

Chapter 23: Closing the Frontier

1. Migration

Transcontinental Railroad

When California entered the Union in 1850, it became clear that the nation needed a railroad to connect East and West. President Lincoln signed the Pacific Railway Act in 1862 hiring the Union Pacific Railroad to build west from Omaha, Nebraska and the Central Pacific Railroad to build east from Sacramento, California. At some point, the two sides would connect.

Real construction started after the Civil War ended in 1865. Using primarily Irish labor, the Union Pacific laid tracks through the Great Plains quickly. Occasional attacks from Native Americans prompted the federal government to send the U.S. army to protect railroad workers.

The Central Pacific had more trouble making progress. The hot summers and cold winters of the Sierra Mountains discouraged many white workers. Management started hiring Chinese laborers who worked for less money and did more work. They hand drilled and blasted through solid **granite** for two years before finally clearing the Sierras.

Both railroad companies met at Promontory, Utah, in 1869. On May 10, a railroad worker drove a golden spike into the track completing the project. Instead of traveling to California in a covered wagon that would take six months, passengers could travel by train from New York to San Francisco in about a week. Thousands of people began moving west.

Buffalo

About 35 million **buffalo** roamed the Great Plains. When the herds moved, the ground shook and it sounded like thunder. It could take days for a large herd to pass a particular point.

For the railroads, buffalo slowed down travel. To reduce the herds, railroads offered hunting expeditions. Hunters shot buffalo for sport as the trains passed through the buffalo herds. Also, hunters killed buffalo for their hides to supply clothing manufacturers back east to make robes, blankets, and rugs.

2. Native Americans

Reservations

As railroads brought more Americans into western land, conflicts between Native Americans and settlers increased. Native tribes often believed they had no choice but to go to war against the invaders.

In order to reduce conflict, in 1851, the federal government created the **reservation** system, land set aside for Native Americans to live far away from settlers. This policy continued for decades but ultimately fell apart. The government promised to protect Native American land and supply tribes with food, clothing, and tools for farming. Too often, the government failed to keep its promises.

Turmoil

Many Native American nations refused to go to the reservations or left the reservations to preserve their **culture** or seek better living conditions.

As settlers took more land and hunting brought the buffalo to near extinction, Native Americans had little left of their former way of life. The federal government sent the army who pursued them, fought them, and finally brought most Native American groups into the reservation system by the early 1890s.

3. Populating the West

Farming

Americans once referred to the Great Plains as the Great American Desert. Grasslands stretched for hundreds of miles with few trees to give shade during the hot, humid summers. However, settlers moving west soon learned that the Plains actually had great soil for farming.

To encourage westward expansion and farming on the Great Plains, Congress passed the Homestead Act in 1862. Potential farmers could get cheap land if they farmed it for five years. Millions of people took advantage of the opportunity. However, farming was difficult and many gave up and went back east after only a few years.

In 1873, farmer Joseph Glidden patented his barbed wire invention. Barbed wire allowed farmers to cheaply fence off their land. The open plains began to close.

Ranching

Wherever trains went, towns sprang up. That opened more markets for ranchers. After the Civil War, an increase in the demand for beef helped make a number of ranchers wealthy.

In Texas, they bred a hardy strain of cattle called the Texas Longhorn

because they had horns that could grow over eight feet wide. Demand for beef in the east led Texas ranchers to move their cattle north to the railroads. In the towns, ranchers sold their cattle and had them shipped to cities like Chicago where the cattle got butchered and sent to markets.

People who worked on ranches were often called **drovers** or cowboys. It was a dirty job with long hours and low pay. Too often, drovers got killed when cattle knocked them off their horses and trampled them. African Americans made up about a quarter of the cowboys and Hispanics about ten percent. Most people moved on to other jobs after a year of working with cattle.

Mining

Mining had always attracted people looking to get rich quick or to find a job with decent pay. In 1859, Henry Comstock discovered silver in Nevada touching off a silver rush that lasted for two decades. That same year, prospectors discovered gold in what would become Colorado. About 100,000 people swarmed into the area. In 1867, gold was discovered in Wyoming. Prospectors found huge deposits of copper in Butte, Montana, in the 1870s. In 1884, gold seekers headed into North Dakota. Finally, the last great gold rush occurred in Alaska in 1898.

Every time prospectors found minerals, people arrived and built towns filled with businesses and services. Sometimes the towns disappeared after the mines shut down and sometimes they continued on. Yet, with each discovery of gold, silver, copper, or other minerals, mining increased the western population. As the population increased, the great wide open plains shrank in size.