

# First Transcontinental Railroad

The First Transcontinental Railroad stretched from the East Coast of the United States to the West Coast. No longer would people travel in long wagon trains that took months to reach California. They could now travel faster, safer, and cheaper by train. In addition to people, things like mail, supplies, and trade goods could now be shipped across the country in just a few days. The railroad was built between 1863 and 1869.

## Background

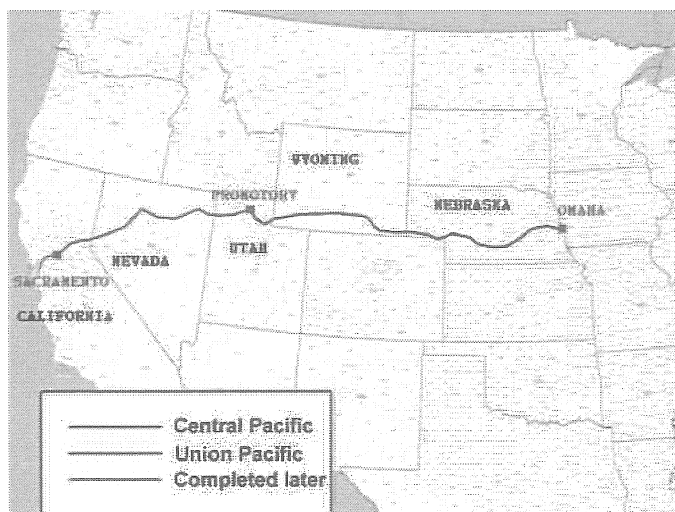
The first talk of a transcontinental railroad started around 1830. One of the first promoters of the railroad was a merchant named Asa Whitney. Asa tried hard for many years to get Congress to pass an act to build the railroad but failed. However, in the 1860s Theodore Judah began to lobby for a railroad. He surveyed the Sierra Nevada Mountains and found a pass where the railroad could be built.

## The Route

There were two main routes along which people wanted the first railroad to be built.

- One route was called the "central route". It followed much the same route as the Oregon Trail. It would begin in Omaha, Nebraska and end up in Sacramento, California.
- The other route was the "southern route". This route would stretch across Texas, New Mexico, and end up in Los Angeles, California.

The central route was eventually chosen by Congress.



Central Pacific: Omaha to Promotory

Union Pacific: Sacramento to Promotory

Sacramento to the coast was completed later

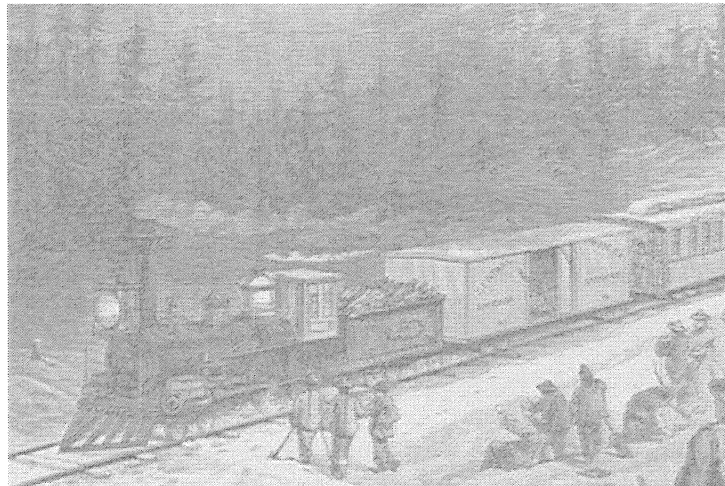
*Route of the First Transcontinental Railroad by Unknown*

## **Pacific Railroad Act**

In 1862 President Abraham Lincoln signed the Pacific Railroad Act into law. The act said that there were two main railroad lines. The Central Pacific Railroad would come from California and the Union Pacific Railroad would come from the Midwest. The two railroads would meet somewhere in the middle.

The act gave the railroad companies land where they could build the railroad. It also paid them for each mile that they built. They were paid more money for miles of track built in the mountains versus miles of track built on the flat plains.

## **Building the Railroad**



*Across the Continent*  
by Joseph Becker

Building the railroad was tough, hard work. Weather conditions were especially tough in the mountains during the winter. A lot of times the only way to travel over the mountains was to go through the mountains by blasting a tunnel. The Central Pacific Railroad had to blast a number of tunnels through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The longest tunnel built was 1659 feet long. It took a long time to build the tunnels. They were able to blast around 1 foot per day on average.

While the Central Pacific Railroad had to deal with mountains and snow, the Union Pacific Railroad had to deal with Native Americans. As the Native Americans came to realize the threat to their way of life that the "Iron Horse" was going to bring, they began to raid the railroad work sites. Also, a lot of the land that was "granted" to the railroad by the government was actually Native American land.

## **The Workers**

The majority of the workers on the Union Pacific Railroad were Irish laborers, many who had served in both the Union and the Confederate armies. In Utah, a lot of the track was

built by Mormon workers. Most of the Central Pacific Railroad was built by Chinese immigrants.

### **The Golden Spike**

The two railroads finally met at Promontory Summit, Utah on May 10, 1869. Leland Stanford, governor of California and president of the Central Pacific Railroad, drove in the last spike. This final spike was called the "Golden Spike" or "The Final Spike". You can see it today at Stanford University in California.



