

Lesson 24: Tensions in the West

How did settlers change the West and affect American Indians?

Lesson 24 – Section 4: Miners

- A second group of pioneers, the miners, dreamed of striking it rich.
- The discovery of gold in California in 1848 set off a great treasure hunt in the mountains and deserts of the West.



Lesson 24 – Section 4: Miners

- By 1874, gold or silver had been found in what are now the states of California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Montana, Colorado, Arizona, Idaho, and New Mexico.
- Although some immigrants also came to seek their fortunes, most miners were young, white American males who dreamed of striking it rich.



Lesson 24 – Section 4: Miners

- Mining in the West followed a predictable pattern.
- First came the discovery of gold or silver, followed by fortune seekers from around the world flocking to the site.
- Almost overnight, mining camps grew into fast-growing settlements called boomtowns.



Lesson 24 – Section 4: Miners

- Since Boomtowns sometimes had no government, no law, and little order, robbery and murder were common.
- Miners fought back by forming “vigilance committees” to control crime. The members of these committees, called vigilantes, handed out quick justice.



Lesson 24 – Section 4: Miners

- When the easy-to-find gold or silver was gone, most miners moved on.
- Just seven years after its birth, for example, Gila City was a ghost town, and all that remained, wrote a visitor, were “three chimneys and a coyote.”



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- In many ways, mining was destructive because it damaged the land and displaced many American Indians.
- But most Americans saw mining as a source of wealth and opportunity.
- Some boomtowns, like Reno and Denver, survived to become prosperous cities.



Lesson 24 – Section 4: Miners

- Mining also opened up the West's mountains and deserts to other settlers who would turn territories into new western states.
- Some were farmers and ranchers, while others were businesspeople who invested in the heavy equipment needed to extract hard-to-find ore from western mountains.



Lesson 24 – Section 5: Ranchers and Cowboys

- A third group of western settlers consisted of ranchers and the cowboys who tended their herds of cattle.
- At the end of the Civil War, millions of longhorn cattle roamed the Texas plains.



Lesson 24 – Section 5: Ranchers and Cowboys

- The market for all this beef was the crowded cities of the East, where cattle worth \$3 to \$6 a head in Texas might be sold for \$50 in New York or Chicago.
- The problem was transporting the cattle to the cities, which was often further complicated by the presence of American Indians and stampeding bison herds.



Lesson 24 – Section 5: Ranchers and Cowboys

- The Plains Indians, who depended on the bison for food, were horrified by the slaughter.
- Other Americans shared this horror, and in 1874, Congress passed a bill outlawing the killing of more bison than could be used for food.
- When President Grant refused to sign the bill into law, General Philip Sheridan supported Grant's decision.



Lesson 24 – Section 5: Ranchers and Cowboys

- By 1880, the bison had all but vanished.
- With their food gone, the Plains Indians had little choice but to move to reservations, leaving the plains open to ranchers and their cattle.



Lesson 24 – Section 5: Ranchers and Cowboys

- The railroads also solved the ranchers' transportation problem.
- In 1867, Joseph McCoy built a stockyard, a large holding pen for temporarily storing cattle, next to the railroad in Abilene, Kansas.
- That summer, cowboys herded thousands of cattle, from Texas to the Abilene stockyard, in what they called the “long drive.”



Lesson 24 – Section 5: Ranchers and Cowboys

- Even though being a cowboy was dangerous and low-paying work, life on the trail still attracted many young adventurers.
- While most were Texans, about a fourth were of African American heritage, and some were Mexican or American Indians.



