

# Conflict and Conquest

The Transformation of the West, 1860–1900

**“The destiny of the American people is to subdue the continent—to rush over this vast field to the Pacific Ocean ... to change darkness into light and confirm the destiny of the human race ... Divine task! Immortal mission!”**

WILLIAM GILPIN, *The Central Gold Region*, 1859

Most Americans envisioned the conquest and transformation of the West as a tale of triumph. In John Gast's 1872 painting, *American Progress*, the beautiful goddess Liberty glides westward, stringing telegraph wire and holding a book, symbols, along with the distant railroad, of the civilization and new technology that would soon tame the wilderness. Beneath her, Gast depicts farmers and pioneers intent on taking advantage of the West's bountiful resources. Turned into a popular lithograph, it was advertised as worthy of hanging in both “the miner's humble cabin” and the “stately marble mansion of the capitalist.” Publishers

put the image on the cover of a popular guide to the West, *The New Overland Tourist and Pacific Coast Guide*.

Before 1840 most Americans viewed the lands west of the Mississippi as a great, untamed and dangerous wilderness of rugged terrain, extreme temperatures, wild animals, and hostile Native Americans. But beginning in the 1840s, an ever-growing number of farmers, miners, ranchers, entrepreneurs, and adventurers moved west, aided after 1869 by the completion of the transcontinental railroad and soaring demand for western products and resources.

Gast's celebratory scene reveals, doubtless unintentionally, the bitter conflict that accompanied the transformation of the West. On the painting's left border, a cluster of Native Americans flee before the advancing whites. Above them a herd of buffalo likewise make their escape. Gast's matter-of-fact portrayal of the seizure of Indian land and the near extinction of the buffalo reflected the nation's enthusiasm for “progress” and the inability—or unwillingness—to confront the human and environmental costs associated with it.

By 1900 the West had been radically transformed. Great networks of railroads and telegraph lines crisscrossed the landscape, as did untold miles of fencing that marked the boundaries of millions of farms and ranches. The western landscape also featured cities like San Francisco and Denver that rivaled their eastern counterparts. Perhaps even more remarkable than the appearance of these new aspects of western life was the disappearance of others. By 1900 the American government had confined hundreds of independent Native American tribes that had once lived in virtually every corner of the West to a series of reservations. Gone, too, were the millions of buffalo from the plains and, in areas of intensive mining, large mountain sections of once pristine landscape. The conquest of the West between 1865 and 1900 included many stories of success, achievement, and undeniable progress, but it was far more complex, violent, and tragic than Gast's dreamy vision suggests.

How did the notion of “progress” shape Americans' vision of western settlement?



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# Natives and Newcomers



Inspired by visions of unlimited opportunity and acts of Congress like the Homestead Act, westward migration increased dramatically after the Civil War. Contrary to the popular notions of a vacant landscape, much of the West was home to hundreds of thousands of Native Americans. Their wide variety of languages, lifestyles, and religious practices made for a rich cultural landscape, but also conflict with the rising numbers of newcomers.

## Congress Promotes Westward Settlement

In 1862 Congress passed three major bills designed to facilitate settlement of the trans-Mississippi West, the vast region of the United States west of the

Mississippi River. The Morrill Land Grant

College Act of 1862 created a system whereby funds raised by the sale of public land went toward establishing colleges specializing in agricultural, mechanical, and technological

education. Far more significant, however, was the Homestead Act.

It provided 160 acres of free land to any settler willing to live on it and improve it for five years.

Those who took advantage of the program included immigrants, landless farmers from the East, single women, and ex-slaves.

Farmers with less patience and more capital could buy the land for a rock-bottom price of \$1.25 per acre after

living on it for only six months. By making

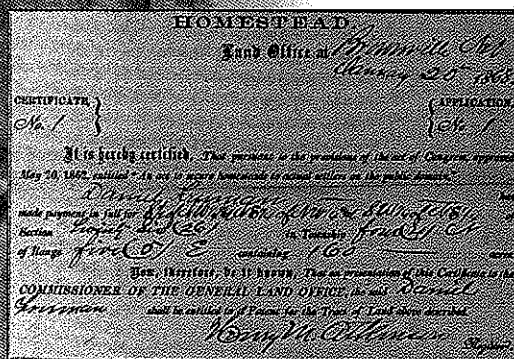
available more than 600 million acres of public land to be settled and farmed, the

Homestead Act touched off the largest migration of people ever within the United States.

The actual results of the Homestead Act varied widely by region. On the Great Plains and the lands farther west—regions with a harsh climate, poor soil, inconsistent supplies of water, and limited access to transportation—farmers who participated in the Homestead Act often went bankrupt. By contrast, it worked well in the northern and central portions of the Midwest, where the soil and the climate were favorable to farming.

One of the fortunate beneficiaries was Daniel Freeman, the first person to take advantage of the Homestead Act when it took effect January 1, 1863. Born in Ohio in 1826, Freeman grew up in upstate New York and Illinois. He became a doctor and served in the Union army during the Civil War. While stationed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, he picked out a section of land in nearby Nebraska he intended to claim as a homestead. Shortly after midnight on January 1, 1863, he woke up the land office clerk and filed his claim—the first of 417 filed that day. Freeman established a successful farm, and as this image of his certificate indicates (15.1), he earned clear title to the land in 1868. In addition to prospering as a farmer, Freeman practiced medicine and served terms as county coroner and county sheriff. He lived on his land until his death in 1908.

Others prospered from the Homestead Act in ways not intended by Congress. Many “homesteaders” were actually speculators who claimed their 160 acres with the intention of selling them for a quick profit in a few years. Larger enterprises like railroads and real estate companies accumulated vast holdings of land



### 15.1 Claiming a Piece of the American West

On January 1, 1863, Daniel Freeman became the first American to file a claim under the Homestead Act. Five years later he received this title, which gave him full ownership of 160 acres of Nebraska farmland. Freeman, shown here more than thirty years after he received a homestead, prospered as a farmer and doctor and served stints as county coroner and county sheriff.

by buying out farmers who failed or paying people to file homestead claims and then buying the land from them. The Homestead Act did indeed attract farmers to the West, but by 1900 only 52 percent of original homestead claimants had acquired legal title to the land.

The third major piece of legislation passed by Congress in 1862 to promote western development, the Pacific Railway Act, created two corporations to build the transcontinental railroad, a line spanning the continent. The Union Pacific was to build west from Omaha, Nebraska, across the Plains and the Rockies to meet the Central Pacific which was to build from California through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. To help the railroad corporations raise sufficient capital to pay for the road, Congress granted them 10 square miles of land (in a checkerboard pattern with the federal government retaining ownership of the remaining sections) for every mile of track completed. The law also granted the railroads cheap loans and cash subsidies for each mile of track laid.

It took six years of low paid, hard and dangerous (scores were killed) work by huge gangs of workers, especially Irish and Chinese, to complete the project. On May 10, 1869, a grand ceremony marking the union of the two lines took place at Promontory Point, Utah. At the appointed moment, Leland Stanford, president of the Central Pacific, drove a symbolic golden spike into place, joining two rails, one placed by a team of Chinese workers and another by an Irish crew. Telegraph wires attached to the sledge hammer and spike sent a signal out across the nation, announcing to all the long-anticipated news: the continent had been spanned. Keenly aware of the historic nature of the event, railroad officials staged this iconic photograph (15.2) showing the workers and locomotives of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific. It soon appeared in numerous publications across the country, often as a lithograph. Conspicuously absent from the photograph, however, are any of the thousands of Chinese workers who labored on the Central Pacific.

**15.2 The Continent Spanned**  
Conscious of the historic significance of the event, workers and officials of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads pose for a photograph while celebrating the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869.



Why was the federal government so eager to assist the companies that built the transcontinental railroad?



the starvation and disease that followed, killed upwards of ten thousand Indians (see Chapter 12).

The region of present-day Arizona, New Mexico, and west Texas likewise fell under Spanish colonial rule in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But because this region was dry and remote, it attracted few Europeans. Native inhabitants, therefore, successfully retained core elements of their culture despite Spanish rule and the presence of Catholic missionaries. Indeed, missionaries managed to gain converts only by conforming their message of Christianity to fit local customs and traditions.

One major group, the Pueblo, descended from the ancient Anasazi people, included the Hopi, Zuni, and Rio Grande Pueblo tribes. They lived in settled farm communities in western New Mexico and eastern Arizona, growing corn and cotton and herding sheep. Neighboring Mexican ranchers, who prized these tribes' rich artistic traditions of decorative pottery and woven cloth, sought these native goods in trade for manufactured goods such as hoes and tools.

Eastern New Mexico and western Texas harbored more tribes, including the Jicarilla Apache and Navajo. Like the Pueblo, they lived in relative isolation from Spanish missions and thus successfully retained much of their traditional religion, language, and culture. Before the sixteenth century they had lived much like the Pueblos, but their adoption of the use of horses, brought to America by the Spanish in the seventeenth century, gradually transformed them into a more migratory people. They hunted, farmed, and tended large flocks of sheep, following them on their seasonal migrations. Sheep provided food, but also wool, which Indian women wove into cloth. The Navajo developed a tradition of silversmithing that produced beautiful jewelry.

The Pacific Northwest, comprising present-day Washington, Oregon, and northern California, was home to thriving native societies. Tribes such as the Chinook, Salish, Yurok, and Shasta lived in settled villages in large houses made from wooden planks. They divided their time between growing vegetables, hunting in the lush forests for bear, deer, and moose, and fishing along rivers and the ocean shore. Highly skilled in woodworking, the men produced excellent canoes for fishing and elaborate totem poles. Women wove intricate baskets that were both beautiful and practical. Many of these tribes enjoyed a rich material life that was offset by their custom of *potlatch*—a ceremony during which rich tribe members gave away many of their possessions as an act of benevolence and a demonstration of superior status.

## Native American Tribes of the Great Plains

While Native American tribes could be found in virtually every corner of the West, by far the largest group—constituting nearly two-thirds of all Native Americans in the West—lived on the Great Plains. This vast open territory stretched east to west from present-day Missouri to the Rocky Mountains, and north to south from North Dakota to Texas. In the northern half (the Dakotas, Idaho, Minnesota, and Montana) lived tribes such as the Flathead, Blackfeet, Crow, Arapaho, Northern Cheyenne, and Sioux. Tribes in the southern Great Plains (present-day Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico) included those relocated from the East during the so-called Trail of Tears ordeal (Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, and Seminole), as well as Pawnees, Comanches, Kiowas, Southern Arapahos, and Cheyenne (see Chapter 8).

The Plains tribes varied culturally, but many shared a similar tribal structure. Most tribes consisted of bands of about three hundred to five hundred related men and women, each governed by a council and widespread community involvement in the decisions the councils made. The Comanches, for example, divided their population of seven thousand (ca. 1870) into thirteen bands.

Religious beliefs and practices varied among the Plains tribes, but most shared important fundamental elements, beginning with the worship of one primary god whom the Sioux called *Wakan Tanka* (the Great Spirit). Plains Indians also believed in spirits found in everything in creation, from the earth itself, to plants, animals, stars, the moon, and sun, and they considered certain places, such as burial grounds, sacred. A shaman deemed *wakan*, or blessed, led religious ceremonies, healed the sick, and even decided where to hunt.

Many Plains tribes lived in settled villages near rivers where they tended fields of corn, beans, and squash; fished; and hunted a variety of local game, including bear, deer, and buffalo. Trade with white settlers, explorers, and trappers since the eighteenth century had allowed them to procure guns, kettles, and tools. These sedentary tribes included the Wichitas of northern Texas and Oklahoma, Pawnees of western Kansas, the Dakota Sioux of Minnesota, the Mandans of North Dakota, the Omahas of Nebraska, the Osages of western Missouri and Arkansas, and the Arikawas of South Dakota.

