

# The Great West and the Agricultural Revolution

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1865–1896

UP TO OUR OWN DAY AMERICAN HISTORY HAS BEEN IN A LARGE DEGREE THE HISTORY OF THE COLONIZATION OF THE GREAT WEST. THE EXISTENCE OF AN AREA OF FREE LAND, ITS CONTINUOUS RECESSION, AND THE ADVANCE OF AMERICAN SETTLEMENT WESTWARD, EXPLAIN AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT.

FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER, 1893

When the Civil War crashed to a close, the frontier line was still wavering westward. A long fringe of settlement, bulging outward here and there, ran roughly north through central Texas and on to the Canadian border. Between this jagged line and the settled areas on the Pacific slope, there were virtually no white people. The few exceptions were the islands of Mormons in Utah, occasional trading posts and gold camps, and several scattered Spanish Mexican settlements throughout the Southwest.

Sprawling in expanse, the Great West was a rough square that measured about a thousand miles on each side. Embracing mountains, plateaus, deserts, and plains, it was the habitat of the Indian, the buffalo, the wild horse, the prairie dog, and the coyote. Twenty-five years later—that is, by 1890—the entire domain had

been carved into states and the four territories of Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and “Indian Territory,” or Oklahoma. Pioneers flung themselves greedily on this enormous prize, as if to ravish it. Probably never before in human experience had so huge an area been transformed so rapidly.



### The Clash of Cultures on the Plains

Native Americans numbered about 360,000 in 1860, many of them scattered about the vast grasslands of the trans-Missouri West. But to their eternal misfortune, the Indians stood in the path of the advancing white pioneers. An inevitable clash loomed between an

acquisitive, industrializing civilization and the Indians' highly evolved lifeways, adapted over centuries to the demanding environment of the sparsely watered western plains.

Migration and conflict—and sometimes dramatic cultural change—were no strangers in the arid West, even before the whites began to arrive. The Comanches had driven the Apaches off the central plains into the upper Rio Grande valley in the eighteenth century. Harried by the Mandans and Chippewas, the Cheyenne had abandoned their villages along the upper reaches of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers in the century before the Civil War. The Sioux, displaced from the Great Lakes woodlands in the late eighteenth century, emerged onto the plains to prey upon the Crows, Kiowas, and Pawnees. Mounted on Spanish-introduced horses, peoples like the Cheyenne and the Sioux transformed themselves within just a few generations from foot-traveling, crop-growing villagers to wide-ranging nomadic traders and deadly efficient buffalo hunters—so deadly that they threatened to extinguish the vast bison herds that had lured them onto the plains in the first place.

When white soldiers and settlers edged onto the plains in the decades just before the Civil War, they accelerated a fateful cycle that exacerbated already fierce enmities among the Indians and ultimately undermined the foundations of Native American culture. White intruders unwittingly spread cholera, typhoid, and smallpox among the native peoples of the

*As early as the Coronado expedition in 1541, Spanish explorers marveled at the Plains Indians' reliance on the buffalo:*

“With the skins [the Indians] build their houses; with the skins they clothe and shoe themselves; from the skins they make ropes and also obtain wool. From the sinews they make thread, with which they sew their clothing and likewise their tents. From the bones they shape awls, and the dung they use for firewood, since there is no fuel in all that land. The bladders serve as jugs and drinking vessels. They sustain themselves on the flesh of the animals, eating it slightly roasted and sometimes uncooked. Taking it in their teeth, they pull with one hand; with the other they hold a large flint knife and cut off mouthfuls, swallowing it half chewed, like birds. They eat raw fat, without warming it.”

plains, with devastating results. Equally harmful, whites put further pressure on the steadily shrinking bison population by hunting and by grazing their own live-



**The Buffalo Hunt, by Frederic Remington, 1890** A New Yorker who first went west at the age of nineteen as a cowboy and ranch cook, Remington (1861–1909) became the foremost artist of the vanishing way of life of the old Far West. Once a common sight on the high plains, the kind of buffalo kill that Remington records here was a great rarity by the time he painted this scene in 1890. The once-vast herds of bison had long since been reduced to a pitiful few by the white man's rifles.



**Pawnee Indians in Front of Their Lodge, c. 1868** The Pawnees of central Nebraska never made war on the United States, which they regarded as an ally in their own struggles against the marauding Sioux.

stock on the prairie grasses. As the once-mammoth buffalo herds dwindled, warfare intensified among the plains tribes for ever-scarcer hunting grounds. “I am traveling all over this country, and am cutting the trees of my brothers,” an Arikara Indian told a U.S. Army officer along the Platte River in 1835. “I am killing their buffalo before my friends arrive so that when they come up, they can find no buffalo.”

The federal government tried to pacify the Plains Indians by signing treaties with the “chiefs” of various “tribes” at Fort Laramie in 1851 and at Fort Atkinson in 1853. The treaties marked the beginnings of the reservation system in the West. They established boundaries for the territory of each tribe and attempted to separate the

Indians into two great “colonies” to the north and south of a corridor of intended white settlement.

But the white treaty makers misunderstood both Indian government and Indian society. “Tribes” and “chiefs” were often fictions of the white imagination, which could not grasp the fact that Native Americans, living in scattered bands, usually recognized no authority outside their immediate family, or perhaps a village elder. And the nomadic culture of the Plains Indians was utterly alien to the concept of living out one’s life in the confinement of a defined territory.

In the 1860s the federal government intensified this policy and herded the Indians into still smaller confines, principally the “Great Sioux reservation” in Dakota Territory, and Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma, into which dozens of southern Plains tribes were forced.

The Indians surrendered their ancestral lands only when they had received solemn promises from Washington that they would be left alone and provided with food, clothing, and other supplies. Regrettably, the federal Indian agents were often corrupt. They palmed off moth-eaten blankets, spoiled beef, and other defective provisions on the friendless Indians. One of these cheating officials, on an annual salary of \$1,500, returned home after four years with an estimated “savings” of \$50,000.

For more than a decade after the Civil War, fierce warfare between Indians and the U.S. Army raged in

*One disheartened Indian complained to the white Sioux Commission created by Congress,*

“Tell your people that since the Great Father promised that we should never be removed we have been moved five times. . . . I think you had better put the Indians on wheels and you can run them about wherever you wish.”



**On the Southern Plains, by Frederic Remington, 1907**

various parts of the West. Army troops, many of them recent immigrants who had, ironically, fled Europe to avoid military service, met formidable adversaries in the Plains Indians, whose superb horsemanship gave them baffling mobility. Fully one-fifth of all U.S. Army personnel on the frontier were African American—dubbed “Buffalo Soldiers” by the Indians, supposedly because of the resemblance of their hair to the bison’s furry coat.



### **Receding Native Population**

The Indian wars in the West were often savage clashes. Aggressive whites sometimes shot peaceful Indians on sight, just to make sure they would give no trouble. At Sand Creek, Colorado, in 1864, Colonel J. M. Chivington’s militia massacred in cold blood some four hundred Indians who apparently thought they had been promised immunity. Women were shot praying for mercy, children had their brains dashed out, and braves were tortured, scalped, and unspeakably mutilated.

Cruelty begot cruelty. In 1866 a Sioux war party attempting to block construction of the Bozeman Trail to

the Montana goldfields ambushed Captain William J. Fetterman’s command of eighty-one soldiers and civilians in Wyoming’s Bighorn Mountains. The Indians left not a single survivor and grotesquely mutilated the corpses. One trooper’s face was spitted with 105 arrows. George Armstrong Custer, the buckskin-clad “boy general” of Civil War fame, now demoted to colonel and turned Indian fighter, wrote that Fetterman’s annihilation “awakened a bitter feeling toward the savage perpetrators.” The cycle of ferocious warfare intensified.

The Fetterman massacre led to one of the few—though short-lived—Indian triumphs in the plains wars. In another Treaty of Fort Laramie, signed in 1868, the government abandoned the Bozeman Trail. The sprawling “Great Sioux reservation” was guaranteed to the Sioux tribes. But in 1874 a new round of warfare with the Plains Indians began when Custer led a “scientific” expedition into the Black Hills of South Dakota (part of the Sioux reservation) and announced that he had discovered gold. Hordes of greedy gold-seekers swarmed into the Sioux lands. The aggrieved Sioux took to the warpath, inspired by the influential and wily Sitting Bull.

Colonel Custer’s Seventh Cavalry, nearly half of them immigrants, set out to suppress the Indians and to return



**Indian Wars, 1860–1890** Surrendering in 1877, Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé declared, “Our chiefs are killed. . . . The old men are all dead. . . . The little children are freezing to death. . . . I want to have time to look for my children. . . . Hear me, my chiefs. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.”

them to the reservation. Attacking what turned out to be a superior force of some 2,500 well-armed warriors camped along the Little Bighorn River in present-day Montana, the “White Chief with Yellow Hair” and his 264 officers and men were completely wiped out in 1876 when two supporting columns failed to come to their rescue.\* But in a series of battles across the northern plains in the ensuing months, the U.S. Army relentlessly hunted down the Indians who had humiliated Custer.

\*When whites wiped out Indians, the engagement (in white history books) was usually a “battle”; when Indians wiped out whites, it was a “massacre.” “Strategy” when practiced by Indians was “treachery.”

*A young lieutenant told Colonel Chivington that to attack the Indians would be a violation of pledges:*

“His reply was, bringing his fist down close to my face, ‘Damn any man who sympathizes with Indians.’ I told him what pledges were given the Indians. He replied that he ‘had come to kill Indians, and believed it to be honorable to kill Indians under any and all circumstances.’”



# MAKERS OF AMERICA

## The Plains Indians

The last of the native peoples of North America to bow before the military might of the whites, the Indians of the northern Great Plains long defended their lands and their ways of life against the American cavalry. After the end of the Indian wars, toward the close of the nineteenth century, the Plains tribes struggled on, jealously guarding their communities against white encroachment. Crowded onto reservations, subject to ever-changing federal Indian policies, assailed by corrupt settlers and Indian agents, the Plains Indians have nonetheless preserved much of their ancestral culture to this day.

Before Europeans first appeared in North America in the sixteenth century, the vast plain from northern Texas to Saskatchewan was home to some thirty different tribes. There was no typical Plains Indian; each tribe spoke a distinct language, practiced its own religion, and formed its own government. When members of different

bands met on the prairies, communication depended on a special sign language.

Indians had first trod the arid plains to pursue sprawling herds of antelope, elk, and especially buffalo. But these early peoples of the plains were not exclusively hunters: the women were expert farmers, coaxing lush gardens of pumpkins, squash, corn, and beans from the dry but fertile soil. Still, the shaggy pelt and heavy flesh of the buffalo constituted the staff of life on the plains. Hunted by men, the great bison were butchered by women, who used every part of the beast. They fashioned horns and hooves into spoons, and intestines into containers. They stretched sinews into strong bowstrings and wove buffalo hair into ropes. Meat not immediately eaten was pounded into pemmican—thin strips of smoked or sun-dried buffalo flesh mixed with berries and stuffed into rawhide bags.



