

This Date in Safety History: November 7, 1875: Completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway



In 1871, a year after enlisting Manitoba, the Canadian government of John A. MacDonald approached the western colony of British Columbia about entering the new Canadian Confederation. B.C. accepted the invitation on one condition: the government's promise to build a transcontinental railroad linking B.C. to the rest of the Confederation to the east within 10 years. Thus began one of the biggest civil engineering projects ever undertaken in North America.

The Canadian Pacific Railway Project

The Canadian Pacific Railway would be built across Rupert's Land, a vast territory of northern wilderness constituting one-third of what would become modern Canada that the government had purchased from the Hudson's Bay Company for CAD \$1.5 million (£300,000) the year before, in the Canadian equivalent of the Louisiana purchase. The government entered into a series of controversial treaties with the Indigenous peoples to secure title to the lands over which the railway would run.

The project was expected to take 10 years but was completed in five. On November 7, 1885, Sir Donald Smith of the Canadian Pacific Railway Co. drove the symbolic “Last Spike” into the tracks at Craigellachie, B.C. It was the crowning moment of a monumental achievement, albeit one that extracted an enormous toll in sweat and blood.

The Costs of Working on the Railroad

The Canadian Pacific Railway project required 5,000 horses, 300 dogsled teams, and thousands of labourers. Men as young as 14 worked up to 16-hour shifts earning one or two dollars per day. The workers had to pay for all their own expenses, including food, clothing, medical care, and transportation to and from the jobsite.

The 15,000 Chinese labourers had it hardest. They received a maximum of \$1.25 a day, and did the most dangerous jobs, including rock blasting. An estimated 700 to 4,000 Chinese workers died on the job. Their families were not compensated – or even notified. Among those lucky enough to survive, most didn’t make enough money to return to China.