Although essential aspects of this Plains lifestyle had changed very little over the centuries, some of

the largest tribes took to using horses (introduced by the Spanish by the eighteenth century) and adopted a migratory lifestyle. These included the Crow, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche, and Lakota Sioux. The horse allowed the Plains tribes to follow the seasonal migrations of the buffalo, whose population stood at 30 million in 1800. This scene, *Buffalo Chase over Prairie Bluffs*, (15.4), painted in 1844 by George Catlin who traveled extensively among Indian tribes in the West from the 1830s to the 1850s, reveals both the drama of the buffalo hunt and the extraordinary horsemanship skills developed by Plains Indians. It also reveals the centrality of the buffalo in Plains Indian culture, for the hunters are shown with clothing, jewelry, spear tips, and bridles made from buffalo parts. Other uses for the buffalo included flesh for food; skin for teepees and blankets; horns and hooves for glue; bones and tendons for weapons; hair for rope; teeth for ornaments; and dung for fuel.

#### 15.4 Plains Indians Hunting the Buffalo

This 1844 painting by George Catlin shows Native American hunters pursuing the buffalo, which they relied upon as a major source of food, clothing, tools, and fuel. [Source: George Catlin (1796–1872) "Buffalo Chase Over Prairie Bluffs", 1832–33. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC/Art Resource, NY]

The military advantages of the horse and the material wealth provided by the buffalo led these migratory tribes to become the dominant powers on the Plains, allowing them to oppress weaker sedentary tribes by exacting tribute. But reliance on the huge migratory beasts also meant that tribes, such as the Lakota Sioux in the north and Comanche in the central Plains, traversed enormous tracts of land during the course of their annual migrations, a practice that increasingly brought them into conflict with whites eager to acquire land. It also increased conflict between rival tribes, such as the Lakota Sioux and Crow, as white settlement forced tribes into closer contact.

While not all Native Americans were warlike, the culture of most Plains Indians relished battle. Warriors

competed to develop reputations for bravery and skill, both during the hunt and in war. Warfare between tribes to determine control over land and access to game usually took the form of small skirmishes where the goal was not so much to kill their opponents as to steal their horses (a measure of a tribe's wealth and power) and drive them from the field. Individual warriors earned fame and respect by "counting coup," or making contact with an enemy with one's hand or weapon. Respect was also earned through acts of charity. Sitting Bull of the Lakota Sioux, for example, rose to prominence and eventually chief of his tribe both through his success as a warrior and due to his many exhibitions of generosity.

"I was a famous hunter. ... I gave the [buffalo] calves that I killed to the poor that had no horses. I was considered a good man."

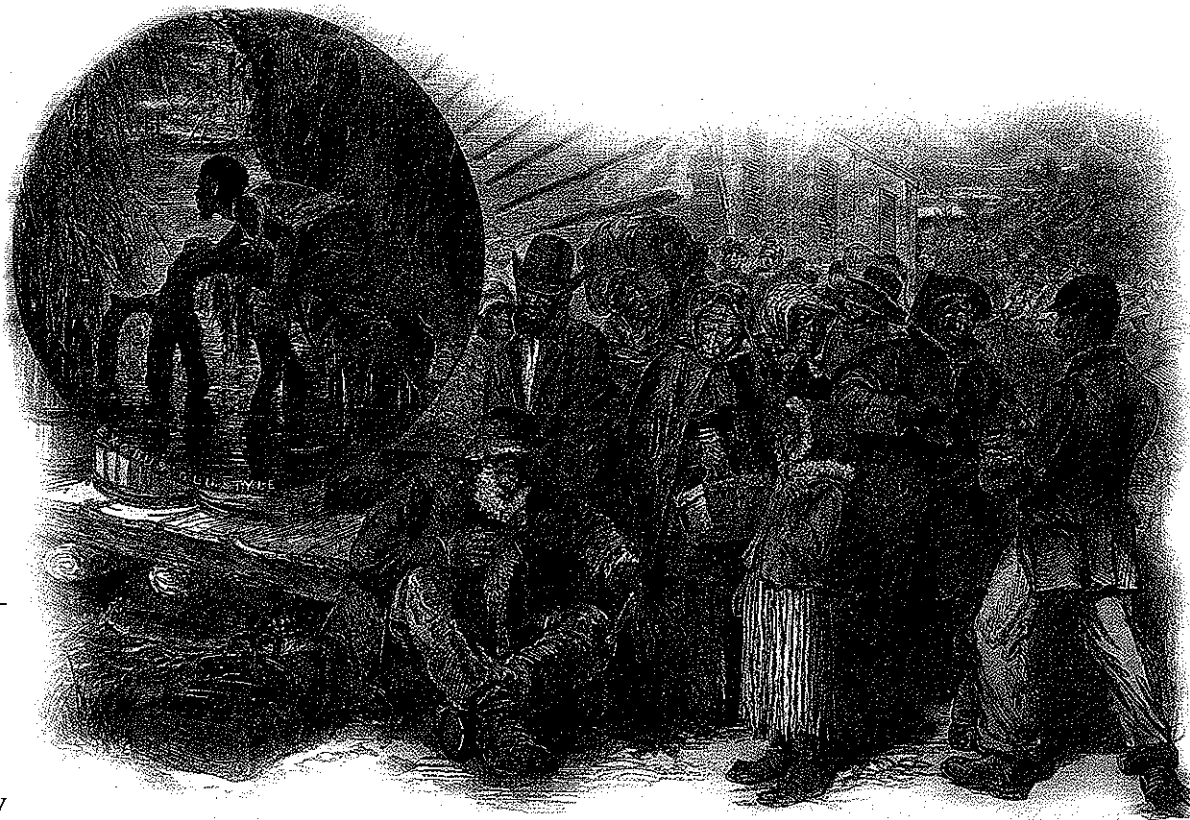
SITTING BULL

## The Great Westward Migration

In the late 1840s, after the Mexican War and the discovery of gold in California, a steady flow of migrant settlers into the trans-Mississippi West commenced. By the mid-1850s, thousands annually traversed the 2,000-mile Oregon Trail that stretched from Missouri to Oregon. What attracted them was a torrent of pamphlets, books, articles, and photographs produced by publicists and boosters, many employed by railroads and land companies, celebrating the virtues of the West as a region of wealth and opportunity.

Several groups led this migration westward. One was the recently freed slaves who hoped to secure new lives as independent farmers, free of the poverty and violence in the South. One of these ex-slaves, Henry Adams, who became a land promoter after emancipation, helped more than twenty thousand "Exodusters" on the "Exodus of 1879" from the South to farms in Kansas. This image from *Harper's Weekly* (15.5) captures the hopeful quality of this move-

ment. Note the contrast the artist draws between the "old style" of African American migration (a desperate escaped slave hiding from a passing steamboat) and "the new" (well-dressed ex-slaves arriving at their destination by steamboat). The name Exodusters reflected the belief that, like the Israelites in the Bible's Book of Exodus, they were heading for a "promised land." The inclusion of a black veteran of the Union army symbolizes the fulfillment of the promise of emancipation won during the war. Unfortunately for many Exodusters, they settled on poor land and lacked the capital necessary



to establish successful farms. As a result only about one-third stayed and the rest moved on or returned to the South.

Native-born whites constituted a second, much larger segment of the westward migration. Many were eastern and midwestern farmers who sought larger plots of land, either through purchase or by the Homestead Act, and opportunities for upward mobility. Others came to work in railroad construction or mining. Still other whites were the large numbers of soldiers in the U.S. Army who had been stationed in the West and elected to stay and settle after their terms of service expired.

One distinct subgroup of native-born whites who relocated to the West were the Mormons. Joseph Smith had founded this religious sect in upstate New York in 1830. But persecution, frequently violent—Smith was killed by a mob in Illinois in 1844—prompted the Mormons to head west in 1846 in search of an isolated homeland that could ensure their security and survival. They eventually chose a valley in Utah near the Great Salt Lake, territory then under Mexican rule. After the United States acquired it following the Mexican-American War, Congress created the Utah territory in 1850 (see Chapter 12), and by 1865 some twenty thousand Mormons lived in the region under a form of theocratic local rule. As more non-Mormons moved into Utah, tensions rose, since many other settlers resisted Mormon

religious authority and condemned the sect's practice of polygamy (a practice they officially banned in 1896).

Joining Exodusters, Mormons, and native-born Americans in the great migration into the trans-Mississippi West were hundreds of thousands, eventually millions, of immigrants to America. Drawing them were the same desires for free, or at least inexpensive, farmland or opportunities to work in mines, on railroads, or in the rapidly expanding economies of western towns and cities. Over time large concentrations of particular ethnic groups

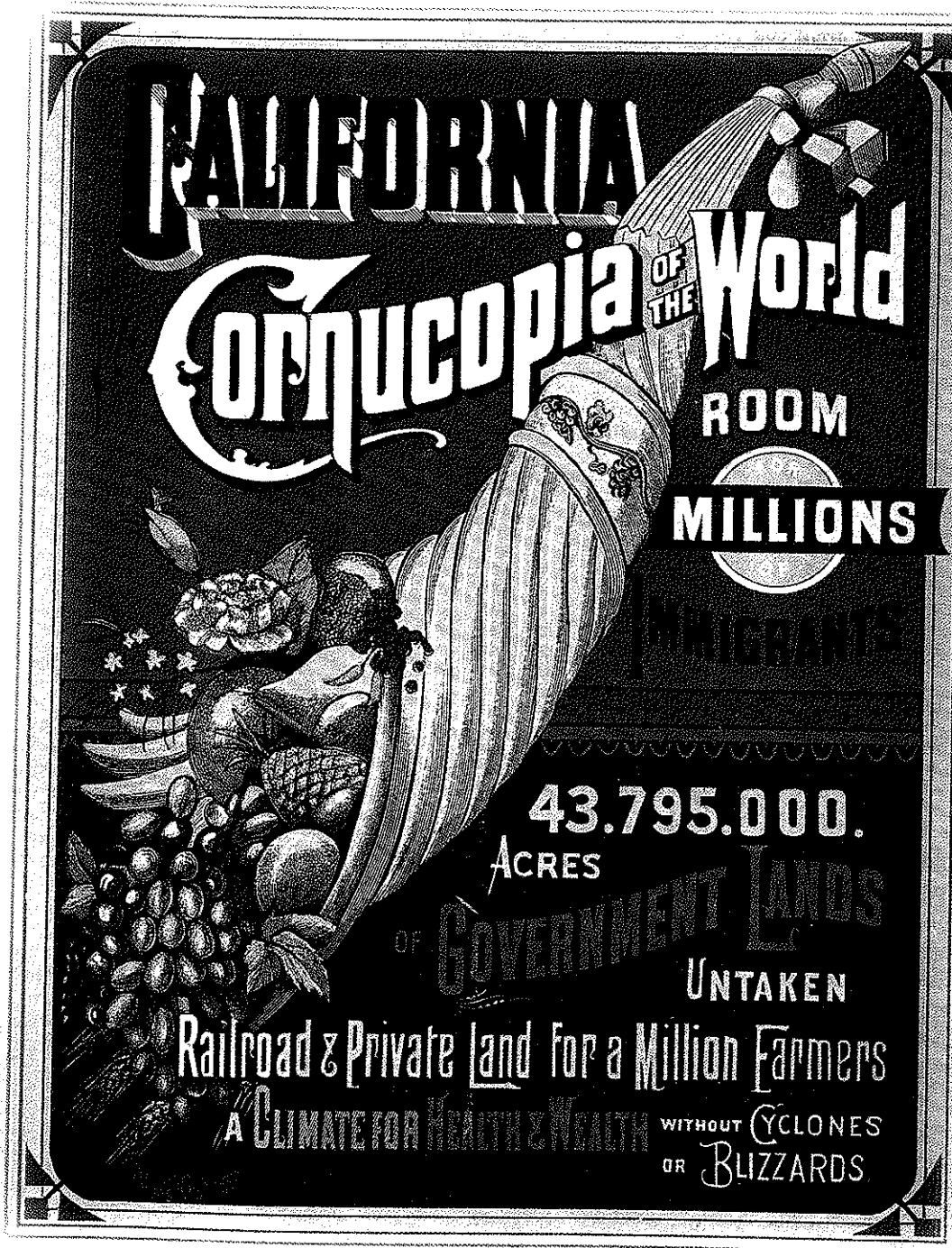
#### 15.5 Seeking a Better Life in the West

In response to poverty and mounting violence in the South, more than twenty thousand African Americans known as "Exodusters" migrated to Kansas in 1879–1880 to acquire homesteads and start new lives as independent farmers.

