

## **WESTWARD EXPANSION**

The boundaries of the United States of America in 1787, at the time of the British Colonies War for Independence, was: the Allegheny mountains to the west, St. Lawrence to the North, and the Atlantic Ocean to the south and east occupying the eastern part of the North American continent. To the west there were thousands of miles of open fertile land having forests, mountains, rivers and plains which were inhabited by Indigenous peoples and Spanish Mexicans. The frontier between the settled lands of the east and the lands of the wild-west was pushed further and further westward in two waves as land was bought, explored, and taken over by the United States Government and settled by immigrants from Europe. The first wave settled land west to the Mississippi River following the Louisiana Purchase. The second wave settled lands west of the Mississippi to California. Farms, mines, railroads, cities and industry sprung up. Many of these immigrants suffered, or worse, died from thirst in the deserts, Indian raids, or from outlaw violence. Most simply wanted land to farm; others wanted to make a quick fortune in the gold prospects of the West.

### **THE WESTERN LANDS**

If you look at a relief map of the United States, then you can see that the land west of the Allegheny Mountains is mostly flat and open until you reach the Rocky Mountains; which is over a thousand miles away. These central plains are separated by the Mississippi River and its' tributaries, such as: the Ohio to the east, and the Missouri; Arkansas; and Red to the west into the Midwest and Great Plains. These rivers formed natural routes for exploration, travel, and trade used during the westward expansion of the United States of America.

The lands of the Midwest: Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin and Minnesota attracted farmers, miners, and Lumber barons seeking rich natural resources. Farmers were attracted to the lush, fertile, glacial soils that supported many varieties of grain, fresh produce, and fruit. Miners sought copper, iron, silver and gold in the mines of northern Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Lumber Barons harvested the great hardwood and pine forests of the Midwest producing world class oak, and white pine. Americans turned west shortly after realizing the potential of these new lands as reports came of more natural resources lying to the west.

The Great Plains may be separated in to two geographic areas: high plains to the west and low plains to the east. Sodbusters were the initial settlers turning lush prairies into plowed fields. Sodbusters in the eastern plains succeeded producing regional crops; whereas, low annual rainfalls made farming unprofitable in the high plains. Low annual rainfalls were caused regionally to due a rain shadow effect produced by the Coastal and Rocky Mountains. The high plains were suitable for livestock though, and soon cattle and sheep ranches exploited this natural resource.

The mountain territories were first settled along travel routes to the Pacific Northwest. These territories were first viewed as a hurdle between the Plains and civilization along the Pacific Coast. Gold and lush valleys brought people to northern California, while farming and lumber attracted others to Oregon and Washington. When the gold rush, west of Sacramento, California, played out prospectors turned to the mountain territories: Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado. Boomtowns sprung up, but with it came many who settled the rich valleys as farmers and businessmen.

There was, then, a great variety of land and climate facing the new settlers. Deserts were difficult to cross, but there were no dense jungles or very rugged mountains, as there were in South America. The people who tamed this vast country were as varied as the land and climate. There were bearded mountain trappers dressed in animal skins, who often saw nobody for months on end. By contrast, settlements by German farmers were organized with houses in neat rows and supported a well regimented work and religious life.

### **THE EXPLORATION OF THE LANDS WEST OF THE MISSISSIPPI**

Explorers, traders and trappers pushed into the unknown lands before settlers. These men were tremendously tough in body and mind. They learned Indian survival methods in the wild, and could stand months of isolation. Trappers, or "mountain men" were the most independent of all the frontiersmen; loners who had turned their back on settled life. It was their stories of trails and passes through mountains that helped government explorers to map the new lands properly.

There was one government expedition which went where no white man had ever been before. In 1803, the United States had made the Louisiana Purchase purchasing many hundred thousands of square miles of land

between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains which was claimed by the French. Napoleon, the ruler of France, was fighting wars in Europe and did not care much about America. So, in order to finance his wars in Europe he agreed to sell the French claim to the land. Daniel Boone explored the territories of Kentucky and Tennessee west to Missouri.

