"I've Been Workin’ on the Railroad” Information Sheet

I've been working on the railroad
All the live-long day.
I've been working on the railroad
Just to pass the time away.
Can't you hear the whistle blowing,
Rise up so early in the morn;
Can't you hear the captain shouting,
“Dinah, blow your horn!”

Dinah, won't you blow,
Dinah, won't you blow,
Dinah, won't you blow your horn?
Dinah, won't you blow,
Dinah, won't you blow your horn?

Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah
Someone's in the kitchen I know
Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah
Strummin' on the old banjo!
Singin’ fee, fie, fiddly-i-o
Fee, fee, fiddly-i-o-o-o
Strummin' on the old banjo.

One of the iconic songs in the American experience is “I’ve Been Workin’ on the Railroad.” The first published version appeared as “Levee Song,” published in 1894. It includes a verse that’s very much like the modern song, though in an African-American minstrel dialect. Minstrel shows were an American form of entertainment developed in the early 1800s. Each show consisted of comic skits, variety acts, dancing, and music.

The “Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah” section is actually an older song that became a part of “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” It was published as “Old Joe, or Somebody in the House with Dinah” in London in the 1830s or -40s. “Dinah” was a generic name for an enslaved African woman. The melody for this section of the song may have been adapted from “Goodnight Ladies,” written as “Farewell Ladies” in 1847 by E. P. Christy. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I%27ve_Been_Working_on_the_Railroad)

Gandy dancers, or section crews, were often made up of immigrants and minorities who competed for steady work despite very low pay and harsh working conditions—Chinese and Native Americans in the West, Irish in the Midwest, East Europeans and Italians in the Northeast, and African Americans in the South. Many gandy dancers sang railroad songs, but it may be that only black gandy dancers sang songs that accompanied their work chants. (http://www.folkstreams.net/film-context.php?id=166)

The Transcontinental Railroad was joined at Promontory, Utah Territory, in 1869. About 300 African Americans worked on the Union Pacific's railroad crews. Few African-American railroad workers were present at the “last spike” ceremony at Promontory; although, there were some buffalo soldiers (all-black regiments in the post–Civil War army) on hand, as they were being transferred from military posts in Kansas to new assignments in California. (https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history-west-timeline/)

Music publishers in the early 1800s did nothing to advertise music or help songwriters develop their skills. Songs really only became popular by word of mouth. Prior to the 1880s, popular music publishing was considered less important than “serious” (classical) music publishing. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_music_publishing)

**Vocabulary**

*levee*—A mound of dirt built to prevent a river from overflowing. Levees were built by railroad workers to protect the tracks, but also as places to build the tracks.
Possible Pictures for “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad”

- A picture of a levee, to help explain why the song was originally called “Levee Song” (https://c8.alamy.com/comp/KBETC8/tracks-on-concrete-railroad-ties-on-a-stony-levee-in-the-north-frisian-KBETC8.jpg)

- A picture of a steam engine from 1870 (https://www.american-rails.com/images/BOSW_JK_4-4-0.jpg)

- A picture of an African-American work team on a northern Virginia railroad in 1862 or 1863. During the US Civil War, free blacks and former slaves constructed vital Union infrastructure and military fortifications. Photo by Andrew J. Russell.
“Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill” Information Sheet

Listen to this song on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otWl9oNi0Rg
- Search for “Smithsonian Folkways - Drill, Ye Tarriers”
Sheet music for “Drill, Ye Tarriers”: https://www.bethsnotesplus.com/2013/03/drill-ye-tarriers.html

Drill Ye Tarriers

This song was first published in 1888, but it was being sung before that. It was attributed to Thomas Casey (words) and, much later, Charles Connolly (music). The song is a work song, and it makes references to the construction of the American railroads in the mid-1800s. The word tarriers in the title refers to Irish workers, drilling holes in rock to blast out railroad tunnels. The word may mean either “to tarry” as in “delay,” or it could be a reference to “terrier” dogs, which dig their quarry out of the ground. (https://www.bethsnotesplus.com/2013/03/drill-ye-tarriers.html)

Vocabulary
attributed—to consider as the creator of
By 1852, Ireland had lost nearly half its population because of the potato blight (a disease that killed the country’s staple food crop) and the famine it created. While approximately one million Irish people perished from starvation, another two million left Ireland in the largest single population movement of the 19th century. Most of the exiles—nearly a quarter of the Irish nation—came to the United States.

