Bygone Era of Trains

The transportation of items by wooden rails started in 1515 in Austria at the Hohensalzburg Fortress and is still used today. By 1550, tramways were used to haul ore from the mines and were drawn by horses. This practice spread, and horse-drawn wagons were used for transportation. The first horse-drawn railway was built in 1604 between Strelley and Wollaton, England. The United States saw its first horse-drawn railway built in Lewiston, New York, in 1764.

A major problem was that wooden rails wore out and had to be replaced often. Then, with the development of the blast furnace in the 1820s, cast-iron rails replaced the wooden rails. However, cast-iron rails were brittle and broke under pressure. That problem was solved in the 1860s with the Bessemer process that made better steel rails.

The development of the steam engine changed the rail systems of the world. The first steam locomotive was built in 1784, and by 1829, George Stephenson had built the engine called the Rocket. The first steam-rail line was from Liverpool to Manchester, England, in 1830. Peter Cooper in America convinced the owners of the B&O Rail Line to use his Tom Thumb engine in 1830.

Cities developed trolley system for public transportation, and Brooklyn trolley congestion was so bad that their baseball team was called the Trolley Dodgers. In 1837, Robert Davidson invented the electric locomotive in Scotland. The first electric tram service was in Austria in 1883. By 1895, Baltimore had a trolley service. The next big development came with the diesel engine in1906, and by 1914, diesel-electric power locomotives were in service. Mass transportation was in full swing by the end of the 19th century. There were 163,562.12 miles of track in the United States by the 1890s. The country had completed the First Transcontinental Rail system in 1869 at Promontory Point, Utah. Russia was building the Trans-Siberian Railway system to go across their vast territory, 9,289 kilometers and eight time zones. Los Angeles had 900 Red Cars that covered 1,100 miles of the county until 1965.

Railroad stations had to be built to handle the commercial and public trains. These stations became places for their railroad owners—Grand Central in New York City and Union Station in Washington, D.C. These stations were the hubs of public train traffic.

The railroad needed places to move, store, and repair engines and cars. There were switching yards, receiving and departing yards, roundhouses in engine yards, and coach yards. The coaches were dining cars, baggage cars, sleeping cars (Pullman cars) and parlor cars.

Other forms of transportation cars, buses and air travel placed a demand for transportation funds. Highways and airports made travel faster and convenient, and rail travel lost to these other methods of travel in most of the United States.

The development of the first modern high-speed trains started in 1964 in Japan. The Bullet Train opened in time for the Olympics and could hit speeds of 160mph between Tokyo and Osaka. China has some 18,000 miles of high-speed rail traffic, and in Europe, high-speed trains cross-national borders. The United States has no high-speed trains built. However, city rail traffic, or streetcars, has made a comeback in many cities—San Diego, Cincinnati, Kansas City and Los Angeles, to name a few.

Trains are still nostalgic and capture the imagination of the young.

D.H.Coop is a retired fire/paramedic and retired teacher having taught IB and AP World History 30 years. He continues to substitute, tutor and consult. www.HistoryDepot.com