

Point of View of the West



In 1840 only about 4% of Americans lived in the western territories. But brave trailblazers and pioneers were moving west into untamed territories in greater numbers in the later 1800s. Newly completed canals, roads, and railroads helped to push territorial expansion.

Free land was a pull factor, too. Settlers could usually get about 160 acres for free if they farmed it 5 years, or they could pay \$1.25 an acre. Over time, people found that the western or plains area was excellent for farming wheat and grazing cattle. The new steel plow, the mechanical reaper, and other new farm equipment helped the small farmer manage large fields and grow more crops. The farmers grew vegetables, wheat, hay, corn, apples, and other fruits.

Besides farming, there were people moving west who were miners, railroad workers, ranchers or small business owners. People prospecting for gold and silver in the “gold rush” usually came first. Next, railroads were being built to connect to new towns and workers arrived to build the tracks. The national government wanted a railroad that went across the entire continent, from the East to the West, called the **transcontinental railroad**. It would make travel across the Great Plains easier. The railroads helped people in the West by shipping to them badly needed farm supplies, coal, home goods and other materials. In turn, the railroad shipped the farmers’ products to the Eastern cities. The growing population of urban cities led to a greater demand for grain.

Another business, cattle ranching, had been conducted for years by earlier Spanish settlers in the West and newly-arriving settlers were adopting the practice as well. As the high demand for beef developed in the East, ranching grew. Eastern markets paid ten times the price of cattle as in the West.

One major difficulty of settling the western territories were the boundaries. High mountain ranges (the Appalachians, the Rockies, and the Cascades), deep and wide rivers like the Mississippi, and hot, dusty deserts created hardships that cost many settlers their possessions or even their life. Westward expansion also resulted in conflict with American Indian tribes. Despite the many uncertainties, many people remained resilient and successfully settled in the West.

The U.S. military, the buffalo hunters, and the settlers began to deplete the bison population on the plains. Several American Indian tribes depended on bison for clothing, food, housing, fuel, medicine, and tools and they believed no one “owned” land. The settlers moving onto tribal lands, the destruction of bison herd by hunters, and new cattle drives increased tensions and led to conflict among new arrivals and American Indian tribes.

Image credit: (2006). *Sailing to california for the california gold rush.* (2006). [Print Graphic]. Retrieved from http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0d/California_Clipper_500.jpg