

The American West

Lesson Overview

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the economic and social changes occurring in the West during this era and how these changes were connected to the rest of America.
2. Explain why people moved into the West and how they coped with the conditions they faced.
3. Explain how American Indians responded to their plight.
4. Analyze the attempts to assimilate American Indians and to displace Mexican Americans living in the West.
5. Assess the legacy of the transformation of the West.

Video: The Promised Land

Historians discuss connections between developments in the West and national industrial growth in the late nineteenth century.

Video script:

Music introduction

Sarah Stage, Arizona State University: I think it's really important to talk about the West as an integral part of the American scene. Otherwise, you'd think the west was just out there from 1840 to 1910 and going completely on its own. The West is an essential part of "gilded age" America. I like to argue that the "gilded" in the gilded age came from the gold fields of California, because the speculative mania that really develops around the mining industry in the West is at the heart of what Mark Twain would see and call "the gilded age."

Richard White, Stanford University: One of the things we forget about this sort of romantic era in the late 19th century West is that it's very much tied in with the growth of the United States as an industrial nation. Take something like cowboys and cattle ranching. Those only can take

place, first of all, because you've got the railroad, which will allow cattle to be taken to market in the East in refrigerated cars, which allow the great packers to really begin to take meat apart. And that's literally what they're doing. They're dismantling cows in Chicago and sending it out in these refrigerated cars all over the nation, putting smaller butchers out of business. The people investing in these ranches are largely European capitalists. So when you begin to look at ranching, what you're not looking at so much is a hearty individualist, you're looking at a manifestation of what it really is – this world market and this new industry which is transforming the United States.

Lesson Focus Points

Look for answers to these questions as you study the lesson:

- What characterized mining operations and the lives of mine workers in the West?
- Who comprised the diverse peoples of the West? What tensions existed among these people? How were these tensions expressed?
- What characterized the operations of territorial government in the West?
- Who were the "Exodusters?" Why did tenancy, sharecropping, and migrant farm labor become common in the West?
- Why did the number of farms increase during this era? Why did the percentage of the American population who were rural decrease?
- Who was Chief Joseph? How did he express the plight of the American Indians? How did the Apache tribes and Geronimo carry on with resistance?
- What was life like for white Americans living on the Great Plains?
- What was the role of commercial interests and speculators in closing the American frontier?
- How did the loss of land affect the cultural identities of Native and Mexican Americans?