**"[I]f you strike off into the broad, free West, and make yourself a farm from Uncle Sam's generous domain, you will crowd nobody, starve nobody, and ... neither you nor your children need evermore beg for Something to Do."**

HORACE GREELEY, Editor,  
*New York Tribune*, 1867





### 15.6 The Railroads Promote Westward Settlement

Railroads placed promotional posters such as this one from 1883 in eastern cities to entice settlers to head west to settle on land owned by the railroads, much of it acquired in land grants from the federal government.

emerged. In Minnesota, for example, 30 percent of its population in 1880 was foreign-born, including more than 66,000 Germans, over 62,000 Norwegians, and just over 39,000 Swedes. Drawn by jobs in the copper mines, thousands of Irish immigrants settled in Butte, Montana. By 1900 it was the most Irish city in America.

Cyclones or Blizzards,” a clear attempt to make California more appealing than the Plains states like Kansas. Also significant is the claim of “Room for Millions of Immigrants,” since only one year earlier Congress, with heavy lobbying from California, passed the Chinese Exclusion Act that barred Chinese immigration to the United States.

As in the East, increased ethnic and racial diversity and economic competition in the West led to tension and conflict that occasionally exploded into raw violence. Frequently victims of the violence were Chinese immigrants. By 1880 California was home to 75,132 Chinese while 30,000 more lived elsewhere in the West. But anti-Chinese racism surged in the 1870s and 1880s as white laborers accused the Chinese of taking jobs and lowering wages. One attack in 1885 at Rock Springs, Wyoming, left twenty-eight Chinese miners dead. Two years later white laborers massacred at least thirty-four Chinese miners in Hells Canyon, Oregon.

Railroads and land companies played a key role in promoting immigration to the West, sending agents and advertisements to Europe to encourage migration, sometimes by entire villages, directly to the West. Railroads brought more than two million immigrants to the trans-Mississippi West between 1870 and 1900. “California, Cornucopia of the World” (1883) was one of countless posters that railroads placed in eastern seaports to attract the attention of newly arrived immigrants (15.6). The competition between western states for settlers is indicated in the phrase “without

# The Economic Transformation of the West



While many Americans were inspired to migrate westward by notions of manifest destiny, the primary motivation was economic—a search for land and work. As a result, economic development was the chief driving force behind the profound transformations of the West after 1865. By 1900 four major industries—the railroad, farming, ranching, and mining—had fundamentally reshaped the region. These industries employed millions of workers and supplied some of the essential needs of consumers and industry in the East and internationally. Such progress, however, did not come without a cost as it was accompanied by labor exploitation, lasting environmental damage, and conflict with Indians.

## The Railroad Fuels Western Development

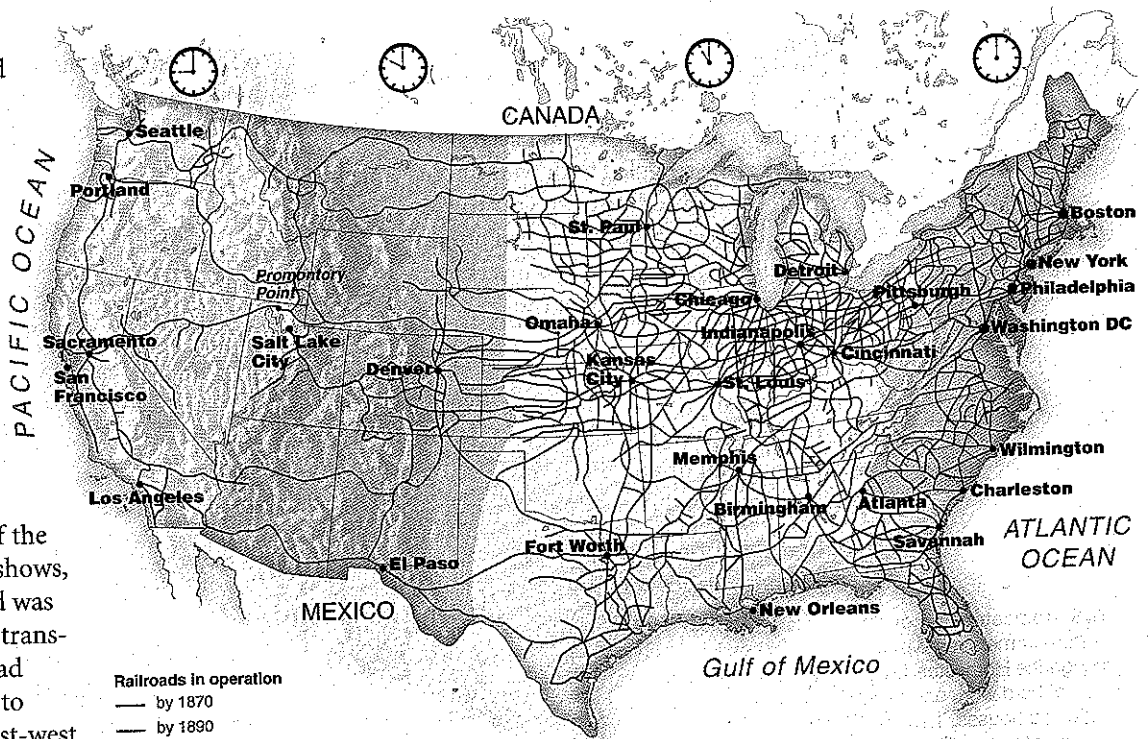
Between 1860 and 1900 the country witnessed astonishing growth in agricultural output. The number of farms in the United States grew from two million to six million, with most of the growth taking place in the West. Agricultural output for the nation increased from \$1.6 billion in 1860 to \$4.3 billion in 1900.

Several factors account for this national boom in agriculture. New technologies such as the steel plow and mechanical reaper dramatically increased the acreage a typical farmer could till. The establishment of many agriculture schools, most funded by state and federal government, led to significant advances in technical knowledge of fertilization, irrigation, crop rotation, and seed selection, and the proper care of livestock.

One of the biggest factors underlying much of this booming growth in agriculture was the spread of the railroad. As the map (15.7) shows, the transcontinental railroad was only the beginning of a vast transportation network that spread across the West. In addition to several subsequent major east-west railroad lines, such as the Atlantic

and Pacific Railroad and the Northern Pacific Railroad, companies built scores of feeder railroads, smaller lines providing access to a major one. This growing network opened up more and more western lands for farming, allowed farmers in once remote areas to sell their grain in the national market. The railroad also benefited many nonfarmers, beginning with the thousands who built the lines and who later gained employment as firemen, engineers, switchmen, mechanics, dispatchers, and clerks. It also opened up western lands for mining and ranching.

**15.7** The Spread of the Railroad  
Government loans and land grants helped spread a railroad network across the nation, facilitating economic development and settlement in the West.



Railroads also transformed the West by promoting urban growth. Many western cities like San Francisco, California; Portland, Oregon; and Denver, Colorado, had arisen as significant centers of trade before the arrival of the railroad. Once connected to the national rail network, however, they boomed into major metropolises. Their economies diversified as demand for construction, food, transportation, and retail opened up new opportunities for entrepreneurs. By 1890 the West was more urbanized than any region in the United States except the Northeast. Denver's population, for example, rose from 5,000 in 1870 to 100,000 in 1890. The population of Omaha, Nebraska, soared in similar manner, from less than 2,000 in 1860 to 140,452 by 1890. Like their eastern counterparts, western cities struggled with all manner of urban problems, including crime, disorder, corruption, poor public health, inadequate water, and ethnic tensions.

## Hard Times for Farmers

While the overall trend in this period was one of expansion and profit, the reality for many farmers was struggle, frustration, and failure. To begin with, farmers faced unpredictable weather patterns. Farmers on the Plains, for example, enjoyed unusually high levels of rainfall between 1878 and 1886, leading them to think this was the norm and encouraging still more farmers to acquire homesteads. But a return to dry conditions and occasional drought after 1886 caused widespread hardship and failure. Other threats came from insects such as grasshoppers that attacked crops.

Farmers also struggled with wild fluctuations in prices paid for their crops from year to year. A plentiful harvest of wheat or corn often meant a glutted market and low prices. In the 1880s wheat farmers on the Plains saw prices fall due to competition with less expensive wheat grown in South America and Australia. Sudden drops in prices pushed many

farmers into foreclosure because most carried high levels of debt to finance the purchase of land and equipment such as harvesters, plows, and windmills.

These conditions favored larger farms, revealing a significant flaw in the original Homestead Act: in the more arid regions of the West the 160-acre allotment was not large enough for profitable farming. By the 1880s so-called bonanza farms of 1,000 acres or more became increasingly common in the Dakotas and California. These large enterprises had more capital and thus could better afford expensive equipment needed for plowing, sowing, and harvesting.

On top of all these challenges were the problems of the loneliness and drudgery of life on the Plains. As this photograph (15.8) of the four Chrisman sisters standing by their sod house in Custer County, Nebraska, illustrates, life on a western farm was often a Spartan existence. Sod houses and dugouts cut into hills lacked even the most basic amenities like running water and glass windows. Apart from occasional trips to town, church, court sessions, and harvest fairs, opportunities for social interaction were rare since farmers usually situated their homesteads far apart. The Chrisman sisters developed a strategy that diminished their isolation and allowed them to fulfill the Homestead Act's requirement that they live on their land in order to receive full title to it. Beginning with Lizzie's homestead claim in 1887 and Lutie's in 1888, the two younger sisters took turns living on the homesteads, keeping their sisters company, helping on the farm, and waiting until they were old enough to file their own claims. Hattie eventually did, but all the homestead plots were gone by the time Jennie Ruth came of age.



### 15.8 Homesteading on the Plains

Western farmers received 160 acres of free land through the Homestead Act, but success required years of hard work and sacrifices such as living in crude sod houses. This one, in Nebraska, was owned by one of the four Chrisman sisters shown here.

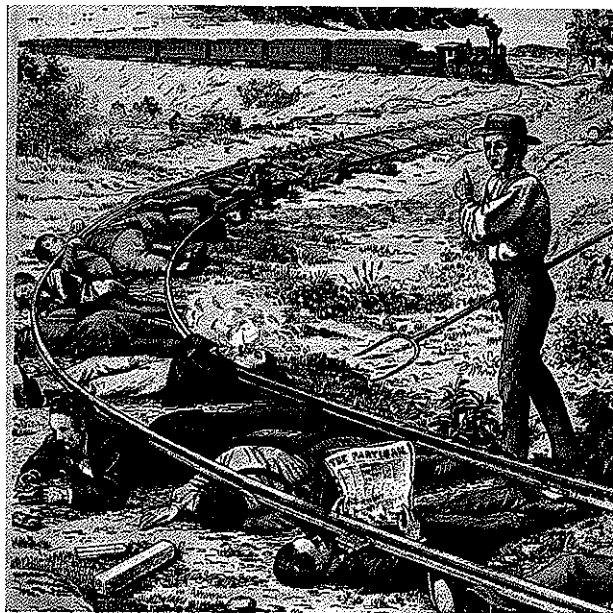
What challenges did western farmers face?

