

# An Agricultural Empire

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From the early nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth, settlers created farms in the American trans-Mississippi West. Each life story in this process was unique, but similar elements might be found in all of them. Collectively, these biographies compose the history of American agriculture and settlement west of the Mississippi. The settlers directed torrents of grain and mountains of meat, hides, wool, and cotton to the markets of the older states and of the world and by their example drew millions of hopeful compatriots and immigrants into the American West to share in the adventure of planting European-American settlements.

Among these hopefuls was Joseph Fish's Yankee grandfather, who pushed across the Vermont boundary line, without realizing it, and settled in lower Canada. A generation later, Joseph's mother converted to the religion of the Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and the family moved with other church members to Will County, Illinois, where her husband, Horace Fish, also accepted the faith. In the fall of 1840, when young Joseph was a few months old, the Fish family moved to Nauvoo. During the persecution of the Saints and the ensuing exodus across Iowa, the family lost most of its possessions. In 1850, after three years in Council Point, the family continued to Deseret. Horace Fish prospered at Circleville on a twenty-five-acre holding, but in 1852 he moved to Parowan to join in the development of the southwestern Utah Territory. The family set out in a heavy snowstorm, but twelve-year old Joseph cared not; he was wearing his first pair of new boots.

The fortified village of Parowan, where Joseph Fish lived until 1878, lay on Center Creek upstream from Little Salt Lake. Since his father was both miller and tanner, much of the agricultural labor fell to young Joseph. The Fishes had a holding in the community's common field, and there they planted potatoes and grain, with several neighbors typically exchanging work in the cultivation and seeding of their plots. To prepare the community field, the settlers pulled clumps of sagebrush with oxen and chains and used wooden plows reinforced with iron from the rims of wagon wheels. Irrigation was essential; ditching, as well as fencing, had to be done, and water needed to be diverted from the ditches to the crops. Joseph learned to cradle two acres of wheat or oats in a day during harvest. Sometimes he helped guard the community herd or helped drive livestock to new range. In winter, Fish often cut timber for the village homestead or for making pine tar.

The Parowan settlers feared hostile Indians and rustlers; the community militia drilled frequently, and males were armed. Joseph helped build roads and hunted wolves

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*Though engaged in a common sort of labor, every western farm family had its own story to tell. Like his neighbors, Elmer Blanchard relied on family assistance at harvesttime. But Blanchard, who was also a poet, insisted on harvesting the grain on his 13-acre Utah farm with an outmoded cradle scythe.*

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*George Edward Anderson (1860-1928). Elmer Blanchard Farm, Mapleton, Utah. Gelatin silver print, 1902. Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.*

or waterfowl. However busy they were, residents found time for the religious observances typical of Mormon settlements, for sessions of lay school, and for theatrical entertainment—in which Joseph joined—as well as for frequent games of shinny or horseshoes. This was Parowan during the 1850s and early 1860s.

Farther west, the enumerators of the federal census in California in 1850 recorded several hundred rancheros. Among them was Don Carlos Antonio Carrillo, a prominent resident of Santa Barbara and owner of the Rancho Sespe. Born in 1783, the son of a Spanish Army captain, Carrillo enlisted as a private at fourteen and left the service as a sergeant while still relatively young. Thereafter, he served in the California assembly, as well as representing his region in the National Congress of Mexico. His political fortunes climaxed with his appointment as governor of California, an honor that was contested by a rival who pressed his cause in Mexico City and in California. In 1838, California residents on both sides of the dispute engaged in a short period of comic-opera warfare. When the Mexican government recognized Carrillo's rival, Don Carlos accepted the decision philosophically and returned to the life of a "pobre ranchero," regretting only that his political career had been expensive.

In 1829, Carrillo petitioned the California authorities for six leagues (twenty-four thousand acres) of land along the Sespe, a tributary of the Santa Clara. At the time, Carrillo owned five hundred head of cattle and two hundred horses and mules. Carrillo established his ranch on the Sespe, but he did not perform the ceremonial crossing of his boundaries until 1842, when, according to the rancho's historian, he "pulled up grass, scattered handfuls of earth, broke off branches of trees, and performed other acts and demonstrations of possession." By 1845, he was running approximately three thousand cattle, droves of horses and mules, and flocks of sheep. A two-story adobe house served as headquarters for the rancho, which included two vineyards and two cultivated fields. In these days of the hide and tallow trade with the United States, Carrillo's herds provided a comfortable life marked by visiting, lavish hospitality, fiestas, and rodeos featuring brilliant horsemanship.

The historian of Rancho Sespe pictured Carrillo and his sons leading the leisurely annual expedition of family and servants to the ranch, all astride spirited Arabian horses, saddles and bridles sparkling with silver. The men were clad in "short breeches extending to the knee, ornamented with gold or silver lace at the bottom . . . soft deer skin [leggings] well tanned, richly colored and stamped with beautiful devices . . . tied at the knee with a silk cord . . . with heavy gold or silver tassels . . . long vests, with filigree buttons of gold or silver . . . [jackets] of dark blue cloth . . . long serape or poncho made in Mexico . . . [vicuña] hats imported from Mexico and Peru." Behind rode the women and children in *carretas*, great squeaking oxcarts. At the ranch was the commotion of the annual rodeo: the sounds of bawling calves and pounding hooves mixed with the shouts of vaqueros and with the thick dust that accompanied roundup. The calves were branded and perhaps a herd selected for slaughter.

