Changes on the Western Frontier

The Western Frontier
1858-1896
As the country was expanding and moving westward, Native American lands and lifestyle were shrinking.
The Depletion of Native Lands

Maps showing the depletion of Native lands from 1850 to 1990.
The US Government wanted Native Americans to assimilate (give up their beliefs and become part of the American way of life).

Dawes Act in 1887

- Wanted to “Americanize” Native Americans by distributing reservation land to individual owners.
- Natives did not believe in land ownership.
Would Natives want to be like a group of people who were destroying their way of life?
Native Americans were pushed further west and told that was their new land.

- Destruction of the Buffalo.
- 1874 Colonel George A. Custer found gold in the Black Hills of South Dakota which started a gold rush challenging Native lands again.
- In 1876 Sitting Bull had a vision of an American attack.
  - Gathered Sioux warriors at Little Big Horn and attacked when Col. Custer arrived with troops.
    - Custer and all of his men were killed.
    - Sitting Bull eventually surrendered.
In 1890 American troops gathered a group of Sioux and took them to Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota.

Troops demanded the Natives’ weapons. A shot was fired (from who?) and the soldiers opened fire.

- In minutes troops slaughtered 300 unarmed Sioux including women and children. The corpses were left on the freezing ground.
- This battle brought the Indian Wars to an end.
Cattle and Cowboys

- The lifestyle of the cowboy was beginning in the west.
  - Not glamorous; hard work
- Americans learned cowboy skills from the Spanish and Mexicans.
- They herded Texas Longhorns (brought to Mexico by the Spanish) for the growing demand for beef.
End of the Open Range

- As cattle turned into big business, cattle herding began to decline.
  - Overgrazing land.
  - Bad weather wiped out herds.
  - Barbed wire fence (invented by Joseph Glidden) created fenced in ranches.
    - Also used by farmers who did not want cattle eating their crops.
  - Ranchers turned to smaller herds of high grade stock that would yield more meat per animal.
Legends of the West

- **James Butler “Wild Bill” Hickok**
  - Spy during the Civil War
  - Was shot while playing poker
  - Never worked with cattle

- **Martha Jane Burke “Calamity Jane”**
  - Sharpshooter
  - Dressed like a man
  - Never worked with cattle
Settling the Great Plains

As ranches are being established and transcontinental railroads are aiding westward expansion, the government is helping people move west.
Transcontinental Railroads
Great Plains
In 1862 Congress passed the Homestead Act

- 160 acres of land for free to any US citizen.
- In 1889 - land giveaway in Oklahoma.
- In less than a day 2 million acres of land were claimed.
- Some people took the land sooner than they were supposed to (before the government allowed it). Oklahoma became known as the “Sooner State.”
Homestead Act of 1862

Note: Alaska was not a state until 1959
As settlers took Western land, Henry Washington and Nathaniel Langford asked Congress to help protect the wilderness from settlement.

Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872.

Later the Department of the Interior forced railroads to give up their Western land holdings.

The country no longer had a continuous frontier.
Western settlers faced hardships.
- Droughts, floods, blizzards, fires, locust plagues, Native Americans.

Trees were scarce in the West so most homes were made from the land.
- Dugout
- Soddy=sod home
Life in the West

- Homesteaders had to be self-sufficient.
- Women worked with men to build a life.
- Women’s roles:
  - Plow fields
  - Make clothes, soap, candles
  - Haul water
  - Can food
  - Medical aid
  - Church, school
1837-John Deere invented a steel plow that could get through heavy soil.

New technologies were developing to make agriculture easier.
- Were expensive
- Cut working time down
- Made more grain available for a wider market (became known as the Breadbasket)

Morrill Act of 1862 & 1890= Gave federal land to use for agricultural colleges.
Farmers in Debt

- Large farms needed to grow a large amount of crops to sell and make a profit.
- Machinery was expensive and often put farmers into debt.
- The debt was difficult to pay off due to:
  - Falling wheat prices
  - Drought and/or lack of crop rotation
  - High railroad shipping costs
  - Retired Greenbacks and increased value of paper money backed by gold.
Farmers’ Alliances

- Farmers were being taken advantage of by railroad companies who were overcharging to transport grain.

- Farmers began to join together for a solution to their financial problem.

- Organizations such as the Farmers’ Alliances sent lecturers to town to educate people about agricultural and rural issues. They wanted support.
Populism

- Populism = 19th century political movement demanding that people have a greater voice in government and seeking to advance the interests of farmers and laborers.

- Start of the Populist Party
  - Had representatives as senators, governors and state legislators
  - Populist programs eventually became the platform for the Democratic Party.
  - Thought government should be responsible for reforming social injustices.
During the Civil War the government issued greenbacks as a form of currency.
- It was retired shortly after the war.
- All other paper money was backed by gold or silver.
- The government’s gold supply was low while trying to purchase silver.
- People panicked and traded their paper money for gold.
  - Stock prices fell.
  - Price of silver plunged because everyone wanted gold.
  - By the end of the year over 15,000 business and 500 banks collapsed.
  - Wages dropped and people were unemployed and hungry.
The Silver v. Gold debate greatly influenced the Presidential Election of 1897.

Democratic Nominee, William Jennings Bryan.
- Compromised on the Gold and Silver standard, with unlimited coinage of silver.
  - This compromise was for the Populists.
- Democrats=Farmers and laborers in the agrarian South and West.

Republican Nominee, William McKinley.
- Gold standard – All currency backed by gold.
- President Cleveland supported this idea.
- Republicans=Business owners and bankers of the industrialized Northeast.
McKinley had thousands of well-known people campaigning for him all over the country while Bryan had little funding and was not widely known.

With McKinley’s election, populism collapsed.

This movement left two legacies:

- Oppressed people could have a political impact.
- It introduced ideas for an agenda of reforms for the 20th century.