

# AMERICAN HISTORY

VOLUME 2



1877-PRESENT

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To Jonathan and Joshua Kidd

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## INTRODUCTION

**W**riting an overview of American history—or of any nation’s history—is a daunting task. There’s so much to cover, yet so much has to be left out. Most people who have ever lived left us little to no surviving records of their lives. Historical overviews usually focus on luminaries such as presidents, tycoons, inventors, and celebrities. And they focus on great events such as battles, economic disasters, and presidential elections. My overview of American history focuses a great deal on such characters and events too. But I have tried where possible to weave in anecdotes of regular people as well. Often my justification for weaving in such stories is their utter typicality, or the way they illuminate people’s everyday experiences and struggles.

Focusing on great events also risks giving the impression that those events had the same significance for everyone in America, but that has rarely been the case. Take the Revolutionary War journal of Baptist chaplain Hezekiah Smith, for example. The July 1776 weekend that the Declaration of Independence was signed, Smith wrote one line in his journal: “Something unwell, tho’ kept about.” He was sick and did not know about events transpiring in Philadelphia that weekend. What seems inordinately significant in retrospect may not have seemed so important at the time. Conversely, events and people that seem momentous at the time may not appear that way in retrospect.

To narrow the focus of this book and make it manageable, I have emphasized certain major themes in American history. Some of the focus emerges from my own interests and perspective. Readers should know that I am a Christian, and a Baptist in particular. I identify with the historic evangelical tradition and the faith of figures such as the Baptist champions of revival and religious liberty in the eighteenth century. This

commitment profoundly shapes my view of history. Therefore, I give a lot of attention to religion. I admittedly think that religious people (which in America has mostly meant Christians), for all their faults, have generally been a force for good in American history. I also illustrate that America's best ideas and most stirring speeches have often been rooted in the language and concepts of faith.

Another major theme of this book is racial and ethnic conflict. From the coming of the first colonizers, and the first shipments of slaves, racial tension and violence have been enduring themes in American history. They remain so today. There are obvious signs of progress in race relations in American history such as the end of slavery and the civil rights movement. But just when we think we've entered a "post-racial" America, racial controversies and racial violence roil American society again. These themes, both valuable and painful to consider, are ones to which Christian historians should give special attention.

A final major theme is the state of American culture, especially with regard to issues such as virtue, traditional moral norms, mass media, and entertainment. These issues are in the background of the whole book. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, however, entertainment and mass media have become progressively central to everyday American life. In an indirectly related development, our most basic cultural institutions, such as family and marriage, have come under increasing duress. Especially since the 1960s, Americans have been jettisoning some of our most basic assumptions about a good society and a wholesome life. We have simultaneously been "amusing ourselves to death," in the words of scholar Neil Postman, as mass media, sports, entertainment, and marketing have become increasingly paramount in our daily lives. I tend to observe and describe rather than excoriate and prescribe in this book. But the accelerating pace of social change, and Americans' concomitant obsession with entertainment, will be obvious.

A book on American history is something like national autobiography. It tells us how we got where we are. It cautions us about mistakes and sins we have committed in the past and urges us not to go there again. It encourages us to understand why the past is often pertinent to the present. It inspires us by the courage of historical heroes and stiffens our resolve as we try to honor their legacies. Christians believe the kingdom of God is our ultimate commitment, and we should confuse no temporal nation with that kingdom. But we are also thankful for the ways God has moved in American history, redeeming untold millions of people and building his church in each generation. I hope that readers will grow in their appreciation for the role faith played in the American past and discern the ways in which America has been (or has not been) a congenial place for people of faith to flourish.

# Reforging the Nation

Out of the wreckage of the Civil War, the American nation began to emerge as a fully continental power with new ambitions that extended to the world stage. The war-torn South would languish for decades, hamstrung by bitter racial strife and the destruction unleashed by the war on its infrastructure and its young men. But immigration, massive capitalist businesses, and urban centers would all boom during the post-Reconstruction era. White settlers would also pour onto the Great Plains and surge out to the Pacific coast, making America a more unified continent than it had ever been before.