Hard work was balanced by leisure; the Carrillo men hunted grizzly bears, attended bullfights, and enjoyed the fiesta. Initially, Carrillo benefited under American rule; goldfield markets raised the value of his herds to unimagined levels. In 1852, at age sixty-nine, the old soldier died. The United States Land Commission approved the Carrillos' title to Rancho Sespe in April 1853, and in September, the administrator of the estate

auctioned the land. Three brothers named Moore, cattle buyers from Ohio, purchased the rancho for \$18,500, about seventy cents per acre.

In Iowa, we find a different story. "Our land is beautiful, though there are few trees . . . . We have good spring water near by. Best of all, the land is good meadowland and easily plowed and cultivated." So wrote Gro Svendsen from Emmet County, northern Iowa, in November 1863. This young woman had accompanied her husband, Ole, from Norway the previous year. After time with friends and relatives in eastern Iowa, the couple established their "new home" in the prairie country drained by the upper Des Moines River. Gro died in 1878 after the birth of her tenth child. The daughter of a respected teacher in Hallingdal, Gro had recorded the details of her life in letters to her parents and siblings in the old country.

Ole Svendsen had hoped to homestead his land and erroneously believed that he must be naturalized to do so. Drafted in 1864, he served in the South with General William Sherman, returning unscathed. Home again, Ole purchased a timber lot to provide boards, rails, and firewood; he tilled more acreage, harvested good crops of wheat, and saw his livestock increase. Meanwhile, Gro made and sold butter. Aided occasionally by work and money from Ole's relatives, the Svendsens never knew abject poverty. But the 1870s were hard years—agricultural prices were low, grasshoppers damaged crops, and the resolution of real estate titles in the area left the Svendsens indebted to a railroad.

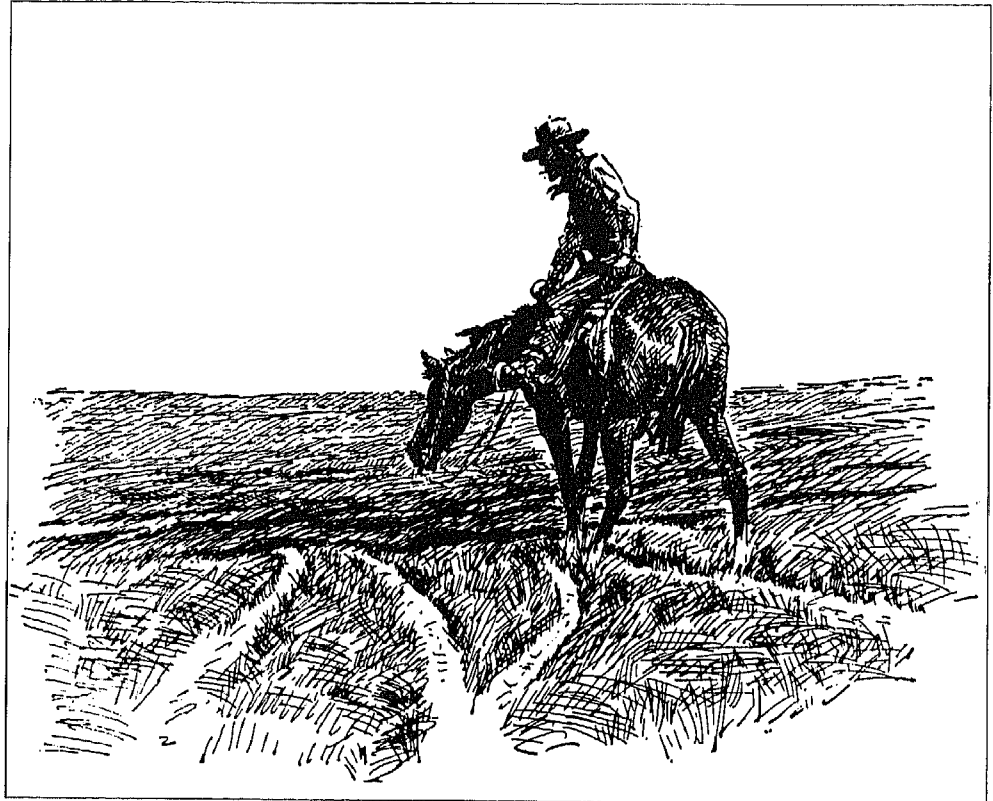
The school system was rudimentary in Emmet County; Gro taught her children in both Norwegian and English. She read assiduously, and on summer evenings she liked to sit in the yard and play the alpenhorn. She and Ole were active in the local Lutheran congregation. As the years passed, Gro corresponded less frequently, but her longing for her family remained strong. The Svendsens sent family portraits to Norway and affectionately scanned the pictures of their relatives. However, the recurrent strain of childbearing, her duty as scribe for less-educated neighbors, and constant work wore Gro down. In her thirties, Gro examined a photo of herself and believed she saw an old woman.

The experiences of the Fish, Carrillo, and Svendsen families illustrate the diversity of agricultural settlement in the West. Other examples of the varied backgrounds of western farmers abound: peoples of the southwestern pueblos, residents of the plazas of Hispanic New Mexico, Swedish settlers in Minnesota and Washington, Willamette Valley pioneers, participants in the Oklahoma land runs, and reclamation homesteaders waiting for that first rush of water in "the ditch." In each new environment, settlers were challenged to create productive farms, to modify old ways, to make do with inadequate resources, and to reconstruct the relationships and boundaries of the community.

