

# Tensions in the West

## 24.1 Introduction

In the spring of 1889, two women arrived at the Nez Percé **reservation** in Lapwai, Idaho. One of them, Jane Gay, had nursed soldiers during the Civil War. The other, Alice Fletcher, had been a leader in the growing movement for women's rights. Now a new cause had brought these women west. They wanted to improve the lives of Native Americans.

Gay and Fletcher were just two of the thousands of Americans who moved west after the Civil War. As you read in the last chapter, during this period politicians in the East were arguing over Reconstruction. Meanwhile, railroad builders, miners, ranchers, and farmers continued to push westward. In this chapter, you will read about how the settlers' dreams of freedom and opportunity clashed with the dreams of the Native Americans who already lived in the West.

The conflict between settlers and Indians was not just a fight over land. It was a conflict between two very different cultures and ways of seeing the world.

Jane Gay and Alice Fletcher discovered these deep differences soon after they arrived at Lapwai. Like other Indians, the Nez Percé had already been forced onto reservations to make way for new settlers. Now Fletcher told the Indians that the government wanted to divide the Lapwai Reservation into farm plots. Each family would receive one plot. Then the Nez Percé could live like other Americans.

The Indians listened in stony silence. Settlers might think of owning a plot of land as a way to be free. But to a Nez Percé, being tied to one spot of earth would be like being in jail.

Finally, one man spoke. "We do not cut up our land in little pieces," the Indian said. "We have not told you to do it. We are content to be as we are."

The Indian's words show why tensions were bound to develop between settlers and Native Americans. As you read about the Nez Percé and other Indian groups, you will see how the progress of the settlers meant the end of the Indians' ways of life.

## 24.2 The Nez Percé

For centuries, the Nez Percé freely roamed the lush mountains and valleys where Oregon, Washington, and Idaho come together today. Their name, which means "pierced nose" in French, was given to them by French explorers. The French had confused the Nez Percé with other Indians who decorated their noses with pieces of shell. In reality, the Nez Percé did not usually pierce their noses or wear nose ornaments.

When horses arrived in the Northwest in the 1700s, the Nez Percé became expert riders and horse breeders. They developed their own special breed known as the Appaloosa. These beautiful, spotted horses were fast, strong, and brave. The Nez Percé trained them to ride into stampeding buffalo herds and single out one animal for the kill.

The Nez Percé treasured their homeland and way of life. But in the years after the Civil War, more and more strangers arrived from the East to settle in the Pacific Northwest. The world of the Nez Percé would never be the same.

***Friendship with Whites*** For decades the Nez Percé were among the friendliest of all western Indians toward whites. In 1805, they saved Lewis and Clark and their expedition from starvation. They were also friendly with the first trappers, traders, and missionaries who came to the North-west. The Nez Percé had never killed a white person.

The friendship was finally broken by Americans' hunger for land and riches. In the 1860s, miners swarmed over Nez Percé land, looking for gold. Settlers followed. Some Nez Percé bands signed treaties in which they agreed to give up their land and move to the Lapwai Reservation in Idaho. Other bands refused to sign any treaty.

One of these "no treaty" bands lived in the Wallowa Valley of eastern Oregon. It was led by a man whose Indian name meant "Thunder Rolling in the Mountains." The newcomers called him Chief Joseph. In 1877, representatives of the United States government presented Chief Joseph with a terrible choice. You can give up your land peacefully and move to Lapwai, they told him, or else army troops will come and force you out.

Fearing a war he could not win, Chief Joseph agreed to move. "I would give up my country," he said, "rather than have the blood of white men upon the hands of my people."

***Blood Is Shed*** That summer, 700 Nez Percé left the Wallowa Valley, their hearts filled with bitterness. One night, a group of angry young warriors slipped out of camp and murdered several whites. Chief Joseph knew that the killings would bring soldiers to punish his people. For the first time, the Nez Percé would be at war with whites.

The soldiers came. Still hoping to avoid war, Indians carrying the white flag of peace came forward to talk. Foolishly, the troops opened fire anyway. Minutes later, 34 soldiers were dead. "I have been in lots of scrapes," reported a survivor, "but I never went up against anything like the Nez Percé in all my life."

