

Early Railroads

Railroads began as rails laid down in a road. The rails were made of wood topped with iron. Horses pulled carts running along the rails. The rails were smoother than the roads so the horses could pull the carts faster than they could pull wagons over roads.

Then Peter Cooper got a better idea. Why not develop a steam engine, or locomotive, to pull the carts? He believed a steam engine would be able to pull heavier loads faster than horses could.

In 1830, Cooper built a steam-powered engine. It was small and weighed barely a ton. Because of its small size, it became known as the Tom Thumb, who was a tiny hero in old English stories. Cooper wanted to let people know about his new machine so he advertised a race between the Tom Thumb, and a gray horse.

On an August day that year, the locomotive and the gray horse lined up side by side. Cooper stood at the controls of the Tom Thumb. The race began. At first the horse pulled ahead. Then the train picked up speed and soon it was neck and neck with the horse. Then Tom Thumb pulled ahead and a great cheer went up.

But suddenly a safety valve in the engine broke. The locomotive slowed and then fell behind the horse. Although Tom Thumb lost the race, steam engines would soon take over from horses.

Over the next 20 years, railroads replaced canals as the easiest and cheapest way to travel. By 1840, the United States had about 3,000 miles of railroad tracks. This was almost twice as much as Europe. A person could travel about 90 miles by railroad in just a few hours. Such a trip took a day and a half by horse-drawn wagon.