Chapter 17

Fire Canoe at Fort Berthold, by William de la Montagne Cary

Indians at Like-A-Fishhook village on the Missouri watch the arrival of a steamboat that will supply the nearby military fort.
The buffaloes and the black-tail deer are gone, and our Indian ways are almost gone,” reminisced Maxidiwiac (mah-chee-dee-WEE-ahsh), or Buffalo Bird Woman, in 1920. A Hidatsa Indian born about 1843 in present-day North Dakota, she found the changes overwhelming. “Sometimes I find it hard to believe I ever lived them [her Indian ways],” she continued. “My little son grew up in the white man’s school. He can read books, and he owns cattle and has a farm. He is a leader among our Hidatsa people, helping teach them to follow the white man’s road. . . . But for me, I cannot forget our old ways. Often in summer I rise at daybreak and steal out to the cornfields; and as I hoe the corn I sing to it, as we did when I was young.” In her own lifetime, Buffalo Bird Woman had moved from a traditional native existence into the modern world. She could not help but ponder how the native customs and traditions that she had learned as a girl had changed in so a short time.

President Jefferson’s emissaries Meriwether Lewis and William Clark had wintered among the Hidatsas in 1804 and had been impressed by their horsemanship and hunting ability. Decimated by smallpox and by attacks from the Dakota Sioux, the Hidatsas in the 1840s, shortly after the birth of Buffalo Bird Woman, had joined with two neighboring tribes, the Mandan and Arikara, to build a new village called Like-A-Fishhook. Initially the new settlement prospered. But, after the Civil War, as white settlers crowded onto their lands, Buffalo Bird Woman and her tribe were pressured by a nearby military garrison.
into signing away more and more of their territory. In 1870, the same year Buffalo Bird Woman’s only son, Goodbird, was born, the federal government created the Fort Berthold Indian reservation nearby. Forced by the federal government to scatter onto small farms, Buffalo Bird Woman and her tribe in 1885 abandoned their village. Interviewed in 1906 by an anthropologist at her son’s North Dakota ranch where she lived, she was able to tell the remarkable story of her life.

Buffalo Bird Woman’s experience was all too common. The displacement of native peoples and the attack on their cultures was a recurring feature around the world, as white Europeans took over native lands. Like the British conquest of the Kikuyu in Kenya and of the Aborigines in Australia, the settlement of the trans-Mississippi West began with the removal of native peoples. This peaceful or, more commonly, brutal relocation of the Indians onto reservations opened up vast tracts of land for settlement and development.

In the North-American trans-Mississippi West, miners, farmers, land speculators, and railroad developers in the 1850s flooded onto the fertile prairies of Iowa, Minnesota, and Kansas, carving the land into farms and communities. Then, in the 1860s, drawn by the earlier discovery of gold in the Rocky Mountains, these same settlers swarmed onto the Great Plains and the semiarid regions beyond them. Scarcely a decade later, the trans-Mississippi West became a contested terrain as Native peoples fought to protect their homeland from these newcomers.

The transformation of the West left a mixed legacy. Although many white families prospered on the High Plains, the heedless pursuit of land and profit threatened not only the Native Americans, but the environment, and sometimes the settlers themselves. Unscrupulous westerners exploited white, Native American, Chinese, and Mexican laborers alike. Hunters slaughtered millions of bison for their hides, miners skinned the mountainsides in search of minerals, and farmers plowed up the prairie sod to build farms, even in areas west of the ninety-eighth meridian, where limited rainfall made farming problematic.

Although westerners attributed their economic achievements to American individualism and self-reliance, the development of the trans-Mississippi West depended heavily on the federal government. The government sent troops, fresh from their victories in the Civil War, to subjugate the Indians. It promoted the acquisition of farm land through the Homestead Act (1862) and subsidized the construction of transcontinental railroad lines. Eastern banks and foreign capitalists provided investment capital and eased access to international markets. In their scramble for new economic opportunities, many Americans chose to view the destruction of the Indian ways of life as the necessary price of civilization and progress.
that sought to force them onto reservations, Native Americans fought back. By the 1890s confinement on inferior reservations had become the fate of almost every Indian nation. Undaunted, Native Americans struggled to preserve their customs and rebuild their numbers.

The Plains Indians

The Indians of the Great Plains inhabited three major subregions. The northern Plains, from the Dakotas and Montana southward to Nebraska, were home to several large tribes, most notably the Lakota, as well as Flatheads, Blackfeet, Assiniboins, northern Cheyennes, Arapahos, Crows, Hidatsas, and Mandans. Some of these were allies, but others were bitter enemies frequently at war. In the Central Plains, the so-called Five Civilized Tribes, driven there from the Southeast in the 1830s, pursued an agricultural life in the Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). Further west, the Pawnees of Nebraska maintained the older, more settled tradition characteristic of Plains river valley culture before the introduction of horses, spending at least half the year in villages of earthen lodges along watercourses. On the southern Plains of western Kansas, Colorado, eastern New Mexico, and Texas, the Comanches, Kiowas, Cheyennes, southern Arapahos, and Apaches still maintained a migratory life appropriate to the arid environment.

Considerable diversity flourished among the Plains peoples, and customs varied even within subdivisions of the same tribe. For example, the easternmost branch of the great Sioux Nation, the Dakota Sioux of Minnesota who inhabited the wooded edge of the prairie, led a semisedentary life based on small-scale agriculture, deer and bison hunting, wild-rice harvesting, and maple-sugar production. In contrast, many Plains tribes—not only the Lakota Sioux, but also the Blackfeet, Crows, and Cheyennes—using horses obtained from the Spanish and guns obtained from traders, roamed the High Plains to the west, and followed the bison migrations.

For all the Plains Indians, life revolved around extended family ties and tribal cooperation. Within the various Sioux-speaking tribes, for example, children were raised without physical punishment and were taught to treat each adult clan member with the respect accorded to relatives. Families and clans joined forces to hunt and farm, and reached decisions by consensus.

For the various Sioux bands, religious and harvest celebrations provided the cement for village and camp life. Sioux religion was complex. The Lakota Sioux thought of life as a series of circles. Living within the daily cycles of the sun and moon, Lakotas were born into a circle of relatives, which broadened to the band, the tribe, the Sioux Nation, and on to animals and plants. The Lakotas also believed in a hierarchy of spirits whose help could be invoked in ceremonies like the Sun Dance. To gain access to spiritual power, or to fulfill vows made on behalf of their relatives’ well-being, young men would “sacrifice” themselves by foregoing food and water, dancing until exhausted, and suffering self-torture. For example, some suspended themselves from poles or cut pieces of their flesh and placed them at the foot of the Sun Dance pole. Painter George Catlin, who recorded Great Plains Indian life before the Civil War, described such a ceremony. “Several of them, seeing me making sketches, beckoned me to look at their faces, which I watched through all this horrid operation, without being able to detect anything but the pleasantest smiles as they looked me in the eye, while I could hear the knife rip through the flesh, and feel enough of it myself, to start involuntary and uncontrollable tears over my cheeks.”

On the semiarid High Plains, where rainfall averaged less than twenty inches a year, both the bison and the Native peoples adapted to the environment. The huge bison herds, which at their peak contained an estimated 30 million animals, broke into small groups in the winter and dispersed into river valleys. In the summer, they returned to the High Plains in vast herds to mate and feed on the nutritious short grasses. Like the bison, the Indians dispersed across the landscape to minimize their impact on any one place, wintering in the river valleys and returning to the High Plains in summer. When their herds of horses consumed the grasses near their camps, they moved. Hunting the bison not only supplied the Native peoples with food, clothing, and tipi covers, but also created a valuable trading commodity, buffalo robes. To benefit from this trade, Indians themselves, as the nineteenth century progressed, increased their harvest of animals.

The movement of miners and settlers onto the eastern High Plains in the 1850s eroded the bison’s habitat and threatened the Native American way of life. Pioneers who trekked westward occupied the river valley sites, where the buffalo had wintered, and exhausted the grasses. In the 1860s, the whites began systematically to hunt the animals, often with Indian help, to supply the eastern market with carriage robes and industrial belt- ing. William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody, a famous scout and Indian fighter, killed nearly forty-three hundred bison in 1867–1868 to feed construction crews building the Union Pacific Railroad. Army commanders also encouraged the slaughter of buffalo to undermine Indian resistance. The carnage that resulted was almost inconceivable in its scale. Between 1872 and 1875, hunters killed 9 million
buffalo, taking only the skin and leaving the carcasses to rot. By the 1880s, the once-thundering herds had been reduced to a few thousand animals, and the Native American way of life dependent on the buffalo had been ruined.

The Assault on Nomadic Indian Life

In the 1850s, Indians who felt pressure from the declining bison herds and deteriorating grasslands faced the onslaught of thousands of pioneers lured by the discovery of gold and silver in the Rocky Mountains. The federal government’s response was to reexamine its Indian policies. Abandoning the previous position, which had treated much of the West as a vast Indian reserve, the federal government sought to introduce a system of smaller tribal reservations where the Indians were to be concentrated, by force if necessary. To achieve this goal, the army established outposts along well-traveled trails and stationed troops that could be mobilized at a moment’s notice.

Some Native Americans, like the Pueblos of the Southwest (who had adapted to Spanish colonial life), the Crows of Montana, and the Hidatsas of North Dakota, peacefully adjusted to their new life. Others, among them the Navajos of Arizona and New Mexico and the eastern Dakota Sioux, opposed the new policy to no avail. By 1860, eight western reservations had been established. Significant segments of the remaining tribes on the Great Plains, more than a hundred thousand people, fought against removal for decades. Between 1860 and 1890, the western Sioux, Cheyennes, Arapahos, Kiowas, and Comanches on the Great Plains; the Nez Percés and Bannocks in the northern Rockies; and the Apaches in the Southwest—faced the U.S. army, toughened by its
experiences in the Civil War, in a series of final battles for the West (see Map 17.1).

Misunderstandings, unfulfilled promises, brutality, and butchery marked the conflict. Nowhere was this more evident than in the eroding relationship between the Cheyennes and Arapahos and the settlers near Sand Creek, Colorado, in 1864. During the gold rush six years earlier, more than a hundred thousand people (more than twice the number who went to California in 1849) had stampeded into the area. The Indians, facing starvation because of unfulfilled treaties that had promised food and support, slipped away from the reservations to hunt bison and steal livestock from settlers.

In the spring of the year, soldiers from the local militia, who had replaced regular army troops fighting in the Civil War, destroyed Cheyenne and Arapaho camps. The Indians retaliated with a flurry of attacks on travelers. The governor, in a panic, authorized Colorado’s white citizenry to seek out and kill hostile Indians on sight. He then activated a regiment of troops under Colonel John M. Chivington, a Methodist minister. At dawn on November 29, under orders to “remember the murdered women and children on the Platte [River],” Chivington’s troops massacred a peaceful band of Indians, including terrified women and children, camped at Sand Creek, who believed that they would be protected by federal troops.

This massacre and others that followed rekindled public debate over federal Indian policy. In response, in 1867 Congress sent a peace commission to end the fighting, and set aside two large land reserves, one north of Nebraska, the other south of Kansas. There, it was hoped, the tribes would take up farming and convert to Christianity. Behind the federal government’s persuasion lay the threat of force. Any Native Americans who refused to “locate in [the] permanent abodes provided for them,” warned Commissioner of Indian Affairs Ely S. Parker, himself a Seneca Indian, “would be subject wholly to the control and supervision of military authorities, [and] . . . treated as friendly or hostile as circumstances might justify.”

At first the plan appeared to work. Representatives of sixty-eight thousand southern Kiowas, Comanches, Cheyennes, and Arapahos signed the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867 and pledged to live on land in present-day Oklahoma. The following year, scattered bands of Sioux, representing nearly fifty-four thousand northern Plains...
Indians, signed the Fort Laramie Treaty and agreed to move to reservations on the so-called Great Sioux Reserve in the western part of what is now South Dakota in return for money and provisions.

But Indian dissatisfaction with the treaties ran deep. As a Sioux chief, Spotted Tail, told the commissioners, “We do not want to live like the white man. . . . The Great Spirit gave us hunting grounds, gave us the buffalo, the elk, the deer, and the antelope. Our fathers have taught us to hunt and live on the Plains, and we are contented.” Rejecting the new system, many bands of Indians refused to move to the reservations or to remain on them once there.

In August 1868, war parties of defiant Cheyennes, Arapahos, and Siouxs raided settlements in Kansas and Colorado, burning homes and killing whites. In retaliation, army troops attacked Indians, even peaceful ones, who refused confinement. That autumn Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer’s raiding party struck a sleeping Cheyenne village, killing more than a hundred warriors, shooting more than eight hundred horses, and taking fifty-three women and children prisoner. Other hostile Cheyennes and Arapahos were pursued, captured, and returned to the reservations.

In 1869, spurred on by Christian reformers, Congress established a Board of Indian Commissioners drawn from the major Protestant denominations to reform Indian agent abuses on the reservations. But the new and inexperienced church-appointed Indian agents, who distributed government rations and ran the reservations, quickly encountered problems. The pacifist Quaker agent Lawrie Tatum, a big-boned Iowa farmer, for example, failed to persuade the Comanches and Kiowas to stay on their reservations in Oklahoma rather than raid Texas settlements. Other agents were unable to restrain scheming whites who fraudulently purchased reservation lands from the Indians. Frustrated by the manipulation of Indian treaties and irritated by the ineptness of the Indian agents, Congress in 1871 abolished treaty making and replaced treaties with executive orders and acts of Congress. In the 1880s, the federal government ignored the churches’ nominations for Indian agents and made its own appointments.

Caught in the sticky web of an ambiguous and deceptive federal policy, and enraged by continuing non-Indian settlement of the Plains, defiant Native Americans struck back in the 1870s. On the southern Plains, Kiowa, Comanche, and Cheyenne raids in the Texas Panhandle in 1874 set off the so-called Red River War. In a fierce winter campaign, regular army troops destroyed Indian supplies and slaughtered a hundred Cheyenne fugitives near the Sappa River in Kansas. With the exile of seventy-four “ringleaders” to reservations in Florida, Native American independence on the southern Plains came to an end. In the Southwest, in present-day Arizona and New Mexico, the Apaches fought an intermittent guerrilla war until their leader, Geronimo, surrendered in 1886.

Custer’s Last Stand, 1876

Of all the acts of Indian resistance against the new reservation policy, none aroused more passion or caused more bloodshed than the battles waged by the western Sioux tribes in the Dakotas, Montana, and Wyoming. The 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie had set aside the Great Sioux Reserve “in perpetuity.” But not all the Sioux bands had fought in the war or signed the treaty.

In 1873, skillfully playing local officials against the federal government, Chief Red Cloud’s Ogala band and Chief Spotted Tail’s Brulé band won the concession of staying on their traditional lands. To protect their hunting grounds, they raided encroaching non-Indian settlements in Nebraska and Wyoming, intimidated federal agents, and harassed miners, railroad surveyors, and any others who ventured onto their lands.

Non-treaty Sioux found a powerful leader in the Lakota Sioux chief and holy man Sitting Bull. Broad-shouldered and powerfully built, Sitting Bull led by example and had considerable fighting experience. “You are fools,” he told the reservation Indians, “to make yourselves slaves to a piece of fat bacon, some hard-tack, and a little sugar and coffee.”

Pressured by would-be settlers and developers and distressed by the Indian agents’ inability to prevent the Sioux from entering and leaving the reservations at will, the federal government took action. In 1874, General William Tecumseh Sherman sent a force under Colonel George Armstrong Custer into the Black Hills of South Dakota, near the western edge of the Great Sioux Reserve. Lean and mustachioed, with shoulder-length reddish-blond hair, the thirty-four-year-old Custer had been a celebrity since his days as an impetuous young Civil War officer.

Custer’s mission was to extract concessions from the Sioux. In November 1875, negotiations to buy the Black Hills had broken down because the Indians’ asking price was deemed too high. Custer now sought to drive the Indians out of the Black Hills. Indians still outside the reservations after January 31, 1876, the government announced, would be hunted down and taken in by force.

The army mobilized for an assault. In June 1876, leading 600 troops of the Seventh Cavalry, Custer proceeded to the Little Bighorn River area of present-day Montana, a hub of Indian resistance. On the morning of June 25, underestimating the Indian enemy and unwisely dividing his force, Custer, with 209 men, recklessly advanced against a large
company of Cheyenne and Sioux warriors led by Chief Sitting Bull, who had encamped along the Little Bighorn. Custer and his outnumbered troops were wiped out.

Americans reeled from this unexpected Indian victory. Newspaper columnists groped to assess the meaning of “Custer’s last stand.” Some went beyond criticism of Custer’s leadership to question the wisdom of current federal policy toward the Indians. Others worried that an outraged public would demand retaliation. Most, however, endorsed the federal government’s determination to quash the Native American rebellion. “It is inconsistent with our civilization and with common sense,” trumpeted a writer in the New York Herald, “to allow the Indian to roam over a country as fine as that around the Black Hills, preventing its development in order that he may shoot game and scalp his neighbors. That can never be. This region must be taken from the Indian.”

Defeat at Little Bighorn made the army more determined. In Montana, troops harassed various Sioux bands for more than five years, attacking Indian camps in the dead of winter and destroying all supplies. Even Sitting Bull, who had led his band to Canada to escape the army, surrendered in 1881 for lack of provisions. The slaughter of the buffalo had wiped out his tribe’s major food source.

Similar measures were used elsewhere in the West against Chief Joseph and his Nez Percé of Oregon and against the northern Cheyennes, who had been forcibly transported to Oklahoma after the Battle of Little Bighorn. Chief Dull Knife led some 150 survivors, including men, women, and children, north in September 1878 to join the Sioux. But the army chased them down and imprisoned them in Fort Robinson, Nebraska. When the army denied their request to stay nearer to their traditional northern lands, tribal leaders refused to cooperate. The post commander then withheld all food, water, and fuel. On a frigid night in January 1879, a desperate Dull Knife and his followers, in a dramatic escape attempt, shot the guards and broke for freedom. Members of the startled garrison chased the Indians and gunned down half of them in the snow, including women and children as well as Dull Knife himself. The Atlanta Constitution condemned the incident as “a dastardly outrage upon humanity and a lasting disgrace to our boasted civilization.” Although sporadic Indian resistance continued until the end of the century, these brutal tactics had sapped the Indians’ will to resist.

“How was Indian life on the Great Plains transformed in the second half of the nineteenth century?”

“A growing number of Americans were outraged by the federal government’s flagrant violation of its Indian treaties. The Women’s National Indian Rights Association, founded in 1883, and other groups took up the cause. Helen Hunt Jackson, a Massachusetts writer who had recently moved to Colorado, published A Century of Dishonor in 1881 to rally public opinion against the government’s record of broken treaty obligations. “It makes little difference . . . where one opens the record of the history of the Indians,” she wrote; “every page and every year has its dark stain.” To help Indians abandon hunting and nomadic life, reformers like Jackson advocated the creation of Indian boarding schools, much like those established for
emancipated slaves. Richard Henry Pratt, a retired military officer, opened such a school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in 1879. Pratt believed that the Indians’ customs and languages had halted their progress toward white civilization. His motto therefore became “Kill the Indian and save the man.” Modeled after Carlisle, other Indian boarding schools taught farming, carpentry, dressmaking, and nursing.

Despite the reformers’ best efforts, the attempt to stamp out Indian identity in the boarding schools often backfired. Forming friendships with Indians from many different tribes, boarding school students forged their own sense of Indian identity. As Mitch Walking Elk, a Cheyenne-Arapaho-Hopi student at the Phoenix Indian School, put it, “They put me in the boarding school and they cut off all my hair, gave me an education, but the Apache’s still in there.”