In 1867, a former clerk in the Department of Agriculture named Oliver H. Kelley founded the Patrons of Husbandry, or Grange. This social and educational society was dedicated to alleviating some of the problems faced by farmers by promoting fellowship, fraternity, and education. Grangers, as they were called, shared ideas about farming through a newsletter and attended lectures offered by traveling experts. Local chapters opened all across the nation, and by the early 1870s the organization had several hundred thousand loyal members.

The Grange was transformed into a powerful political movement during the severe economic depression triggered by the Panic of 1873. Hundreds of thousands of farmers faced ruin as prices plummeted, while their creditors demanded payment for loans, and railroads charged high prices to transport their produce to market. In their desperation they created Granger Parties, which in 1874 won control of the legislatures of Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota and enjoyed significant influence in several more. They enacted a series of "Granger Laws," some of the earliest regulations of banks and corporations, especially railroads. Granger-dominated state legislatures passed laws setting maximum rates for transporting or storing grain and banning abusive practices such as offering preferred customers special rates. Grangers tried, as this 1873 cartoon (15.9) indicates, to convince Americans not involved in farming to recognize the threat posed to them by uncontrolled railroad power. As a "Consolidation Train," a name suggesting monopoly, pulls cars labeled "extortion," "bribery," "usurpation," and "oppression," a Granger warns unsuspecting citizens of their impending doom.

Railroad magnates denounced these limitations on their power and profit as unconstitutional and sued. The Supreme Court, however, in two key cases in 1876 (*Munn v. Illinois* and *Peik v. Chicago and North Western Railroad*) ruled that state legislatures did possess the legal authority under the Constitution to regulate commerce, including especially commerce between states.

Despite this stunning legal victory, the Granger movement faded when the depression lifted and farm product prices rose in the late-1870s, ending the crisis that had produced it. In addition the Democratic and Republican parties added pro-farmer planks to their party platforms that made the Granger parties seem less necessary.



**15.9 Warning of the Perils of Monopoly**  
The Grangers saw themselves as reformers trying to warn the American public about the growing danger of powerful railroads to the survival of democracy and individual liberties.

## The Cattle Kingdom

Another key emerging sector of the western economy was cattle ranching. When the United States annexed Texas in 1845, millions of longhorn cattle (introduced to Central America in the sixteenth century by the Spanish) roamed the range, raised mainly for their skins and tallow. But as Americans developed a taste for beef in the 1860s, ranchers came to envision the great profits to be made if they could get their cattle to northern markets. A longhorn that cost \$4 in Texas could be sold for \$40 on the northern market.

Beginning in 1866 and lasting two decades, Texas ranchers began the first of the annual Long Drives of more than 1,000 miles to bring the cattle to market. Ranchers Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving drove several thousand cattle from Texas to Colorado, prompting many imitators, who moved some 260,000 Texas longhorns onto the Great Plains within a year. In 1867 another cattle entrepreneur, Joseph McCoy, established a stockyard, hotel, bank, and office in a small Kansas town along the Kansas-Pacific Railroad. Advertising heavily, he quickly turned Abilene, Kansas for a time into the premier cattle drive destination. By the early 1870s more than 600,000 longhorns arrived per year to be sold and then transported by rail to Chicago and other destinations for slaughtering.

Over time the need for the drives diminished as rail lines were extended from Kansas into Texas and entrepreneurs established large cattle ranches close to railroads in states north of Texas, such as Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, and Colorado.

The period of the great cattle drives lasted only twenty years, but it firmly established the cowboy as an enduring icon of the Old West. Nineteenth-century dime novels, paintings, books, and plays (and in the twentieth century, films) traditionally depicted cowboys as paragons of manliness, independence, and courage who spent most of their days battling fierce Indians and driving cattle (see 15.20) and nights in raucous saloons playing poker and engaging in brawls and occasional gun fights. But the life of a cowboy was far more difficult and complicated. Cattle drives exposed them to harsh weather that included searing heat, flash floods, and deadly blizzards. Cowboys' wages averaged only about a dollar a day—or less if the price of beef fell—and they survived on a relentless diet of meat, beans, and coffee. They worked from dawn until dusk and then served a shift guarding the cattle at night against rustlers and hostile Indians.

Moreover, American cowboys were a far more diverse lot than the popular images depicting them as exclusively white men would indicate. Approximately one-third of cowboys in the American West were nonwhite, the largest group being Mexican *vaqueros*. Indeed, much of the equipment, clothing, techniques, and culture of the American cowboy derived from Mexican and Spanish traditions. This borrowing is evident in the many items associated with cowboys that bear names derived from Spanish. For example, the word *cowboy* itself is a direct translation of the Spanish term *vaquero*, while other terms such as lariat (*la reata*), chaps (*chaparejos*), and wrangler (*catallerango*) are anglicized versions of Spanish words.

Native Americans worked as cowboys, as did African Americans who accounted for one in seven cowboys. The eight cowboys shown in this 1880s photograph (15.10) worked on the ranch of Thomas Jones (shown standing) in Texas. One of the most famous was Bose Ikard. Born a slave in Mississippi in

1847, he was later taken to Texas where he became a skilled cowboy. Freed by the Civil War, he played a key role in the first Long Drive led by Goodnight and Loving.

Ranching held out the prospect of great profits, but ranchers faced considerable challenges. In the early 1870s the invention of barbed wire effectively ended open-range ranching and the long drives as farmers enclosed their land to protect crops from cattle hooves. Cattle ranchers also clashed with other livestock enterprises, such as sheep herders, over access to water and grazing lands. These conflicts frequently led to violence and on several occasions to widespread hostilities known as “range wars.” Ranchers, like farmers, also were vulnerable to extremes of weather, losing cattle in times of scorching heat and drought, as well as freezing cold and snow. Similarly, they suffered from rapid expansion of the ranching industry in the mid-1880s and consequent flooding of the market with cattle that caused a collapse of beef prices, sending many ranchers into bankruptcy.

## Fortunes Beneath the Ground: The Mining Booms

While many western adventurers found fortune and failure in railroads, farms, and ranches, still others tried their luck underground in the many mining districts that emerged in the West. The second great western mining boom, after California in 1849 (see Chapter 12), began in 1859 with the discovery of vast silver deposits in Nevada. The Comstock Lode, as the Nevada site was eventually called, yielded an astonishing \$300 million to \$400 million in silver in the next twenty years.

As was the case in most mining booms, the initial discoverers and nearly all the small-timers who followed garnered only modest profits. The real fortune came in the succeeding years as heavily

### 15.10 African American Cowboys

Despite the popular image of cowboys as white men, many were African American and Hispanic.



How did the reality of cowboy life differ from that presented in popular culture?

capitalized and incorporated enterprises established mining operations to extract the ore. Among the titans who accrued stupendous fortunes were four Irishmen—John Mackay, Jim Fair, James Flood, and William O'Brien—known collectively as the “Silver Kings.” They bought a controlling interest in the Consolidated Virginia Mine, an operation that many declared “spent” and virtually worthless. Yet in 1873 their miners hit the greatest silver vein of them all, the Big Bonanza that eventually yielded more than \$100 million. Most fortune seekers, however, earned modest livings as wage earners working in the mines, while others flocked to the resulting boomtown, Virginia City, to work in construction, dry goods stores, and saloons. Thousands of women in Virginia City found work in hotels, laundries, and restaurants. Unfortunately, low wages and a lack of a family network to fall back upon led many women to become prostitutes.

Other mining booms for gold and silver, but also the discovery of such valuable metals as copper, lead, and zinc, followed in Colorado, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and the Dakotas. In every case the resulting boom followed the predictable path: the early mining claims gave way to larger, more sophisticated operations. The new corporations had the capital and knowledge to invest in the technology needed to dig deep shafts, extract the ore from rocks, process it on site, and ship it by rail to market. Like eastern industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, these corporations often integrated their resources with the means and methods of production to maximize profits (see Chapter 16). The industrial revolution was not merely an eastern phenomenon.

## The Environmental Legacy

Economic development in the trans-Mississippi West led to countless success stories of enterprising and risk-taking individuals who established farms, ranches, mines, and small businesses, or who simply found lucrative employment in the region's many urban centers. But such development in many cases carried with it a significant price in terms of the natural environment.

Mining, for example, came in many forms, but in nearly every case it left behind a badly scarred landscape. Open-pit mining of the Mahoning iron ore mine in Minnesota's Mesabi Range eliminated vast tracts of forest and created massive gouges in the land (15.11). These changes shattered the local ecosystem and choked surrounding waterways with

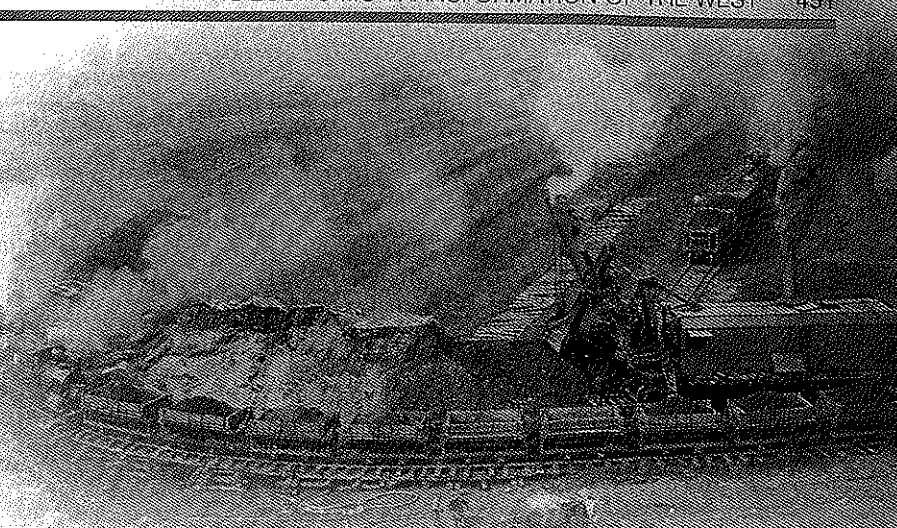
muddy runoff water. Hydraulic mining, or the use of high-pressure water streams to wash away soil and gravel, created similar problems. Ore processing often used highly toxic chemicals to separate ore from rock or other materials that the miners simply dumped into rivers or open fields, where they eventually seeped into the water table and throughout the ecosystem.

The arrival of ever-growing numbers of humans in the West altered the delicately balanced western ecosystems. On the Great Plains, for example, hunting and other human activity led to the eradication or near eradication of elk, bear, wolf, and buffalo populations. Conversely, settlers introduced foreign animals and plants that, lacking natural predators, spread rapidly and disrupted the balance of the ecosystem. For example, cheatgrass, accidentally introduced to the West from Asia in the 1890s, quickly spread over millions of acres, wiping out or diminishing other flora and greatly increasing the incidence of wildfires.

Farming in some arid areas of the West, through the use of deep-cutting steel plows that loosened hard-packed dry soil, contributed to significant topsoil erosion over time. Vast herds of livestock had a similar effect as their grazing eliminated the grass whose roots held the soil in place. Likewise the practices of the timber industry led to deforestation, the loss of habitat for many animal and plant species, and without trees to shield the soil from heavy rainfall, erosion.

As *Competing Visions: Preservation versus Exploitation* (page 452) reveals, some Americans decried this environmental damage, but the great majority of Americans viewed the West through the lens of Manifest Destiny, seeing it as a place of limitless resources provided by God for the enjoyment and enrichment of human beings.

**15.11 The Price of Unchecked Economic Development**  
Western states bowed to the powerful and profitable mining industry, leaving its practices unregulated. As a result, methods such as open-pit mining led to serious environmental damage.



