

Grade 8 Narrative

Oh, Canada

The border to Canada was not a formidable opponent when we started to trek north for our annual fishing trip. This would be the last year to enter this beautiful country without presenting a passport to the border guards under the red and white maple leaf flag. Our old, Caribbean-sea blue Suburban pulled through the passage lanes, we answered the woman behind the smoky glass that we were indeed the children of the driver and entering the country of our own accord, and we settled in for the rest of the journey. The beauty of this country's rocky countryside was an interesting contrast to the flat plains of our home in middle Nebraska.

My brothers and I gauged the amount of time it would take to reach Thunder Bay, Ontario, reminding each other of the mile-per-hour timing versus the kilometer-per-mile timing. We knew we were approaching this small city on the shores of Northern Lake Superior when we caught a whiff of the paper plant at the southern edge of the city limits. The putrid smell of wet wood being processed to paper was much worse than I remembered it to be; the results of this process permeated our car, the air, and my nose for several kilometers; we breathed a sigh of true relief when the air cleared enough for us to breathe deeply again. We paused for a supper break and a view of Kakabeka Falls. Legend has it that if you listened carefully, you could hear the cry of the Ojibwa maiden as she cries for her lost love. The falls thundered in our ears as we crossed the man-made bridge to the other side, and for brief moments along the way I found myself feeling the thrill of momentary fear as my overactive mind took me over the bridge railing into the roaring waters in an imaginary fall.

We pulled ourselves away from the beauty of the falls and the bay and continued north. Thunder Bay held our interest for a bit more as this last highway of northern civilization led us past the Terry Fox monument marking his run across the country to raise awareness and funds for cancer research. We stopped at the lookout and gazed out at the huge pile of rock in the middle of the bay known as Sleeping Giant. The enormity of this rock brought to mind the idea of an iceberg, knowing that what we were seeing was only a small portion of the formation. We gathered ourselves and boarded the bright blue beast bearing our fishing and camping gear. Heading further north we took a winding highway around Lake Nipigon and through many small towns. The drive was long, but aside from the logging trucks that rumbled our ride, it was picture postcard beautiful. We watched for streams of water that flowed out of rocks upon the face of the high cliffs, and we tried to spot loons diving for their meals out on the lake. After what seemed to me to be a day's long travel, we passed through the last small town before reaching our camp. Where we were headed was only marked on local maps; the bound atlas that brought us this far now showed nothing but a road to nowhere. Goodbye television, telephone, and video games!

Finally, the destination I'd been waiting for! We unloaded the fishing poles, life jackets, waterproof bags, food, and tackle; then we headed to the owner's office to purchase our five-day permit. By now the sun was setting on the horizon and the cry of loons told me it would soon be too dark to catch anything but black fly and mosquito bites. I took one last look at the

lake and mentally challenged the elements to defy the master angler abilities I had acquired in my seventeen years. Walleye and northern pike beware! I climbed the wooden-plank stairs to the cabin, shook the sand off of my shoes, and declined the offer to sit up and talk for the next several hours. I wanted to get to bed and get to tomorrow. In the morning I would head out to a hidden lake found only by driving for an hour and a half on a logging road and begin my reason for enduring the long drive from Nebraska: fishing in the cold, clear waters of Canada.

Grade 8 Informational

The Transcontinental Railroad

The first railroads in the United States were built in the East during the 1820s. By 1850, railroads connected many cities east of the Mississippi River, but railroads were still a dream for frontier places. After California became a state in 1849, a growing number of people wanted to connect the West Coast with the rest of the country. For many years, people had traveled across the Nebraska Territory, and soon a railroad would cross it, too.

Agreeing on a Route

Building a transcontinental railway required vast stretches of land. An act of Congress was needed to obtain the land. In the years leading up to the Civil War, sectional differences between the North and the South made Congressional agreements rare. Senator Stephen Douglas wanted a new railroad built west through Nebraska to the West Coast. He first introduced a bill to build a railroad in 1844. That plan was not acceptable to southern interests, which wanted a transcontinental railroad line to go west from New Orleans. Sectional conflicts made an agreement about a transcontinental route impossible.

In 1859, Abraham Lincoln, who was then an attorney with the Rock Island Railroad, met with railroad surveyor Grenville Dodge in Council Bluffs, Iowa. They planned to make Council Bluffs the eastern terminus of the transcontinental railroad. When the Civil War erupted two years later, southern representatives stopped attending Congress. As a result, southern opposition to the proposed railroad route was removed. The Pacific Railway Act of 1862 cleared the way for railroad construction to begin.

Overcoming Challenges

The transcontinental railroad was an engineering feat. Laying railroad track great distances over difficult terrain with limited resources made the task complicated. Two companies were formed to get the work done. The Union Pacific Company started in Omaha, Nebraska, and built west. Council Bluffs, Iowa, was intended to be the eastern terminus of the railroad. However, the Union Pacific Company did not want to start the project by building an expensive bridge over the Missouri River, so construction began in Omaha instead. The Central Pacific Company began in Sacramento, California, and built east. The two companies would join their lines to form a transcontinental route.

Little progress was made by the Union Pacific during the war years. A labor shortage caused by the war was one reason for the lack of progress. Financial problems added to the challenge. The logistics of how to get materials to the right location at the right time had not been worked out. Conflicting interests tried to influence where the main railroad line would be laid. Delays and disagreements were common. When the war was over, the Union Pacific Company began to make headway, but the progress was still too slow.

Grenville Dodge took over the task of chief engineer for the Union Pacific. Dodge was a decisive leader who chose the Platte River valley as the route for the railroad. The Platte River created a natural westward route across level land. The work began to proceed at a faster pace.

Building the Railroad

Surveyors were the first workers on the construction site. Surveyors took measurements and collected data. The surveyors for the transcontinental railroad looked for the straightest, most level route. They put stakes in the ground to mark the route and recorded their findings for the engineers.

Engineers looked at the survey data and decided where the line would be laid. Engineers had to decide how to manage laying railroad track over hills, valleys, streams, and rivers. The goal was to keep the roadbed as level as possible. Low areas were filled with dirt; steep inclines were cut. Making cuts and fills took time and cost money. Level ground was best. As the line progressed west, the engineers knew less about the actual conditions of the land and the climate. Was a dry streambed ever a raging river? How high should the track be elevated to account for high water? Many times, the engineers built wooden trestles over streambeds rather than fill the area. This solution was quicker and cheaper. After the actual conditions of the streambed were known, it was either filled in with dirt or a permanent bridge was built.

Once the roadbed was ready, the workers who laid the railroad tracks came in. Wagons loaded with wooden ties—cut to a uniform size—came first. The ties were laid evenly side-by-side on the roadbed. Next, teams of workers picked up rails and laid them on the ties. Then two-person teams hammered spikes into the ties to hold the rails in place. Wooden gauges were used to space the rails properly. After the rails were nailed into place with spikes, they were bolted together with plates of steel. Finally gravel or dirt was filled in between the ties to stabilize them. This process was repeated until the job was done.

Completing the Task

The Union Pacific and Central Pacific lines were joined at Promontory Point, Utah, in 1869. At a celebration on May 10, a ceremonial spike was hammered in place to commemorate the event. Railroad lines now crossed 2,000 miles from the Missouri River to the West Coast. During the 1860s, railroad connections in the East had also increased. With the completion of this link between Omaha and Sacramento, passengers and freight could travel by railroad from New York to California.

The completion of the transcontinental railroad was a turning point in American history. It brought settlers to the West. By 1890, the U.S. Census declared that the American frontier had disappeared.

