

Chapter 17

The West Transformed (1860–1896)

What You Will Learn

Miners and railroad builders led to settlement of the West. Native Americans struggled to maintain their way of life. Western farmers faced many challenges.

Chapter 17 Focus Question

As you read this chapter, keep this question in mind: **How did the growth of big business affect the development of the West?**

Section 1

Mining and Railroads

Section 1 Focus Question

How did mining and railroads draw people to the West? To begin answering this question,

- Find out about the boom and bust of the gold and silver rushes.
- Learn about the railroad boom.

Section 1 Summary

Americans rushed west after gold was discovered. Railroad companies helped open up the West to settlement.

Boom and Bust

In 1865, the western frontier stretched from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. It took in mountains, prairies, deserts, and forests. Settlers heading west passed over the Great Plains, which they thought were barren.

The trickle of settlers headed west became a flood when gold was discovered in California in 1849. Miners spread from California to South Dakota.

In 1859, silver was found in the Sierra Nevada. The find was known as the Comstock Lode. It became one of the richest silver mines in the world. Only big companies had the machinery to mine the ore deep underground. By the 1880s, western mining had become big business.

Key Events

1867

First cattle drive on Chisholm Trail.

1887

Dawes Act breaks up Native American tribal lands.

1889

Oklahoma opens to homesteaders.

Reading Strategy

Reread the bracketed paragraph. It describes a cause and an effect. Underline the cause and circle the effect.



Miners lived in boomtowns that sprang up overnight. These towns supplied food, board, and tools to the miners at very high prices. Women could make a good living running boarding houses, restaurants, and laundries.

Almost half of miners were foreign-born. They often faced hostility and discrimination. For example, laws restricted Chinese miners to claims abandoned by others.

Mining towns sprouted so fast that law and order were hard to find. People formed groups of **vigilantes**, or self-appointed law keepers. Vigilantes hunted down people they considered criminals and punished people as they saw fit. As towns grew, residents created more lasting forms of government. But in some towns, when all the ore was taken, miners and merchants left. Boomtowns became ghost towns. ✓

The Railroad Boom

Before 1860, the railroads stopped at the Mississippi River. The federal government offered the railroad companies **subsidies**, or grants of land and money, to build out their lines. For every mile of track they laid, railroads got ten square miles of land next to the track. Very quickly, the railroads owned over 180 million acres.

In 1862, Leland Stanford and his partners won the right to build a railroad eastward from Sacramento. Their company was called the Central Pacific Railroad. It would build the western leg of the **transcontinental railroad**, a railroad line spanning the continent. At the same time, the Union Pacific Railroad was building west from Omaha. On May 10, 1869, the two lines met in Promontory, Utah.

With the transcontinental railroad in place, the west became a fixed part of the U.S. economy. Goods flowed between the East and the West. Railroad stops turned into towns that grew rapidly. Eight western territories became states in the period from 1864 to 1890. ✓

Check Your Progress

1. What was the Comstock Lode?

2. How did railroads come to own millions of acres of land?

Vocabulary Builder

Based on context clues in your reading, write your own definition of a boom.

✓ Checkpoint

List three kinds of businesses women ran in boomtowns.

✓ Checkpoint

Name the two companies that built the transcontinental railroad.
