Westward Expansion: Crash Course US History #24

Crash Course: U.S. History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=Q16OZkgSXfM
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/Q16OZkgSXfM

Hi I'm John Green, this is Crash Course US History, and today we leave behind the world of industry and corporations to talk about the Wild Wild West. Spoiler Alert! You have died of dysentery.

And in the process we're going to explore how all of us, even those of us who are vegans or eat sustainably produced food, benefit from massive agribusiness that has its roots in the wild wild west.

The West still looms large in American mythology as the home of cowboys and gunslingers and houses of ill-repute and freedom from pesky government interference but in fact-

(Past John)-it was probably not as wild as we've been told. Ugh! Mr. Green, why can't America live up to its myths just once?-

Because this is America, me from the past, home to Hollywood and Gatsby and Honey Boo Boo. We are literally in the myth-making business.

(Intro)

So before the Hollywood Western, the myth of the frontier probably found its best expression in Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 lecture "The Significance of the Frontier in American History". Turner argued that the West was responsible for key characteristics of American culture: beliefs in individualism, political democracy and economic mobility. Like, for 18th and 19th century Americans, the western frontier represented the opportunity to start over and possibly to strike it rich by dint of one's own individual effort. Even back when the West was like, Ohio.

In this mythology, the West was a magnet for restless, young men who lit out for the uncorrupted, unoccupied, untamed territories to seek their fortune, but in reality, most Western settlers went not as individuals but as members of a family or as part of an immigrant group. And they weren't filling up unoccupied space either because most of that territory was home to American Indians. Also, in addition to Easterners and migrants from Europe, the West was settled by Chinese people and by Mexican migrant laborers and former slaves. Plus, there were plenty of Mexicans living there already who became Americans with the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

And the whole West as a place of rugged individualism and independence turns out to be an oversimplification. I mean, The Federal Government, after all, had to pass the law that spurred homesteading, then had to clear out American Indians already living there and had to sponsor the railroads that allowed the West to grow in the first place. About as individualistic as the government buying Walden Pond for Henry David Thoreau - What's that? It's a state park now? The government owns it? Well, there you go.

Now railroads didn't create the desire to settle the West but they did make it possible for people who wanted to live out West to do so for two reasons. First, without railroads there would be no way to bring crops or other goods to market. I mean, I guess you could dig a canal across Kansas, but if you've ever been to Kansas that is not a tantalizing proposition. Second, railroads made life in the West profitable and livable because they brought the goods that people needed, such as tools for planting and sowing, shoes for wearing, books for putting on your shelf and pretending to have read. Railroads allowed settlers to stay connected with the modernity that was becoming the hallmark of the industrialized world in the 19th century.

Now we saw last week that the federal government played a key role in financing the transcontinental railroad, but state governments got into the act too, often to their financial detriment. In fact, so many states nearly went bankrupt financing railroads that most states now have constitutional requirements that they balance their budgets. But perhaps the central way that the federal governments supported the railroads in Western settlement and investment in general was by leading military expeditions against American Indians, rounding them up on ever-smaller reservations and destroying their culture.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

There was an economic as well as a racial imperative to move the Native Americans off their land: white people wanted it. Initially, it was needed to set down railroad tracks and then for farming but eventually it was also exploited for minerals like gold and iron and other stuff that makes industry work. I mean, would you really want a territory called "The Badlands" unless it had valuable minerals?

Early Western settlement of the Oregon Trail kind did not result in huge conflicts with Native Americans, but by the 1850s a steady stream of settlers kicked off increasingly bloody conflicts that lasted pretty much until 1890. Even though the fighting started before the Civil War, the end of the war between the states meant a new, more violent phase in the warring between American Indians and whites. General Philip H. "Little Phil" Sheridan set out to destroy the Indians' way of life, burning villages and killing their horses and especially the buffalo that was the basis of the plains tribes' existence. There were about 30 million buffalo in the US in 1800, by 1886 the Smithsonian Institute had difficulty finding 25 good specimens.

