

Classroom Activities for: The Kids Book of Canada's Railway

by Deborah Hodge

Use these cross-curricular activities to engage your students in thinking about the time in Canadian history when the first transcontinental railway was built (late 1800s).

Language Arts

- I imagine you are a surveyor, railway navvy, or a homesteader on the Canadian prairies and write a journal entry describing a typical day.
- I imagine you are a Chinese navvy building the railway in British Columbia in the late 1800s. Write a letter to your family in China describing your life and work.
- Write opinion pieces, or stage a debate or dramatic performance, with students taking differing points of view, on the building of the railway across the Canada. Choose a variety of roles or positions including the: surveyors, navvies, Metis, Aboriginal people, CPR and Canadian government.
- Make a postcard with an illustration on one side and a message on the other describing your journey as a passenger on the first transcontinental train across Canada on July 4, 1886.
- Compile a list of old railway terms, slang and definitions.

Geography

- On a wall map of Canada, trace the route of the CPR — Montreal to Vancouver. Point out the location of major cities in Canada (many of which developed as a result of the CPR).
- Note the geography of various areas (Canadian Shield, Rocky Mountains, prairies etc.) and how they might have affected the construction of the CPR track.

History

- Make a chart comparing “Canada Before the Railway” and “Canada Today”. Include information on: population, areas of settlement, wages, transportation, immigration, communication and so on.
- In a written or oral report, compare living and working conditions and wages for different groups of railway workers: Chinese navvies, European labourers, and English speaking workers.
- Many of British Columbia's first Chinese citizens came to Canada to help build the railway. What happened to these workers after the railway was built? Research the history of Chinese citizens in British Columbia over the last 100 years. What challenges did they face? What contributions did they make to British Columbia? Present your findings to the class.
- Take a field trip to a train museum or ride on an old steam train.

Science

- Research the history and development of the steam engine and present your findings in a written or oral report.
- Use an atlas to determine average temperatures and precipitation for various seasons across Canada. Consider how the weather might have affected the working conditions of surveyors and navvies.

Fine Arts

- Paint or draw a scene from the early days of Canada's railway.
- Design a poster advertising travel on the early CPR trains.
- Build a model trestle or railway bridge with popsicle sticks or toothpicks.
- Sing or listen to old railway songs such as “I've Been Working on the Railroad”.

Your Ideas

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