



Railroads made the settlement and growth of the West possible. By the late nineteenth century, maps of the Midwest were filled with advertisements touting how quickly a traveler could traverse the country. The *Environment and Society* Portal, a digital project from the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, a joint initiative of LMU Munich and the Deutsches Museum.

As one booster put it, “the West is purely a railroad enterprise.” No economic enterprise rivaled the railroads in scale, scope, or sheer impact. No other businesses had attracted such enormous sums of capital, and no other ventures ever received such lavish government subsidies (business historian Alfred Chandler called the railroads the “first modern business enterprise”).¹⁸ By “annihilating time and space”—by connecting the vastness of the continent—the railroads transformed the United States and made the American West.

No railroad enterprise so captured the American imagination—or federal support—as the transcontinental railroad. The transcontinental railroad crossed western plains and mountains and linked the West Coast with the rail networks of the eastern United States. Constructed from the west by the Central Pacific and from the east by the Union Pacific, the two roads were linked in Utah in 1869 to great national fanfare. But such a herculean task was not easy, and national legislators threw enor-

mous subsidies at railroad companies, a part of the Republican Party platform since 1856. The 1862 Pacific Railroad Act gave bonds of between \$16,000 and \$48,000 for each mile of construction and provided vast land grants to railroad companies. Between 1850 and 1871 alone, railroad companies received more than 175,000,000 acres of public land, an area larger than the state of Texas. Investors reaped enormous profits. As one congressional opponent put it in the 1870s, “If there be profit, the corporations may take it; if there be loss, the Government must bear it.”¹⁹

If railroads attracted unparalleled subsidies and investments, they also created enormous labor demands. By 1880, approximately four hundred thousand men—or nearly 2.5 percent of the nation’s entire workforce—labored in the railroad industry. Much of the work was dangerous and low-paying, and companies relied heavily on immigrant labor to build tracks. Companies employed Irish workers in the early nineteenth century and Chinese workers in the late nineteenth century. By 1880, over two hundred thousand Chinese migrants lived in the United States. Once the rails were laid, companies still needed a large workforce to keep the trains running. Much railroad work was dangerous, but perhaps the most hazardous work was done by brakemen. Before the advent of automatic braking, an engineer would blow the “down brake” whistle and brakemen would scramble to the top of the moving train, regardless of the weather conditions, and run from car to car manually turning brakes. Speed was necessary, and any slip could be fatal. Brakemen were also responsible for coupling the cars, attaching them together with a large pin. It was easy to lose a hand or finger and even a slight mistake could cause cars to collide.²⁰

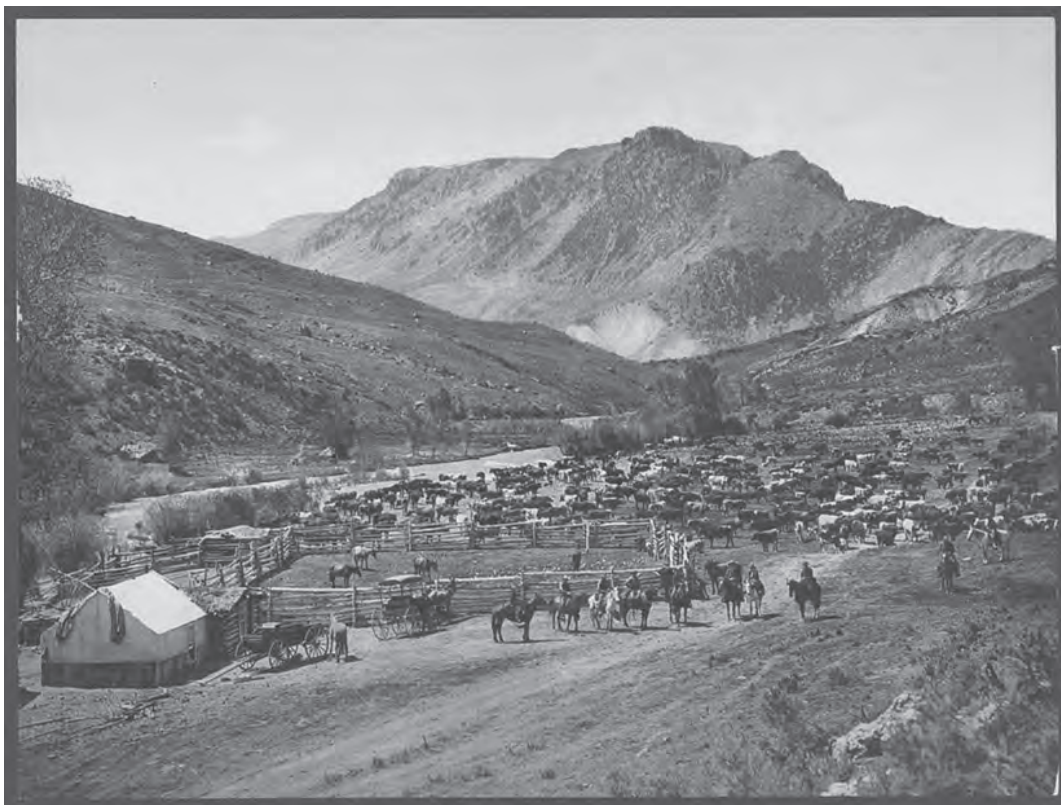
The railroads boomed. In 1850, there were 9,000 miles of railroads in the United States. In 1900 there were 190,000, including several transcontinental lines.²¹ To manage these vast networks of freight and passenger lines, companies converged rails at hub cities. Of all the Midwestern and western cities that blossomed from the bridging of western resources and eastern capital in the late nineteenth century, Chicago was the most spectacular. It grew from two hundred inhabitants in 1833 to over a million by 1890. By 1893 it and the region from which it drew were completely transformed. The World’s Columbian Exposition that year trumpeted the city’s progress and broader technological progress, with typical Gilded Age ostentation. A huge, gleaming (but temporary) “White City” was built in neoclassical style to house all the features of the fair and cater to the needs of the visitors who arrived from all over



