Ch 16 Lec Notes

Once the Civil War was over, many Americans went west, drawn by opportunities to reinvent themselves, own their own farms, escape persecution, and a host of other reasons. Once again, relationships with Native Americans took on great significance as these longtime residents of the West confronted migrants from the East.

One group of longtime residents were the Comanches, a nation of Plains Indians that was generally considered the most powerful in the years leading up to the Civil War. Indeed, like many Indian nations of the West, the Comanches welcomed the war as a way to redirect attention away from their people. Building a way of life based on buffalo hunting, alliances, wars, and trade, the Comanche empire in the early 1800s was considered equal in size and power to the United States. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Comanches had begun to decline, as the United States government and Texas Rangers enticed Comanche enemies into competing alliances. With U.S. troops diverted and divided by the Civil War, the Comanches were able to develop a new set of trading relationships with prosperous New Mexicans, called Comancheros. These trading relationships, which often included trade in people as well as stolen animals, proved a source of tension with the U.S. government, and resulted in the Medicine Lodge Creek Treaty of 1867, which provided for a Comanche reservation but also gave the Comanches the right to hunt on the open plains in Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). Expectations for how the Comanche would live their lives after the Treaty diverged almost immediately, with the U.S. government expecting the Indians to adopt a largely agricultural lifestyle, while the Comanche were intent on preserving their semi-nomadic existence, using the reservation as a winter camp and continuing their trading relationships with the Comancheros. After several unsuccessful peace efforts, the U.S. government used force to move the Comanches to a permanent reservation. Meanwhile, American buffalo hunters began to replace the Comanches as American industries found new uses for buffalo hides. By the 1870s, a fierce new Comanche leader, Quanah Parker, emerged, opposed to compromise and ready to use force if necessary. At the same time, a spiritual leader, Isa-Tai, urged the Comanches to repudiate white ways and end their trading relationships. It was a message that had been provided before, in other times by prophets of other Indian nations: Give up white ways, and the old way—in this case a life based on buffalo—would return. Joining with the Arapahoes to eliminate the white presence, the Comanches attacked. They were met by U.S. forces who destroyed the main Comanche camp, forcing the Indians to beg for food. For the next four decades, Quanah Parker became the principal chief of the Comanches and led them from warfare to ranching and farming. Just 27 when he initially surrendered, he ended up with his own car and telephone, traveled by train, and hunted with Theodore Roosevelt.

The Dine, or Navajos, were as warlike as the Comanches and occupied a large swath of New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas. In 1862, the U.S. Army arrived and attacked the Apaches and Navajos after finding that the Confederates had already fled. A year later, they had confined 400 Apaches at the reservation known as Bosque Redondo, and threatened the Navajos (a nation of about 10,000) with annihilation if they did not join them there. Troops led by Kit Carson marched through Navajo land, destroying orchards, crops, and livestock. Eventually, some 6000 Navajos surrendered. But the reservation at Bosque Redondo proved a failure. Traditional enemies, the Navajos and Apaches had little interest in cooperating with one another, and the arid land of the area could not support such a large population. The Comanches also took advantage of the reservation, attacking their own enemies. By 1868, a new agreement allowed the Navajos to return to a reservation in their own homeland. The Apaches were relocated to a new reservation in the 1870s and 1880s. The Navajo promised to stop raiding and returned to a pastoral lifestyle. In large part because of this decision, the size of the Navajo nation tripled between 1864 and 1900, an unusual experience for American Indians.

In California, Indian groups had already been decimated by the arrival of white settlers in the years following the gold rush and by previous decades of Spanish and Mexican rule. Although some reservations were created in Northern California, white settlers largely ignored them if they thought they could find gold or wanted the land. Many California Indians starved or were murdered by whites. In 1872, Kintpuash, a Modoc leader, led his people out of a reservation they shared with the Klamaths and Snakes and returned to their homelands on Lost River in California. Knowing the territory better than the U.S. Army allowed them to resist successfully for a time, but eventually the army won. Survivors were relocated in Indian Territory.