In addition to their advocacy of boarding schools, well-intentioned humanitarians concluded that the Indians’ interests would be best served by breaking up the reservations, ending all recognition of tribal governments, and gradually incorporating individual Native Americans into mainstream society by giving them the rights of citizens. In short, they proposed to eliminate the “Indian problem” by eliminating the Indians as a culturally distinct entity. Inspired by this vision, they supported the Dawes Severalty Act, passed in 1887 (see Map 17.2).

The Dawes Act was designed to turn Indians into landowners and farmers. The law emphasized severalty, or the treatment of Indians as individuals rather than as members of tribes, and called for the distribution of 160 acres of reservation land for farming, or 320 acres for grazing, to each head of an Indian family who accepted the law’s provisions. The remaining reservation lands (often the richest) were to be sold to speculators and settlers, and the income thus obtained would go toward purchase of farm tools. To prevent unscrupulous people

Map 17.2 Western Indian Reservations, 1890
Native American reservations were almost invariably located on poor-quality lands. Consequently, when the Dawes Severalty Act broke up the reservations into 160-acre farming tracts, many of the semiarid divisions would not support cultivation.
from gaining control of the lands granted to individual Indians, the government would hold the property of each tribal member in trust for twenty-five years. Those Indians who at that point had accepted allotments would also be declared citizens of the United States.

The Dawes Act did not specify a timetable for the breakup of the reservations. Few allotments were made to the Indians until the 1890s. The act proved to be a boon to speculators, who commonly evaded its safeguards and obtained the Indians’ best land. By 1934, the act had slashed Indian acreage by 65 percent. Much of what remained in Indian hands was too dry and gravelly for farming. In the twentieth century, ironically, periodic droughts and the fragile, arid High Plains landscape would push many white farmers back off the land.

Although some Native Americans who received land under the Dawes Act prospered enough to expand their holdings and go into large-scale farming or ranching, countless others struggled just to survive. Hunting restrictions on the former reservation lands prevented many Indians from supplementing their limited farm yields. Alcoholism, a continuing problem exacerbated by the prevalence of whiskey as a trade item (and by the boredom that resulted from the disruption of hunting and other traditional pursuits), became more prevalent as Native Americans strove to adapt to the constraints of reservation life (see Table 17.1).

The Ghost Dance and the End of Indian Resistance on the Great Plains, 1890

Living conditions for the Sioux worsened in the late 1880s. The federal government reduced their meat rations and restricted hunting. When disease killed a third of their cattle, they became desperate. The Sioux, who still numbered almost twenty-five thousand, turned to Wovoka, a new visionary prophet popular among the Great Basin Indians in Nevada. Wovoka foresaw a catastrophic event that would bring the return of dead relatives, the restoration of the bison herds, and the renewal of traditional life. Some versions of his vision included the destruction of European-Americans and their removal from Indian lands. To bring on this new day, the prophet preached a return to traditional ethics, and taught his followers a cycle of ritual songs and dance steps known as the Ghost Dance. Wearing sacred Ghost Shirts—cotton or leather vestments decorated to ward off evil—the dancers moved in a circle, accelerating until they reached a trancelike state and experienced visions.

Table 17.1 Nineteenth-Century Federal Indian Policy

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<tr>
<th>Law or Treaty</th>
<th>Provisions</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bill for the Removal of Indians, 1830.</td>
<td>Payment to move to the Indian Territory (Oklahoma), land allotments, and supplies.</td>
<td>To move the Cherokees from Georgia and open their lands to settlers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerous treaties with various tribes, 1830s–1860s.</td>
<td>Payment of debts, supplies, and yearly subsidies (annuities).</td>
<td>Removal to vaguely specified lands west of the Mississippi River.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fort Laramie Treaty, 1868. Included Sioux, Crows, northern Cheyennes, and northern Arapahos but not Sitting Bull’s band.</td>
<td>Created the Great Sioux Reserve west of the Missouri River in South Dakota. Provided livestock and farm implements.</td>
<td>Part of a new reservation policy to “insure civilization for the Indians and peace and safety for the whites.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of the Board of Indian Commissioners in 1869.</td>
<td>Church denominations could appoint Indian agents.</td>
<td>To clean up corrupt reservation management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The U.S. unilaterally ends all treaty making in 1871.</td>
<td>Executive orders or bilateral agreements ratified by both houses of Congress now establish or modify reservations.</td>
<td>Of the 162 Indian reservations in 1890, 56 were created by executive order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Allotment Act (Dawes Act), 1887.</td>
<td>Divided tribally held reservation lands into small allotments for families and individuals. Sold off “surplus.”</td>
<td>Designed to destroy tribal organization and assimilate the Indian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curtis Act, 1898.</td>
<td>Abolished the Indian Territory in Oklahoma.</td>
<td>Passed to undercut tribal power.</td>
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of the future. Many believed that the Ghost Shirts would protect them from harm.

In the fall of 1890, as the Ghost Dance movement spread among the Sioux in the Dakota Territory, Indian officials and military authorities grew alarmed. The local reservation agent decided that Chief Sitting Bull, whose cabin on the reservation had become a rallying point for the Ghost Dance movement, must be arrested. On a freezing, drizzly December morning, he dispatched a company of Indian policemen from the agency to take Sitting Bull into custody. When two policemen pulled the chief from his cabin, a scuffle ensued, shots rang out, and Sitting Bull was mortally wounded. As bullets whizzed by, Sitting Bull's horse began to perform the tricks it remembered from its days in the Wild West show. Some observers were terrified, convinced that the spirit of the dead chief had entered his horse.

Two weeks later, one of the bloodiest episodes of Indian-white strife on the Plains occurred. On December 29, the Seventh Cavalry was rounding up 340 starving and freezing Sioux at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, when someone fired a gun. The soldiers retaliated with cannon fire. Within minutes 300 Indians, including 7 infants, were slaughtered. Three days later, a baby who had miraculously survived was found wrapped in a blanket under the snow. She wore a buckskin cap on which a beadwork American flag had been embroidered. Brigadier General L. W. Colby, who adopted the baby, named her Marguerite, but the Indians called her Lost Bird.

As the frozen corpses at Wounded Knee were dumped into mass graves, a generation of Indian-white conflict on the Great Plains shuddered to a close. Lost Bird, with her poignantly patriotic beadwork cap, highlights the irony of the Plains Indians' response to white expansion. Many
Natives did try to adapt to non-Indian ways, and some succeeded fully. Goodbird, the son of Buffalo Bird Woman, became a Congregational minister, a prosperous farmer, and a leader of the Hidatsa tribe. He carefully blended his traditional Indian religious beliefs with Christianity. Others did less well economically. Driven onto reservations, many Plains Indians became dependent on governmental support. By 1900, the Plains Indian population had shrunk from nearly a quarter-million to just over a hundred thousand. Nevertheless, the population began to increase slowly after 1900. Against overwhelming odds, the pride, religious traditions, and cultural identities of the Plains Indians survived all efforts at eradication.

Unlike the nomadic western Sioux, the more settled Navajos of the Southwest adjusted more successfully to the reservation system, preserving traditional ways while incorporating elements of the new order in a complex process of cultural adaptation. By 1900, the Navajos had tripled their reservation land, dramatically increased their numbers and their herds, and carved out for themselves a distinct place in Arizona and New Mexico.

These extraordinary changes were forced on the Indian population by the advance of non-Indian settlement. In the name of civilization and progress, non-Indians in the generation after the Civil War pursued a course that involved a mixture of sincere (if misguided) benevolence, coercion wrapped in an aura of legality, and outbursts of naked violence. Many white Americans felt toward the Indians only contempt, hatred, and greed for their land. Others viewed themselves as divinely chosen instruments for uplifting and Christianizing Native peoples. Both groups, however, were blind to the value of Native American life and traditions. And both were unsuccessful in their attempts to shatter proud peoples and their ancient cultures.

Settling the West

The successive defeats of the Native Americans opened for settlement a vast territory that reached from the Great Plains to the Sierra Nevada and Cascade Mountains. In the 1840s, when nearly a quarter-million Americans had trudged overland to Oregon and California, they had typically endured a six- to eight-month trip in ox-drawn wagons. After 1870, railroad expansion made the trip faster and considerably easier. In the next three decades, more land was parceled out into farms than in the previous 250 years of American history combined, and agricultural production doubled.

The First Transcontinental Railroad

Passed in 1862, the Pacific Railroad Act authorized the construction of a new transcontinental link. The act provided grants of land and other subsidies to the railroads for each mile of track laid, which made them the largest landholders in the West. Over the next half-century, nine major routes, which ran from the South or Midwest to the West, were built. More than any other factor, the expansion of these railroads accelerated the transformation of everyday life west of the Mississippi.

Building the railroad took backbreaking work. Searching for inexpensive labor, the railroads turned to immigrants. The Central Pacific employed Chinese workers to chip and blast rail bed out of solid rock in the Sierra Nevada. The railroad preferred the Chinese laborers because they worked hard for low wages, did not drink, and furnished their own food and tents. Nearly twelve thousand Chinese graded the roadbed while Irish, Mexican-American, and black workers put down the track.

On May 10, 1869, Americans celebrated the completion of the first railroad spanning North America. As the two sets of tracks—the Union Pacific’s, stretching westward from Omaha, Nebraska, and the Central Pacific’s, reaching
eastward from Sacramento, California—met at Promontory Point, Utah, beaming officials drove in a final ceremonial golden spike. The nation’s vast midsection was now far more accessible than it had ever been.

The railroads quickly proved their usefulness. In the battles against Native Americans, the army shipped horses and men west in the dead of winter to attack the Indians when they were most vulnerable. From the same trains, hunters gained quick access to the bison ranges and increased their harvest of the animals. Once Indian resistance had been broken, the railroads not only expedited the shipment of new settlers and their supplies, but also provided fast access for the shipment of cattle and grain to eastern urban markets. In short, the railroads accelerated the development of the West.

Settlers and the Railroad

During the decade after the passage of the Pacific Railroad Act, Congress awarded the railroads 170 million acres, worth over half a billion dollars. By 1893, Minnesota and Washington had also deeded to railroad companies a quarter of their state lands; Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas, North Dakota, and Montana had turned over a fifth of their acreage. As mighty landowners, the railroads had a unique opportunity to shape settlement in the region—and to reap enormous profits (see Map 17.3).