A Comanche Village,  
by George Catlin, 1834



(above) **A Sioux Carving**  
Horses were essential to the culture of the Plains Indians, and they often carved likenesses of horses killed in battle. Note the red-stained holes depicting this horse's wounds.

(right) **A Cheyenne Cradleboard for Carrying a Baby**



**Chan-Chä-Uiá-Teüin, Teton Sioux Woman, by Karl Bodmer, c. 1830s** Bodmer, a German artist, painted this woman's portrait during an expedition to the Great Plains. Her name means "Woman of the Crow Nation," which seems to suggest that she was taken captive from the Sioux's mortal enemies, the Crows.

The nomadic Plains Indians sought what shelter they could in small bands throughout the winter, gathering together in summer for religious ceremonies, socializing, and communal buffalo hunts. At first these seasonal migrations required arduous loading and carting. The Indians carried all their possessions or heaped them on wheelless carts called travois, which were dragged by dogs—their only beasts of burden.

Then in the sixteenth century, the mounted Spanish *conquistadores* ventured into the New World. Their steeds—some of them escaping to become mustangs, the wild horses of the American West, and others acquired by the Indians in trade—quickly spread over the plains. The horse revolutionized Indian societies, turning the Plains tribes into efficient hunting machines that promised to banish hunger from the prairies. But the plains pony also ignited a furious competition for grazing lands, for trade goods, and for ever more horses, so that wars of aggression and of revenge became increasingly bitter and frequent.

The European invasion soon eclipsed the short-lived era of the horse. After many battles the Plains Indians found themselves crammed together on tiny reservations, clinging with tired but determined fingers to their traditions. Although much of Plains Indian culture persists to this day, the Indians' free-ranging way of life has passed into memory. As Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux, put it, "Once we were happy in our own country and we were seldom hungry, for then the two-leggeds and the four-leggeds lived together like relatives, and there was plenty for them and for us. But then the Wasichus [white people] came, and they made little islands for us . . . and always these islands are becoming smaller, for around them surges the gnawing flood of Wasichus."

When the Civil War closed, some 15 million of these meaty beasts were still grazing on the western plains. In 1868 a Kansas Pacific locomotive had to wait eight hours for a herd to amble across the tracks. Much of the food supply of the railroad construction gangs came from leathery buffalo steaks. William “Buffalo Bill” Cody—sinewy, telescope-eyed, and a crack shot—killed over 4,000 animals in eighteen months while employed by the Kansas Pacific.

With the building of the railroad, the massacre of the herds began in deadly earnest. The creatures were slain for their hides, for their tongues or a few other choice cuts, or for sheer amusement. “Sportsmen” on lurching railroad trains would lean out the windows and blaze away at the animals to satisfy their lust for slaughter or excitement. Such wholesale butchery left fewer than a thousand buffalo alive by 1885, and the once-numerous beasts were in danger of complete extinction. The whole story is a shocking example of the greed and waste that accompanied the conquest of the continent.

*Civil War veteran and long-time Indian fighter General Philip Sheridan (1831–1888) reflected on the wars against the Indians:*

“We took away their country and their means of support, broke up their mode of living, their habits of life, introduced disease and decay among them, and it was for this and against this they made war. Could anyone expect less?”

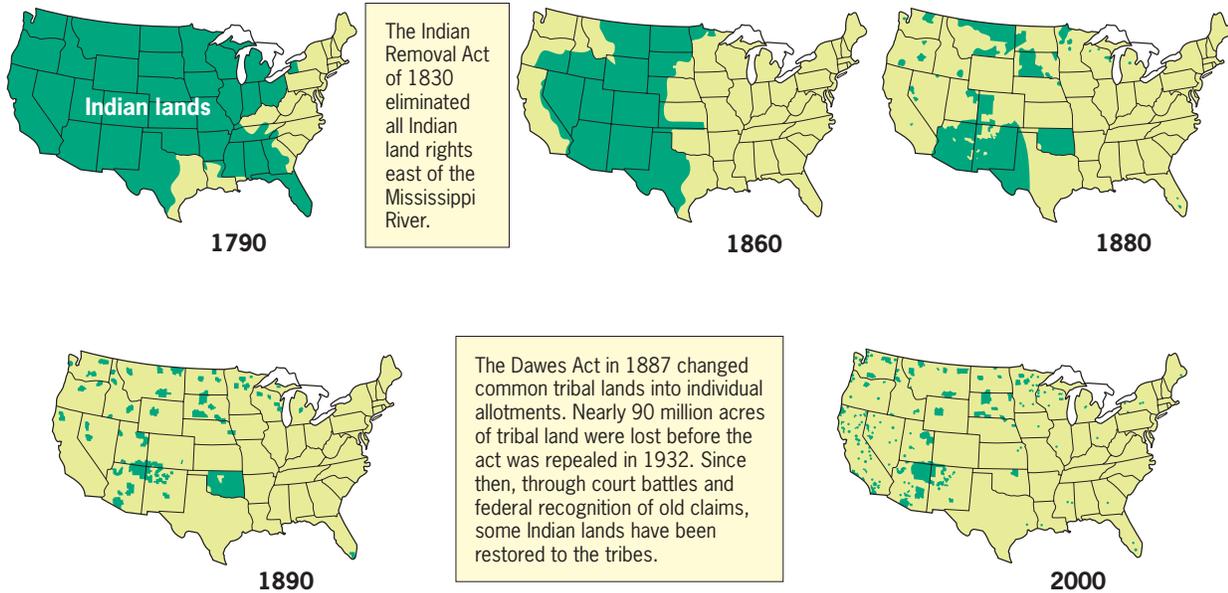
Jackson, a Massachusetts writer of children’s literature, pricked the moral sense of Americans in 1881 when she published *A Century of Dishonor*. The book chronicled the sorry record of government ruthlessness and chicanery in dealing with the Indians. Her later novel *Ramona* (1884), a love story of injustice to the California Indians, sold some 600,000 copies and further inspired sympathy for the Indians.

Debate seesawed. Humanitarians wanted to treat the Indians kindly and persuade them thereby to “walk the white man’s road.” Yet hard-liners insisted on the current policy of forced containment and brutal

  
**The End of the Trail**

By the 1880s the national conscience began to stir uneasily over the plight of the Indians. Helen Hunt

**Vanishing Lands** Once masters of the continent, Native Americans have been squeezed into just 2 percent of U.S. territory. (Source: Copyright © 2000 by *The New York Times*. Reprinted by permission.)





**Lakotas Receiving Rations at Standing Rock Reservation, ca. 1881** Once the scourge of the Plains, the Lakota (Sioux) were reduced by the 1890s to the humiliation of living on government handouts.

punishment. Neither side showed much respect for Native American culture. Christian reformers, who often administered educational facilities on the reservations, sometimes withheld food to force the Indians to give up their tribal religion and assimilate to white society. In 1884 these zealous white souls joined with military men in successfully persuading the federal government to outlaw the sacred Sun Dance. When the “Ghost Dance” cult later spread to the Dakota Sioux, the army bloodily stamped it out in 1890 at the so-called Battle of Wounded Knee. In the fighting thus provoked, an estimated two hundred Indian men, women, and children were killed, as well as twenty-nine invading soldiers.

The misbegotten offspring of the movement to reform Indian policy was the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887. Reflecting the forced-civilization views of the reformers, the act dissolved many tribes as legal entities, wiped out tribal ownership of land, and set up individual Indian family heads with 160 free acres. If the Indians behaved themselves like “good white settlers,” they would get full title to their holdings, as well as citizenship, in twenty-five years. The probationary period was later extended, but full citizenship was granted to all Indians in 1924.

Reservation land not allotted to the Indians under the Dawes Act was to be sold to railroads and white settlers, with the proceeds used by the federal government to educate and “civilize” the native peoples. In 1879 the government had already funded the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, where Native American children, separated from their tribes, were taught English and inculcated with white values and customs. “Kill the Indian and save the man” was the school founder’s motto. In the 1890s the government expanded its network of Indian boarding schools and sent “field

matrons” to the reservations to teach Native American women the art of sewing and to preach the virtues of chastity and hygiene.

The Dawes Act struck directly at tribal organization and tried to make rugged individualists out of the Indians. This legislation ignored the inherent reliance of traditional Indian culture on tribally held land, literally pulling the land out from under them. By 1900 Indians had lost 50 percent of the 156 million acres they had held just two decades earlier. The forced-assimilation doctrine of the Dawes Act remained the cornerstone of the government’s official Indian policy for nearly half a century, until the Indian Reorganization Act (the “Indian New Deal”) of 1934 partially reversed the individualistic approach and belatedly tried to restore the tribal basis of Indian life (see p. 784).

Under these new federal policies, defective though they were, the Indian population started to mount

*The Indian spokesman Plenty Coups said in 1909,*

“I see no longer the curling smoke rising from our lodge poles. I hear no longer the songs of the women as they prepare the meal. The antelope have gone; the buffalo wallows are empty. Only the wail of the coyote is heard. The white man’s medicine is stronger than ours. . . . We are like birds with a broken wing.”

slowly. The total number had been reduced by 1887 to about 243,000—the result of bullets, bottles, and bacteria—but the census of 2000 counted more than 1.5 million Native Americans, urban and rural.



### Mining: From Dishpan to Ore Breaker

The conquest of the Indians and the coming of the railroad were life-giving boons to the mining frontier. The golden gravel of California continued to yield “pay dirt,” and in 1858 an electrifying discovery convulsed Colorado. Avid “fifty-niners” or “Pikes Peakers” rushed west to rip at the ramparts of the Rockies. But there were more miners than minerals, and many gold-grubbers, with “Pikes Peak or Bust” inscribed on the canvas of their covered wagons, creaked wearily back with the added inscription, “Busted, by Gosh.” Yet countless bearded fortune-seekers stayed on, some to strip away the silver deposits, others to extract nonmetallic wealth from the earth in the form of golden grain.

“Fifty-niners” also poured feverishly into Nevada in 1859, after the fabulous Comstock Lode had been uncovered. A fantastic amount of gold and silver, worth more than \$340 million, was mined by the “Kings of the Comstock” from 1860 to 1890. The scantily populated state of Nevada, “child of the Comstock Lode,” was prematurely railroaded into the Union in 1864, partly to provide three electoral votes for President Lincoln.

Smaller “lucky strikes” drew frantic gold- and silver-seekers into Montana, Idaho, and other western states. Boomtowns, known as “Helldorados,” sprouted from the desert sands like magic. Every third cabin was a saloon, where sweat-stained miners drank adulterated liquor (“rotgut”) in the company of accommodating women. Lynch law and hempen vigilante justice, as in early California, preserved a crude semblance of order in the towns. And when the “diggings” petered out, the gold-seekers decamped, leaving eerily picturesque “ghost towns,” such as Virginia City, Nevada, silhouetted in the desert. Begun with a boom, these towns ended with a whimper.