*Driving the Golden Spike on 10th May, 1869  
by American School*

### **Interesting Facts about the First Transcontinental Railroad**

- The Pony Express traveled a similar route to the central route and helped to prove that the route was passable in winter.
- The transcontinental railroad was also called the Pacific Railroad and the Overland Route.
- The total length of the First Transcontinental Railroad was 1,776 miles.
- The Central Pacific Railroad was controlled by four men called the "Big Four". They were Leland Stanford, Collis P. Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker.
- It was later, in November of 1869, when the Central Pacific connected San Francisco to Sacramento.





6) Most of the workers for the Union Pacific Railroad came from what country?

- Ireland
  - Italy
  - Russia
  - Africa
  - They were Native Americans
- 

7) True or False: Native Americans were happy to have the railroad running through their land.

- TRUE
  - FALSE
- 

8) In what state did the two railroads finally meet?

- California
  - Nevada
  - Utah
  - Arizona
  - Colorado
- 

9) Around how long was the First Transcontinental Railroad?

- 299 miles
  - 507 miles
  - 914 miles
  - 1776 miles
  - 3045 miles
- 

10) Which of the following was NOT a state that the railroad passed through?

- Utah
- Nebraska
- California
- Nevada
- Oregon

Use the information in the passage to answer these questions :

1) During which decade was the First Transcontinental Railroad constructed?

- 1790s
  - 1820s
  - 1860s
  - 1910s
  - 1940s
- 

2) Which route did Congress select for the First Transcontinental Railroad?

- Southern route
  - Northern route
  - Westward route
  - Middle route
  - Central route
- 

3) Which president signed the Pacific Railroad Act into law?

- Abraham Lincoln
  - James Polk
  - John Tyler
  - Andrew Johnson
  - Thomas Jefferson
- 

4) What railroad company started in California and worked their way east?

- California Railroad
  - Central Pacific Railroad
  - West Coast Railroad
  - Union Pacific Railroad
  - Sacramento Railroad
- 

5) How were the railroad companies paid?

- By the hour
  - By the year
  - By the day
  - By the mile
  - They built the railroad for free
-

# Anansi and Turtle: A Carribean story

By Angela McAllister, The Quarto Group on 10.01.19

Word Count 670

Level MAX

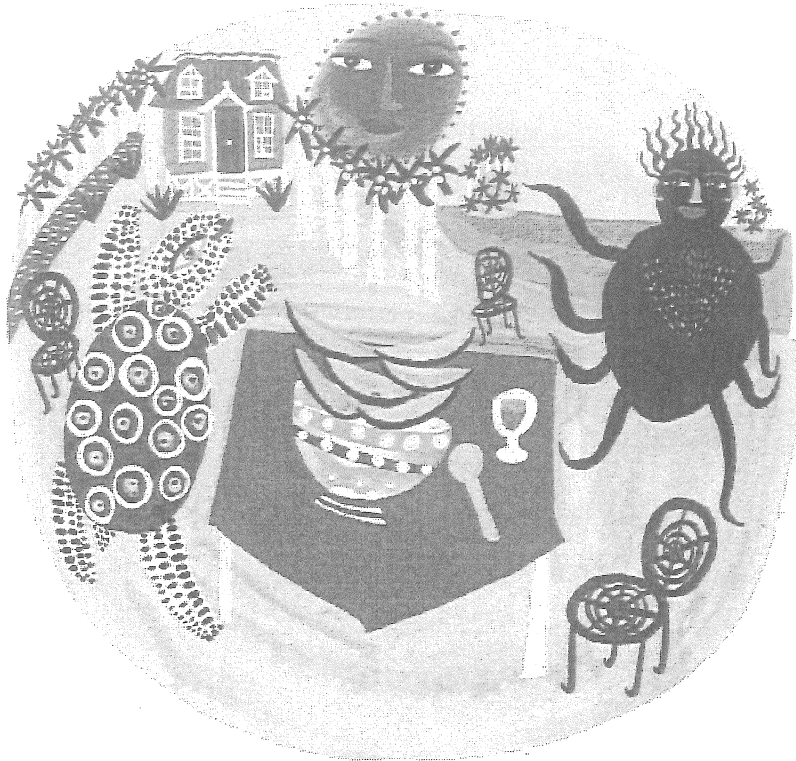


Illustration by: Christopher Corr/The Quarto Group

*Editor's Note: The following text is an adaptation of a story about Anansi, a key character in West African and Caribbean folklore. Anansi usually takes the shape of a spider but in some stories appears in other forms. A classic trickster character, Anansi is famously clever. He often uses his smarts to get around the rules. This adaptation appears in the children's anthology "A Year Full of Stories" by Angela McAllister.*

One hot summer's day, Turtle went for a walk. After a while, he began to feel hungry. He smelled something cooking nearby and followed the delicious smell until he came to the house of Anansi the Spider Man.

Anansi was sitting in the sun outside his house, just about to eat his lunch. On the table before him was a big bowl of sweet roasted yams.

"Hello, Anansi," said Turtle. "I am very hungry, can I share your lunch?"

"No!" Anansi said. "I've grown these yams and roasted them and I am going to eat every one myself."

Turtle gazed at the yams and felt hungrier than ever. "That's not kind," he said. "It's good manners to offer food to anyone who comes to your home."

Anansi frowned. "Well, all right then," he agreed. So Turtle sat down at the table. However, as soon as he reached out for a yam, Anansi jumped up.

"Look at your hands, Turtle," he said. "You can't come to the table with dirty hands! Go down to the river and wash them."

Turtle could not deny that his hands were dirty, so he went to wash them in the river. While he was gone, Anansi quickly ate as many yams as he could.

When Turtle returned, he was hungrier than ever. But Anansi still would not let him eat.

"Look at your hands, Turtle," he said, "you've made them dirty again walking back from the river! You should have walked on the grass. You can't sit at the table with dirty hands."

