Western Settlement and Immigration (1865-1900)

VUS.8 ~ How did the nation grow and change from the end of Reconstruction through the early twentieth century?
~ What was the relationship among territorial expansion, westward movement of the population, new immigration, growth of cities, and the admission of new states to the Union?

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, economic opportunity, industrialization, technological change, and immigration fueled American growth and expansion. As a result, the late nineteenth century was a period of significant change in the United States. Following the Civil War, the westward movement of settlers intensified (increased) into the vast (very large) region between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean. As a result, the western half of the United States experienced great change. Many Americans had to rebuild their lives after the Civil War. Thousands of them responded to the incentive (attraction) of free public land available under the Homestead Act. These Americans moved west to take advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862, which gave free public land in the western territories to settlers who would live on and farm the land. Specifically, this law granted 160 acres of land to any American citizen who was the head of a household and over 21. The only conditions were that the settler would live on the land for five years and make improvements to it. To qualify for free land under the Homestead Act one could not have fought for or given aid to the Confederacy. The Standards of Learning for Virginia and United States history say that “Southerners, including African-Americans in particular, moved west to seek new opportunities after the Civil War.” However, one should remember that most white Southerners could not qualify for free land under the terms of the Homestead Act, because they had supported the Confederacy. In addition, although between 1879 and 1881 a significant number of African-Americans moved to Kansas during the migration of the Exodusters, the Great Migration of African-Americans out of the South did not begin until World War I. The Exodusters were African-Americans who fled the South in large groups in 1879 and 1880, heading west, especially to Kansas.

The years immediately before and after the Civil War were also the era of the American cowboy. Cowboys conducted long cattle drives for hundreds of miles over unfenced open land in the West, the only way to get cattle to market. They drove herds of cattle from the Texas plains, where they were raised, to markets in the Midwest, like Abilene, Kansas. These cattle were then shipped by railroad to such Midwestern market cities as Kansas City, Omaha, and Chicago, where they were slaughtered and processed. Originally, cattle drives were the only way to get cattle to market. However, the era of the cattle drives was short-lived. Long cattle drives soon became unnecessary, because the railroad expanded into the less populated areas of the Great Plains.

In addition, new technologies, like railroads and the mechanical reaper, opened new lands in the West for settlement and made farming profitable by linking resources and markets and by increasing the efficiency of production. Railroads connected rural areas in the West to market towns and major cities. Farmers used the mechanical reaper to harvest wheat, one of the major crops on the Great Plains. By 1900, the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain regions of the American West were no longer a mostly unsettled frontier. Instead, this part of the United States was fast becoming an area of farms, ranches, and towns.

In order for the Great Plains to be settled, it was necessary for the United States government to get rid of the Indians, who lived there. Consequently, the forcible removal of the American Indians from their ancestral lands would continue throughout the remainder of the 19th century, as settlers continued to move west following the Civil War. Agricultural expansion was accomplished through wars against the Plains Indians, leading to new federal Indian policies. For example, in 1887 Congress passed the Dawes Act, the most significant attack on traditional Indian ways. This law abolished tribal organizations, divided reservations into tracts (plots of land) to be given to Indian families, and provided that proceeds from the
sale of reservation lands would go to Indian education. Indians who participated in the Dawes Act could, for the first time, become American citizens. However, many Indians did not want to be assimilated (absorbed) into white American culture. They refused to accept the government offer under the Dawes Act and continued to live in the harsh environment of reservations. These Indians remained dependents of the federal government and faced a bleak future of poor quality, government-supplied food and clothing. As federal policy succeeded in removing the Indians from the plains and white Americans continued to move westward, many new states were created in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain regions. By the early twentieth century, all forty-eight states that make up the continental United States (the area between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans) had entered the Union.

Significant change also occurred in the eastern half of the United States. Before 1880*, most immigrants to America came from northern and western Europe. Historians have called this first phase of immigration the "old immigration." Thus, immigrants prior to 1880 usually came from Great Britain, Ireland, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries of Norway, and Sweden. However, between 1880 and World War I, most immigrants came from southern and eastern Europe. This second wave of "new immigrants" came from Italy, Greece, Poland, Russia, present-day Hungary and the Balkan Peninsula (modern Yugoslavia before its collapse). Like earlier immigrants, these "new" immigrants came to America seeking freedom (political and religious) and better lives for their families (economic opportunity). During the "new immigration," immigrants from Europe usually entered the United States through Ellis Island in New York harbor. Their first view of America was often the Statue of Liberty, standing nearby, as their ships arrived from their Atlantic voyage. *[The Virginia and United States History Standards of Learning divide immigration at 1871. They suggest that "prior to 1871 most immigrants to America came from northern and western Europe," while, "during the half-century from 1871 until 1921 most immigrants came from southern and eastern Europe, as well as Asia (China and Japan)." In contrast, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History described the "New Immigrants" differently in its reading "The Huddled Masses 1880-1920." In this article historian Steven Mintz said that "European immigration to the United States greatly increased after the Civil War, reaching 5.2 million in the 1880s then surging to 8.2 million in the first decade of the twentieth century." "Unlike earlier immigrants, who mainly came from northern and western Europe," wrote Mintz, "the 'new immigrants' came largely from southern and eastern Europe. Largely Catholic and Jewish in religion, the new immigrants came from the Balkans, Italy, Poland, and Russia." Please see http://www.gilderlehrman.org/institute/era_immigration.php, scroll down to "Curriculum Modules from Our Website," and follow link "Immigration (1880-1920)."