The railroads set up land sales offices and sent agents to the East Coast and Europe to recruit settlers. While the agents glorified the West as a new Garden of Eden, the land bureaus offered prospective buyers long-term loans and free transportation. Acknowledging that life on the Great Plains could be lonely, the promoters advised young men to bring their wives (because “maidens are scarce”) and to emigrate as entire families and with friends.

One unintended consequence of these land promotions was to make land available to single women, or “girl homesteaders” as they were known at the time. In Wyoming, single women made up more than 18 percent of the claimants. Women filed 10 to 20 percent of the claims in Colorado, sometimes as individuals and sometimes to add to family holdings.

In addition to the millions of Americans who migrated from nearby states, the railroads helped bring nearly 2.2 million foreign-born settlers to the trans-Mississippi West between 1870 and 1900. Some agents recruited whole villages of Germans and eastern Europeans to relocate to the North Dakota plains. Irish laborers
hired to lay track could be found in every town along the rail lines. By 1905, the Santa Fe Railroad alone had transported sixty thousand Russian Mennonites to the fertile Kansas plains where black pioneers called exodusters had preceded them in the 1870s (see Chapter 16).

The railroads influenced agriculture as well. To ensure quick repayment of the money owed to them, the railroads urged new immigrants to specialize in cash crops—wheat on the northern Plains, corn in Iowa and Kansas, cotton and tobacco in Texas. Although these crops initially brought in high revenues, many farmers grew dependent on income from a single crop and became vulnerable to fluctuating market forces.

**Homesteading on the Great Plains**

Liberalized land laws were another powerful magnet pulling settlers westward. The Homestead Act passed in 1862 reflected the Republican Party's belief that free land would enable the poor to achieve economic
independence. It offered 160 acres of land to any individual who would pay a ten-dollar registration fee, live on the land for five years, and cultivate and improve it. Although nearly four hundred thousand families claimed land under the provisions of the Homestead Act between 1860 and 1900, the law did not function as Congress had envisioned. Advance agents representing unscrupulous speculators filed false claims for the choicest locations, and railroads acquired huge landholdings. The result was that only one acre in every nine went to the pioneers for whom it was intended.

A second problem resulted from the 160-acre limit specified by the Homestead Act. On the rich soils of Iowa or in the fertile lands in California, Oregon, and Washington, a 160-acre farm was ample, but in the drier areas west of the hundredth meridian, a farmer needed more land. In 1873, to rectify this problem, Congress passed the Timber Culture Act, which gave homesteaders an additional 160 acres if they planted trees on 40 acres. For states with little rainfall, Congress enacted the Desert Land Act in 1877, which made 640 acres available at $1.25 an acre on condition that the owner irrigate part of it within three years. However, this act, along with the Timber and Stone Act of 1878, which permitted the purchase of up to 160 acres of forest land for $2.50 an acre, was abused by grasping speculators, lumber-company representatives, and cattle ranchers seeking to expand their holdings. Yet, even though families did not receive as much land as Congress had intended, federal laws kept alive the dream of the West as a place for new beginnings.

In addition to problems faced by those who chose property in areas that lacked sufficient rainfall to grow crops, almost all settlers faced difficult psychological adjustments to frontier life. The first years of settlement were the most difficult. Toiling to build a house, plow the fields, plant the first crop, and dig a well, the pioneers put in an average of sixty-eight hours of tedious, backbreaking work a week in isolated surroundings. Howard Ruede, a Pennsylvania printer who migrated to Kansas to farm, wrote home in 1877 complaining about the mosquitoes and bedbugs infesting his house, which was cut out of thick grass sod and dug into the ground. He and countless others coping with the severe Plains conditions saw their shining vision of idyllic farm life quickly dim. For blacks who emigrated from the South to Kansas and other parts of the Plains after the Civil War, prejudice compounded the burdens of adjusting to a different life (see Chapter 16).

Many women found adaptation to Plains frontier life especially difficult. At least initially, some were enchanted by the landscape. But far more were struck by the “horrible tribes of Mosquitoes”; the violent weather-drenching summer thunderstorms with hailstones as “big as hen’s eggs” and blinding winter blizzards; and the crude sod huts that served as their early homes because of the scarcity of timber. One woman burst into tears upon first seeing her new sod house. The young bride angrily informed her husband that her father had built a better house for his hogs.

The high transience rate on the frontier in these years reflected the difficulty that newcomers faced in adjusting to life on the Great Plains. Nearly half of those who staked homestead claims in Kansas between 1862 and 1890 relinquished their rights to the land and moved on. However, in places like Minnesota and the Pacific Northwest that were populated largely by Germans, Norwegians, and other immigrants with a tradition of family prosperity tied to continuous landownership, the persistence rate (or percentage of people staying for a decade or more) could be considerably higher (see Table 17.2).

### Table 17.2 The African-American and Chinese Population in Western States and Territories, 1880–1900

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State or Territory</th>
<th>1880</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1880</th>
<th>1900</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arizona Terr.</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>1,846</td>
<td>1,630</td>
<td>1,419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>6,018</td>
<td>11,045</td>
<td>75,132</td>
<td>45,753</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>2,435</td>
<td>8,570</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>3,379</td>
<td>1,467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>43,107</td>
<td>52,003</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>1,523</td>
<td>1,765</td>
<td>1,739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>2,385</td>
<td>6,269</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>5,416</td>
<td>1,352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Mexico Terr.</td>
<td>1,015</td>
<td>1,610</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma Indian Terr.</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>56,684*</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>1,105</td>
<td>9,510</td>
<td>10,397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>393,384</td>
<td>620,722</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>836</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>2,514</td>
<td>3,186</td>
<td>3,629</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Combined total for Indian and Oklahoma territories.

Many who weathered the lean early years eventually came to identify deeply with the land. Within a decade, the typical Plains family that had “stuck it out” had moved into a new wood-framed house and had fixed up the front parlor. Women worked particularly hard on these farms and took pride in their accomplishments. “Just done the chores,” wrote one woman to a friend. “I went fence mending and getting out cattle . . . and came in after sundown. I fed my White Leghorns [chickens] and then sat on the step to read over your letter. I forgot my wet feet and shoes full of gravel and giggled joyously.”

**New Farms, New Markets**

Farmers on the Plains took advantage of advances in farm mechanization and the development of improved strains of wheat and corn to boost production dramatically. Efficient steel plows; specially designed wheat planters; and improved grain binders, threshers, and windmills all allowed the typical Great Plains farmer of the late nineteenth century to increase the land’s yield tenfold.

Barbed wire, patented in 1874, was another crucial invention that permitted farmers to keep roving livestock out of their crops. But fencing the land touched off violent clashes between farmers and cattle ranchers, who demanded the right to let their herds roam freely until the roundup. Generally the farmers won.

The invention of labor-saving machinery together with increased demand for wheat, milk, and other farm products created the impression that farming was entering a period of unparalleled prosperity. But few fully understood the perils of pursuing agriculture as a livelihood. The cost of the land, horses, machinery, and seed needed to start up a farm could exceed twelve hundred dollars, far more than the annual earnings of the average industrial worker. Faced with substantial mortgage payments, many farmers had to specialize in a crop such as wheat or corn that would fetch high prices. This specialization made them dependent on the railroads for shipping and put them at the mercy of the international grain market’s shifting prices.

Far from being an independent producer, the western grain grower was a player in a complex world market economy. Railroad and steamship transport enabled the American farmer to compete in the international market. High demand could bring prosperity, but when world overproduction forced grain prices down, the heavily indebted grower faced ruin. Confronted with these realities, many Plains farmers quickly abandoned the illusion of frontier independence and easy wealth.

Unpredictable rainfall and weather conditions further exacerbated homesteaders’ difficulties west of the hundredth meridian, where rainfall averaged less than twenty inches a year. Farmers compensated through “dry farming”—plowing deeply to stimulate the capillary action of the soils and harrowing lightly to raise a covering of dirt that would retain precious moisture after a rainfall. They also built windmills and diverted creeks for irrigation. But the onset of unusually dry years in the 1870s, together with grasshopper infestations and the major economic depression that struck the United States between 1873 and 1878 (see Chapter 16), made the plight of some midwesterners desperate.

**Building a Society and Achieving Statehood**

Despite the hardships, many remote farm settlements blossomed into thriving communities. Among the first institutions to appear, churches and Sunday schools became humming centers of social activity as well as of worship. Farmers gathered for barn raisings and group threshings, and families pooled their energies in quilting and husking bees. Neighbors readily lent a hand to the farmer whose barn had burned or whose family was sick. Cooperation was a practical necessity and a form of insurance in a rugged environment where everyone was vulnerable to instant misfortune or even disaster.

When the population increased, local boosters lobbied to turn the territory into a state. Achieving statehood required the residents of the territory to petition Congress to pass an enabling act establishing the territory’s boundaries and authorizing an election to select delegates for a state constitutional convention. Once the state constitution had been drawn up and ratified by popular vote, the territory applied to Congress for admission as a state.

Under these procedures, Kansas entered the Union in 1861, followed by Nevada in 1864 and Nebraska in 1867. Colorado joined in 1876. Not until 1889 did North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Washington gain statehood. Wyoming and Idaho came into the Union the following year. Utah finally entered in 1896. With Oklahoma’s admission in 1907 and Arizona’s and New Mexico’s in 1912, the process of creating permanent political institutions in the trans-Mississippi West was complete (see Map 17.4).

Although generally socially conservative, the new state governments supported woman suffrage. As territories became states, pioneer women battled for the vote. Seven western states held referenda on this issue between 1870 and 1910. Success came first in the Wyoming Territory, where men outnumbered women 6 to 1. The tiny legislature enfranchised women in 1869 in the hope that it would attract women, families, and economic growth. The Utah Territory followed in 1870 and reaffirmed its support for woman suffrage when it became a state. Nebraska in 1867 and Colorado in 1876 permitted women to vote in school
elections. Although these successes were significant, by 1910 only four states—Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado—had granted women full voting rights. The very newness of their place in the Union may have sensitized legislators in these states to women’s important contributions to settlements, and the intense competition among parties may have made them open to experimentation, but by and large, familiar practices persisted.