So Turtle went back to the river. While he was gone, Anansi quickly ate up the rest of the yams.

When Turtle returned and found the bowl empty, Anansi just smiled. "I hope you have enjoyed your lunch, Turtle," he said. "Now I have things to do."

Turtle nodded thoughtfully. "First, you must agree to come to lunch at my house, Anansi," he said. "You must let me return the favor."

Anansi always liked to get something for nothing, so he agreed to visit Turtle the following day.

The next day, Anansi walked down to the creek where Turtle lived. "Turtle looks very well fed," he thought to himself, "I expect I am in for a big feast!"

When he arrived Turtle greeted him. "The table is laid, Anansi," he said. "Please follow me," and he dived down to the bottom of the creek.

Anansi jumped into the water and followed. Down he went, deeper and deeper until he saw a table full of delicious-looking food. "Take a seat, Anansi," Turtle said.

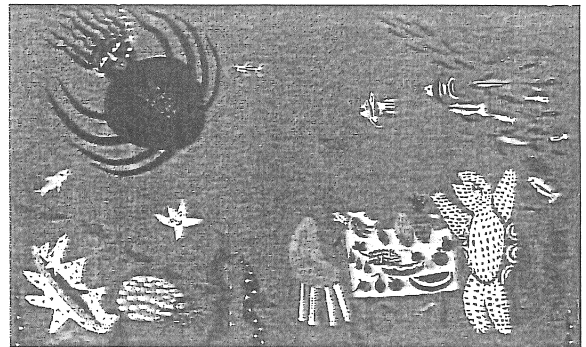
Anansi licked his greedy lips, but as soon as he sat down ... whoop ... he felt himself shooting up to the surface again! He was not heavy enough to stay at the bottom of the creek!

"Hmm!" Anansi was determined to eat Turtle's lunch. He searched for some stones on the river bank and put them in his jacket pockets, then he jumped into the water once more. This time, he sank down and stayed down. But as he reached out for something to eat, Turtle shook his head.

"Oh no, Anansi," Turtle said. "It's not polite to wear your jacket at the table. You must remove it." So Anansi took off his jacket and ... whoop ... he shot up to the surface again!

Anansi climbed onto the riverbank, coughing and spluttering. As he shook himself dry, Turtle peeped out of the water.

"I hope you enjoyed your lunch, Anansi," he said. "It was so good that there is nothing left!"



## DIRECTIONS

Focus question: Why is it important to be able to predict storms?

Read each section: Come up with a 3-5 word heading that tells the reader what that part is all about.

Go back and reread the section. What are details that support your main idea?

Jot down 2-4 ideas for that section.

Go back and reread the section. Look for details that address the focus question and the heading (main idea)? Did you identify the same details? Why did you choose these details for this part? Now your details match your heading and the focus of the article!

Repeat with each section.

You can do this work in the margins or on the chart on the back side of this page.

### EXAMPLE:

I read a section. \_\_\_\_\_

One small step for a woman, one giant leap for womankind! Astronaut Sally Ride joined NASA in 1978. She was one of six women chosen for the job. She became the first American woman to voyage, or travel, to space. She was born on May 26, 1951 in Los Angeles, California and made the journey on June 18, 1983. *WR News* student reporter Leah Meador talked with Ride about her starring role in NASA's history.

As the first U.S. woman to go into space, she believed that it was important for her to be a role model for young girls, especially those who wanted to be astronauts. She loved science and wanted to help women and girls who wanted to study science and mathematics, too. After she left NASA in 1987, she became involved in a project that lets middle school students take pictures of Earth using a camera on the International Space Station.

**I choose a heading:** Sally Ride: Role Model (only 4 words) and complete the columns for each section in the article (see below).

Focus Question: How do we generate interest in science?

Section Headings	Details	Which details fit my focus question?	Why are these details the best for the section and the focus question?
Sally Ride: Role Model	Ride was the first American woman in space. She believed that it was important for her to be a role model for young girls. She hoped they would think about careers in science and math, and she became involved in a project that lets middle school students take pictures of Earth using a camera on the International Space Station.	She believed that it was important for her to be a role model for young girls. She hoped they would think about careers in science and math, and she became involved in a project that lets middle school students take pictures of Earth using a camera on the International Space Station.	I think Sally Ride generated interest in science by showing that women could be astronauts, but also that there are many careers in math and science that young people might not know about. Imagine taking a picture of Earth from the International Space Station!

