

mll
middle level learning

Workin' on the Railroad

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Teaching History in a Post-Industrial Age

ANN BIANCHETTI

The first time I fell in love with history was on a fifth grade field trip. Our teacher had taken us to a historic house. The stoop of the house had a handprint image, and the curator explained to my class that this print was made by the builder's daughter way back in the 1800s. I put my hand inside that handprint made so long ago and felt a connection; I had one of those mystical moments when I felt time stand still; I felt connected to those who came before. I suddenly "got" history as something that could belong to me, as something that was about true stories of people just like me.

Now, as a social studies teacher, I emphasize the story of history (sticking to the facts as much as they are known) and the human qualities of the players. Middle school kids are in the throes of exploring self-identity and attempting to define their worlds. They

love drama, and history provides plenty of it. I find that teaching history as dramatic stories of human weaknesses, strengths, failures, and triumphs inspires them.

In historical events, students have a chance to explore how those in the past constructed their worlds and self-identity; they get to see how people fit in and what that might mean for them. It's so beautiful to me to hear kids' exclamations about historical figures like Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, Dona Marina, Thomas Jefferson, etc. When they say, "Snap, he was whacked," or, "She was cool, I like her," I am able to see past the slang to understand what they mean: Here's a historical figure that I'm beginning to understand. I am curious about this person. I want to learn more.

Our Town

Paterson is located in a corner of northeast New Jersey, nestling at the bottom of the Watchung Mountains and hugging the Passaic River. We are within view of the New York City skyline. Paterson was founded in 1791 by Alexander Hamilton and his "Society for Useful Manufactures" or SUM. Our city is home to the third largest waterfall on the east coast of North America. The Great Falls inspired Hamilton to create an industrial city, with the rushing water providing power for turbine engines. He arranged for Pierre L'Enfant, who designed the nation's capital city, to design a system of waterways and other constructions, including a dam across the Passaic River, in Paterson.

The city flourished during the Indus-

trial Revolution, becoming the capital of silk manufacturing in America, and earning the nickname Silk City. Paterson has played a vital role in American and labor history. It was here that the first steam locomotive, submarine, and Colt revolver were built. Industries grew and with them the stories of immigrants and laborers one usually associates with Chicago and New York City. Factories and beautiful architecture shared the landscape with towering spires, smoke stacks, and an elegant yet sturdy bridge over the falls. The falls themselves still provide more than 90 percent of the electricity for the city of Paterson, and they are still gorgeous.

But it is sad to see what has happened to Paterson over the last two decades. Gradually factories closed and jobs became scarce, leading to widespread poverty. The factory buildings are abandoned and much of the city is in disrepair. A few years ago it was ranked the second poorest city in the state. The city government has been rocked with corruption. My students are so used to hearing Paterson talked about in negative terms on the news, they are shocked when I tell them the importance this city had in earlier times. One student said, "If Paterson is so great, why do people hate us so much?"

I love this city and hope to see it revitalized one day. The beautiful buildings and falls are still here. The people are resilient and full of energy. Paterson has the potential to be a leading museum area for labor history (as Williamsburg is for colonial history) but it would take a lot of money that just isn't here.

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A steam locomotive climbs the craggy mountains near Gunnison, Colorado.
Photograph by Linda Bucklin.

Middle Level Learning

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About Our School

Many poor districts in New Jersey are called Abbot districts, after a late 1980s court case. Ms. Abbot, the mother of a student from the Newark school system, sued the state claiming that the Newark schools did not provide the “thorough and efficient” education our state Constitution promises to all students. She won, and various districts have since been taken over by the state and labeled “Abbot districts.” Paterson has been an Abbot district for almost 10 years, and the state is still trying to improve the situation.

One by-product of the state takeovers was the creation of small “academy style” public magnet schools. The aim was to reduce class sizes, which had swollen to 35 to 40 students. My school, The Academy of Performing Arts, falls in this group. We opened our doors in 1999, and I was one of the first teachers hired by our school’s founder, who recruited me from another school in Paterson.

We are a middle school with grades 5 through 8. Our students are 70 percent African-American, 25 percent Latino/a, and 5 percent Middle Eastern. Most of our students get free or reduced breakfast and

lunch. We have one section of each grade, with 20 to 23 students per class. Our whole school has an enrollment of no more than 80 to 90 students.

We have had some success. Our test scores are consistently higher than other schools in the district, and we have achieved local fame with our traveling dance troupe and choir. Some of our students even performed in a semi-professional production this summer. The goal of the school and teachers is to raise the bar in all academic areas. Since we are small, we are like a family, with all the wonderful and difficult situations that can bring. Our smallness means that we have the same students in our classrooms year to year, and each of us teaches our subject to all four grades. It’s wonderful to see students grow from little fifth graders to eighth-grade young men and women.

What Works

What really works in my middle school social studies classroom is hands-on activities in a curriculum that is based on history, but draws from all the disciplines. While history is the foundation for my lessons, we also study how geography affects history (Would Egypt have been so powerful with-

out the Nile?), how sociology and psychology affect history (How did the beliefs of the Middle Ages contribute to rigid class structures? How did the public’s response to the attack on Pearl Harbor lead to the imprisonment of Japanese-Americans?). Of course, one can see how the disciplines of law, civics, anthropology, and economics also play their part in the examination of history.

It is through history, and the examination of the other social studies disciplines as they relate to history, that students see the importance of one person, or grassroots groups like the early abolitionists. By extension, students see the importance they may play in the unfolding of the present, which is, after all, the history of tomorrow.

I want to nurture the fire that burns in me, the belief that education is the great emancipator and equalizer. I want to embody the phrase “teaching for social justice,” to demonstrate that despite the many obstacles my students face, they can rise above them with guidance from teachers who make a difference.²

I hope that in my social studies classes, students are having their own “handprint on the stoop” moments and beginning to figure out where, when, and how they will make their own handprint on history. 🖨️

Notes

1. Find more information about Paterson through the Library of Congress’s American Memory Project (online at memory.loc.gov). In 1994 the Library of Congress documented labor history in Paterson through the American Folklife center in a study, “Working In Paterson” (www.loc.gov/folklife/guides/Paterson.html). A description of L’Enfant’s work for Paterson can be found at www.nps.gov/nero/greatfalls/index.htm. There was also a movie made about the deteriorating condition of our schools and the famous “Crazy Joe” Clark, who turned things around (*Lean on Me*, starring Morgan Freeman).