Of course, European Americans were not the first to utilize the agricultural potential of the North American continent. Earlier migrants, the Indians, had adopted farming practices long before the era of European expansion. Natives of the northeastern woodlands were raising corn, beans, and squash when the Puritans arrived, and centuries earlier, Hohokam Indians had tended irrigation canals where Arizonans today practice a more elaborate water husbandry. Apache Indians channeled water to their crops in New Mexico during the eighteenth century. Although some Indian groups depended on hunting, the natives had identified a range of seeds, nuts, roots, tubers, bulbs, leaves, and

*The transformation of open range into farmland struck many artists as a metaphor for the shape of western history. For Charlie Russell, devoted artist of the cowpuncher's West, "trails plowed under" signaled the end of the exhilarating freedom of western life and the emergence of a new, more constricted, agricultural society.*

*Charles M. Russell (1864–1926). Trails Plowed Under. Pen-and-ink on paper, ca. 1926. From Trails Plowed Under by Charles M. Russell. Copyright 1927 by Doubleday, a division of Bantam, Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Bantam, Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.*



barks to use for food, fiber, and medicine. They sometimes fostered particular flora by planting seeds or otherwise manipulating the environment. As American settlements expanded, the frontiersmen planted Indian corn, potatoes, squash, and beans side by side with the wheat, oats, barley, and peas of Europe.

Among the European Americans who went West, most dreamed of fertile fields and the bounty that cultivation provided. But there is a no-man's-land between farming and pastoralism in American history. Was the young Hamlin Garland, tending herd on the Iowa prairies in the 1870s, a cowboy or a farm boy? Garland herded cattle on grasslands, but he also knew that he, his pony, and the cattle were an integral part of a nearby farm enterprise. Garland's cowboy days illustrate the tendency of frontier agriculturists to use the free range adjacent to settlements. Access to market was difficult for the pioneer farmer, and livestock provided an ideal crop; cattle, sheep, and hogs could be driven to market by their owners or sold to traveling drovers.

For a time in the plains country of the trans-Mississippi West, the cattle and shepherders ranged far ahead of the pioneer farmers, and the scale of their operations exceeded such activity east of the Mississippi. Even here, however, the herders built on the foundations of other livestock frontiers—northern, southern, and Hispanic—and found markets for feeder animals and supplies of young range stock or breeding animals in the western farm regions. The agricultural settlers of the trans-Mississippi West failed to oust the graziers from all of their domain, but they followed them doggedly. One of

Charles M. Russell's most poignant sketches shows a cow pony sniffing curiously at the edge of plowed land, its grizzled rider dejectedly contemplating the constricted horizons of his future.

### *Who Were the Settlers?*

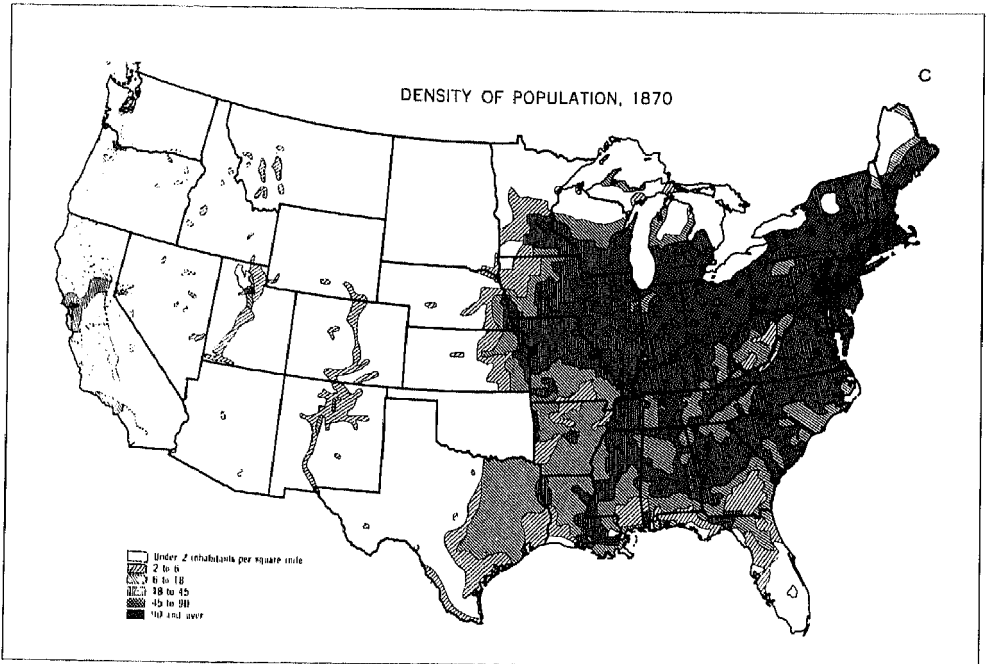
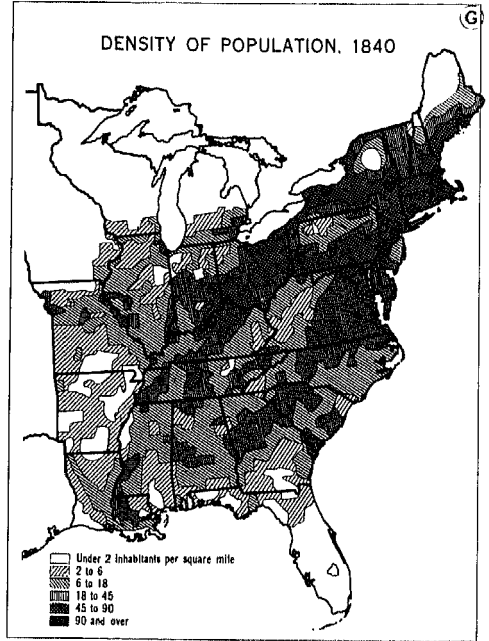
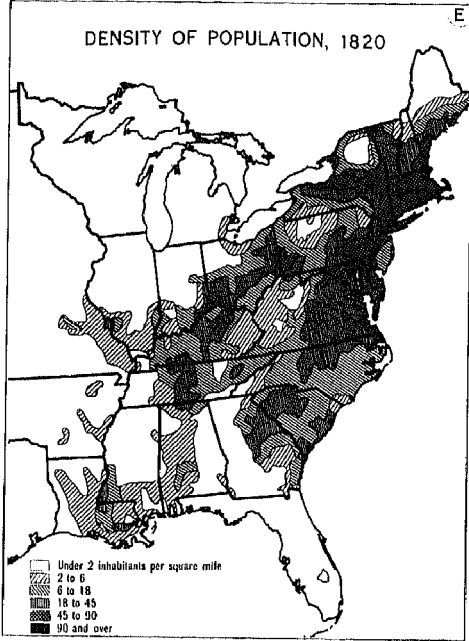
For over three centuries, Americans expanded the geographic limits of farming. Many of the new farms were maintained by succeeding generations of the settlers' families, but children and grandchildren also established their own farms, and immigrants joined the native-born. There were about 450,000 European-American farmers by 1800. Fifty years later, the number was almost 1.5 million, and by 1910, it was 6.4 million. By the mid-1930s, the total of farm operators had peaked, well short of 7 million.