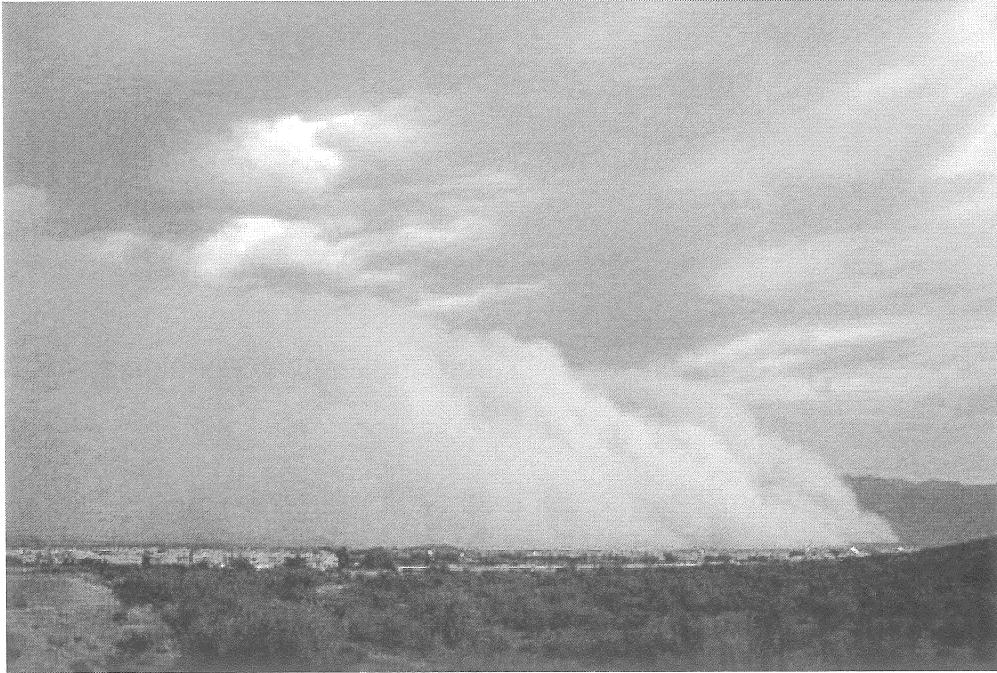
Focus Question: \_\_\_\_\_

Section Headings	Details	Which details fit my focus question?	Why are these details the best for the section and the focus question?

Focus Question: Why is it important to be able to predict storms?

# A Dangerous Dust Storm

by ReadWorks



One day in 2011, in Phoenix, Arizona, a woman was getting in her car, which was parked in her driveway. Suddenly, her husband ran out of the house. He was waving his arms and yelling.

Without another word, the woman ran back in her house and shut the front door. The husband and wife stood at their front window. A few minutes later, the sky began to darken. And then, sand began to swirl around the house. Soon, sand and dust were everywhere, blowing all around the house. This lasted for almost an hour.

► **Heading:** \_\_\_\_\_  
The woman and her husband were watching an especially violent type of dust storm. A dust storm is a kind of storm where wind picks up clouds of sand and dust from the desert and blows them into the air. Phoenix is built in the middle of the Sonoran Desert. It gets several dust storms every year. Most of the dust storms are very small, but some of them are very big. A large, thick dust storm hit Phoenix in 2011. It was more than a mile tall and 50 miles wide. Severe dust storms can last for up to three hours.

These dust storms happen in other areas too. Countries in the northern part of Africa can get very violent dust storms that last a long time. If this type of dust storm strikes near a farm, it can cover the farm with dust and sand. This means the farmer can no longer plant crops. \_\_\_\_\_

Often the farm must be abandoned.

► Heading: \_\_\_\_\_

Dust storms can be very dangerous. When a dust storm hits, it makes it difficult to see. If you are outside during a dust storm, you may not be able to see more than a few inches in front of you. When a dust storm is approaching Phoenix, the local weather stations start broadcasting warnings for people to get off the street. People are told to park their cars, so they don't crash. Airplanes are not allowed to take off from or land at the Phoenix airport because the pilots cannot see well.

The dust in a dust storm can also make people sick. Some of the dust can carry pesticides and toxins. People go inside during a dust storm so that they do not inhale the dust. People with pets, like dogs and cats and horses, also bring their animals inside so that they do not get sick.

Weather forecasters are always trying to get better at predicting when a dust storm will happen. The sooner they know a dust storm is coming, the sooner they can warn people about it. The sooner people are warned about a dust storm, the more lives will be saved. This is because more people will be able to get to safety before the dust storm strikes.

► Heading: \_\_\_\_\_

Paul Fisher and his family have lived in Arizona for more than 20 years. He can remember seeing many intense dust storms during that time. One time, he was out walking his dog, Jimbo, shortly after he had moved to Phoenix. As he was walking, he looked out at the desert and saw what looked like a big, dark wall. He stared at it for a few minutes. Suddenly, he realized what he was looking at. He grabbed Jimbo and ran back to the house. He was just able to get inside before the storm hit.

"Once you're in a [violent dust storm], you never forget it," he said. "It's like a thunderstorm, but instead of rain, all you can see is sand."



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What happens during a dust storm?

- A. heavy rains mix with dust and dirt, creating large rivers of mud
- B. wind picks up clouds of sand and dust from the desert and blows them into the air
- C. wind picks up clouds of sand and dust from the desert and forms a tornado
- D. wind blows dust and dirt around high in the sky and away from the ground

2. The author lists different things people do to protect themselves during a dust storm. What is one of these things?

- A. People get into their cars and drive away.
- B. People stay outdoors to protect their animals.
- C. People stay indoors with their animals.
- D. People fly away in airplanes.

3. The text states that dust storms can be very dangerous. What evidence from the text best supports this statement?

- A. "Soon, sand and dust were everywhere, blowing all around the house."
- B. "Weather forecasters are always trying to get better at predicting when a dust storm will happen."
- C. "Severe dust storms can last for up to three hours."
- D. "The dust in a dust storm can also make people sick."

4. Paul Fisher was out walking his dog Jimbo in Arizona when he saw an intense dust storm approaching. The passage says that he grabbed Jimbo, ran back to the house, and was able to get inside just before the storm hit. How can Paul's actions best be described?

- A. unusual
- B. frightening
- C. reasonable
- D. irrational

5. What is the main idea of this text?

- A. Violent dust storms can be very dangerous and harmful to humans and animals.
- B. Countries in the northern part of Africa can get very violent dust storms that last a long time.
- C. Local weather stations start broadcasting warnings for people to get off the street when a dust storm approaches the area.
- D. People in Phoenix, Arizona, know what to do when an intense dust storm approaches.

6. Read the following sentences: "Weather forecasters are always trying to get better at **predicting** when a dust storm will happen. The sooner they know a dust storm is coming, the sooner they can warn people about it."