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“Workin’ on the Railroad”: African American Labor History

REBECCA MAHER

IN THE SPRING OF 2003 I worked with a team of eighth grade teachers at Asheville Middle School in North Carolina on a project that combined fine art, music, the history of the railroads, and the African American experience in our state and nation.¹ In my classroom, students interviewed a retired train conductor, who was African American, to learn about his work environment before and after desegregation. They watched and discussed a video made by older students at nearby Owen High School about the role of African Americans in laying the railroad tracks in Buncombe County, North Carolina. Finally, they learned about the life and works of three African American artists who depicted their society during the first half of the twentieth century and created a work of art (in the style of the times) that drew upon the many things that they had learned in this unit of study.

The Students and the Curriculum

Asheville Middle School is an urban school located in downtown Asheville, which is in the Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina. According to statistics gathered in Asheville City Schools, the Asheville Middle School population of about 800 students is approximately 48 percent white, 43 percent African American, and 4 percent Hispanic, the remainder being Asian, American Indian, and mixed ethnicity. Almost half of the student population receives a free or reduced lunch (which is a commonly used measure of poverty). My eighth grade class had nine Anglo, three African American, and one Hispanic students. There were nine boys and four girls, and four out of the thirteen students had serious disabilities. The class met five days per week for forty-five minute periods.

In North Carolina public schools, “eighth grade students examine the role of North Carolina in the history of the American nation. ... [They] place the state within the context of the larger national history since our state, as one of the original thirteen, has shared the entirety of the national experience.”² I am an art teacher, but my students did much more than work with images and paint. In conjunction with the social studies teacher, I prepared lessons about the Underground Railroad and how the slaves used symbols in quilts to communicate their unspoken thoughts.³ We studied the Civil Rights movement and how higher-paying jobs slowly opened up for African Americans over the course of the 1900s. We also talked about the Civil Rights movement as it developed at the local and state, as well as national level. When we came to study the biographies and paintings of three African American artists, students had the historical background to “connect the dots,” to appreciate the threads of meaning and experience that go into the making of a true work of art.

An Interdisciplinary Unit of Study

While I was integrating language arts, social studies, and music into my art lessons, the eighth grade social studies/language arts teacher and the chorus director were integrating art into their lessons. All of us focused on local railroad history from an African American perspective during a unit of study that spanned four weeks. We met regularly to discuss our integrated lessons and share resources.

The social studies/language arts teacher had the students design a timeline that noted key events of railroad history. She invited a retired railroad worker into her classroom to talk about his experiences in the mid 1960s



and 1970s, which included protesting poor working conditions for African American railroad workers. She also engaged students in writing poetry based on the experiences of people living at the time.

The chorus director choreographed a performance in which students recreated some of the sights and sounds of the railroad work gang. The chorus, dressed in pin-stripped overalls and caps, tapping with sticks the size of ax-handles, performed at a school assembly and the nearby YMI Cultural Center.

In my classroom, students wrote in a journal two to three times a week in response to an activity or discussion. In each entry, I asked students to reflect upon what they had learned—to try to describe their own intellectual understanding and their emotional reactions to the course material and discussions in the classroom.

A Student-Made Video

(1 day)

Early in the unit of study, I showed a 30-minute video, *Daylight Enters Buncombe County*, about the laying of the railroad tracks through the Black Mountain region. Owen High School (Buncombe County, North Carolina) students had made the video the previous year as part of a social studies and media project.[†] I asked my students to pick out three historical facts or events that they learned from watching the video and to be prepared to write about the topic in their journals and discuss it in class. In addition, I asked the students to write how they felt about the movie and what they liked or disliked about the form and content of the film.

I often enhance a lesson by showing part or all of a film that relates to the topic at hand. This time, I decided to use a student-made video because I wanted my own students to begin thinking about taking what they learn in a lesson and using it immediately—making something out of it. I wanted them to begin seeing themselves as co-creators of the historical record. The idea of creating their own permanent work was a big motivational force that ran through the unit.

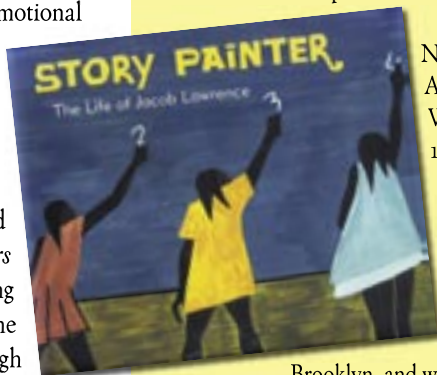
Three Carolina Artists and the Harlem Renaissance

Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and John Biggers participated in the Harlem Renaissance or were directly influenced by it.[†] The Harlem Renaissance is a period from about 1920 to 1930 that saw an incredible flowering of art, literature and music. The Renaissance encouraged an exploration of African American culture and creativity. Black Americans were encouraged to celebrate their heritage and to become “The New Negro,” a hopeful term coined in 1925 by sociologist and critic Alain LeRoy Locke.

ROMARE BEARDEN (1914-1988) was born outside Charlotte, NC. Shortly after his birth the family moved to Harlem where, by the early 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance was developing. The Bearden family’s apartment became a meeting place for intellectuals and jazz musicians. Thus, at an early age, Romare became immersed in politics and music. His work explores history, community, and the struggles of individuals to overcome the obstacles of daily life.

Bearden developed a technique in which he would paint broad areas of color on various thicknesses of rice paper and then glue these papers onto canvas. Bearden would then tear sections of the paper away until a motif emerged. He received many honors and awards during his life including the North Carolina Medal of the State and the National Medal of the Arts.

JACOB LAWRENCE (1917-2000), as both a storyteller and a historian, interpreted the history, the daily life and the struggles of African Americans for over sixty years. He did this through his own style, one that is at once representational and abstract.



Lawrence was born in Atlantic City, NJ and in 1930 he settled in New York City with his family. In 1932 he took classes at the College Art Association, and studied under Charles Alston at the Harlem Art Workshop. He enrolled in Federal Art Project classes from 1934-37. In 1938 he had his first solo exhibition in the Harlem YMCA and joined the WPA Federal Art Project easel section. Lawrence and Bearden were friends in New York City.

