

The American West

The West in the Gilded Age

Railroads were vital in linking the West to other parts of the country. Mining, ranching, and farming became commercial enterprises tied in with national and international markets. As elsewhere, some people profited, and others fought to survive.

Video: Farming on the Plains

The federal government's land policy (Homestead Act) and land subsidies to railroads spurred movement into the plains, bringing ranchers and farmers into the national market. Many settlers struggled to adjust to a harsh environment; some endured, and some left.

Look for answers to these questions when watching the video:

- How and why did mining on the Comstock Lode and other areas in the West reflect the industrialization going on in other parts of the country in the late nineteenth century?
- How and why did the federal government and the railroads encourage economic development of the West? Why did people move West?
- How did cattle ranching evolve in the West between 1865 and 1900? Why did barbed wire revolutionize the cattle business? How was ranching similar to other businesses of the era?
- Why was farming on the Great Plains so difficult? How did farmers cope?
- How did mechanization affect farming? Why was farming becoming more commercial? How did the Miller & Lux company illustrate agribusiness? How had the ideal of the self-sufficient yeoman farmer been transformed?

Video script:

Music introduction

Narrator: Unlike the East, where the government largely stayed out of business, the federal government had a central role to play in the development of the West. Nationally subsidized railroads carried settlers to the Great Plains, where they staked a claim under the Federal

Homestead Act, or bought land the government had granted to the railroads.

Actors, Land Pitchmen: Ten years' credit... 6% interest...only the interest payment down.

Better terms than ever! Products will pay for land and improvements. Large discounts for cash!

Buy train tickets to explore the land. Deductible from the final cost if land is purchased...

Richard White: The movement West of the Missouri is very much an artifact of railroad expansion, both because the railroads provide transportation and provide a way for farmers to get goods to market, but also the railroads sell as much land as farmers acquire from the Homestead Act. In the initial stages they're bringing them into some of the best agricultural lands in the world. Later on they're bringing them into very marginal agricultural lands and they're promising them that rain will follow the plow.

Charlene McAden: My great-grandfather, Enoch Martin Lafferty, was a farmer in Missouri and he wanted to come when they opened the territory of Oklahoma for homesteading.

My grandfather was not 18 yet, so he could not claim any land. But his brother did. And his brother, whose name was Omer, claimed what is now the township of Garber.

There was not really anything there. There were no homes, of course no roads. The summer, August, does rival hell. It is hot. In the winter there's nothing to stop the wind. They don't have any trees! So the wind comes from the North Pole and just comes right through there. They had to have been a strength somewhere that gave them the courage to fight the environment.

Richard White: But they're overwhelmed by the immensity of the place. They're overwhelmed by the distance from neighbors. They're overwhelmed by the lack of rainfall. They're overwhelmed by a whole series of things.

Patty Limerick, University of Colorado: There's nothing worse, really, than those descriptions of what it was like to be in a grasshopper plague. It's pretty awful, the devastation with which they can land and take out a crop.

Actor, Mary Lyon: They devoured every green thing but the prairie grass.

Actor, Adelheit Viets: I was wearing a dress of white with a green stripe. The grasshoppers settled on me and ate up every bit of the green stripe in that dress before anything could be

done about it.

Narrator: Despite the hardships, the farmers of the Great Plains endured. One pioneer woman remembered...

Actor, Pioneer Woman: ...The thrill of conquering a new country, the attraction of the prairie, which simply gets into your blood and makes you dissatisfied away from it, the low lying hills, the unobstructed view of the horizon.

Narrator: Farmers may have felt alone on the wide prairie, but they were not isolated from the march of progress. Agriculture, like every other business in America, was transformed by industrialization.

Richard White: Farmers are going into the plains in order to create what's an icon – a family farm. But the problem is they are competing with farmers all over the world and the basic commodities they're producing, wheat, are being produced far more than anybody can consume. So this is one of the things that makes it a very, very hard row to hoe for these farmers in the late 19th century and what happens to many of them is they leave farming.

Charlene McAden: Omer tried to stay there but he said it was the most godforsaken piece of the world he could imagine. It has to rival hell. So he traded his 160 acres for a mule and a wagon and he went back to Missouri and drove a trolley car the rest of his life and I guess was very, very happy.

End of video.

Activity: Check Your Understanding

This quiz reviews different aspects of farming and development in the West during the late nineteenth century. The federal government played a huge role in western development, both through the Homestead Act, which encouraged settlement, and subsidies to railroad builders. While the family farm was an ideal that migrants to the West sought to maintain, in reality they faced competition from farmers all over the world, which relentlessly drove down the prices for wheat and other commodities. Overwhelmed by conditions such as the distance from neighbors, harshness of the weather, and the immensity of the plains, some farmers settling on the Great Plains packed up and moved back East.

Gilded Age: East and West

Industrialization was not limited to the East during the Gilded Age. Many factors that helped transform the East into an industrial giant were also at work in the West during the late nineteenth century. See how many similarities you can identify in this activity.

Interactive Activity: Gilded Age: East and West

This activity reviews how many factors that helped transform the East into an industrial giant were also at work in the West during the late nineteenth century. Similarities include corruption in government, government intervention, environmental pollution, special interest groups, exploitation of natural resources, competition in world markets, corporate mergers, foreign investment, changes in transportation, monopolies, technological advancements, racial antagonism, disgruntled workers forming unions, and innovative management techniques.

Additional Resources

Websites

[The West](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/program/episodes/)

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The West is an eight-part documentary series that includes selected documentary materials, archival images and commentary, as well as links to background information and other resources.