For individual settlers, forging a new life in the West was often difficult, full of daily struggles and drudgery. In 1875, a nineteen-year-old woman named Luna Kellie went ahead with her father into Nebraska while her husband stayed behind in Missouri to accumulate more cash for their new farm. She also brought her five-month-old son with her. A few hundred miles northwest of Kansas City, they came to the village of Hastings, Nebraska, which Kellie regarded as a “mudhole” and the “worst looking little town I had ever seen.” On the bleak prairie no trees or any other notable structures broke up the monotonous landscape. All she saw were occasional sod houses. She had not expected them to be so dirty. Her father reminded her that sod houses were dirty because they were made of dirt. Her family would live not in a sod house but in a dug-out, or a cave excavated into the side of a riverbank. It had the great advantage that its roof did not leak, unlike most pioneer structures.

Only a year before Kellie moved, the Great Plains were struck by an invasion of grasshoppers that reminded many of the plagues that beset Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. Everywhere they stepped, they crushed grasshoppers underfoot. The insects



**Figure 16.1.** J. C. Cram sod house, Loup County, Nebraska.

ate all vegetation in sight and reportedly even gnawed on green-colored clothing. They consumed root crops such as carrots and onions down into the ground. Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the enduringly popular *Little House* books about frontier life, wrote that the grasshoppers were the one thing that nearly vanquished her mother's indomitable will. Wilder remembered listening to the incessant "whirring and snipping and chewing" of the innumerable grasshoppers as she lay in bed. Everywhere the grasshoppers went, they laid eggs, ensuring that their progeny would be back the next growing season.

## Indian Wars

As people like the Kellie and Wilder families moved into the West, they were not entering an unpopulated wilderness. Continuing an American story that went back to Columbus, the geographic expansion of people of European ancestry put increasing pressure on Native Americans' territory, cultures, and livelihood. At the end of the Civil War, about 250,000 Native Americans lived in the West, in an area that composed

about half of the United States' territory. These areas had been absorbed by measures such as the Louisiana Purchase and the surrender of northern Mexico at the end of the Mexican War in the 1840s. But the Indians who lived there had an uncertain and often hostile relationship with the American nation. Some of them, such as the Cherokees, had been forced into the West by Indian removal policies. Others, including the Comanches and the Lakotas, had long lived in the West and experienced less pressure from whites than the Indian groups in the East had before the Civil War.

The West became easier for whites to access because of government forts built to protect settlers and because of growing national railroad networks. The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, when the Central Pacific and Union Pacific lines joined in a ceremony at Promontory Point, Utah. Soon four more transcontinental lines would be completed, and towns spread out around railroad depots throughout the West.



**Figure 16.2.** Eastern approach to Dale Creek Bridge, 1869. The great West was illustrated in a series of photographic views across the continent taken along the line of the Union Pacific Railroad west from Omaha, Nebraska.

As settlement spread, so did fights, murders, and battles between whites and Indians across the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain region. In the late 1850s, gold was discovered in the area around Pikes Peak in Colorado, leading to a massive influx of whites and conflict with local Arapaho and Cheyenne tribes. Cheyenne chief Black Kettle eventually sought to negotiate peace with the US Army and took hundreds of his followers to an encampment at Sand Creek, Colorado. But Black Kettle's people were attacked in November 1864 by forces under the command of Colonel John Chivington. Chivington had declared, "I have come [to Colorado] to kill Indians, and I believe it is right and honorable to use any means under God's heaven to kill Indians." When recruiting for his militia, Chivington displayed the bodies of a white family that had been murdered by Indians.

Chivington told the soldiers to "kill and scalp all, big and little. Nits make lice"—he wanted even the Indian children exterminated. When Chivington's force attacked, Black Kettle sought to display an American flag and a white flag of truce to declare their peaceful intentions, but to no avail. Chivington's militia bombarded Sand Creek with artillery and rifle fire and then moved in to individually butcher the elderly, women, and children. (Only a few dozen fighting-age Indians were at the camp.) Some whites were disgusted by the Sand Creek massacre. Frontiersman and soldier Kit Carson wrote that Chivington's "men shot down squaws, and blew the brains out of little innocent children. You call such soldiers Christians, do ye? And Indians savages? What do you suppose our Heavenly Father, who made both them and us, thinks of these things?" Black Kettle and his wife survived the massacre, only to be killed when they were trying to flee US forces under the command of George A. Custer in 1868.

