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### Race Relations in the American West

Race in the American West became less about culture and more about the color of one's skin. Nearly two and a half centuries of cultural differences that shaped American relationships in the East and South would be whitewashed in the American West. Whether it be the Comanche, Arapaho, Cherokee, Choctaw or Tonkawa most plains tribes were no longer viewed for their cultural differences. Rather what happened was the whites viewed them all as savages that were impeding their doctrine of Manifest Destiny. The Mexicans, too, fared no better in the eyes of the whites, who no longer looked upon them as their distant relatives from Europe. Instead whites created racial differences to justify the exploitation of Mexican workers and the kidnapping of a group of Catholic children in an Arizona mining town. Ultimately these relationships would come to question white authority, not only in the American West but all throughout the continental United States.

As the American frontier pushed westward of the Mississippi river, one's cultural heritage and cultural differences became less significant as descriptive traits of personality. A sense of race based on pigmentation had suddenly emerged. Large groups of people were lumped together in insignificant categories without regard to culture, heritage, history and religious or political ideology. This happened to all groups that moved out West, whether through forced migration or mass migration. People's identities became based off the color of their skin. Perhaps, no other group than the Native American Indians were weighted down

with this burden more crucially. All tribes, the Iroquois, Cherokee, Choctaw stood as an impediment to westward expansion. S.C. Gwynne wrote in his book, *Empire of the Summer Moon*, “Beginning with the subjection of the Atlantic costal tribes (Pequots, Penobscots, Pamunkeys, Wampanoags, et al), hundreds of tribes and bands had either perished from the earth, been driven west into territories, or forcibly assimilated.”<sup>1</sup> These tribes were forced upon lands of very hostile and dangerous enemies. As the American frontier reached Texas white settlers would find out just how dangerous they were. The Parkers being one such group that would come to clash with the Comanches. The raid on their ranch would mark the beginning of the end of the Natives on the Western Plains. “They hated Indians with a particular passion,” Gwynne wrote, “considering them less than fully human, and thus blessed with inalienable rights to absolutely nothing. Government in all its forms lagged behind such frontier folk, often showing up much later and often reluctantly.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1838 the first president of the Texas Republic, Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar, called for a total war on the Plains Indians that did not submit to the white’s demand for land. Gwynne wrote, “He [Lamar] believed that Indians should be either expunged from Texas or killed outright. This included all Indians, from the Comanches on the west to the Wacos in the middle, and the Shawnees and Delawares and Cherokees in the east.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S.C. Gwynne, *Empire of the Summer Moon*, (New York, Scribner, 2010) 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 75.

When in and out groups are created throughout societies winners and losers are created. This is what happened in the American West. Linda Gordon explained, “Although the Mexican racial system was different than the American, both groups in Clifton-Morenci frequently discussed racial difference, and Mexicans like Anglos infused it with hierarchical notions of superiority/inferiority, civilization/primitivism.”<sup>4</sup> Mexicans had wanted to adopt lighter skinned children to promote the social mobility of their families. Gordon suggested that prior to 1904 this may have been acceptable. However, as the eugenics movement swept through the nation at the turn of the twentieth century a sense of culture became less important (Mexicans were European by most accounts) and skin color and genetics moved to the forefront. Perhaps no story better illustrates this than that of Margarita Chacon’s.

Chacon was born of either French and German or Spanish and German parents. She was of European decent, however, because of her dark complexion and Mexican tongue she was listed in the 1910 US census as being of Mexican decent. Ten years prior her and her husband both were listed as a white American. This dichotomy was drawn because of industry. In the mining town of Clifton-Morenci the miners were frequently underpaid and mistreated due to the color of their skin. “No Mexican mineworker,” Gordon wrote, “slotted into his job by the copper companies, could shed his race, no matter how skillful or respectable he was, just as no white mineworker or manager could lose his race, not matter how badly he worked and behaved.”<sup>5</sup> Out west race came to define one’s character.

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*, (Cambridge, Mass. 1999). 311.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 311.