Once the loose surface gold was gobbled up, ore-breaking machinery was imported to smash the gold-bearing quartz. This operation was so expensive that it could ordinarily be undertaken only by corporations pooling the wealth of stockholders. Gradually the age of big business came to the mining industry. Dusty, bewhiskered miners, dishpans in hand, were replaced by impersonal corporations, with their costly machinery

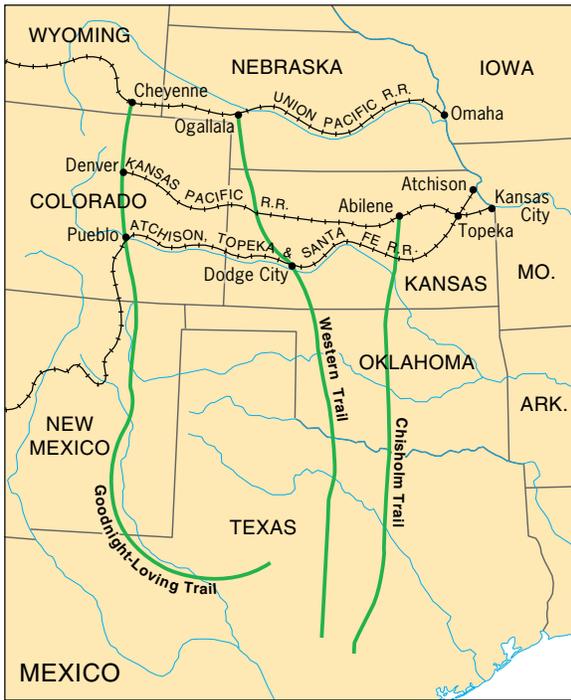


**Dance-Hall Girl, Virginia City, Nevada, c. 1890**  
Women as well as men sought their fortunes in the frontier West—especially in wide-open mining towns like Virginia City.

and trained engineers. The once-independent gold-washer became just another day laborer.

Yet the mining frontier had played a vital role in subduing the continent. Magnetlike, it attracted population and wealth, while advertising the wonders of the Wild West. Women as well as men found opportunity, running boardinghouses or working as prostitutes. They won a kind of equality on the rough frontier that earned them the vote in Wyoming (1869), Utah (1870), Colorado (1893), and Idaho (1896) long before their sisters in the East could cast a ballot.

The amassing of precious metals helped finance the Civil War, facilitated the building of railroads, and



Cattle Trails

intensified the already bitter conflict between whites and Indians. The outpouring of silver and gold enabled the Treasury to resume specie payments in 1879 and injected the silver issue into American politics. “Silver Senators,” representing the thinly peopled “acreage states” of the West, used their disproportionate influence to promote the interests of the silver miners. Finally, the mining frontier added to American folklore and literature, as the writings of Bret Harte and Mark Twain so colorfully attest.



### Beef Bonanzas and the Long Drive

When the Civil War ended, the grassy plains of Texas supported several million tough, long-horned cattle. These scrawny beasts, whose horn spreads sometimes reached eight feet, were killed primarily for their hides. There was no way of getting their meat profitably to market.

The problem of marketing was neatly solved when the transcontinental railroads thrust their iron fingers into the West. Cattle could now be shipped bodily to the



**Dressed to Kill** Cowboys came in all varieties and sizes in the wild and woolly frontier West—and in all kinds of garb as well.

stockyards, and under “beef barons” like the Swifts and Armour, the highly industrialized meatpacking business sprang into existence as a main pillar of the economy. Drawing upon the gigantic stockyards at Kansas City and Chicago, the meatpackers could ship their fresh products to the East Coast in the newly perfected refrigerator cars.

A spectacular feeder of the new slaughterhouses was the “Long Drive.” Texas cowboys—black, white, and Mexican—drove herds numbering from one thousand to ten thousand head slowly over the unfenced and unpeopled plains until they reached a railroad terminal. The bawling beasts grazed en route on the free government grass. Favorite terminal points were flyspecked “cow towns” like Dodge City—“the Bibulous Babylon of the Frontier”—and Abilene (Kansas), Ogallala (Nebraska), and Cheyenne (Wyoming). At Abilene order was maintained by Marshal James B. (“Wild Bill”) Hickok, a fabulous gunman who reputedly killed only in self-defense or in the line of duty and who was fatally shot in the back in 1876, while playing poker.

As long as lush grass was available, the Long Drive proved profitable—that is, to the luckier cattlemen who escaped Indians, stampedes, cattle fever, and other hazards. From 1866 to 1888, bellowing herds, totaling

over 4 million steers, were driven northward from the beef bowl of Texas. The steer was king in a Cattle Kingdom richly carpeted with grass.

What the Lord giveth, the Lord also can taketh away. The railroad made the Long Drive, and the railroad unmade the Long Drive, primarily because the locomotives ran both ways. The same rails that bore the cattle from the open range to the kitchen range brought out the homesteader and the shepherd. Both of these intruders, sometimes amid flying bullets, built barbed-wire fences that were too numerous to be cut down by the cowboys. Furthermore, the terrible winter of 1886–1887, with blinding blizzards reaching 68 degrees below zero, left thousands of dazed cattle starving and freezing. Overexpansion and overgrazing likewise took their toll, as the cowboys slowly gave way to plowboys.

The only escape for the stockmen was to make cattle-raising a big business and avoid the perils of overproduction. Breeders learned to fence their ranches, lay in winter feed, import blooded bulls, and produce fewer and meatier animals. They also learned to organize. The Wyoming Stock-Growers' Association, especially in the 1880s, virtually controlled the state and its legislature.

This was the heyday of the cowboy. The equipment of the cowhand—from “shooting irons” and ten-gallon hat to chaps and spurs—served a useful, not an orna-

mental, function. A “genuwine” gun-toting cowpuncher, riding where men were men and smelled like horses, could justifiably boast of his toughness.

These bowlegged Knights of the Saddle, with their colorful trappings and cattle-lulling songs, became part of American folklore. Many of them, perhaps five thousand, were blacks, who especially enjoyed the newfound freedom of the open range.

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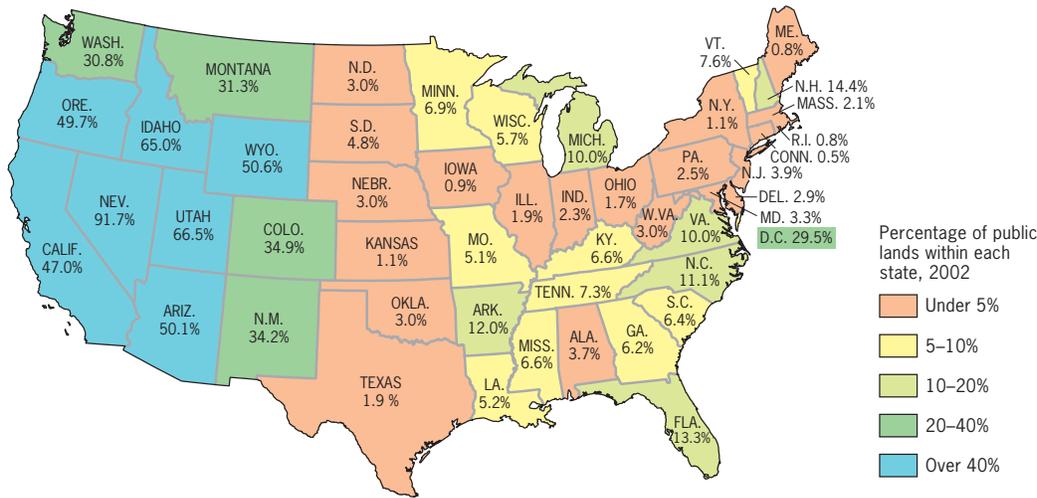
### The Farmers' Frontier

Miners and cattlemen created the romantic legend of the West, but it was the sober sodbuster who wrote the final chapter of frontier history. A fresh day dawned for western farmers with the Homestead Act of 1862. The new law allowed a settler to acquire as much as 160 acres of land (a quarter-section) by living on it for five years, improving it, and paying a nominal fee of about \$30.

The Homestead Act marked a drastic departure from previous policy. Before the act, public land had been sold primarily for revenue; now it was to be given away to encourage a rapid filling of empty spaces and to provide a stimulus to the family farm—“the backbone of democracy.” The new law was a godsend to a host of



**The Homesteader's Wife,**  
by Harvey Dunn  
Women as well as men  
toiled without shade or  
respite on the sun-scorched  
and wind-parched Great  
Plains.



**Myth and Reality in the West** American folklore pictures the western United States as a land of rugged individualists who tamed the wild region with grit and brawn. The reality is that the federal government is by far the West's largest landowner—and that federal projects, especially dam-building, have done more to shape the region than all the cowboys and farmers put together. (Sources: Center of the American West and *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2003.)

farmers who could not afford to buy large holdings. During the forty years after its passage, about half a million families took advantage of the Homestead Act to carve out new homes in the vast open stretches. Yet five times that many families *purchased* their land from the railroads, the land companies, or the states.

The Homestead Act often turned out to be a cruel hoax. The standard 160 acres, quite adequate in the well-watered Mississippi basin, frequently proved pitifully inadequate on the rain-scarce Great Plains. Thousands of homesteaders, perhaps two out of three, were forced to give up the one-sided struggle against drought. Uncle Sam, it was said, bet 160 acres against ten dollars that the settlers could not live on their homesteads for five years. One of these unsuccessful gambles in Greer County, western Oklahoma, inspired a folk song:

*Hurrah for Greer County! The land of the free,  
The land of the bedbug, grasshopper, and flea;  
I'll sing of its praises, I'll tell of its fame,  
While starving to death on my government  
claim.*

Naked fraud was spawned by the Homestead Act and similar laws. Perhaps ten times more of the public domain wound up in the clutches of land-grabbing

promoters than in the hands of bona fide farmers. Unscrupulous corporations would use “dummy” homesteaders—often their employees or aliens bribed with cash or a bottle of beer—to grab the best properties containing timber, minerals, and oil. Settlers would later swear that they had “improved” the property by erecting a “twelve by fourteen” dwelling, which turned out to measure twelve by fourteen *inches*.

The railways also played a major role in developing the agricultural West, largely through the profitable marketing of crops. Some railroad companies induced Americans and European immigrants to buy the cheap land earlier granted to the railroads by the government. The Northern Pacific Railroad at one time had nearly a thousand paid agents in Europe distributing roseate leaflets in various languages.

