This Bulletin contains the winning essays of the DAR American History Essay contest. Each year students are given a title to work with and challenged to write an essay on that topic. The 2010 topic was “Describe how you felt on May 10, 1869, when the golden spike was driven at Promontory Summit, Utah, to celebrate the completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad.” Another hint given was “Pretend you are either a settler planning to use the train to travel to your new home in the West, an Irish or Chinese worker who helped build the line, or a Native American whose way of life was greatly affected by the railroad.” Grade 5 essays were to contain 300 to 600 words and grades 6 through 8, 600 to 1000 words. The essays were judged “for historical accuracy, adherence to topic, organization of materials, interest, originality, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and neatness.” Marjorie Way and her committee of Stamp Defiance Act Chapter DAR members and local historians read and judged the essays and presented awards to the winning writers. The following New Hanover County student essays represent the four local winners. They will move on to the state level and those winners will go to the national level.

“The Transcontinental Railroad”  
Ryan Dunwoody  
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It’s May 10, 1869, and the Golden Spike has been driven at Promontory Summit, Utah, finishing the Transcontinental Railroad. The railroads, Union Pacific and Central Pacific, have been joined, linking the entire country. However, today I’m very sad. As a Great Plains Native American, the railroad is destroying my whole way of life. My tribe and many others depend on the buffalo for food, shelter, and clothing. The railroad companies hired men to destroy the buffalo and have taken our land to build more railroad tracks.

The Great Plains is a big area in the middle of this country that the white people call the United States. I am a member of the Lakota tribe. The Great Plains region is made up of grasslands, valleys, streams, and hills. There are three Native American tribes of the Great Plains: the Sioux, the Cheyenne, and the Arapaho. The name Sioux refers to a large group of Native Americans speaking a common or similar language. They are often divided into three groups based on their location. In the 1800s the Western group was called the Lakota; that’s my tribe.

Given my nomadic lifestyle I use a movable tepee. I make my tepee with three tree branches, sinew, and buffalo hides. We wear deerskin clothing in the warm summer and spring. In the freezing winters I wear thick buffalo hides. We wear deer skin moccasins for shoes year round. We believe in the Great Spirit, Manitou. Manitou created the land and everything in it. We get our food from crops like maize, beans, and pumpkins. Sometimes we trade food with other tribes. We hunt buffalo, deer, and antelope. We usually dry our food in the sun to help preserve it for many years.
The buffalo is a great symbol in our tribe. We kill it because my tribe depends on its many uses to survive. My tribe has found at least fifty two uses for the buffalo. I have used buffalo hides to make a cradle for my son, and moccasin tops for my family. I use buffalo hair for bedding, and medicine balls for the tribe. I use the meat for food. I do not waste one bit of the buffalo. I even use the buffalo poop for fire! One method we use to kill the buffalo is to follow it while wearing animal hides to mask our scent. Then we wait for the best time to kill the buffalo. Another strategy we use to get the buffalo is to put the skulls of other dead buffalo in a ring. Then we wait for a single buffalo to stray from the herd to investigate the ring of skulls and ambush it.

The two railroad companies want us gone. They studied us and thought that if they killed all the buffalo, then we would lose our major food source. Sadly, they were correct. The railroad companies, Central Pacific and Union Pacific, advertised hunting by rail! They hired people to shoot all the buffalo they saw from the windows of a moving train. The companies did not stop the train if they saw a herd of buffalo. They wanted to frighten and split the herd, so it would be easier for the hunters to shoot the buffalo. They didn’t even use the buffalo; they just let them rot where they fell. The amount of buffalo in the Great Plains was at least sixty million before the white men took over.

The railroad companies were treating us terribly. If they saw us, they would shoot us. All we wanted was peace and our land. The white men took all the land that we owned and more. We tried to defend our land by fighting the white man. However, we were at a major technological disadvantage. We only had bows and arrows, lances, and buffalo skin shields. The white men had long rifles, pistols, and shotguns. Large numbers of our tribe were killed, and with the loss of the buffalo we had no choice but to go on Indian reservations made by the white men. Life is terrible on the reservation. We cannot grow any crops there, because the soil is too lifeless. There is no freedom.

We were once proud and free to live in peace with nature and the land. Our land once stretched...
farther than the human eye could see, but that was all before the white men built the railroad. With the coming of the railroad we have lost the buffalo and our land. We have been forced to go to the reservations or die. Many of the Indians chose to die honorably in war. Others died on the reservations due to starvation or the harsh winters.

It’s May 10, 1869, at Promontory Summit, Utah, and I have witnessed the driving of the golden spike, finishing the Transcontinental Railroad. I’m miserable because the Lakota way of living is ruined. The railroad companies have destroyed the buffalo and have taken our land to complete the railroad. Now, there will be more white people coming since the railroad is finished.