Many Indian nations during this period were themselves divided about how to deal with U.S. encroachment. Some sought accommodation with whites, attempting to live by the rules set out by the U.S. government on reservations. Others sought to take action against U.S. troops and settlers or tried to live independently away from U.S. settlements. The Nez Perce, who occupied parts of Oregon and Idaho, illustrated this division, with “progressives” agreeing to live on a large reservation while the “nonprogressives” refused. The nonprogressives, who were attempting to live independently, faced increased pressure from whites. Led by Chief Joseph, they began a long and tragic retreat eastward attempting to find sanctuary with the Crow or Sioux. Later, they turned north toward Canada, but were intercepted by the U.S. Army just forty miles short of the border. Chief Joseph’s famous speech upon his surrender “I am tired of fighting…I will fight no more forever” is considered a landmark document of American History.

Within the northern Great Plains, the Sioux were a powerful force. The Lakota Sioux fought some of the largest battles with the U.S. Army in the 1870s. After an 1866 attack on U.S. troops, the Lakota signed the Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868) promising to avoid war in exchange for the abandonment of three U.S. forts. A faction led by Sitting Bull derided the treaty as not protecting Sioux interests, and events less than a decade later proved him right. After gold was discovered in the Black Hills of South Dakota, the Sioux were ordered to leave their winter campgrounds. At the Little Bighorn River in 1876, General Armstrong Custer’s troops were surrounded by Sitting Bill with a larger force of Sioux and Cheyenne. None of the U.S. troops, including General Custer, survived, and the Battle of Little Bighorn became the stuff of legend, perhaps the most famous Indian victory. Less than a month later, U.S. forces under General Philip Sheridan attacked and defeated the Sioux, who were then broken up and forced to relocate to a series of smaller reservations. Some of the land that remained was deemed “surplus” and given to white settlers and miners.

By 1890, a new movement, the Ghost Dance, was sweeping through many Indian nations, including the Sioux. In many ways, it resembled earlier pan-Indian movements, calling for a rejection of white ways and a return to the lifestyle and prosperity of the ancient ones. Whites felt threatened by this movement, and the army was sent to the Pine Ridge reservation. After some refused to stop the dance, the army intervened, resulting in as many as 300 Indians killed in what became known as the Wounded Knee Massacre. It was the end of organized armed Indian resistance in the West.

The period after the Civil War was marked by increased white settlement in the West, thanks in part to the Homestead Act (1862) which promised 160 acres of land in the West to anyone who would live on the plot and farm it. Railroad companies had received huge land grants from state and federal government, and once the railroads were built, companies unloaded surplus land to settlers. As a result of the new pressures and tensions created by increased white settlement and the building of transcontinental and other railroad lines, federal policy toward Indian nations changed. U.S. Army units that had been fighting in the Civil War were now freed for service in the West; among these were segregated African American units known as “Buffalo Soldiers.” The presence of a large force that was capable of fighting Indians brought even more settlers to territory that had been controlled by Indians. Meanwhile, Congress created the Indian Peace Commission to negotiate treaties with Plains tribes, while developing the “reservation system” that would set aside pieces of land for Indian nations who would live apart from whites.

Although U.S. policy fluctuated throughout the late 19th century, the idea of assimilation to white culture was an important one, and it manifested in a number of different ways. Upon assuming the presidency in 1869, Ulysses S. Grant initiated a new Indian Peace Policy that sought to end the corruption in the Indian Bureau and to treat Indians with dignity. At the same time, he hoped to accommodate white settlement. Dealing with the current pressures in the West required Indian assimilation to white ways, Grant believed. He appointed Ely S. Parker as the first Native American Commissioner of Indian Affairs and used Christian missionaries to take the lead in managing reservations. He also declared reservations off limits to the army. But the results of “Grant’s Peace Policy” were mixed. Many Indians resented the confinement on reservations, where they often had to deal with inept agents and supplies that were slow to come. The army largely ignored the policy, often pursuing Indians into the very reservations they were supposed to protect.

By the 1880s, some white reformers believed that Indians would not be able to assimilate so long as they maintained their own ways on reservations. Once again, American identity was tied to land ownership, not by an Indian tribe or nation, but by individuals. The Dawes Act (1887) effectively ended the reservation system, dividing Indian lands into 160-acre tracts (the same lots provided by the Homestead Act) to be assigned to each Indian family who agreed to settle on it and farm. These families would also become U.S. citizens, and after 25 years, could sell their land to someone else. Although it was hailed as an enlightened piece of legislation, the Dawes Act helped to destroy Indian culture and tribal identity. At the same time, reservation land beyond the 160 acres required for each family was declared “surplus” and sold to whites. Just a few tribes, like the Navajos and Senecas, were able to avoid implementation of the Dawes Act and retained communal ownership.

