



Revised 2/25/2026

Title: Railroads Transform Montana

Grade Level: Middle School

Subject(s): Social Studies/Montana State History

Duration: One to Two Fifty-Minute Class Periods

Description: This power point lesson complements, but does not duplicate, information presented in Chapter 9: "Railroads Link Montana to the Nation, 1881-1915" from the textbook *Montana: Stories of the Land* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2008).

Goals: Student will learn how trains affected the social, economic, and physical landscape of Montana.

Objectives: Students will be able to:

- Explain why many people living in Montana, as well as many outside of Montana, wanted to territory to have railroads.
- Identify how railroads impacted Indian lands.
- Explain how railroads changed life in Montana.

Content Standards:

- **SS.G.6-8.6.** Identify how the historical and contemporary movement of people, goods, and ideas from one area can impact change, conflict, and cooperation in other areas.
- **SS.H.6-8.2.** Analyze how the historical events relate to one another and are shaped by historical context, including societies in the Americas.
- **SS.H.6-8.5.** Explain how Montana has changed over time and how this history impacts the present.
- **SS.H.6-8.2.** Analyze how the historical events relate to one another and are shaped by historical context, including societies in the Americas
- **SS.H.6-8.3.** Analyze how, since European contact, historical events and policies have mutually impacted American Indian and European societies.
- **SS.H.6-8.5.** Explain how Montana has changed over time and how this history impacts the present.

Materials:

- PowerPoint (which you can download from the following link: <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/textbook/Chapter9/RailroadingPowerPoint.pptx>) and script, below.
- Laser pointer (optional)
- Laptop projector

Procedure:

- Print either the script (starting on page 3) or script with accompanying slides.
- To access the script with accompanying slides open the PowerPoint. Select "Print," making sure that "Notes Pages" is selected in the "Print What" dialogue box.
- Review the script and PowerPoint before presenting, taking notes on what points you wish to emphasize.
- Before beginning the PowerPoint, engage your class with the introductory exercise. Then present the PowerPoint, stopping frequently to ask questions and engage in discussion as recommended in the script.

Assessment: Instructor may utilize Chapter 9 Review questions on page 187.

Special Comments: This PowerPoint focuses on the ways the railroad transformed Montana. It barely touches on railroad construction and doesn't talk at all about the many immigrants who worked on the railroads. More information on these and other railroad-related topics can be found in *Montana: Stories of the Land* chapter 9, "Railroads Link Montana to the Nation."

The 29-minute video, *From the Far East to the Old West: Chinese and Japanese Settlers in Montana*, includes information on Chinese and Japanese railroad workers, and might be another good supplement. (The Mansfield Center donated a copy of this video to every Montana school, so check your library. The video is also available through Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/2327023>.) Teachers wishing to incorporate more IEFA material into this unit may wish to have their students complete the two worksheets designed to accompany this chapter. Both explore (in different ways) the railroads' impact on the tribes and can be found at this link: <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/StoriesOfTheLand/Part2/Chapter9/>.

Activity:

Introductory exercise: Have students look around the room, in their backpacks, at their clothes. Can they find ANYTHING wholly made and manufactured in MONTANA?

Ask: How do the things we use, the foods we eat get to us today? (**Answer:** Ships, trucks, and trains.) What would life be like if those methods of transportation did not exist?

Begin PowerPoint.

[SLIDE 1: INTRODUCTION] Transportation shapes our lives in fundamental ways. And new methods of transportation always change life and society. The coming of the horse to the Plains in the 1700s transformed life here; as did the coming of automobiles in the twentieth century. This is also true about the coming of the railroad in the nineteenth century.

That's the transformation we're going to look at today. While looking at the history of railroads in Montana, we'll try to discover the answer to four important questions (**these questions will appear on screen one by one as you advance the PowerPoint**):

1. Why did railroads want to come to Montana?
2. Why did many Montanans want railroads?
3. How did railroads affect Montana Indians?
4. How did they change life here for all Montanans?