The Spread of Mormonism

Persecuted in Illinois, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints known as Mormons, had moved to the Great Salt Lake Valley in 1847. Led by Brigham Young, their prophet-president, and a Council of Twelve Apostles, they sought to create the independent country of Deseret. Their faith emphasized self-sufficiency and commitment to family. In the next two decades, recruitment in Great Britain and the Scandinavian countries boosted their numbers to more than 100,000 in settlements that ranged from Idaho in the north to Mexico in the south. Increasingly, these Mormon communities conflicted with non-Mormons and with the U.S. government, which disapproved of the church’s involvement in politics, its communal business practices, and its support of polygamy.

Trying to balance their territorial claims for the Kingdom of God against the pressures of American secular society, the Mormons sought at first to be economically independent. In 1869, they developed their own railroad branches connecting Salt Lake City and Ogden to the Central Pacific Railroad, and they set up Zion’s Cooperative Mercantile Institution to control wholesale and retail activities. They asked all Mormons to abstain from coffee, tea, and alcohol, and established their own People’s Party to mobilize the Mormon vote.

But a series of federal acts and court decisions, starting with the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act in 1862, challenged the authority of their church and their practice of polygamy or plural marriage. In United States v. Reynolds (1879), the Supreme Court declared plural marriages unlawful and held that freedom of religion did not protect religious practices. Then, in 1887, the Edmunds-Tucker Act dissolved the church corporation, limited its assets to $50,000, abolished women’s right to vote, and put its properties and funds into receivership (control by the courts).

In response, in 1890 the church president publicly announced the official end of polygamy. A year later, the Mormons dissolved their People’s Party. The church supported the application for statehood, which was granted in
1896. Confiscated church properties were returned, voting rights were restored, and jailed polygamists were pardoned, but the balance between sacred and secular had permanently shifted. Mormon settlements would continue in the twentieth century to draw new members and influence economic and social development in western communities.

**Southwestern Borderlands**

The annexation of Texas in 1845 and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that had ended the Mexican-American War in 1848 ceded to the United States an immense territory, part of which became Texas, California, Arizona, and New Mexico. At the time, Mexicans had controlled vast expanses of the Southwest. They had built their own churches, maintained large ranching operations, and had traded with the Indians. Although the United States had pledged to protect the liberty and property of Mexicans who remained on American soil, over the next three decades American ranchers and settlers took control of the territorial governments. Like the displacement of the American Indians, much of the Spanish-speaking population was forced off the land. Mexicans who stayed in the region adapted to the new Anglo society with varying degrees of success.

In Texas, the struggle for independence from Mexico had left a legacy of bitterness and misunderstanding. After 1848, Texas cotton planters confiscated Mexican lands and began a racist campaign that labeled Mexicans as nonwhite. Only white people, the Texans asserted, deserved economic and legal rights. Angered by their loss of land and discriminatory treatment, Mexican bandits retaliated by raiding American communities. Tensions peaked in 1859 when Juan Cortina, a Mexican rancher, attacked the Anglo border community of Brownsville, Texas, and freed all the prisoners in jail. Cortina battled the U.S. army for years until the Mexican government, fearing a U.S. invasion, imprisoned him in 1875.

Mexican-Americans in California in the 1850s and 1860s faced similar pressures. A cycle of flood and drought, together with a slumping cattle industry, had ruined many of the large southern California ranches owned by the **californios**, Spanish-speaking descendants of the original Spanish settlers. The collapse of the ranch economy forced many of them to retreat into segregated urban neighborhoods called barrios. Spanish-surnamed citizens made up nearly half the 2,640 residents of Santa Barbara, California, in 1870; because of the influx of new settlers they comprised barely a quarter of the population ten years later. Maintaining a tenacious hold on their traditions, many Spanish-speaking people in Santa Barbara and other towns survived by working as day laborers.

In California, the pattern of racial discrimination, manipulation, and exclusion was similar for Mexicans, Native Americans, and Chinese. At first, the number of new “Anglos” was small. As the number of whites increased, they identified minority racial, cultural, and language differences as marks of inferiority. White state legislators passed laws that made ownership of property difficult for non-Anglos. Relocated to a migratory labor force, non-Anglos were tagged as shiftless and irresponsible. Yet their labor made possible increased prosperity for the farmers, railroads, and households that hired them.

The cultural adaptation of Spanish-speaking Americans to Anglo society initially unfolded more smoothly in Arizona and New Mexico, where Spanish settlement had been sparse and a small class of wealthy Mexican landowners had long dominated a poor, illiterate peasantry. Moreover, since the 1820s, well-to-do Mexicans in Tucson, Arizona, had educated their children in the United States and formed trading partnerships and business alliances with Americans. One of the most successful was Estevan Ochoa, who began a long-distance freight business in 1859 with a U.S. partner and then expanded it into a lucrative merchandising, mining, and sheep-raising operation.

The success of men such as Ochoa, who became mayor of Tucson, helped moderate American settlers’ antagonistic attitudes. So, too, did the work of popular writers like Helen Hunt Jackson. By sentimentalizing the gracious colonial Spanish past, Jackson increased public sympathy for Spanish-speaking Americans. Jackson’s 1884 romance **Ramona**, a tale of the doomed love of a Hispanicized mixed-blood (Irish-Indian) woman set on a California ranch overwhelmed by the onrushing tide of Anglo civilization, was enormously popular. Jackson’s novel also appealed to upper-class Mexican-Americans known as **Nuevomexicanos** who traced their lineage back to the Spanish conquest.

Still, conflicts over property persisted in Arizona and New Mexico. In the 1880s, Mexican-American ranchers organized themselves into a self-protection vigilante group called Las Gorras Blancas (the **White Caps**). In 1888, they tore up railroad tracks and attacked both Anglo newcomers and those upper-class Hispanics who had fenced acreage in northern New Mexico previously considered public grazing land. But this vigilante action did not help, as Anglo-dominated corporate ranchers steadily increased their land holdings. Relations also changed in the urban centers, as discrimination forced Mexican-American businessmen to restrict their business dealings to their own people, and the Spanish-speaking population as a whole...
became more impoverished. Even in Tucson, where the Mexican-American elite enjoyed considerable economic and political success, 80 percent of the Mexican-Americans in the work force were laborers in 1880, taking jobs as butchers, barbers, cowboys, and railroad workers.

As increasing numbers of Mexican-American men were forced to search for seasonal migrant work, women took responsibility for holding families and communities together. Women managed the households when their husbands were away, and fostered group identification by maintaining traditional customs, kinship ties, and allegiance to the Catholic Church. They served as godmothers for one another’s children; tended garden plots; and traded food, soap, and produce with other women. This economy, invisible to those outside the village, stabilized the community in times of drought or persecution by Anglos.

Violence and discrimination against Spanish-speaking citizens of the Southwest escalated in the 1890s, a time of rising racism in the United States. Rioters in Beeville and Laredo, Texas, in 1894 and 1899 attacked and beat up Mexican-Americans. Whites increasingly labeled Mexican-Americans as violent and lazy. For Spanish-speaking citizens, the battle for fair treatment and respect would continue into the twentieth century.

Exploiting the Western Landscape

The displacement of Mexican-American and Native peoples from their lands opened the way for the exploitation of the natural environment in the trans-Mississippi West. White publicists, developers, and boosters had long promoted the region as a land of boundless opportunity. Between 1860 and 1900, a generation of Americans sought to strike it rich by joining the ranks of miners, ranchers, and farmers intent on making a fortune. Although the mining, ranching, and farming “bonanzas” promised unheard-of wealth, they set in motion a boom-and-bust
economy in which many people went bankrupt or barely survived and others were bought out by large-scale enterprises. Of all the groups that surged into the nation’s midcontinent in the late nineteenth century, none had to revise their expectations more radically than the speculators and adventurers thirsting for quick fortunes.

The Mining Frontier

In the half-century that began with the California gold rush in 1849, a series of mining booms swept from the Southwest northward into Canada and Alaska. Sensational discoveries in California’s Sierra Nevada produced more than $81 million worth of gold bullion in 1852. The following year, Henry Comstock, an illiterate prospector, stumbled on the rich Comstock Lode along Nevada’s Carson River. Later in the same decade, feverishly pursuing rumors of new strikes, prospectors swarmed into the Rocky Mountains and uncovered deep veins of gold and silver near present-day Denver. Over the next five decades, gold was discovered in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, South Dakota, and, in 1896, in the Canadian Klondike. Although the popular press clearly exaggerated reports of miners scooping up gold by the panful, by 1900 more than a billion dollars’ worth of gold had been mined in California alone.

The early discoveries of “placer” gold, panned from streams, attracted a young male population thirsting for wealth and reinforced the myth of mining country as “a poor man’s paradise” (see Map 17.5). In contrast to the Great Plains, where ethnic groups recreated their own ethnic enclaves, western mining camps became ethnic melting pots. In the California census of 1860, more than thirty-three thousand Irish and thirty-four
thousand Chinese had staked out early claims (see Table 17.2).

Although a few prospectors became fabulously wealthy, the experience of Henry Comstock, who sold out one claim for eleven thousand dollars and another for two mules, was more typical. Because the larger gold and silver deposits lay embedded in veins of quartz deep within the earth, extracting them required huge investments in workers and expensive equipment. Deep shafts had to be blasted into the rock. Once lifted to the surface, the rock had to be crushed, flushed with mercury or cyanide to collect the silver, and smelted into ingots. No sooner had the major discoveries been made, therefore, than large mining companies backed by eastern or British capital bought them out and took them over.

Life in the new mining towns was vibrant but unpredictable. During the heyday of the Comstock Lode in the 1860s and 1870s, Virginia City, Nevada, erupted in an orgy of speculation and building. Started as a shantytown in 1859, it swelled by 1873 into a thriving metropolis of twenty thousand people complete with elaborate mansions, a six-story hotel, an opera house, 131 saloons, 4 banks, and uncounted brothels. Men outnumbered women three to one. Money quickly earned was even more rapidly lost.

