The Golden Spike

Read the passage. Then answer the questions in full sentences.

Name _____ Date _____

The transcontinental railroad, a railroad that crossed the continent, was scheduled to be finished on May 8, 1869. David Hewes, a San Francisco contractor, was disappointed that no one had made a special item to celebrate it. So he used $400 of his own gold to have a golden spike cast, or made by pouring melted metal into a mold. The spike was 5 5/8 inches long and weighed 14.03 ounces. Its top was engraved with the words “The Last Spike,” and one side carried a wish for the country’s unity, “as this Railroad unites the two great Oceans of the world.” Nevada sent a silver spike for the ceremony too.

At the ceremony, workers laid a polished tie of California laurelwood, with holes drilled for the special spikes. A tie is the wooden beam that the rails rest on. Leland Stanford, president of the Central Pacific, and Thomas Durant, vice president of the Union Pacific, gently tapped the precious spikes with a silver-plated hammer so as to leave no mark.

Then the precious spikes and the laurelwood tie were removed, and a plain pine tie took their place. A final iron spike and an ordinary hammer were wired to the telegraph line so that the nation could “hear” the blows. Stanford swung and struck the tie instead, and Durant missed the tie completely. At last, a regular rail worker drove the spike home, and the telegrapher sent the message “D-O-N-E.” It was 12:47 p.m. on May 10, 1869.

1. **Why did David Hewes have the golden spike made?**

2. **What does “precious spikes” mean in the second paragraph? What in the passage shows it?**

3. **Why were the final iron spike and its hammer wired to the telegraph line?**

4. **The golden spike says “The Last Spike.” Was it really the last spike? Support your answer with details from the passage.**

Answer key

The Golden Spike

1. Why did David Hewes have the golden spike made?
   He was disappointed that no one had made a special item to celebrate the finishing of the transcontinental railroad.

2. What does “precious spikes” mean in the second paragraph? What in the passage shows it?
   Spikes made of valuable metals. The passage describes a golden spike and a silver spike, and the men tapped them gently so as to leave no mark.

3. Why were the final iron spike and its hammer wired to the telegraph line?
   So that the nation could “hear” the blows as the last spike was driven.

4. The golden spike says “The Last Spike.” Was it really the last spike? Support your answer with details from the passage.
   Sample answer: No. The golden spike was only tapped gently and then removed with the laurelwood tie. The real last spike was an iron spike that a regular rail worker drove into a plain pine tie. The golden spike was a way to celebrate, not a working part of the railroad.