The Oglala leader, Red Cloud, launched one of the most effective offensives ever against US forces from 1866 to 1868, in what became known as "Red Cloud's War." Once again the hostilities resulted from an enormous influx of white prospectors and settlers, this time in response to the discovery of gold in Montana in the early 1860s. The US Army sought to protect white travelers along the Bozeman Trail into the region. They built Fort Philip Kearny in present-day northern Wyoming in 1866, but in late 1866 Red Cloud tricked army forces into pursuing his warriors outside the fort and led them into an ambush in which eighty-one US soldiers were killed. The attack was widely treated as a massacre in the national media, but it forced the army to temporarily reconsider its approach to the Great Plains Indians. Red Cloud agreed to the Treaty of Laramie (1868), with the provision that the Oglala and other Lakota peoples be given fairly large reservation lands, where the United States promised to ban white settlement. The army withdrew from forts, including Fort Philip Kearny, which Indians burned when the soldiers left.

In the southern Great Plains, Comanche and Kiowa Indians rose up in the 1870s against the incursions of white buffalo hunters, who were decimating the vast herds of buffaloes (American bison) upon which so many Native Americans of the southern plains depended. Whites killed the buffalo for a number of reasons; the value of their hides was only one. Another was clearing out rangeland for cattle raisers. But many saw killing the buffalo as an assault on the Indian way of life. “Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone,” explained one white officer. The effect of the campaign against the buffalo was stunning: the herds went from a total of perhaps 13 million bison in 1850, to only a few hundred left alive in the 1880s. (In America today there are more than 500,000 American bison, most of them held by ranchers.)

The Comanches had long ruled the southern plains as a kind of Indian empire, but by the 1870s they were under severe duress because of the dwindling buffalo herds and pressure from US forces. The Comanches took new inspiration from the prophecies of a medicine man named Isatai, who urged them to return to traditional native rituals for spiritual and military power. In June 1874, Isatai and Quanah Parker, the Comanche leader whose Anglo mother, Cynthia Ann, had been stolen away from her family almost forty years earlier, led an attack on the buffalo hunter outpost of Adobe Walls, in the Texas panhandle. The battle was inconclusive, but it helped precipitate the Red River War of 1874–1875.

Philip Sheridan, a celebrated Union commander in the Civil War, vowed to root out the Comanches from the Texas panhandle once and for all. The decisive battle of the Red River War came at Palo Duro Canyon in September 1874, when US forces trapped a group of Comanches who were known to be leaders in the cattle-rustling trade across the Texas border with Mexico. Many of the Comanches escaped, but they had to leave behind their vast herd of ponies. The soldiers, realizing the ponies’ value to the Comanches (and the likelihood that they would steal them back if possible), slaughtered more than a thousand of the animals. Some Comanches and other southern plains Indians continued to fight. But in June 1875, Quanah Parker decided to surrender and take his family and many followers to a reservation at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

### **Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee**

The 1868 Treaty of Laramie did not end the violence between the Lakota people and the US Army. Again, the discovery of gold in the Black Hills region (in what would become South Dakota) in the mid-1870s enticed thousands of white prospectors into Lakota territory. Conflict erupted, and the US Army sent in forces to protect white

settlers and to convince the Lakotas to go to ever-smaller reservations. One of the army's commanders in the campaign against the Lakotas was George A. Custer, who overextended his detachment to attack an Indian camp on the Little Bighorn River in Montana in June 1876. (It was the week before the centennial of American independence.) Custer assumed it would be an easy victory, but his 260 soldiers stumbled into an encampment of at least 1,500 Lakota and Cheyenne warriors. The warriors under Lakota medicine man Sitting Bull and war leader Crazy Horse were flummoxed by the sight of the small American force attacking the vastly superior native army. Custer's soldiers were utterly decimated. The only ones left alive on Custer's side were his Crow and Arikara Indian scouts and allies. The national media was appalled at "Custer's last stand" and demanded the Lakota resistance be crushed. Most of the Lakotas surrendered to the American army by the end of 1876. Crazy Horse was bayoneted under mysterious circumstances at a Nebraska army fort in 1877. Sitting Bull held out until 1881, when he agreed to retire to a reservation.



**Figure 16.3.** Pueblo Indian farmers, one holding a hoe, one holding an ox yoke; possibly Pueblo of Isleta, New Mexico.