Under the leadership of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, 48 tough young men set off in the spring of 1804 up the river Missouri into the unknown. Aided by an Indian woman named Sacajawea, they reached the Rocky Mountains in May 1805 and finally the Pacific Ocean in November.

Before settlers could immigrate in quantity: 1) the newly discovered territories needed to be mapped more thoroughly, and 2) more contacts made with the Indians. Traders were vital in this role. They set up remote trading posts and dealt with the Indians and white trappers buying furs and selling everything from blankets and knives to salt and tobacco. Life was often dangerous since the Indians were not always friendly, and trappers not always honest. The job of opening up the West was also done by Commercial fur hunters and trappers between 1820 and the 1840's. Commercial contracts eliminated the trading post middle man. Fur companies sent trappers out to meet months later at an agreed spot. The meeting spots were great gatherings of mountain men sharing grand tales while beaver pelts were exchanged for guns, ammunition and groceries. By the mid-1840's, the beavers were hunted almost to the point of extinction.

## **OREGON, TEXAS AND THE MEXICAN WAR**

The next great addition of land to the United States came in the 1840s and brought the American flag right up to the Pacific. Mexico had won her independence from Spain in the 1820s and owned California, Texas and most of the Southwest of the present-day United States. The Mexican government had enormous problems in its early years. It did not have proper control of its outlying territories and was unable to stop large numbers of North Americans settling in them. These Americans tried to throw off Mexican control. Texas broke away in the 1830s and became a member of the Union in 1845. In the following year the United States declared war on Mexico. By 1847 she had conquered all Mexican territory north of the Rio Grande, including California. At the same time the British government agreed to hand over to the United States most of the Oregon territory which lies north of California. Both countries had claimed it but in the end the British did not think it worth a fight. By 1850 then, the bulk of the 20th century United States was in existence.

## **THE OREGON TRAIL AND THE GOLD RUSHES**

In the 1840s it was Oregon above all that attracted settlers. Stories spread of how good the Oregon farming was. Thousands of families caught what was known as 'Oregon fever'. They sold up all their possessions to buy a wagon or 'prairie schooner' to make the long journey from the starting point at independence, Missouri. Had they known what the journey was going to be like, probably many would never have started. The first part of the journey was easy, with few Indians to fight and plenty of grass for grazing. Then they entered Indian territory and often met fierce resistance from the Great Plains Confederation of the Sioux. Lastly they had to cross the mountains. Thousands never reached Oregon.

It was, however, gold rather than land that triggered off the really big movement to the far West in 1849, when gold was discovered in California. The rush to California meant disaster for many who did not prepare for the journey properly. Instead of following the Oregon Trail to its end and then going down the coast, many tried to take a short cut across the Nevada desert. As a result the desert trails were littered with the bones of horses and men. Most of the 80,000 or so 'Forty-niners' who reached California did not find gold. They came because of stories of the lucky few who had found gold dust in river and stream beds. The trouble was that there was very little gold to be had in this way. Most of the gold was locked deep in the Mountainside of the Sierra Nevada that separated California and Nevada. A lot of money was needed to sink main shafts and to buy the equipment to separate the gold from the quartz rock in which it was buried. A few well-equipped and wealthy gold-miners did make a fortune, but most found little or nothing.

The towns built as a result of this movement were not properly organized or policed. The houses were shanties, whisky was cheap, and law and order were enforced by local self-appointed groups. This pattern happened elsewhere in the West. If the Washington government could not provide law and order quickly enough, the people on the spot made their own arrangements. Often this meant very tough and ready justice but it did make many ordinary Americans take part in running their own affairs. When the gold gave out, many of the gold settlements were abandoned and became ghost towns. Most of the Forty-niners stayed in California

and became farmers or workers in the new towns and cities that sprang up. Thus the gold rush brought about the very fast settlement of California, so that by 1850 it could become a state of the Union. The search for gold and silver continued elsewhere. In the 1850s, Colorado saw a rush of prospectors, and in the 1860s it was Nevada, Montana and Idaho. In 1859, the very rich Comstock Lode was discovered, and in 1891-94, Cripple Creek in Colorado saw the last great gold rush. But most of the rewards did not go to the early prospectors; only the big mining companies had the money and equipment to get at the gold. By the 1860s the far west was fairly well settled. Proper trails linked it to the departure points on the Missouri in the East. Only the Great Plains between still remained unsettled.