In addition to violent resistance, some Indians turned to a spiritual movement to try to preserve their traditional way of life. Around 1890 the Ghost Dance movement arose in and around South Dakota. Ghost Dancers believed that if they gathered together to dance and engage in religious rituals, eventually the white man would disappear and the buffalo would return, and with them the Indians' traditional customs. But even though a combined force of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors completely destroyed George Custer's force of 250 cavalry men at Little Bighorn in 1876, and Geronimo took years to subdue in the southwest, Western Native Americans were all defeated by 1890 and the majority were moved to reservations.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Boy this Wild West episode sure is turning out to be loads of fun! It's just like the Will Smith movie! Alright Stan, this is about to get even more depressing so let's look at like some pretty mountains and Western landscapes and stuff while I deliver this next bit.

So in 1871 the US government ended the treaty system that had, since the American Revolution, treated Native Americans as if they were nations. And then, with the Dawes Act of 1887, the lands set aside for the Indians were allotted to individual families rather than to tribes. Indians who, quote, "adopted the habits of civilized life," which in this case meant becoming small-scale, individualistic Jeffersonian farmers, would be granted citizenship and there were supposed to be some protections to prevent their land from falling out of Native American possession. But these protections were not particularly protective, and much of the Indian land was purchased either by white settlers or by speculators. After the passage of the Dawes Act, Indians lost 86 million of the 138 million acres of land in their possession.

Ah boy it's time for the mystery document. The rules here are simple. I guess the author of the mystery document and then you get to see me get shocked when I'm wrong. Alright...

"I have seen the Great Father Chief, the next great chief, the commissioner chief; the law chief; and many other law chiefs and

they all say they are my friends, and that I shall have justice, but while all their mouths talk right I do not understand why nothing is done for my people. I have heard talk and talk but nothing is done. Words do not pay for my dead people. They do not pay for my country now overrun by white men. They do not protect my father's grave. Good words will not give my people a home where they can live in peace and take care of themselves. I am tired of talk that comes to nothing. It makes my heart sick when I remember all the good words and all the broken promises."

I mean that could be almost any American Indian leader. This is totally unfair, Stan! All I really know about this is that the Great Father Chief is the President. I mean it could be any of a dozen people. How 'bout if I say the name in 10 seconds I don't get punished? And... start!

Sitting Bull
Crazy Horse
Geronimo
Chief Bigfoot
(um) Keokuk
Chief Oshkosh
Chief Joseph (bell goes off) OH! YES! YES!

And now let us move from tragedy to tragedy. So if you're thinking that it couldn't get worse for the Native Americans... it did. After killing off the buffalo, taking their land and forcing Indians onto reservations, the Bureau of Indian Affairs instituted a policy that amounted to cultural genocide. It set up boarding schools, the most famous of which was in Carlisle Pennsylvania, where Indian children were forcefully removed from their families to be civilized. This meant teaching them English, taking away their clothes, their names, and their family connections. The idea, put succinctly, was to quote, "kill the Indian, save the man."

Now the US wasn't the only nation busy subjugating its indigenous inhabitants and putting them on reservations in the late 19th century, like, something similar was happening in South Africa, in Chile, and even to first peoples in Canada. And you're usually so good, Canada. Although the slower pace of Western settlement meant that there was much less bloodshed so...another point to Canada. And as bad as the American boarding school policy was, at least it was short-lived compared with Australia's policy of removing aboriginal children from families and placing them with white foster families, which lasted until the 1970s.

Alright Stan, we need to cheer this episode up. Let's talk about cowboys, the Marlboro Man riding the range, herding cows and smoking, solitary in the saddle, alone in his emphysema. Surely that is the actual West, the men and women — but mostly men — who stood apart from the industrializing country as the last of Jefferson's rugged individuals.

