RAILROADS

In 1827, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad became the first chartered railway in the United States. Other railroads followed rapidly. By 1890 the US had almost 130,000 miles of track in operation.

The rapid growth of railroads changed America. Cross-country traffic required schedules. Accurate time 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.

In 1860 the land west of the Mississippi River contained few people. In the Far West, only Texas (1845), California (1850), and Oregon (1859) were states. The Railroad Act of 1862 gave grants of land to railroads. This "free land" was used to cover the cost of building new railroads. The railroad companies sold their "free" land to settlers who then provided revenue through freight and passenger traffic. Cheap land and rapid transportation brought rapid settlement. Ten territories became states 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 worked on wheels, brakes and couplings. Conductors kept the trains on time and helped passengers. Depot managers and section hands lived in 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. The telegraph allowed home offices to keep track of their freight and passengers strung out across the country. In the rail yards and on the trains new methods of communication emerged so that accidents could be prevented. During the day, a system of hand signals connected the brakemen, conductors and the engineers. At night, or in bad weather, lanterns amplified the hand signals. Very quickly a "lantern language" developed that allowed safe and efficient railroad travel.

Railroad lanterns symbolize the major changes that railroads brought to the US. Lanterns allowed the efficient and safe operation of all trains. Engineers, brakemen and conductors used 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. Electric lanterns are still used when radio communications do not work, or in times of bad weather. Lanterns and signaling grew hand-in-hand with railroads as the US changed into a major industrial nation in the late 19th century.