Lawrence married Gwendolyn Wright in 1941. He created his paintings in series; some of his earliest projects focused on Frederick Douglas and Toussaint L'Overture, the Black general who led a successful slave revolt against the French in Haiti. In 1943 he moved to

Brooklyn, and was inducted into the US Coast Guard. After a one-man show in 1944, the Museum of Modern Art circulated his Migration of the Negro series nationally. He was discharged from the Coast Guard in 1945, and in the summer of 1946 taught at Black Mountain College with his wife. Lawrence was accorded many honors in his life.^{††}

JOHN BIGGERS (1924-2001) was born in Gastonia, NC, in a “shotgun house” built by his father.^{†††} He was the youngest of seven children. His father was a Baptist preacher, schoolteacher, principal of a three-room school, shoemaker, and farmer. His mother did laundry and cooked for wealthy families in the area.

Biggers studied at Lincoln Academy and Hampton Institute, now Hampton University, a historically black college in Virginia, planning to study the practical trade of plumbing. During his first year there, he enrolled in an art class. While at Hampton, Biggers was introduced to the art of the American Regionalists and the Mexican muralists. He also was influenced by figures prominent in the Harlem Renaissance.

In 1943 Biggers was drafted into the U.S. Navy. In 1949 he moved to Houston, where he became the founding chairman of the art department at Texas Southern University, then called Texas State University for Negroes. He held that position for thirty-four years. In 1957 Biggers made his first trip to Africa, one of the first American black artists to do so, to study African traditions and culture. The experience transformed his life and work. On his return, Biggers created a visual diary of his travels, *Ananse: The Web of Life in Africa*. The book, published in 1962, included eighty-nine drawings and accompanying text. “That such glorious celebrations of the beauty and power of African culture were executed in the heart of segregated Texas is testimony to the enormous impact Africa had on this talented artist.”^{††††}

Notes

[†] This sidebar is an excerpt from “Journey Towards Sunrise at the Asheville Art Museum in Asheville, NC,” Carolina Arts (June 2001), www.carolinaarts.com/601ashevilleam.html.

^{††} John Duggleby, *Story Painter* (New York: Chronicle Books, 1998).

^{†††} A “shotgun” house is a small, one-room dwelling found in many lower income neighborhoods in the rural South. Biggers stated that the term “shotgun house” is a corruption of “shogun” house, meaning “God’s house” in the language of the Yoruba people of Africa.

^{††††} Alvia Wardlaw, *Black Art, Ancestral Legacy* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art, November 1989).

Three Biographies (5 days)

Jacob Lawrence, John Biggers, and Romare Bearden are artists of international acclaim who portrayed the heritage of the African-American people. Their connections to North Carolina are strong: Biggers and Bearden are natives of North Carolina, and Lawrence taught at Black Mountain College in western North Carolina. Each of them produced some art that featured railroad workers, which was the “hook” I used to bring them into the unit of study. All of them conveyed tremendous respect and passion in portraying humanity.

The fact that many ordinary African-Americans survived under oppressive laws and then struggled to secure freedom and equality is often overshadowed by praise of the few leaders who became famous in that struggle. Headlines about the landmark victories, while essential, do not tell the story of the many, many people who endured hardships and took risks in hopes of a better day. Lawrence, Biggers, and Bearden put the spotlight on the poignant beauty of everyday people working, playing, and living their lives.

I assigned students to review the biographical information and artistic styles, then write their artist statements with these

factors in mind. For example, John wrote, “My picture is full of energy and life. I based my picture on the artist of Romare Bearden. The style of the artist is unique and simple . . . The way he has simple shapes and the unique style of the trains. And it’s similar because of the way I used solid colors and stripes.”

Oral Histories (4 days)

Students interviewed retired railroad workers in both social studies and music classes, which gave them two independent sources of primary-source information. In preparation for an interview with Harold Maybin, a retired train conductor, my students composed questions under my guidance. We gave the final list of questions to Mr. Maybin in advance of the interview so that he would have time to reminisce and prepare his talk. In sum, we asked him to share his memories of growing up, to describe his family, and to tell what it was like working for railroad companies as an African American between the years of 1965 and 1997. Students also asked how the railroad industry affected his life as well as that of the broader community. Students used information they had learned—relating to economic, technological, and civil rights developments of the time—to compose their questions.

Mr. Maybin came to our classroom for the interview, which we documented with audiotape, videotape, and still photographs.⁵ Mr. Maybin shared the details of his family life talking about his wife and children and his mother and father. He spoke about his work history. Prior to working for the railroad, he was able to make very little money. As a new railroad employee, he started at a low position and slowly worked up to the conductor’s job. The experience was bitter sweet. He discussed the long hours and being away from his family for up to six days at a stretch under poor working and living conditions. For example, as an African American working under Jim Crow laws, he had to sleep in the engine room. He was not allowed to use an indoor bathroom. Food and water were often not available during working hours.

Mr. Maybin recounted how he was often blamed for problems that occurred even if he had done his job properly. For example, he described several train accidents in which train workers were seriously injured because one of the white workers fell asleep on the job. Mr. Maybin would be blamed and laid off from work. Each time he contested the decision. He and his African American peers protested to the government and



Oral History Alert!

Railroads are a vital part of America’s transportation system, but the generation that worked on the railroads during the 1940s and 1950s, when train travel was very popular, is elderly. Now is the time to find these people (such as the black men and women who were members of the Pullman Porters union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters) and ask them to tell their stories. Oral narratives are part of the “first draft of history.” Don’t miss this opportunity. Hand your students a video camera, tape recorder, or paper and pencil and show them how to become an oral historian.

Kathryn Walbert, “Elementary How To Do It: Oral History Projects,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 16, no. 4 (March/April, 2004); Library of Congress, memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/oralhist/ohhome.html.



gradually won basic rights that the white workers took for granted. He said he learned a lot and grew through the job and all of its challenges.