As used in the passage, what does the word "**predicting**" mean?

- A. saying that an event has happened
- B. saying that an event will happen before it happens
- C. saying that an event will never happen
- D. saying that an event has never happened

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

During a dust storm, it is important to take precautions, \_\_\_\_\_ staying indoors.

- A. such as
- B. before
- C. finally
- D. although

8. What do local weather stations in Phoenix do when a dust storm is approaching the city?

9. Why is it important for forecasters to improve their ability to predict dust storms?

10. How might people be affected if forecasters did not have the ability to predict dust storms? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Focus Question: \_\_\_\_\_

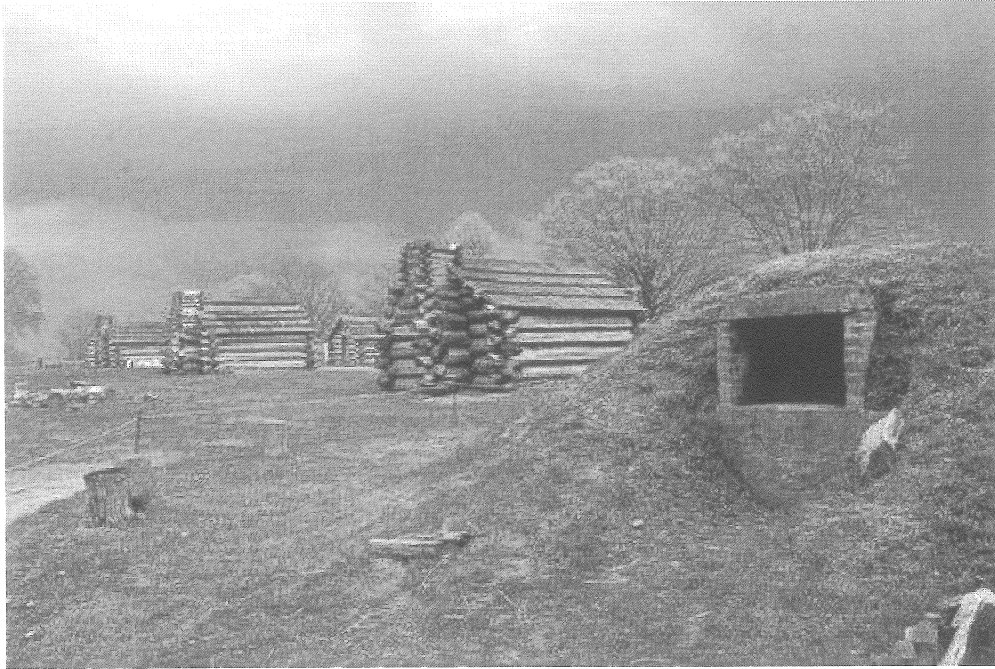
Section Headings	Details	Which details fit my focus question?	Why are these details the best for the section and the focus question?



Focus Question: How did Valley Forge influence George Washington?

## Colonization & Revolutionary War - Valley Forge

by ReadWorks



*replica of a Valley Forge camp*

Heading: \_\_\_\_\_

One of the hardest battles George Washington and his troops fought was not against the British. It was against the winter. In the fall of 1777, the British Redcoats occupied Philadelphia, a very important city where the Second Continental Congress had adopted the Declaration of Independence. Many congressmen wanted General Washington to reclaim the city. But Washington knew the Continental Army was not ready. Instead of attacking Philadelphia, Washington took his army to a plateau nearby, above the town of Valley Forge. There, he waited out the winter months.

The winter was bitterly cold. Colonists had hidden supplies for the army, but the British had raided their goods. The months from December 1777 to February 1778 were the hardest three months of the war. The troops had little food beyond the squirrels and small animals they could hunt in the forest. Many did not have uniforms, and many more lacked boots. A soldier's feet would get so cold from walking on the snow and ice that his entire leg might turn black from frostbite. Sometimes, the frostbite was so severe that the soldier's leg would have to be amputated.

Heading: \_\_\_\_\_

The men lived in wooden huts. Each hut was one room and had a small fireplace. Twelve men shared a hut. They had just enough space to lie down, but they did not have

blankets. The temperatures often fell below freezing. Many men became sick, and some died. Diseases such as smallpox, dysentery, and typhus killed as many as 2,000 men. The winter tested the loyalty of American troops. Some soldiers abandoned the army.

*Heading:* \_\_\_\_\_

Washington did what he could to help his troops. A new man was put in charge of sending supplies to the soldiers. He built bridges and improved roads so that food could reach the army. Another man helped Washington train the soldiers to fight the British more effectively. By spring, things began to improve rapidly for the troops.

The nation would never forget the sacrifices of the Continental Army at Valley Forge. Washington's men grew to recognize him as a strong, caring leader. He led the army until the end of the Revolutionary War when Great Britain surrendered. Washington was looking forward to retiring to his home at Mount Vernon. But because he was so respected, the American people called him to duty. He became the first President of the United States.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What was one of the hardest battles that the Continental Army ever fought?
  - A. The Battle for Philadelphia in December 1777.
  - B. The Battle of Mount Vernon in 1778.
  - C. The battle against the winter from 1777 to 1778.
  - D. The battle against the British in Valley Forge in February 1778.
  
2. The purpose of the second paragraph in the passage is to:
  - A. Show how many battles the British won against the Continental Army.
  - B. Illustrate the battle to reclaim Philadelphia.
  - C. Expand on the difficult winter conditions Washington's troops had to endure.
  - D. Illustrate Washington's attempts to support his troops.
  