But... no. Once again, we have the railroad to thank for our image of the cowboy. Like, those massive cattle drives of millions of cows across open-range Texas? Yeah, they ended at towns like Abilene and Wichita and Dodge City, because that's where the rail heads were. Without railroads, cowboys would've just driven their cattle in endless circles, and without industrial meat processing, there wouldn't have been a market for all that beef. And it was a lot of beef... if you know what I'm talking about. I'm actually talking about beef.

By the mid 1880s, the days of open-range ranching were coming to an end, as ranchers began to enclose more and more land, and set up their businesses closer to, you guessed it, railroad stations. There are also quite a few things about Western farming that just fly in the face of the mythical Jeffersonian yeoman farmer ideal. Firstly, this type of agricultural work was a family affair. Many women bore huge burdens on Western farms, as can be seen in this excerpt from a farm woman in Arizona:

"Get up, turn out my chickens, draw a pail of water...make a fire, put potatoes to cook, brush and sweep half inch of dust off floor, feed three litters of chickens, then mix biscuits, get breakfast, milk, besides work in the house and this morning had to go half mile after calves."

These family-run farms were increasingly oriented toward production of wheat and corn for national and even international markets, rather than trying to eke out subsistence. Farmers in Kansas found themselves competing with farmers in Australia and Argentina, and this international competition pushed prices lower and lower. Secondly, the Great Plains, while remarkably productive agriculturally, wouldn't be nearly as good for producing crops without massive irrigation projects. Much of the water needed for plains agriculture comes from a massive underground lake: the Ogallala Aquifer. Don't worry, by the way, the aquifer is fed by a magic and permanent H_2O factory in the core of the Earth that you can learn about in Hank's show Crash Course Chemistry.

What's that? It's going dry? My god, this is a depressing episode!

Anyway, large-scale irrigation projects necessitate big capital investments, and therefore large, consolidated, agricultural enterprises that start to look more like agribusiness than family farms. I mean, by 1900, California was home to giant commercial farms, reliant on irrigation and chemical fertilizers. Some of them were owned not by families but by big corporations like the Southern Pacific Railroad. And they were worked by migrant farm laborers from China, the Philippines, Japan, Mexico... As Henry George, a critic of late 19th century corporate capitalism, wrote: "California is not a country of farms, but... of plantations and estates."

When studying American History, it's really easy to get caught up in the excitement of industrial capitalism, with its robber barons and new technologies and fancy cities, because that world looks very familiar to us, probably because it's the one in which we live. After all, if I was running a farm, like that Arizona woman I talked about earlier, there's no way I could be making these videos, because I'd be chasing my calves. I don't even know what a litter of chickens is, is it four chickens? 12? Six — it's probably 12, because eggs do come in dozens.

The massive agricultural surplus contemporary farms create, and the efficient transportation network that gets that surplus to me quickly makes everything else possible, from YouTube to Chevy Volts. And no matter who you are, you benefit from the products that result from that massive surplus. That's why we're watching YouTube right now. So agriculture and animal husbandry did change a lot in the late 19th century America, as we came to embrace the market-driven ethos that we either celebrate or decry these days. And in the end, the Wild West ends up looking a lot more like industrial capitalism than like a Larry McMurtry novel.

The Wild West, like the rest of the industrialized world, was incentivized to increase productivity, and was shaped by an increasingly international economic system. And it's worth remembering that even though we think of the Oregon Trail and the Wild West being part of the same thing, in fact, they were separated by the most important event in American history: the Civil War. I know that ain't the mythologizing you'll find in Tombstone, but it is true. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

(Out-tro)

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller; our script

supervisor is Meredith Danko; the associate producer of the show is Danica Johnson; the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer, Rosianna Halse Rojas, and myself; and our graphics team is Thought Café.

Every week there's a new caption for the libertage, if you would like to suggest one you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thanks for watching Crash Course. If you enjoy it, make sure you subscribe, and as we say in my hometown: don't forget to be awesome.

Augh! Ohhh, I didn't get a good push... (Laughs)