Shattering the myth of the Great American Desert opened the gateways to the agricultural West even wider. The windswept prairies were for the most part treeless, and the tough sod had been pounded solid by millions of buffalo hooves. Pioneer explorers and trappers had assumed that the soil must be sterile, simply because it was not heavily watered and did not support immense forests. But once the prairie sod was broken with heavy iron plows pulled by four yokes of oxen—the “plow that broke the plains”—the earth proved

*In making the arduous journey across the western prairies, many women settlers discovered new confidence in their abilities. Early on in her trek, Mary Richardson Walker (1811–1897) confided in her diary that*

*“my circumstances are rather trying. So much danger attends me on every hand. A long journey before me, going I know not whither, without mother or sister to attend me, can I expect to survive it all?”*

*Only a month later, she recorded that “in the afternoon we rode thirty-five miles without stopping. Pretty well tired out, all of us. Stood it pretty well myself.”*

astonishingly fruitful. “Sodbusters” poured onto the prairies. Lacking trees for lumber and fuel, they built homes from the very sod they dug from the ground and burned corncobs for warmth.

Lured by higher wheat prices resulting from crop failures elsewhere in the world, settlers in the 1870s rashly pushed still farther west, onto the poor, marginal lands beyond the 100th meridian. That imaginary line, running north to south from the Dakotas through west Texas, separated two climatological regions—a well-watered area to the east, and a semiarid area to the west. Bewhiskered and one-armed geologist John Wesley Powell, explorer of the Colorado River’s Grand Canyon and director of the U.S. Geological Survey, warned in 1874 that beyond the 100th meridian so little rain fell that agriculture was impossible without massive irrigation.

Ignoring Powell’s advice, farmers heedlessly chewed up the crusty earth in western Kansas, eastern Colorado, and Montana. They quickly went broke as a six-year drought in the 1880s further desiccated the already dusty region. Western Kansas lost half its population between 1888 and 1892. “There is no God west of Salina,” one hapless homesteader declared.

In the wake of the devastating drought, the new technique of “dry farming” took root on the plains. Its methods of frequent shallow cultivation supposedly were adapted to the arid western environment, but over time “dry farming” created a finely pulverized surface

soil that contributed to the notorious “Dust Bowl” several decades later (see p. 783).

Other adaptations to the western environment were more successful. Tough strains of wheat, resistant to cold and drought, were imported from Russia and blossomed into billowing yellow carpets. Wise farmers abandoned corn in favor of sorghum and other drought-resistant grains. Barbed wire, perfected by Joseph F. Glidden in 1874, solved the problem of how to build fences on the treeless prairies.

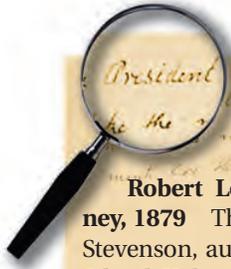
Eventually federally financed irrigation projects—on a colossal scale, beyond even what John Wesley Powell had dreamed—caused the Great American Desert to bloom. A century after Powell’s predictions, arching dams had tamed the Missouri and Columbia Rivers and had so penned up and diverted the canyon-gnawing Colorado that its mouth in the Gulf of California was dry. More than 45 million acres were irrigated in seventeen western states. In the long run, the hydraulic engineers had more to do with shaping the modern West than all the trappers, miners, cavalymen, and cowboys ever did. As one engineer boasted, “We enjoy pushing rivers around.”



### The Far West Comes of Age

The Great West experienced a fantastic growth in population from the 1870s to the 1890s. A parade of new western states proudly joined the Union. Boomtown Colorado, offspring of the Pikes Peak gold rush, was greeted in 1876 as “the Centennial State.” In 1889–1890 a Republican Congress, eagerly seeking more Republican electoral and congressional votes, admitted in a wholesale lot six new states: North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Washington, Idaho, and Wyoming. The Mormon Church formally and belatedly banned polygamy in 1890, but not until 1896 was Utah deemed worthy of admission. Only Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Arizona remained to be lifted into statehood from contiguous territory on the mainland of North America.

In a last gaudy fling, the federal government made available to settlers vast stretches of fertile plains formerly occupied by the Indians in the district of Oklahoma (“the Beautiful Land”). Scores of overeager and well-armed “sooners,” illegally jumping the gun, had entered Oklahoma Territory. They had to be evicted repeatedly by federal troops, who on occasion would shoot the intruders’ horses. On April 22, 1889, all was in readiness for the legal opening, and some 50,000



## EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

**Robert Louis Stevenson's Transcontinental Journey, 1879** The celebrated Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson, author of such enduring classics as *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, journeyed from Scotland to California in 1879 to rendezvous with his American fiancée, Frances Osbourne. Between New York and San Francisco, Stevenson traveled on the transcontinental railroad line completed just ten years earlier, and he dutifully recorded his impressions of America, the West in particular, as he made his way toward California. Stevenson's account of his trip provides an unusually gifted writer's vivid portrait

of the trans-Mississippi West at the close of the era of the Indian wars. Like all travelogues, Stevenson's colorful tale may reveal as much about the traveler as it does about the things he saw. Yet historians frequently make use of such documents to reconstruct the original appearance and texture of places that were once the exotic destinations of adventurous travelers, before they were transformed by the onrush of modernity. In the passages reproduced here, inspired by the view as Stevenson's train passed through Nebraska and Wyoming, what features of the landscape does the author find most remarkable? How does he portray the railroad?

### THE PLAINS OF NEBRASKA

. . . We were at sea—there is no other adequate expression—on the plains of Nebraska. . . . It was a world almost without a feature; an empty sky, an empty earth; front and back, the line of railway stretched from horizon to horizon, like a cue across a billiard-board; on either hand, the green plain ran till it touched the skirts of heaven. . . . [G]razing beasts were seen upon the prairie at all degrees of distance and diminution; and now and again we might perceive a few dots beside the railroad which grew more and more distinct as we drew nearer till they turned into wooden cabins, and then dwindled and dwindled in our wake until they melted into their surroundings, and we were once more alone upon the billiard-board. The train toiled over this infinity like a snail; and being the one thing moving, it was wonderful what huge proportions it began to assume in our regard. . . .

[That] evening we left Laramie [Wyoming]. . . . And yet when day came, it was to shine upon the same broken and unsightly quarter of the world. Mile upon mile, and not a tree, a bird, or a river. Only down the long, sterile cañons, the train shot hooting and awoke the resting echo. That train was the one piece of life in all the deadly land; it was the one actor, the one spectacle fit to be observed in this paralysis of man and nature. And when I think how the railroad has been pushed through this unwatered wilderness and haunt of savage tribes, and now will bear an emigrant for some £12 from the Atlantic to the Golden Gates; how at each stage of the construction, roaring, impromptu cities, full of gold and lust and death, sprang up and then died away again, and are now but wayside stations in the desert; how in these uncouth places pig-tailed Chinese pirates worked side by side with border ruffians and broken men from Europe, talking together in a mixed dialect, mostly oaths, gambling, drinking, quarrelling and murdering like wolves; how the plumed hereditary lord of all America heard, in this last fastness, the scream of the 'bad medicine waggon' charioting his foes; and then when I go on to remember that all this epical turmoil was conducted by gentlemen in frock coats, and with a view to nothing more extraordinary than a fortune and a subsequent visit to Paris, it seems to me, I own, as if this railway were the one typical achievement of the age in which we live, as if it brought together into one plot all the ends of the world and all the degrees of social rank, and offered to some great writer the busiest, the most extended, and the most varied subject for an enduring literary work. . . .



**Average Annual Precipitation, with Major Agricultural Products as of 1900**

Northern Hemisphere storms typically circle the globe in a west-to-east direction. Much of the life-nourishing water in these storms is dumped as rainfall on the western slopes of the Pacific coastal ranges and the Rocky Mountains, creating huge “rain shadows” in the Great Basin and in the western Great Plains. Westward-faring pioneers had to learn new agricultural techniques when they pushed settlement into the drought-prone regions west of the 100th meridian, as reflected in the patterns of crop distribution by 1900.

“boomers” were poised expectantly on the boundary line. At high noon the bugle shrilled, and a horde of “eighty-niners” poured in on lathered horses or careening vehicles. That night a lonely spot on the prairie had mushroomed into the tent city of Guthrie, with over 10,000 people. By the end of the year, Oklahoma boasted 60,000 inhabitants, and Congress made it a territory. In 1907 it became the “Sooner State.”

### **The Fading Frontier**

In 1890—a watershed date—the superintendent of the census announced that for the first time in America’s experience, a frontier line was no longer discernible. All

the unsettled areas were now broken into by isolated bodies of settlement. The “closing” of the frontier inspired one of the most influential essays ever written about American history—Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” in 1893.

As the nineteenth century neared its sunset, the westward-tramping American people were disturbed to find that their fabled free land was going or had gone. The secretary of war had prophesied in 1827 that five hundred years would be needed to fill the West. But as the nation finally recognized that its land was not inexhaustible, seeds were planted to preserve the vanishing resource. The government set aside land for national parks—first Yellowstone in 1872, followed by Yosemite and Sequoia in 1890.

But the frontier was more than a place; it was also a state of mind and a symbol of opportunity. Its passing ended a romantic phase of the nation's internal development and created new economic and psychological problems.

Traditionally footloose, Americans have been notorious for their mobility. The nation's farmers, unlike the peasants of Europe, have seldom remained rooted to their soil. The land, sold for a profit as settlement closed in, was often the settler's most profitable crop.

Much has been said about the frontier as a "safety valve." The theory is that when hard times came, the unemployed who cluttered the city pavements merely moved west, took up farming, and prospered.

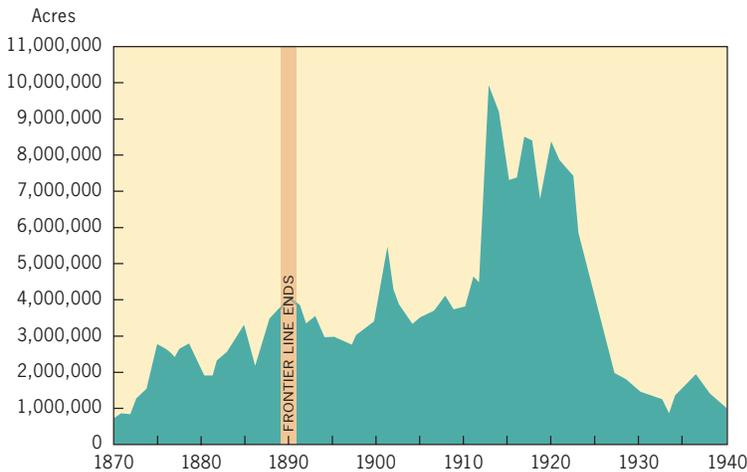
In truth, relatively few city dwellers, at least in the populous eastern centers, migrated to the frontier during depressions. Most of them did not know how to farm; few of them could raise enough money to transport themselves west and then pay for livestock and expensive machinery.

But the safety-valve theory does have some validity. Free acreage did lure to the West a host of immigrant farmers who otherwise might have remained in the eastern cities to clog the job markets and to crowd the festering and already overpopulated slums. And the very *possibility* of westward migration may have induced urban employers to maintain wage rates high enough to discourage workers from leaving. But the real safety valve by the late nineteenth century was in western cities like Chicago, Denver, and San Francisco, where failed farmers, busted miners, and displaced easterners found ways to seek their fortunes. Indeed, after about 1880 the area from the Rocky Mountains to the

Pacific Coast was the most urbanized region in America, measured by the percentage of people living in cities.

