

CHAPTER 17

The Development of the West, 1865–1900

THEMATIC GUIDE

Chapter 17 begins a series of four chapters that analyze the transition of American society from an agrarian society to an urban, industrialized society. The expansion westward in the late nineteenth century closed the physical frontier that had been part of American society since its beginnings. As in the past, American expansion was carried out at the expense of Indians. Americans were and are an ethnocentric people. They see their civilization, their society, and their value and belief systems as being better than those of other peoples. This ethnocentrism led Americans to believe that they had a right to expand and to impose their values and beliefs on the peoples and societies they encountered. It is this attitude that formed the basis of the failed Dawes Severalty Act.

As Americans sought opportunity in this vast western region, they discovered and developed the riches of the land, thus conquering the natural-resource frontier—a prerequisite for the subsequent development of an industrialized economy. Exploitation of the land and its resources for profit raised questions in several areas: (1) who owns the resources, private developers or the American people; (2) which takes precedence—the desire for progress and profit or the desire to protect the natural landscape; and (3) who has rights to the precious streams, rivers, and basins of the West—only those along their banks or all those who intend a beneficial use of river water.

The natural-resource frontier, especially the mining and lumber frontiers, produced personalities who enriched American folklore; but reality was far different from folk tales. Most westerners worked long hours as they attempted to eke out an existence for themselves and their families. Women and nonwhites suffered discrimination, especially with the development of racial categories by the dominant Anglo Americans and European immigrants. Furthermore, although individual initiative was important in the development of the West, individuals usually gave way to corporate interests, which had the capital necessary to undertake the expensive extraction of minerals, timber, and oil. In addition, the federal government, as owner of the western lands, encouraged the development of the area by actively aiding individuals and corporations through measures such as the Timber and Stone Act and the Newlands Reclamation Act.

As frontiers of opportunity were conquered in the West, the expansion of regional and transcontinental railroad lines—made possible by generous government subsidies—helped create a vast national marketplace. Besides providing nationwide economic opportunities to farmers and industrialists, the railroad altered concepts of time and space, gave rise to new communities, and brought technological reforms as well as organizational reforms that affected modern business practices.

Railroad expansion and Indian removal made possible the successful settlement and development of the farming and ranching frontiers. These frontiers shared the characteristics of the natural-resource frontier: use of public land for private enrichment; the importance of technological innovations to successful development; government promotion of settlement and development; the bowing of the individual to corporate interests; the emergence of a frontier folk culture, especially in relation to the ranching frontier; and contributions to urbanization and to national economic growth and expansion.

IDENTIFICATION AND SIGNIFICANCE

After studying Chapter 17 of *A People and a Nation*, you should be able to identify *and* explain fully the historical significance of each item listed below.

- Identify each item in the space provided. Give an explanation or description of the item. Answer the questions *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when*.
- Explain the historical significance of each item in the space provided. Establish the historical context in which the item exists. Establish the item as the result of or as the cause of other factors existing in the society under study. Answer this question: *What were the political, social, economic, and/or cultural consequences of this item?*

1. Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis