"The Great Father told me when the railroad got through I would have a plenty of everything, but I have not seen it yet. I have received nothing, and I am poor, as you can see by my clothes . . ."**
>
> *—A CROW TRIBAL MEMBER, TAKES WRINKLES, TESTIFYING BEFORE THE SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE CONDITION OF SIOUX AND CROW INDIANS, 1884*

pressure the government to take big bites out of the Indian **reservations** (land that tribes reserved for their own use through treaties).

Treaties (agreements between governments) with Indian tribes in the 1850s had included permission to build railroads, roads, and telegraph lines across tribal lands. But by the time railroads actually arrived in Montana, circumstances had changed so much that the government had to negotiate new agreements with the tribes.

"We Talked until It Made My Heart Feel Dead"

In 1880 the federal government brought a delegation of Crow leaders to Washington, D.C., where they met with the president and other government officials who pressured the Crow to allow the railroad to cross their reservation. Pretty Eagle reported to the Crow Council after his return. "The whites got together and talked until it made my heart feel dead . . . I saw the Great Father [the president] again and told him that I would not let the cattle, or the Railroad, pass over my land. Finally the Great Father told us that they wanted the land . . . and that if we did not give it up it might be bad for us, that they might put us in some other place. Then he told us what they would give us for our land and we thought it might be good to sell it."

The Crow Reservation Loses Millions of Acres

These were the days of the open-range cattle boom (see Chapter 8). Cattle and sheep ranchers—and Montana's political leaders—regularly petitioned Congress to reduce the size of existing reservation lands and open up more acreage for ranches, farms, and settlements.

In 1882 the government approved an agreement with the Crow tribe that reduced the Crow Reservation by 1.5 million acres and gave a 400-foot-wide **right-of-way** (the legal right to cross someone else's property) to the Northern Pacific Railroad. The Crow signed the agreement because they needed the money the government offered and wanted to demonstrate trust and cooperation. "Crow and whites are all one people," Chief Crazy Head told a council gathered to discuss the issue. "Bring along the railroad . . . Don't cut timber!"

A decade later the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad also gained a right-of-way across Crow land. It also cut timber—**disregarding** (ignoring) its agreement with the Crow. Over the next 12 years, the government pressured the Crow to give up nearly 3 million more acres from the Crow Reservation.

The Northern Tribes Lose the Sweetgrass Hills

Like the Northern Pacific, the Great Northern Railway pressured Congress to gain permission to cross Assiniboine, Gros Ventre, and Blackfeet reservation lands that stretched across northern Montana Territory. Tribal leaders hated the idea of giving up more land, but their people were

suffering: the bison were gone, smaller game animals were increasingly hard to find, and miners had destroyed many of the places where their people had traditionally harvested bitterroot, chokecherries, and other important foods.

The land they had left was the only wealth they could draw on to benefit their people. In the end the tribes agreed to the government's proposal: to sell 17 million acres of land—including the sacred Sweetgrass Hills region—for $1.5 million (about $32.7 million today). Some of it was paid in houses, tools, farming equipment, and cattle. Much of it the tribes never saw. Reservation agents, who were sometimes dishonest and sometimes just incompetent, lost payments, failed to record them, or simply used them for profit-making projects for themselves and other non-Indians.

The 1887 agreement shrank the Blackfeet Reservation, which had stretched across almost two-thirds of eastern Montana, to a small area between the Continental Divide and the headwaters of the Marias River.

1883: The Northern Pacific Railroad

Even while the government was still negotiating for Indian lands, the Northern Pacific Railroad was building westward. Like the Utah and Northern, the Northern Pacific Railroad took a long time to build into Montana. Imagine what an immense job it was to lay tracks from Lake

FIGURE 9.4: The Northern Pacific Railroad promised free rail passage to American Indians whose land they crossed, and also agreed to compensate tribes or families for any cattle killed by the trains. The railroad did not live up to either promise.

FIGURE 9.5: Laying flat track across uneven territory required dynamite to loosen rock, horse-drawn wagons to move dirt, and endless hours of shoveling by hand.

Superior west for almost 2,000 miles across the Northern Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the Cascade Range and all the way to the Pacific Ocean. It was one of the largest corporate projects of the 1800s.

Land Grants: A Priceless Gift from the Government

Railroad construction was enormously expensive. Usually, railroads paid for construction by borrowing from **financiers** (investors who finance huge projects) and by government subsidies. The Northern Pacific had received a charter to build its transcontinental line during the Civil War (1861–65). Money to build railroads was hard to come by. So, instead of money, the government gave the Northern Pacific **land grants** (free land that the federal government gives to a company, an organization, or a state).

In all, Congress gave the Northern Pacific 39 million acres of land—an area slightly larger than the state of Georgia—including 13.3 million acres in Montana (14 percent of all the land in the state). For every mile of main line the company built in Montana, the Northern Pacific was given 40 square miles of land to use, develop, sell, or lease.

The Northern Pacific's land grant was the largest land grant in the history of American railroads. By 1900 the railroad was the biggest landowner in Montana.

The Northern Pacific Drives the Last Spike

The Northern Pacific met many delays. A nationwide economic crisis called the Panic of 1873 brought the whole nation's economy to a near standstill. It stopped railroad construction completely at Bismarck, Dakota Territory. After the panic ended, construction resumed in 1879. The Northern Pacific rushed to finish building as quickly as possible so it could start making money.

From 1882 to 1883 track-laying crews worked feverishly to complete the 900-mile stretch between Glendive, Montana, and Ritzville, Washington. On the western end, thousands of experienced Chinese laborers blasted through rock, built bridges, and laid track through Idaho and along the Clark Fork River in western Montana. They worked through rain, mudslides, snow, fallen timber, steep gorges, and several accidents with explosives. Meanwhile, on the eastern portion, rail gangs of Swedes and Irishmen labored across the plains from Glendive to Garrison.

On September 8, 1883, the Northern Pacific held a ceremony at Gold Creek (west of Garrison) to drive the last spike joining the east and west lines. Five excursion trains, one of them carrying former

president Ulysses S. Grant, unloaded hundreds of visitors to celebrate the completion of the transcontinental railroad across the northern tier. Now it took just a few days to travel the same distance that the Lewis and Clark Expedition had covered in two years.

A German Journalist at the NP's Last Spike Celebration

"The signal was given. A contest began. Workers began an impassioned race to complete the last mile—Caucasians from the east, Chinese from the west. Who would finish first? Rails slammed into ties, taking their places as if by magic, and were fastened with spikes hit in a violent rat-a-tat-tat . . .

"The job was done. Steel ran from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Ocean . . . Shouts of jubilation!"

—PAUL LINDAU, GERMAN JOURNALIST,
WRITING FOR THE GERMAN NEWSPAPER *NATIONAL ZEITUNG*

1887: The Great Northern Railway

James J. Hill was a railroad **tycoon** (wealthy businessman) who built the Great Northern Railway. Hill was a scrappy, hot-tempered Canadian whose heroes were men who tried to conquer the world, like Genghis Khan, Napoleon, and Alexander the Great. People called Hill "the Empire Builder."

James Hill wanted to build an empire that would control transportation and communication from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. His goal was to undercut the Northern Pacific Railroad by offering lower prices. Hill's transcontinental railroad did not receive land grants, as the Northern Pacific did. Instead, he attracted big private investors. These investors included members of the Rockefeller family, which owned Standard Oil, one of the largest corporations in the world.

With their support, Hill built the Great Northern Railway, which stretched from Minnesota across North Dakota and Montana and into Washington. The route became known as the Hi-line because it was the northernmost transcontinental route in the United States.

FIGURE 9.6: The Northern Pacific sold special satin souvenir tickets for the first train ride from Helena to St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1883.

The Great Northern's Mad Dash for Great Falls

The Great Northern had to stop construction in 1886 to wait for the government's negotiations for Indian lands. The 1887 agreement over the Sweetgrass Hills gave the Great Northern Railway a 75-foot right-of-way over the Rocky Mountains and through western Montana—plus permission to use all the stone and lumber it needed for construction. While the railroad waited, it stockpiled thousands of tons of building materials at Minot, Dakota Territory.

Then, in the spring of 1887, Hill's track-laying crew started westward in a terrific rush for Great Falls. They broke many records for high-speed railroad construction. Track-laying gangs set more than 116 miles of rail in the month of August, moving 9.7 million cubic feet of earth—all with horses. They used 100 million **board feet** (a measurement of lumber equal to a board 1 foot long, 1 foot wide, and 1 inch thick) of timber to build bridges and lay railroad ties—enough lumber to build 3,333

