General History Chapter 12

Americans Move West

Section 1- Joining the Nation Together

**transcontinental**- across a continent

**prairie**- a large area of level or slightly rolling land

**homesteader**- a person who received land under the Homestead Act of 1862

What do you think of when I say “Western United States”? Describe the climate, terrain, etc. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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In the mid 1800’s, most Americans would say that the frontier began west of the Mississippi River. They thought of the land as flat and treeless. Settlers discovered that not all areas were flat. When workers began to build a railroad joining the East and the West, they had to cut through mountains.

At the start of the Civil War, there were about 35,000 miles of railroad track in the United States. Most of the track was east of the Mississippi River. Why?

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For years, Americans dreamed of a **transcontinental** railway. The railroad would run across the entire continent, joining the east coast and west coast of the country.

The hard work of joining the two coasts by rail began. One company, the Central Pacific Railroad Company, started building east from Sacramento, California, in 1863. Two years later, the Union Pacific Railroad Company started building west from Omaha, Nebraska.

Each company hired thousands of workers. What would some of the jobs that employees of the railroad might have to do. Remember, they are starting new.

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Most of the workers on the Union Pacific were Irish immigrants. The Central Pacific workers were mostly Chinese Immigrants. Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans also worked on the huge project.

Building the railroad tracks was hard and dangerous work. Workers on the Central Pacific had to dig around the mountains and sometimes went right through them with only pick axes and shovels.

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| |  | | --- | | \* A legend is a traditional story sometimes popularly regarded as historical but unauthenticated. | |

One famous legend, the Legend of John Henry, tells of a man who worked for the railroad and helped get through the mountains. We will now watch a short video about the legend.

Finally, on May 10, 1869, the two railroad lines met at Promontory Point, in Utah. Soon, other transcontinental railroads were built. This makes it easy for us to travel across the country.

The area between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains was a huge **prairie** known as the Great Plains. The Great Plains looked like an ocean of grass. It had good soil and perfect for raising cattle and other animals.

During and after the Civil War, the government encouraged farmers to move west. In 1862, Congress passed the Homestead Act. It gave men who were at least 21 years old 160 acres of land. The men had to pay $10, settle on the land for five years, build a home within six months, and grow crops. What would you do with 160 acres of land? List at least five things. Be specific. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Hundreds of thousands of families began moving onto the Great Plains after the Homestead Act was passed. These people were called **homesteaders**.

Section 2- Problems on the Great Plains

**reservation**- public land set aside by the government for the use of a particular group of people

**tradition**- the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs from one generation to another

Settlers and railroads changed the land as they moved west. How might this be?

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The lives of Native Americans also changed. How might their lives have changed?

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Before the Civil War, the U.S. government set aside land on the Great Plains for Native Americans. In the late 1860’s, the government decided to allow settlers to live on that land. Lawmakers then set aside small areas of land called **reservations** for Native Americans.

However, many settlers moved onto the land that had been promised to Native Americans. Obviously, they did not want to leave their homes and **traditions**.

Native Americans began trying to protect their land. In 1864, gold miners moved onto Native American land in Colorado. U.S. troops attacked a Native American village at Sand Creek. The Native American chief saw that his village was in great danger. He raised a white flag as a signal that he did not want to fight. The soldiers did not stop their attack. Hundreds of Native American men, women, and children were killed.

Even though many Americans felt that the attack was wrong, Native Americans were still forced to move to reservations.

The buffalo was very important to the Native Americans. They were used for food, clothing, and blankets. They caused major problems for railroads. Their herds tore up tracks and trains were not able to move along the rails.

Hunters were hired to kill the buffalo. “Buffalo Bill” Cody once killed thousands of buffalo in a year. In the 1860’s, there were about 160 million buffalo on the Great Plains. By 1890, fewer than one thousand buffalo were left.

Today, buffalo live in national parks. Laws have been passed to protect them.

A great battle was fought after the Lakota, a Native American group, moved to a reservation in the Black Hills of South Dakota. In 1874, miners discovered gold on the reservation. Thousands of miners rushed in to take the land.