Indian children were also sent to special boarding schools that would, reformers thought, help them to assimilate into mainstream American culture. Students were taught to speak in English only, dress like white Americans, and embrace Protestant Christianity. The Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania became the model for 25 Indian schools built between 1879 and 1902.

Much of the new pressure on the West stemmed from the consequences of railroad building. Dreams of a transcontinental railroad that would speed passengers and commerce from coast to coast had been building since the 1850s, interrupted for a time only by the Civil War. Indeed, it was Stephen Douglas’ hope for a transcontinental line through Illinois that had helped to spark his introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. Dreams became reality by the early 1860s, when the Central Pacific started building eastward from Sacramento and the Union Pacific westward from various terminals in Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri. These terminuses were already connected to several eastern railroad lines. The hard physical labor involved in railroad building was done mostly by Irish workers on the Union Pacific and Chinese workers on the Central Pacific. The meeting of the rails finally occurred in 1869, ushering in a new age of steam with far-reaching effects. By the 1890s, there were four transcontinental railroad lines stretching across the U.S., connecting to a broad railroad network that touched just about every town and city.

Technological innovations also helped to speed the railroads. George Westinghouse’s air brakes made trains safer and more efficient, as did new coupling systems that allowed train workers to hold on to their fingers—and lives—a little longer. Pullman sleeper cars meant passengers who could afford it could travel in style and relative comfort. A transcontinental trip in the 1870s took about ten days, compared to the six to eight weeks during the Gold Rush. Train networks also mandated more efficient methods of communication. Indeed, the railroads changed the conception of time itself, creating the four Time Zones that we know today in 1883. The railroads also boosted business, creating subsidiary industries that supported track and train construction. And the railroad network knitted the nation together in ways that had previously been thought impossible, creating national brands like Nabisco that would be recognizable in any community from coast to coast. Soon, the United States would be connected to a Pacific market of trade and commerce that was dependent upon goods coming across the country to ports along the Pacific coast. Now, the nation’s economy would be linked to the rise and fall of world markets. Whether it was a glut of wheat in Argentina or a drop in the value of silver in Japan, western farmers and eastern businessmen would feel the effects.

Tensions also developed in the West among the relatively new white settlers, who often found their interests at odds with one another. Farmers vied with cattle ranchers over the right to fence land, while longtime residents who had relied on vague property lines were put off by the new demand for precise lines. Outlaws and gunfighters existed on the margins, picking off the weak when they could and taking control of large amounts of cash—and sometimes the law—when they felt like it.

In Texas, cattle raising whites appeared in the 1850s and expanded greatly in the next two decades. Most cattle grazed on open land, officially owned by the federal government, but contested by various Indian nations. Unbranded cattle were considered free for the taking. In the meantime, huge ranches, like the King Ranch, which eventually expanded to well over a million acres, were beginning to take hold, bringing corporate sensibilities into areas once controlled by small ranchers. In the decades after the Civil War, Americans began to eat more beef, resulting in the founding of cattle towns like Abilene, Kansas, designed to be destinations for long cattle drives that would eventually allow beef in Texas to be consumed by a consummate New Yorker. At the cattle town, arriving cattle would be loaded onto transcontinental trains; the cowboys who herded them there would stay behind for a few days, helping these towns acquire a certain reputation for drunkenness and disorder. Although the golden age of the cowboy was not long, lasting only until about 1900, cowboys helped to contribute to the romantic legend of the West. Less romantic was the cowboys’ generally low pay and long hours. Cowboys came also from a variety of backgrounds; Nat Love, one of the most celebrated cowboys of the age, was African American, although this fact tended to be left out of the literature. Women, too, were drawn to these towns, many helping to relieve cowboys of their ready cash by working as prostitutes. For many women, prostitution was often the only way to survive and could be a route to independence. Few stayed in the business for very long.

In 1882, Gustavus Swift created a new fleet of refrigerated railroad cars that increased the demand for beef even further. The Chicago Union Stock Yards, where packinghouses like Swift, Armour, Morris, and Hammond dominated the industry, became the hub for feeding the world. The cattle industry changed as well, as larger ranchers sought to fence their cattle and at times hired gunfighters to force smaller ranchers from the area. Nature, too, could play a card; hard winters in the 1880s meant dead cattle and higher prices, while economic recessions meant that Americans back east were eating less beef. By the 1890s, advances in the care and feeding of cattle enabled a shift to smaller scale ranches to assure quality control. Cowboys were replaced by ranch families, where every member of the household contributed to the success of the enterprise.