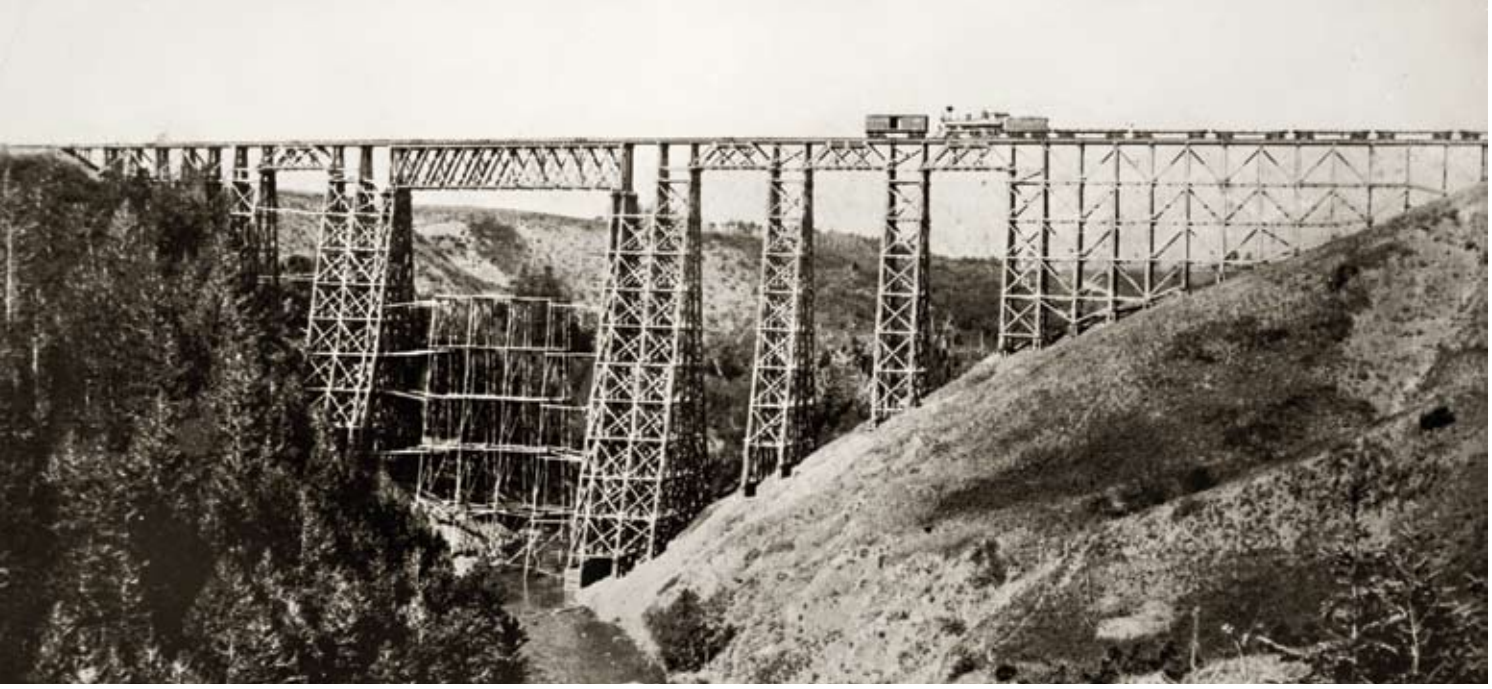


FIGURE 9.7: The mountainous terrain of western Montana created many problems for the men building the railroads. It also involved some amazing feats of engineering, like the gigantic trestle over the Two Medicine River, on the east side of what is now Glacier National Park.

houses. And the horses ate 600,000 bushels of oats. The line reached Havre on September 6, then veered southwest toward Great Falls.

Meanwhile, the Montana Central line—which Hill also partly owned—laid track from Butte through Helena and north to Great Falls to meet the Great Northern. When it was finished, it linked Hill's transcontinental railroad to the mining wealth of Butte. Soon all of Hill's railroads merged into one company called the Great Northern Railway.

Each railroad had to pick a route across the Rocky Mountains. The Northern Pacific Railroad had taken Mullan Pass, west of Helena. Hill had to find a different way.

Rumors circulated about an easy pass over the mountains to the north. But the Blackfeet and Salish tribes did not want railroads cutting through their hunting grounds. They protected its location for a long time.

In 1889—after the bison were gone—an Indian guide took a Great Northern engineer named John F. Stevens into the mountains and showed him the pass. Now called Marias Pass, it is located just south of Glacier National Park. At 5,213 feet in elevation, it proved to be the easiest of all passes used by the railroads to cross the Rockies. Because it was so hard for the railroads to find, Marias Pass was often called "Lost Pass." But it was never lost to the Indian people.

Once over the Rockies, the Great Northern dipped south to present-day Kalispell, then pushed across mountainous northwestern Montana and across the Cascade Range, reaching Seattle in July 1893.

1907: The Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad

In 1907 a third transcontinental railroad arrived—the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, which most people called the Milwaukee Road. It was Montana's only twentieth-century transcontinental railroad. It was known for its sleek style and modern engineering.

While most passenger cars were black or dark green, the Milwaukee's trains were a flashy orange and maroon. Other transcontinentals laid track across the frontier, but the Milwaukee built through a settled landscape. It erected standardized station buildings with a recognizable style. Instead of wooden trestles, it built more modern-looking steel bridges anchored in concrete.

The Milwaukee Road entered southeast Montana in 1907 and cut through eastern Montana to reach towns not served by the Northern Pacific. Then it crossed the Northern Pacific tracks at Terry and angled north through the agriculturally rich Musselshell Valley. It crossed the Rockies through a 2,200-foot tunnel at Pipestone Pass, then eased down into Butte along the Butte, Anaconda and Pacific Railway tracks. From there, it paralleled the Northern Pacific along the old Mullan Road into Idaho and west to the coast.

The Milwaukee Road's route to the Pacific allowed the company to gain a share of the profitable freight business of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, which owned mines in Butte and a smelter in Anaconda. But it also brought railroad access into sparsely populated areas of eastern Montana. To increase business there, the Milwaukee corporation aggressively marketed homesteading land in eastern Montana. Like the other railroads, the Milwaukee advertised eastern Montana as a farmer's paradise (see Chapter 13).

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of the Milwaukee Road was its electrified line. In the 1910s the railroad electrified the portion of its line from Harlowton to Avery, Idaho, so that electric motors could pull trains over the steep grades instead of the standard steam engines.

These electrified rails came partly because of John D. Ryan. Ryan was president of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company and sat on the board of directors of the Milwaukee Road. In 1912 Ryan bought up several small power companies and formed the Montana Power Company. It began supplying electricity to the copper giant's mines and smelters. Then he arranged for the Milwaukee Road to switch from steam power to electric power and to become a major customer of Montana Power as well.

The Montana Power Company gained enormous economic and political **clout** (influence) in the region. With control of both Anaconda Copper and Montana Power, John D. Ryan became the most powerful man in Montana and a major figure in the nation's industrial history.

FIGURE 9.8: On the Milwaukee Road, passenger and freight trains alike were powered over mountain passes by electric current generated by giant motors. On the down grade, the motors were reversed and acted as **dynamos** (machines that convert mechanical energy into electric energy) and returned power to the lines.

