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America's West

The American West is iconic and much romanticized in American history. It was and is a uniquely American ideal or institutionalized dream. It represented hope and adventure to thousands of Americans in the post-Civil War era. It represented heartbreak for those who shunned social norms or didn't buy into the white man's view of the world. It created a balm of unification for the North and South after the Civil War that kept the United States together. The push to master the West spurred innovation and ingenuity. The frontier as Americans knew it then, was expanded and eventually conquered. Many of the political battles of the East found fertile ground, where there otherwise was none, to grow.

Fortune and the future lead many to expand business out west. What that business was depended on the need or drive of those involved. Charles Goodnight, arguably the first cowboy as we know them, saw the need to move cattle from the depressed markets of the south to the well-paying markets of the north and west. "Fittingly for the first cattle drive of the western cattle industry, their route along the Pecos River blazed the way for cattlemen after them and became famous as the Goodnight-Loving Trail (Richardson 70)." Goodnight and Oliver Loving lead fourteen cowhands to New Mexico to sell the cattle to the army. Thus, was triggered the "cattle rush" (Richardson 71) and the cowboy was born. Not long after this the image of the cowboy was also romanticized though it was a brutal way to live. The men who did it enjoyed the freedom it gave them. According to Teddy Blue Abbot, the cowboys had fun which was

never talked about and were “the most independent class of people on earth.” (Richardson 73) This was a microcosm of the hope that the West provided. Economic prosperity, freedom, the ability to choose one’s destiny were all part of that first cattle drive.

The various Indian tribes of the West felt heartbreak at the hands of the white man’s government and military. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 was hard enough on eastern tribes but to then, twenty years down the road, start to divvy up what was supposed to be theirs permanently must have been more than they wanted to bear. Stephen Douglas, the architect of this theft, was an opportunist who wanted to kick the can like so many other politicians. “Douglas thought in 1854 that he had arranged for peace and prosperity. Instead, he became a widely hated man...” (Limerick 93) While much of that hate came from his own country men, the eastern Indian tribes that were double crossed by his machinations had a rightful claim to that hate. Other Indian tribes wanted their peoples and lands left alone. “Men like Quanah in the Southwest and Sitting Bull in the Northwest fought against the American free labor ideal, trying to hold their communal lands and economy against those who would divide it up for individual opportunity.” (Richardson 74) Indians were disenfranchised from the beginning, not having their rights protected under the Constitution because they were not considered citizens.

Through all the turmoil and optimism of the West, industry rolled on with new innovations and inventions regularly. From the trans-pacific railroads to the splitting of the atom, the West has been the home of technological leaps and bounds. “From 1860 to 1890, the U.S. Patent Office issued more than half a million patents.” (Richardson 80) That time frame saw the development of air brakes for trains, new typewriters, cable streetcars, and the compression ice machine among others. The West also illustrated the boom and bust cycle in almost every form of industry. “Like other varieties of Western enterprise, high tech featured a myth of widespread

success and a reality of a few winners and many losers.” (Limerick 150) In 1867, Secretary of State William Henry Seward arranged to buy the territory of Alaska in the hopes of attaining the western ports of what is now Canada. The allure the West had to people from the East was as romanticized as it was impractical. Many came seeking fortune in the nineteenth century as well as the twentieth just to be let down. They had to settle for wages back in the days of mining and cattle ranching. Wage labor was not the concept it is now.

Wage labor and working conditions also hastened the rise of labor unions. Starting mostly in secret because of the negative view society had of them, the unions’ original purpose was for the welfare of the working man. “In 1869, the men who created reform organizations primarily wanted to defend their own version of free labor – safe conditions, reasonable hours, fair wages – against avaricious employers, but they frightened those from across the economic spectrum who endorsed the idea of economic harmony.” (Richardson 95)