## **CATTLE AND RAILROADS**

Until the 1860s, the great central plains between the Missouri and Mississippi in the east and the Rocky Mountains were an endless area of grasslands to be crossed as fast as possible. Rainfall, even outside the desert states, was low and farming did not look easy. And the Indian peoples were determined to keep the white man out if they could.

The coming of the railroads and the cattlemen changed all this. By 1869 the first railroad stretched from the Pacific to Omaha, Nebraska. In the following years many other lines were built. Now at last men and goods could be carried cheaply and quickly across the continent. The first people to see the chances offered by the railroads were the Texan cattlemen. During the Civil War, ranches had not been looked after and 5 million semi-wild cattle roamed the state. In the North a growing population wanted beef, so the Texan cattlemen took the cattle for hundreds of miles to Abilene, Kansas where they were shipped to Chicago by raft. They soon realized that there would be great advantages in keeping the huge herds of cattle on the Great Plains. The railroad companies built lines to the main centers and the cattle ranches began. The era of the cowboy was born. The frontier cowboy towns became legendary. Guns and drink were cheap, and cowboys arrived in town with perhaps several months pay to spend. It is not surprising that life was violent.

## **THE DESTRUCTION OF THE PLAINS INDIANS**

Between the early 1860s and late 1880s, the Indian tribes of the plains, Sioux and Blackfeet, Pawnee and Apache among them, were broken and defeated. The Indians had lived for centuries by hunting the 15 million or so buffalo which roamed the plains in huge herds. The buffalo supplied their meat, their dwellings, their clothing: in fact, their way of life. For the white men the buffalo were at first a nuisance and later an easy source of food and valuable skins. White hunters began to hunt them to extinction. The U.S. government tried to force the Indians to give up their old hunting grounds in return for barren reservations. Even when the Indians agreed to move on to a reservation peacefully, they were not safe. In 1864, for instance, large numbers of Cheyenne moved to the Sand Creek reservation. Without warning they were then massacred by white soldiers. The Indians massacred whites in return. The Indian wars had begun.

When the government tried to force all the Indians into reservations the Cheyenne were joined by the Sioux, Comanche, Kiowa and Apache. Sometimes the Indians managed to wipe out overconfident white soldiers, as when they destroyed General Custer and 264 troops at Little Big Horn in 1876. But their struggle was doomed. Without the buffalo they were forced to depend on the white government for food. Defeated and demoralized, they drifted into government reservations.

## **THE FARMERS SETTLE THE GREAT PLAINS**

Between 1870 and 1890, the biggest movement westward took place. Spreading from the railroad tracks, hundreds of thousands of settlers moved into the Dakotas, Wyoming, Montana and Idaho. The last territory settled was Oklahoma in 1889. A frantic rush took place to seize a piece of this last bit of the wilderness. The frontier was closed. There was now no dividing line between wild and settled land.

How were the dry plains turned into farming land? Why did the cattlemen give way to the farmers? One reason why the cattlemen were forced out was the summer drought of 1886, when the grasslands withered and cattle starved. The winter was the worst in living memory and thousands more cattle froze to death. Many ranch owners were ruined. The other major reason for the farmers' success was the spread of new inventions that made farming possible on the Great Plains. Barbed wire began to be sold in the 1870s and large areas of land could now be enclosed cheaply and quickly. Equipment to dig deep wells became available. Most important, new machines were developed, such as the steel gang plow that could turn several furrows at once; special

harrow to break up the soil; mechanical reapers and binders, and steam threshing machines. Vast areas could now be farmed far more efficiently.