Of those 1.5 million American farmers in 1850, only 119,000 were located beyond the Mississippi, most of them in the states along the river from Iowa to the Gulf. Sixteen thousand of them farmed in Texas and in the New Mexico Territory. The census takers reported fewer than 1,000 farmers in Utah and California and 1,200 in Oregon. This distribution foretold the future. Farmers moved west in the hundreds of thousands after 1850, but most trans-Mississippi farmers tilled their fields in the two tiers of states adjacent to the river. Thus, in 1890, the 201,903 farms in Iowa more than doubled the total in Washington, Oregon, and California combined. Moreover, the number of farms in the older states west of the great river continued to grow. The 16,552 farms added in Iowa during the 1880s exceeded the combined total in Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho in 1890 and almost equaled the number in Colorado. Although true pioneering had vanished in the Hawkeye State, farm makers continued to develop unimproved lands, draining wetlands and subdividing older units.

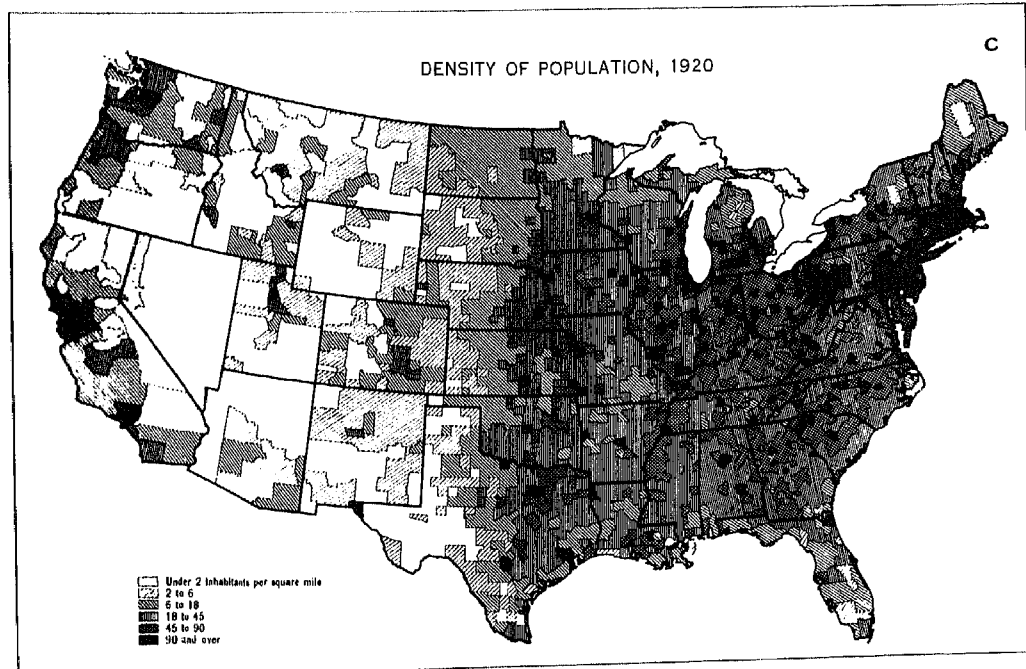
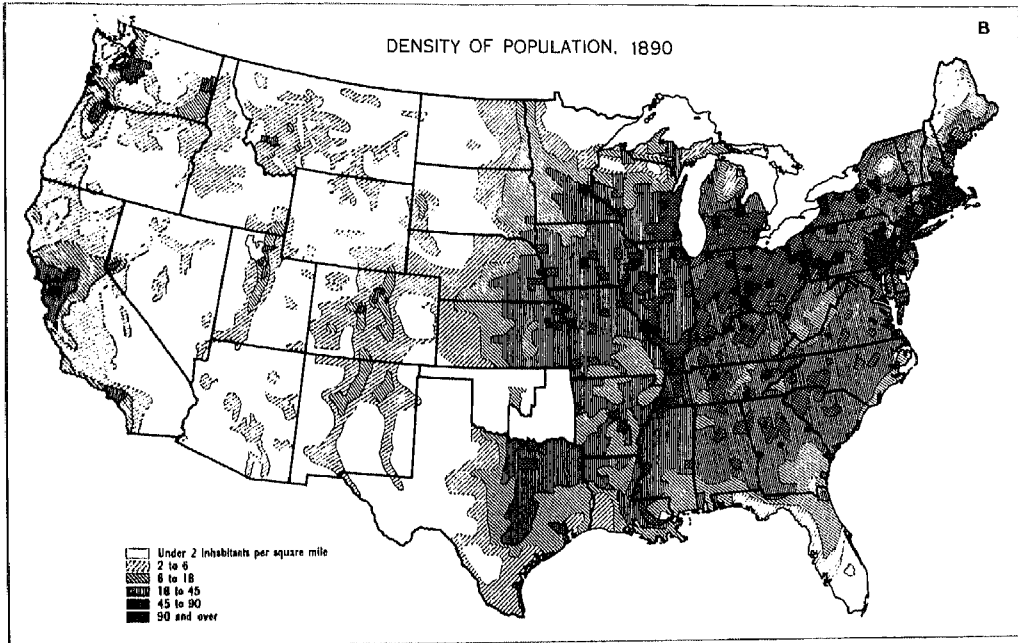
The best-known historian of the West, Frederick Jackson Turner, loved maps. In those the federal census cartographers were drawing during the late nineteenth century depicting American population growth, he found the basic patterns of the westward movement across the Mississippi. From various staging points in the central Mississippi Valley, settlers fanned out to form an area of contiguous settlement that reached the western border of Missouri by 1850 and then advanced into the plains country in a great ellipse, its northern perimeter anchored in Wisconsin and Minnesota, its southern in Texas, with the Indian lands that were to be Oklahoma breaking the pattern until the end of the century. The overleaping movement of pioneer farmers, Mormons, and gold seekers to Oregon, California, and the promised land of the Latter-day Saints during the 1840s and thereafter provided the cartographers with a different configuration—one of vertical bands in the great valleys of the Pacific rim and of strips and islands in the basin, plateau, and mountain country. Here the maps show the tendency for population to move not only westward but also north or south, or even west to east, as farmers followed the miners but were more rigorously confined to river valleys and irrigable areas.