# Competing Visions

## PRESERVATION VERSUS EXPLOITATION

Much of the economic damage and disruption that resulted from the development of farms, ranches, mines, and other businesses in the West followed from a prevailing attitude among Americans that all of nature was at their service. Lansford W. Hastings, a famous Western explorer, vividly expresses that view in the passage below. Less popular, but nonetheless significant, is the protest over environmental degradation set forth by George Perkins Marsh, a diplomat-turned-environmentalist. How does Hastings invoke the language of Manifest Destiny to justify his vision of the settlement of the West? How does he view the natural resources of the West? How does Marsh challenge the ideas that nature possesses limitless resources and that economic development is glorious progress?

### Lansford W. Hastings, *The Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California* (1846)

This infant country ... is destined, in a very few years; to exceed by far, that of any other country of the same extent and population, in any portion of the known world. ... [T]here is no country ... possessing a soil so fertile and productive, with such varied and inexhaustible resources, and a climate of such mildness, uniformity and salubrity; nor is there a country, in my opinion, now known, which is so eminently calculated, by nature herself, in all respects, to promote the unbounded happiness and prosperity, of civilized and enlightened man. ...

In view of their increasing population, accumulating wealth, and growing prosperity, I can not but believe, that the time is not distant, when those wild forests, trackless plains, untrodden valleys, and the unbounded ocean, will present one grand scene, of continuous improvements, universal enterprise, and unparalleled commerce: when those vast forests, shall have disappeared, before the hardy pioneer; those extensive plains, shall abound with innumerable herds, of domestic animals; those fertile valleys, shall groan under the immense weight of their abundant products: when those numerous rivers shall team [sic] with countless steam-boats, steam-ships, ships, barques and brigs; when the entire country, will be everywhere intersected, with tumpike roads, rail-roads and canals; and when, all the vastly numerous, and rich resources, of that now, almost unknown region, will be fully and advantageously developed. ... [W]e are also led to contemplate the time, as fast approaching, when the supreme darkness of ignorance, superstition, and despotism, which now, so entirely pervade many portions of those remote regions, will have fled forever, before the march of civilization ... [These accomplishments] shall forever stand forth, as enduring monuments, to the increasing wisdom of man, and the infinite kindness and protection, of an all-wise, and overruling Providence.

**Albert Bierstadt, *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California*, 1868** [Source: See Credits section]

### George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature*, 1864

Man has too long forgotten that the earth was given to him for usufruct [use without damage] alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste. ... But man is everywhere a disturbing agent. Wherever he plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discords. ... Indigenous vegetable and animal species are extirpated, and supplanted by others of foreign origin ... The terrible destructiveness of man is remarkably exemplified in the chase of large mammalia and birds for single products ... The wild cattle of South America are slaughtered by millions for their hides and horns; the buffalo of North America for his skin or his tongue ... What a vast amount of human nutriment, of bone, and of other animal products valuable in the arts, is thus recklessly squandered! ...

... The ravages committed by man subvert the relations and destroy the balance which nature had established between her organic and her inorganic creations ... When the forest is gone, the great reservoir of moisture stored up in its vegetable mould is evaporated, and returns only in deluges of rain to wash away the parched dust into which that mould has been converted. The well-wooded and humid hills are turned to ridges of dry rock, which encumbers the low grounds and chokes the watercourses with its debris, and ... becomes an assemblage of bald mountains, of barren, turfless hills, and of swampy and malarious plains.



Why did few people heed the warnings of writers like Marsh?

# Native Americans under Siege



Westward expansion benefited many Americans, but it proved a devastating fate for Native Americans. They faced a relentless tide of white settlers who possessed both superior weaponry and a belief that they had a higher claim to western land. White settlers also enjoyed the support of the federal government and army. The result for Native Americans in the last third of the nineteenth century was broken treaties, devastating wars, relocation to reservations, and a policy of forced assimilation.

## Mounting Problems for Native Americans

In 1851, as it became clear that the traditional government policy of simply forcing tribes into the West was no longer viable because of increased white migration into the region, Congress passed the Indian Appropriations Act. It set aside vast tracts of the Oklahoma Territory as reservations for dozens of Native American tribes. That same year the U.S. government, the Sioux, and several other Plains tribes signed the first Treaty of Fort Laramie. In exchange for declaring nearly all of the central and northern Great Plains off limits, the tribes agreed to allow white settlers to pass unmolested along the Oregon Trail as they moved westward. But the lasting peace that government officials and tribal leaders hoped the treaty would secure did not materialize. Tension and violence between white settlers and Native American tribes only increased in the coming years.

Native Americans faced a series of problems that ultimately doomed their efforts to resist Euro-American incursion onto their lands. Chief among these were the racist attitudes of white Americans that characterized Indians as backward, pagan, violent savages, who lacked a rightful claim to the lands they occupied. Many Americans believed their own culture was vastly superior and considered Native Americans

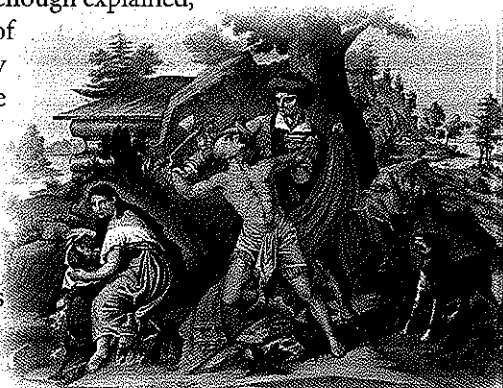
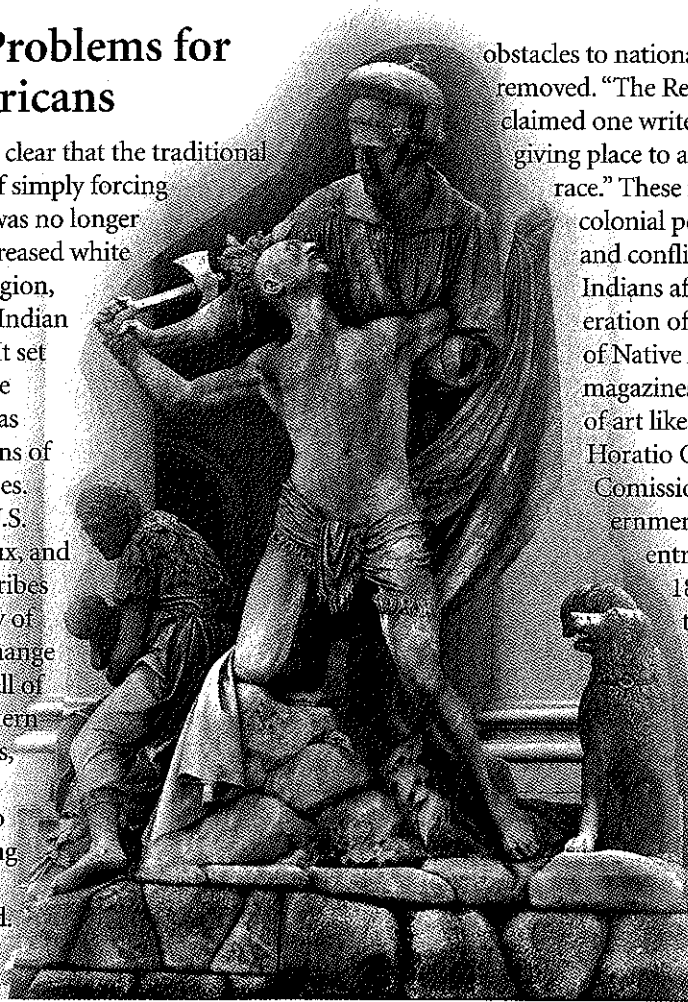
obstacles to national progress that must be removed. "The Red Men are a doomed race," claimed one writer in 1877, for "the savage is giving place to a higher and more civilized race." These notions originated in the colonial period, but greater contact and conflict between whites and Indians after 1850 led to a proliferation of largely negative depictions of Native Americans in newspapers, magazines, songs, plays, and works of art like *The Rescue*, by sculptor Horatio Greenough (15.12).

Commissioned by the federal government and placed at the entrance to the U.S. Capitol in 1853, the scene drew upon the many sensationalized stories and paintings of white settlers, especially women, being kidnapped, raped, and murdered by Native Americans. But Greenough departed from the traditional depictions and introduced a towering, dominant white settler.

Notice the contrasts in the men's size, demeanor, and clothing. "I have endeavoured," Greenough explained, "to convey the idea of the triumph of the whites over the savage tribes." By 1874, the scene had merged with the life of the famous pioneer and icon of frontier masculinity, Daniel Boone (15.13). Both images proclaim Indian savagery and justify white domination, a message that eventually resulted in the sculpture's removal from public view in 1958.

**15.12 Promoting an Image of Indian Savagery**  
This 1853 sculpture by Horatio Greenough promoted the idea among white Americans that Native Americans were violent savages.

**15.13 Seeing Savagery**  
Greenough's image became so widely known that a dime novel artist easily adapted it to a Daniel Boone story.





White hostility to Native Americans shaped government policy, especially when it came to signing and honoring treaties. Invariably, it seemed, federal officials negotiated treaties with tribes that promised to permanently fix the boundaries of their hunting grounds and places of habitation, only to find soon thereafter that whites, hungry for land, had begun settling there. Rather than enforce the terms of the treaty and force the removal of white settlers, the government inevitably revised the treaty to further shrink designated Native American lands.

This combination of white settlers' desire for land and disregard for Native Americans' rights, and the efforts of Native Americans to resist white encroachment, led to repeated outbreaks of violence. One of the most egregious incidents was the Sand Creek Massacre. Angered by sporadic attacks on settlers by some Native American tribes in Colorado, a military outfit under Colonel John M. Chivington raided on November 29, 1864 a peaceful encampment of eight hundred Cheyenne at Sand Creek. With most of the Cheyenne men off hunting, Chivington's force slaughtered more than two hundred Indians, mostly defenseless women and children, mutilated their bodies, and returned to Denver with their scalps.

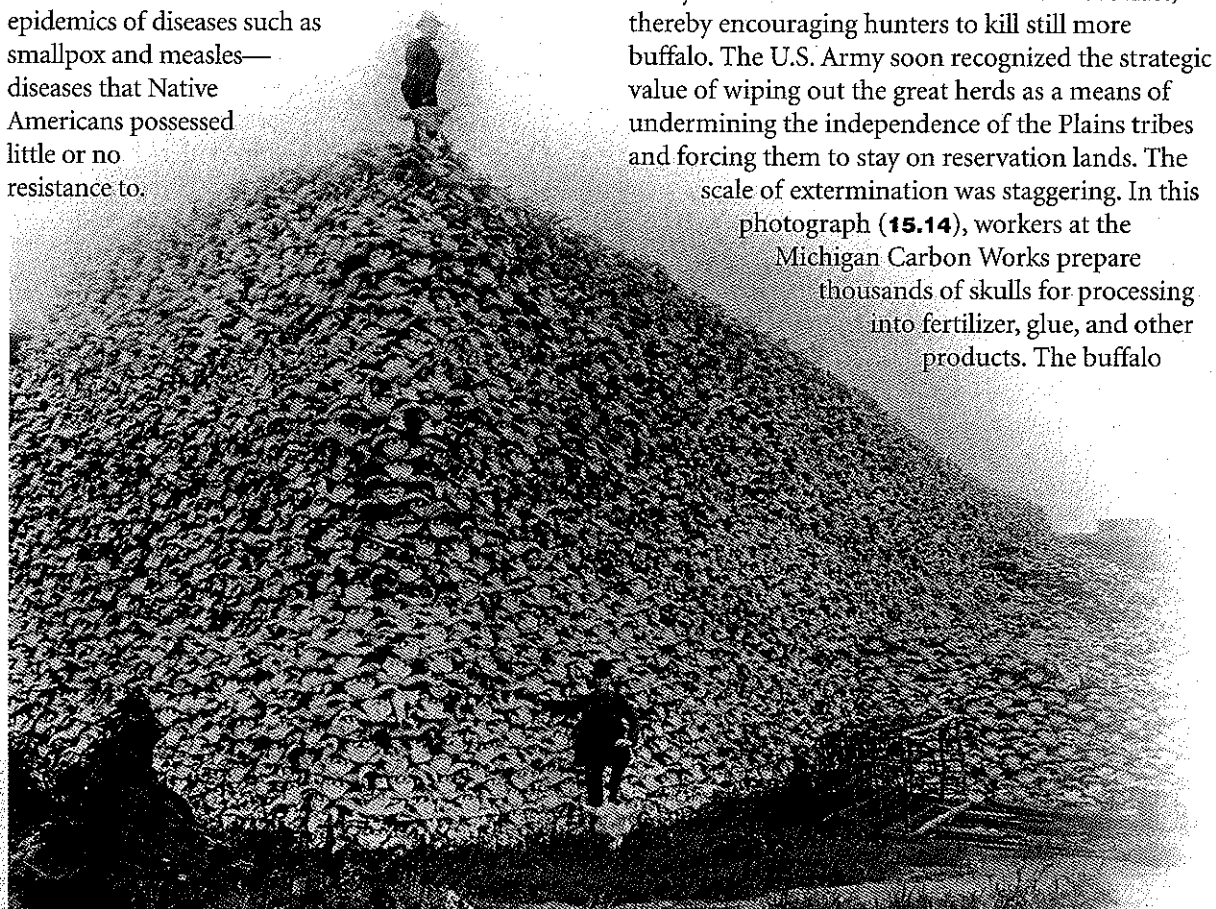
Native Americans also confronted epidemics of diseases such as smallpox and measles—diseases that Native Americans possessed little or no resistance to.