U.S. history cannot be properly understood unless it is viewed in light of the westward-moving experience. As Frederick Jackson Turner wrote, "American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West." The story of settling and taming the trans-Mississippi West in the late nineteenth century was but the last chapter in the saga of colonizing various American "wests" since Columbus's day—from the West Indies to the Chesapeake shore, from the valleys of the Hudson and Connecticut Rivers to the valleys of the Tennessee and Ohio Rivers.

And yet the trans-Mississippi West formed a distinct chapter in that saga and retains even to this day much of its uniqueness. There the Native American peoples made their last and most desperate struggle against colonization, and there most Native Americans live today. There "Anglo" culture collided most directly with Hispanic culture—the historic rival of the Anglo-Americans for dominance in the New World—and the Southwest remains the most Hispanicized region in America. There America faced across the Pacific to Asia, and there most Asian Americans dwell today. There the scale and severity of the environment posed their largest challenges to human ambitions, and there the environment, with its aridity and still-magical emptiness, continues to mold social and political life, and the American imagination, as in no other part of the nation. And in no other region has the federal government, with its vast landholdings, its subsidies to the railroads, and its massive irrigation projects, played so conspicuous a role in economic and social development.



**Homesteads from the Public Lands (acreage legally transferred to private ownership)**  
See the related map on p. 607.

The westward-moving pioneers and the country they confronted have assumed mythic proportions in the American mind. They have been immortalized by such writers as Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Helen Hunt Jackson, and Francis Parkman, and by such painters as George Catlin, Frederic Remington, and Albert Bierstadt. For better or worse, those pioneers planted the seeds of civilization in the immense western wilderness. The life we live, they dreamed of; the life they lived, we can only dream.



### The Farm Becomes a Factory

The situation of American farmers, once jacks-and-jills-of-all-trades, was rapidly changing. They had raised their own food, fashioned their own clothing, and bartered for other necessities with neighbors. Now high prices persuaded farmers to concentrate on growing single “cash” crops, such as wheat or corn, and use their profits to buy foodstuffs at the general store and manufactured goods in town or by mail order. The Chicago firm of Aaron Montgomery Ward sent out its first catalogue—a single sheet—in 1872.

Large-scale farmers, especially in the immense grain-producing areas of the Mississippi Valley, were now both specialists and businesspeople. As cogs in the vast industrial machine, these farmers were intimately tied to banking, railroading, and manufacturing. They had to buy expensive machinery in order to plant and

harvest their crops. A powerful steam engine could drag behind it simultaneously the plow, seeder, and harrow. The speed of harvesting wheat was dramatically increased in the 1870s by the invention of the twine binder and then in the 1880s by the “combine”—the combined reaper-thresher, which was drawn by twenty to forty horses and which both reaped and bagged the grain. Widespread use of such costly equipment naturally called for first-class management. But the farmers, often unskilled as businesspeople, were inclined to blame the banks and railroads or the volatility of the global marketplace, rather than their own shortcomings, for their losses.

This amazing mechanization of agriculture in the postwar years was almost as striking as the mechanization of industry. In fact, agricultural modernization drove many marginal farmers off the land, thus swelling the ranks of the new industrial work force. As the rural population steadily decreased, those farmers who remained achieved miracles of production, making America the world’s breadbasket and butcher shop. The farm was attaining the status of a factory—an outdoor grain factory. Bonanza wheat farms of the Minnesota–North Dakota area, for example, were enormous. By 1890 at least a half-dozen of them were larger than fifteen thousand acres, with communication by telephone from one part to another. These bonanza farms foreshadowed the gigantic agribusinesses of the next century.

Agriculture was a big business from its earliest days in California’s phenomenally productive (and phe-

**Harvesting in Washington State** Humans, horses, and machine join forces in this turn-of-the-century scene.



nomenally irrigated) Central Valley. California farms, carved out of giant Spanish Mexican land grants and the railroads' huge holdings, were from the outset more than three times larger than the national average. The reformer Henry George in 1871 described the Golden State as "not a country of farms but a country of plantations and estates." With the advent of the railroad refrigerator car in the 1880s, California fruit and vegetable crops, raised on sprawling tracts by ill-paid migrant Mexican and Chinese farmhands, sold at a handsome profit in the rich urban markets of the East.



### Deflation Dooms the Debtor

Once the farmers became chained to a one-crop economy—wheat or corn—they were in the same leaky boat with the southern cotton growers. As long as prices stayed high, all went well. But when they skidded in the 1880s, bankruptcy fell like a blight on the farm belts.

The grain farmers were no longer the masters of their own destinies. They were engaged in one of the most fiercely competitive of businesses, for the price of their product was determined in a world market by the world output. If the wheat fields of Argentina, Russia, and other foreign countries flourished, the price of the farmers' grain would fall and American sobbusters would face ruin, as they did in the 1880s and 1890s.

Low prices and a deflated currency were the chief worries of the frustrated farmers—North, South, and West. If a family had borrowed \$1,000 in 1855, when wheat was worth about a dollar a bushel, they expected to pay back the equivalent of one thousand bushels, plus interest, when the mortgage fell due. But if they let their debt run to 1890, when wheat had fallen to about fifty cents a bushel, they would have to pay back the price of two thousand bushels for the \$1,000 they had borrowed, plus interest. This unexpected burden struck them as unjust, though their steely-eyed creditors often branded the complaining farmers as slippery and dishonest rascals.

The deflationary pinch on the debtor flowed partly from the static money supply. There were simply not enough dollars to go around, and as a result, prices were forced down. In 1870 the currency in circulation for each person was \$19.42; in 1890 it was only \$22.67. Yet during these twenty years, business and industrial activity, increasing manyfold, had intensified the scramble for available currency.

*A contemporary farm protest song, "The Kansas Fool," ran,*

The bankers followed us out west;  
And did in mortgages invest;  
They looked ahead and shrewdly planned,  
And soon they'll have our Kansas land.

The forgotten farmers were caught on a treadmill. Despite unremitting toil, they operated year after year at a loss and lived off their fat as best they could. In a vicious circle, their farm machinery increased their output of grain, lowered the price, and drove them even deeper into debt. Mortgages engulfed homesteads at an alarming rate; by 1890 Nebraska alone reported more than 100,000 farms blanketed with mortgages. The repeated crash of the sheriff-auctioneer's hammer kept announcing to the world that another sturdy American farmer had become landless in a landed nation.

Ruinous rates of interest, running from 8 to 40 percent, were charged on mortgages, largely by agents of eastern loan companies. The windburned sons and daughters of the sod, who felt that they deserved praise for developing the country, cried out in despair against the loan sharks and the Wall Street octopus.

Farm tenancy rather than farm ownership was spreading like stinkweed. The trend was especially marked in the sharecropping South, where cotton prices also sank dismayingly. By 1880 one-fourth of all American farms were operated by tenants. The United States was ready to feed the world, but under the new industrial feudalism, the farmers were about to sink into a status suggesting Old World serfdom.



### Unhappy Farmers

Even Mother Nature ceased smiling, as her powerful forces conspired against agriculture. Mile-wide clouds of grasshoppers, leaving "nothing but the mortgage," periodically ravaged prairie farms. The terrible cotton-boll weevil was also wreaking havoc in the South by the early 1890s.

The good earth was going sour. Floods added to the waste of erosion, which had already washed the topsoil off millions of once-lush southern acres. Expensive fertilizers were urgently needed. A long succession of droughts seared the trans-Mississippi West, beginning in the summer of 1887. Whole towns were abandoned. “Going home to the wife’s folks” and “In God we trusted, in Kansas we busted” were typical laments of many impoverished farmers, as they fled their weather-beaten shacks and sun-baked sod houses. One irate “poet” snarled,

*Fifty miles to water,  
A hundred miles to wood,  
To hell with this damned country,  
I’m going home for good.*

To add to their miseries, the soil-tillers were gouged by their government—local, state, and national. Their land was overassessed, and they paid painful local taxes, whereas wealthy easterners could conceal their stocks and bonds in safe-deposit boxes. High protective tariffs in these years poured profits into the pockets of manufacturers. Farmers, on the other hand, had no choice but to sell their low-priced products in a fiercely competitive, unprotected world market, while buying high-priced manufactured goods in a protected home market.

The farmers were also “farmed” by the corporations and processors. They were at the mercy of the harvester

trust, the barbed-wire trust, and the fertilizer trust, all of which could control output and raise prices to extortionate levels. Middlemen took a juicy “cut” from the selling price of the goods that the farmers bought, while operators pushed storage rates to the ceiling at grain warehouses and elevators.

In addition, the railroad octopus had the grain growers in its grip. Freight rates could be so high that the farmers sometimes lost less if they burned their corn for fuel than if they shipped it. If they raised their voices in protest, the ruthless railroad operators might let their grain spoil in damp places or refuse to provide them with cars when needed.

Farmers still made up nearly one-half the population in 1890, but they were hopelessly disorganized. The manufacturers and the railroad barons knew how to combine to promote their interests, and so, increasingly, did industrial workers. But the farmers were by nature independent and individualistic—dead set against consolidation or regimentation. No really effective Carnegie or Gompers arose among them to preach the gospel of economic integration and concentration. They never did organize successfully to restrict production until forced to by the federal government nearly half a century later, in Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal days. What they did manage to organize was a monumental political uprising.



**Nebraska Homesteaders in Front of Their Sod House, 1887**

These two brothers and their families had escaped to Canada from the slave South during the Civil War. Returning to the United States in the 1880s, they took advantage of the Homestead Act to stake out farms in Custer County, Nebraska.

## The Farmers Take Their Stand

Agrarian unrest had flared forth earlier, in the Greenback movement shortly after the Civil War. Prices sagged in 1868, and a host of farmers unsuccessfully sought relief from low prices and high indebtedness by demanding an inflation of the currency with paper money.

The National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry—better known as the Grange—was organized in 1867. Its leading spirit was Oliver H. Kelley, a shrewd and energetic Minnesota farmer then working as a clerk in Washington. Kelley's first objective was to enhance the lives of isolated farmers through social, educational, and fraternal activities. Farm men and women, cursed with loneliness in widely separated farmhouses, found the Grange's picnics, concerts, and lectures a godsend. Kelley, a Mason, even found farmers receptive to his mumbo-jumbo of passwords and secret rituals, as well as his four-ply hierarchy, ranging (for men) from Laborer to Husbandman and (for women) from Maid to Matron. The Grange spread like an old-time prairie fire and by 1875 claimed 800,000 members, chiefly in the Midwest and South. Buzzing with gossip, these calicoed and callous folk often met in red schoolhouses around potbellied stoves.