> **"All I have done so far is to survive as nothing more than a humble worker like pigs and cows. Is my youth being wasted? No I have dreams. I have hopes. Life means nothing if you don't try to better yourself."**
>
> *—HENRY HASHITANE, A JAPANESE NORTHERN PACIFIC RAILROAD EMPLOYEE IN MONTANA, IN A 1905 DIARY ENTRY*

The Men Who Built the Railroads

Railroad construction depended on young, single, immigrant men who were willing to live in traveling bunkhouses or tent camps that moved as the tracks progressed. The work was hard, and the living conditions were poor. Railroad companies usually did not provide heat, good food, or clean water. The workers could bathe only when the railroad route took them close to a river.

Both the Northern Pacific and the Great Northern Railway hired Asian immigrants to help build their railroads. The Northern Pacific used several thousand Chinese laborers. These experienced railroad workers performed extremely difficult and dangerous work, like planting dynamite in cliffs to blast out rock. Sometimes workers fell from the rope ladders they used to descend the steep cliffs. Sometimes dynamite exploded at the wrong time.

The Great Northern Railway hired several thousand Japanese section hands to maintain its line. They, too, took backbreaking jobs and usually received lower pay than white workers—just 90 cents to the whites' $1.45 (now worth $21 to $33) per ten-hour day.

One Japanese railroad laborer later wrote, "Life in the [rail] gangs was almost unbelievably hard . . . and the meals were barely enough to support life . . . With not a single holiday even once a month, they worked all in a sweat to earn money."

Later, Japanese workers advanced to higher-paying jobs, and many settled here. By about 1900 there were 2,400 Japanese spread across Montana in towns like Missoula, Whitefish, Belt, and Wolf Point.

Asians often faced racism and discrimination. White workers accused Chinese and Japanese laborers of stealing jobs from them because they would work for lower wages. But most **labor unions** (organizations of employees that bargain with employers) refused to let Asian laborers join or to help them organize for higher pay.

Some communities did welcome Japanese workers and their families. In the Great Northern town of Whitefish, a woman named Elizabeth Peck taught English to more than 400 Japanese residents and fondly remembered their friendship. In 1921 she asked the Japanese community to donate money to help build a new building for her church. To her surprise, the Japanese families of Whitefish bought two windows worth $750 (nearly $8,500 today), which came with a plaque reading, "For Mrs. Elizabeth D. Peck from the Japanese."

FIGURE 9.9: The railroads hired Chinese, Japanese, Italians, Greeks, Swedes, Norwegians, Poles, Bulgarians, and immigrants from many other countries. These two Italians, who worked for a Northern Pacific maintenance crew, dressed up one Sunday and asked photographer Evelyn Cameron to take their portrait to send home to their families.

The railroads also hired immigrants from many European countries, especially Sweden, Norway, Italy, and Bulgaria. These immigrants spread out across Montana, where they kept the track and equipment in good repair. They also worked in railroad yards, assembling long lines of cars into trains. The work could be dangerous, especially in busy yards, where the threat of losing a hand or of being run over was ever present.

In 1911 railroads employed nearly 23,000 Montanans. By about 1920 Montana had one of the highest proportions of railroad workers of any state. These railroad employees joined labor unions, and the unions negotiated with the railroads for higher pay and safer working conditions. With the unions' help, railroad work went from being dangerous and poorly paid in the 1800s to being highly regulated and well paid in the 1900s.

Communities where large numbers of railroad workers lived (like Forsyth, Havre, and Harlowton) thrived as railroaders spent their paychecks at local businesses. Railroad workers' income was especially important to these towns when the homestead boom went bust (see Chapter 13).

Railroads Crisscross the Land

As Montana's population grew, more railroad companies built lines to places the Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads did not serve. Soon one of the nation's most successful railroads pushed a line westward into Billings from the south. This was the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad—called the Burlington. The Burlington completed a line from Omaha to Billings in 1894 and later added another line from Billings to Denver.

Independent short line railroads and branch lines of the major companies soon filled in the gaps between the major routes. Some were very short, like the 20-mile Montana Western, which ran from Conrad to Valier; the 25-mile Montana, Wyoming and Southern (Bridger to Bearcreek); and the Big Blackfoot Railway, which extended 11 miles east from Bonner.

By about 1910 nearly 4,300 miles of railroad tracks stitched across Montana. Main line, branch line, and short line railroads stretched to all of the state's industrial regions. They were like the veins and arteries of Montana. They pumped food, supplies, fuel, and equipment into the towns and the mining and logging centers, and they carried products out. Most towns or businesses off the railroad grid stayed small. They were served only by horse, wagon, steamboat, or stagecoach.

By 1920 you could ride a train to most small towns in Montana. The tiny, remote mining town of Elkhorn (in Jefferson County) welcomed three trains a day. In the 98 miles between Opheim and Bainville, in far northeastern Montana, there were more than 15 stops.

FIGURE 9.10: Railroads followed many ancient trails across Montana. By 1916 trains served almost every town in the state. Construction of railroad branch lines continued into the late 1920s. Communities that were not along a railroad track quickly faded.

Railroads Changed Everyday Life

The coming of the railroads changed life in the late 1800s even more than the Internet did in the early 2000s. They connected towns and people together much more easily. People could order new farm equipment, furniture, and musical instruments from mail-order catalogs and have them shipped in by train. They could also learn about—and order—the latest fashions.

Trains carried in new, mass-produced gadgets, machines, and technologies like washing machines, telephones, and automobiles. Conveniences like the wringer washing machine made life on the Plains much easier.