Making a Quilt (10 days)

So-called “quilting” projects at schools often involve pasting felt shaped onto a piece of cloth. I wanted to challenge students to make a real quilt, piece by piece, using patterns that they had designed. Students first drew illustrations (imitating the style of one of the artists) from the biographies they had studied. They selected details from these pictures to enlarge (by redrawing them) and cut out (to form patterns). Placing the patterns on different colors and types of fabric, they cut the fabric and sewed or glued the fabric shapes together to form quilt panels. Students hand-stitched the panels together to form the quilt.

The students found the sewing to be a fun part of the project. Several African American boys in particular enjoyed the experience, as they had been taught basic sewing skills by their grandmothers.

Student Writing (part of every day)

The students’ responses to the videos were very well written and included details such as dates and related events. I asked them to

tell what they were thinking about as they watched the video. Students noted the harsh working and living conditions of the railroad workers. One girl wrote: “The project we are working on is a quilt depicting railroad history in Western North Carolina. It is from the African American point of view. I think that it is a good idea to do something like this from a different point of view.”

The following is an excerpt from a boy’s

response to the video [original student errors are retained]:

I learned that it was hard to build trains and their train tracks through the mountains. They also used inmates to build the train tracks. And the Swananowa tunnel is the longest tunnel built. I did not like how they kept playing music in the background of the story, because I could not hear what they were saying. I believe that I might like this project.

Following the interview with the retired railroad conductor, he wrote the following entry:

I learned that the train workers were great dressers and they had class. Some times the main worker would let other workers drive the train, but they had to quickly sneak off so the boss would not see them and get every one in trouble. Most of the females like the train workers, and they said that they are the best kind of men cause they had jobs.

When I showed a video on John Biggers, a girl wrote the following journal entry:

In this video it talks about John Biggers and how his artwork uses texture & shape to create almost touchable

Internet Resources on Labor and the Arts

American Labor Studies Center (www.labor-studies.org) provides interesting links to lesson plans and resources on topics of interest such as child labor and labor songs. ALSC is a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to collect, analyze, and disseminate labor history and labor studies K-12 curricula and related materials, aligned to the various state and national standards. Materials cover such areas as the history, organization, activities, and issues affecting the labor movement and the political, economic, and cultural aspects of workers and their unions.

Labor Arts (www.laborarts.org) is a virtual museum of the cultural artifacts of working people and their organizations—“images that help us understand the past and present lives of working people.” Various exhibits provide (for example) the lyrics to many work and union songs; union posters, buttons, and stickers; political cartoons; and photographs.

The Whitney Museum of Art (www.whitney.org/jacoblawrence/art/labor.html) hosts a neat interactive exhibit of a Jacob Lawrence painting, “They Also Worked in Large Numbers on the Railroad” (Panel 38 from *The Migration of the Negro*). Move your mouse over the painting to elicit questions. The curator explains that “the jobs available to southern migrants were often backbreaking and monotonous, with low pay, and little chance for advancement. Many worked long hours on the railroads. Blacks were excluded from labor unions [for many years], and they had few means to rectify their working situation.”



art. Some of the work that he shows on here sometimes can look like you could touch the people in there. The elements of texture, shape, line, color are represented separately in each of his works of art. It also shows the values of the colors; their dark shades and their lighter shades. He talks about the lines and about how each of his paintings represent something that has happened in the world. Like the sun and the moon rising and setting. Some examples of the different elements of design are: the different kinds of lines that he used in his picture, the different shades of the colors, the texture and feeling of the picture.

Students wrote brief answers on a questionnaire that I administered before and after the unit of study. Primarily an opinion poll about the course and my teaching of it, the survey included a few questions that drew out content knowledge from some of the students. For example, some wrote more information on the question about historical sites in Asheville at the end of the study. Sarah's short answer to a question about historic sites, "Pack Place, and different places around here," became (after the unit) "the

church, Vance monument, Railroad, Biltmore Estate, Smith McDowell House."

Students expressed a willingness to participate and do the work of this challenging unit of study. There were, however, a few stones in the road. During the first two weeks, some students periodically expressed frustration and confusion over how the speakers and videos fit together with the artwork. Frederick, a student in my art class, wrote: "We haven't drawn in ages. Its all talk and writing in this book."

In response to the daily journal entries, I wrote each student a note providing encouragement, support, and sometimes analysis, such as pointing out connections between topics. This effort (providing written feedback to individual students) took me about two hours each week. I gave daily grades for class participation and journal writing. One student did not speak English, so I asked him to write in Spanish. I wrote out his assignments and commented on his work in Spanish as well, in coordination with the Spanish language and ESL teachers.

A PowerPoint Presentation and Assembly (2 school days plus 2 weekend hours)

The first six students to finish their quilt panels began work on a PowerPoint presentation

about the process they went through in creating the quilt, using photos and notes from the interviews, the quilt making sessions, the artists' biographies, and the general history of the period. These students became very enthusiastic and even volunteered to talk in a school assembly about their artwork.

One student had been particularly negative during this unit of study. She had resisted doing the work, complaining that it was too much or too hard. She found every excuse to just sit and complain up until the time came to work on the computer. That week, she took a lead role in creating the PowerPoint presentation and was the first to volunteer to get up at an all school assembly to read her statement about one of the artists. She spoke clearly about what she had learned and done during the project.

After the final week of the unit of study, the thirty students involved in the project hosted a one-hour school assembly. The program included the PowerPoint Presentation, the reading of student poetry, and a description of the timeline. Students performed some American railroad working songs with rhythm sticks, echoing the sounds of a legendary time for American workers and industry.

Conclusion

I spent one month with my eighth grade art class studying African American artists and local labor history from an African American perspective. I found the experience to be positive overall, and would recommend similar projects to other teachers. The journals allowed thoughts and feelings to flow between individual students and myself, communication that probably would not happen in a group discussion. The project united the students, allowing them to work as a whole in a cooperative manner. The students were able to be creative intellectually and artistically. The end results—the collection of student writing, the quilt, the songs, and the PowerPoint presentation before a large audience—were quite impressive. The students particularly enjoyed taking photographs during the interview and quilt making. The community at large and in the school was receptive to the presentations and the artwork. And although it is difficult to measure this kind of thing, I like



Detail of a quilt, made by eighth grade students of Rebecca C. Maher, about the railroads and African American history.

to think that the work of these students contributed, in a small way, to improving relations among the different ethnic and social groups in our school and in the community of Asheville.⁶

Notes

1. This project was part of the “Ties that Bind,” a larger project sponsored by the African American Cultural Center (YMI Cultural Center) in Asheville, North Carolina. My longer paper, on which this article is based, was titled “African American History in the Classroom: An Art-Based Research Study.” This research project included five methods of data collection: a questionnaire given to students before the unit of study, written observations by the teacher, student journals with teacher responses, student works (such as the quilt, photographs, and PowerPoint presentation), and a questionnaire given after the unit of study had ended. It was done as part of an undergraduate Art Teacher Certificate program at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, and funded by the Undergraduate Research Division.
2. North Carolina Social Studies Curriculum, rev. 1991, p. 91.
3. Ava L. McCall. “Quilting Across Cultures,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 15, no. 2 (November/December 2002): 20-25; Pat McMillion, “Comment: Quilts and the Underground Railroad,” and Response by Ava L. McCall, *ibid.* 15, no. 4, p. 5.
4. *Daylight Enters Buncombe County* (30-minute video, Buncombe County, NC: Owen High School, 2000).
5. The YMI Cultural Center signed a release of information with Mr. Maybin, since they had arranged the interview for us.
6. I would like to thank Rita Martin, director of the YMI Cultural Center; Pam Coxe, principal of Asheville Middle School; Linda Nelms at the University of North Carolina at Asheville; Pat Berkley, the coordinator of the Ties that Bind project; and especially my cooperating teacher, Shirley Whitesides, at Asheville Middle School in North Carolina.

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A Union of Railroad Workers Sets the Pace

A. PHILIP RANDOLPH PULLMAN PORTER MUSEUM

During the century spanning the years 1868-1968, the African-American railroad attendant's presence on the train became an American tradition. By the 1920s, a peak decade for the railroads, more than twenty thousand African-Americans were working as porters, providing a variety of services for passengers on the sleeping cars. The railroad was the largest employer of black labor at that time in the United States and Canada. Other jobs held by African Americans were dining car waiters, chefs, and track layers.

"Service not Servitude"

The Pullman Porters organized and founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925. The BSCP was the very first African-American labor union to sign a collective bargaining agreement with a major U.S. corporation. A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979) was the determined, dedicated, and articulate president of this union who fought to improve the working conditions and pay for the Pullman Porters. During this era, the railroad companies were among the most powerful corporations in the nation.

The porters had tried to organize since the beginning of the century. The wages and working conditions were below average for decades. For example, the porters were required to work 400 hours per month or 11,000 miles (whichever occurred first) to receive full pay. Porters depended on the passengers' tips in order to earn a decent level of pay. Typically, the porters' tips were more than their monthly salary earned from the Pullman Company.

Founding a Labor Union

After many years of suffering these types of conditions, the porters united with A. Philip Randolph as their leader. Finally, having endured threats from the Pullman Company such as job loss and harassment, the BSCP

forced the company to the bargaining table. On August 25, 1937, after 12 years of battle, the BSCP was recognized as the official union of the Pullman Porters. Today, many railroad workers are members of the Transportation Communications Union (TCU), which carries on the work of the BSCP.


Protected by the union, the job of a Pullman Porter was one of economic stability and held high social prestige in the African-American community. A. Philip Randolph utilized the power of the labor union and the unity that it represented to demand significant social changes for African-Americans nationally. Randolph and the members of the BSCP understood the power of collective work and community involvement. They improved the quality of life for themselves and made sure that their efforts improved the lives of those who were to follow. Their story is one of ordinary men who did extraordinary things.

March on Washington 1941 (halted)

Randolph first planned a March on Washington in 1941 to protest against governmental hiring practices that excluded African-Americans from federal employment and federal contracts. Randolph understood that this type of racial discrimination was the reason for the economic disparities between whites and blacks in this country. Randolph proposed that African-Americans march on Washington to demand jobs and freedom. Just the proposal for a march spurred President Roosevelt into action: He signed Executive Order 8802, which banned discrimination in the federal government and defense industries in June 1941. The march was not held because the organizers got what they asked for!

March on Washington 1963 (completed)

Randolph's leadership influenced many leaders including Dr. King and Malcolm X.

As a result of the groundwork laid 22 years earlier for the 1941 March on Washington, Randolph was prepared for the leadership role he held in the 1963 March on Washington. With Bayard Rustin as the main organizer of the march, Randolph was able to unite the many groups and leaders that comprised this national call for masses of people to take action. He was 73 years old at the time. On August 28, 1963, 250,000 people attended this monumental march, which set a precedent demonstrating the power of unity and action. After the march, Randolph, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, John Lewis and others met with President Kennedy. Within a year, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed. 

Questions for discussion:

1. Why did railroad porters believe that they needed to unionize?
2. How many years of organizing and protest did it take before Pullman Company executives conceded that they should negotiate with a union of porters?
3. Did A. Philip Randolph's efforts over the course of his life affect only railroad workers?
4. Where could you look to find out more about some of the people mentioned in the last section above, such as Bayard Rustin and John Lewis?
5. What happened in December of 1941 that created a demand for workers, including African American men, in the United States?

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Laying Track Over the Sierra Nevada

U.S. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

AN ASTOUNDING CONSTRUCTION FEAT OF Chinese Americans was the work done on the western section of the transcontinental railroad. The groundbreaking ceremony for the new line took place in Sacramento in 1863, but up until 1865, less than 50 miles of running track had been laid, and this was over relatively level land. The construction superintendent for the Central Pacific Railroad, J. H. Strobridge, was reluctant to hire Chinese workers, even though they had been employed on the California Central Railroad and were praised for their work by the Sacramento Union in 1858. When Strobridge finally tested the skill of a Chinese immigrant work crew, it graded a roadbed more accurately than did an experienced crew of white laborers, much to the latter's chagrin.

Beginning in 1865, Chinese American workers built the section of the railroad through the foothills and over the high Sierra Nevada. Work in the beginning was slow and difficult. After the first 23 miles, Central Pacific faced the daunting task of laying tracks over terrain that rose 7,000 feet in 100 miles. To conquer the many sheer embankments, the Chinese workers were lowered by ropes from the top of cliffs and—while suspended—chipped away at the granite, and then planted explosives that would rough out the shape of a tunnel or ledge. A racist expression of that era, “A Chinaman’s Chance,”

reflects how treacherous the work was.

