

The United States entered a period of great change after the Civil War. Large numbers of Americans moved to settle certain areas of the West for the first time. This changed the life of the Plains Indians and led to conflict. In the years between 1860 and 1890, blacks also experienced changes in their way of life. Furthermore, the population of the country itself was changing, as a new era of immigration brought millions of people to the United States.

Settlers on the Last Frontier

In the years after the Civil War, American settlers moved into the last frontier. This was the area between the frontier line-which ran from Minnesota through Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and eastern Texas-and the Far West. The last frontier included the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the Great Basin. Before this time, the only Americans to see these lands were those moving into Oregon, California, and Texas.

Miners. New discoveries of gold and silver brought miners to the last frontier. In 1859, a small mining boom occurred in Colorado. Other finds in that area over the next 30 years supplied new sources of mineral wealth. A huge deposit of silver, known as the Comstock Lode, drew miners to Nevada in 1859. Idaho became a center of mining activity in the 1860's. Between 1862 and 1868, discoveries were made in Montana. Mining also became important in New Mexico, Arizona, and South Dakota.

Settlement of the mining frontier most often followed a pattern. After a "strike" was made, hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miners moved into an area and made claims. A mining camp was set up, from which a small town grew. Each find brought settlers, as well as miners, to the area. Many of the settlers set up farms or started businesses. These communities were known as "boom" towns. Important cities-such as Boise, Idaho, Helena, Montana, and Virginia City, Nevada, began as *boom towns* on the mining frontier. Once a deposit was mined

out, however, the town was often abandoned as the miners went to look for new claims. The empty, lifeless towns the miners left behind became known as *ghost towns*.

Ranchers. The large sweep of open land attracted ranchers to the last frontier. With its millions of acres of grass, it was well suited to raising cattle. At first, ranches generally grew up around military posts or mining towns. Later, they spread over a wider area.

The leading cattle center was Texas. By 1865, there were about four million longhorn cattle there. Descended from Spanish cattle brought into Texas in the 1500's, these animals were more suited to the area than eastern stock. They could withstand blizzards, drought, and certain diseases.

Cattle to Market. In the 1850's, Texas cattle owners had driven small herds to Galveston and Shreveport for shipment by water to New Orleans and the East. This method was both slow and costly. A cheaper, faster method appeared in the late 1860's, when the first railroads were built into Kansas.

Joseph McCoy, an Illinois cattle dealer, wanted to use the railroads to move Texas cattle to city markets in the East. McCoy made an agreement with officials of the Kansas Pacific Railroad. According to this agreement, cattle brought to the town of Abilene, Kansas, would be shipped by train to eastern stockyards at certain rates. In 1867, 35,000 cattle were shipped east from Abilene. In 1870, the number reached 300,000. Soon several cattle trails led to the railroads. In addition to Abilene, other Kansas "cow towns," such as Wichita, Ellsworth, and Dodge City, arose near the ends of the trails.

Bringing the cattle north from Texas to Abilene was called the *long drive*. The drive north followed one of the cattle trails, such as the Chisholm Trail to Abilene. From there, most of the cattle were shipped to the East for beef. Some cattle from Texas were used to build up herds in Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Colorado, Montana, and the Dakotas.

Conflict on the Open Range. There was conflict on the *open range*, or unclaimed public

grasslands. By 1879, cattle raising had become a big business. However, as more people invested their money in cattle, more animals were bred than the land could support. This led to overgrazing. Soon, there was trouble between large and small cattle owners as well as between cattle and sheep owners. There was also trouble between cattle owners and people who wanted to settle and farm the land. Before long, often violent range wars broke out in the West. To keep out settlers, cattle owners built fences around large areas of land. Settlers cut these fences to get water and built their own to keep herds from trampling their crops. Cattle owners cut these fences, which interfered with grazing. While problems continued, the open-range cattle business slowly declined. Finally, two severe winters in 1885-1886 and 1886-1887 killed thousands of animals and brought an end to open-range cattle raising.

The owners who survived changed their way of raising cattle. The size of the herds was reduced. Cattle owners used barbed wire, introduced in 1874, to fence off their land. Cowhands, who had once worked on the cattle drives, became ranch hands—fixing fences, branding cows, and living more or less in one place.

Homesteaders. *Homesteaders*, or people who settled on land with plans to farm it, also moved west in search of land. In 1862, Congress passed the **Homestead Act** to encourage settlement in the West. This act gave settlers 160 acres (64 hectares) of land after they had lived on it for five years and improved it. Before this time, public land had generally been sold to raise money for the government. Many people from the East and some from Europe rushed to accept the government's offer.

Western Settlement. The line of settlement moved west across the Great Plains. In earlier years, Americans had not settled this area because it was thought to be unsuited to farming. By 1865, farmers were moving into the eastern areas of Kansas and Nebraska on the edge of the Great Plains. The federal government, railroad companies, and private land companies soon began to promote settlement of the lands farther west.

In the early 1880's, the western part of Kansas and Nebraska was settled by homesteaders. Thousands of farmers moved into the eastern Dakotas from 1868 to 1885. The populations of Minnesota, Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Colorado, and Montana increased greatly. In the years from 1860 to 1900, more new land was opened for farmers than during any other time in the first 200 years of the country's history.

Problems. Homesteaders faced many problems. West of 98° longitude, there was little rainfall, few streams, and practically no trees. Drought was common, as were blizzards in the winter and insects in the summer. Many homesteaders gave up and returned to the East or moved elsewhere. Those who stayed learned to adapt. They used new steel plows to work the soil. They planted a new kind of Russian wheat which needed less water. They built windmills to pump underground water to the surface. These homesteaders also began to use *dry-farming*. This meant plowing deeply into the soil to bring up underground moisture.

Despite the problems, the homesteaders settled much of the remaining area of the West. In 1890, the head of the United States Census Bureau declared that the frontier had closed.