Trains changed many things about life in Montana—even things as basic as the type of houses people lived in and the food they ate. Communities without their own sawmills could import milled lumber, plate glass windows, and architectural ornaments like **embossed** (pressed with a design) tin ceilings. Cabins built from local materials were no longer the only kind of housing available. You could order an entire house from the Sears and Roebuck or Montgomery Ward catalog and have the pieces shipped out by train.

Trains had refrigerator cars that carried fresh fruit, vegetables, and seafood into Montana from other places. Stores could carry a wider variety of foods—everything from oranges to oysters—instead of just canned goods and locally grown produce.

Fancy restaurants opened in Butte, Helena, Billings, and Great Falls, offering foods from far away. The trains themselves also offered sophisticated menus featuring delicacies like green sea turtle soup, lobster, English plum pudding, and strawberry Bavarian cream.

FIGURE 9.11: This was the cover illustration for Helena's Capital Restaurant Christmas Day menu in 1897. The menu offered fillets of salmon, lobster, and ham in champagne sauce, along with sauces, cheeses, and desserts. Such a menu would have been impossible before trains.

Trains Brought People Together More

Trains became an important part of Montana's social life. Groups like the Shriners and Boy Scouts **chartered** (reserved) special trains for their meetings. Others chartered trains to get to sports events, fairs, or ceremonial gatherings. Politicians rode across the countryside giving speeches from trains. Sometimes the railroads gave free passage to special chapel cars. People who did not live near churches—or who were out working in a railroad construction camp—could gather for church at these movable chapels.

Trains brought first-class entertainers of all kinds to Montana's big cities. Butte was one of the main railroad stops between Minneapolis and Seattle, so many touring opera, theater, and musical shows played there. Renowned actress Lillian Russell said that Butte "reminded me of some of Chicago's busiest streets . . . and I never shall forget it." Lesser-known performers also rode the rails, bringing live theater and vaudeville acts to towns along the tracks.

The short lines and smaller railroads, which connected smaller towns, sometimes served as school buses. Kids would dash for the train as it made its regular stops along its route. As one engineer remembered, "If someone were missing at a stop, we could usually find him coming across a field or popping out of a house. We knew where they lived and would whistle to tell them we were coming or waiting for them."

FIGURE 9.12: Trains brought entertainment of all kinds—including circuses—into Montana. These elephants are part of a parade advertising the arrival of the circus in Billings in August 1912.

Railroads also improved communication. A **telegraph** (an electric message system that transmitted coded signals along a wire) conveyed messages over great distances almost immediately. Telegraph lines followed the tracks. Each station had its own telegrapher, who conducted railroad business but also relayed breaking news, making the station an important community gathering place.

Trains Became a Part of the Community

"When a person couldn't make it into town and needed a small order for a machine or harness part, match a piece of cloth or thread, we would take the order on the trip into town and during the layover scurry over to the stores to make the purchase so that we could drop them off on the return trip . . . Then one day someone thought it would be nice to have the local morning paper delivered. Before I knew it, I was throwing off 20 to 30 papers each morning at appointed spots along the line. I became quite proficient at hitting the mark as we rolled along."

—A. G. "PAUL" BUSCH, A LONGTIME MOTORMAN FOR THE GALLATIN VALLEY RAILWAY, AN INTERURBAN TRAIN THAT CONNECTED A FEW SMALL TOWNS TO BOZEMAN

Sometimes people played chess with someone in a neighboring town via telegraph. In Whitehall, railroad telegrapher Pat Huntley recorded the progress of World Series baseball games as they came across the wire. His son, Chet, later wrote, "A cluster of people would gather in the waiting room of the station, and I would bellow through the ticket window the play-by-play action of the game." Chet Huntley grew up to become one of the nation's most famous television newscasters.

Railroads Transformed the Landscape

As they built across Montana, the Northern Pacific, Great Northern, and Milwaukee Road created towns, placed streets, and sold lots. They needed to earn back the high cost of construction—and to build business for themselves.

Many towns like Forsyth, Livingston, Harlowton, Glasgow, Havre, and Lima were originally created by the railroads as bases for maintenance and operations. As the railroads sold land, these maintenance centers blossomed into towns (see Chapter 14).

Railroads also worked hard to fill the land with people. As the Milwaukee Road built across sparsely populated eastern Montana, it began aggressively marketing Montana as a great place to homestead (see Chapter 13). Soon the Northern Pacific and the Great Northern joined in. Railroad companies became the biggest marketers of Montana to the world.

In response, people flooded in by the thousands. Between 1880 and 1900 Montana's population increased from 39,000 to 243,000 people.

Two New National Parks

The railroads also advertised Montana as a great place to visit by train. They built upscale hotels in a few remote and beautiful areas to attract wealthy tourists. Many of these hotels had indoor toilets, fancy dining rooms, and even electric lights—long before the average Montanan had electricity.

The Northern Pacific Railroad even helped create Yellowstone National Park. In the early 1870s railroad officials lobbied Congress to set aside a large tract of land in Wyoming and Montana as a public "pleasuring ground." Congress created Yellowstone National Park in 1872. It was the first time that any national government had set aside public lands for a national park.

The Great Northern Railway promoted the splendors of Montana's

northwest mountains. Great Northern executives encouraged Congress to set aside the beautiful Rocky Mountain area, known to the Blackfeet as the "Backbone of the World," as a preserve. The railroad built a series of hotels and Swiss-style backcountry chalets to promote tourism on their railroad. In 1895 the government pressured Blackfeet chief White Calf to sell 800,000 acres of this land. In 1910 it became part of Glacier National Park.