***The Flight to Canada*** In desperation, the Nez Percé headed for the one place where they might still live free—Canada. For the next three months, Chief Joseph led the U.S. Army on a chase of more than 1,000 miles through rugged mountain country. Although greatly outnumbered, his warriors won several battles.

The chase ended less than 40 miles from the Canadian border. Forced to surrender, Chief Joseph spoke his heart in these words:

*I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed.... The old men are all dead.... It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills, and have no blankets, no food; no one knows where they are.... Hear me, my chiefs. I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.*

After their surrender, Chief Joseph and his followers were sent to a barren reservation in Oklahoma. There they began to fall sick and die. Soon they had a cemetery just for babies, with more than a hundred graves.

Chief Joseph begged the government to allow his people to join the rest of the Nez Percé in Lapwai. Although some did go to Lapwai, others, including Chief Joseph, were sent to the Colville Reservation in Washington. They never went back to their homeland. When the chief died in 1904, the doctor listed the cause of death as “a broken heart.”

### 24.3 New Interest in the West

Settlers had been gradually forcing Native Americans from their land ever since the first colonists arrived in North America. Still, by the start of the Civil War, the West was populated mostly by roaming Indians and huge herds of buffalo. Then, in 1861 and 1862, Congress passed two laws that stirred new interest in the West—the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railroad Act.

***The Homestead Act*** The Homestead Act offered farmers 160 acres of public land in the West for free. All the farmer, or **homesteader**, had to do was clear the land and farm it for five years. At the end of that time, the homesteader was given ownership of the land.

The impact of the new law was enormous. Year after year, the promise of free land drew hopeful homesteaders west. Between 1860 and 1910, the number of farms in the United States tripled from 2 million to more than 6 million.

***The Pacific Railroad Act*** The Pacific Railroad Act called for the building of a **transcontinental railroad** to link the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. This huge construction project was given to two railroad companies, the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific.

To help the railroad companies pay for the project, Congress gave them **subsidies** in the form of sections of free land for every mile of track they laid. Later, the railroads could sell this land to settlers. The government also loaned the two companies more than \$60 million.

The Pacific Railroad Act kicked off the greatest period of railroad construction in the nation’s history. By 1900, the railroads had laid 170,000 miles of track, much of it in the West. “Rail barons” like the Central Pacific’s Leland Stanford and Charles Crocker made vast fortunes.

Railroads opened the West to a flood of new settlers. The newcomers included farmers and ranchers, prospectors and preachers, schemers and dreamers, and more than a few crooks. But most were ordinary folk who dreamed of a new start. For them, the West was a place where a lot of hard work and a little luck could make their dreams come true.

### 24.4 The Railroad Builders

The plan for building a transcontinental railroad looked simple enough on paper. The Union Pacific would start in Nebraska and build tracks westward across the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. Meanwhile, the Central Pacific would start in California and lay tracks eastward across the Sierra Nevada mountains and the Great Basin. The two lines would meet somewhere in between the starting points. The company that laid the most track would get more land, more loans, and more profits.

Laying track was hard work. First the surveyors studied the land and chose the route for the tracks. They were followed by the graders, who prepared the land. Armed with picks and shovels, the graders cut through hills and filled up valleys to make the route as level as possible.

Next came the tracklayers. They put down wooden ties and hauled in heavy iron rails. One rail weighed 700 pounds, and there were 400 rails in each mile of track. Last came the spikers. The spikers nailed the rails to the ties with spikes—ten spikes per rail, three hammer blows for every spike.

***The Union Pacific Builds West*** The Union Pacific got off to a slow start. Then, in 1866, a former Civil War general named Grenville Dodge took charge of construction. Dodge had built railroads before the war, and, as a military officer, he knew how to lead men. Now he commanded an army of 10,000 workers. Most of them were Irish immigrants who were fleeing the slums of eastern cities. They were joined by other immigrants, ex-soldiers, Mexicans, and freed slaves. All were young men who needed jobs and craved adventure. Most of all, they hoped to start new lives in the open spaces of the West.

By 1867, Dodge's crews were laying as much as seven miles of track a day across the plains. The workers lived in tent cities that followed the tracks west. These portable towns were tough, often dangerous places. A reporter wrote, "Not a day passes but a dead body is found somewhere in the vicinity with pockets rifled of their contents."