The Transcontinental Railroad
Haley Maxwell
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It was early in the morning when I first awoke. I stepped outside in the hot, sweltering sunshine of the Plains with beads of sweat already rolling down my forehead. All the children of the village were still busy dreaming of the roaming buffalo and the tall grass. I’m Jeravo and I have an interesting story to tell you.

When I turned 15, I was very excited because I was finally old enough to travel with the men in our tribe as we followed and hunted the migrating buffalo. The other men gave me the job of spotting the buffalo on the day we left so that we knew which way to go. I also had to go search and collect supplies such as fallen tree branches, small stones, and some of the tall, long strands of grass. All of these materials helped us make our spears and bow and arrows. I couldn’t help but think about how we were going to hunt the buffalo, if we were going to use the buffalo pound or the buffalo jump. In the buffalo pound method we have one man dress in a buffalo robe and lure the buffalo into a ravine or ditch. Then the other men stampede the buffalo into a corral and kill them with spears or arrows. For the buffalo jump we have some of the hunters chase the buffalo to a cliff and then they yell and wave blankets which sends the animals over the cliff. Then we kill them while they are injured and weak. I woke up early so that I could get a head start on my gathering of supplies. I walked into the shade of a tree and I unrolled my buffalo hide that holds all of my tools that help me collect the many different items.

The following day a small meeting was held to make sure we had all needed supplies like our weapons and clothes and food. It was the first meeting that I had ever attended. At the meeting the chief of the village talked about the buffalo herd and that we shouldn’t harm the mother and young baby buffalos that were just born, stumbling around on unsteady feet, and always by its mother’s side. Then the rest of the men started to go through all the needed supplies and made sure that we had them. Once the meeting was over my mom went to all of the houses and collected the food for our trip. The women all prepared food for our journey and my mom always made some special pemmican for my dad to eat when he went on the hunts and she had made me some too. I had trouble sleeping that night because I was so excited and anxious.

Finally, the day had come and it was all very exciting! When I was searching for buffalo, there was none to be seen anywhere. When I told the chief he just said that we should travel northwest because that’s the direction the buffalo normally travel. Everything was set and ready as was I. We all said goodbye to our families and we set out on our long trek. As I looked back, I saw the tears in my mother’s eyes, slowly traveling down her cheeks as she’s waving goodbye. It made me sad but I was still excited because this trip symbolizes that I was finally a man.

We were a few hours into our trip and we didn’t see buffalo anywhere, but we kept moving and hoped that we’d find them. Well, we didn’t find the buffalo, but we found something much more interesting. We spotted white men working on building something. It was the first time I saw a white person; their skin was so light compared to mine. At first I didn’t realize what they were doing but then I remembered a talk that I had with my grandfather.

Before I left, my grandfather had told me that he heard from another tribe that the white people were making a railroad that spanned across the country. They call it the Transcontinental Railroad. There were two separate railroads called the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific. The Central Pacific had started its construction in Sacramento, California. The people who worked on the Central Pacific were Chinese men who were known for their hard work and
their good quality of work. There’s also the Union Pacific who had started its railroad construction in Omaha, Nebraska. The workers on the Union Pacific were Irishmen who worked with military precision.

Both railroads were building towards each other and planned to connect at a common point. The thought of having to meet somewhere turned into a competition of who could get there first. The meeting place ended up being Promontory, Utah. Both railroads ended up working together to reach the end point. There was a big celebration held when both of the railroads had made it to Promontory. To commemorate such a special time and a new start for the country, the golden spike was driven. It was driven on May 10, 1869 by Leland Stanford who was the governor of California from 1861 to 1863. He then invested much money into the construction of the Central Pacific railroad and he later became the president of the Central Pacific.

Although this was a big deal for the nation, it greatly affected my tribe and other tribes as well. The railroad opened up the west to the whites and when they come here, they are going to drive away all the buffalo which may never come back! I went out later that spring to the Plains and I stood and waited. I waited for a glimpse of movement in the distance. The wind was blowing the grass back and forth in a melodious motion. As I was out there, I thought about my tribe; I don’t know how we’ll make it without the buffalo.

The Transcontinental Railroad
The Diary of a Chinese Worker,
Charlotte Jones
Alderman Elementary School, 5th Grade

January 13th, 1869
Dear Diary,
I was so cold last night in my tent. I woke up to over forty feet of snow! To get to work, we have to dig tunnels underground. In the Sierra Mountains, my coffee turns to ice in just a few minutes, so I must drink it while it is still hot! I miss my family and the sun so much! Once this railroad is finished it will be over 1,800 miles long!