Meanwhile, in the Southwest, people of Mexican descent brought their own conception of land ownership to view with that of the arriving Anglo-Americans. For Mexicanos, any land that was not specifically part of the home or irrigation system was held in common as open grazing land which all could use. This conflicted with the Anglo view of private ownership. When investors from the East Coast and Britain began buying up land and fencing it for their own cattle ranches, violence erupted. In New Mexico, a secret organization of Mexicanos called the White Caps cut fences, hoping to restore the open range. The territorial governor called in federal troops, yet many residents of the area were sympathetic with the fence cutters, many of whom eventually gained office in the territorial legislature. In Texas, where the white majority grew more rapidly, tensions were higher. Police power rested with the Texas Rangers, who frequently pursued Mexican Americans who challenged the existing power structure.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, more farmers came west. New farming techniques enabled farms in areas that had been incapable of supporting agriculture just a few years before. The farmers came from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds, including people of different faiths, different regions within the eastern U.S., immigrants from Europe and Mexico, former slaves, and Indians. Mormons settled in and around Salt Lake City in Utah, while special trains brought whole villages of Scandinavians and Germans places like Iowa. Black Americans hoping for a better life for themselves and their children joined the Kansas Exodus, some settling in all black towns and villages. Single women filed their own homestead claims, while railroad barons often arranged for settlements along their own rail lines. Between 1881 and 1885, 67,000 new settlers claimed homesteads in the “Great Dakota Land Boom.” Another boom went off in 1889, when the federal government declared a large swath of what had been Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma open to white settlement. By 1910, there were 6.4 million farms in the country, with a large number west of the Mississippi.

Still others came west in search of mineral wealth. Following the gold rush of 1849, gold and silver rushes had taken place in a number of other places. Silver was found along the Carson River in Nevada in 1859, and news of the Comstock Lode brought thousands of miners to the region. Others went to the Black Hills of South Dakota, despite its status as part of the Sioux reservation. An Irish immigrant in search of silver near Butte, Montana eventually found one of the richest deposits of copper in the world. New towns emerged nearly overnight whenever there was mining. Overwhelmingly male, they were often overwhelmed by the violence that erupted whenever there was a disagreement among the miners. Meanwhile, European-descent miners continued to drive Chinese and Mexican American miners from the fields. Eventually, though, mining came to be dominated by large corporations rather than by individuals, with jobs often divided by ethnicity.

During the late nineteenth century, much of the West was consumed by violence. Violence could take many forms, as the Indians fought with the U.S. Army, ranchers fought farmers or each other, miners fought at the drop of a hat, and outlaws exploited the tension with violence of their own. Gunfighters like Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp became legends of the West, but the person who did the most to create the legend was William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, who operated a highly successful “Wild West” show in the 1880s. Sitting Bull himself traveled with the show for a time, as did Annie Oakley, a sharpshooter who epitomized the “good” frontier woman. Shows like Cody’s helped to establish stereotypes of the West that would persist well into the twentieth century—the white cowboy, the taciturn Indian, the white army. (Annie Oakley actually never lived west of Ohio.)

As the population of the western territories increased, they applied for statehood. Kansas became a state in 1861, and six new states were admitted within months of each other in 1889 and 1890. While it was still a territory, Wyoming granted the 1200 women living there the right to vote, and allowed them to continue to exercise that right when it became a state in 1890. Colorado granted women the right to vote in 1893. Statehood was trickier in Utah, where the Mormon commitment to plural marriage horrified most people in the rest of the country. Eventually, in 1890, the Mormon Church announced the end of plural marriage and the territory received statehood in 1896. Issues of race delayed the admission of some states. Oklahoma had originally been reserved as Indian Territory, housing a number of nations relocated there from the East as a result of Andrew Jackson’s removal policies. Despite a push for partition of the area into Indian and white regions, Oklahoma was eventually admitted as a single state in 1907. The United States also balked at admitting territories with Mexican American majorities. Eventually, New Mexico and Arizona were admitted in 1912.