

# ***T*Trains** across the USA

by Phyllis McIntosh



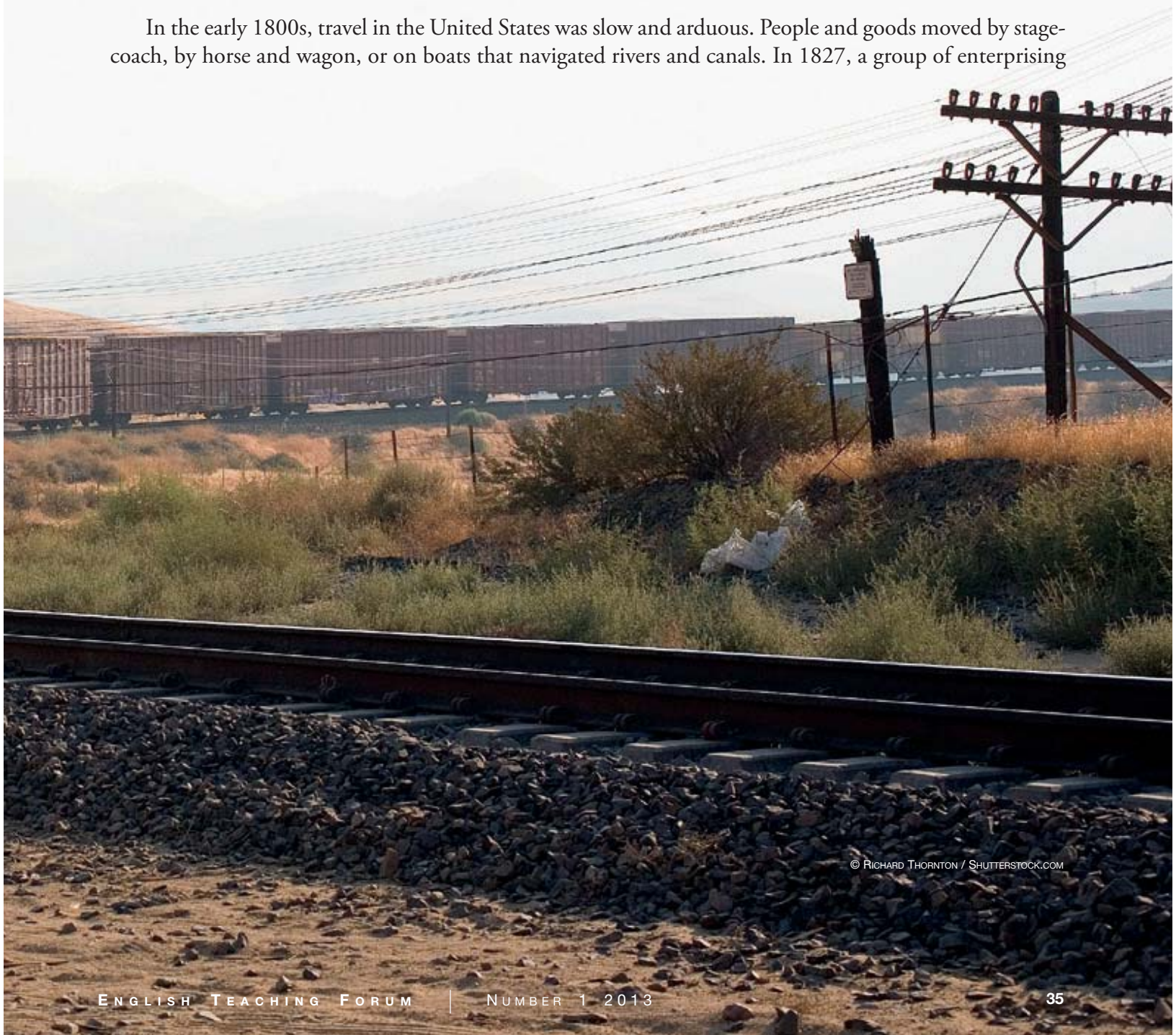


With colorful names like Wabash Cannonball, Speed Witch, and Tom Cat, trains have steamed their way into the American psyche. They have a mystique all their own that persuades railroad enthusiasts to lovingly preserve old locomotives and picturesque train stations and entices generations of children, and adults, to play with model railroads.

As an efficient mode of transportation, trains revolutionized travel and commerce across the vast expanses of the North American continent and united the states from east coast to west. Although in recent decades trains have been overshadowed by automobiles and airplanes as modes of general travel in the United States, they still carry more than 40 percent of the nation's freight. And passenger trains, whose routes traverse some of the most scenic regions of the country, remain a popular and relaxing way to travel. Though modern trains may lack the charm of their forerunners, they harken back to a golden age of transportation that lives on in American culture.

## Birth of Rail Travel

In the early 1800s, travel in the United States was slow and arduous. People and goods moved by stagecoach, by horse and wagon, or on boats that navigated rivers and canals. In 1827, a group of enterprising



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This antique illustration shows workers of the Union Pacific Railroad laying track for the transcontinental railroad that was completed in 1869.



gentlemen in Baltimore, Maryland, took a gamble on a new means of transport, chartering the nation's first commercial railroad to compete with New York's Erie Canal. Because their goal was to extend the rails 380 miles from Baltimore to the Ohio River, these men named their railroad the Baltimore & Ohio, known simply as the B&O.

On July 4, 1828, 90-year-old Charles Carroll, the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence, laid the ceremonial first stone for the new railroad. Two years later when the first 13 miles of rails opened, horses pulled the trains along the track. But the B&O soon introduced a small experimental steam engine called the Tom Thumb, thought to be the first steam locomotive built in the United States. According to legend, the Tom Thumb once raced a horse-drawn rail car. The horse galloped to victory after a mechanical failure halted the locomotive, but steam power won out in the end. By 1831, the B&O's four-legged horses had been replaced by the Iron Horse, the name given to the early steam locomotive.

As trains became more common, not everyone welcomed them. Turnpike operators, canal companies, stagecoach companies, tavern owners, and innkeepers

mounted sometimes violent opposition to the newfangled railroads. Even author Henry David Thoreau ranted about "that devilish Iron Horse, whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town."

Such complaints could not stop progress, however. By 1840, there were 2,800 miles of railroad track east of the Mississippi River; a decade later that figure had tripled to 9,000 miles. During the Civil War in the 1860s, railroads played a vital role in moving men and materials to the battlefield.

Amid the darkest days of the Civil War, the United States embarked on a mission to complete a transcontinental railroad, a dream long held by President Abraham Lincoln. Over six years, two companies—the Union Pacific starting in Omaha, Nebraska, and the Central Pacific starting in San Francisco, California—laid more than 1,700 miles of track. The Central Pacific employed thousands of Chinese laborers, who had immigrated to the United States after gold was discovered in California, for the grueling task of carving the railroad through the Sierra Nevada mountains.

On May 10, 1869, the two rail lines met at Promontory Point, Utah, where they were joined with a ceremonial golden spike. As the message "Done" was tele-



Now on display for its historical significance, this steam locomotive was part of the Florida Railway System in the late 1890s and early 1900s.

graphed across the nation, bells rang out in cities from coast to coast. A cross-country trip that, a decade earlier, had taken several months could now be completed in just one week.

## The Golden Age of Railroads

The turn of the 20th century ushered in a golden age of railroads that would last for 50 years. Some features of this golden age are described below.

- **Steam locomotives.** In the early 1900s all trains were powered by massive steam locomotives whose boilers were fired first by wood and later by coal. The distinctive chuff-chuff sound produced by the venting of steam inspired the term *choo-choo* as a nickname for a train. Among the most famous steam locomotives were the Union Pacific Railroad's Big Boys of the 1940s. Weighing 600 tons and extending 132 feet in length, these powerful machines were designed to pull freight trains over a mountainous route in Utah and Wyoming.

During the 1930s, railroads began to turn to cleaner, less labor-

intensive forms of locomotion, such as diesel engines and electricity provided by overhead wires. The last major steam-powered rail line closed in 1960, and by the end of the decade, steam locomotives had all but disappeared from the nation's rails. They live on, however, in dozens of museums, on short-line scenic railways, and in the hearts of thousands of enthusiasts who volunteer their time to educate a new generation about the mystique of the steam locomotive.

- **Luxury passenger trains.** By the early 20th century, railroads took pride in speeding customers to their destinations in comfort and luxury. In addition to standard seating, trains began to feature specialized cars for dining, sleeping, socializing, and enjoying the scenery. Most were produced by the Pullman Company of Illinois, best known for its Pullman sleeper, which featured private accommodations for nighttime travelers.

In the 1930s, the outward appearance of many passenger trains also changed. Inspired by the Art Deco movement, railroad companies enshrouded their locomotives





The Crawford Depot in Carroll, New Hampshire, built by the Maine Central Railroad in 1891, is typical of railroad architecture of that era. Preserved as a visitor center, the depot was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

and cars with an aluminum skin that gave them a sleek, modern look. Known as streamliners, these trains epitomized style, comfort, and speed.

The most celebrated of the streamliners was the 20th Century Limited, operated by the New York Central Railroad between New York City and Chicago. Catering to upper class and business travelers, the Limited was renowned for the plush red carpet that was rolled out for passengers to walk on going to and from the train. That practice is thought to have given rise to the phrase “red carpet treatment” to refer to special service.

- **Iconic railroad stations.** The hundreds of railroad stations built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries included numerous architectural gems, ranging from the wood and brick Victorian-style depots that graced towns across the country to the ornate railway palaces of the major cities. As pride in these

architectural works of art has grown, many towns and small cities have taken steps to preserve their stations, converting them into museums, restaurants, and shops. Some of the grandest structures, like New York City’s Pennsylvania Station, are gone forever. Others, notably New York’s Grand Central Terminal, escaped the wrecking ball through the efforts of celebrities such as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

- **Harvey Girls and Pullman Porters.** Women and African Americans played key roles in the early days of railroads. The Union Pacific Railroad, for example, hired women as nurse-stewardesses to assist elderly passengers and women with children on cross-country journeys.

The best known of the early railway women were the Harvey Girls, young women hired by entrepreneur Fred Harvey to work as waitresses in his restaurants and hotels at stops along the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad in the west-

ern states. These young women in their starched black-and-white uniforms conveyed a wholesome image that attracted railroad passengers to the more than 80 Harvey House establishments. Because many of the Harvey Girls eventually married and settled in the areas where they worked, they are credited with helping to civilize the Wild West.

African American men, hired by George Pullman to staff his Pullman sleeping and dining cars, were the backbone of customer service aboard trains in the early 20th century. Although working on the trains was considered one of the most prestigious jobs open to blacks at the time, the porters often were overworked and underpaid. In 1925, led by activist A. Philip Randolph, the porters formed the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first black labor union to bargain successfully with a major corporation. Randolph and the Sleeping Car Porters remained major voices in the civil rights movement through the 1960s.

## Railroads Today

With the growth of air travel and development of the interstate highway system following World War II, the heyday of the railroads came to an end. Both passenger and freight revenues declined, and by the 1960s railroads were in financial trouble. But over the years, with help from the U.S. government, the railroads have rebounded; once again they represent a major segment of transportation in the United States. And today's rail service includes:

- **Long-distance passenger trains.** To relieve railroads of the increasingly



Amtrak's 40th anniversary train makes a stop at the station in Bakersfield, California, during its anniversary tour in 2011.



An Amtrak conductor signals to someone on the platform at the Wilmington, Delaware, train station.



The Empire Builder, a passenger train with a scenic route from Chicago to the Pacific Northwest, makes a station stop.



A commuter train pulls out of downtown Chicago.





A string of tank cars rattles along a railroad track.

steep costs of running passenger trains, Congress in 1970 passed a law that created the National Railroad Passenger Corporation—known as Amtrak—to provide passenger service between cities. Amtrak, which celebrated 40 years of continuous service in 2011, carries nearly 29 million passengers a year on a nationwide network serving 500 destinations in 46 states and three Canadian provinces.

Amtrak's busiest route is the Northeast Corridor between Washington, D.C., and Boston, which transports more than a quarter million passengers every weekday. One loyal and enthusiastic rider for 35 years was Joe Biden, who as a U.S. Senator commuted via Amtrak from his home in Delaware to Washington every day that Congress was in session.

Trains remain a favorite way to see the United States in all its wonder. Popular scenic routes include those of the California Zephyr, which passes through the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevadas on its daily run from Chicago to

San Francisco; the Coast Starlight, which skirts the West Coast from Seattle to Los Angeles; and the Empire Builder, whose route from Chicago to Seattle and Portland, Oregon, includes the majestic wilderness of the Pacific Northwest, Glacier National Park, and the Columbia River Gorge.

Amtrak also boasts the longest passenger train in the world—the Auto Train, which carries passengers and their cars 900 miles from Lorton, Virginia, near Washington, D.C., to Orlando, Florida.

- **Commuter trains.** Two dozen commuter rail lines transport millions of passengers daily between the suburbs and central business districts of major metropolitan areas. Operated mostly by local governments or quasi-government entities, these trains share tracks with Amtrak and freight railroads. Many connect to bus and subway lines in the cities.

Many commuter trains run only during morning and evening rush hours—when most people are going to and from work—but others operate from morning until late at night



A train loaded with freight containers makes its way to a port where the containers will be loaded on ocean-going ships.

transporting people to sporting events and other recreational destinations in addition to places of employment.

The New York City and Chicago metropolitan areas have the greatest concentrations of commuter trains in the United States. The nation's oldest and busiest commuter railway is the Long Island Railroad, which operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. With 700 miles of track, it covers the entire length of Long Island via two routes and connects to three terminals in New York City.

- **Freight trains.** In the 1970s, Congress passed laws to rescue declining freight railroads. Now largely deregulated, the railroads have reorganized, discontinued unprofitable routes, and returned to prominence in transporting goods across the country. Of the more than 500 freight railroads currently operating in the United States, the vast majority are local short-haul lines. Seven major long-haul railroads account for most freight industry revenue, however.

Trains carry 43 percent of inter-city freight as measured by weight, according to the American Association of Railroads (AAR). The most important commodity transported is coal, which is used mainly to generate electricity at coal-fired power plants. Other major rail commodities include industrial chemicals and fertilizers, grain, food, steel, forest products, motor vehicles, and waste and scrap materials.

Many freight trains carry a variety of goods in a mix of specialized cars, such as flatcars, oil tank cars, closed boxcars, and motor vehicle carriers. But some are dedicated to a single product. One notable example is the so-called juice train, which travels northward daily from Florida's citrus region.

## Recent Trends in Railroading

### Containerized freight shipping

The past two decades have seen tremendous growth in an efficient means of transport known as intermodal service, or containerized shipping, in which freight





Acela trains, seen here in Washington, D.C., provide high-speed rail service—reaching speeds of 150 miles per hour—along the Northeast Corridor of the United States.

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is packed in containers that can be carried by train, truck, and ocean-going ships. The method combines the door-to-door convenience of trucks with the long-haul economy of railroads, and it greatly streamlines international shipping.

### Focus on the environment

Both Amtrak and freight railroad companies emphasize that trains' fuel efficiency and lower pollution levels make them a greener alternative to other means of transport. According to the AAR, trains on the average are four times more fuel efficient than trucks. Furthermore, a single freight train can take the loads of at least 280 trucks off overcrowded highways.

For passengers, railroads represent a welcome alternative to clogged highways and cramped airplanes, and, according to Amtrak president and CEO Joe Boardman, trains “preserve the pleasure that once made people want to travel.”

### High-tech equipment

Like many aspects of modern life, railroads today operate with the aid of computers, satellites, and remote sensors. Many railroad employees are white-collar workers who command trains from hundreds of miles away through electronic

control of signals, switches, and other high-tech mechanisms.

### High-speed rail

Currently, the nation's only high-speed service is Amtrak's Acela Express, inaugurated in 2000 along the Northeast Corridor. The Acela is capable of speeds up to 150 miles per hour, but because of aging track and congested areas, it actually reaches that speed on only a portion of the route.

Amtrak says it is planning for 220 miles per hour service on the Northeast Corridor. In California, construction is slated to begin in 2012 on an 800-mile high-speed system that will link the state's major cities.

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Although modern trains lack the aura of a chugging steam locomotive or a sleek twentieth-century streamliner, the plaintive sound of a train whistle in the night can still stir the soul. As train aficionado Ruth Guyer commented on National Public Radio: “The other evening I stepped onto the track near my home and stared off till my eyes met the vanishing point where the glistening iron rails seemed to merge. I knew the tracks would never do that, but I thought if the trains themselves were ever to vanish, the romance of travel would surely be lost.”



Caboose

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## Train Talk

**ballast** – gravel, slag, or other material placed on the rail bed to hold tracks in place

**brakeman** – train crew member who inspects the train, assists the conductor, operates the brakes, and assists with switching

**caboose** – car attached to the rear end of a freight train for use by the train crew

**conductor** – person in charge of a train and its crew

**coupler** – a device for connecting train cars or locomotives together

**engineer** – person who operates a locomotive

**limited** – a passenger train that serves only main stations; emphasis is on comfort, speed, and convenience

**main line** – the principal artery of a railroad system; used by trains operating between cities

**roundhouse** – a building, usually circular in design, where locomotives and other railroad cars are inspected, cleaned, repaired, and serviced

**siding** – a short stretch of track used to store railroad cars or enable trains on the same line to pass

**switch** – a connection between two lines of track that permits trains to pass from one track to another

## Websites of Interest

### Amtrak

[www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com)

In addition to routes and schedules, this website of America's passenger railroad network offers virtual tours of sleeping car accommodations, information on planning a vacation by rail, and an online magazine with feature stories, riders' memories, and a "Kids Depot" game section.

### Association of American Railroads

[www.aar.org](http://www.aar.org)

This website of the trade association that represents the freight railroad industry includes statistics and information about the efficiency and impact of freight trains in transporting the nation's goods.

### B&O Railroad Museum

[www.borail.org](http://www.borail.org)

A guide to the museum of the nation's first commercial railroad, this site features an education section with information about the history of railroads in the United States that includes downloadable lesson plans.

### National Museum of American History

<http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/exhibition>

A virtual tour of the Museum's America on the Move exhibition about transportation, this site traces the impact of railroads on people, towns, and commerce from the late 1800s until the present day.

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Trains evoke a sense of romance and adventure that moves people to bestow names on them and immortalize them in story and song.

### **What's in a name?**

Some trains have had straightforward names that identified their freight contents—Johnstown Steel Special, Beef Train, Florida Perishables. Some names indicated a train's route or destination—the Southwesterner, City of Miami—and some their typical riders: Fisherman's Special.

Many other trains have names that denote power and speed, such as Thunderbolt, Rocket, Cannon Ball, Blue Dart, Silver Streak, or simply Guts. Animal names—Black Cat, Red Fox, Blue Goose, Rabbit Run—are popular for freight trains. Passenger trains

have borne names of American heroes—George Washington, Abraham Lincoln—and poetic labels that create images of pleasurable escape—Desert Wind, Gulf Breeze, Starlight, Southern Belle.

A streamliner of the 1940s acquired its name, Phoebe Snow, from an advertising campaign that had run several decades earlier. Around the turn of the century, the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad created a fictional character named Phoebe Snow, a young socialite in a pristine white dress, to promote its trains powered by cleaner-burning anthracite coal. Lackawanna's riders, the railroad claimed, would still look clean when they reached their destination, unlike travelers on other steam trains, who often emerged from a long trip covered in black soot from burned soft coal.

## Train songs

Trains figure prominently in American folk songs, blues, and country music. Most Americans have sung or heard the traditional song “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad,” for example. “The City of New Orleans,” a popular folk song of recent years recorded by such artists as Willie Nelson, Arlo Guthrie, and Johnny Cash, immortalizes a nightly Amtrak train that still travels between Chicago and New Orleans.

More upbeat songs include “Chattanooga Choo Choo,” a Big Band favorite in the 1940s, and the bluegrass fiddle tune “Orange Blossom Special,” which commemorates a luxury passenger train that once ran between New York City and Miami. Another bouncy melody, “On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe,” sung by Judy Garland in a 1940s movie about the Harvey Girls, pays tribute to the railroad along which Fred Harvey built his famous Harvey House restaurants.

## Colorful characters

Trains are associated with a variety of larger-than-life characters, both real and imagined. One legendary hero is John Henry, an immensely strong railroad builder who wielded his hammer in a race against a drilling machine. Henry won but, exhausted, collapsed and died with his hammer in his hand.

Engineer Casey Jones, a real-life railroad hero from 1900, has become part of American lore for trying to slow his train as it was about to wreck, losing his life but saving other lives in the process.

A romanticized group of railroad characters are the hobos, who sneaked onto freight trains to roam the country in search of work, especially during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The number of hobos declined when diesel power replaced steam; trains no longer had to make frequent stops for water, which had given the hobos opportunities to hop on and off the trains.



The Casey Jones Home and Railroad Museum in Jackson, Tennessee, pays tribute to the famous engineer who lost his life, while saving others, in a train wreck.



**T**his section presents three stand-alone language learning activities related to the theme of trains. Each activity is designed for students at the proficiency level indicated.

## Train Lineups

**Level:** Low Intermediate and up

**Time required:** 15 minutes for preparation (more if students use the Internet); 10 minutes for each lineup

**Goals:** To get students to speak and listen to one another, cooperate to quickly achieve an objective, and move around with a purpose

**Materials:** a blackboard or other kind of board for writing target sentence structures

**Preparation:** In some countries, trains are prevalent and are used by many people; in other places, trains are not common. It is best to begin the activity by finding out whether your students have had experience riding trains.

### Procedures:

1. If you don't already know whether your students have experience riding trains, begin by finding out. You might simply ask, "How many of you have ridden on a train?" You can follow up by asking students where they went, who went with them, what they remember about the train ride, and so on.

2. On the board, write the following template:

**Departure date:**

**Destination:**

**Cost of ticket:**

**Number of people with you:**

3. Ask students to plan a train trip they would like to take, and tell them to fill in their own templates with information based on the trip they plan.

If students are not sure of the information, such as the exact cost of the ticket, you can ask them to estimate it. Or, if you have access to the Internet, students can find the information.

*Note:* If all your students have ridden on trains, they can fill in information based on their experience rather than on a trip they plan. In that case, please see Variations for details on how to conduct the activity.

4. Tell students that they are going to participate in a lineup activity and that they will have to stand up, ask and answer questions, and line up in order, based on the information they have written down.

5. On the board, write the following questions that students can ask to elicit information from their classmates (possible answers are in parentheses):

**Departure date:** When are you going? / When are you planning to go? (I'm going on [date]. / I'm planning to go on [date].)

**Destination:** Where are you going? / Where are you planning to go? (I'm going to [place]. / I'm planning to go to [place].)

**Cost:** How much will your ticket cost? (My ticket will cost [amount].)

**Number of people:** How many people are going with you? ([Number] people are going with me.) [*Note:* If only one person is going with the student, the answer would be "One person is going with me."]

Go over the questions; make sure students understand what each question means and how to answer the questions.

6. Have students stand up. Tell them that they will form a line according to information they have written down, and that they must ask one another questions in order to find their place in the line. If you begin with the date of departure, the student with the earliest departure date will stand at the beginning of the line (show students where the line will begin), and other students will line up in order, with the last student being the one with the latest departure date. Order will be formed from the initial chaos.

Students should ask the appropriate question to other classmates, and as questions are answered, they stand in order. Often, small chains will form, and then the members of the chains merge as students continue asking and answering until one long line is formed.

This is an opportunity for students to mingle and have fun. However, they might be tempted to simply shout out their information before being asked a question. To avoid that situation, you might make one rule: *Students cannot give information unless someone asks them a question.* You can circulate to make sure everyone is following the rule (and you can feel free to find your place in line, too).

7. Once the line is formed, ask students when they are going on the trip—or have students ask one another, one at a time, so that the whole class can hear. All students should listen to the answers to make sure they are standing at the correct place in line.

8. Follow the same procedure to form new lines by having students ask each other questions about

the remaining items in the template; students will stand in order from shortest trip to longest trip, then least expensive to most expensive, and then the fewest number of people traveling together to the most people traveling together.

### Variations

1. If all your students have traveled on trains, you can conduct the activity based on the most recent trip each student has taken. The lineup process remains the same, but students will be using the past tense in their questions and answers:

**Departure date:** When did you go? (I went on [date].)

**Destination:** Where did you go? / What was your destination? (I went to [place].)

**Cost:** How much did your ticket cost? / How much was your ticket? (My ticket cost [amount].)

**Number of people:** How many people went with you? ([Number] people went with me.) [*Note:* If only one person went with the student, the answer would be “One person went with me.”]

2. Lineups can be used for many topics, from birthdays to zoo animals. Depending on the topic, students will practice using simple or continuous present, past, and future tenses. It’s always a good idea to ask the students for input, as they often have excellent lineup ideas. The last person in line could be a good candidate for giving an idea!



# Train Dictadraw

**Level:** Intermediate

**Time required:** 45 minutes

**Goals:** To practice and produce vocabulary related to trains by describing and drawing

**Materials:** pictures or photocopies of trains (pictures could be the same or different, depending on availability); paper; pencils or pens; tape

**Preparation:** If pictures or photocopies are not available, ask pairs or groups of students to draw a train. These drawings should be kept secret from other students. Later the train drawings can be exchanged with another pair or group to carry out the dictadraw portion of the activity.

**Procedures:**

1. Teach the learners the target train vocabulary. This could include the following:

**Types of trains**

steam locomotive  
diesel locomotive  
electric locomotive  
high-speed train  
trolley  
tram

**Train cars**

passenger car  
dining car  
freight car  
flat car  
oil tank car  
caboose

**Parts of locomotives or cars**

window  
wheel  
smokestack

2. Check that the learners have a sound knowledge of the vocabulary by performing simple drills. You might show a picture of a train and ask students to describe it in pairs; you can also have students use one of the words in a simple sentence.

3. Divide the class into groups of four or five people—or pairs of students if you prefer.

4. Tell the groups that they must choose one person to be an artist. Some groups may have more than one student who wants to be an artist; some groups may have none. You can move people around accordingly, as not everyone is comfortable with drawing.

5. Ask each artist to stand or sit so that his or her back is facing the group (or partner) and so that everyone in the group can see the artist's back. When everyone is ready, give each artist a blank piece of paper to draw on.

6. Go to each group and, using tape, affix the picture, photocopy, or drawing of the train to each artist's back. Be careful to make sure that the artists do not see the picture. (You can have students help with this step as long as they understand that the artist should not see the picture that will be on his or her back.)

7. Each group must now describe the picture to the artist, making use of the train vocabulary. Group members should take turns providing information. Artists may ask for clarification as needed.

At first, it can be helpful for the artist to receive a general overall understanding of the picture rather than a lot of details all at once.

For example, the describers might begin with an overview: *This is a picture of a train with an electric locomotive, three passenger cars, and a caboose.*

The describers can then concentrate on details: *The locomotive has eight wheels—four are in the front, and four are in the back.*

The artist can also ask questions to get more detail and clarification:

Artist: *How many windows are in the passenger car?*

Describer: *There are eight windows in the passenger car.*

While the groups are speaking and drawing, you can circulate around the class to answer questions and monitor progress. The drawing portion should take about 15 to 20 minutes, depending on the complexity of the photos or drawings.

8. When artists have finished drawing, have the groups compare the artist's drawing with the original. They should notice details that were missed, added, or changed, and they should try to figure out how they could accurately describe those details. However, the artist should not make any changes to the drawing after seeing the original.

9. Post the original drawings or photos alongside the students' drawings on the wall or in another space visible to the entire class.

10. Ask each group to take a turn describing its train to the whole class. This could be done by the artist as his or her chance to use the language, or it could be done by another member or all members of the small group.

Another option is to have groups describe differences between the original photo or drawing and the artist's drawing that was based on their description.

You can take advantage of these comparisons as an opportunity to notice which details the students were able to describe and understand accurately and which details were difficult for them to communicate or comprehend. The missed or inac-

curate details could lead to teaching moments and give you an idea of points that need to be addressed in students' learning.

11. Provide positive feedback regarding language use and drawing skills!

### Variations

1. You can add vocabulary to make the activity more challenging, to allow students to describe additional details (such as people on a train), or to include pictures of a train station. The following vocabulary might be helpful:

#### People involved with trains

engineer  
conductor  
passenger  
freight hopper

#### Parts of the track or station

rail  
tie  
spike  
platform

2. Descriptions of the trains can be written and returned to you for review.

3. The dictadraw activity can be done with other pictures or just about anything the class is studying. Other types of drawings could be personal appearance, clothing, or rooms in a house.



# Who Gets to Ride?

**Level:** Intermediate and higher

**Time required:** 1 hour

**Goals:** To develop pair or group cooperation and critical thinking skills

**Materials:** One handout of the Passenger List (page 52) for each pair or group; if handouts are not available, you can write the information on the board or dictate it to the class.

**Background:** This is a highly adaptable pair- or group-decision activity in which students work together to find a solution to what could be a fairly complex problem: whom to allow onto an overcrowded train.

### Procedures:

1. Divide the students into pairs or small groups; four or five people per group is a good number.

2. If you are using groups, ask each group member to assume a role within the group. Here are possible roles:

- Leader – maintains group unity by helping with decision making and by resolving possible disputes within the group
- Secretary – records the group's decisions and reasons
- Presenter – presents the group's findings to the whole class
- Monitor – keeps the group speaking English
- Enforcer – keeps the group on task

3. If some groups have more than five people, more than one person in each group can have the same role. You and your students can also create other roles.