Let's start by trying to imagine life before railroads—which, of course, is also before cars. How do you think people traveled? (**Solicit answers:** steamboats, canoes, horseback, stage coach, ox train, on foot.)

[SLIDE 2: PRE-RAILROAD TRAVEL] Here are some ways people got around before railroads. Steamboats traveled at about the speed of a brisk walk. The 2,300-miles from St. Louis to Fort Benton took almost two months.

[SLIDE 3: GOOGLE EARTH MAP] How long do you think would it take to make the 265 trip between Fort Benton and Virginia City, today by car? (**Have students do the math—the following information will appear as you advance the PowerPoint:** 26 miles traveling at 60 miles per hour = 4 hours and 25 minutes)

How long do you think it took in the 1860s, before there were cars or trains? (**Write down guesses on the board**)

[SLIDE 4: STAGE COACH] It could take up to forty-eight hours to travel by stagecoach the 140 miles from Fort Benton to Helena (today it's about a 2-and-½-hour drive)—and another 18 hours to travel the 124 miles from Helena to Virginia City. **(Have students compute miles per hour if you wish.)**

Here's a puzzle: Why do you think it took so much longer to get from Fort Benton to Helena than it did from Helena to Virginia City? **(Solicit ideas.)**

[SLIDE 5: STAGECOACH IN THE MUD] How fast you could go depended on how fresh your horses were, how much weight they were carrying, the terrain you had to cross, how good the roads were, and the weather.

Travel by stage could be a rough and unpleasant experience. Here's how one angry passenger described part of his trip from Helena to Fort Benton in 1868: "Bull teams of freighters were called upon twice to take the coach out of mud holes and up hills. Passengers, the first night out, walked nearly the entire distance from Dearborn to Bird Tail Rock. ..."

[SLIDE 6: FORT BENTON DOCK] As difficult as it was for individuals to travel across Montana territory in the 1880's, it was even more difficult and expensive to import and export materials. In the late 1860's and 1870's, it took 2,500 men, 3,000 teams of horses and 20,000 oxen and mules just to carry the freight from the steamboat docks at Fort Benton to Montana's scattered mining centers.

[SLIDE 7: WAGON TRAIN] Averaging about fifteen miles a day, ox or mule drawn wagons were even slower than stagecoaches—though they could haul much greater weight.

Why would that matter? What type of materials would people want to import? To export?

(Possible student responses might include

For exports: gold and silver

For imports: food, manufactured cloth, heavy machinery, pianos, glass windows, bicycles—anything that was not being made in Montana—which included most of the things wanted by non-Indians immigrants!)

Before the 1860s, importing and exporting large quantities of goods was not a huge priority. Why not? **(Get your class to brainstorm**, if necessary by asking leading questions like, who was here before 1860? Answer—Indians, fur trappers and traders, missionaries, a few prospectors.)

[SLIDE 8: CAMAS] Montana Indians obtained most of what they needed from nature, as they had for thousands of years—they harvested traditional plants like camas, and they hunted buffalo and other game animals. They did trade for manufactured goods (note the iron cooking pot and head scarf in this picture) but manufactured goods were less essential to their survival—and the manufactured goods they traded for were generally fairly small and easy to transport.

[SLIDE 9: FREE TRAPPER] Indian and non-Indian fur trappers were connected to an international economic system. They harvested fur, which they then transported by way of horse, pack train ...

[SLIDE 10: RED RIVER CART] ... or Red River cart to river ports like Fort Benton and Fort Union. The furs and hides were then shipped east by steamboat.

[SLIDE 11: FORT UNION] While the fur trade was big—it wasn't so big that it needed a way to bring huge amounts of materials into and out of Montana. Steamboats and wagon trains could handle the job.

Ask students the question: What changed in 1862? That's right: the discovery of GOLD! And then SILVER! And then, especially COPPER!