While the worst devastation had taken place in previous centuries during initial European contact (see Chapter 1), epidemics of smallpox continued to erupt, killing thousands. For example, a smallpox outbreak in the Pacific Northwest in 1862 killed some twelve thousand Indians. The widespread abuse of alcohol, a commodity obtained through trade with whites, further compromised Native American health.

Additionally, long-standing animosities among tribes prevented Native Americans from developing a united front against the U.S. Army. White officials took advantage of these divisions to obtain help from one tribe, in the form of guides and even soldiers, against another. Disunity *within* tribes also contributed to this problem, as individual bands guarded their autonomy and resisted the idea of centralized authority. For example, in 1863 leaders of the Nez Perce tribe split over whether to sign a treaty that would confine them to a reservation. There were exceptions, of course, and some tribes managed to overcome this problem, at least temporarily.

The Plains tribes' dependence upon the buffalo left them particularly vulnerable in the 1870s. Railroad companies, disdainful of the large herds that occasionally disrupted the passage of trains, hired gunmen to kill buffalo. Entrepreneurs presently made buffalo robes fashionable in the East, thereby encouraging hunters to kill still more buffalo. The U.S. Army soon recognized the strategic value of wiping out the great herds as a means of undermining the independence of the Plains tribes and forcing them to stay on reservation lands. The

scale of extermination was staggering. In this photograph (15.14), workers at the Michigan Carbon Works prepare thousands of skulls for processing into fertilizer, glue, and other products. The buffalo



**15.14 Evidence of Extermination**

This mountain of buffalo skulls gathered by a fertilizer company attests to the scale of wanton killing of buffalo in the 1870s and 1880s.

How did negative stereotypes of Native Americans influence government policy?

population, estimated at thirty million in 1800, plunged to only a few thousand by the early 1880s creating a major crisis for the Plains Indians who depended on them.

The technological disparity between white settlers and Indians gave the former an enormous advantage. Euro-American settlers and army soldiers

between the parties to this agreement shall for ever cease," declared the treaty in words that would soon prove false. "The government of the United States desires peace, and its honor is hereby pledged to keep it."

Despite these measures, continued violation of treaties by white settlers who ventured onto Indian

**"Women and children were killed and scalped, children shot at their mothers' breasts, and all the bodies mutilated in the most horrible manner. ... Colonel J. M. Chivington all the time inciting his troops to their diabolical outrages."**

MAJOR EDWARD WYNKOOP, testimony before congressional committee investigating the Sand Creek Massacre

alike were heavily armed with modern rifles. The army also possessed early machine guns (called Gatling guns) and heavy artillery. While many Native American tribes had long ago acquired firearms, they never produced guns and ammunition and they remained dependent on whites for them. The U.S. Army also benefited from the telegraph, which allowed them to communicate over great distances about troop movements and Native American military activity, and to request supplies and reinforcements as needed.

## Wars on the Plains

Despite its lack of commitment to honoring them, the federal government nonetheless signed many treaties in the late 1860s hoping to bring peace to the West and allow continued settlement by whites. Treaties were drawn up and signed with the Apache, Cheyenne, and Arapaho in 1865, the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache in 1867 (the Medicine Lodge Treaty), and the Sioux (the second Fort Laramie Treaty) in 1868. The latter treaty ended Red Cloud's War (1866–1868), a conflict that erupted when the army announced plans to build forts along the Bozeman Trail in the Wyoming and Montana territories to protect white migrants drawn by the discovery of gold in Montana. It guaranteed to the Sioux ownership of the Black Hills and land and hunting rights in South Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana. It also explicitly barred white people from these lands. "From this day forward all war

lands and bands of Indians who refused to accept confinement on reservation lands led to increased bloodshed. The Red River War broke out in 1874 on the southern plains in present-day Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas when bands of Kiowa, Comanche, southern Cheyenne, and southern Arapaho Indians, angered over the federal government's failure to uphold its obligation to provide adequate supplies and keep whites off the reservation land (the army actually organized buffalo hunting parties that devastated local herds), left the reservation and launched raids against white settlements. Led by Lieutenant General Philip Sheridan, the army crushed the rebellion by the spring of 1875, thereby ending any future Native American resistance on the southern plains.

By then the primary scenes of conflict had shifted to the northern plains. The discovery of gold in the Black Hills of South Dakota in 1874 touched off a flood of white fortune seekers into the region that was indisputably (as stipulated in the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty) territory granted exclusively to Native American tribes. Rather than keep white trespassers out, however, the federal government demanded the Sioux vacate their Red River hunting grounds and return to their reservations. When the tribes refused to comply, the army launched an offensive.

In the late spring of 1876 the Seventh Cavalry, led by a young and vainglorious lieutenant colonel named George Armstrong Custer, closed in on a large band of Cheyenne, Sioux, and Arapaho warriors,

including the well-known Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, near the Little Bighorn River in Montana. Eager to earn fame and believing there were only a few hundred Indian warriors when in fact the number was closer to four thousand, Custer attacked before the rest of the army (and other officers who might overshadow him) arrived. The Battle of Little Bighorn quickly disintegrated into one of the most devastating defeats ever suffered by the U.S. military as Custer and 257 of his men were killed.

Although the Battle of Little Bighorn was an overwhelming triumph for the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho, it quickly proved a hollow victory. As this cartoon (15.15) published in the *New York Graphic* a few weeks after the battle vividly demonstrates, the eastern media ignored Custer's blundering and instead depicted him and his men as valiant victims and demanded vengeance. Notice the artist's blunt depiction of Indians as savage, semianimal beings in stark contrast to the two white soldiers, one a

heroic victim and the other a coolheaded executioner. The caption, "The Right Way to Dispose of Sitting Bull and His Braves—What the Country Expects of General Sheridan," was a not-so-subtle assertion of the popular belief that the government was showing too much leniency toward Native Americans who resisted white expansion into the West. Responding to this pressure, the U.S. government expanded military action in the Black Hills, forcing the Sioux and other defiant tribes onto reservations.

## War and Conflict in the Far West

Farther west, native tribes encountered similar problems. During the final third of the nineteenth century, the states and territories west of the Rockies also were growing. The mining and railroad industries, the economic centerpieces of that region, required a great deal of land—land long occupied by Native Americans. Just as they were on the Great Plains, the tribes on the West Coast and in the intermountain West



**15.15** The Negative Fallout from Little Bighorn

After the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho Indians defeated Custer and the Seventh Cavalry in the Battle of Little Bighorn, negative press coverage hardened white attitudes toward Native Americans. This image appeared in the *New York Graphic* (August 15, 1876).

How did the victory over Custer and his men ultimately prove very costly to the Plains Indians?

faced an encroaching white population that considered the land theirs for the taking.

In 1876, following the massacre of Custer and the Seventh Cavalry, army and government officials increased pressure on tribes to move to reservations. One such group targeted was a portion of the Nez Perce tribe that lived on the northwestern plateau of Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. In 1863

most of the Nez Perce tribe had agreed to move onto a reservation, but about a quarter had refused. Led by Chief Joseph, about 750 Nez Perce (500 of them women, children, and

elderly non-combatants) fled the region to escape the army. Over the ensuing four months, they engaged in an epic flight of 1,500 miles, hoping to cross into Canada. Despite their small numbers and dwindling supplies, they defeated the army in several battles and came within 40 miles of the Canadian border before they were forced to surrender to the army and to life on a reservation.

Similar scenes of final military resistance played out in the Southwest. An Apache warrior named Geronimo had emerged in the 1860s and 1870s as a fearless opponent to encroaching Euro-American and Mexican settlers. Eventually captured by federal authorities in 1874, Geronimo and some four thousand Apaches were sent to a reservation at San Carlos, Arizona. The grim life on the reservation led him to escape and resume his campaign of resistance. In the face of mounting pressure from the army, he surrendered again in 1884. In 1885 and again in 1886, Geronimo escaped with a small band of warriors and their families and eluded capture for months. These escapades added to his already legendary status, but he eventually surrendered for good in 1886, ending the last significant Native American resistance.

Resistance to exploitation and abuse also erupted in the Southwest among Hispanos (descendants of Spanish colonists) and Mexicans in the 1880s and 1890s. Euro-American settlers who arrived in New Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century eventually gave rise to a powerful ruling class of politicians, landowners, and ranchers. Many allied

themselves with powerful gangs that provided protection and intimidated (and sometimes killed) their rivals. Poor Hispano and Mexican farmers often bore the brunt of these ruling Euro-Americans' ruthless tactics and hunger for land. When officials began to sell off to speculators and ranchers what had long been used as common grazing lands, the poor farmers resisted. The most famous of these resisters

were *Las Gorras Blancas*, or the White Caps, a secret militant vigilante group of Mexican men who in the late 1880s and early 1890s wore white masks and cut fences on lands taken

over by speculators. They also destroyed railroad bridges, buildings, and crops.

“Hear me, my chiefs! I am tired.  
My heart is sick and sad. From where  
the sun now stands, I will fight no  
more forever.”

CHIEF JOSEPH, shortly after his  
surrender in 1877

## In Pursuit of a Solution

While most Americans expressed little concern over the fate of Native Americans in the West, a notable few did raise their voices in protest. One of the first was Helen Hunt Jackson. Inspired by an 1879 lecture by Susette La Flesche and her uncle, Chief Standing Bear, relating the plight of the Ponca tribe to an audience in Connecticut, she began speaking and lobbying on behalf of Native Americans. In 1881 she published *A Century of Dishonor*, a book that chronicled in searing detail the misguided and murderous treatment of Native Americans by the U.S. government. The book prompted Congress to appoint a commission to study Indian affairs and seek a new and more humane policy.

Another influential reformer garnered a wide audience as an authentic spokesperson for the Native Americans. Sarah Winnemucca, the granddaughter of a Northern Paiute chief, had received some education from white families in Nevada and California and worked as a translator for the army. In the late 1870s she began lecturing in the East demanding more humane treatment of the Paiutes and other tribes that brought her to the attention of eastern and western reformers. Winnemucca tried to gain credibility among whites by presenting herself as an “Indian Princess,” an image firmly

“The Indians must conform to “the white man’s ways,” peaceably if they will, forcibly if they must. They must adjust themselves to their environment, and conform their mode of living substantially to our civilization. ... They can not escape it, and must either conform to it or be crushed by it.”

