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Rough Patches on the Railroad

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Title: Rough Patches on the Railroad

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Grade Levels: 9-10

Time: 45-50 minute class period

Focus Statement: As we continue to dig deeper into the Gilded Age, we begin to see the importance the railroad made for the expansion of the United States. The Transcontinental Railroad was one of the America's biggest accomplishments in all of its history. It gave companies the ability to move resources across the country in ways that were once either very difficult or impossible to do. The railroad system boosted the economy and was developing the country at a pace that would make it one of the most powerful countries in the world. As time went on, more and more expansion of the railroad was occurring. With all its benefits, there were also issues and problems that arose for those who were not benefiting from this development. Workers on the railroad were treated badly, forced to work in harsh conditions and were paid very little for the amount of work they were required to do. Railroad strikes during the Gilded Age is a topic that is not often discussed due to the negative light it may shine on the railroad industry. The railroad system is always seen as one of the greatest accomplishments of the time but not many people are aware of the issues it created.

The students will be developing a habit of mind during this lesson. It is important the students perceive past events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time, to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness. It is crucial the students attempt to be in the mind of those who were living in this era to fully understand why not everyone approved of the railroad and attempt to comprehend why they had these negative feelings. Attempting to be in this frame of mind will only expand their knowledge of the subject. To do this requires background knowledge of the subject and understanding the mindset that was in place during this time. Exploring the economy of the time and how this resulted in many firings and pay decreases will help to explain why so many workers were outraged. The forming of unions is another important idea to explore when understanding the reasoning's for these strikes. This knowledge will help to dive into the true mindset of these people.

MN Standard: As the United States shifted from its agrarian roots into an industrial and global power, the rise of big business, urbanization and immigration led to institutionalized racism, ethnic and class conflict and new efforts at reform. (Development of an Industrial United States 1870-1920)

MN Standard Benchmark: Explain how technological innovation, heavy industrialization, and intensified boom-bust cycles of an unregulated capitalist economy led to changes in the nature of work, economic scale and productivity, the advent of the modern corporation, and the rise of national labor unions. (Development of an Industrial United States: 1870-1920)

Learning Objective:

- Express both positives and negatives of the railroad in context during the late 19th century
- Understand the multiple perspectives of the railroad strikes

Resources:

- Materials from the era include:
 - Two images from the era which deal with the Pullman Strikes
 - Two documents that discuss the strikes that were occurring
 - One song that was written during the era

Methods/Procedures:

Beginning: (5-10 minutes)

- Begin the lesson with asking the class what they know about railroads during the Gilded Age. Ask about what they know about railroads in general. Bring up questions that would keep the students engaged and help to come up with ideas. Why build the railroad? Who does it benefit? Who is the most impacted? This will get the students into thinking about the railroad and give a base to work off of and these ideas can be used later on in the lesson. Knowing the positive and negative of a railroad will get them into the right frame of mind to understand the concepts later in the lesson.
- Present the PowerPoint that gives a general overview of the beginning of the railroad system in the United States. The PowerPoint includes talking about the need to expand the railroad system at a rapid pace to connect the developing America to the west. The Transcontinental Railroad will be the main point of discussion. The PowerPoint presentation and lecture will also discuss how it impacted America as we move out of reconstruction and into the Gilded Age. Expansion into the 1870-1890s will be mentioned to show that the expansion never really ended.

Middle: (20-25 minutes)

- Now that there has been a general refresher of the beginnings of the railroad, we can delve into issues with the railroad. The lecture will continue with discussing problems that occurred while building the railroads. You can refer back to anything that was mentioned in the beginning of the lesson that may refer to this portion. The main topic that is addressed are the railroad strikes that occurred during the Gilded Age. The development of labor unions gave railroad workers the power to fight for their freedoms and rights as workers. The Railroad Strike of 1877 and the Pullman Strike of 1894 will be two prime examples that will help explain the railroad didn't always benefit everyone. The lecture will also include the reasons for the strike and events occurred as a result of the strike.
- After the lecture, the students will be paired up in groups of two and will each be assigned a document to analyze and eventually express to the class what the documents purpose is and how it relates to the discussion. The documents include two images, two pieces of literature and a song that was created to describe working for a railroad company. The students will not be given any information regarding the title of the materials so they can use prior knowledge from the lecture and piece together what the materials are expressing in terms of the feeling towards the building and expansion of the railroad.
- After giving the students 5-10 minutes to analyze the document, each group will explain to the class what material they were given and explain how the document expresses the railroad expansion. Was it positive or negative? Who do you think created the source? This discussion can begin to tie information from the lecture and apply it to actual documents of the time which would only deepen their knowledge on the subject.

End: (5-10 minutes)

- Once the group work is done, it is time to bring everyone back to their seats so we can reflect on what we learned today. The discussion will include things the students learned from the lesson. This will be done by having the students writing down a short reflection with these questions: 1. What are some things you learned today that you didn't know previously? 2. What was your favorite part of the lesson? 3. Could this lesson be applied to types of transportation that are used today? If yes, how so? If no, why not? The reflection needs to be at least 8 sentences to show that the students understood the lesson and did learn during the lesson.

Afterwards:

Self-Reflection

- Present the materials before lecturing about the railroad strikes that occurred during the Gilded Age.
- Find more materials to use so each student can have their own document.