3. If the British soldiers had not stolen the Continental Army's supplies, how might the winter from 1777-1778 in Valley Forge have been different?
  - A. Fewer Continental Army soldiers would have suffered as greatly during the winter from 1777 to 1778.
  - B. The Continental Army would have suffered just as much as they did without supplies.
  - C. The Continental Army would not have suffered from frostbite during the winter from 1777 to 1778.
  - D. The British Army would have won the war against the Continental Army.

4. Read the following sentences: "The winter tested the loyalty of American troops. Some soldiers abandoned the army."

The word **loyalty** most nearly means

- A. focus
- B. commitment
- C. distraction
- D. strength

5. This passage is mainly about

- A. The Continental Army's hardships during the winter of 1777-1778 in Valley Forge and George Washington's leadership
- B. How George Washington saved his troops and gave the troops all the supplies that they needed
- C. How Continental Army was completely destroyed and unable to recover after the winter of 1777-1778 in Valley Forge
- D. The ways that the British Troops made the Continental Army weaker during the Revolutionary War

6. Why were the three months between December 1777 and February 1778 the hardest of the war?

7. What sort of personal qualities might a soldier in the Continental Army have needed to survive the Revolutionary War? Make a list of qualities. Explain why you think each is important for a soldier to survive the war.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

George Washington knew his troops were not ready to attack Philadelphia \_\_\_\_ he took his army to Valley Forge.

- A. though
- B. because
- C. so
- D. but



## Secret Agent Cows

By Ryan Kimble, Cricket Media on 11.12.19

Word Count 2,061

Level MAX

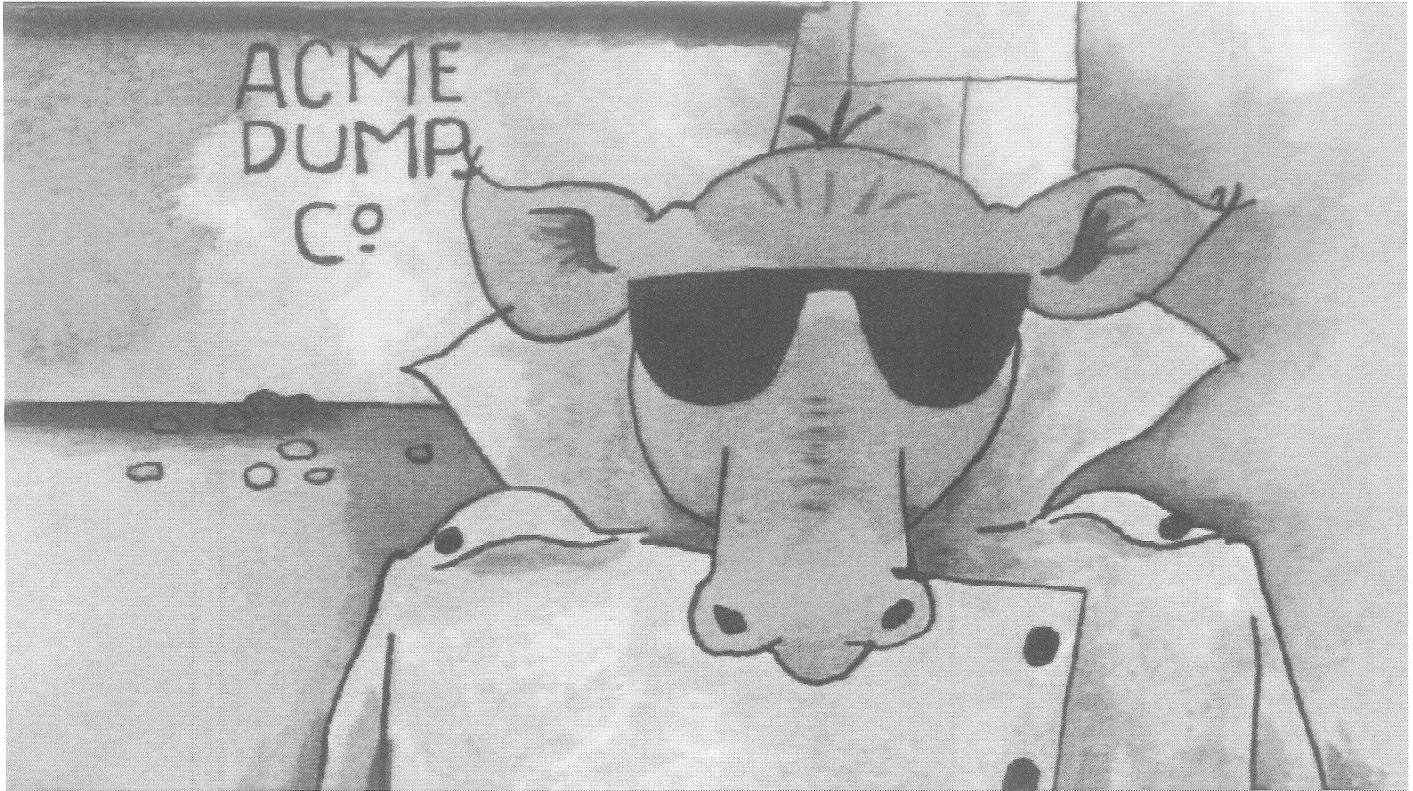


Illustration 1. "It wore dark sunglasses, but that hardly disguised the fact that it was a cow." Illustration by: Francis Blake/Cricket Media  
Illustrations by: Francis Blake/Cricket Media

Lee was one of those people who figured all things could be explained. There was a perfectly good reason why bumblebees have six legs and why bark on a tree is brown.