THOMAS J. MORGAN, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1889

**INDIAN LAND FOR SALE**

GET A HOME  
OF  
YOUR OWN  
EASY PAYMENTS



PERFECT TITLE  
POSSESSION  
WITHIN  
THIRTY-DAYS

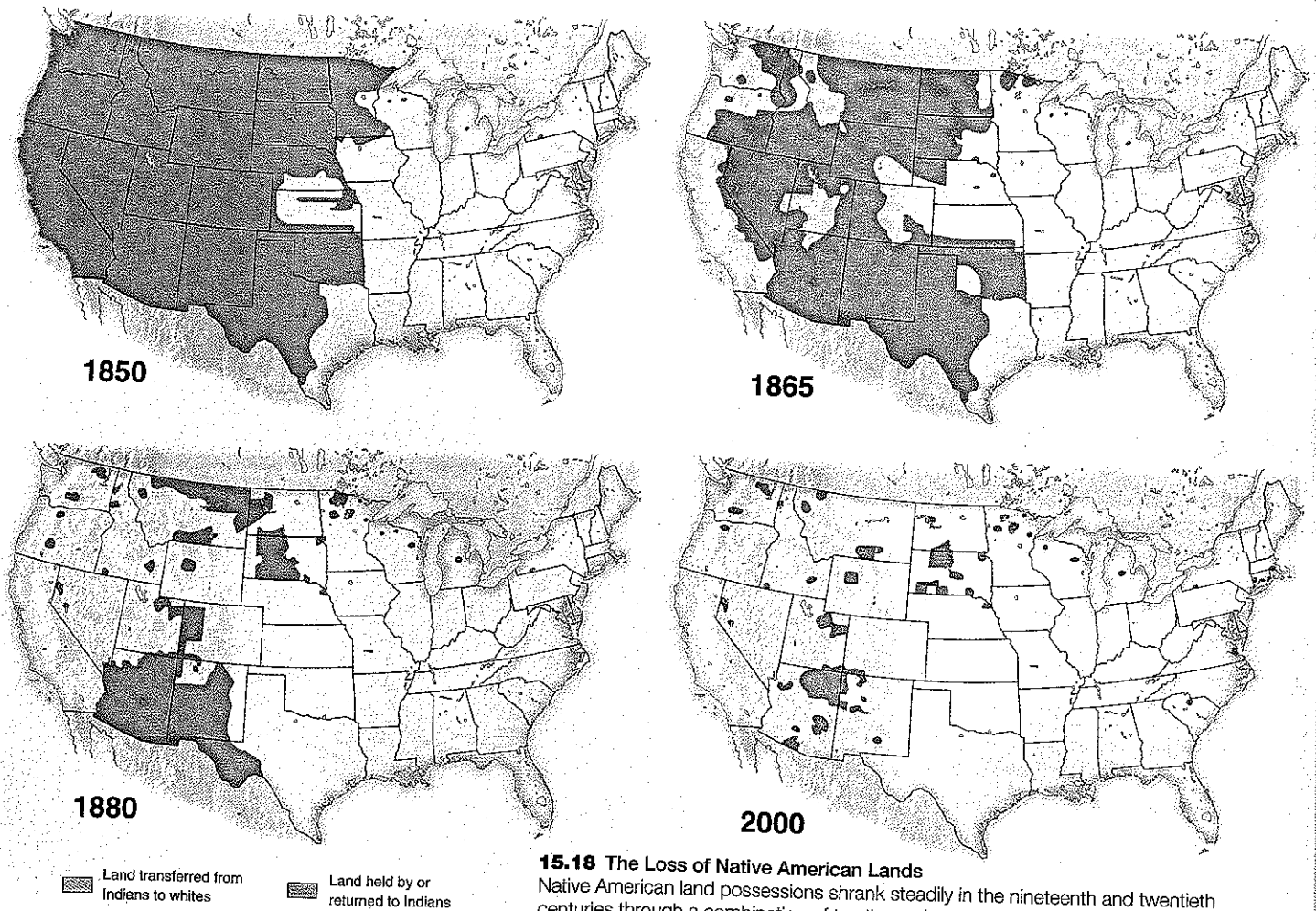
**FINE LANDS IN THE WEST**  
IRRIGATED IRRIGABLE GRAZING AGRICULTURAL DRY FARMING

**15.17 Selling off Reservation Lands**

This advertisement issued by the federal government in 1911 vividly illustrates the Dawes Severalty Act in action as it exuberantly proclaims a sale of 350,000 acres of Indian land.

their allotted land long before the twenty-five-year term. The act also allowed, as indicated by the poster (15.17), for the government to sell land deemed “surplus” to white settlers. This poster touts the high quality of the estimated 350,000 acres

being offered for sale in 1910. As the map (15.18) shows, by the time the Dawes Act was replaced in 1934, two-thirds of Native American reservation land had been lost.



**15.18 The Loss of Native American Lands**

Native American land possessions shrank steadily in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through a combination of treaties, sales, and forced expulsion by white settlers and soldiers. In 1887 the Dawes Severalty Act accelerated this trend by encouraging the breakup of reservations.

How did the Dawes Act play a key role in the loss of Native American land?

# Resistance and Romanticism



The surrender of Geronimo in 1886 symbolized the end of any significant armed resistance by Native Americans to the Euro-American settlement of the trans-Mississippi West. Nonetheless, a revival movement called the Ghost Dance, soon arose to offer one final attempt to reverse the fortunes of Native Americans. When that effort ended in brutal suppression at the hands of the army at a place called Wounded Knee, Native Americans turned to more subtle and enduring efforts to preserve their tribes, families, and culture.

At the same time, white Americans continued to fashion a pleasing image of the West as a place of adventure, heroism, individualism, and opportunity. This image found its way into art, literature, music, and innumerable aspects of popular culture in the twentieth century. Yet in recent decades, historians and activists have offered a corrective to this romantic image that takes into account the experiences of Native Americans, Mexicans, and women, as well as the impact on the environment.

## Persecution and Persistence

The last major form of resistance to the Euro-American conquest of the West emerged in the late 1880s. The Ghost Dance movement originated in the 1870s, but did not become widely popular until a Northern Paiute shaman named Wovoka began preaching a message of Native American revival based on a vision he had experienced during a total eclipse of the sun in 1889. In this vision, which he related to his followers, he saw a great flood that scoured the land clean of all white settlers, leaving behind Indians who had remained true to traditional teachings and a renewed herd of buffalo. Wovoka told his followers to perform the Ghost Dance, a ritual ceremony where participants donned special shirts and danced in a circle until gradually brought to an ecstatic state that they believed drew to them the spirits of ancestors who would protect them from the white man's bullets.

The hopeful message of the Ghost Dance spread rapidly among Native Americans from the Rocky Mountains to the Great Plains, alarming federal officials who feared it contained the seeds of rebellion. They were especially concerned about its popularity among the Sioux and tried to curb it. After they moved a large group of Sioux Ghost Dancers to Wounded Knee Creek in present-day South Dakota, the army attempted to disarm them on December 29, 1890. When one of the Indians accidentally fired his gun, the soldiers attacked. The clash quickly turned into a massacre, and although estimates vary widely, between two hundred and three hundred Sioux were slaughtered. This photograph (15.19), titled "The Medicine Man

Taken at Wounded Knee, S.D.," conveyed some of the brutality of the event. The date of January 1, 1891, on the photograph indicates that bodies were left unattended for days before being interred in a mass grave. Note the rifle placed on the body by a soldier or the photographer to present an image of a hostile Indian. It was not the bloodiest clash between Native Americans and the U.S. Army, but the Wounded Knee Massacre came to symbolize the brutality associated with the conquest of the West.

The end of armed conflict did not mean an end to resistance for Native Americans. In the coming decades, as they struggled with the loss of tribal lands, the cultural erosion caused by the boarding schools,

**15.19** Massacre at Wounded Knee  
In an incident that came to symbolize American brutality toward Native Americans, U.S. soldiers killed between two hundred and three hundred and three hundred Sioux at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, after a tense standoff over the Ghost Dance movement.  
[Source: © Nebraska State Historical Society Photograph Collections]



What made Wovoka's message so appealing to Indians and so frightening to military officials?

and high levels of poverty and alcoholism, Native Americans found ways to preserve their culture, including many languages, artistic forms, and religious beliefs. They did so by maintaining traditions within families and establishing informal methods of passing on traditions from one generation to the next. As a result, when a Native American rights movement emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, it included a commitment to reaffirming and strengthening traditional Native American cultures.

## Creating Mythical Heroes and Images

The story of the American West has long been the object of romanticism and myth. The image of the West as a place of high adventure, heroism, rugged individualism, and endless opportunity developed with the very first enthusiastic reports of Western explorers such as Lewis and Clarke (see Chapter 7). But this image really flourished after 1850 as greater numbers of people headed west and sent back to loved ones in the East countless letters describing the marvels and perils of the frontier. Increasingly journalists sent back dispatches from the West describing wide-open lands, roaring rivers, majestic mountains, and the heroic struggles of pioneers against weather and hostile Indians. Eventually writers turned to fiction, especially a new genre known as the “dime novel.”

The first Western dime novels appeared in the 1860s, and their subjects soon became pop heroes. Two early heroes were “Deadwood Dick,” a cowboy dressed in black, and his girlfriend “Calamity Jane,” who could handle not only her rifle and six-shooter, but also anything else that came her way. Another wildly popular Western character was Buffalo Bill. Based on the legendary exploits of a real Western scout, William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, stories about him first appeared in a newspaper and then in dime novel form as “Buffalo Bill, King of the Border Men.” When it sold well its author, Ned Buntline, wrote a steady stream of Buffalo Bill stories. So, too, did other authors who flaunted copyright laws (eventually fifty thousand dime novels were published from the 1850s to the 1920s).

Cody grew famous but he earned no royalties from the novels. Seeking a way to capitalize on his fame, he created in 1883 “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,” a circus-like production that purported to show audiences the thrilling and harrowing life on the frontier, replete with huge reenactments of cattle

drives and clashes between Indians and cowboys, as well as exhibitions of marksmanship, cattle roping, and riding. The show proved hugely popular and it grew more elaborate every year, eventually topping out at 400 horses and 650 cowboys, Indians, musicians, and support staff. Over time Cody added big-name stars like the famous sharpshooter Annie Oakley and even the Sioux chief Sitting Bull.

Most Americans, indeed, much of the Western world, viewed the West, through Buffalo Bill’s performances, as a place of heroism, optimism, gallantry, and success (see *Images as History: Annie Oakley*).

## The West in Art and Literature

Western imagery and ideas also shaped American art and literature. Mark Twain, whose real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens, emerged in the late nineteenth century as one of the first authentically American novelists generally unaffected by European mores. Twain headed west in the early 1860s when his older brother Orion became secretary of the Nevada territory. He had hoped his brother could provide him with a government job, but he also wanted to find his share of the gold and silver associated with the Comstock Lode. Accordingly, he headed west. The result was his classic book *Roughing It* (1872), which fit in with the evolving Western tradition of the yarn or tall tale, and the beginnings of a literary career informed by his experiences with the wild life of Virginia City. His subsequent major works, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), while not especially “Western” in that they were set along the Mississippi River, both contained Western themes of adventure, individualism, and a desire to escape the constraints of modern society for a purer, more authentic world. In keeping with this theme, when Huck Finn sets out at the end of the book to start life anew, he heads for the West.