4. Make sure each member has a clear understanding of what will be expected of him or her in the group. You might want to circulate around the class and ask students to tell you their roles and responsibilities. Make it clear that all students are expected to participate in the group discussion.

By now the level of anticipation regarding the activity will be high; this is a good thing.

5. Tell the students that they are conductors on a train, and they will need to solve a problem. The cashier has sold too many tickets, and now there is not enough room for everyone who wants to be on the train.

6. Give each group the Passenger List of ten passengers who are waiting to get onto the train, or write the list on the board. Tell students that ten people want to ride, but there is room for only five more passengers. Each person has a valid reason for wanting to ride, but the conductors must choose only the five people they think have the best reasons. People who do not board this train will have to wait three hours for the next one.

The Passenger List has a simple description of the reason each person has for wanting to ride the train. Go over these descriptions to make sure that everyone understands the vocabulary.

7. Give students about five minutes to think about the list individually and to choose the five people they think should be allowed to board the train.

8. Tell students to share their own decisions with other members of their groups. Tell the groups that they must come to an agreement about which people they will allow to board the train.

9. Tell students that at the end of 20 minutes, each Presenter should be ready with the following:

- A list of the five people chosen to ride on the train
- A short description *in the group's own words* of why the group has chosen each of these five people; it is very important to emphasize that the students must use their own language skills for the description. (If not done this way, the Presenters might simply read the descriptions from the Passenger List.)

Circulate around the class to check that the groups are on task. You can especially make sure

that the Monitors are doing their jobs. When you hear a language other than English being spoken, you can remind them it is their job to tell other group members to use only English.

After 15 minutes, give a 5-minute warning before asking the Presenters to give their decisions. If one group finishes before the others, check the work to see if it looks complete and ask that group to present first. The honor of being first often results in a rush of final reviewing and preparation. All group members should help the Presenter formulate reasons for the group's decision.

10. Depending on the number of pairs or groups in the class, you may want to limit the number of presentations. If you think you won't have time for all Presenters, have each group share its ideas with another group; then you can choose a few Presenters to share with the class. The most important aspect of this activity is not the choices the students have made, but the process and language they have used to come to these choices and to explain them.

### **Variation**

There are versions of this activity that have other themes. For example, if your class is studying cities or parts of a town, you can try a similar activity called "Helping the People in [insert the name of your city or town]." Students are "given" a certain amount of money to fund projects around the city or town, such as building schools, cultural centers,

sporting venues, a train station, public housing, etc. Each project has a specific cost, and students must budget their money accordingly.

### **Extensions**

1. This activity gives students an opportunity to engage in critical thinking, pair work or group work, and decision making. However, to give students additional language practice, you can extend the activity by, for example, having students role-play a conversation between two or more of the people who were not chosen to board the train or a conversation featuring one of the passengers trying to convince the conductor to allow him or her to board. Or each student can write an email (or text message) from one of the people who was not chosen to someone that person was supposed to meet—perhaps explaining the reason for the delay, suggesting new plans, and so on.

2. After your class is familiar with the concept, groups can work on writing their own group decision activity. One student group wrote an activity called "Fruit Salad," in which a child is given a certain amount of money to go to the market and buy fruit for the salad. The group created a list of 10 kinds of fruits, each with a specific cost.

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### Passenger List

**Louisa** – Just started her new job last week and was late once after staying up all night with her young son, who was sick. If she is late again she will get a second warning, which could mean she will lose her job.

**Will** – A member of Congress/Parliament who is riding the train because he strongly supports public transportation and wants others to follow his example.

**Gigi** – Must get to the hair salon on time because she is going out with her friends to celebrate her birthday.

**Tolik** – Wants to ride the train because he is in love with Gigi. He is planning on declaring his love to her on the train today.

**Rocco** – Needs to be on time to catch a flight overseas to begin a year of studying abroad.

**Anna** – A group of business owners wants to build a parking garage on the grounds of the city park, and she needs to be on time for a meeting to keep the park from disappearing.

**Julio** – He dreams of being an actor; he has a tryout for the lead role in a new movie and cannot be late if he wants to get the role.

**Lily** – A 75-year-old woman going to babysit her grandchildren, whom she has not seen in more than a year.

**Maya** – A doctor who needs to get to the clinic on time to treat her patients.

**Marina** – On her way to the university; if she is more than ten minutes late, her teacher will lock the door and not let her in to take the final exam.