It made perfect sense, too, that Lee was lying in a dumpster. He was lying in a dumpster because the much larger Max had thrown him there. Max had thrown him there because Lee had looked at him funny. Lee had looked at him funny because he was scared of getting thrown in the dumpster like the last three days on his way home from school. Perfect sense.

The dumpster was empty, which was worse because it hurt when Lee dropped to the cold, hard bottom. He wished it was filled with lots of garbage to cushion his fall.

Twelve had to be the worst age, Lee figured. That's when homework starts. Real homework — not easy stuff like in younger grades, but worksheets that take hours and projects that eat up entire weekends.

Twelve was also when bullies became a problem. Bullies used to only flick his ear or give him a whack that didn't hurt much, but now they were getting stronger and angrier.

Yes, twelve was a terrible age to be. But what if each year got worse and worse? Bullies would only get bigger. Homework would only get harder. The thought of growing up scared him silly. He sighed at the bottom of the dumpster. Maybe I should just stay here, he thought.

When he finally stood up, he spotted a large figure in the alley. Lee dropped back down to hide. Taking a peek, he saw that the figure was wearing a beige trench coat. It had skinny legs and ears that stuck out. Its feet were hooves, yet it was standing upright. Lee had never seen a hoofed animal that stood like a human.

The creature turned sideways. It wore dark sunglasses, but that hardly disguised the fact that it was a cow.

The cow talked into some kind of phone, and the back wall of a building burst into a circle of red light. The red turned violet, then blue as the circle expanded. Now the light took up almost half of the brick wall. The cow jumped into the circle and vanished. Instantly, the wall changed back to normal as if nothing had ever touched it.

Lee climbed out of the dumpster and ran to the wall. Running his fingers up and down the rough surface confirmed there were no trapdoors.

It was the back wall of a bakery. Lee entered through the front door and looked around, seeing no cow. He thought about asking the lady who worked there, but she would probably think he was playing a prank.

There must be a perfectly good reason for what happened, Lee thought as he walked home. There was a reason for everything.

The next day, Lee's sixth-grade class got a new student.

"Do you think there's something weird about the new kid in our class?" Lee asked his friend Dylan during lunch.

"You mean Steve?" Dylan said.

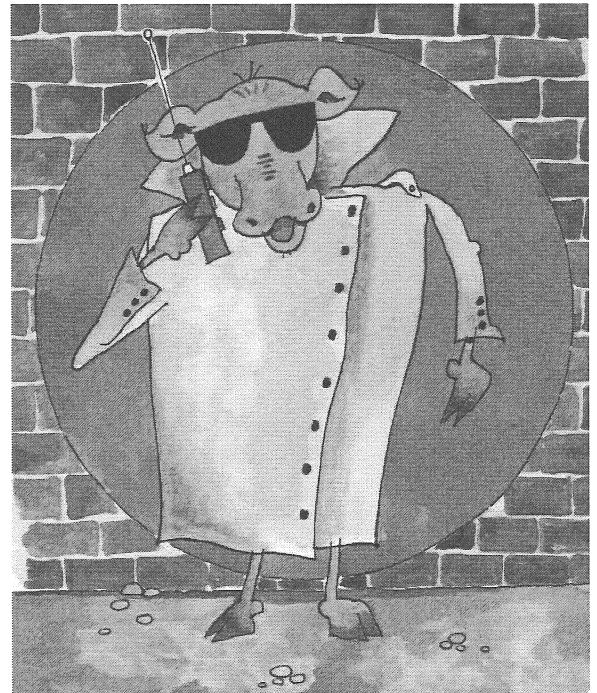
"Yeah."

"I guess he is a little weird," Dylan said. "He didn't even buy a lunch, and it's taco day."

"That's not what I mean," Lee said. "Is it just me, or is Steve a cow?"

"You know, I did find that kind of strange," Dylan said. "Because he's a dairy cow, not a bull, and only girls are dairy cows. But for some reason he's named Steve, which is a boy's name."

"That's what you think is strange about him?" Lee said. "Not the fact that HE'S A COW AND HE'S IN OUR CLASS!"



Dylan shrugged. "I didn't want to point out that he's a cow because I thought it might embarrass him."

Lee was also too afraid to ask Steve if he was a cow. He couldn't just go up and ask someone, "Are you a cow?" Besides, he was certain that if Steve was a cow, there was a perfectly good reason why he was in their class.

At church on Sunday, Lee wasn't even thinking about cows. When it came time to shake hands with people around him and exchange the sign of peace, he turned around and gasped. In the pew behind him, a tall cow with sunglasses stood with its hoof out for Lee to shake. This cow had more black spots than Steve. Lee shook its hoof and said, "Peace be with you." "Peace be with you," the cow said.

For the rest of Mass, Lee felt uncomfortable. He could feel hot breath on his neck. There had to be a reason why there was a cow standing behind him. The cow must be Catholic.

Or maybe these cows were spying on him.

Walking home from school, Lee felt a meaty hand on his shoulder.

"You missed your appointment," Max said. "You were supposed to be in the dumpster five minutes ago!"

Lee tried to run, but Max grabbed his coat. He carried Lee to the dumpster behind the bakery. He was about to throw Lee in the dumpster when a cow wearing sunglasses appeared. Startled, Max let go of Lee.

"Who are you?" Max said.

The cow raised its hooves, and Max ran away.

"Thanks," Lee said as he brushed himself off. "Are you a secret agent or something?"

"My name is Mooshoolu," the cow said. "I belong to the Interuniversal Oversight Agency, or M.O.O."

"But . . . the letters don't match."

Mooshoolu didn't seem to hear him. "We at M.O.O. try to make sure things happen the way they're supposed to throughout the universes."

