

CHAPTER
5

TELESCOPING THE TIMES

Changes on the Western Frontier

Summary

CHAPTER OVERVIEW *In the late 1800s, growing numbers of white settlers move to the West, and Native Americans lose their lands. Railroads cross the nation. The open range gives way to fenced ranches. Populism rises and falls.*

❶ Cultures Clash on the Prairie

MAIN IDEA *The cattle industry boomed in the late 1800s, as the culture of the Plains Indians declined.*

Native Americans of the Great Plains followed a way of life centered on the horse and buffalo. Buffalo provided food, clothing, shelter, and other essentials. These Native Americans lived in family groups or large clans. The leaders of a tribe ruled by counsel rather than force.

After the Civil War, the Plains attracted tens of thousands of white settlers who wanted to own land. Many went to Colorado to mine gold. The Homestead Act offered cheap land to farmers, attracting more than 400,000 from 1862 to 1900. Several thousand were African Americans. Others were immigrants from Germany and Scandinavia.

Earlier the government had granted the entire Plains to Native Americans. As more white settlers wished to move there, the government made new treaties restricting the land that Native Americans could use. Conflict erupted. In 1864, a militia attacked a camp of Cheyenne, killing 200, mostly women and children. Meanwhile the Sioux chief Red Cloud protested white settlers moving to the Black Hills, an area sacred to his people. Some Sioux signed a treaty that accepted living on a reservation but others refused.

In 1874, Colonel George Armstrong Custer reported that the Black Hills held gold. A new gold rush began, and the government offered to buy the land. The Sioux refused, and the army moved in. Custer and his soldiers were all killed in the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876. Within months, though, the army defeated the Sioux.

The Dawes Act of 1887 tried to force the assimilation of Native Americans into white culture. Reservations were broken up and some of the land was given to each adult family head for farming. The policy failed because the Native Americans were cheated of the best land.

However, possibly more devastating to the Plains tribes was the killing of millions of buffalo on which they had depended.

In the 1880s, many Sioux turned to a ritual called the Ghost Dance, which promised to bring the buffalo back and restore Sioux lands. In 1890, a nervous army killed about 300 unarmed Sioux in the Battle of Wounded Knee.

Vast herds of cattle replaced buffalo. The Spanish had begun building ranches of longhorn cattle. Eventually the ranches became established in Texas. Native Americans, mainly Spanish prisoners, were the first cowboys. They developed many features of cowboy culture. *Corral* and *rodeo* come from Spanish words. In time, ranches in the West held huge herds of cattle.

After the Civil War, demand for beef rose sharply in the growing populations of Eastern cities. Ranch owners began to move their cattle north to be shipped by rail to Chicago. Soon tens of thousands of cattle were driven on the Chisholm Trail from Texas to Kansas. Abilene, Kansas, became a major shipping point.

More than 50,000 cowboys worked the herds in the next two decades. About a quarter were African Americans and about 12 percent Mexican. Cowboys worked long days—from 10 to 14 hours—in all kinds of weather. In the spring, the cowboys rode the range to round up the cattle. After branding the new calves with the ranch's symbol, cowboys led thousands of animals on the long drive to Kansas, which took about three months. When the herd reached a railroad town, they were sold, and the cowboys celebrated.

Herds grew too large, and overgrazing and bad weather struck the Plains in the late 1880s. In a terrible three-day blizzard in 1887, ranchers lost most of their herds. Ranchers began to use barbed wire to fence in their land. They moved away from longhorns to other breeds of cattle. The era of the open range and cattle drives ended.

2 Settling on the Great Plains

MAIN IDEA Settlers on the Great Plains transformed the land despite great hardships.

Building the transcontinental railroad—stretching from East to West—helped promote settlement on the Plains. From 1850 to 1871, the government granted huge tracts of land to companies ready to lay railroad tracks. In 1867, the Central Pacific began building east from Sacramento and the Union Pacific west from Omaha. Irish and Chinese immigrants plus African Americans and Mexican Americans did much of the back-breaking work. In 1869, the two routes met in Utah, completing the first transcontinental track.

The railroads sold some of their land at low prices to farmers. The governor of Kansas invited African Americans to settle, attracting many. The federal government, too, offered cheap land. On one day in 1889, 2 million acres were claimed in Oklahoma. The government also wanted to preserve some wilderness. In 1872, land was set aside to create Yellowstone National Park. Millions of acres more were set aside later.

The new settlers had to endure many hardships. However, from 1850 to 1900, the number of people living west of the Mississippi rose from 1 percent to almost 30 percent of the nation's population in 1850.

The Plains were largely treeless, so people built homes as dugouts in the sides of hills or out of sod. Homesteaders were isolated and had to produce everything they needed. Women worked in the fields alongside men as well as tending the children, running the house, and doing the cooking and laundry.

The farmers used a steel plow to break the prairie's tough soil and machines to harvest their wheat. The federal government gave land to states to create agricultural colleges. With new crop strains and techniques developed there, the eastern Plains became productive.

The farmers were plagued by weather and debt. Machines cost money, which they had to borrow. When grain prices fell, they could not repay their loans. They also resented how much they had to pay railroads to ship their crops.

3 Farmers and the Populist Movement

MAIN IDEA Farmers united to address their economic problems, giving rise to the Populist movement.

Farmers were also plagued by changing economic conditions. After the Civil War, the supply of money shrank, making each dollar in circulation worth more. This hurt farmers who had to repay their loans in more expensive dollars. They urged policies that would promote “cheap money.” They wanted more money printed or the amount of silver coins to be increased.

The Grange, a farmers' organization, pushed for laws to regulate railroads. Other groups arose. The Farmers Alliance sent lecturers to farm areas trying to drum up support for cheap money and railroad reform. The Southern Alliance and the Colored Farmers' National Alliance group pursued similar campaigns.

The farmers' movement resulted in the formation of the Populist, or People's, Party in 1891. The Populists urged policies to help farmers. They also pushed for democratic reforms such as the direct election of senators and adoption of the secret ballot for voting. The party pulled 10 percent of the vote in the 1892 presidential election and won many local contests.

A business panic in 1893 started a depression. As the economy continued to falter, Democrats ran William Jennings Bryan for president in 1896. He campaigned for cheap money by urging that the nation's currency be backed by plentiful silver as well as gold. The Populists nominated Bryan as well. Urban voters feared that cheap money would mean rising prices. Republican William McKinley won election over Bryan, and the Populist movement died.

Review

1. Why did Native Americans and settlers come into conflict?
2. What was a cowboy's life like?
3. How did settlers change the Great Plains?
4. Describe the rise and fall of Populism.