The Grangers gradually raised their goals from individual self-improvement to improvement of the farmers' collective plight. In a determined effort to escape the clutches of the trusts, they established cooperatively owned stores for consumers and cooperatively owned grain elevators and warehouses for producers. Their most ambitious experiment was an attempt to manufacture harvesting machinery, but this venture, partly as a result of mismanagement, ended in financial disaster.

Embattled Grangers also went into politics, enjoying their most gratifying success in the grain-growing regions of the upper Mississippi Valley, chiefly in Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota. There, through state legislation, they strove to regulate railway rates and the storage fees charged by railroads and by the operators of warehouses and grain elevators. Many of the state courts, notably in Illinois, were disposed to recognize the principle of public control of private business for the general welfare. A number of the so-called Granger Laws, however, were badly drawn, and they were bitterly fought through the high courts by the well-paid lawyers of the "interests." Following judicial reverses, most severely at the hands of the Supreme Court in the famous *Wabash* decision of 1886 (see p. 538), the Grangers' influence faded. But their organization has lived on as a vocal champion of farm interests, while brightening rural life with social activities.



### The Farmers' Grievances

This poster from 1875 expresses one of the agrarian radicals' fundamental premises: that all other walks of life were dependent—or even parasitic—on the indispensable work of farmers. In his famous "Cross of Gold" speech in 1896 (see p. 620), Populist presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan put it this way: "Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country."

Farmers' grievances likewise found a vent in the Greenback Labor party, which combined the inflationary appeal of the earlier Greenbackers with a program for improving the lot of labor. In 1878, the high-water mark of the movement, the Greenback Laborites polled over a million votes and elected fourteen members of Congress. In the presidential election of 1880, the Greenbackers ran General James B. Weaver, an old Granger who was a favorite of Civil War veterans and who possessed a remarkable voice and bearing. He spoke to perhaps a half-million citizens in a hundred or so speeches but polled only 3 percent of the total popular vote.



### Prelude to Populism

A striking manifestation of rural discontent came through the Farmers' Alliance, founded in Texas in the late 1870s (see p. 523). Farmers came together in the Alliance to socialize, but more importantly to break the strangling grip of the railroads and manufacturers through cooperative buying and selling. Local chapters spread throughout the South and the Great Plains during the 1880s, until by 1890 members numbered more than a million hard-bitten souls.

Unfortunately, the Alliance weakened itself by ignoring the plight of landless tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and farmworkers. Even more debilitating was the Alliance's exclusion of blacks, who counted for nearly half the agricultural population of the South. In the 1880s a separate Colored Farmers' National Alliance emerged to attract black farmers, and by 1890 membership numbered more than 250,000. The long history of racial division in the South, however, made it difficult for white and black farmers to work together in the same organization.

Out of the Farmers' Alliances a new political party emerged in the early 1890s—the People's party. Better known as the Populists, these frustrated farmers attacked Wall Street and the “money trust.” They called for nationalizing the railroads, telephone, and telegraph; instituting a graduated income tax; and creating a new federal “sub-treasury”—a scheme to provide farmers with loans for crops stored in government-owned warehouses, where they could be held until market prices rose. They also wanted the free and unlimited coinage of silver—yet another of the debtors' demands for inflation that echoed continuously throughout the Gilded Age.



**Mary E. Lease (1853–1933)** She was so eloquent as to be called the “Patrick Henry in Petticoats.”

Numerous fiery prophets leapt forward to trumpet the Populist cause. The free coinage of silver struck many Populists as a cure-all, especially after the circulation of an enormously popular pamphlet titled *Coin's Financial School* (1894). Written by William Hope Harvey, it was illustrated by clever woodcuts, one of which depicted the gold ogre beheading the beautiful silver maiden. In fiction parading as fact, the booklet showed how the “little professor”—“Coin” Harvey—overwhelmed the bankers and professors of economics with his brilliant arguments on behalf of free silver. Another notorious spellbinder was red-haired Ignatius Donnelly of Minnesota, three times elected to Congress. The queen of the Populist “calamity howlers” was Mary Elizabeth (“Mary Yellin”) Lease, a tall, athletic woman known as the “Kansas Pythoness.” She reportedly demanded that Kansans should raise “less corn and more hell.” The big-city *New York Evening Post* snarled, “We don't want any more states until we can civilize Kansas.” To many easterners, complaint, not corn, was rural America's staple crop.

Yet the Populists, despite their oddities, were not to be laughed away. They were leading a deadly earnest and impassioned campaign to relieve the farmers' many miseries. Smiles faded from Republican and Democratic faces alike as countless thousands of Populists began to sing "Good-bye, My Party, Good-bye." In 1892 the Populists had jolted the traditional parties by winning several congressional seats and polling more than 1 million votes for their presidential candidate, James B. Weaver. Racial divisions continued to hobble the Populists in the South, but in the West their ranks were swelling. Could the People's party now reach beyond its regional bases in agrarian America, join hands with urban workers, and mount a successful attack on the northeastern citadels of power?



### Coxey's Army and the Pullman Strike

The panic of 1893 and the severe ensuing depression strengthened the Populists' argument that farmers and laborers alike were being victimized by an oppressive economic and political system. Ragged armies of the unemployed began marching to protest their plight. In the growing hordes of displaced industrial toilers, the Populists saw potential political allies.

The most famous marcher was "General" Jacob S. Coxey, a wealthy Ohio quarry owner. He set out for

Washington in 1894 with a few score of supporters and a swarm of newspaper reporters. His platform included a demand that the government relieve unemployment by an inflationary public works program, supported by some \$500 million in legal tender notes to be issued by the Treasury. Coxey himself rode in a carriage with his wife and infant son, appropriately named Legal Tender Coxey, while his tiny "army" tramped along behind, singing,

*We're coming, Grover Cleveland,  
500,000 strong,  
We're marching on to Washington  
to right the nation's wrong.*

The "Commonweal Army" of Coxeyites finally straggled into the nation's capital, but the invasion took on the aspects of a comic opera when "General" Coxey and his "lieutenants" were arrested for walking on the grass.

Elsewhere, violent flare-ups accompanied labor protests, notably in Chicago. Most dramatic was the crippling Pullman strike of 1894. Eugene V. Debs, a charismatic labor leader, had helped organize the American Railway Union of about 150,000 members. The Pullman Palace Car Company, which maintained a model town near Chicago for its employees, was hit hard by the depression and cut wages by about one-third, while holding the line on rent for the company houses. The workers finally struck—in some places overturning Pullman cars—and paralyzed railway traffic



### Coxey's Army Enters the District of Columbia, 1894

They are shown here clearing a lock on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. Jacob Sechler Coxey arrived in the Capital with only about 500 men, far short of the 100,000 he predicted would come to make a "living petition" of the unemployed.

*After the Pullman strike collapsed, Eugene Debs (1855–1926) said,*

*“No strike has ever been lost.”*

*In 1897 he declared,*

*“The issue is Socialism versus Capitalism. I am for Socialism because I am for humanity.”*

from Chicago to the Pacific coast. The American Federation of Labor conspicuously declined to support the Pullman strikers, thus enhancing the AF of L's reputation for “respectability” even while weakening labor's cause by driving a large wedge into the workers' ranks.

The turmoil in Chicago was serious but not yet completely out of hand. At least this was the judgment of Governor John Peter Altgeld of Illinois, a friend of the downtrodden, who had pardoned the Haymarket Square anarchists the year before (see p. 552). But U.S. attorney general Richard Olney, an archconservative and an ex-railroad attorney, urged the dispatch of federal troops. His legal grounds were that the strikers were interfering with the transit of the U.S. mail. President Cleveland supported Olney with the ringing declaration,

“If it takes the entire army and navy to deliver a postal card in Chicago, that card will be delivered.”

To the delight of conservatives, federal troops, bayonets fixed, crushed the Pullman strike. Debs was sentenced to six months' imprisonment for contempt of court because he had defied a federal court injunction to cease striking. Ironically, the lean labor agitator spent much of his enforced leisure reading radical literature, which led to his later leadership of the socialist movement in America.

Embittered cries of “government by injunction” now burst from organized labor. This was the first time that such a legal weapon had been used conspicuously by Washington to break a strike, and it was all the more distasteful because defiant workers who were held in contempt could be imprisoned without a jury trial. Signs multiplied that employers were striving to smash labor unions by court action. Nonlabor elements of the country, including the Populists and other debtors, were likewise incensed. They saw in the brutal Pullman episode further proof of an unholy alliance between business and the courts.

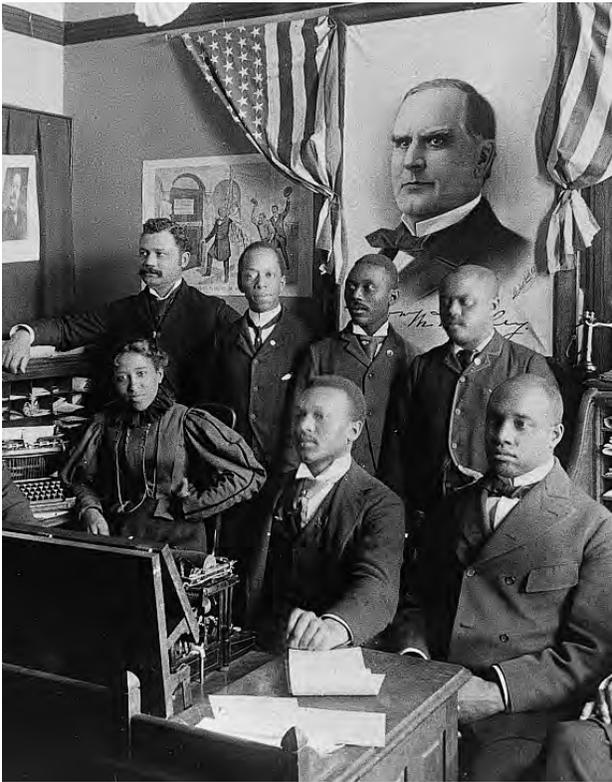


### Golden McKinley and Silver Bryan

The smoldering grievances of the long-suffering farmers and the depression-plagued laborers gave omi-



**The Pullman Strike, 1894**  
Illinois National Guardsmen fire on Pullman Company strikers, July 7, 1894. Police clubs and U.S. Army rifles and bayonets finally broke the back of a strike that halted railroads throughout the country.



**McKinley Campaign Headquarters, Chicago, 1896**  
Those few black Americans who could exercise their right to vote in the 1890s still remained faithful to "the party of Lincoln."

nous significance to the election of 1896. Conservatives of all stripes feared an impending upheaval, while down-and-out husbandmen and discontented workers cast about desperately for political salvation. Increasingly, monetary policy—whether to maintain the gold standard or inflate the currency by monetizing silver—loomed as the issue on which the election would turn.

The leading candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1896 was former congressman William McKinley of Ohio, sponsor of the ill-starred tariff bill of 1890 (see p. 523). He had established a creditable Civil War record, having risen to the rank of major; he hailed from the electorally potent state of Ohio; and he could point to long years of honorable service in Congress, where he had made many friends with his kindly and conciliatory manner.