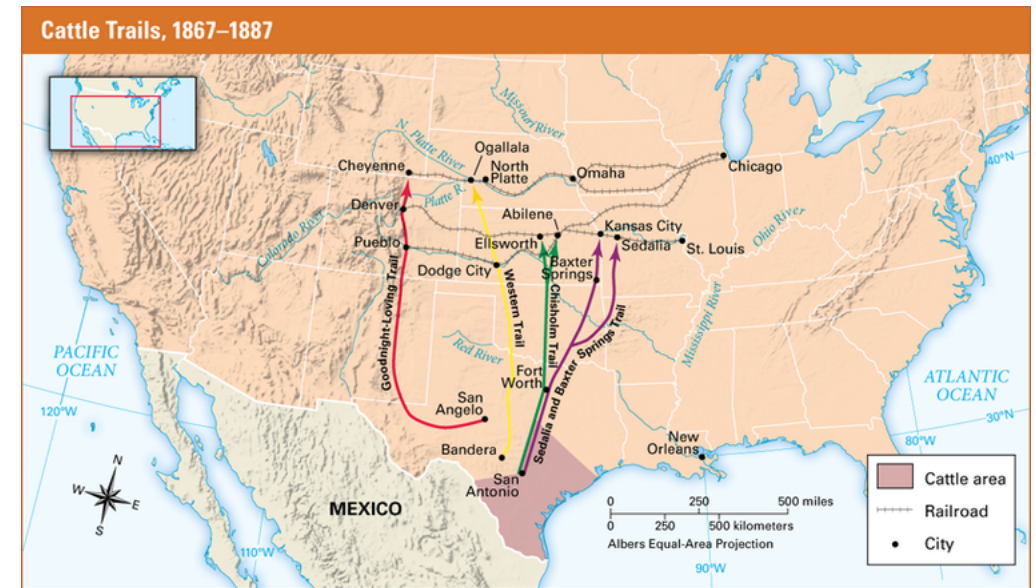
Lesson 24 – Section 5: Ranchers and Cowboys

- Rarely, however, were black cowboys promoted to trail boss.
- Jim Perry, for example, was an expert rider, roper, and trail cook, who believed prejudice against blacks was the only reason he was not the boss of his own team.



Lesson 24 – Section 5: Ranchers and Cowboys

- After growing rapidly for 20 years, the cattle industry collapsed during the winter of 1886–1887.
- That terrible season, which was the worst anyone could remember, was called the “Great Die-Up” by ranchers because whole herds of cattle froze to death.



Lesson 24 – Section 5: Ranchers and Cowboys

- The days of the long drive were over as wild cow towns became civilized ranching centers and adventuresome cowboys settled down to work as ranch hands.
- Although the cattlemen's glory years faded into the past, they had left their mark on the West. They had opened the Great Plains to settlement and had created an industry that remains an important part of life in the West today.



Lesson 24 – Section 6: Homesteaders

- Farmers followed the ranchers onto the Great Plains. For half a century, the plains had been viewed as too dry for farming, causing mapmakers to label the area the “Great American Desert.”
- Then, in the 1870s, years of plentiful rain allowed a few lucky homesteaders to plow and plant the grassland so that their fields yielded fine crops.



Lesson 24 – Section 6: Homesteaders

- Rain might not follow the rails or the plow, but a rush of new settlers did.
- By 1900, some 600,000 homesteaders from the East had moved onto the Great Plains, lured west by the promise of free or cheap land.
- While many were farm families, some were former slaves looking for a new start in freedom. Tens of thousands of European immigrants also settled the plains.



Lesson 24 – Section 6: Homesteaders

- The homesteaders faced huge challenges as they struggled to turn grasslands into grain fields.
- Rain was unreliable. Some years their crops withered under the hot prairie sun, but in other years, locusts—large grasshoppers that travel in swarms—swept across the plains, eating everything in their path.
- In addition, the plains had few trees, so there was little wood for homes.



Lesson 24 – Section 6: Homesteaders

- Over time, the homesteaders solved these problems.
- Homesteaders chose to build their homes out of chunks of sod, or soil held together by grassy roots, replacing the more common building material, wood.
- They learned how to use windmills to pump water from deep in the ground, and how to plow deeply to reach moist soil.



Lesson 24 – Section 6: Homesteaders

- The Mennonites also introduced a type of winter wheat that thrived on the plains.
- With hard work and the right crop, homesteaders made the Great Plains one of the most productive wheat-growing regions in the world.