For the Plains Indians, the railroad was an invasion of their homeland. They watched in anger as millions of buffalo were slaughtered, destroying their main source of food. Warriors attacked the work crews and derailed supply trains by prying up sections of track. Grenville Dodge demanded military help, and soon he had 5,000 troops guarding his crews as they inched their way west.

***The Central Pacific Builds East*** In California, the Central Pacific Railroad faced different problems. Soon after the company began laying track, many of the workers dashed off to newly discovered silver mines in Nevada. Construction practically stopped.

In desperation, Charles Crocker, the head of construction, hired 50 Chinese workers. He doubted that the Chinese were big enough to do heavy construction. On average, they weighed just 110 pounds. But the Chinese surprised him. They could do as much work in a day as any other crew, and often more.

Crocker was so impressed that he sent agents to China to hire more Chinese workers. The agents were lucky. War and unrest had driven millions of Chinese into poverty and debt. Young men jumped at the chance of going to America to build a railroad. Most of them planned to save their money and return to China as wealthy men.

More than 12,000 Chinese laborers worked for the Central Pacific. They cleared trees, shoveled dirt, blasted tunnels, and laid tracks. At least 1,000 Chinese workers lost their lives in explosions, snow slides, and other accidents. Despite these losses, the workers managed to lay up to ten miles of track in a day.

***The Two Lines Meet*** On May 10, 1869, the two lines met at Promontory Point, Utah. A golden spike was driven in to complete the 1,800 miles of track. In time, a network of railroads would bring new settlers, encourage construction of towns and cities, and allow mail and supplies to be shipped clear across the country.

The Chinese workers, who had contributed so much to building the railroad, were not acknowledged at the celebration. Their reward for years of hard work was to lose their jobs. A few of them fulfilled their dream of returning to China. But most stayed on in America, helping to build new farms and businesses across the West.

## **24.5 The 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. By 1874, gold or silver had been found in California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Montana, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico.

***Boomtowns and Ghost Towns*** Mining in the West followed a predictable pattern. First came the discovery of gold or silver. Soon fortune seekers from around the world flocked to the site. Almost overnight, mining camps mushroomed into fast-growing settlements called boomtowns.

Newspaper reporter J. Ross Browne described the birth of one such town, Gila City, in present-day Arizona:

*Enterprising men hurried to the spot with barrels of whiskey and billiards tables.... Traders crowded in with wagons of pork and beans. Gamblers came with cards.... There was everything in Gila City within a few months but a church and a jail.*

These instant towns had no government, no law, and little order. Robbery and murder were common. Honest miners fought back by forming "vigilance committees" to control crime. The members of these committees, called vigilantes, handed out quick justice. A suspected murderer might be arrested, tried, convicted, and hanged all in the same day. If asked about their methods, the vigilantes pointed out that there were no courts or jails nearby. And no miner had time to waste guarding criminals.

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

***Mining Changes the West*** In many ways, mining was destructive. It damaged the land and displaced many Native Americans. But most Americans saw mining as a source of wealth and opportunity. Some boomtowns, like Reno and Denver, survived to become prosperous cities. Mining also opened up the West's mountains and deserts to other settlers. Some were businesspeople who invested in the heavy equipment needed to extract hard-to-find ore from western mountains. Others were farmers and ranchers. These were the people who would turn lonely territories into new western states.

## **24.6 Ranchers and Cowboys**

A third group of settlers in the West 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 plains of Texas. The longhorns got their name from their impressive horns, which could measure more than seven feet from tip to tip. The market for all this beef was the crowded cities of the East. Cattle worth \$3 a head in Texas might be sold for \$50 in New York or Chicago. The problem was how to transport the cattle to the cities. This challenge was complicated by the presence of angry Indians and stampeding buffalo herds.

***The Extermination of the Buffalo*** The railroads made the ranchers' task much easier. As the railroads moved onto the Great Plains, buffalo hunters followed. The hunters killed huge numbers of buffalo for their hides and bones, which were shipped by rail for sale in the East.

The Plains Indians depended on the buffalo for food. They were horrified by the slaughter. So were some other Americans. In 1874, Congress passed a bill outlawing the killing of more buffalo than could be used for food. But President Grant refused to sign the bill into law. General Philip Sheridan supported Grant's decision. "You ought to give each hunter a medal," he said. "Let them kill, skin and sell until the buffalo are exterminated [wiped out]. Then your prairies can be covered with cattle and the cowboy."