[SLIDE 12: HELENA] Mining kept bringing people into Montana. Soon, timber camps spread into the woods, and farmers and ranchers came to raise crops, sheep, and cattle (first to supply the growing Montana population—and later to take advantage of the rich grassland to raise cattle for export).

Thus, mining made Montana a busy place, even before the coming of the railroad. But it could only grow so fast without good transportation that could bring in heavy equipment and supplies.

Ask students the question: What kind of transportation could keep Montana's economy growing? That's right, railroads.

[SLIDE 13: TRAIN AND QUOTE] Let's pause for a moment to look at this quote from the Helena *Independent* newspaper in 1875, five years before the first tracks were laid in Montana:

“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.”

Why did the newspaper think the railroad would be a good thing? How would it increase population, industry and capital?

(Here are some things your class might come to through discussion: Trains were the only quick and effective way to span the great distances from Montana to faraway cities and markets. Railroads would make travel to and from state easier; they provide more reason to come to the state—because there would be more jobs. A farmer could grow wheat without a railhead near by—but what would he do with that wheat once it was harvested? Before railroads, farmers supplied local markets. With railroads, they could tap into larger markets, making more money. Big mining companies could bring in the equipment they needed to mine and could transport the ore from the mine heads to smelters, and the refined products to markets. Infrastructure is necessary for a profitable capital investment. Large mining operations provide large number of jobs in mining, but also logging and other supporting industries—which in turn attracts even more people. Those people need places to live, to shop, to amuse themselves—which attracts merchants and other service providers.)

Transitional Question: Can you think of anyone in Montana who might NOT benefit from an increase in population, industry, and capital?

[SLIDE 14: BODMER] Answer: The tribes. Already, with the gold and silver boom, Montana's Native Americans had watched prime hunting and gathering grounds being destroyed.

[SLIDE 15: ALDER GULCH] They had watched as cattle competed with bison for fodder. They had experienced pressure from the federal government (itself under pressure from ranchers and miners) to cede (or give up) territory.

For the tribes, the coming of the railroad meant more loss of land and more competition for resources.

[SLIDE 16: US MAPS] Let's look at some maps.

(These questions will appear on screen one by one as you advance the PowerPoint):

How much of Montana was Indian land in 1850?

How much of Montana was Indian land in 1870 (before the railroad)?

How much of Montana was Indian land in 1890?

[SLIDE 17 MONTANA MAP] Let's take a closer look: Montana tribes lost millions of acres between 1870 and 1890, in large part due to the coming of the railroad.

[SLIDE 18 MONTANA RAILROADS]

Ultimately, Montana had many railroads.

The very first railroad was built between Corinne, Utah, and Butte in 1881. Why do you think they chose to build to Butte? (**Answer:** Because they knew they could make money exporting copper and import mining equipment).

(Advance the screen to show this text.) 1881: The Utah and Northern connects Butte to the America's first transcontinental railroad, the Union Pacific, at Corinne, Utah.

By 1910, three transcontinental lines crossed Montana. (Who knows what transcontinental means? "Trans" means "to cross"; Continental refers to the continent—so these were railroads that crossed the entire continent.)

(Advance the screen to show this text.) 1883: Northern Pacific Railroad completes its transcontinental line.

(Advance the screen to show this text.) 1887: The Great Northern Railway builds across northern Montana, reaching Seattle in 1893.

(Advance the screen to show this text.) 1907: The Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific (the Milwaukee Road) enters southeast Montana, completing its transcontinental line in 1909.

[SLIDE 19: NP LAST SPIKE CEREMONY] The first transcontinental line to cross Montana was The Northern Pacific. This painting, which hangs in the Montana State Capitol, commemorates the "Last Spike" ceremony held in Gold Creek, Montana to celebrate the Northern Pacific's completion of its transcontinental line in 1883.