As a presidential candidate, McKinley was largely the creature of a fellow Ohioan, Marcus Alonzo Hanna,

who had made his fortune in the iron business and now coveted the role of president maker. "I love McKinley," he once said. As a wholehearted Hamiltonian, Hanna believed that a prime function of government was to aid business. Honest, earnest, tough, and direct, he became the personification of big industry in politics. He was often caricatured in cartoons, quite unfairly, as a bloated bully in a loud checkered suit with a dollar sign in each square. He believed that in some measure prosperity "trickled down" to the laborer, whose dinner pail was full when business flourished. Critics assailed this idea as equivalent to feeding the horses in order to feed the sparrows.

The hardheaded Hanna, although something of a novice in politics, organized his preconvention campaign for McKinley with consummate skill and with a liberal outpouring of his own money. The convention steamroller, well lubricated with Hanna's dollars, nominated McKinley on the first ballot in St. Louis in June 1896. The Republican platform cleverly straddled the

**Crying for Protection, 1896** Uncle Sam is called on in this cartoon to nurse so-called infant industries—some of which had in fact long since grown into vigorous adulthood.



money question but leaned toward hard-money policies. It declared for the gold standard, even though McKinley's voting record in Congress had been embarrassingly friendly to silver. The platform also condemned hard times and Democratic incapacity, while pouring praise on the protective tariff.

Dissension riddled the Democratic camp. Cleveland no longer led his party. The depression had driven the last nail into his political coffin. Dubbed "the Stuffed Prophet," he was undeniably the most unpopular man in the country. Labor-debtor groups remembered too vividly his intervention in the Pullman strike, the backstairs Morgan bond deal, and especially his stubborn hard-money policies. Ultraconservative in finance, Cleveland now looked more like a Republican than a Democrat on the money issue.

Rudderless, the Democratic convention met in Chicago in July 1896, with the silverites lusting for victory. Shouting insults at the absent Cleveland, the delegates refused, by a suicidal vote of 564 to 357, to endorse their own administration. They had the enthusiasm and the numbers; all they lacked was a leader.

A new Moses suddenly appeared in the person of William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska. Then only thirty-six years of age and known as "the Boy Orator of the Platte,"\* he stepped confidently onto the platform before fifteen thousand people. His masterful presence was set off by a peninsular jaw and raven-black hair. He radiated honesty, sincerity, and energy.

The convention-hall setting was made to order for a magnificent oratorical effort. A hush fell over the delegates as Bryan stood before them. With an organlike voice that rolled into the outer corners of the huge hall, he delivered a fervent plea for silver. Rising to supreme heights of eloquence, he thundered, "We will answer their demands for a gold standard by saying to them: 'You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.'"

The Cross of Gold speech was a sensation. Swept off its feet in a tumultuous scene, the Democratic convention nominated Bryan the next day on the fifth ballot. The platform demanded inflation through the unlimited coinage of silver at the ratio of 16 ounces of silver to 1 of gold, though the market ratio was about 32 to 1. This meant that the silver in a dollar would be worth about fifty cents.

\*One contemporary sneered that Bryan, like the Platte River in his home state of Nebraska, was "six inches deep and six miles wide at the mouth."

Democratic "Gold Bugs," unable to swallow Bryan, bolted their party over the silver issue. A conservative senator from New York, when asked if he was a Democrat still, reportedly replied, "Yes, I am a Democrat still—very still." The Democratic minority, including Cleveland, charged that the Populist-silverites had stolen both the name and the clothes of their party. They nominated a lost-cause ticket of their own, and many of them, including Cleveland, not too secretly hoped for a McKinley victory.

The Populists now faced a dilemma, because the Democratic majority had appropriated their main plank—"16 to 1," that "heaven-born ratio." The bulk of the Populists, fearing a hard-money McKinley victory, endorsed both "fusion" with the Democrats and Bryan for president, sacrificing their identity in the mix. Singing "The Jolly Silver Dollar of the Dads," they became in effect the "Demo-Pop" party, though a handful of the original Populists refused to support Bryan and went down with their colors nailed to the mast.



### Class Conflict: Plowholders Versus Bondholders

Mark Hanna smugly assumed that he could make the tariff the focus of the campaign. But Bryan, a dynamo of energy, forced the free-trade issue into the backseat when he took to the stump in behalf of free silver. Sweeping through 27 states and traveling 18,000 miles, he made nearly 600 speeches—36 in one day—and even invaded the East, "the enemy's country." Vachel Lindsay caught the spirit of his oratorical orgy:

*Prairie avenger, mountain lion,  
Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan,  
Gigantic troubadour, speaking like a siege gun,  
Smashing Plymouth Rock with his boulders  
from the West.\**

Free silver became almost as much a religious as a financial issue. Hordes of fanatical free-silverites hailed Bryan as the messiah to lead them out of the wilderness of debt. They sang "We'll All Have Our Pockets Lined with Silver" and "No Crown of Thorns, No Cross of Gold."

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**William Jennings Bryan, Campaigning (Again) in 1908** The premier orator of his day, Bryan also became a perennial presidential candidate, running in 1896, 1900, and 1908. He lost every time.

Bryan created panic among eastern conservatives with his threat of converting their holdings overnight into fifty-cent dollars. The “Gold Bugs” responded with their own free and unlimited coinage of verbiage. They vented their alarm in abusive epithets, ringing from “fanatic” and “madman” to “traitor” and “murderer.” “In God We Trust, with Bryan We Bust,” the Republicans sneered, while one eastern clergyman cried, “That platform was made in Hell.” Widespread fear of Bryan and the “silver lunacy” enabled “Dollar Mark” Hanna, now chairman of the Republican National Committee, to shine as a money-raiser. He “shook down” the trusts and plutocrats and piled up an enormous “slush fund” for a “campaign of education”—or of propaganda, depending on one’s point of view. Reminding the voters of Cleveland’s “Democratic panic,” Republicans appealed to the “belly vote” with their prize slogan, “McKinley and the Full Dinner Pail.” The McKinleyites amassed the most formidable

political campaign chest thus far in American history. At all levels—national, state, and local—it amounted to about \$16 million, as contrasted with about \$1 million for the poorer Democrats (roughly “16 to 1”). With some justification, the Bryanites accused Hanna of “buying” the election and of floating McKinley into the White House on a tidal wave of mud and money.

Bryan’s cyclonic campaign began to lose steam as the weeks passed. Fear was probably Hanna’s strongest ally, as it was Bryan’s worst enemy. Republican businesspeople placed contracts with manufacturers, contingent on the election of McKinley. A few factory owners, with thinly veiled intimidation, paid off their workers and told them not to come to work on Wednesday morning if Bryan won. Reports also circulated that employers were threatening to pay their employees in fifty-cent pieces, instead of in dollars, if Bryan triumphed. Such were some of the “dirty tricks” of the “Stop Bryan, Save America” crusade.

Hanna’s campaign methods paid off. On election day McKinley triumphed decisively. The vote was 271 to 176 in the Electoral College and 7,102,246 to

**The Sacrilegious Candidate** A hostile cartoonist makes sport of Bryan’s notorious Cross of Gold speech in 1896.



*In gold-standard Britain, there was much relief over McKinley's victory. The London Standard commented,*

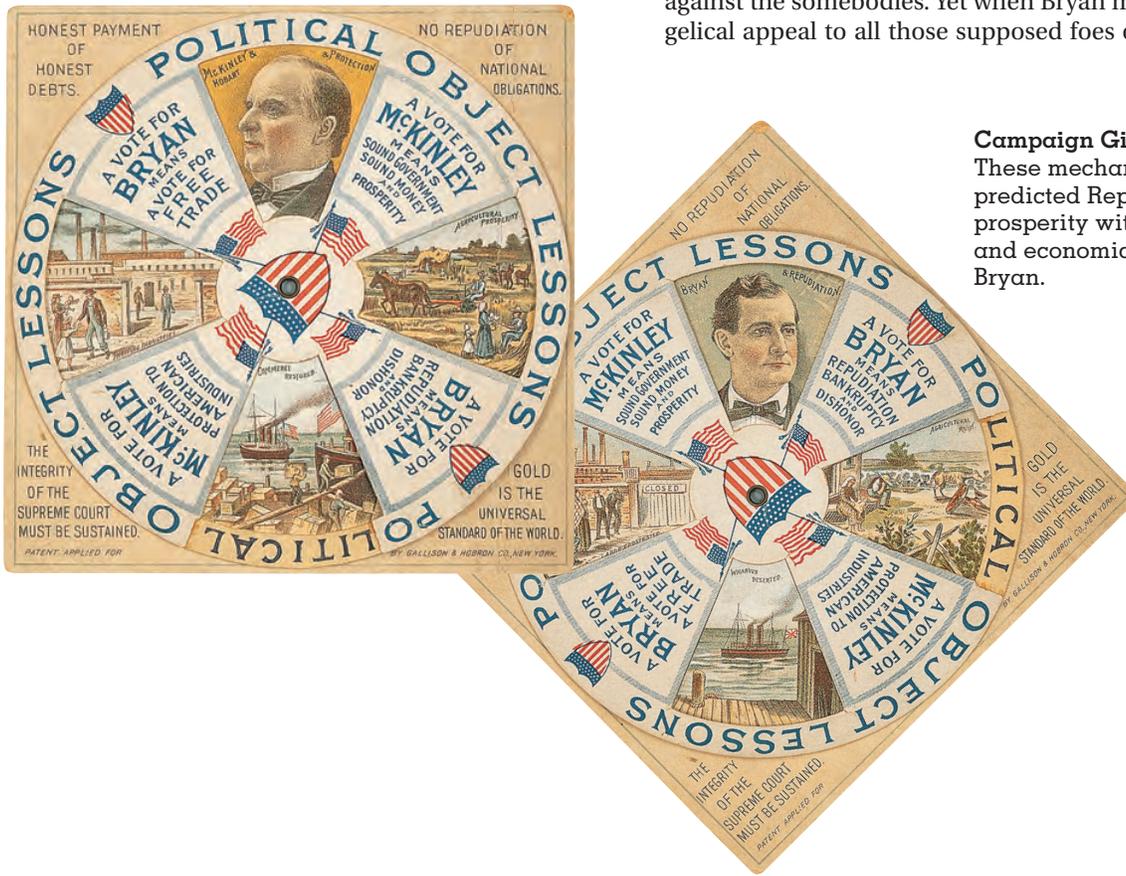
*"The hopelessly ignorant and savagely covetous waifs and strays of American civilization voted for Bryan, but the bulk of the solid sense, business integrity, and social stability sided with McKinley. The nation is to be heartily congratulated."*

6,492,559 in the popular election. Driven by fear and excitement, an unprecedented outpouring of voters flocked to the polls. McKinley ran strongly in the populous East, where he carried every county of New

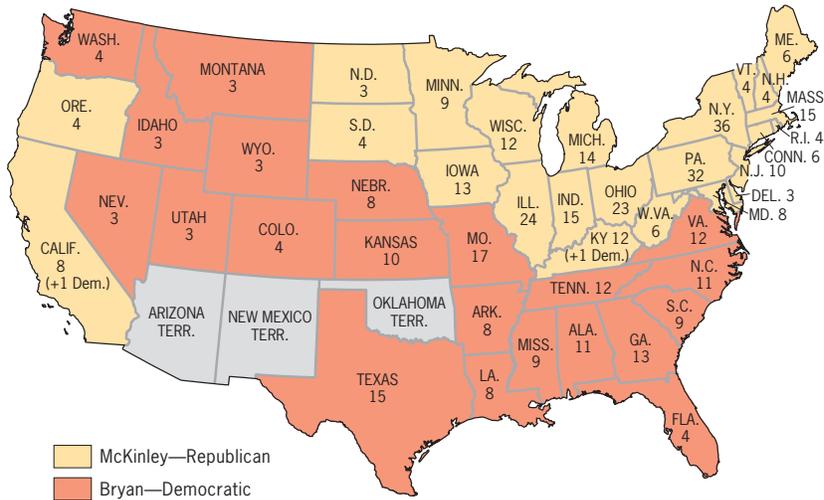
England, and in the upper Mississippi Valley. Bryan's states, concentrated in the debt-burdened South and the trans-Mississippi West, boasted more acreage than McKinley's but less population.