the world. Highlighted in the title of this world's fair were the changes that had overtaken North America since Columbus made landfall four centuries earlier. Chicago became the most important western hub and served as the gateway between the farm and ranch country of the Great Plains and eastern markets. Railroads brought cattle from Texas to Chicago for slaughter, where they were then processed into packaged meats and shipped by refrigerated rail to New York City and other eastern cities. Such hubs became the central nodes in a rapid-transit economy that increasingly spread across the entire continent linking goods and people together in a new national network.

This photochrom print depicts a cattle roundup in Cimarron, Colorado, a crossroads of the late-nineteenth-century cattle drives. Detroit Photographic Co., c. 1898. Library of Congress.

This national network created the fabled cattle drives of the 1860s and 1870s. The first cattle drives across the central Plains began soon after the Civil War. Railroads created the market for ranching, and for the few years after the war that railroads connected eastern markets with important market hubs such as Chicago, but had yet to reach Texas ranchlands, ranchers began driving cattle north, out of the Lone Star state, to major railroad terminuses in Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska. Ranchers used well-worn trails, such as the Chisholm Trail, for drives, but conflicts



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arose with Native Americans in the Indian Territory and farmers in Kansas who disliked the intrusion of large and environmentally destructive herds onto their own hunting, ranching, and farming lands. Other trails, such as the Western Trail, the Goodnight-Loving Trail, and the Shawnee Trail, were therefore blazed.

Cattle drives were difficult tasks for the crews of men who managed the herds. Historians estimate the number of men who worked as cowboys in the late-nineteenth century to be between twelve thousand and forty thousand. Perhaps a fourth were African American, and more were likely Mexican or Mexican American. Much about the American cowboys evolved from Mexican *vaqueros*: cowboys adopted Mexican practices, gear, and terms such as *rodeo*, *bronco*, and *lasso*.

While most cattle drivers were men, there are at least sixteen verifiable accounts of women participating in the drives. Some, like Molly Dyer Goodnight, accompanied their husbands. Others, like Lizzie Johnson Williams, helped drive their own herds. Williams made at least three known trips with her herds up the Chisholm Trail.



Cowboys such as the one pictured here, c. 1888, worked the cattle drives that supplied the meatpacking industry in Chicago and other midwestern cities. Their work was obsolete by the turn of the century, yet their image lived on through the romanticization of the West in American popular culture. Library of Congress.

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Many cowboys hoped one day to become ranch owners themselves, but employment was insecure and wages were low. Beginners could expect to earn around \$20–\$25 per month, and those with years of experience might earn \$40–\$45. Trail bosses could earn over \$50 per month. And it was tough work. On a cattle drive, cowboys worked long hours and faced extremes of heat and cold and intense blowing dust. They subsisted on limited diets with irregular supplies.²²

But if workers of cattle earned low wages, owners and investors could receive riches. At the end of the Civil War, a steer worth \$4 in Texas could fetch \$40 in Kansas. Although profits slowly leveled off, large profits could still be made. And yet, by the 1880s, the great cattle drives were largely done. The railroads had created them, and the railroads ended them: railroad lines pushed into Texas and made the great drives obsolete. But ranching still brought profits and the Plains were better suited for grazing than for agriculture, and western ranchers continued supplying beef for national markets.

Ranching was just one of many western industries that depended on the railroads. By linking the Plains with national markets and rapidly moving people and goods, the railroads made the modern American West.

VI. The Allotment Era and Resistance in the Native West

As the rails moved into the West, and more and more Americans followed, the situation for Native groups deteriorated even further. Treaties negotiated between the United States and Native groups had typically promised that if tribes agreed to move to specific reservation lands, they would hold those lands collectively. But as American westward migration mounted and open lands closed, white settlers began to argue that Indians had more than their fair share of land, that the reservations were too big, that Indians were using the land “inefficiently,” and that they still preferred nomadic hunting instead of intensive farming and ranching.