FIGURE 9.13: Trains helped Montana's cattle and sheep industries boom. Trains brought in cattle to fatten on the rich Montana grasslands, then shipped fattened cattle as well as sheep, wool, and other products east to market.

Railroads Fueled an Industrial Boom

The biggest change the railroads brought was to Montana's industries.

Railroads brought in the machinery and equipment that **industrialized** Montana (developed its industries on a large scale). Mining companies shipped in huge, heavy equipment for hard-rock mines and smelters. Silver and copper mining expanded quickly.

Sawmills imported large-scale equipment, then transported millions of timbers to the underground silver and copper mines—and for use by the railroads themselves. And the railroads shipped silver **ore** (rock containing precious metals, in this case silver), refined copper, cattle, sheep, and wool eastward to market.

FIGURE 9.14: Railroad transportation helped silver smelters like this one at Wickes grow into large, industrial complexes. These towns offered thousands of jobs to newcomers.

A Boom for Silver and Copper

By 1883, the year the Northern Pacific completed its line across Montana, the territory had become the second-largest producer of silver in the nation. By 1889, 25 percent of the silver mined in the United States came from Montana. For the next few years, Montana produced $20 million a year (equal to $403.7 million today) in silver.

Montana's copper smelting industry began at the same time that electricity and telephones spread around the world. Copper conducts heat, electric current, and voice transmission very efficiently. Copper went into electric and telephone wire, copper coils, copper tubing, and thousands of other needs of the industrialized world. This could not have happened without the railroads.

FIGURE 9.15: Train robber James Calvin Towers tied this simple mask over his face when he held up the Great Northern's North Coast Limited a few miles east of Butte in 1907. Trains provided the fastest, safest transport for cash, gold, and other valuables into and out of Montana—and train robbers knew it.

By 1900 Butte and Anaconda were producing 61 percent of the copper in the United States and 23 percent of the copper in the world. The copper from Butte and Anaconda was so important to the Industrial Revolution that some historians say the Butte-Anaconda region helped transform the United States into a modern superpower.

Coal to Fuel the Railroads

The railroads also began mining coal to fuel their engines. The Northern Pacific Railroad developed coal mines east of Bozeman, near Red Lodge, and later at Colstrip, which become its most productive mine. The Great Northern Railway mined coal from a large deposit in Cascade County, near the communities of Stockett and Sand Coulee. The Milwaukee Road mined coal near Roundup. Montana's phenomenal coal reserves offered enough for all.

Railroad Owners Gain Power over Montana

Railroad owners invested in mining, **refining** (separating precious metal from rock), and lumber industries. They wanted these industries to grow so they could profit from them and from the freight traffic they would generate. Soon a small group of corporate owners and financiers—including John D. Ryan, William A. Clark, Marcus Daly, and James J. Hill—gained tremendous political and economic power in Montana. They exercised that power to shape laws, regulations, and transportation rates in ways that benefited their corporations.

The Northern Pacific Railroad, through its land grants, controlled vast **swaths** (areas) of Montana land. As the railroad claimed sections of land, it made some enemies among the people who worked farms or mines nearby. Great Falls farmer W. R. Sellew wrote in an 1888 letter that he was out cutting grain for neighboring farms when the Great Northern came through his farm and laid railroad tracks 50 feet from his house—so close "it shakes the house when they go by," he said.

Some Montanans resented the political and economic power that railroads gained. Farmers in eastern Montana complained that they paid outrageously high transportation rates while the mines enjoyed special treatment. This resentment created many conflicts in the territorial **legislature** (the branch of government that passes laws), pitting agricultural counties against the more powerful industrial counties. Some people even came to see train robbers as modern-day Robin Hoods.

On the Doorstep of Statehood

By 1889 Montana's raw materials were streaming to eastern markets, its population was booming, and a string of new settlements had been established throughout its frontier lands. After 25 difficult years as a territory, Montana was ready to become a state.

How It Worked

Signals in the Railroad Yard

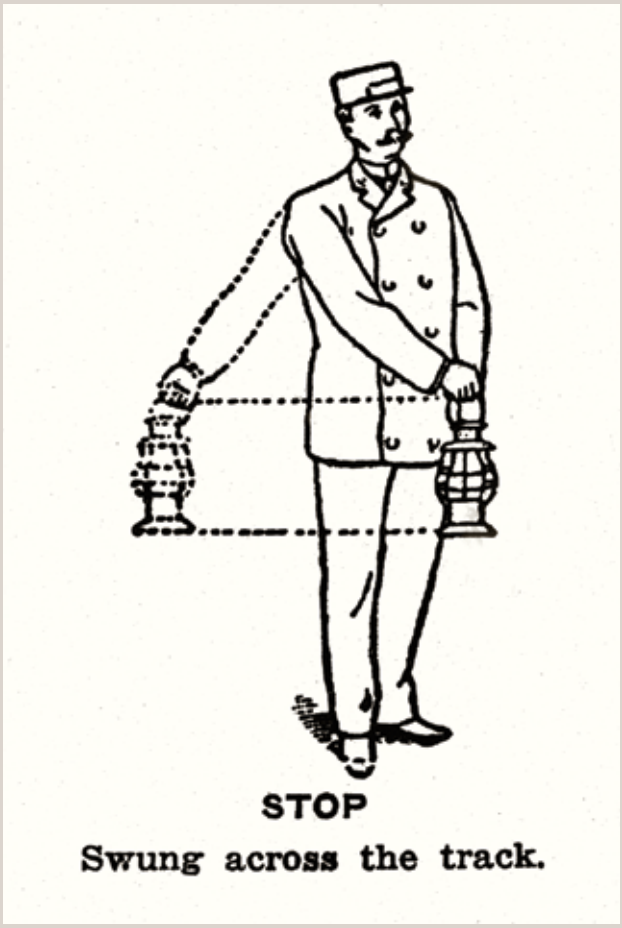
Crews in the railroad yards coupled and uncoupled cars, switched cars from one engine to another, tested air brakes, and sometimes helped unload freight and baggage. Any work done near a moving train car was a dangerous operation, and the locomotive engineer had to know exactly when to start the train forward, stop, or go backward in the yard.

