



# KEEPING TIME

HOW RAILROADS REPLACED THE SUN

## HOW DO YOU TELL TIME?

Do you wear a watch? Do you look at a clock? Almost all Americans wear watches or use some sort of timepiece. Our lives are built around keeping **schedules** for school, work, and play. As people cross the country, time changes and they must change their watches to local time.

It wasn't always like this. Time hasn't always been measured in minutes or hours. In the days of covered wagon travel, time was kept by noting where the sun was located in the sky. High noon varied from place to place as the earth revolved around the sun.

Determining time based on the sun's position had worked well for hundreds of years. Nothing more was needed when people traveled no faster than a team of horses could run or a fast ship could sail. But when railroads came to the West, it changed the face of time.



## WHAT IS THAT ?

*You're looking at a sundial. A sundial is a device that uses the sun to tell the time. It is made of a plate with numbers and a pointer that casts a shadow. It shows the time of day by the movement of the shadow across the numbers.*



*Wellington, Washington was the site of one of the worst train disasters in U.S. railroad history. On March 1, 1910, two Great Northern trains were swept off the tracks by an avalanche killing 96 people. Before the coming of railroad, travel often stopped when weather became poor. The railroad used men and equipment to fight the snow. Sometimes, these efforts were more successful than others.*

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## DOES A MINUTE MATTER?

Because of technology, it became important to know exactly what time it was, down to the minute. This was because two trains might be traveling on the same set of tracks going in different directions. Most of the trains in the United States ran on what was called a single-track line. If both trains were moving towards one another at the same time, it could result in a heads-on **collision**. This was the sort of accident that every railroad worker feared most.

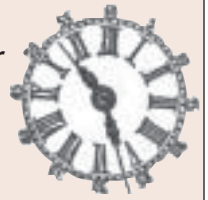


Courtesy of NASA.



### What's a **TIME ZONE**?

A time zone is a region or place that has the same time everywhere in it. There are 24 standard time zones in the world, each with a space of one hour.



The United States has five time zones: Pacific, Mountain, Central, Eastern and Atlantic. Washington state is in the Pacific standard time zone.

Have you ever been late somewhere? How did it make you feel? Imagine if being late could make you get stuck somewhere far away from home. Many travelers were afraid of that happening to them. This was because there were 56 time zones in the United States. So many different time zones caused confusion. This often caused people to miss their trains or barely make it to the station in time to catch them.

Railroad managers wanted only to schedule trains so that **passengers** could travel safely. The only way to do this was to find a way to solve the problem of time. Together, without any help from the government, American railroad managers decided to introduce time zones.

## HOW FAR IS AN HOUR?

November 18, 1883 became known as "The Day of Two Noons". On this day, every clock at each railroad station was reset as noon was reached within each time zone. Some states, like Mississippi, asked the people who lived there to set their watches and clocks at home to match their local station.

Instead of 56 time zones, this helped create just five zones- Pacific, Mountain, Central, Eastern, and Atlantic. These time zones took their names from the railroads that crossed those parts of the country.

Not everyone was happy with the change. Some people thought that railroads were trying to take control of all parts of life. One newspaper, the *Indianapolis Daily Sentinel*, said:

"Railroad time is to be the time of the future. The sun is no longer to boss the job. People- 55,000,000 of people- must eat, sleep and work as well as travel by railroad time." There were people who refused to change their clocks and watches. In time, however, this would change as Americans learned how useful the new time standards were.

## FIND OUT MORE!

Prerau, David. *Seize the Daylight: The Curious and Contentious Story of Daylight Savings Time*. 2005: Thunder's Mouth Press.

Schwantes, Carlos. *Railroad Signatures across the Pacific Northwest*. 1996: University of Washington Press.



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Timetables like the one above were created for railway travelers. These timetables helped them plan their trips.

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