# Western Development in 19th Century

### Migration

The postwar period also saw western migration accelerate even faster than ever before. One of the reasons, of course, was the railroad. Who needed those silly little covered wagons now? Just hop on a giant engine and be carted along a rail line.

Of course, railroads also brought the destruction of beautiful lands and animals. American sportsmen loved to shoot buffalo out of the windows of train cars, leaving them to die and rot while their trains steamed away west. This was especially problematic for the Native Americans, who relied on buffalo herds for their survival. Many fought back, most notable the Sioux, but the U.S. Army had a new job after the war: to subdue the Native Americans and clear the west for safe settlement.

The federal government was chomping at the bit to settle the West. They dangled as many carrots as they could before American settlers, like the **Homestead Act**and the **Morrill Land Grant Act.**They offered settlers 160 acres of land, which they could keep as long as they established a "homestead" on it—aka build a house and a farm and hang out there for more than 5 years.

### Native Americans

What to do with the Native Americans? Fighting them took time, manpower, and ammo—and sometimes ended badly, like in the **Battle of Little Big Horn**where **General Custer**was killed by the Sioux. They could, of course, be forced onto reservations, but then they started to complain that the land was bad, and that settlers kept taking it away.

Again, in its constant pendulum swing between warring against and trying to civilize Native Americans, the American government swung to the latter. It passed the **Dawes Severalty Act,**which divided reservation lands into 160-acre allotments and gave them to Native American families.

Oh. This looked exactly like the Homestead Act, right? Wrong. Native Americans had to live on the land for a total of 25 years,not just 5, and only then were they awarded American citizenship. Many of them found that 160 acressoundslike a lot, but isn't enough to make a profit off of. Many sold their lands to whites, and the Indian nations that had existed in the west since Indian Removal began to dissolve.

This all seemed like good news to white settlers, who found that farming and cattle-driving (that's right—cowboys.) were tough but lucrative out west. Plus, they were even building cities like Chicago and San Francisco, which proved as capable of industrializing as the North. Of course, that brought along many of the same problems, too…like immigration. In the far west, the main "foreign devils" were the Asians—Chinese and Japanese who had initially come to work on the railroads. Americans were so viciously against them that they forced the government to pass the **Chinese Exclusion Act**in 1882, totally stopping all further immigration.

### Turner's Frontier Thesis

So, western migration and growth—at least, the white kind—continued apace. Then something weird happened in 1890: the U.S. census declared that the west was all settled up: there were no more territories, only states. That declared the "**closing of the frontier."**

Big deal. There was still land,what difference did that make? As it turns out, it made an interesting psychological difference. Scholar **Frederick Jackson Turner**presented his **Frontier Thesis**at the Chicago World Fair, theorizing that the frontier was the very ingredient that made the nation so distinctly "American." It created the "American spirit" of independence, intrepidness, mobility, and progress. It fostered democracy and created a safety valve for troubled areas in the crowded East. Now…it was "gone." Americans wondered—was that the end of the "American spirit"? Would a whole new host of troubles now arise? Where now could they find their identity?

Interesting that these questions came right as America was creeping toward the dawn of a new century. A new century that was marked not by a gaze turned west, but a gaze turned east: to Europe, the "Third World," and global dominance.

Before we read about the politicians who began pointing their fingers across the Atlantic, though, take a closer look at those who tried to mold the rapidly morphing nation to their designs.