The free-silver election of 1896 was perhaps the most significant political turning point since Lincoln's victories in 1860 and 1864. Despite Bryan's strength in the South and West, the results vividly demonstrated his lack of appeal to the unmortgaged farmer and especially to the eastern urban laborer. Many wage earners in the East voted for their jobs and full dinner pails, threatened as they were by free silver, free trade, and fireless factories. Living precariously on a fixed wage, the factory workers had no reason to favor inflation, which was the heart of the Bryanites' program.

The Bryan-McKinley battle heralded the advent of a new era in American politics. At first glance the election seemed to be the age-old story of the underprivileged many against the privileged few, of the indebted back-country against the wealthier seaboard, of the country against the city, of the agrarians against the industrialists, of Main Street against Wall Street, of the nobodies against the somebodies. Yet when Bryan made his evangelical appeal to all those supposed foes of the existing



**Campaign Gimcracks, 1896**  
 These mechanical cards predicted Republican prosperity with McKinley and economic ruin with Bryan.



**Presidential Election of 1896 (with electoral vote by state)**  
 This election tolled the death knell of the Gilded Age political party system, with its razor-close elections, strong party loyalties, and high voter turnouts. For years after 1896, Republicans predominated, and citizens showed a declining interest in either joining parties or voting.

social order, not enough of them banded together to form a political majority.

The outcome was instead a resounding victory for big business, the big cities, middle-class values, and financial conservatism. Bryan's defeat marked the last serious effort to win the White House with mostly agrarian votes. The future of presidential politics lay not on the farms, with their dwindling population, but in the mushrooming cities, with their growing hordes of freshly arriving immigrants.

The smashing Republican victory of 1896 also heralded a Republican grip on the White House for sixteen consecutive years—indeed, for all but eight of the next thirty-six years. McKinley's election thus imparted a new character to the American political system. The long reign of Republican political dominance that it ushered in was accompanied by diminishing voter participation in elections, the weakening of party organizations, and the fading away of issues like the money question and civil-service reform, which came to be replaced by concern for industrial regulation and the welfare of labor. Scholars have dubbed this new political era the period of the "fourth party system."\*



### Republican Stand-pattism Enthroned

An eminently "safe" McKinley took the inaugural oath in 1897. With his impeccable white vest, he seemed never

to perspire, even in oppressively muggy Washington. Though a man of considerable ability, he was an ear-to-the-ground politician who seldom got far out of line with majority opinion. His cautious, conservative nature caused him to shy away from the flaming banner of reform. Business was given a free rein, and the trusts, which had trusted him in 1896, were allowed to develop more mighty muscles without serious restraints.

Almost as soon as McKinley took office, the tariff issue, which had played second fiddle to silver in the "Battle of '96," quickly forced itself to the fore. The current Wilson-Gorman law was not raising enough revenue to cover the annual Treasury deficits, and the Republican trusts thought that they had purchased the right to addi-

\*The first party system, marked by doubts about the very legitimacy of parties, embraced the Federalist-Republican clashes of the 1790s and early 1800s. The second party system took shape after 1828 with the emergence of mass-based politics in the Jacksonian era and pitted Democrats against Whigs. The third party system, beginning in 1860, was characterized by the precarious equilibrium between Republicans and Democrats, as well as the remarkably high electoral participation rates that endured from the end of the Civil War to McKinley's election. The fourth party system is described above. The fifth party system emerged with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s, initiating a long period of Democratic ascendancy. Each "system," with the conspicuous exception of the fifth, lasted about three and one-half decades—a cyclical regularity that has long intrigued political scientists and historians. Debate still rages about whether the country passed into a sixth party system with Richard Nixon's election in 1968—or a seventh with George W. Bush's decisive victory in 2004.

tional tariff protection by their lush contributions to Hanna's war chest. In due course the Dingley Tariff Bill was jammed through the House in 1897, under the pounding gavel of the rethroned "Czar" Reed. The proposed new rates were high, but not high enough to satisfy the paunchy lobbyists, who once again descended upon the Senate. Over 850 amendments were tacked onto the overburdened bill. The resulting piece of patchwork finally established the average rates at 46.5 percent, substantially higher than the Democratic Wilson-Gorman Act of 1894 and in some categories even higher than the McKinley Act of 1890. (See the chart in the Appendix.)

Prosperity, long lurking around the corner, began to return with a rush in 1897, the first year of McKinley's term. The depression of 1893 had run its course, and farm prices rose. Paint-thirsty midwestern barns blossomed in new colors, and the wheels of industry resumed their hum. Republican politicians, like crowing

roosters believing they caused the sun to rise, claimed credit for attracting the sunlight of prosperity.

With the return of prosperity, the money issue that had overshadowed politics since the Civil War gradually faded away. The Gold Standard Act of 1900, passed over last-ditch silverite opposition, provided that the paper currency be redeemed freely in gold. Nature and science gradually provided an inflation that the "Gold Bug" East had fought so frantically to prevent. Electrifying discoveries of new gold deposits in Canada's fabled Klondike, as well as in Alaska, South Africa, and Australia, brought huge quantities of gold onto world markets, as did the perfecting of the cheap cyanide process for extracting gold from low-grade ore. Moderate inflation thus took care of the currency needs of an explosively expanding nation, as its circulatory system greatly improved. The tide of "silver heresy" rapidly receded, and the "Popocratic" fish were left gasping high and dry on a golden-sanded beach.

## Chronology

**c. 1700-** New Indian peoples move onto  
**1800** Great Plains

**1858** Pikes Peak gold rush

**1859** Nevada Comstock Lode discovered

**1862** Homestead Act

**1864** Sand Creek massacre  
Nevada admitted to Union

**1867** National Grange organized

**1876** Battle of the Little Bighorn  
Colorado admitted to the Union

**1877** Nez Percé Indian War

**1881** Helen Hunt Jackson publishes *A Century of Dishonor*

**1884** Federal government outlaws Indian Sun Dance

**1885-**  
**1890** Local chapters of Farmers' Alliance formed

**1887** Dawes Severalty Act

**1889** Oklahoma opened to settlement

**1889-** North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana,  
**1890** Washington, Idaho, and Wyoming  
admitted to Union

**1890** Census Bureau declares frontier line ended  
Emergence of People's party (Populists)  
Battle of Wounded Knee

**1892** Populist party candidate James B. Weaver polls  
more than 1 million votes in presidential  
election

**1893** Frederick Jackson Turner publishes "The  
Significance of the Frontier in American  
History"

**1894** "Coxey's Army" marches on Washington  
Pullman strike

**1896** Utah admitted to Union  
McKinley defeats Bryan for presidency

**1897** Dingley Tariff Act

**1900** Gold Standard Act

**1907** Oklahoma admitted to Union

**1924** Indians granted U.S. citizenship

**1934** Indian Reorganization Act

## VARYING VIEWPOINTS

### Was the West Really “Won”?

For more than half a century, the Turner thesis dominated historical writing about the West. In his famous essay of 1893, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” historian Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the frontier experience molded both region and nation. Not only the West, Turner insisted, but the national character had been uniquely shaped by the westward movement. Pioneers had brought the raw West into the embrace of civilization. And the struggle to overcome the hazards of the western wilderness—including distance, deserts, drought, and Indians—had transformed *Europeans* into tough, inventive, and self-reliant *Americans*.

Turner’s thesis raised a question that Americans found especially intriguing in 1893. Just three years earlier, the superintendent of the census declared that the frontier, defined as a zone with little or no settled population, had closed forever. What new forces, Turner now asked, would shape a distinctive American national character, now that the testing ground of the frontier had been plowed and tamed?

Turner’s hypothesis that the American character was forged in the western wilderness is surely among the most provocative statements ever made about the formative influences on the nation’s development. But as the frontier era recedes ever further into the past, scholars are less persuaded that Turner’s thesis adequately explains the national character. American society is still conspicuously different from European and other cultures, even though Turner’s frontier disappeared more than a century ago.

Modern scholars charge that Turner based his thesis on several questionable assumptions. Historian David J. Weber, for example, suggests that the line of the frontier did not define the quivering edge of “civilization” but marked the boundary between diverse cultures, each with its own claims to legitimacy and, indeed, to legitimate possession of the land. The frontier should therefore be understood not as the place where “civilization” triumphed over

“savagery,” but as the principal site of interaction between those cultures.

Several so-called New Western historians take this argument still further. Scholars such as Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, and Donald Worster suggest that the cultural and ecological damage inflicted by advancing “civilization” must be reckoned with in any final accounting of what the pioneers accomplished. These same scholars insist that the West did not lose its regional identity after the frontier line was no longer recognizable in 1890. The West, they argue, is still a unique part of the national mosaic, a region whose history, culture, and identity remain every bit as distinctive as those of New England or the Old South.

But where Turner saw the frontier as the principal shaper of the region’s character, the New Western historians emphasize the effects of ethnic and racial confrontation, topography, climate, and the roles of government and big business as the factors that have made the modern West. The New Western historians thus reject Turner’s emphasis on the triumphal civilizing of the wilderness. As they see the matter, European and American settlers did not tame the West, but rather conquered it, by suppressing the Native American and Hispanic peoples who had preceded them into the region. But those conquests were less than complete, so the argument goes, and the West therefore remains, uniquely among American regions, an unsettled arena of commingling and competition among those groups. Moreover, in these accounts the West’s distinctively challenging climate and geography yielded to human habitation not through the efforts of heroic individual pioneers, but only through massive corporate—and especially federal government—investments in transportation systems (like the transcontinental railroad) and irrigation projects (like the watering of California’s Central Valley). Such developments still give western life its special character today.