Before radios, the workers in the yard communicated with the locomotive engineer using a system of signals. There was a different signal for each movement of the train. Raising your hand straight up and lowering it again meant *go forward*. Swinging your hand in a vertical circle backward meant *back up*. Holding your hand out at arm's length meant *slow down*, and swinging your arm or a lantern across the track meant *stop*.

To test the brakes, a brakeman swung his hands horizontally above his head to signal *apply air-brakes*, then held his hand at arm's length above his head to signal *release air-brakes*.

The locomotive engineer used whistle signals to respond to the brakeman's hand signals or to let the crew know whenever the engine was going to move. Whistle signals combined short and long toots. You probably have heard the most common one: two long sounds, a short, and a long—*toot-toot-tut-toot*—which means *train approaching public grade crossing*.

FIGURE 9.16: A lantern, flag, or hand swung horizontally across the tracks meant "stop the train," according to the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad's code of train rules for 1929.



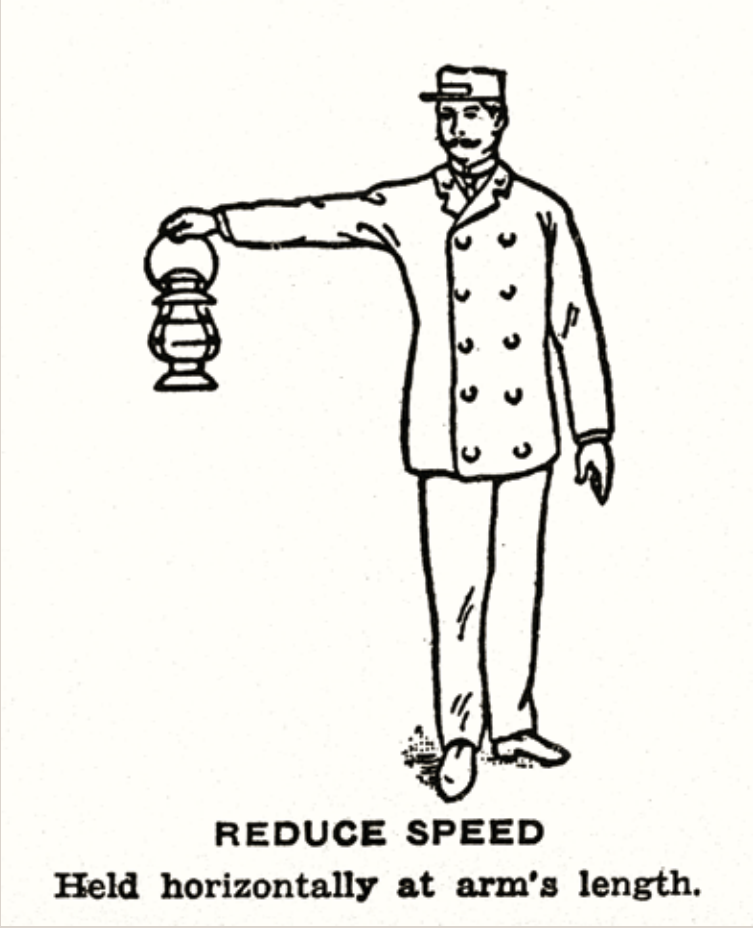


FIGURE 9.17: Holding a lantern at arm's length was the signal to "reduce speed."

Other whistle signals sent messages specifically to the brakeman. Two short toots meant *got your signal*. Three short toots meant *backing up*. Four short toots meant *please repeat your signal*. One short and three longs sent a flagman down the tracks to protect the rear of the train and to signal any oncoming train to stop. Three longs and a short sent one out to protect the front of the train. Four or five long toots called the flagmen back. And a series of short blasts meant *Emergency!*

Today brakemen and engineers have cell phones to communicate about emergencies or any complicated maneuvers. But you are still likely to hear whistle signals in the train yard and at public crossings. And if you ride the train today, you'll most likely hear the same "All aboard!" that railroad conductors have said for more than 150 years—followed by a raised and lowered arm that signals to the engineer *go forward*.

CHAPTER 9 REVIEW

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Identify: (a) Northern Pacific Railroad; (b) Great Northern Railway; (c) James J. Hill; (d) John D. Ryan
2. Define: (a) transcontinental; (b) right-of-way; (c) financier; (d) land grants; (e) labor unions; (f) industrialize
3. Why did the people living in Montana as well as many outside of Montana want the territory to have railroads?
4. What was the major impact of railroads on Indian lands?
5. What was the Hi-line route?
6. What was unique about the way the Milwaukee Road powered its trains?
7. Who came to Montana to work on the railroads?
8. How did trains affect the social, economic, and physical landscape of Montana?