By the 1880s, Americans increasingly championed legislation to allow the transfer of Indian lands to farmers and ranchers, while many argued that allotting Indian lands to individual Native Americans, rather than to tribes, would encourage American-style agriculture and finally put Indians who had previously resisted the efforts of missionaries and federal officials on the path to “civilization.”

Passed by Congress on February 8, 1887, the Dawes General Allotment Act splintered Native American reservations into individual family homesteads. Each head of a Native family was to be allotted 160 acres, the



typical size of a claim that any settler could establish on federal lands under the provisions of the Homestead Act. Single individuals over age eighteen would receive an eighty-acre allotment, and orphaned children received forty acres. A four-year timeline was established for Indian peoples to make their allotment selections. If at the end of that time no selection had been made, the act authorized the secretary of the interior to appoint an agent to make selections for the remaining tribal members. To protect Indians from being swindled by unscrupulous land speculators, all allotments were to be held in trust—they could not be sold by allottees—for twenty-five years. Lands that remained unclaimed by tribal members after allotment would revert to federal control and be sold to American settlers.²³

Americans touted the Dawes Act as an uplifting humanitarian reform, but it upended Indian lifestyles and left Indian groups without sovereignty over their lands. The act claimed that to protect Indian property rights, it was necessary to extend “the protection of the laws of the United States . . . over the Indians.” Tribal governments and legal principles could be superseded, or dissolved and replaced, by U.S. laws. Under the terms of the Dawes Act, Native groups struggled to hold on to some measure of tribal sovereignty.

The stresses of conquest unsettled generations of Native Americans. Many took comfort from the words of prophets and holy men. In Nevada, on January 1, 1889, Northern Paiute prophet Wovoka experienced a great revelation. He had traveled, he said, from his earthly home in western Nevada to heaven and returned during a solar eclipse to prophesy to his people. “You must not hurt anybody or do harm to anyone. You must not fight. Do right always,” he exhorted. And they must, he said, participate in a religious ceremony that came to be known as the Ghost Dance. If the people lived justly and danced the Ghost Dance, Wovoka said, their ancestors would rise from the dead, droughts would dissipate, the whites in the West would vanish, and the buffalo would once again roam the Plains.

Native American prophets had often confronted American imperial power. Some prophets, including Wovoka, incorporated Christian elements like heaven and a Messiah figure into indigenous spiritual traditions. And so, though it was far from unique, Wovoka’s prophecy nevertheless caught on quickly and spread beyond the Paiutes. From across the West, members of the Arapaho, Bannock, Cheyenne, and Shoshone nations, among others, adopted the Ghost Dance religion. Perhaps the most avid Ghost Dancers—and certainly the most famous—were the Lakota Sioux.



Red Cloud and American Horse—two of the most renowned Oglala chiefs—are seen clasping hands in front of a tipi on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Both men served as delegates to Washington, D.C., after years of actively fighting the American government. John C. Grabill, “‘Red Cloud and American Horse.’ The two most noted chiefs now living,” 1891. Library of Congress.



The Lakota Sioux were in dire straits. South Dakota, formed out of land that had once belonged by treaty to the Lakotas, became a state in 1889. White homesteaders had poured in, reservations were carved up and diminished, starvation set in, corrupt federal agents cut food rations, and drought hit the Plains. Many Lakotas feared a future as the landless subjects of a growing American empire when a delegation of eleven men, led by Kicking Bear, joined Ghost Dance pilgrims on the rails westward to Nevada and returned to spread the revival in the Dakotas.

The energy and message of the revivals frightened Indian agents, who began arresting Indian leaders. Then Chief Sitting Bull and with several other whites and Indians, were killed in December 1890 during a botched arrest, convincing many bands to flee the reservations to join the fugitive bands farther west, where Lakota adherents of the Ghost Dance were preaching that the Ghost Dancers would be immune to bullets.

Two weeks later, an American cavalry unit intercepted a band of 350 Lakotas, including over 100 women and children, under Chief Spotted Elk (later known as Bigfoot). They were escorted to Wounded Knee Creek, where they camped for the night. The following morning, December 29, the American cavalrymen entered the camp to disarm Spot-



ted Elk's band. Tensions flared, a shot was fired, and a skirmish became a massacre. The Americans fired their heavy weaponry indiscriminately into the camp. Two dozen cavalymen had been killed by the Lakotas' concealed weapons or by friendly fire, but when the guns went silent, between 150 and 300 Native men, women, and children were dead.²⁴

Wounded Knee marked the end of sustained, armed Native American resistance in the West. Individuals continued to resist the pressures of assimilation and preserve traditional cultural practices, but sustained military defeats, the loss of sovereignty over land and resources, and the onset of crippling poverty on the reservations marked the final decades of the nineteenth century as a particularly dark era for America's western tribes. But for Americans, it became mythical.

Burial of the dead after the massacre of Wounded Knee. South Dakota, 1891. Library of Congress.

VII. Rodeos, Wild West Shows, and the Mythic American West

"The American West" conjures visions of tipis, cabins, cowboys, Indians, farm wives in sunbonnets, and outlaws with six-shooters. Such images pervade American culture, but they are as old as the West itself: novels,