By 1880, the buffalo had all but vanished. With their food gone, the Plains Indians had little choice but to move to reservations. The plains were now open to ranchers and their cattle.

***The "Long Drive"*** The railroads also solved the ranchers' transportation problem. In 1867, Joseph McCoy built a stockyard next to the railroad in Abilene, Kansas. A stockyard is a large holding pen where cattle are kept temporarily. That summer, cowboys herded a few thousand cattle from Texas to the Abilene stockyard, in what they called the "long drive." There the cattle were loaded into boxcars and shipped east. Over the next 20 years, cowboys drove more than 5 million cattle to Abilene and other "cow towns" beside the rails.

Being a cowboy was dangerous and low-paying work. Still, life on the trail attracted many young adventurers. Most were Texans. About a third were of Mexican or African American heritage. Rarely, however, were black cowboys promoted to trail boss. Jim Perry, for example, was an expert rider, roper, and trail cook. He once said, "If it weren't for my damned old black face, I'd have been a boss long ago."

During the long drive, cowboys worked 17 hours a day, seven days a week, for three to four months. Much of the work was boring—except for moments of terror when a herd stampeded. By the time they reached the end of the trail, most cowboys were ready for rowdy fun, including drinking, gambling, and brawling. That made the cow towns wild, noisy, and often dangerous places.

The most notorious cow town was Dodge City in Kansas. An eastern newspaper described it as "a wicked little town." Between 1872 and 1878, 64 victims of gunfights were buried on the hill above the town. Later, several graves were dug up to make way for a new school. The gravediggers turned up a fine collection of skeletons, most still wearing their cowboy boots. To this day, the Dodge City cemetery is known as Boot Hill.

***The End of the "Long Drive"*** After growing rapidly for 20 years, the cattle industry collapsed in 1887. The winter of 1886–1887 was the worst that anyone could remember. January was so cold that one cowboy described his life as "hell without the heat." Whole herds of cattle froze to death. Ranchers called that terrible winter the "Great Die-Up." Many of them lost everything. The survivors reduced their herds and fenced their grazing lands. They built barns and raised hay so that they could shelter and feed their animals in winter. The days of the long drive were over. Wild cow towns became civilized ranching centers. Adventuresome cowboys settled down to work as ranch hands.

The cattlemen's glory years faded into the past. Still, they had much to be proud of. They had opened the Great Plains to settlement. And they had created an industry that remains an important part of life in the West today.

## **24.7 The Homesteaders**

Farmers followed the ranchers onto the Great Plains. For half a century, the plains had been viewed as too dry for farming. Mapmakers labeled the area the "Great American Desert." Then in the 1870s, a few homesteaders plowed and planted the grassland. They were lucky. These were years of plentiful rain, and their fields yielded fine crops.

The western railroads and land dealers made the most of this good luck. Maybe the plains used to be too dry for farming, they said, but not any more. Some even said that rain had followed the rails west. “The increase of railroads,” wrote a Colorado journalist, “has the...effect of producing more showers.” Others gave farming the credit for the wet years, claiming that “rain follows the plow.”

***The Homesteaders Arrive*** Rain might not follow the rails or the plow, but a rush of new settlers did. By 1900, some 500,000 homesteaders had moved onto the Great Plains. Many were farm families from the East who were lured west by the promise of free or cheap land. Some were former slaves looking for a new start in freedom. Tens of thousands of European immigrants also settled the plains. While most of them were seeking land, one group, Russian Mennonites, came looking for religious freedom.

***Farming the Dry Plains*** 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. Other years clouds of locusts, or large grasshoppers, swept across the plains, eating everything in their path. In addition, the plains had few trees, so there was little wood for homes.

Over time, the homesteaders solved these problems. Instead of using wood, they built houses out of chunks of sod (mats of soil held together by grassy roots). They used windmills to pump water from deep in the ground. They learned how to plow deeply to reach moist soil. The Mennonites introduced a type of winter wheat that thrived on the plains. With hard work and the right crop, homesteaders made the Great Plains the most productive wheat-growing region in the world.