The boom-and-bust cycle evident in Virginia City was repeated in towns across the West. Mark Twain captured the thrill of the mining "stampedes" in Roughing It (1872). "Every few days," wrote Twain, "news would come of the discovery of a brand-new mining region: immediately the papers would teem with accounts of its richness, and away the surplus population would scamper to take possession. By the time I was fairly inoculated with the disease, 'Esmeralda' had just had a run and 'Humboldt' was beginning to shriek for attention. 'Humboldt! Humboldt!' was the new cry, and straightway Humboldt, the newest of the new, the richest of the rich, the most marvelous of the marvelous discoveries in silver-land, was occupying two columns of the public prints to 'Esmeralda's' one."

One unintended consequence of the gold rush mania was the growth of settlement in Alaska. Small strikes were made there in 1869, two years after the United States had purchased the territory from Russia. More miners arrived in the 1880s after prospector Joe Juneau, for whom the town of Juneau was named, and others developed the Treadwell Mine. But it was the discovery of gold in the Canadian Klondike in 1897 that brought thousands of prospectors into the area and eventually enabled Alaska to establish its own territorial government in 1912.

Word of new ore deposits like the ones in Alaska lured transient populations salivating to get rich. Miners who worked deep within the earth for large corporations typically earned about $2,000 a year at a time when teachers made $450 to $650 and domestic help $250 to $350. But most prospectors at best earned only enough to go elsewhere, perhaps buy some land, and try again. Nevertheless, the production of millions of ounces of gold and silver stimulated the economy, lured new foreign investors, and helped usher the United States into the mainstream of the world economy.

Progress came at a price. The long-term cost to the environment to extract these metals was high. Hydraulic mining, which used water cannons to dislodge minerals, polluted rivers, turned creeks brown, and flushed millions of tons of silt into valleys. The scarred landscape that remained was littered with rock and gravel filled with traces of mercury and cyanide, and nothing would grow on it. Smelters spewed dense smoke containing lead, arsenic, and other carcinogenic chemicals on those who lived nearby and often made them sick. The destruction to the environment is still evident today.
**Cowboys and the Cattle Frontier**

Like the feverish expansion of the mining frontier during the 1860s and 1870s, open-range cattle ranching boomed in these same decades. In this case, astute businessmen and railroad entrepreneurs, eager to fund their new investments in miles of track, promoted cattle herding as the new route to fame and fortune. The cowboy, once scorned as a ne’er-do-well and drifter, was now glorified as a man of rough-hewn integrity and self-reliant strength.

In 1868, Joseph G. McCoy, a young cattle dealer from Springfield, Illinois, shrewdly combined organizational and promotional skills to turn the cattle industry into a new money-maker. With the forced relocation of the Plains Indians onto reservations and the extension of the railroads into Kansas in the post–Civil War period, McCoy realized that cattle dealers could now amass enormous fortunes by raising steers cheaply in Texas and bringing them north for shipment to eastern urban markets (see Map 17.5).

McCoy built a new stockyard in Abilene, Kansas. By guaranteeing to transport his steers in railcars to hungry eastern markets, he obtained a five-dollar kickback from the railroads on each cattle car shipped. To make the overland cattle drives from Texas to Abilene easier, McCoy also helped survey and shorten the Chisholm Trail in Kansas. Finally, in a clever feat of showmanship, he organized the first Wild West show, sending four Texas cowboys to St. Louis and Chicago, where they staged roping and riding exhibitions that attracted exuberant crowds. At the end of his first year in business, thirty-five thousand steers were sold in Abilene; the following year the number more than doubled.

The great *cattle drives* of the 1860s and 1870s turned into a bonanza for herd owners. Steers purchased in Texas at nine dollars a head could be sold in Abilene, after deducting four dollars in trail expenses, for twenty-eight dollars. A herd of two thousand head could thus bring a tidy thirty-thousand-dollar profit. But the cattlemen, like the grain growers farther north on the Great Plains, lived at the mercy of high interest rates and an unstable market. During the financial panic of 1873, cattle drovers, unable to get extensions on their loans, fell into bankruptcy by the hundreds.

Little of the money made by the large-scale cattle ranchers found its way into the pockets of the cowboys themselves. The typical cowpunchers who drove herds through the dirt and dust from southern Texas to Abilene earned a mere thirty dollars a month, about the same as common laborers. They also braved the gangs of cattle thieves that operated along the trails. The most notorious of the cattle rustlers, William H. Bonney, better known as Billy the Kid, may have murdered as many as eleven men before he was killed by a sheriff in 1881 at the age of twenty-one. The long hours, low pay, and hazardous work discouraged older ranch hands from applying. Most cowboys were men in their teens and twenties who worked for a year or two and then pursued different livelihoods.

Of the estimated 35,000 to 55,000 men who rode the trails in these years, nearly one-fifth were black or Mexican. Barred by discrimination from many other trades, blacks enjoyed the freedom of life on the trail. Although they were excluded from the position of trail boss, they distinguished themselves as resourceful and shrewd cowpunchers. **Nat Love**, the son of Tennessee slaves, left for Kansas after the Civil War to work for Texas cattle companies. As chief brander, he moved through Texas and Arizona “dancing, drinking, and shooting up the town.” By his own account, he was “wild, reckless, free,” and “afraid of nothing.” On July 4, 1876, when the Black Hills gold
rush was in full swing. Love delivered three thousand head of cattle to a point near the hills and rode into Deadwood to celebrate. Local miners and gamblers had raised prize money for roping and shooting contests, and Nat Love won both, as well as a new title, Deadwood Dick.

Close relationships sometimes developed between black and white cowboys. Shortly before Charles Goodnight, a white pioneer trailblazer, died in 1929, he recalled of the black cowboy Bose Ikard, a former slave, that "he was my detective, banker, and everything else in Colorado, New Mexico, and the other wild country I was in. The nearest and only bank was at Denver, and when we carried money I gave it to Bose." Goodnight revealed much about the economic situation of blacks on the Plains, however, when he added that "a thief would never think of robbing him [Ikard]—never think of looking in a Negro's bed for money."

The cattle bonanza, which peaked between 1880 and 1885, produced more than 4.5 million head of cattle for eastern markets. (See Beyond America—Global Interactions: Cattle-Raising in the Americas.) Prices began to sag as early as 1882, however, and many ranchers plunged heavily into debt. When President Grover Cleveland, trying to improve federal observance of Indian treaties, ordered cattlemen to remove their stock from the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation in 1885, two hundred thousand more cattle were crowded onto already overgrazed ranges. That same year and the following two of the coldest and snowiest winters on record combined with summer droughts and Texas fever to destroy nearly 90 percent of the cattle in some regions, pushing thousands of ranchers into bankruptcy. The cattle industry lived on, but railroad expansion brought the days of the open range and the great cattle drives to an end. As had the mining frontier, the cattle frontier left behind memories of individual daring, towering fortunes for some, and hard times for many.

Cattle Towns and Prostitutes

One legacy of the cattle boom was the growth of cities like Abilene, Kansas, which shipped steers to Chicago and eastern markets. Like other cattle towns, Abilene went through an early period of violence that saw cowboys pulling down the walls of the jail as it was being built. But the town quickly established a police force to maintain law and order. City ordinances forbade carrying firearms and regulated saloons, gambling, and prostitution. James B. "Wild Bill" Hickok served as town marshal in 1871, but his tenure was less eventful than legend had it. Dime novelists described him as "a veritable terror to bad men on the border," but during his term as Abilene's lawman, Hickok killed just two men, one of them by mistake. Transient, unruly types certainly gave a distinctive flavor to cattle towns like Abilene, Wichita, and Dodge City, but the overall homicide rates there were not unusually high.

If cattle towns were neither as violent nor as lawless as legend would have it, they did still experience a lively business in prostitution, as did most cities at this time. Given the large numbers of unattached young men and numerous saloons (Abilene, in the 1870s, with a permanent population of 500, had 32 drinking establishments), prostitution thrived. Prostitutes came from all social classes and from as far away as China, Ireland, Germany, and Mexico. Some became prostitutes as an escape from domestic violence or because of economic hardship. Others, like the Chinese, were forced into the trade. But whatever the reasons for entering the business, prostitutes risked venereal disease, physical abuse, and drug and alcohol addiction.

As western towns became more settled, the numbers of women in other occupations increased. Some found work as cooks or laundresses on ranches. Others married merchants, doctors, and businessmen. Although few of the first generation rode the range, their daughters became increasingly involved in the everyday work of the ranch and became proficient riders themselves.

Bonanza Farms

The enthusiasm that permeated mining and ranching in the 1870s and 1880s also percolated into agriculture. Like the gold rushes and cattle bonanzas, the wheat boom in the Dakota Territory started small but rapidly attracted large capital investments that produced the nation's first agribusinesses.

The boom began during the Panic of 1873, when the failure of numerous banks caused the price of Northern Pacific Railroad bonds to plummet. The railroad responded by exchanging land for its depreciated bonds. Speculators, including the railroad's own president, George W. Cass, jumped at the opportunity and purchased more than three hundred thousand acres in the fertile Red River valley of North Dakota for between fifty cents and a dollar an acre.

Operating singly or in groups, the speculators established factory-like ten-thousand-acre farms, each run by a hired manager, and invested heavily in labor and equipment. On the Cass-Cheney-Dalrymple farm near Fargo, North Dakota, which covered an area six miles long by four miles wide, fifty or sixty plows rumbled across the flat landscape on a typical spring day. The New York Tribune reported that Cass, who had invested fifty thousand dollars for land and equipment, paid all his expenses plus the cost of the ten thousand acres with his first harvest alone.
The publicity generated by the tremendous success of a few large investors like Cass and Oliver Dalrymple led to an unprecedented wheat boom in the Red River valley in 1880. Eastern banking syndicates and small farmers alike rushed to buy land. North Dakota’s population tripled in the 1880s. Wheat production skyrocketed to almost 29 million bushels by the end of the decade. But the profits so loudly celebrated in the eastern press soon evaporated. By 1890, some Red River valley farmers were destitute. The wheat boom collapsed for a variety of reasons. Overproduction, high investment costs, too little or too much rain, excessive reliance on one crop, and depressed grain prices on the international market all undercut farmers’ earnings. Large-scale farmers who had invested in hopes of getting rich felt lucky just to survive. Oliver Dalrymple lamented in 1889 that “it seems as if the time has come when there is no money in wheat raising.”