Immigrants made valuable contributions to the dramatic industrial growth of America during the late 1800s. For example, Chinese workers helped to build the transcontinental railroad. They often faced severe racial prejudice and discrimination, especially in areas like California where they formed a sizeable minority. Immigrants also worked in textile and steel mills in the Northeast and the clothing industry in New York City. Slavs, Italians and Poles worked in the coalmines of the mid-Appalachian Mountains in the East. Immigrants often worked for very low pay and in dangerous working conditions to help build the nation's industrial strength. Factories in the large cities provided jobs, but workers' families often lived in harsh conditions crowded into tenements (run-down, low rental apartment buildings) and slums.

Immigration contributed to the rapid growth of such cities, as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and New York. These cities became both manufacturing and transportation centers. The rapid growth of cities caused housing shortages and the need for new public services, such as sewage and water systems and public transportation. New York City began construction of one of the nation's first subway systems at the turn of the twentieth century, and many other cities built trolley and streetcar lines.

Immigrants began the process of assimilation (making similar/molding) into what some American historians have termed the American "melting pot." Under the "melting pot" thesis (idea), immigrants from throughout the world have brought their distinct cultures to America. These cultures have then melted together - much like the ingredients in a cake - to form a new and unique American culture. While often settling in the growing cities' ethnic neighborhoods (with people from the same country or culture),
immigrants and their children have worked hard to learn English, adopt American customs, and become American citizens. Under the "melting pot" thesis, the public schools have served an essential role in this process of assimilating (absorbing) immigrants into American society.

Most recent historians have disagreed with all or part of the "melting pot" thesis. They suggest the "melting pot" idea represents what many Americans want to believe happened rather than what actually has happened. These historians compare American society to a "salad bowl" [or "mixing bowl"] rather than a "melting pot." They agree that immigrants from throughout the world have brought their distinct cultures to America. They also agree that immigrants have learned English, adopted American customs, and become American citizens. But these historians also argue that many immigrants have worked hard to preserve and pass to their children part of their old world customs and traditions. They emphasize that this very diversity (differences) in American culture contributes to the uniqueness of the United States. Therefore, they argue American society is like a "salad bowl." Each ethnic (national) group has kept part of its old world culture, while at the same time accepting basic characteristics of American culture. Likewise, in a salad bowl each type of vegetable (ethnic group) keeps its individual flavor; at the same time, the mixture of vegetables with the addition of a salad dressing (American culture) creates something new. Finally, critics of the "melting pot" thesis have argued that institutions like public schools have hurt, as well as helped, immigrants to America. They point out that white Anglo-Saxon Protestant native-born Americans (WASPs) usually have both controlled public schools and insisted that public schools teach white Protestant values, history and customs. [A Protestant is any Christian who is not a Roman Catholic, a Mormon, or a member of an Orthodox faith.] These critics claim native-born white Protestants have wanted immigrant children to lose their old world customs and adopt WASP culture as their own. For that reason, Roman Catholics started parochial schools (schools run by religious groups) in the United States. Thereby, Roman Catholic leaders hoped to prevent the Protestant-controlled public schools from forcing the children of Roman Catholic immigrants to learn and practice Protestant values and traditions.

Despite the valuable contributions immigrants made to build America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immigrants often faced hardship and hostility. Many native-born Americans resented immigrants. They feared immigrants would take jobs for lower pay than American-born workers. There was also great prejudice against immigrants based on religious and cultural differences. Mounting resentment led Congress to limit immigration through both the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration Restriction Act of 1921. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 halted immigration of Chinese laborers for the next ten years. Congress passed this law in response to an anti-Chinese movement in the West during the 1870s and 1880s. Native-born white workers had blamed Chinese immigrants for taking jobs away from them and undercutting wages. The Chinese Exclusion Act began a sixty year period of ever more restrictive immigration. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1921 placed the first numerical limits, called quotas, on immigrants according to their nationality. It particularly discriminated against immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and was followed three years later by a law that established even stricter quotas. These acts effectively cut off most European immigration to America for the next several decades. Nevertheless, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immigrants and their descendants continued to contribute immeasurably to American society.