## **24.8 War on the Plains**

The flow of miners, ranchers, and farmers to the West compelled a change in federal policy toward Native Americans. Under the Indian Removal Act of 1830, Native Americans had been promised lands in the Great Plains in exchange for giving up their homelands in the East. By the mid-1800s, whites were pushing deep into this “Indian Territory.” A number of small wars raged as Indians resisted the tide of settlement. More and more, government officials saw Indians as standing in the way of the agricultural and industrial development of the West.

In 1867, Congress tried to separate Indians and settlers by moving the Indians onto reservations. In exchange for their land, the Native Americans were promised food, farm tools, and schools where their children would learn to “live like whites.”

The new policy was backed up by force. The U.S. Army was authorized to round up Indians and keep them on reservations.

Many Native Americans fought this effort to take away their land and change their way of life. In the 1870s, the wars on the plains would settle the issue once and for all.

***Reservation Life*** The nomadic Plains peoples hated the idea of being penned up on a reservation. A Sioux chief named Sitting Bull spoke for many Indians when he said:

*I will remain what I am until I die, a hunter, and when there are no buffalo or other game I will send my children to hunt and live on prairie mice, for when an Indian is shut in one place, his body becomes weak.*

Despite Sitting Bull’s words, the buffalo were disappearing, and most Plains Indians had little choice but to move to reservations. Once they did, however, the promised food often failed to arrive. Sometimes dishonest Indian agents sold it to settlers instead. Often the food was spoiled by the time it reached the Indians.

Hungry and unhappy with reservation life, many warriors left the reservations to look for game or to attack settlers. When they did, they were hunted down by army troops.

General George Crook sympathized with the Indians. “I do not wonder that when these Indians see their wives and children starving they go to war,” he wrote. “And then we are sent out to kill. It is an outrage.”

***The Battle of the Little Big Horn*** The most famous battle in this long struggle was fought near the Little Big Horn River in present-day Montana. The Battle of the Little Big Horn soon came to be known by another name—Custer’s Last Stand.

The trouble began when soldiers led by Indian fighter George Custer found gold in the Black Hills of Dakota Territory. Within months, 15,000 gold-hungry whites were swarming over Sioux land. Rather than remove the miners, the government demanded that the Sioux sell the Black Hills. The Sioux refused. “I never want to leave this country,” a leader named Wolf Necklace told the government agents. “All my relatives are lying here in the ground, and when I fall to pieces I am going to fall to pieces here.”

The army was ordered to force the Indians out. In June 1876, army scouts reported that several thousand Sioux and Cheyenne were camped beside the Little Big Horn River. Custer was ordered to locate the camp and then wait for reinforcements.

Once Custer spotted the Indian camp, however, he decided to attack at once. The attack ended in disaster. Custer split up his troops, and the group that he led suddenly found itself surrounded by angry warriors.

The battle, one warrior said, lasted no longer than a hungry man needs to eat his dinner. In those few minutes, Custer and all his men—about 260 soldiers—were killed.

Angry whites called the battle a massacre. Over the next few months, the army tracked down the Sioux and Cheyenne and forced them onto reservations. Ignoring earlier treaties, Congress took the Black Hills and another 40 million acres of land away from the Sioux.

By 1887, most Native American peoples had been moved onto reservations. Never again would Indians roam freely across the West.

## **24.9 Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, you read about the tensions that developed between settlers and Native Americans in the West after the Civil War. You used an illustration of a buffalo hide to record information about four groups of settlers and their impact on the West's native peoples.

As settlers moved west, Native Americans were pushed off their lands and onto reservations. When Indians like the Nez Percé resisted, soldiers were sent to move them by force.

During the Civil War, the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railway Act aroused new interest in the West. The completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 opened the West to a flood of new settlers.

Much of the West was first explored by miners seeking gold and silver. The railroads helped ranchers and cowboys introduce large-scale cattle ranching to the Great Plains. Homesteaders turned the Great Plains into the most productive wheat-producing region in the world.

The wars between settlers, soldiers, and Plains Indians came to a head in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. The Indians won the battle, but soon afterward the Sioux and Cheyenne were forced onto reservations.

The settling of the West helped to make the United States one of the world's largest and wealthiest countries. In the next chapter, you will learn how the rise of big business created new opportunities and problems for workers, immigrants, and politicians from east to west.