Even on the central plains, settlement did not always surge simply westward. Local settlement jutted out along transportation routes and sometimes proceeded from north to south or vice versa or filled upland gaps between previously settled valleys. The outer margins of the farming frontier reflected the pulsations of the general economy and the alternation of years of little or of generous rainfall. In good times, the agricultural

Based on data from federal census reports, these population-density maps graphically document the westward movement of the American people. In 1890, the superintendent of the census noted, "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line." This observation, vividly supported by the 1890 map, helped inspire the historian Frederick Jackson Turner's famous remarks about the disappearance of the American frontier.



Maps reproduced from  
Charles O. Paullin, Atlas  
of the Historical Geograph-  
y of the United States  
(1932).



frontier expanded; it remained stationary, or retreated—as in eastern Colorado and western Kansas—during the depression and drought years of the late nineteenth century. In part, such contraction involved the departures of those who failed, those whose will, health, or resources proved inadequate—“in God we trusted, in Kansas we busted” read the wry doggerel. But even in years of prosperity, the population was mobile as new settlers came and residents left.

For the most part, the treaty makers and the soldiers swept the Native Americans from the path of the settlers; relatively few trans-Mississippi pioneers lived close to Indians for long. When the overlanders of the 1840s began to arrive, they found French-Canadian settlers, former employees of the Hudson’s Bay Company, living in the lower Columbia-Willamette region. The American settlers drew on this outpost of habitant-métis culture for agricultural knowledge and supplies, but the fur trade left a minimal legacy of agricultural settlement.

Our inheritance from Spanish colonization was a different matter. Within a generation in American California, the argonauts and American businessmen and agriculturists overran a culture of rancho and petty irrigation agriculture, penetrating the world of the thirteen thousand Californios by purchase and intermarriage and transforming it by an expansion of large- and small-scale commercial agriculture on undeveloped Spanish or Mexican grants and federal and state lands. The legacy of Hispanic institutions and landholdings influenced the later development of California, but we cannot distinguish a Hispanic frontier there after 1848.

In New Mexico the situation was different. Although most of the population would have been categorized as mestizo rather than Spanish, some seventy thousand Hispanos lived in New Mexico during the 1840s, near five to ten thousand Pueblo Indians. During the early nineteenth century, the Hispano population of New Mexico clustered along the upper Rio Grande del Norte from Socorro to Taos and extended for short distances up tributary rivers. From Santa Fe, the population branched eastward into the upper valley of the Pecos. Islands of population existed on two tributaries of the Little Colorado, while a feeble settlement struggled for existence on the Santa Cruz River below Tucson. Isolated by the arid country stretching from El Paso to Socorro, pressured by the Comanche, Apache, Navajo, and Ute Indians, riven with the tension of Hispano versus Pueblo, and with a population unschooled and religiously insular, Spanish New Mexico has been termed “a forlorn gateway to imaginary cities of gold on the arid plains.” One author wrote that New Mexico in about 1815, “stalemated physically, culturally, and economically by the conditions of the land and by the Indian menace, was an arrested frontier society.” It was not, however, arrested in terms of population expansion after 1820.

