Time Zones and Railroads

A few hundred years ago, individual towns kept track of time independently, based on the sun. When the sun was at its zenith, it was noon. Each town set their clocks to noon every day, and the town clock was the official time by which all other clocks and pocket watches in town were set. When railroads began carrying people long distances, however, the differing time at every stop became confusing. How was someone supposed to know exactly what time to catch their train? People recognized that technological innovation has necessitated the standardization of timekeeping.

The first country to set an entire region to a standard time was Britain. Dr. William Hyde Wollaston (1766-1828) is credited with coming up with the idea, which was made popular by Abraham Follett Osler (1808-1903). London time was adopted as the standard time, and the Great Western Railway was the first to adopt it, in November 1840. Within seven years, almost all railways used London time. By 1855, most clocks in Britain showed Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), though some had two minute hands, so they could display both GMT and the local time. The legal system in Britain maintained local time for many years, until the Statutes (Definition of Time) Act went into effect on August 2, 1880.

The U.S. experienced similar problems with their railway schedules. Although standardizing time in the U.S. had been proposed to Congress by William Lambert in 1809 and Charles Dowd in 1870 (Dowd revised his proposal in 1872), it wasn't adopted by the U.S. and Canadian railways systems for another eleven years. Many regions resisted the standardization of time. Detroit kept local time until 1900. When the City Council first decreed that clocks should be adjusted by 28 minutes to reflect Central Standard Time, there was so much dissention that it wasn't until 1905 that Detroit officially adopted CST.