UNIT 1
Building Railroads/ Cultivating the Land (Taking Roots)

MATERIALS:
- Historical Narrative
- Poster
- Audio clip
- Video clip
- e-Comic
- Assignments & Activities

Historical Narrative

ROOTS AND ROUTES
The discovery of the passage through the Pacific Ocean in 1565 created a link between Spanish ports in Mexico and the Philippines, bringing American furs and precious metals to the Philippines in exchange for spices and textiles from Asia. European colonies in the Americas became the center of a global web of oceangoing mercantile activity. With this burgeoning trade came Asian people.

As early as 1635, Chinese barbers were reportedly plying their trade in Mexico City. By the 1760s, Filipinos had built fishing villages in the bayous of New Orleans and along the Mississippi Delta. The thriving “East Indies” trade brought a handful of Indians to the Northeast of the Americas. In the latter part of the 18th century, Native Hawaiians were working as seamen and laborers from Peru to the Aleutian Islands, as well as in eastern seaboard harbor towns like Nantucket and New Bedford. In 1834, three young Japanese sailors were rescued off the northern coast of what was then Oregon Country. These were the first Asians and Native Hawaiians to join what would become the nation of America.

GOLD RUSH
By 1852, over 25,000 Chinese had come to America, mostly from Canton (Guangdong) Province, for the promise of gold. Small groups of Indians, Japanese, and Filipinos also joined the Gold Rush, as well as a few hundred Native Hawaiians who came to California as sailors on trading schooners and set up small “Kanaka” (Pacific Islander) colonies in gold country.

Few struck it rich in the hills. Most were driven out by vigilantes and taxes designed to purge foreign miners. Most of the money Chinese men earned came from backbreaking drudgery as cooks, laundrymen, gardeners, and household help.

Credit: Photograph by Bill Allan

The Santísima Trinidad, the replica of which is shown here, was the largest of the Manila merchant galleons, sailing between the Philippines and Mexico in the 18th century. Credit: Photograph by Bill Allan

When word reached China that treasure was being pulled from the ground and plucked from the streams in the American West, tens of thousands of young Chinese seeking opportunities bought passage to California, the place they called Gam Saan, “Gold Mountain.” Credit: Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley
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Historical Narrative

THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD
By the mid-1860s, the Western boom and the end of the Civil War placed America in a quandary. The growing nation had a frantic need for labor to meet the rapid pace of industrialization. The barons of commerce turned to a controversial replacement: imported hands from Western Europe and Asia.

Chinese immigrant workers would build much of the treacherous Central Pacific stretch of the Transcontinental Railroad, running from Sacramento through the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains.

Chinese laborers made up over 80% of the Central Pacific workforce and set records for track-laying speed while tunneling deep underground and setting explosives in high mountain peaks. Many lost their lives, but through their incredible diligence and industry, the Western line was completed and joined to its Eastern counterpart in 1869, seven years ahead of schedule.

The “Golden Spike” ceremony at Promontory Summit, Utah Territory, on May 10, 1869, celebrated the final ceremonial spike joining the rails of the First Transcontinental Railroad across the United States. Chinese laborers were excluded from the official photo, much as their stories would be excluded from official histories of the railroad. Credit: National Archives and Records Administration

LABOR OF THE LAND
Asian immigrants played a major role in the development of agriculture in America. In California, Asian tenant farmers became a force in the cultivation of fruit, vegetables, flowers, and poultry. In Washington, Asians immigrants were fishermen and worked in canneries.

In the sovereign Kingdom of Hawai‘i, King Kamehameha III’s 1848 decree, known as the Great Mahele (“Division”), established the concept of private landownership for the first time and paved the way for the rise of the plantation economy. Eager investors and businessmen rapidly acquired property and converted much of it to industrial agriculture, predominantly sugarcane.

Plantation owners began importing laborers, largely from Asia. Between 1850 and 1887, nearly 50,000 Chinese arrived to work on new plantations in the Kingdom of Hawai‘i. Over 200,000 Japanese arrived between 1885 and 1924, and over 112,000 Filipinos arrived by 1930. Many workers stayed and settled in the islands, eventually making Hawai‘i, when it joined the union in 1959, the first and only state with a predominately Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander population.

An immigrant farmer from India harvests beets. Credit: Southern Oregon Historical Society
Assignments & Activities

POSTER

1. What elements of the poster stand out to you? What kinds of labor does the poster chronicle? Where and when?

2. How does the poster use image and narrative to tell a story? To represent culture and community?

3. How does this cultural/historical material relate to your own community and family?

4. Why is this cultural/historical material important?

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

1. Pick one of the sections, and pick out a key theme or topic. With a partner, trade themes or topics, go back to the historical narrative, and explain what you think your partner means by his or her chosen theme or topic. Report your findings back to the larger group.

2. Draw some connections between the different sections, between the Gold Rush and the Transcontinental Railroad, for example, or the Transcontinental Railroad and Labor of the Land. What do these histories have in common? What people, places, or themes do they share?

3. Pick one of the sections outlined in the narrative and do some additional research online. What new information can you find about these key moments in Asian Pacific American history? Give a short oral report of your findings to your group.

4. Think about the narrative in relation to the poster. How does historical information about Asian Pacific American agricultural labor add to or change your understanding of the building of the transcontinental railroad?

AUDIO CLIP

Novelist Maxine Hong Kingston reads a passage about railroad labor from her novel China Men.

1. What information does this audio clip add to what we know about railroad labor from the poster?

2. How does the story bring alive the experiences of Chinese immigrant railroad workers?

3. How does hearing the story out loud influence how you think about it?

VIDEO CLIP

Historian Franklin Odo discusses the history of hole-hole bushi, Hawaiian plantation labor songs.

1. What does this video clip add to what we know about agricultural labor in Hawai‘i?

2. What do you think of the music? How does it add to or change how you think about farm work, immigrant laborers, and plantation culture?

e-COMIC

1. What stands out about the page on the transcontinental railroad?

2. Does the image tell the same story we find on the poster? How is the comic book page like the poster? How is it different?

3. If you were creating your own comic book page on the theme of Asian Pacific American labor today, how would you craft it? What images would you use? What stories? How do Asian Pacific Americans help build and move our country? Where would you fit yourself into this page? Plan and draw a single-page comic.