April 20th, 1869
Dear Diary,
Today, as the snow is melting, I think about my Chinese friends that are no longer with me. Three workers died from blasting dynamite. Many other workers lost their fingers from the blasting equipment. We dangle from 7000 foot cliffs in baskets tied with ropes. I will miss them dearly and write their families the sad news.

Next week, we will attempt to lay out ten miles of track in one day! As tired as the Chinese are, I know that we will achieve our goal! I have worked for long days with dangerous equipment such as, two wheeled dump carts, wheel barrows, axes, ropes, blasting powder, and mules.

Before I eat, I bathe and change because I am so sweaty. I have to make my meals like, fish, dried oysters, fruit, mushrooms, seaweed, dried bamboo sprouts, veggies, pork, salted cabbage, sweet rice crackers, Chinese bacon, and sweet tea. After I ate tonight, I sat around the campfire and sang songs. I have to wear floppy shirts and pants made from blue cotton. Also, I have to wear straw hats to keep the boiling sun out of my face.

It’s not fair! We do not get treated the same way as the Irish. They say we’re “weird” because of what we wear and eat, they drink from puddles and they waste their money on gambling. The Irish get paid thirty five dollars a month, while we only get paid twenty five. This makes me really aggravated! Also, they don’t have to buy their food and supplies, but we do! The Chinese Workers shall have a protest! Finally we get paid thirty five dollars, but we still have to buy our own food and supplies.

May 10th, 1869
Dear Diary,
It’s May 10, 1869, the happiest day or my life! I am finally standing here at the Transcontinental Railroad ceremony. We have connected the Union and the Central Pacific Railroads. These railroads connected at the Promontory Summit, Utah. Eight Chinese Workers are honored to drive the golden spike in to the final rails, and I am one of the honored workers! I can finally go home with over four hundred dollars to live with my family. I can eat the best food, and wear the best clothing for a wonderful life! I hope that the families at home don’t feel sad if they lost someone special. I will leave the United States to go home to see my wonderful, loving family tomorrow!
Dear Father,

We have done a lot of work on the railroad recently and have finally finished it. In order to complete it on time the Central Pacific took many risks that I think were unnecessary because of the high damage they caused. This railroad had caused major changes in the economy and entirely new industries have been created to build it. There was a huge ceremony when the last spike was driven in! I wonder what the future holds now that America’s coasts are linked.

The time to build the railroad was pushed behind for several years by the Civil War. In order to make up for lost time, many risks were taken. A new experimental explosive was used to try and make progress blasting through the mountains faster. Unfortunately many workers died from its instability. The noise from the explosive was incredibly loud! Some good came from the deaths however and the safety procedures for laying explosives are much more elaborate. While they are not as sophisticated as they could be, they have lowered the mortality rate significantly.

Once the supervisors realized that Chinese workers were more willing to work in the harsh cold of winter, many more workers were sent in from China. The new laborers did not get as high a pay as the older ones such as myself did. There was even a strike until their pay was raised! However, they still are paid considerably less.

Work on the railroad has been very difficult. All work requires heavy labor. The food quality for workers has been average. It is very repetitive because we eat buffalo (a large hairy animal somewhat like a cow but larger and more majestic) almost every day. A lot of the job’s hazards come from the Indians as they are very aggressive. Out of all the Indian tribes only the Pawnee have been peaceful. While the other tribes attacked us, the Pawnee helped and even fought back the other tribes. In honor of their bravery, the government rewarded them with permission to use the railroad. Even though I work much harder than the American workers do, I still receive much less pay and am forced to work in much harder conditions.

The railroad has really changed the economy, many new industries have appeared and old ones have advanced. A soon as the railway needed coal the production of the coal industry spiked up. Because the railroad tracks used lots of steel, the steel industry became extremely efficient and steel became much more affordable. In order to make food supplies to be carried across the country on the trains, the meat packaging industry has advanced and refrigeration is more common.

After the completion of the railroad a huge ceremony was held. A solid gold spike was driven into the last part of the railroad. The crowd was so enormously large that you could barely see what was happening! Some of my friends who were closer to the front claimed that the first attempt to hammer in the golden spike missed. People all through the nation listened in to hear the telegraph operator announce D-O-N-E to signify the completion of the railroad.

After all the work we went through to complete the railroad I am sure it will have a huge impact on the world years from now. Many obstacles have come in the way of building the railroad and the working conditions were very harsh. After all the work was done and the last spike was driven in at Promontory Summit a massive celebration was held. I hope this is a sign of great things to come in the future of this country!

Respectfully,
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Keeping the Past Present