The discrimination faced by the Irish famine refugees was obvious. There were job advertisements that read “No Irish Need Apply.” The Irish filled the lowest and most dangerous jobs, often at low pay. The other working-class Americans saw the cheaper laborers taking their jobs, and didn't want them around. Many people in the government wanted to restrict immigration, especially from Catholic countries—including Irish Catholics.

The number of people needed to build the First Transcontinental Railroad was huge. The main laborers, the ones who laid the track, did back-straining work for days on end. They often worked in rough conditions, not making very much money. At first, Irish immigrants were the main builders of the Central Pacific Railroad. Irish workers were paid $35 a month but were provided with living space (a tent). Many felt that the pay was not enough for what the work required. As a result, many Irish workers quit. To fill the gap, Central Pacific turned to Chinese immigrants. Railroad workers, whatever their country of origin, lived in makeshift camps right alongside the railroad line.

In 1866, construction began in earnest for the Union Pacific, as newly arrived Irish immigrants and Civil War veterans showed up in pursuit of work, and money for that work. Former soldiers, convicts from eastern prisons, and, later along the route, Mormons living near the railroad in Utah Territory joined the Irish workers. Roughly 3,000 Irish immigrants worked for the two railroads. Sanitation was a prime concern with Union Pacific workers. Food was the same almost every day, consisting mainly of beef, bread, and coffee. Workers lived in filthy conditions in the close quarters of the working camps.

Railroad work was challenging. It consisted of digging, grading, and track-laying across the Great Plains for long hours, sun up to sun down through hard conditions. The style of labor was very military-like, with project managers swearing and shouting orders which workers were expected to obey like soldiers. Workers were paid three dollars a day, with food and lodging provided. They had only three breaks a day for meals. Harsh winter storms, Native-
American raids, and a lack of supplies made track-laying difficult and slow. Irish immigrants faced discrimination and were sometimes viewed as dirty drunks. Even still, the railroad companies relied on their labor, and the Irish were valued as hard workers and good track layers. (Adapted from http://utahhistoricalmarkers.org/cat/rr/irish-railroad-workers/#_ftnref3)
Possible Pictures for “Drill, Ye Tarriers”

- A picture of Irish railroad workers posing on the track (http://utahhistoricalmarkers.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/5a4395d358fe4ccfd0e3bcb79ea2edec.jpg)

A picture of men in Benton, Wyoming, of a “hell-on-wheels” town that sprang up with the building of the railroad

“Drum Song of Fengyang” Information Sheet

Listen to the song: [https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200196394/](https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200196394/)

- Search for “Library of Congress - Drum Song of Fengyang”

Sheet music for "Drum Song of Fengyang": [http://folkmusiclinks.blogspot.com/2015/03/fengyang-flower-drum-song.html](http://folkmusiclinks.blogspot.com/2015/03/fengyang-flower-drum-song.html)

Most of the Chinese immigrants who traveled to America in the 1800s were young men from rural backgrounds who only spoke Chinese. The majority came from the southern Guangdong region of China. They brought with them their own musical styles, including songs that told stories which often included lyrics about earlier Chinese migrant experiences.

“Drum Song of Fengyang” is about a wife complaining that her husband is lazy, while the husband complains that his wife has big feet. The song is well known in China. There are many similar songs with funny complaints about family life. It seems that those singing it chose to be funny even though life was difficult. The song was probably written during the late Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) in the Guandong province. It was sung by flood refugees from the north of China who found themselves singing on city streets in southern China to earn money to survive. This explains why the song is sung in Mandarin, while the language of Guandong is Cantonese. ([https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197427/](https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197427/))

**Vocabulary**

*rural*—living in the country, relating to farming
Chinese Railroad Workers Information Sheet

As the United States spread across the continent, railroads were needed to connect cities for both travel and the transportation of goods. Chinese workers immigrated in order to build railroads and to work in service trades. Most of these were Cantonese speakers from southern China. The majority were men, many of whom hoped to return to China or to earn enough money to bring their families to America at a later time. (https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/historical-topics/songs-of-immigration-and-migration/)

Chinese workers left behind their families in search of jobs and opportunities in the United States. For nearly all of these Chinese workers, this was their first time being out of their home country and in a foreign land. Despite racial harassment, Chinese laborers worked hard. They were paid no more than $30 a month and had to pay for their own living space and food from railroad stores. They sometimes lived in the underground tunnels they were constructing, some of which collapsed onto the workers. More than 1,000 Chinese workers died in rail-related accidents. (https://www.uen.org/transcontinentalrailroad/downloads/G7IrishWorkersTranscontinentalRailroad.pdf)