When winter came to the high Sierras, the Chinese American laborers worked and lived under the snow. They dug chimneys and airshafts, and lived by lantern light, tunneling their way from the camps to the portal of the tunnel. A labyrinth of passages developed under the snow. The corridors were sometimes wide enough to allow two-horse sleds to move through freely, and they were up to 200 feet long. Through them, workmen traveled back and forth, digging, blasting, and removing the rubble. The work continued round the clock. Loss of life was heavy, for tunnels collapsed, and snow slides sometimes carried away whole camps.

In 1867, 2,000 Chinese American workers went on strike, an action that was noted for the nonviolence and sobriety of the strikers. (At this time, white labor unions did not allow Chinese Americans to become union members. Strikes were often accompanied by fights and drunkenness among the idle strikers). The supervisors knew how difficult it would be to train strikebreakers (other laborers) to perform the same dangerous work as done by the Chinese Americans.

Within a month, the strikers won a reduction in work hours (from ten or more to eight hours a day), but were unsuccessful in obtaining pay equal to that of white laborers. On completion of the railroad, their work was acknowledged by supervisor E. B. Crocker in Sacramento, who said: “I wish to call to your minds that the early completion of this railroad we have built has been in large measure due to that poor, despised class of laborers called the Chinese, to the fidelity and industry they have shown.”

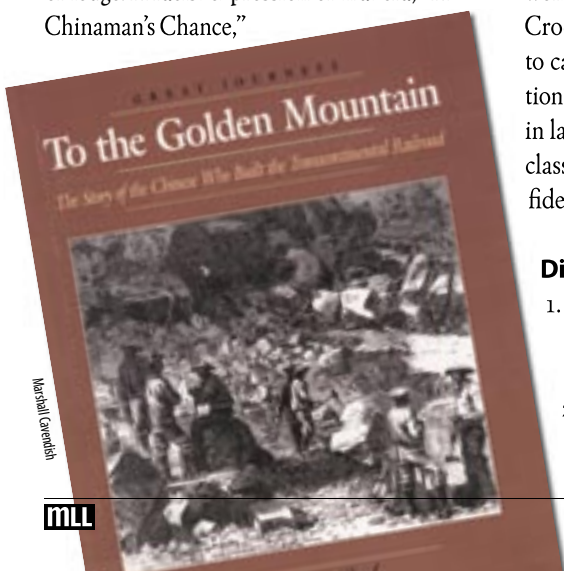
Discussion Questions

1. What skills did Chinese American immigrants bring with them that were useful for railroad construction.
2. What, would you guess, are some of the most hazardous jobs today?

- Where could you look to find out? One research center students can use is the U.S. Department of Labor, www.osha.gov/SLTC/teenworkers/teenworkers.html, which reports that teenage employees are killed on the job most often from (1) Homicide, (2) Driving or traveling as passengers in motor vehicles, (3) Machine-related accidents, (4) Electrocution, and (5) Falls.
3. Why didn't Chinese Americans work with labor unions during the 1860s to improve their working conditions?
 4. During celebrations at the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, few official speeches or newspaper articles in the U.S. recognized the contributions of Chinese Americans (the example quoted above was one exception). Was this omission fair at the time? Why might it be useful to our generation to know about this history?

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Diary of a Railroad Construction Engineer, 1868

Before a railroad track could be laid, a survey team had to plan its course over rivers, and around or through hills and mountains. Read these passages from the diary of A. N. Ferguson, who worked as a Civil Engineer for the Union Pacific Rail Road. Underline any words that are new to you. Be ready to discuss these passages with the class. (*Teacher: See discussion questions on page 15, first part.*)

SUNDAY, APRIL 26, 1868—Our train stopped at a station two hours last night on account of Indians. Made North Platte a few hours after sunrise where we had breakfast. This is a very warm morning. Had dinner at Sidney Station. Arrived at Cheyenne about 6 o'clock p.m. Had supper at Rollins House after which we walked around town where we witnessed strange sights. The whole city was the scene of one high carnival—gambling saloon and other places of an immoral character in full blast—bands of music discoursing from the fronts of various places—streets crowded with men—and numerous houses illuminated, and vice and riot having full and unlimited control, making the Sabbath evening a sad and fearful time instead of being holy and peaceful. Retired to bed early....

TUESDAY, MAY 12, 68—This has been a fearful day. The party rose early and Newcomb and Upton made stakes until dinner. Gray and I figured on the estimate until noon. After our dinner he told me to take the party cross the river and stake out some work on the western shore. I accordingly started with the party consisting of four men including myself, and after some delay in finding the ford, crossed the river in our team and proceeded to work on the "line." I ran about 10 sta., [surveyor's stakes] when finding that we had lost the "tape line," I recalled the party and started on our return to camp. Newcomb walking most of the way to the river's bank in search for the "tape."

We all got in the wagon and were in the rapids about midway across, when our driver, who was not well acquainted with the ford, got the team a little too low down, and the first thing we knew was that the water was flooding in the wagon box, and our mules were out of their depth and being swiftly carried down stream by the terrible violence of the current.

At this moment the wagon box was capsized, and the other part uncoupled and we were all floundering among the waves below the rapids. I retained the leveling instrument in my hand all this time at the risk of being drowned as the wagon box was pressing me down ... I had got one foot entangled in it some how and was fearfully struggling to extricate myself. I immediately saw that it was for me a struggle for life or death, and therefore dropped the instrument and clung to the hind wheels—the other boys having already floated off and were drowning below me....

Notwithstanding my clothing, a pair of heavy boots, and a havensac which was slung across my shoulder, I started to swim across the icy current.... As I gained the bank I found one of the men who had saved himself by clinging to the box until it had floated against a pile

of driftwood—the other two, John Sullivan and Oliver Newcomb were drowned. Upton, the man who was saved, said that he saw the boys as they went down for the last time, as they were but a short distance from him, and that he will never forget the look of awful terror and despair that had settled on their countenances, and the persons who were standing on the shore on either side, who were powerless to help, could hear their dying shrieks as they rang out upon the air....

We were the only two who were saved—everything else including team, 3 guns, instruments, were lost....