During the years 1820–70, the Hispanos had their own agrarian frontier. Settlers filtered out from the old communities, developing holdings on streams where they could irrigate patches of grain, corn, beans, peppers, and other vegetables or in canyons that served as bases for grazing flocks. To the east of the old settlements, the New Mexicans pushed their ranchos, or plazas, “crude clusters of adobe and stone houses in a labyrinth of pole and brush corrals” (according to one scholar), north along the margins of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and east into Canadian headwaters to Tascosa, south along the Pecos almost to Fort Sumner, and southeast to the Penasco River and neighboring

streams. To the west, the Hispano pioneers penetrated the San Luis Valley, pushed along various of the Rio Grande's tributaries beyond previous boundaries of settlement, and washed into the headwaters of the San Juan and Little Colorado rivers. When American rule began, this frontier expansion was under way, reflecting population growth and the vitalization of the New Mexican economy that occurred after trade relationships developed with the lower Missouri River valley. After the Mexican War, the American army's efforts to curb the southwestern tribes encouraged the spread of Hispano settlement. By the early 1870s, Spanish-speaking settlers were confronting Texas cattlemen and Mormon farmers. As the Hispanos struggled to hold their lands against these aggressive competitors and to contend with small-scale irrigation agriculture, this frontier thrust lost both its distinctive character and its vitality.

When the American colonists began their great republican experiment, the union was one of cultures as well as one of economic and political institutions. The northeastern states formed a reservoir of Yankees, children both of the sea and the field, who were energetic and commercially oriented and who nurtured a Puritan sense of mission. The people of the middle states were of Dutch and British origins, leavened during the eighteenth century with German and Scotch-Irish settlers who moved into the interior of Pennsylvania and followed the Great Valley into the backcountry of Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas. A few representatives of other cultural groups were scattered within this matrix of population. Of the white population of the United States in 1790, some 60 percent were English in origin, and the Scots, Irish, and Germans by birth or descent each made up 5 to 10 percent. Those of Dutch, French, Swedish, or Spanish origins totaled 3 percent or less. From the 1630s onward, on the basis of importation and natural increase, there was a growing African-American population, held, for the most part, in slavery. That institution survived into the late colonial period in the northern colonies and residually into the early national period of some northern states, but it thrived in the southern colonies. The census takers of 1790 estimated that within a U.S. population of 3,929,000 were 697,624 slaves and 59,557 free blacks.

After 1790, a stream of migrants from the northeastern and Middle States flowed westward, occupying western New York and even parts of southern Canada; from these places they moved into the upper areas of the Old Northwest. Simultaneously, settlers from the Virginia and Carolina backcountries flooded into Kentucky and Tennessee and the southern regions of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. In turn, the southern border states and the Old Northwest were sources of migrants for the trans-Mississippi Middle West. While some of the population in the southern backcountry moved north and west through the Appalachian chain, another current of southerners trekked along the Gulf, creating a pool of potential settlers for Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas.

Modest during the first thirty years of the American Republic, immigration quickened in the 1830s, when more than half a million new residents arrived. By the 1850s, the number had risen to almost three million, and five and one-quarter million entered the country during the 1880s. Initially, most of the immigrants in this period were Irish, but by the 1850s, Germans were arriving in comparable numbers. Many newcomers came from the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, and Canada, and almost every European state or province was represented. One historian of American immigration argued that the newcomers shunned the frontier—they were "fillers in." Many did

establish themselves in towns or cities or in older farming communities, but immigrants also shared in the agricultural settlement of the trans-Mississippi West. Foreign-born Kansans never totaled more than 13 percent of the population in the period of most rapid settlement in the state, 1860–90, and the proportion in Texas was smaller. But Nebraskans of foreign extraction made up more than 20 percent of the state's residents between 1860 and 1880, dropping to 19 percent in 1890. At that time, 32 percent of Dakotans had been born under other flags. A magnet for gold seekers, California counted 39 percent of its residents as foreign-born in 1860, with approximately 30 percent remaining in that category thirty years later. These facts of population composition and growth are basic to understanding agricultural settlement in the trans-Mississippi West because there, the agrarian culture bearers of the older American North and South mingled with settlers of different heritage, and together they faced new challenges of adaptation.

According to one of the songs of the Mormon handcart migration, "Some may push and some may pull." So it was when individuals considered moving into or within western America. Inability to find farms close to parents or relatives, inhospitable social or religious environments, nagging loads of debt, the conviction that one's locality was ague-ridden or otherwise unhealthy, and clouded land titles—these were factors that pushed people westward. On the other hand, settlers were lured by opportunities for cheap land, tales of rising land values and fantastic crop yields, the urging of relatives in the new country, and newspaper stories or letters singing the praises of a frontier region.

Some westward migrants believed themselves to be agents of destiny. Southern frontiersmen flocking to Mexico and, later, independent Texas considered themselves apostles of republican institutions and were eager to expand their domain. Others who pioneered the overland trail to Oregon or Hispanic California fused the ideology of imperial republicanism with an ambition to prosper in a rich new country. Marching into the Great Salt Lake basin in the wake of Brigham Young and his pioneers, the Latter-day Saints sought not only a religious utopia but also economic security. John Brown and his sons waged war on the slave power in Kansas but staked out land claims there as well.

Some migrants impulsively decided to emigrate; others deliberated at length, push and pull commingled in their minds. Sometimes the embittered bachelor, the bereaved widower, or the independent young woman resolved, in solitary contemplation, to leave his or her home; but usually the decision was a product of family, community, or congregational interaction. Many wives went unwillingly, dreading the disruption of family, the dangers of the trail, and the primitive conditions of pioneering. Others welcomed the adventure and shared their spouses' hopes for success in the West. "A setting hen never gains any feathers," one wife pertly responded when importuned by family members to let her husband proceed her.

The rural householders who left midwestern communities during the nineteenth century were younger than the community mean, possessed less property than those who stayed, and had smaller families. In mid-nineteenth-century Appanoose County, Iowa, for example, the mean total wealth of persisting householders, age thirty to thirty-nine in 1860, was \$2,348, whereas those of the same age group who left the county during the next decade possessed assets averaging only \$1,401. Such differences were not

always present and often were not great. Although family heads in every adult age group migrated, the typical nonpersisters were in their thirties and were not impoverished. Indeed, some members of the initial migration to Oregon and California possessed means beyond the average of the communities from which they came.