(If you have time, you may want to pause to discuss the iconography of this painting. Here is some background: *Driving the Golden Spike*, by Amedee Joullin—this mural was painted in 1903. It hangs in a prominent place in the state capitol, and was paid for by the Northern Pacific Railroad. Although called *Driving the Golden Spike*, the last spike was actually made of iron and is now in the Montana Historical Society collections. The painter tried hard to create recognizable portraits of actual attendees, including President US Grant (holding the sledgehammer) and railroad president Henry Villard, on the right. There was a delegation of Crow Indians at the last spike ceremony—they were invited in recognition of their "willingness" to sign the treaty that allowed the railroad to cross their land. Why do you think they are sitting in the foreground?)

[SLIDE 20: GREAT NORTHERN BRIDGE] Montana's second transcontinental line was the Great Northern Railway, which entered Montana in 1887 and reached Seattle in July 1893.

[SLIDE 21: MILWAUKEE ENGINE] Finally, the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad (better known as the Milwaukee Road) entered Montana in 1907 and completed its line to the Pacific in 1909. Later, the Milwaukee Road became known for its technological innovations, like using electricity to power its trains over steep mountain passes.

[SLIDE 22: RAILROAD MAP] Many “short-line” railroads filled in the gaps. Do you know what a “short line” is? It is just what it sounds like, a spur line that connects towns (or industrial sites) to the main, transcontinental line. By 1910, nearly 4,300 miles of railroad tracks crisscrossed Montana. **(Find your town. What railroad was it on or near?)**

What were the results of having all these railroads?

[SLIDE 23: POPULATION GRAPH] The railroads brought thousands of newcomers into Montana. In 1880, Montana's non-Indian population was approximately 39,000. It more than tripled by 1890—and grew to more than six times by 1900 (to a total of 243,000 people).

[SLIDE 24: SMELTER] Railroads brought the equipment and machinery that Montana's mines needed to industrialize their operations.

[SLIDE 25: CARLOAD OF TIMBER] They made Montana's large-scale timber industry possible.

[SLIDE 26: GLENDIVE] They built entirely new towns and employed many people.

(If you have time, you may want to point out that the railroad created this town from scratch, and platted the streets to follow the tracks. If the town had been a “steamboat” town—the streets would have been oriented to the river—and would have been much curvier.)

[SLIDE 27: BUTTE] They enabled smaller, older towns to grow into cities. Mining made Butte the largest city between Minneapolis and Seattle, but without the railroad the industry would never have grown so big.

[SLIDE 28: TEPEES BY THE TRACKS] And railroad companies continued to pressure Indian tribes to cede land. They also illegally cut timber on the reservations, and they did NOT live up to treaty obligations, like free train travel for all members of the Crow tribe, which they had promised.

So, did Indians gain *anything* from the coming of the railroad?

Discuss. Possible answers may include more consumer goods, a way to ship crops and cattle to market once tribal members began farming and ranching, employment opportunities, and a faster way to travel—students should not be left with the impression that all Indians rejected all facets of modernity and should recognize that Indians' attitudes toward railroads were not uniform (EU 2) and changed over time (e.g., were different in 1880 than in 1940). That said, students should also recognize the huge losses the tribes incurred due to the coming of the railroad.

[SLIDE 29: GN PROMOTIONAL POSTER] What else did railroads do? Well—they were instrumental in creating the early tourism industry.

[SLIDE 30: MILWAUKEE ROAD BROCHURE] And railroads lured thousands of homesteaders to Montana to populate the eastern plains with widely distributed pamphlets like this one.

Do you know why railroads were interested in promoting homesteading?

Answer: The railroads wanted to increase their business—more people in Montana meant more customers for them, and more agricultural production meant more freight traffic. It is important to note that railroads did NOT come to Montana to promote homesteading. However, once they were in Montana, they recognized that homesteaders could provide them with lucrative business and they actively promoted settlement. **You may want to tell your students you will be studying this in more depth later.)**

Which railroad published this brochure? (**Answer:** The Milwaukee Road.)

[SLIDE 31: MENU] Railroads also transformed everyday life, bringing new foods from lobsters to bananas ...

[SLIDE 32: CIRCUS] ... and new forms of entertainment.