Large-scale farms proved most successful in California’s Central Valley. Using canals and other irrigation systems to water their crops, farmers were growing higher-priced specialty crops and had created new cooperative marketing associations for cherries, apricots, grapes, and oranges by the mid-1880s. Led by the California Citrus Growers’ Association, which used the “Sunkist” trademark for their oranges, large-scale agribusinesses in California were shipping a variety of fruits and vegetables in refrigerated train cars to midwestern and eastern markets by 1900.

The Oklahoma Land Rush, 1889

As farmers in the Dakotas and Minnesota were enduring poor harvests and falling prices, hard-pressed would-be homesteaders greedily eyed the Indian Territory, as present-day Oklahoma was then known. The federal government, considering much of this land virtually worthless, had reserved it for the Five Civilized Tribes since the 1830s. Because these tribes (except for some Cherokees) had sided with the Confederacy during the Civil War, Washington had punished them by settling thousands of Indians from other tribes on lands in the western part of the territory. By the 1880s, land-hungry non-Indians argued that the Civilized Tribes’ betrayal of the Union justified further confiscation of their land.

In 1889, over the Native Americans’ protests, Congress transferred to the federally owned public domain nearly 2 million acres in the central part of the Oklahoma Territory that had not been specifically assigned to any Indian tribe. At noon on April 22, 1889, thousands of men, women, and children in buggies and wagons stampeded into the new lands to stake out homesteads. (Other settlers, the so-called Sooners, had illegally arrived earlier and were already plowing the fields.) Before nightfall tent communities had risen at Oklahoma City and Guthrie near stations on the Santa Fe Railroad. Nine weeks later, six thousand homestead claims had been filed. In the next decade, the Dawes Severalty Act broke up the Indian reservations into individual allotments and opened the surplus to non-Indian settlement (see Map 17.6). The Curtis Act in 1898 dissolved the Indian Territory and abolished tribal governments.

The Oklahoma land rush demonstrated the continuing power of the frontier myth, which tied “free” land to the ideal of economic opportunity. Despite early obstacles—the 1889 rush occurred too late in the season for most settlers to plant a full crop, and a drought parched the land the following year—Oklahoma farmers remained
Nineteenth-century dime novels and Wild West Shows celebrated cowboys as quintessentially American—
independent, self-reliant, tough, and occasionally vio-
lent. Driving herds of cattle north from Texas to Kansas,
the cowboys, who rode the open range from the end of
the Civil War through the mid-1880s, appeared to be the
unique product of the American West. From a more
global perspective, however, North-American cowboys
shared much in common with the Mexican vaqueros
and Argentinian gauchos. Like their counterparts in
Latin and South America, they drew on a long tradition
of cattle herding that had begun centuries earlier in

Spanish conquistadors and English colonists brought
to the New World their practice of raising beef cattle on
the open range rather than in fixed enclosures. In sixteenth-
century Mexico, African slaves often joined mixed-bloods
of Spanish and Indian ancestry to brand and tend cattle.
On the rich grasslands of Argentina, horsemen first hunted
wild cattle that had escaped earlier settlements. Later, after
the Indians were driven off the open range, these horse-
men, now called gauchos, tended cattle on large ranches.

Gauchos and cowboys were colorful characters, usu-
ally young men, often from lower-class backgrounds.
The English naturalist, Charles Darwin, visiting Argentina
in 1833, described them as being “generally tall
handsome, but with a proud and dissolute expression of countenance. They frequently wear their mustaches, and long black hair curling down their backs. With their brightly-colored garments, great spurs clanking about their heels, and knives stuck as daggers (and often so used) at their waists, they look a very different race of men from what might be expected from their name of Gauchos, or simple countrymen.” Like cowboys, they busted broncos, taming the wild horses to accept riders, and rounded up strays. They also hunted wild ostriches, whose feathers fetched high prices in Europe. As in North America, some gauchos became bandits, which added to their romantic appeal.

Gauchos and cowboys, like other cattle herders around the world, whether Russian Cossacks, South African Dutch farmers, or Canadian cowhands, were often skilled horsemen. American cowboys drew on both Anglo and Hispanic traditions. Unlike the gauchos in Argentina who used bolas, an Indian invention of three balls connected by rawhide thongs, to entangle a steer’s feet and immobilize it, American cowboys used the Hispanic lariat to rope the necks of their cattle and place them in a corral. Like British herdsmen who used dogs, American cowboys taught their horses to maneuver quickly and sharply to keep the herd in line or to cut out a steer to be branded. Like their counterparts in Canada, they organized rodeos to show off their riding and lassoing skills.

Although horses were universally used to herd cattle throughout the Americas, each open-range cattle-raising region had its own distinctive features. In California, where the open-range cattle boom peaked in the decade after 1848, Hispanic cowhands used rawhide lassos, which they looped around the saddle horn to immobilize lassos, and wore the Spanish great-rowel spurs over soft shoes. Since Anglo-Texans adapted British cattle-herding practices that used abrupt turns to cut a steer from the herd, they modified the traditional Spanish saddle by adding a second belt to hold it more securely on the horse, and adopted the pointed-toe, high-heeled riding boot, which would hold the boot, in the stirrup during these tight turns. Cattle-raisers on the Great Plains, while following many Texas cowboy practices, added river irrigation to grow hay fields to help tide their herds over the harsh winters. Canadian cattlemen, in contrast, employed acculturated Indians as cowhands and sometimes followed British practices and used collie dogs as well as horses to help herd cattle.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the cattle booms in both North and South America that depended on open-range grazing practices had passed. By maximizing herd size and fertility, cattlemen had inadvertently destroyed perennial grasses, damaged the landscape, and in some cases caused desertification. Farmers and sheep-raisers competed for grazing land and fenced off access to many ranges. At the same time, the extension of railroad lines made it possible to ship cattle directly from ranches to urban areas, a practice that fundamentally changed the livestock industry. In both North and South America, large-scale ranchers took control of cattle-raising and kept wages low. British investment syndicates, for example, purchased large ranches in Texas and Wyoming where they raised immense herds for eastern urban markets.

Not surprisingly, the idealization and romanticization of the cowboy that occurred after open-range grazing had disappeared in North America produced similar celebrations of gauchos and vaqueros in Argentina and Mexico. In all three areas, the reality was different. The colorful cowhands who had stirred the popular imagination as symbols of a freer, more independent way of life had been reduced to seasonal laborers with little chance of advancement.

Questions for Analysis

- What traditions shaped open-range ranching in the Americas?
- What was the popular mythic image of the cowboy, the vaquero, and the gaucho?
- What was the environmental impact of open-range grazing?
optimistic about their chances of making it on the last frontier. Most survived because they were fortunate enough to have obtained fertile land in an area where the normal rainfall was thirty inches, ten inches more than in the semiarid regions farther west. Still, within two generations a combination of exploitative farming, poor land management, and sporadic drought would place Oklahoma at the desolate center of what in the 1930s would be called the dust bowl (see Chapter 24).

**The West of Life and Legend**

In 1893, four years after the last major tract of western Indian land, the Oklahoma Territory, was opened to non-Indian settlement, a young Wisconsin historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, delivered a lecture entitled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” “[T]he frontier has gone,” declared Turner, “and with its going has closed the first period of American history.” Although Turner’s assertion that the frontier was closed was based on a Census Bureau announcement, it was inaccurate (more western land would be settled in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth). But his linking of economic opportunity with the transformation of the trans-Mississippi West caught the popular imagination and launched a new school of historical inquiry into the effects of the frontier on U.S. history.

Scholars now recognize that many parts of Turner’s “frontier thesis,” particularly its ethnocentric omission of Native Americans’ claims to the land, were inaccurate. Yet his idealized view of the West did reflect ideas popular among his contemporaries in the 1890s. As farmers, miners, ranchers, Indian agents, and prostitutes had pursued their varied activities in the real West, a parallel legendary West had taken deep root in the American imagination. In the nineteenth century, this mythic West was a product of novels, songs, and paintings. In the twentieth century, it would be perpetuated by movies, radio programs, and television shows. The legend merits attention, for its evolution is fascinating and its influence has been far-reaching.

**The American Adam and the Dime-Novel Hero**

In the early biographies of frontiersmen like Daniel Boone and in the wilderness novels of James Fenimore Cooper, the western hero’s personal development sometimes parallels, but more often runs counter to, the interests of society. Mid-nineteenth-century writers, extending the theme of the western wilderness as an alternative to society, presented the frontiersman as a kind of mythic American Adam—simple, virtuous, and innocent—untainted by a corrupt social order. For example, an early biographer of Kit Carson, the Kentucky-born guide who made one of the first recorded crossings of California’s Mojave Desert in 1830, depicted him as a perfect antidote to the evils of refined society, an individual of “genuine simplicity, . . . truthfulness . . . [and] bravery.” At the end of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck rejects the constraints of settled society as represented by Aunt Sally and heads west with the declaration, “I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before.” In this version of the legend, the West is a place of adventure, romance, or contemplation where one can escape from society and its pressures.

But even as this conception of the myth was being popularized, another powerful theme had emerged as well. The authors of the dime novels of the 1860s and 1870s offered the image of the western frontiersman as a new masculine ideal, the tough guy who fights for truth and honor. In *Buffalo Bill: King of the Border Men* (1869), a dime novel loosely based on real-life William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody, Edward Judson (who published under the name Ned Buntline) created an idealized hero who is a powerful moral force as he drives off treacherous Indians and rounds up villainous cattle rustlers.