AUGUST 68 — After supper Upton and I went up to the hunters and brought back with us a fine hind quarter of fresh antelope. While sitting in one of our tents a few days ago, a bullet entered the canvass making quite a hole through it and struck near my side and within about one foot or fourteen inches of me. It was quite a narrow escape from receiving an ugly wound. ... It is no unusual thing to hear bullets near by and at times overhead whistling with their shrill demoniac sound ... It is all owing to the carelessness of individuals in our vicinity whose reckless disregard to life and limb in their promiscuous shooting is perfectly outrageous and alarming. This is a fine evening—it can only be described as beautiful....

A short time after breakfast I started for Benton to see about timber for stationary engine. While there, the locality was visited by quite a severe wind storm which hurled immense clouds of heavy dust before and partially demolishing tents, light frame house and everything else that obstructed its pathway. Shortly after this I started on my return for camp where I arrived late in the afternoon pretty well fatigued with my exertions....

EARLY AUGUST 68 — ... I have been more ill than for a number of years past. Laying on a lowly bed in this far off country and away from friends at home is rather cheerless and disturbing. But thanks to Almighty God I have so far recovered my health which is a great and inestimable blessing, only to be fully appreciated after having been deprived of it for sometime. ... Grasshoppers made their appearance here in vast quantities today—they appeared to be moving in a north-erly direction. This is a beautiful moonlight night—some mud.

Source

These excerpts are from the "Diary of Judge A. N. Ferguson engaged as Civil Engineer with a U.P.R.R. [Union Pacific Rail Road] Surveying Party April 25, 1868 to May 10, 1869" (Park Net, U.S. National Park Service, www.nps.gov/gosp/research/ferguson.html). Visit the Park Services' Transcontinental Railroad webpages to read the complete diary—and much more.

Train Schedules, Standardization, and “the Day of Two Noons”

STEVEN S. LAPHAM

THE ADVENT OF THE RAILROADS brought with it the need for *standardization* in many ways. For example, in Civil War days there were eight different rail gauges (the measured distance between one rail and other), with the result that the engines or train cars of one line could not use another—the wheels would not fit a different track. Freight had to be offloaded from one train and reloaded onto the next; passengers debarked and embarked. A few years after the Civil War, however, the present standard gauge—four feet, eight and one-half inches—had become uniform across the United States. Another example of standardization was in signaling: it was important that a red flag not mean “speed up” in one region of the country and “stop” in another! A third example of standardization was in safety procedures: many accidents occurred among railroad workers until rules of safety became widely known, practiced, and enforced (see The Back Page). A fourth example was standardization in steel manufacturing, which was important for the reliability of wheels and rails.

In the early years of the 20th century, thousands of train derailments were caused by broken rails, broken wheels, flanges, and axles. The U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) performed materials research to study the possible causes of these failures. By 1930, as better steel went into rails and trains—with NIST’s help in standardizing materials and processing—the rate of accidents from these causes fell by two-thirds (www.100.nist.gov/industrial.htm).

By the 1870s, the speedy steam engine had created a strange problem, which called again for a new type of standardization. As a train traveled from east to



west, the passengers could observe that every town along the route set its clock to a slightly different time. How could a useful schedule of arrivals and departures be created if everyone’s clock struck noon (for example) at a different moment?

Sanford Fleming, a Canadian railroad planner, proposed the idea of standard time. New ideas, however, may not be happily embraced by the general public. William F. Allen, the first secretary of the railroad companies’ General Time Convention (GTC), wrote and spoke tirelessly to promote time standardization. To minimize public opposition, the GTC’s proposed new time zones deviated very little from existing norms: most changes were kept to half an hour or less.

The 1883 adoption of standard time zones did not come easily. Many Americans, particularly those who continued to mark the passage of time by the natural rhythms of the sun, resisted the efforts of railroad officials and scientists to impose standard time on the nation.

Sunday, November 18, 1883 was known as the “day of two noons” because people were required to stop what they were doing and reset their clocks anywhere from two to thirty minutes. In various cities, there were some people (apparently the less-well-educated) who worried that some calamity would follow such meddling with “natural forces,” but the change was orderly and unremarkable.

Today, there are four Standard Time Zones across the continental United States (Eastern, Central, Mountain, and Pacific) and two that cover the states of Alaska and Hawaii (Alaska and Aleutian). 🌐

Source

“History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web,”
Department of History, George Mason University,
historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5748.html.

Turning Back The Hands

A Quiet Change to the Standard Time
Stopping the Pendulums In the City Clocks and in the Railroad Stations...

At just 9 o'clock, local time, yesterday morning Mr. James Hamblet, General Superintendent of the Time Telegraph Company, and manager of the time service of Western Union Telegraph Company, stopped the pendulum of his standard clock in Room No. 48 in the Western Union Telegraph Building. The long glistening rod and its heavy cylindrical pendulum ball was at rest for 3 minutes and 58.38 seconds. The delicate machinery of the clock rested for the first time in many months. The clicking of the electric instrument on a shelf at the side of the clock ceased and with it ceased the corresponding ticks on similar instruments in many jewelry and watch stores throughout the City.

When, as nearly as it could be ascertained, the time stated above had elapsed, the heavy pendulum was again set in motion and swung backward and forward in its never varying trips of one second each from one end of its swing to the other. With the starting of the pendulum the clicking of the little instruments all over the City at intervals of two seconds between each click was resumed. Mr Hamblet had changed the time of New York City and State.

The adjustment of Mr Hamblet's standard clock was sufficiently accurate for the ordinary uses of mankind, but not for scientific purposes. His clock is adjusted to hundredths parts of a second, a space of time so infinitesimal as to be almost beyond human perception. That absolute accuracy might be assured, comparisons were then made by telegraph with the observations at Washington, Allegheny, Penn., and Cambridge, Mass., and

absolute accuracy was thus obtained. From the actual time thus obtained the New York Central Railroad took the new standard of time at 10 o'clock, and thus became the first railroad in the country to adopt a new standard. This time was chosen by this company as the hour least likely to interfere with its business....

The Western Union Telegraph Company's time-ball fell sharply at the new 12 o'clock, and so gave to mariners and ship-masters an opportunity to set their time pieces on seventy fifth meridian time.

