RAILROADS

In 1827, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad became the first chartered railway in the United States. Other railroads followed rapidly. Between 1850 and 1890, US trackage increased 1440 %, from 9,000 miles of track to almost 130,000 miles of track.

The tremendous growth of railroads in the 19th century altered American society. The most obvious change dealt with time. Transcontinental traffic required schedules. Accurate timing was necessary to insure that trains did not collide and that passengers and freight arrived when promised. The US Congress created time zones across the country and standardized time. Railroads also redistributed the population.

Prior to the Civil War, in the Far West, only Texas (1845), California (1850), and Oregon (1859) were states. The Railroad Act of 1862 set the standard for building transcontinental railroads when it authorized grants of land to railroad companies as collateral for loans. Railroads sold their "free" land to settlers who then provided revenue through freight and passenger traffic. Cheap land and rapid transportation brought rapid settlement. Ten new states were added to the Union between 1860 and 1900, nine of them in the Trans-Mississippi West.

Railroads also created jobs that had never before existed. Engineers were needed to drive the trains. Brakemen provided maintenance on wheels, brakes and couplings. Conductors kept the trains on time and assisted passengers. Depot managers and section hands populated the small towns that grew up along the rails. Hotels and restaurants housed and fed passengers. All of this activity depended upon communication.

A telegraph line existed along each major rail line in the United States. These connections allowed home offices to keep track of their freight and passengers strung out across the US. In the rail yards and on the trains new systems of communication emerged so that accidents could be prevented. During the day, a system of hand signals connected the brakemen, conductor and the engineer. At night, or in bad weather, lanterns with various covered globes amplified the hand signals. Over time, a "lantern language" developed that allowed safe and efficient movement along the railways.

Railroad lanterns symbolize the major changes that railroads brought to the US in the latter part of the 19th century. Lanterns were critical to the efficient and safe operation of all trains, whether along the rails or in the rail yards. Brakemen and conductors utilized a standardized system of signals to communicate up and down the line. The signal system was the same regardless of location, or railroad company.

Today, radios have mostly replaced lanterns for communication, but lanterns are not extinct. Electric lanterns are still used when radio communications do not work, or in times of inclement weather. Lanterns and signaling grew hand-in-hand with railroads, as the US became a major industrial nation in the late 19th century.