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Think about the impact of the railroads on Indian tribes. What, if anything, did Indians gain by the coming of the railroads? What did they lose?
2. Analyze the role the railroads played in Montana's settlement. If the railroads had not come, do you think Montana's population would have grown so quickly in the late 1800s? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think Asian railroad workers were treated differently from white railroad workers? Are there any comparisons to present-day labor conditions?
4. Imagine there was still a broad network of rail links between towns in Montana. How, if at all, might this affect your life?
5. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, under President Dwight Eisenhower, was the beginning of the vast interstate highway system in the United States and spelled trouble for the railroads. Compare the advantages and disadvantages of rail and road, for both shipment of goods and passenger travel.
6. Reread the sidebar, "We Talked until It Made My Heart Feel Dead," on page 172. Why do you think Pretty Eagle changed his mind about ceding part of the Crow Reservation?

PAST TO PRESENT

1. Research how the U.S. government supports the railway industry today, and compare it to the support it gave them in the 1800s (for example, land grants) and to the support it provides for highway maintenance and construction. Do you think current government support for railroads should increase, decrease, or remain the same? Why?

MAKE IT LOCAL

1. Do you have a train depot in your home town? Is it still in use and, if so, in what capacity (as a railway station or as something else)?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Investigate the names of five towns along a major rail route. What, or who, were they named for, and who chose their names?
2. Prepare a report on the history of Asian workers on western railroads.
3. Apply the Five Themes of Geography to the arrival of railroads in Montana. Think particularly about the three parts of "Movement": goods, people, and ideas. Create a poster using images to illustrate the different themes.
4. Create a poster sponsored by one of the railroad companies encouraging people to move to Montana to homestead. What aspects of the information might be a bit unrealistic or exaggerated? (See Chapter 13 for an actual example.)
5. Think about life in a small town in eastern or central Montana during the late 1800s. Write a "Day in the Life of . . ." account chronicling a change or event that the railway brought to someone in that town.

Credits

The following abbreviations are used in the credits:

BBHC Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming
GNPA Glacier National Park Archives
LOC Library of Congress
MAC Montana Arts Council, Helena
MDEQ Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Helena
MDT Montana Department of Transportation, Helena
MFWP Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Helena
MHS Montana Historical Society, Helena
MHSA Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena
MHSL Montana Historical Society Library, Helena
MHS Mus. Montana Historical Society Museum, Helena
MHS PA Montana Historical Society Photograph Archives, Helena
MSU COT Montana State University College of Technology, Billings
NMAI National Museum American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
MSU Billings Special Collections, Montana State University Billings Library
NARA National Archives and Records Administration
NPS National Park Service
NRIS Natural Resource Information System, Montana State Library, Helena
SHPO State Historic Preservation Office, Montana Historical Society, Helena
TM Travel Montana, Helena
UM Missoula Archives & Special Collections, The University of Montana–Missoula
USDA United States Department of Agriculture
USFS United States Forest Service
WMM World Museum of Mining, Butte

Chapter 9

FIG. 9.1 *Jawbone Railroad, Sixteen Mile Canyon,* R. E. DeCamp, MHS Mus.

FIG. 9.2 Detail of Yankee Jim's toll gate, M.T., 1884, photo by F. Jay Haynes, MHS PA, Haynes Foundation Coll. H-1404

FIG. 9.3 Main Street, looking north from Bridge Street, Helena, MT, ca. 1879, MHS PA 954-202

FIG. 9.4 Looking up Clarks Fork River, and crossing of Thompson River, 1890, photo by F. Jay Haynes, MHS PA, Haynes Foundation Coll. H-2023

FIG. 9.5 Big Cut and Beaver Creek Valley, Northern Pacific, 1879, photo by F. Jay Haynes, MHS PA, Haynes Foundation Coll. H-229

FIG. 9.6 Souvenir ticket, MHS Mus. 1986.78.60

FIG. 9.7 Two Medicine Creek Trestle, GNRR, 1891, MHS PA

FIG. 9.8 Three Forks, MT, photo by Milwaukee Road News Bureau, MHS PA

FIG. 9.9 Milwaukee railroad workers, 1910, photo by Evelyn Cameron, MHS PA PAc 90-87.59-7

FIG. 9.10 Montana railroads, 1915, map by MHS, base map courtesy NRIS

FIG. 9.11 Capital Restaurant Menu detail, 1897, Ephemera Files, MHSL

FIG. 9.12 Elephants on parade, Billings, 1912, MHS PA PAc 96-83.6

FIG. 9.13 Northern Pacific Railroad Poster, MHS Mus. 1980.61.209

FIG. 9.14 Wickes, M.T., 1886, photo by F. Jay Haynes, MHS PA, Haynes Foundation Coll. H-1746

FIG. 9.15 Railroad bandits' mask, MHS Mus. X1908.01.01

FIG. 9.16 Brakeman with lantern, *Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company: The Standard Code of Train Rules, Block Signal and Interlocking Rules* (1929), p. 13, MHSL

FIG. 9.17 Brakeman with lantern, *Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company: The Standard Code of Train Rules, Block Signal and Interlocking Rules* (1929), p. 13, MHSL