Curious people, some of whom could not exactly understand how the time could be changed without some serious results, crowded the sidewalk in front of jewelry stores and watch repair establishments to see the great transformation. There was a universal expression of disgust when it was discovered that all that was necessary to effect the change was to stop the clock for four minutes and then start it again. A large crowd gathered in the vicinity of the City Hall to watch the change as indicated on the faces of the clock which rests under the shadow of the restored Cypriote antique of Justice. ...

When the reader of THE TIMES consults his paper at 8 o'clock this morning at his breakfast table it will be 9 o'clock in St. John, New Brunswick, 7 o'clock in Chicago, or rather in St. Louis—for Chicago authorities have refused to adopt the standard time, perhaps because the Chicago meridian was not selected as the one on which all time must be based—6 o'clock in Denver, Col. and 5 o'clock in San Francisco. That is the whole story in a nut-shell.

Discussion Topics

Questions for the class after students read the handout, a primary source document on page 12, “Diary of a Railroad Construction Engineer.”

1. What were some of the hazards and hardships faced by construction engineers and their staff during the building of this railroad? See if you can identify four of them. (Students might mention storms, river rapids, careless firing of guns, illness, grasshoppers, and human vices, like gambling and drinking.)
2. Ferguson was a surveyor. He mentions some of the tools and tasks of his profession. For example, the workmen “make stakes” for him to use. Where could you look to find definitions of some of these terms and descriptions of the work? (“Tape line,” “leveling instrument,” “sta.” = surveyor’s stake. A good dictionary will include definitions of many tools and jobs, even if they are not in common usage. Students could also visit the library to find books for youth about surveying, the early railroads, and the industrial development of the West.)
3. One evening a bullet whizzed through Ferguson’s tent. Did he assume that someone was trying to murder him? (No. He attributes the shooting to “the carelessness of individuals” with a “reckless disregard to life and limb.” Earlier in the diary, he relates the death of a man from a stray bullet.)
4. Was Ferguson in charge of the work crew? In other words, was he the top leader of this engineering corps? What is your evidence? (On Tuesday May 12, 1868, Gray gives instructions to Ferguson, so Gray appears to be of higher rank.)
5. Locate, on a map of the western United States, the two towns that Ferguson mentions. (North Platte is in Nebraska, and Cheyenne is in Wyoming.) What rivers are they on? Why would a railroad follow the course of a river? (A river winds its way along low points of land between hills and peaks. It is easier to lay track on level ground, for example along a flood plain, than up and down inclines—and it’s easier to pull a train on level ground as well.)

Answers to Back Page

These are answers to the questions on page 16, “This Hammer’ll be the Death of Me.”

ANSWER 1

(C) In the late 1800s, the “life expectancy” of a switchman on the job was 7 years. Before the invention of radio communication and remote-control switching, the job of “herding” steam engines called for quick reflexes and clear thinking. (www.crowlaw.com/history.htm)

ANSWER 2

(A) There were 2675 railroad-worker fatalities (deaths) reported in 1901. In the same year, 41,142 injuries were reported.

ANSWER 3

(G) There were many hazards (including all of those mentioned) in building and operating the early railroads, and the law considered accidents to be the fault of the laborer, not the railroad company.

ANSWER 4

(C) After the transcontinental railroad was completed, the Pacific Rising newspaper reported that the remains of 1,200 Chinese laborers were being shipped to China. Brokers in China loaned emigrants money for passage to America. Many brokers guaranteed free shipment of the body back to China if the person died while in California.

ANSWER 5

(B) Under pressure from labor unions, the U.S. Congress finally enacted the first Federal Employers’ Liability Act (F.E.L.A.) in 1906—about 76 years after the birth of the industry—in an effort to reduce the appalling accident rate, promote uniformity in railroad equipment and practices, and provide some compensation to accident victims and their families.

(See sources on pages 11 and 12)



“This Hammer’ll be the Death of Me”

Railroad Worker Injury and Death in the Early Years

Railroads were the largest employers in the United States during the second half of the 1800s. Equipment was primitive, safety practices were not enforced, and many laborers were killed or seriously injured—with no compensation for victims or their families—in the name of progress and to maximize profits of the railroad corporations.¹ The hazards of building the railroads (and then operating them) became the stuff of folksongs.² For example, consider these lyrics:

He picked up a hammer and a piece of steel
Said, “This hammer’ll be the death of me”... — *Ballad of John Henry*

1865, I found myself more dead than alive
1866, I stepped on a pile of dynamite sticks... — *Paddy Workin’ on the Railroad*

Last week a premature blast went off
And a mile in the air went big Jim Goff... — *Drill, Ye Tarriers*

Circle the letter of the correct answer. It’s okay to guess, this quiz will not be graded. You will receive more information on this topic in preparation for a class discussion.

QUESTION 1

A switchman, or “switch monkey,” was a laborer who stood beside the track and pulled large handles that slid a short section of track to guide trains from one rail line to another. The job could be deadly. In the late 1800s, when any new man was hired to work as a switchman, his employers calculated that he was likely to likely die on the job within _____ years.

- A) 27
- B) 17
- C) 7

QUESTION 2

In 1901, the number of railroad employees killed on the job was _____.

- A) 2675
- B) 267
- C) 26

QUESTION 3

What were common causes of death among railroad workers in the 1800s?

- A) Boiler (steam engine) explosions or releases
- B) Falling from cliffs
- C) Dynamite and nitroglycerin explosions
- D) Snow avalanches and hypothermia (freezing)
- F) Sun stroke and heat exhaustion
- G) All of the above

QUESTION 4

In 1870, a California newspaper reported that the remains of _____ Chinese American railroad laborers who died on the job were being shipped back to China for burial.

- A) 12
- B) 120
- C) 1200

QUESTION 5

The U.S. railroad industry began about 1830 (when there were only about 23 miles of track all told). The U.S. Congress first passed a law holding employers responsible for safety in the workplace _____ years later (by which time more than one hundred thousand miles of track spanned the nation).

- A) 36
- B) 76
- C) 16

Notes

1. See pp. 10-12 for more history and references.
2. “The gangs of Irish muckers and rock drillers, who dug and blasted out the right of way for so many American railroads, east and west, were known as tarriers. . . .” Alan Lomax, ed., *Folk Songs of North America* (New York: Doubleday/Dolphon, 1975), 408.

(Answers on page 15, second part)