[SLIDE 33: CONCLUSION] Can you imagine what Montana's history would have been like without the railroad?

Credit/caption information

SLIDE 1: Detail, “Great Falls, Montana: Its situation, surrounding, resources, railroad and river connections, 1893” (O. C. Mortson, ca. 1893), Montana Historical Society (hereafter MHS) Library Map A-335

SLIDE 2: Stump Horn children and horse travois, photo by Christian Barthelmess, c. 1895, MHS PA 981-030; Steamboat *Rosebud* on the Missouri River, MHS 955-147, 1886; Main Street, looking north from Bridge Street, Helena, MT, ca. 1879, MHS Photograph Archives (hereafter PA) 954-202

SLIDE 3: Google earth map, 2010

SLIDE 4: Stage coach in Wolf Creek Canyon, n.d., MHS PA 952-940

SLIDE 5: Divide to Wisdom and Gibbonsville, Ida. Stage, Chas. Ralston, Driver, n.d., MHS PA 952-927

SLIDE 6: *Bull Team on the Whoop-Up Trail*, painting by Lee Kerr, 1906, MHS Museum X1932.03.01

SLIDE 7: Fort Benton dock, 1879, Stereo Collection - Fort Benton, M.T.

SLIDE 8: *Preparing and Cooking Camas*, Gary Schildt, 2005, MHS Museum

SLIDE 9: *Free Trappers*, C. M. Russell, 1911, MHS Museum

SLIDE 10: Métis people on Red River cart, n.d., MHS PA, 950-580

SLIDE 11: *Fort Union on the Missouri*, Karl Bodmer, c. 1845, MHS Museum

SLIDE 12: *Wagon Trains at Helena, Montana, 1874*, lithograph by William de la Montagne Cary, MHS Museum

SLIDE 13: *Jawbone Railroad, Sixteen Mile Canyon*, R. E. DeCamp, 1904, MHS Museum

SLIDE 14: *Encampment of the Piekann Indians*, Karl Bodmer, c. 1845, MHS Museum

SLIDE 15: Hydraulic mining in Alder Gulch, M.T., ca. 1869–71, photo by W. H. Jackson of the Hayden Survey, MHS PA, Mines and Mining

SLIDE 16: Maps created by MHS

SLIDE 17: Map created by MHS

SLIDE 18: Text only, no image

SLIDE 19: *Driving the Golden Spike*, by Amedee Joullin, 1903, Montana State Capitol

SLIDE 20: Two Medicine Creek Trestle, GNRR, 1891, MHS PA

SLIDE 21: Three Forks, MT, n.d., photo by Milwaukee Road News Bureau, MHS PA

SLIDE 22: Map created by MHS

SLIDE 23: Graph created by MHS

SLIDE 24: Neversweat Mine, c. 1900, courtesy World Museum of Mining

SLIDE 25: Railroad ties stacked on Union Pacific flatcar, n.d., MHS PA 949-141

SLIDE 26: Aerial view, Glendive, MT, photo by Roy Swan, n.d., MHS PA 947-708

SLIDE 27: High school band parading up Montana Street, Butte, Montana, 1939, photo by Arthur Rothstein, LC-USF33- 003098-M2, Farm Security Administration - Office of War Information Photograph Collection (Library of Congress)

SLIDE 28: Looking up Clarks Fork River, and crossing of Thompson River, 1890, photo by F. Jay Haynes, MHS PA, Haynes Foundation Coll. H-2023

SLIDE 29: "Western Trips," Great Northern Railway, 1920, Oregon Historical Society

SLIDE 30: Cover, *Montana* (The Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway, ca. 1917), MHS Library Pam 3882

SLIDE 31: Capital Restaurant Menu detail, 1897, Ephemera Files, MHS Library

SLIDE 32: Elephants on parade, Billings, 1912, MHS PA PAc 96-83.6

SLIDE 33: *The Great Northern*, by Tucker Smith, 1989, MHS Museum