## **THE PEOPLING OF THE UNITED STATES**

Where did all the new settlers come from? Part of the answer is the massive increase in the population. There were just over 23 million Americans in 1850. By 1880 there were 50 million. Part of this was a natural increase, which was happening throughout Europe and America since each year more people were being born than were dying. But also in those 30 years between 1850 and 1880, over 7 1/2 million immigrants arrived from Europe and settled in the farmlands of the mid and far west. Of all the immigrants it was the Germans, Swedes and Norwegians, followed towards the end of the century by Poles and Czechs, who took the largest part in the westward surge. After 1900 there was a new surge of immigrants from Europe, who came mostly to the cities and factories of the East. Polish and Russian Jews came to escape anti-Jewish persecution. Southern Italians fled from poverty and epidemics. Nearly all these later immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were poorer and less educated than earlier settlers.

During this period, the cities grew rapidly: Chicago had 12 families in 1831, 30,000 people in 1850 and 1,700,000 in 1900. It became the center of the meat processing and packing industry.

## **THE CLOSING OF THE FRONTIER**

With no new land available it became more important that the land was farmed well in order to produce the increasing amount of food needed by the growing population. It became necessary to buy barbed wire and new machines. Expensive freight charges on the railroads had to be paid. Only the bigger farmers were able to afford the amounts needed. Many small farmers went out of business.

Another result of the end of the frontier inside the United States was that some leaders of the U.S. government began to look for more land from their neighbors. This had been done in the 1840s when Mexico lost much territory. There was much talk of America's 'Manifest Destiny' - that is, the belief that America had the right to rule all the land from Mexico to the Arctic, the islands of the Caribbean and even, some said, parts of East Asia. Since fighting for Canada would mean a long war with the British, the U.S. government looked elsewhere for easier pickings in Central America and the Pacific. A war was fought against Spain, and as a result, the United States took from her the Philippines in the Pacific and gained much influence in newly independent Cuba. She intervened, too, in Mexico and Panama to strengthen her position. The United States of America was beginning to look outwards and to feel her power.

## **WHAT THE FRONTIER MEANS TO AMERICANS**

Thousands, perhaps millions, of Americans lived on the frontier between 1790 and 1890. What they learnt helped to shape the American character. To begin with, the frontier helped to make Americans out of the millions of European immigrants. Everyone had to live and work together to survive. In the wilds, a good shot or carpenter was often more use than someone whose father was a lord; a person was judged by what he was and could do rather than by his background. Also, in a world where shops were hundreds of miles away, men learnt to look after themselves, and to make much of what they needed, rather than buy it. Even in the twentieth century the idea survived that helping yourself is a good thing and that you should not depend on others. American attitudes to government were also influenced by the frontier. Many men who went west did not like being ordered around by any government. The Congress in Washington was a very long way off and it therefore made sense for people on the spot to make decisions. Out of this grew a distrust of central government and a very strong wish for as many things as possible to be controlled at local level. One bad effect of living on the frontier was that Americans became very wasteful in their behavior. If you shot a whole herd of buffalo, there were plenty more; if you wore out the soil by over farming it, you simply moved on to new lands. The land seemed limitless and it took a long time for people to realize that resources might run out.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FRONTIER FOR THE UNITED STATES IN THE WORLD**

The United States could never have grown at the rate she did without the rich lands and minerals of the West. Her population could not have been fed and her industries could not have expanded without the food from the prairies and the raw materials. For most of the nineteenth century America did not use her growing power in the

world. The slavery problem and the sheer business of taking over the whole country took up most of her energies. But in the twentieth century this rich land made the United States into a superpower. Even before America's industrial power became clear at the beginning of the twentieth century, the frontier had greatly affected European economies. The farmers of the Great Plains produced more than they could sell in the United States and, from the late 1870s, large amounts of cheap grain and beef were sent to Europe. Many European countries had to put taxes on American imports to stop them ruining their own agriculture. However, the increasing populations of Europe could not have survived without American food. In the last part of the twentieth century the United States has helped to feed the world.

### **THE FRONTIER AS LEGEND**

Memories of the frontier way of life are strong a hundred years later. Cowboy films have kept alive the legends of cattlemen and mountain men, of Jesse James and Billy the Kid, of Sitting Bull and Wild Bill Hickok. They were dangerous and hard times but men and women had to work and fight and stand up for themselves. There was much violence and cruelty on the frontier, but there were also many heroes. In a hundred years America turned an uncultivated land into a powerful, rich and free nation. The frontier made America and influenced much of what has happened since.