In June 1876, Colonel George Custer, a U.S. officer, led a small group of about 225 soldiers against the Lakota. The Lakota, led by Chiefs Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, fought Custer and his men at the Little Bighorn River, in Montana. They killed Custer and all of his men. The Battle of Little Bighorn was one of the most famous battles between Native Americans and white soldiers in U.S. history.

It became harder and harder for Native Americans to fight against whites who were claiming their land. They were ordered off their land. Several battles ensued after Chiefs (and their tribes) refused to leave.

By 1880, most Native Americans in the United States lived on reservations. Because of this, a movement grew to stop the use of reservations. Reformers, such as Sarah Winnemucca, wanted Native Americans to have more rights. In 1887, the Dawes Act was passed. Here is what the Dawes Act said.

1.) Native Americans are to be educated.

2.) Native Americans are to become farmers.

3.) Native Americans can become U.S. citizens.

4.) Native Americans cannot sell their land for 25 years.

This act, however, did not work. It did not work because Native Americans wanted to keep their own traditions. Also, Native Americans who had been hunters did not want to become farmers.

As time passed, Native Americans lost more and more of their land. A Native American leader named Wovoka taught his followers a special dance. This was to help the Plains people live peacefully and joyously. This dance was called the Ghost Dance.

In 1890, U.S. lawmakers believed the Ghost Dance to be a war dance. They ordered all Native Americans in the Plains area near Wounded Knee Creek to turn over their weapons. A shot was fired and the U.S. soldiers again killed hundreds of men, women, and children. This was the end of hope for Native Americans.

Section 3- Life on the Great Plains.

**prospector**- a person who searches for gold, silver, or other valuable minerals

**boom town**- a camp that grows into a town almost overnight

The wide-open lands of the Great Plains drew many people. What type of people would want to head there? Think of jobs and other opportunities when answering.

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Some were drawn to the land for perfect soil. Others sought great wealth such as gold, silver or cattle.

Cattle first arrived in North America with Spanish settlers. Later, large ranches were started in the southern part of the United States, especially in Texas. The flat, grassy land was perfect for raising cattle.

At first, cattle were raised for their skins. Cattle leather was used in clothing, shoes, and other goods. However, as the country’s population grew, so did their demand for beef.

A steer that cost $4 in Texas could sell for $40 in large cities such as New York or Chicago. Making 10 times your investment is a great business to be in.

As the beef business grew, so did the needs of workers. Cattle workers were called cowhands. Cowhands were typically young males. They worked through hazardous conditions. These included:

1.) Dust Storms

2.) Blazing Heat

3.) Icy Blizzards

The cowhand’s job was to keep the cattle from getting lost or stolen. Once a year, cowhands went on a cattle drive. This was a journey to bring the cattle to rail yards for shipment. These lasted months and resulted in lost, stolen or dead cattle.

Cowhands

1.) Worked 18 Hour Days

2. Ate Fried bacon, Boiled Bean, Biscuits, Black Coffee

3.) Wore sombreros (wide brimmed hats), Bandanas, Leather Trousers

4.) Slept on the Ground

5.) Earned $25 per month plus free food

Wherever gold was located, that town became a mining town. People were hoping to “strike it rich”. Colorado was one such area, even though few found riches. Mining gold was often difficult and deadly. Miners worked in darkness underground. Gold did not just show up on the surface of the Earth. Poison gases, cave-ins and accidents were part of daily life. One miner out of every 30 died.

Thousands of **prospectors** crossed the Great Plains to the Rocky Mountains to mine gold. They set up camps in Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Nevada. All of these became **boom towns**.

Since boom towns grew so rapidly, there were no police at first. Thieves, outlaws, and dishonest gamblers often broke the law. Vigilante groups formed to take justice into their own hands. They hunted down lawbreakers and would hang or shoot them. Boom towns only lasted until the end of the 1800’s.

Farming proved more difficult than first thought. Weather wreaked havoc. Summer heat, tornadoes, and floods destroyed crops. Another problem was insects.

Families that found life too difficult moved farther west or returned to the East. Homesteaders who stayed teamed together to form a group called the Grange. The Grange held meetings for families to get to know one another. It helped solve problems the farmers faced. Members worked hard to keep railroad companies from charging too much money to ship farm crops. Farmers set up small markets to share goods to one another.