The Chinese laborers proved to be tireless workers, and some 14,000 were working in hard conditions in the Sierra Nevada by early 1867. Reports from this time period indicate that few Chinese learned English. Thus, a translator was necessary. Chinese were paid less than white workers, and they were restricted to laborer roles. When the Chinese threatened to strike for higher wages, supervisors withheld their food, effectively breaking the strike. (See “Transcontinental Railroad” by David Dynak)

“Divided into gangs of about 30 men each, they work under the direction of an American foreman. The Chinese board themselves. One of their number is selected in each gang to receive all wages and buy all provisions. They usually pay an American clerk—$1 a month apiece is usual—to see that each gets all he earned and is charged no more than his share of the living expenses. They are paid from $30 to $35 in gold a month, out of which they board themselves. They are credited with having saved about $20 a month. Their workday is from sunrise to sunset, six days in the week. They spend Sunday washing and mending, gambling and smoking, and frequently, old timers will testify, in shrill-toned quarreling. . . . " (Alta California, San Francisco, November 9, 1868. http://cprr.org/Museum/Chinese.html)

As much as Leland Stanford (the president of the Central Pacific Railroad) benefitted from the hard work of Chinese people on the Central Pacific Railroad, he led efforts through the 1860s and 1870s to stop the legal immigration of Chinese to the United States. This resulted in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned further immigration of Chinese workers into the United States and was not repealed until 1943. This is the reason Chinese people stopped being the main maintenance workforce for the railroad by 1900. They were replaced by immigrants from Japan, Italy, Greece, and Mexico. (https://www.uen.org/transcontinentalrailroad/downloads/G7ChineseWorkersonthetCRR.pdf)
For more information, see http://cprr.org/Museum/Chinese.html.
Possible Pictures for “Drum Song of Fengyang”

- A picture of Chinese railroad workers digging

- A picture of Chinese railroad workers in rocky terrain
  (https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6ft8jvp)
A picture of a Chinese game: Chinese workers brought the game of Wei-Chi with them to the United States. Chinese railroad workers would have played this game in the evenings or on their days off to pass the time and to relax. 
(https://www.uen.org/transcontinentalrailroad/downloads/G7ChineseWorkersontheTCRR.pdf)
“Echo Canyon” Information Sheet

Listen to the song: https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197140/
(search for “Library of Congress – Echo Canyon sound”)
Sheet music for “Echo Canyon”: https://www.8notes.com/scores/4358.asp?type=gif

Echo Canyon

Verse: In the canyon of Echo there’s a railroad begun, And the Mormons are cutting and grading like fun; They say they’ll stick to it until it’s complete, For friends and relations they’re longing to meet.

Chorus: Hooray, Hurrah! The railroad’s begun! Three cheers for our contractor, His name’s Brigham Young! Hurrah! The railroad’s begun! Three cheers for our contractor, His name’s Brigham Young! Hurrah! The railroad’s begun!

Verse: Now there’s Mr. Reed, he’s a gentleman too He knows very well what the Mormons can do He knows in our work we are steadfast and true And if Mormon boys start it, it’s bound to go through

Chorus

Verse: We surely must live in a very fast age We’ve traveled by ox-cart and then took the stage But when such conveyance is all done away We’ll travel by steam-cars upon the railway

Chorus

Here is a transcription of speech from the sound recording: “This is L. M. Hilton. Ogden, Utah. I’m going to sing ‘Echo Canyon’ or ‘Hooray, Hurrah! The Railroad’s Begun.’ Mormon boys and men, under the direction of Brigham Young, who helped build the railroad into Utah in 1868 and -69, composed this song, and it has been sung in Utah ever since.”

Vocabulary

*stage*—stage coach
*conveyance*—means of transportation (vehicle, car, bus, airplane)
*gay*—excited, happy, pleasant
In 1847, because of severe persecution for their religious beliefs, Mormon pioneers moved west from Nauvoo, Illinois, to what is now Utah, on lands near the Great Salt Lake. At the time, this was a region of Mexican territory inhabited by Native Americans. The area had been chosen by an advance party in 1846, followed by pioneers, many of whom set out on foot without horses or mules, pulling handcarts filled with their belongings. (https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/historical-topics/songs-of-immigration-and-migration/)

Mormon leaders, though supportive of the Transcontinental Railroad, worried that the railroad would change their community. They felt the railroad brought both good and bad things. The railroad would increase immigration of Mormons to Utah and would reduce the costs of goods transported to and from Utah, but they worried it would also increase the number of undesirable people moving to Utah. To show his support for the Transcontinental Railroad in 1863, Brigham Young purchased five shares of stock of the Union Pacific Railroad valued at $1,000 per share. Young signed a contract with the Union Pacific to build the railroad line from Echo to the shores of the Great Salt Lake, a distance of 150 miles. In the fall of the same year, Young contracted with Central Pacific officials to build the railroad from Humboldt Wells, Nevada, to Ogden, Utah, a distance of 200 miles. Young believed that this opportunity would benefit the people of Utah. It would create jobs during construction as well as after the railroad began operating. (https://railroad.lindahall.org/essays/cultural-impacts.html)

As survey and construction work neared Utah Territory, the Union Pacific gave Brigham Young the opportunity to complete early survey work as well as create part of the roadbed from the head of Echo Canyon to the Great Salt Lake. The Union Pacific offered to provide all the tools and equipment needed for the work and transportation. However, the Union Pacific did not provide the money and supplies they promised. This made it difficult to buy the necessary supplies and take care of the Mormon railroad workers. (https://www.uen.org/transcontinentalrailroad/downloads/G7MormonRailroadWorkers.docx)

Brigham Young hired several subcontractors to manage the work, including his son Joseph Young and John Sharp. Sharp had a hard time finding enough men who could leave their farms to work for him. Even with that difficulty, more than 2,000 Mormon men worked on the railroad construction project. At one point, the Union Pacific thought the Mormons weren’t getting work done fast enough, and they sent their own workers to work on the tunnels. They found the Echo and Weber canyons were the most difficult terrain through which the Union Pacific had to build. One month later, the Union Pacific superintendent Samuel Reed decided that the railroad employees were making less progress than had been made by Mormon workers. He asked the Mormons to resume work on the tunnels. (https://www.uen.org/transcontinentalrailroad/downloads/G7MormonRailroadWorkers.docx)

In the 1860s, the officials of Union Pacific and Central Pacific were almost the only non-Mormon citizens of the United States who had warm, friendly feelings toward the Mormons. So successful had anti-Mormons been in their hateful propaganda that almost no one understood or appreciated the Utah pioneers. But the railroad officials appreciated the Mormons. Their presence meant help in building the road and customers to use it when it was built. (http://cprr.org/Museum/Stewart-Iron_Trail.html)

*propaganda*—information that is designed to mislead or persuade
Possible Pictures for “Echo Canyon”

- Mormon workers digging the Union Pacific’s Deep Cut #1 through Weber Canyon, 1868 (https://www-tc.pbs.org/wgbh/americanc experience/media//gallery_images/tcrr_gallery_09.jpg)

- A large group of Mormon emigrants, 1866. From the Utah State Historical Society. (https://www-tc.pbs.org/wgbh/americanc experience/media//gallery_images/tcrr_gallery_04.jpg)
A reporter visited the Echo and Weber Canyon work sites and reported that “after the day’s work was done, the animals turned out to herd and the supper over, a nice blending of voices in sweet singing proved that the materials exist among the men for a capital choir, and there is some talk of organizing one.”
“Ainkappata” Information Sheet

Listen to the song: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/usupress_pubs/24/
- Download audio track 02

Written words for the song come from p. 30 of the following PDF:
https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=usupress_pubs

**Ainkappata**
Ainkappata yoowennekinna,
Ainkappata yoowennekinna.
Aiyoo wainna aiyoo wainna,
Aiyoo wainna aiyoo wainna.
Ainkappata yoowennekinna,
Ainkappata yoowennekinna.
Aiyoo wainna aiyoo wainna,
Aiyoo wainna aiyoo wainna.

**Ainkappata**
‘Red Currant’
Ainkappata yoowennekinna,
red currant gently-stand (dur)-moving

Aiyoo wainna aiyoo wainna, rhythmical song words
(similar to how we might sing “ooh” or “la-la-la” in American songs)

An English translation that’s easier to sing is “Red currants swaying gently.”

This is a natayaa song. Yoo is the sung form of the root word yuu(n) which means “gentle, peaceful, still.” Ainkappata is a medicinal plant.

natayaa—parade, walk in a procession

The Shoshone tradition shares different kinds of hupia, or poetry songs. Natayaa hupia are very ancient songs, which are sung in the ritual called natayaa, performed especially before the round dance. The round dance is a social dance, meaning others can participate in the dance. In this ritual, an elder or several elders lead a procession of people singing the songs. The people march counterclockwise to the dance ground, which has a pine-nut tree or an aspen planted in its center. Then they offer prayers to the “Maker of People” for a good harvest that year and for harvests to come in the future. The people then purify themselves by washing themselves and putting red ochre (a special colored dirt) or white clay on their bodies. Afterwards, the round dance begins.