For most westering Americans, the decision to emigrate involved the vision of a verdant farm and a thriving family. Land was the lure. Settlers learned of the agricultural possibilities of the West in myriad ways. Land speculators advertised their western holdings with handbills, pamphlets, and newspaper stories. In the early nineteenth century, the American travel account was a popular literary form, and many publications described parts of the American frontier. Although few literary travelers penetrated the land beyond the Mississippi during the first half of the nineteenth century, more of them did so as transportation expanded into the western grasslands and mountain regions. Eastern newspapers featured letters from the West, sometimes from former residents happily reestablished on the new frontiers and on other occasions from eastern newspapermen exploring the region. Early in the nineteenth century, guidebooks became available, describing the natural resources and surface features of western regions and providing digests of the federal land laws and state laws of interest to prospective emigrants, as well as depicting appropriate routes and transportation agencies. Josiah T. Marshall's *Farmer's and Emigrant's Hand-Book: Being a Full and Complete Guide for the Farmer and the Emigrant*, of 1845, was almost five hundred pages long, with chapters on the "Naturalization and Preemption Laws" and a "Miscellany—Containing a vast variety of Recipes, Hints, Tables, Facts, etc. etc., to aid the Emigrant, whether male or female . . . in daily life."

Westerners were keenly aware of the importance of attracting settlers. If others joined them, western economies would thrive; emigrants would be not only comrades in state building but also consumers and producers. Western lawmakers, officials, and community leaders subscribed to the gospel of development. Minnesota established a State Board of Immigration in 1855, and other western states followed suit. Such agencies hired representatives who distributed pamphlets and other materials, trumpeting the abundance of cheap farmlands. By 1864, Kansas was sending emissaries abroad, and after 1872, the thick *Biennial Reports* of the Kansas Board of Agriculture informed readers about crop production and the availability of farmland. In 1887, the governor of the Wyoming Territory promised wonderful futures to "practical, every-day farmers, who will put their hands to the plow and not look back."

The federal government granted public lands to the new western states for the support of education, for the erection of public buildings, and after 1820, for the improvement of transportation. If revenue was to be derived from their sale, the lands must be advertised. By the 1840s, railroads had begun obtaining land grants from the states, and with the advent of the Illinois Central project in 1850, the great era of federal land-grant railroad advertising dawned. Companies like the Union Pacific and the Northern Pacific energetically advertised their imperial domains. Railroad land departments organized excursions for newspapermen and land lookers, sent agents abroad, and printed handbills and pamphlets describing their fertile lands and favorable terms of purchase. The Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company advertised "millions of acres of Iowa and Nebraska Lands" for sale—on ten years time, at 6 percent interest,



payments of principal to begin after two years, and with the cost of a land excursion ticket to be deducted from the first payment if the purchase was made within thirty days. While the settler sought his new farm, his family might wait in "free rooms" in Burlington, Iowa, or Lincoln, Nebraska.

Western community leaders were also active. Local lawyers and real estate men persuaded easterners with capital to invest in western land, mortgages, and tax certificates and to entrust the supervision of such investments to them. In the process, they sang the praises of the country. On the postbellum frontiers, realtors thrived first as claim locators, guiding land seekers to lands that were available under federal laws. Some attempted to attract settlers from the older regions.

The community of black settlers at Nicodemus, Kansas, owed its existence to such activity. "All Colored People that want to GO TO KANSAS, on September 5th, 1877, Can do so for \$5.00." So read the handbills that announced the formation of the colony (membership, one dollar) in Lexington, Kentucky, during the summer of 1877. Among those who paid their dollar was the freedman Thomas Johnson. He was part of a group of three hundred who reached the townsite of Nicodemus in Graham County, Kansas, in mid-September, only to find a settlement of bankside dugouts. Arriving later, the wife of an African-American minister saw "various smokes coming out of the ground." "The scenery," she wrote, "was not at all inviting, and I began to cry." A white Kansan from Indiana, W. R. Hill, provided the initial impetus for the establishment of this community of blacks in the valley of the South Fork of the Solomon River, 240 miles west of Topeka. Hill was a townsite promoter and claim locator, and of the five dollars mentioned in the handbill, two dollars was paid to him for his services in locating the colony families on claims, two dollars covered the filing fee at the land office, and one dollar went into the colony treasury.

Western urban centers harboring pretensions (and most did) organized chambers of commerce or boards of trade whose advertising and reports were designed to attract emigrants. By the last third of the nineteenth century, community leaders viewed "booming" editors, such as Marsh Murdock, of the *Wichita Eagle*, as prizes beyond price. In the spirit of the game, the *Kirwin (Kansas) Chief* printed Lucy Larcom's "A Call to Kansas" in 1876: "Yeoman strong; hither throng! / Nature's honest men, / We will make the wilderness / Bud and bloom again."

"Boom" went "bust" when the feverish settlement activity of the 1880s in the plains country collapsed amid dust, low prices, and foreclosures. But as western frontier communities prospered in the early twentieth century, community leaders once more sang of opportunity, only now they were "boosters." Their intent was the same.

Although the journalistic scribbling and advertising had an impact, personal contact with western family members or neighbors who returned for visits often provided the incentive to go West. And letters from those in the West were passed from hand to hand within families. Ephraim G. Fairchild, a resident of Jones County, Iowa, in 1857 wrote to a relative, "I think that I can plough and harrow out here without being nocked and jerked about with the stones as I allways have been in Jersey . . . if Father and Mother and the rest of the family was out here . . . they would make a living easier than they can in Jersey." So worked the process of chain migration. In Scandinavia such letters were

“America Letters” and were read by family networks. The same process occurred in church congregations, spreading migration fever.