Just as Twain’s stories crackled with the realism of life on the Mississippi and in the West, Western art found its realist in Frederic Remington. Remington’s background prepared him perfectly: after attending Yale’s art school, he visited Montana, worked as a sheep herder and bar owner in Kansas, and started following the army, sketching battle scenes. Drawing upon earlier Western artists like George Catlin (see 15.4), he painted, drew, and sculpted vivid scenes of Western life. Most were vignettes of the lives of unknown cowboys, Native Americans, and soldiers.

# Images as History

## ANNIE OAKLEY

Two years after William Cody launched his Wild West show, he hired a woman who went on to become one of his most celebrated performers. Annie Oakley was a gifted sharpshooter, born and raised not in the West, but in Ohio. Taught to shoot at a young age, she killed game to earn money for her struggling family. At age sixteen she beat a professional in a sharpshooting match. She soon married the man and joined him on stage. In 1885 they joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West.

For sixteen seasons Oakley stunned and thrilled audiences with her marksmanship. She shot cigarettes from her husband's mouth and coins from his fingers. She blasted an endless succession of glass balls thrown in the air. She hit a target behind her by holding a

mirror in one hand and shooting over her shoulder with the other. No one could match the "peerless lady wing shot."

But as this photograph and virtually every one she posed for shows, an essential part of Oakley's appeal lay in her image as an ideal frontier woman who combined Victorian femininity and rugged, almost masculine, strength.

Oakley's adoring public was not put off by her entry into the traditionally male world of guns and horses because she presented a pleasing and reassuring feminine persona. In so doing Annie Oakley, the woman from Ohio, played a key role in shaping the evolving mythical image Americans held of the Old West.

Oakley's dual image as both feminine and tough is captured in her facial expression. In all of her studio portraits, she presents herself as beautiful and composed, but unsmiling, to emphasize her grit and fearlessness.

While Oakley radiated a beguiling feminine charm (she entered the show ring skipping and blowing kisses to the audience), this hand-on-hip pose was very masculine and expressive of manly self-assuredness that audiences associated with cowboys.

Conforming to Victorian mores about proper behavior for women, Oakley always wore a dress and rode side saddle.

Her many medals were intended to lend her authenticity, as if to say that although she was a performer, her skills as a shooter were real.



Oakley's outfit was modeled on the cowboy's, but with exceptions to emphasize her femininity. Unlike the oblong cowboy hat, hers had a broad round brim. She set it on the back of her head to reveal her face and ladylike curls.

She always appeared with a gun, a central icon of how Americans in the late nineteenth century understood the West. It was a symbol they associated almost entirely with men.

Annie Oakley poses for one of her many studio portraits depicting an idealized image of a frontier woman.



One exception was Lt. Col. George A. Custer, whom Remington helped make into a hero after the Battle of Little Bighorn. Charles Russell, a cowboy-turned-artist, also emerged as leader of Western art, producing works that often depicted more sensational and imaginative scenes than Remington. Both men played a central role in creating the iconic image of the American cowboy. Russell's 1897 painting (15.20) is typical of most depictions, showing skilled and fearless cowboys roping a bull.

## Historians Reinterpret the American West

Another key influence on the way Americans came to develop a particular image of the West was the work of historian Frederick Jackson Turner. In 1893 he published an essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," that took as its starting point the recent announcement by the Census Bureau based on data compiled from the recent 1890 census that the American frontier was "closed," that is, for all practical purposes the United States was essentially "settled" from coast to coast. In the essay he set forth what historians long have called the Turner Thesis or the **Frontier Thesis**. According to Turner, the frontier had played a vital role in shaping the American character and consequently American institutions. The frontier's importance began with the first settlers during the colonial period along the eastern seaboard and continued in every succeeding generation as it pushed farther and farther west. This seemingly endless supply of land created widespread opportunity for upward mobility. The tough demands of the frontier, Turner argued, forced Americans to develop a spirit of rugged individualism and innovation.

Frontier life also fostered values

such as equality and democracy because success was determined not by one's background but rather by one's ability to work hard, sacrifice, and command the respect of others.

Turner's thesis proved enormously influential. Several generations of Western historians based their writing and research on his ideas about the frontier. His influence also spread well beyond Western history—indeed, well beyond the study of history itself. Some American politicians and policy makers reacted to the apparent closing of the frontier in the 1890s by embracing imperialism to acquire new lands and markets that might make up for the absence of new places to conquer within the United States.

During the second half of the twentieth century, a new generation of historians reexamined Turner's thesis. In 1987 Patricia Nelson Limerick published *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. Just as Turner's article was a product of the optimism and anxiety of late-nineteenth-century American society, Limerick's book offered an interpretation that reflected the fact that she was a woman raised in the 1960s, a time of social ferment, when historians began to focus more on racial, ethnic, and gender issues. Consequently she brought a far more critical eye to her study of the West than Turner.

That awareness was clear in one of the words in Limerick's title: *conquest*. Turner had seen white Euro-American settlers as triumphing over such "obstacles" as a stubborn landscape and "a fierce race of savages." Limerick and other writers, known as "new Western historians," presented a far more complicated story. While not dismissing Turner entirely they emphasized, for example, that Native Americans had inhabited the West for thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans and thus had a legitimate claim to the land. Viewed from this perspective, the story of westward migration was one of violence, exploitation, and conquest. Limerick and other historians also stressed the diversity of the West, seeing it as a meeting place of a wide array of Native American tribes, Euro-Americans, European and Asian immigrants, African Americans, Mexicans, and Hispanos that contributed to and shaped a Western culture that was not simply "white."

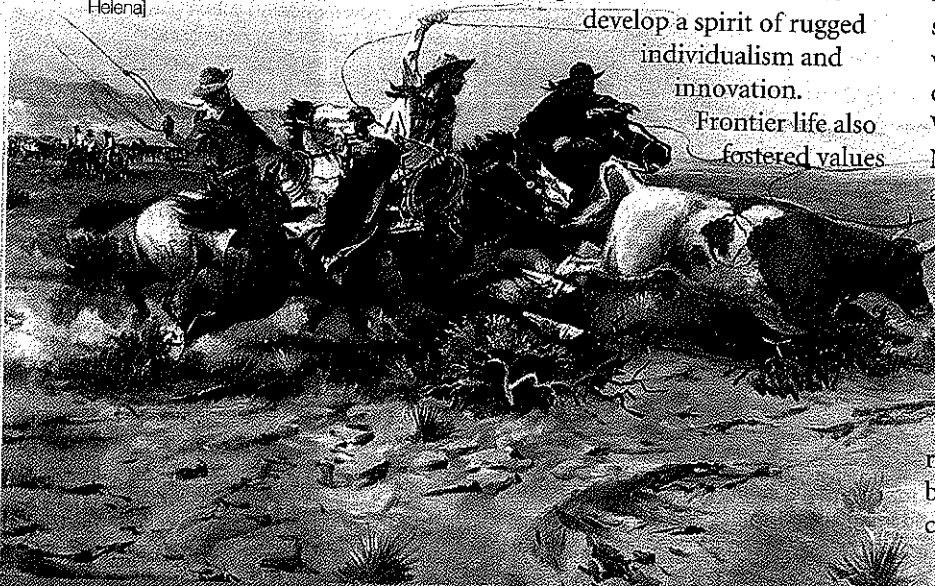
Finally, the more critical approach of new Western historians has taken into account the environmental impact of westward economic development.

This new way of seeing the history of the West in recent years has had an impact beyond the history books. Hollywood films on Western themes began to change as well. In the classic Western epics of the

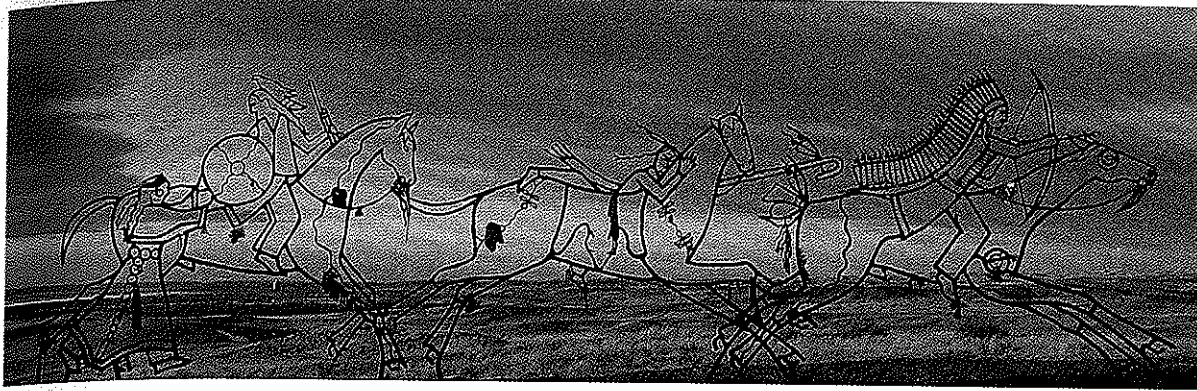
### 15.20 The Making of an American Icon

Artists such as Charles Russell, who painted this scene, *The Herd Quitters*, in 1897, played a central role in promoting the cowboy as a symbol of the West as a place of heroism, daring, and manly individualism.

[Source: Montana Historical Society, Helena]



How have new Western historians changed the way many Americans understand the history of the West?



### 15.21 Reinterpreting the History of the West

After more than 125 years of only commemorating Custer and his men, in 2003 the site of the Battle of Little Bighorn added an Indian Memorial to honor the Native Americans who fell in the battle. [Source: Colleen Cutschal, "Spirit Warriors". Bronze sculpture, 34 ft. x 14 ft. in an arc. Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, Montana. Brandon University, Canada]

1940s and 1950s, cowboys were heroes, fighting Indians who terrorized innocent white settlers. Beginning in the 1990s filmmakers began to present a more complicated view of the story of westward settlement, lawlessness, and white-Indian conflict. *Dances with Wolves* (1990), for example, presented Native Americans in very sympathetic terms. *Unforgiven* (1992) presented the West as a place of violence, lawlessness, failure, desperation, and corruption, where the line between good and evil is not at all clear. Many more such films followed.

This reassessment of the West's history has also brought significant changes in the way museums and public memorials present key chapters in American history. Nowhere is this more apparent than at the site of the 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn. For more than a century following the battle, the site was maintained as a memorial that depicted Custer and his men as heroic martyrs who died in

the cause of Western settlement. The site was named for Custer (Custer Battlefield National Cemetery) and featured a memorial to the Seventh Cavalry and some Indian scouts on Last Stand Hill. Native Americans, who, of course, won the battle, were simply ignored. But the influence of new Western history and Native American activism led to the renaming in 1991 of the site Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and in 2003 the unveiling of the Native American memorial shown here (15.21). Located only 100 yards from the Seventh Cavalry monument, it features three bronze outline sculptures representing Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors who participated in the battle. Its official theme is "Peace through Unity," but it also represents a growing awareness that for far too long Americans relied upon an incomplete and overly simplistic understanding of the history of the American West.

## Conclusion

The second half of the nineteenth century brought extraordinary changes to the United States as a whole, but especially in the trans-Mississippi West. In 1850 the primary occupants of the region were Native Americans. Most had lived there for thousands of years and developed an extraordinary diversity of lifestyles, traditions, and religious practices. White settlers, spurred on by manifest destiny, enthusiastic reports of open land, and measures such as the Homestead Act, soon began pouring into the region. They established millions of farms, founded countless towns and cities, and developed thriving railroad, ranching, and mining industries.

But this rapid settlement and economic development came with a cost, most especially for Native Americans who were eventually forced onto reservations. Despite subsequent federal policies that emphasized forced assimilation and the breakup of reservations, Native Americans worked to retain essential elements of their culture in the twentieth century. Even as the final phases of western settlement and Native American defeat were playing out, Americans began to develop a mythical image of the West that, despite corrective efforts by activists and historians in recent years, remain alive and well in the American imagination.