"There's more than one universe?"

"Yes. There are an infinite number of universes."

"How many is infinite?" Lee asked. "Is that more than a billion?"

Mooshoolu laughed. "You could multiply a billion by a billion every second for the rest of your life and never get close to infinity. The biggest number you can think of, even if you multiply it by itself a hundred trillion times, will never be big enough. Infinity never stops."

"I see."

"We at the Interuniversal Oversight Agency, or M.O.O., have been watching you for quite some time. We need you for a very important mission."

"What's the mission?"

"To place a feather on a ship."

"Pardon?"

"You must go to another universe and place a feather on a ship. It is your destiny."

What a crummy destiny, Lee thought.

"Sorry, but I'm confused," Lee said. "Why does it matter that I put a feather on a ship?"

"It may seem small," Mooshoolu said, "but it makes all the difference in that universe. The extra weight of the feather is all that's needed for the ship to sink. Please hurry. The feather needs to be placed soon."

"But why —"

"No more questions. It will all make sense when you get there."

Mooshoolu took a phone from his pocket and dialed a number. Light exploded from inside the dumpster.

"Here's our peephole," Mooshoolu said as the light grew more intense and changed color. "Once we jump inside it, we'll be transported to another universe. Hurry, before the portal closes!" Lee stared at the light coming from the dumpster. Well, he thought, maybe that world's better than this one.

He leapt into the blinding light.

An eyeball skipped across the crystal blue waters of a pond. Its optic nerve fluttered as the eyeball barely touched the water's surface with each jump. Three more eyeballs came skipping after it.

"Oh, no!" Mooshoolu yelled.

Lee turned around. "What's the matter?"

"This is the wrong universe. I didn't want to admit this to you, but today's my first day on the job." Mooshoolu sat down and cried.

"It's all right," Lee said. "Everybody has a lousy first day on their job. Even the best secret agent cow in the world was probably pretty useless his first day."

Mooshoolu sprang up. "I remember!" He dialed another number, and a new peephole burned into the ground. They jumped.

Three tall tree trunks had hammocks stretched between them. Each trunk had little pegs sticking out that were too small for adult feet. Lush green leaves provided shade.



"This is it!" Mooshoolu said. "This is the correct universe."

"What's it called?"

"It doesn't have a name. Most universes don't."

"Well, what's the name of the country?"

"There aren't countries," Mooshoolu said. "It's all one country, I guess."

If there are no countries, Lee thought, that means there are probably no wars.

A boy slightly younger than Lee climbed down the pegs of a tree. He wore twigs and leaves.

"Don't they have proper clothes in this universe?" Lee muttered to Mooshoolu.

"Take it easy," Mooshoolu said. "They don't know any better."

The boy approached them cautiously, his mouth agape.

"Howdy," Lee said.

"I better get Beak!" The boy turned and ran. Soon a group of eight children wearing twigs and leaves gathered around them. The tallest one had a large nose. He stood in front, carrying a pointed stick.

"The name's Beak."

"I'm Lee. This is Mooshoolu."

Some of the children giggled at Mooshoolu.

"We come in peace," Lee said.

"Let's take them back to the lunk," Beak said.

They led Lee and Mooshoolu to a pit of leaves, where they sat.

"Are there any adults here?" Lee asked.

"What's an uh-dolt?" a girl said.

"Someone who's grown up, I mean."

"Gronupp?" Beak said.

Lee thought for a moment. "Who's the oldest person here?"

"I'm the tallest," Beak said.

"How many years have you been alive?" Lee asked.

The children looked confused by the question.

"So this is a world of children," Lee said.

"Of course," said a skinny boy. "What else is there?"

Lee shrugged. He liked it in this universe.

"You arrived on a special day," Beak said. "In fact, we were just about to set sail."

"Where to?" Lee asked.

"The Great Beyond."

Beak led them to the beach. On the horizon was a sort of fog.

"See that weird gray fuzziness?" Beak said. "It's always been there waiting for us."

"Why would you want to go to a weird gray fuzziness?"

"To see what it's like," Beak said.

"I wouldn't if I were you," Lee said. "You have a good thing going here. You all seem to be well fed and happy. There's no homework, no teenagers to bully you, no adults to tell you what to do, no responsibilities at all!"

"Stop using strange words," Beak said. "We've been planning this trip for a long time. You can't stop us!"

Beak and the other children ran to a large boat made of sticks and leaves. Lee and Mooshoolu watched them from the sand.

"That weird gray fuzziness," Lee said to Mooshoolu. "Is it what I think it is?"

"Indeed." Mooshoolu took a feather out of his pocket and gave it to Lee.

"I . . . I can't," Lee said.

"Why not? Place the feather on their ship."

"But you told me they'll sink!"

"Isn't that better than growing up?"

The children pushed the boat into the water and hopped on.

Lee stared at the feather quivering in the breeze. For a second he thought about placing it on the back of the boat. There was still time to do it. But he couldn't. To reach the weird gray fuzziness would probably be horrible for the children, but it would be better than drowning in the ocean. The boat got smaller and smaller. Lee watched it disappear in the gray horizon.

Mooshoolu dialed a number on his phone. He and Lee leapt into the portal of light that appeared. Back in Lee's home universe, they climbed out of the dumpster.

"I'm so sorry," Lee said. "I failed the mission. I messed everything up!"

"No," Mooshoolu said. "You did exactly what you were supposed to do."

Mooshoolu stepped into a new portal and left Lee alone by the dumpster. Lee headed home, more sure than ever there was a perfectly good reason for everything.

He never saw another secret agent cow again.