Cody himself, playing upon the public fascination with cowboys, organized his own *Wild West Show* in 1883. In the show, which toured the East Coast and Europe, cowboys engaged in mock battles with Indians, reinforcing the dime-novel image of the West as an arena of moral encounter where virtue always triumphed.

**Revitalizing the Frontier Legend**

Eastern writers and artists eagerly embraced both versions of the myth—the West as a place of escape from society and the West as a stage on which the moral conflicts confronting society were played out. Three young members of the eastern establishment, Theodore Roosevelt, Frederic Remington, and Owen Wister, spent much time in the West in the 1880s, and each was intensely affected by the adventure.

Each man found precisely what he was looking for. The frontier that Roosevelt glorified in such books as *The Winning of the West* (four volumes, 1889–1896), and that Remington portrayed in his statues and paintings, was a stark physical and moral environment that stripped away all social artifice and tested each individual’s character. Drawing on a popular version of English scientist Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory, which characterized life as a struggle in which only the fittest survived, Roosevelt and Remington exalted the disappearing frontier as the proving
ground for a new kind of virile manhood and the last out-
post of an honest and true social order.

This version of the frontier myth reached its apogee in
Owen Wister’s enormously popular novel *The Virginian* (1902), later reincarnated as a 1929 Gary Cooper movie and a 1960s television series. In Wister’s tale, the elemen-
tal physical and social environment of the Great Plains produces individuals like his unnamed cowboy hero, “the
Virginian,” an honest, strong, and compassionate man, quick to help the weak and fight the wicked. The Virginian is one of nature’s aristocrats—ill-educated and unsophis-
ticated but tough, steady, and deeply moral. The Virginian sums up his own moral code in describing his view of
God’s justice: “He plays a square game with us.” For Wis-
ter, as for Roosevelt and Remington, the cowboy was the
Christian knight on the Plains, indifferent to material gain as he upheld virtue, pursued justice, and attacked evil.

Needless to say, the western myth was far removed
from the reality of the West. Critics delighted in pointing
out that not one scene in *The Virginian* showed the hard
physical labor of the cattle range. The idealized version
of the West also glossed over the darker underside of
frontier expansion—the brutalities of Indian warfare, the forced removal of the Indians to reservations, the
racist discrimination against Mexican-Americans and
blacks, the risks and perils of commercial agriculture and cattle-raising, and the boom-and-bust mentality
rooted in the selfish exploitation of natural resources.

Further, the myth obscured the complex links be-
tween the settlement of the frontier and the emergence
of the United States as a major industrialized nation in-
creasingly tied to a global economy. Eastern and foreign
capitalists controlled large-scale mining, cattle, and
agricultural operations in the West. The technical know-
how of industrial America underlay the marvels of west-
ern agricultural productivity. Without the railroad, that quintessential symbol of the new industrial order, the
transformation of the West would have been far slower.

**Beginning a National Parks Movement**

Despite its one-sided and idealized vision, Owen Wister’s celebration of the western experience reinforced a growing recognition that many unique features of the western land-
scape were being threatened by overeager entrepreneurs.
One important byproduct of the western legend was a surge of public support for creating national parks and the beginning of an organized conservation movement.

Those who went west in the 1860s and 1870s to map the rugged terrain of the High Plains and the Rocky Mountains were often awed by the natural beauty of the landscape. Major John Wesley Powell, the one-armed veteran of the Civil War who charted the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon in 1869, waxed euphoric about its towering rock formations and powerful cataracts. “A beautiful view is presented. The river turns sharply to the east, and seems enclosed by a wall, set with a million brilliant gems... On coming nearer, we find fountains bursting from the rock, high overhead, and the spray in the sunshine forms the gems which bedeck the way.”

In his important study, Report on the Lands of the Arid Regions of the United States (1878), Powell argued that settlers needed to change their pattern of settlement and readjust their expectations about the use of water in the dry terrain west of the hundredth meridian. Recognizing that incoming farmers had often mistakenly believed that rain would miraculously follow the plow, Powell called for public ownership and governmental control of watersheds, irrigation, and public lands, a request that went largely unheeded.

Around the time Powell was educating Congress about the arid nature of the far West, a group of adventurers led by General Henry D. Washburn visited the hot springs and geysers near the Yellowstone River in northwestern Wyoming and eastern Montana. They were stunned by what they saw. “You can stand in the valley of the Yosemite [the California park land protected by Congress in 1864],” wrote one of the party, “and look up its mile of vertical granite, and distinctly recall its minutest feature; but amid the canyon and falls, the boiling springs and sulphur mountain, and, above all, the mud volcano and the geysers of the Yellowstone, your memory becomes filled and clogged with objects new in experience, wonderful in extent, and possessing unlimited grandeur and beauty.” Overwhelmed by the view, the Washburn explorers abandoned their plan to claim the area for the Northern Pacific Railroad and instead petitioned Congress to protect it from settlement, occupancy, and sale. Congress responded in 1872 by creating Yellowstone National Park to “provide for the preservation... for all time, [of] mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park... in their natural condition.” In doing so, they excluded the Native Americans who had long considered the area a prime hunting range.

These first steps to conserve a few of the West’s unique natural sites reflected the beginning of a changed awareness of the environment. In his influential study Man and Nature in 1864, George Perkins Marsh, an architect and politician from Vermont, had attacked the view that nature existed to be tamed and conquered. Cautioning Americans to curb their destructive use of the landscape, he warned the public to change its ways. “Man,” he wrote, “is everywhere a disturbing agent. Wherever he plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discords.”

Marsh’s plea for conservation found its most eloquent support in the work of John Muir, a Scottish immigrant who had grown up in Wisconsin. Temporarily blinded by an accident, Muir left for San Francisco in 1869 and quickly fell in love with the redwood forests. For the next forty years, he tramped the rugged mountains of the West and campaigned for their preservation. A romantic at heart, he struggled to experience the wilderness at its most elemental level. Once trekking high in the Rockies during a summer storm, he climbed the tallest pine he could find and swayed back and forth in the raging wind.

Muir became the late nineteenth century’s most articulate publicist for wilderness protection. “Climb the mountains and get their good tidings,” he advised city-dwellers. “Nature’s peace will flow into you as the sunshine into the trees. The winds will blow their freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.” Muir’s spirited campaign to protect the wilderness contributed strongly to the establishment of Yosemite National Park in 1890. Two years later, the Sierra Club, an organization created to encourage the enjoyment and protection of the wilderness in the mountain regions of the Pacific coast, made Muir its first president.

The precedent established by the creation of Yellowstone National Park remained ambiguous well into the twentieth century. Other parks that preserved the high rugged landforms of the West were often chosen because Congress viewed the sites as worthless for other purposes (see Map 30.2). Awareness of the need for biological conservation would not emerge until later in the twentieth century (see Chapter 21).

 Ironically, despite the crusades of Muir, Powell, and Marsh to educate the public about conservation, the campaign for wilderness preservation reaffirmed the image of the West as a unique region whose magnificent landscape produced tough individuals of superior ability. Overlooking the senseless violence and ruthless exploitation of the land, contemporary writers, historians, and publicists proclaimed that the settlement of the final frontier marked a new stage in the history of civilization, and they kept alive the legend of the western frontier as a seedbed of American virtues.
Conclusion

The image of the mythic West has long obscured the transformation of people and landscape that took place there in the second half of the nineteenth century. Precisely because industrialization, urbanization, and immigration were altering the rest of the nation in unsettling ways (see Chapters 18 and 19), many Americans embraced the legend of the West as a visionary, uncomplicated, untainted Eden of social simplicity and moral clarity. The mythic West represented what the entire society had once been like (or so Americans chose to believe), before the advent of cities, factories, and masses of immigrants.

But the reality of westward expansion was more complex than the mythmakers acknowledged. Under the banner of economic opportunity and individual achievement, nineteenth-century Americans used the army to subdue the Indians, undermine their traditional way of
life, and drive them onto reservations. They also ruthlessly exploited the region's vast natural resources. In less than three decades, they killed off the enormous buffalo herds, tore up the prairie sod, and littered parts of the landscape with mining debris.

Thus the mythic view of the frontier West as the arena for society building and economic opportunity obscured the dark side of the expansion onto the Great Plains and beyond. Despite the promise of the Homestead Act, which offered 160 acres of free land to those who would settle on it for five years, much of the best land had been given to railroads to encourage their expansion. Speculators had grabbed other prime locations. Homesteaders were often forced to settle on poorer-quality tracts in areas where rainfall was marginal. In many places, large business enterprises in mining, ranching, and agribusiness, financed by eastern and European bankers, shoved aside the small entrepreneur and took control of the choicest natural resources.

Nevertheless, the settlement of the vast internal continental land did reinforce the popular image of the United States as a land of unprecedented economic opportunity and as a seedbed for democracy. Although the exclusion of blacks, Indians, and Spanish-speaking Americans belied the voiced commitment to an open society, the founding of new towns, the creation of new territorial and state governments, and the interaction of peoples of different races and ethnicities tested these ideas and, with time, forced their rethinking. The increasing willingness to give women the vote in many of the new western states would spread within the next two decades.

Although the persistence of the mythic view of the West served to hide the more ruthless and destructive features of western expansionism, the experiences gained from settling the interior territories and the utilization of the region's extensive physical resources led to the beginnings of the conservation movement and a reassessment of traditional American views of the environment. By the turn of the century, the thriving farms, ranches, mines, and cities of that region would help make the United States into one of the world's most prosperous nations.

### Key Terms

- Plains Indians
- William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody
- Fort Laramie Treaty
- Sitting Bull
- Helen Hunt Jackson
- Dawes Severalty Act
- Ghost Dance
- Wounded Knee
- Edmunds-Tucker Act
- White Caps
- Comstock Lode
- cattle drives
- Nat Love
- Curtis Act
- Wild West Show
- Owen Wister
- John Wesley Powell
- Yellowstone National Park
- George Perkins Marsh
- John Muir
- For Further Reference
women’s experiences on the American and African frontiers.