Colonies of former neighbors developed in the West, by specific plan or by the accretion of family members, former neighbors, or acquaintances from the same eastern locality or foreign country. Of the organized colonies, none was more exotic than Bethlehem Yehuda, a corporate colony based on socialistic principles established during the early 1880s by idealistic young unmarried Ukranian Jews near Mount Vernon, South Dakota. But as the writer Irving Howe noted, “The leap from a Ukranian *shtetl* to . . . South Dakota—the cultural leap, the economic leap—was simply too great.” Bethlehem Yehuda failed.

The last generation of American social historians has shown that nineteenth-century Americans were highly mobile. The federal census takers of one enumeration found less than half of the same pioneer farm households recorded by their predecessors a decade earlier. In the interim, settlers had come and gone. Given that there were fifty-five live births per one thousand of population in the United States in 1820—a figure that stood at thirty in 1910 (as compared with eighteen in 1970)—we might have expected such results. Once fully settled, the rural communities of the nineteenth century produced more children than could be accommodated without drastic subdivision of farms. Barring local urban or industrial opportunities, individuals had to leave, and some went West. That region did not draw equally from the older states and foreign countries; among American migrant residents in western regions, a predominance of settlers came from the nearer states. This held true even in the transcontinental migration to Oregon, where Missourians were most common in the early days. Settlers from more than a few hundred miles away became more common on the plains during the late nineteenth century, when the emigrant’s boxcar provided an attractive alternative to the covered wagon.

Although many western farmers moved several times during the course of their lives, the early generations west of the Mississippi blended stability with movement. Most rural communities developed a core of longtime resident farmers; other settlers came and went, and some maturing children sought opportunity elsewhere. Thirty or forty years after the settlement of western rural communities, farmers bearing the surnames of original settlers could still be found, whereas their siblings were farming on new frontiers. In other cases, particularly among some foreign-born settlers, sons and sons-in-law acquired the adjacent lands of aging farmers and established family enclaves within the community.

### *Acquiring Land*

In early June 1873, Henry Ise and his bride, Rosie, reached Henry’s homestead and dirt-roofed log cabin in Osborne County, Kansas. Frank and Sam, their team of horses, had pulled the canvas-covered wagon, loaded with supplies, and the husband and wife had alternated between sitting on the wagon seat and driving their small herd of cattle. That day, the sun shone, prairie flowers bloomed in profusion, meadowlarks filled the air with birdsong, and Rosie wore calico and a pink sunbonnet. Although threatened by a flood in Dry Creek at the corner of Henry’s claim, the couple arrived at the farmstead safely. The cabin measured eighteen by fifteen feet and was flanked by a straw-roofed stable,

a chicken house of sod, a well with wheel and buckets, and a small fenced corral. Within the cabin were a bed, a tiny stove, boxes for chairs, and a nail-box washstand positioned on a floor of cottonwood boards. Nearby patches of sturdy corn, wheat, and oats promised good things to come. Spartan though this was, other homesteader wives found less-developed claims awaiting them.

When the pioneer farmers pushed across the Mississippi during the early nineteenth century, they understood the major features of the federal land-disposal system. Federal surveyors had preceded them, or were soon to follow, leaving a grid of baselines and prime meridians in which were set ranges of townships six miles square, subdivided by survey crews into thirty-six mile-square sections, each further divisible into smaller units. Within the framework of the federal survey, the settlers sought land to their liking. Initially, they used the land auction with its minimum price of \$1.25 per acre (after 1820) and the right of purchase by private entry of offered, but unsold, land. Due in part to the political power of the pioneers, Congress liberalized the system, passing preemption, donation, and homestead laws, as well as implementing environmental adaptations like the timber culture laws and the Desert Land Act of the 1870s. But the settlers also found many fertile western lands available only by purchase from railroad companies or western territories or states, as well as from the reviled land speculators.

Congress approved thousands of laws relating to the nation's public domain, but the Homestead Act (1862) symbolized the process of western settlement. Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people . . . whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." Jefferson hoped that the lands of the United States would be used to foster the development of this class of citizens. The Homestead Act seemingly epitomized such thought. In reality, Congress established a system of land disposal that also served the interests of capitalists and developers. For this reason, as well as the feeling that the law did not meet western needs, historians have sometimes belittled the importance of the Homestead Act and the amendments that increased the size of the grant from 160 to 640 acres and shortened the period of compulsory residence. The facts of farm making between 1860 and 1920 contradict this belittlement. During those years, the number of farms in the United States increased by some 4.4 million. At the same time, 1.4 million homesteaders or their heirs received final patents, equivalent to 32 percent of the increase in farm numbers. So, the Homestead Act probably accounted for a substantial proportion of the new farms opened during this country's greatest period of agricultural expansion. Also, many pioneers filed claims under the law and relinquished them for a sum proffered by other settlers or commuted them to cash purchases. Sometimes commutation reflected poverty and distress; on other occasions the relinquisher or the commuter expected a quick profit. Still, for seventy years the Homestead Act gave legions of Americans inexpensive access to the land market and farm ownership.

Acquiring a farm was not always easy, and over time, it became more difficult. When Congress passed the Homestead Act in 1862, the farm frontier of the prairies and plains still included much of Minnesota, some of northwestern Iowa, most of Nebraska, and two-thirds of Kansas. For over a generation, 160 acres had been an ample unit through much of the unsettled portion of these states and in California, Oregon, and the Washington Territory. But settlers moving into the high plains and the dry plateau and