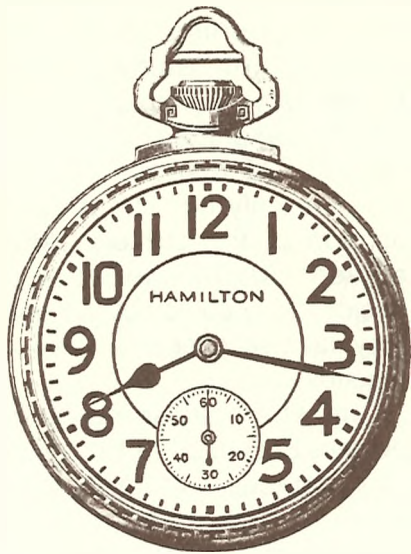# What Time Is It?

Before the railroads stretched iron rails across the nation, each city or town kept its own local time. Clocks in each place were set at twelve noon when the sun reached the highest point in the sky. This local time, or sun time, depended on the **longitude** or **meridian** of the town. For every degree of longitude there is a four-minute difference. This worked very well when people traveled from one place to another only at the slow-moving pace of steamboats or horse-drawn wagons.

When railroads came, the differences in time caused problems. Each railroad used the local sun time of its major city. When it was noon solar time in Chicago, it was 12:07 in Indianapolis, Indiana, 11:50 in St. Louis, Missouri, 11:48 in Dubuque, Iowa, 11:41 in St. Paul, Minnesota, and 11:27 in Omaha, Nebraska. The solution to this problem was to divide the world into twenty-four standard time zones. On November 18, 1883, at twelve noon the United States railroads adopted a system for standard time zones. Cities, too, began to use standard time. Eventually standard time zones were adopted by nations of the world. Iowa is in the Central Time Zone.

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longitude *n.* — distance east or west of the prime meridian, measured in degrees.

meridian *n.* — lines on a map representing either half of the circle that passes through the north and south poles.

Twenty-five steam whistles sound off in the Creston yards to announce the adoption of standard time at 12:00 noon, November 18, 1883.

courtesy of Robert J. Dietrich