The poetry songs presented here are a gift and legacy from the Shoshone people to the world. The songs are wonderful pieces of music, often with rhythms and melodies that differ from the classical European tradition. They can only be fully appreciated as pieces of sung verse, not simply printed on a page. (https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=usupress_pubs, p. 18; additional information on how to pronounce the Shoshone words can be found on pages 28–32 of the PDF, listed as pages 14–18 in the book)
Native American Information Sheet

The Native American people who lived in the American West are not all the same. Different tribal groups spoke different languages, followed different customs, nurtured families, maintained friendships with some groups, and fought against others. Even though all Native Americans faced similar challenges as people advanced into their homelands, they did not all respond to the migrants, settlers, and railroad builders in the same way. The Pawnee people cultivated friendly relations with American settlers, and they formed a strong alliance with the US Army to defend the Transcontinental Railroad against the Pawnees' traditional Native American enemies, the Lakota and Cheyenne peoples. (https://www.uen.org/transcontinentalrailroad/downloads/G7IndigenousEncountersTranscontinentalRailroad.pdf)

By 1860, many Native American tribes, including the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho, had made deals with the US government by signing treaties and had lost the rights to most of their land. Most of the treaties were not kept by the federal government. The construction of the Transcontinental Railroad had drastic consequences for the native tribes of the Great Plains. The railroad was built in their traditional hunting grounds and caused wildlife to disappear. This was very traumatic to the Plains tribes because they depended on the bison for food, clothing, and many other things. Many tribes felt threatened by the railroad and tried to defend themselves. Some Native Americans tried to prevent the railroad from being built by attacking white settlements. They attacked the railroad tracks, the machinery, and the workers themselves. The railroad builders fought back. They knew that the Plains tribes needed the bison to survive. They decided to kill as many bison as possible in order to get rid of the tribes. (https://dp.la/exhibitions/transcontinental-railroad/human-impact/native-americans)

General William Tecumseh Sherman wrote of the Indians in 1867, “The more we can kill this year, the less will have to be killed the next year, for the more I see of these Indians the more convinced I am that they all have to be killed or be maintained as a species of paupers.” Sherman also had another plan: “Kill the buffalo and you kill the Indian.” Sherman knew that as long as the Lakota Sioux hunted buffalo, they wouldn’t leave. In a letter, Sherman wrote that as long as buffalo roamed those parts of Nebraska, “Indians will go there. I think it would be wise to invite all the sportsmen of England and America there this fall for a Grand Buffalo hunt, and make one grand sweep of them all.” (“The Transcontinental Railroad" document by David Dynak)

pauper—a very poor person

After the Bear River Massacre in 1863, in which the US government killed 350 Shoshone people, the Shoshone were wary of the white man, especially his intentions. The Shoshone observed from a distance the building of the railroad. They were fascinated by the little men with long, single braids who worked feverishly, like ants. The workers moved fast and quick and rarely stopped to rest. The Shoshone knew the men were not white. They called them “yellow.” A story is told about one of these Chinese men who was hurt while working and was “released” because of his injury. He didn’t get paid because he could no longer work. The Shoshone took him in and helped him heal. He stayed with the Shoshone for a bit and then left. The man said he had been working to make money to return back to his home and family. Home, they assumed was across the waters. The Northwestern Shoshone were herbalists. They were hunters and gatherers who knew the land well. They knew the seasons of plants and were very familiar with the medicinal value of them. When help was given to the railroad men, it was done cautiously to avoid any conflict. Maybe that’s why you don’t hear too much about the Indians
during this time. 1863 changed a lot of things. (Oral history account about the Shoshone and the railroad shared by Patty Timbimboo-Madsen)
Possible Pictures for “Ainkappata”

- A picture of Pawnee villages that were comprised of earth lodge homes, from Kansapedia, Kansas State Historical Society.  
  (https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/pawnees/15611)

  (https://www.uen.org/transcontinentalrailroad/downloads/G7IndigenousEncountersTranscontinentalRailroad.pdf)
Shoshone people, perhaps near Fort Bridger, Wyoming, 1868/1869. The man with arm raised is reportedly the Eastern Shoshone leader Washakie. Photograph by A.J. Russell. Beinecke Library, Yale University. (www.wyohistory.org)

Note: All of these images can be found in this PDF: https://www.uen.org/transcontinentalrailroad/downloads/G7IndigenousEncountersTranscontinentalRailroad.pdf