The US government sought to reduce the size of the reservations and to get Native Americans to possess land as individuals and families, not tribes. This was the motivation behind the Dawes Severalty Act (1887). This law provided for the breakup of the reservations into 160-acre plots, designed for purchase by heads of Indian families. (This followed a logic similar to that of the Homestead Act of 1862.) Taking the government's offer of a homestead would also make the Indian farmers citizens of the United States. Indians had not been considered citizens before, and section 2 of the Fourteenth Amendment had specifically excluded Native Americans from representation. The remaining reservation lands not designated as homestead allotments would become available for purchase by whites.

The Dawes Act tied Indian citizenship to the “civilized” pursuit of family life and sedentary farming. Even Buffalo Bill Cody, the popular Wild West entertainer, endorsed the Dawes Act. “Giving a tribe an immense tract to roam over, and feeding and clothing them until they learned to support themselves . . . is foolish,” Cody said. “It would ruin white men if it should be applied to them.” Some Native Americans took up the government’s offer in the Dawes Act, but they often struggled to provide for their families, as they ended up on lands poorly suited even to subsistence farming. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, sought to reverse the failed policies of the Dawes Act, but the federal government continued to struggle to find effective policies to alleviate the endemic poverty found among many Native American groups.

Meanwhile, episodes of Indian resistance against the United States continued. In 1890, a nativist revival movement centered around the ritual of the “Ghost Dance” gave some of the Lakotas hope of a return of Indian power. The visions of a Paiute Indian leader in Nevada started the Ghost Dance movement, and it filtered up through the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains. The revelations, said to be from Native Americans’ ancestors, urged them to give up alcohol and to turn back to traditional native practices and rites. If they did, the white people’s power would falter and the buffalo herds would once again thrive, the prophecies said. When the Ghost Dance movement came to Sitting Bull’s reservation, authorities worried that he would encourage the native revival. Lakota policemen came to arrest him in late 1890, and in the ensuing clash, more than a dozen people died, including Sitting Bull.

On December 29, 1890, US soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry, George Custer’s old unit, confronted hundreds of Lakotas associated with the Ghost Dance movement. They were camped at the snowy Wounded Knee creek in southern South Dakota. A Lakota medicine man reportedly called on the Indians to resist the soldiers, believing the Ghost Dancers’ ceremonial garb would deflect bullets. In the struggle a gun discharged, and the soldiers began shelling the encampment with cannon fire. When the shooting stopped, twenty-five soldiers and 146 Indians, including forty-four women and eighteen children, lay dead. Wounded Knee became symbolic for many Native Americans of their treatment by the American government. Eight decades after the massacre, in 1973, an internal dispute among Oglala Lakotas turned into a confrontation with federal law enforcement officials as Lakotas associated with the American Indian Movement occupied the town of Wounded Knee. The U.S. Marshals Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation laid siege to Wounded Knee for seventy-one days before the protestors finally surrendered.



**Figure 16.4.** “Burial of the dead at the battle of Wounded Knee, South Dakota. US soldiers putting Indians in a common grave; some corpses are frozen in different positions.” 1891.

## New Lands and New Opportunities in the West

The decimation of Native American societies west of the Mississippi River opened the door for a massive migration of whites, including new European immigrants, onto the Indians’ former lands. Smaller numbers of Asians also migrated into the new Pacific-coast states and territories. Almost 200,000 Chinese people came to the United States between the 1840s and 1880s. By 1870, Chinese people represented about one-tenth of California’s population, playing a key role as laborers in the mining and railroad industries. Resentment among native-born and European workers prompted the national government to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which ended immigration from China for a decade.

Hispanics also moved across the Rio Grande into the American Southwest. As the United States came into possession of much of the former Mexican-controlled Southwest in the 1840s, the descendants of the original Spanish colonizers began to lose their hold on the land there. But the Spanish-speaking population continued

to grow. Perhaps one-fourth of the population of Los Angeles County was Spanish-speaking as of 1880. (Los Angeles was founded in 1781, with the Catholic parish church of Our Lady the Queen of Angels [1784] serving as a focal point in the city's life for much of its first 150 years of existence.) The city of Los Angeles was growing fast, as was its Mexican population. Some 5,000 Mexicans lived in the city in 1910, but that number soared to 30,000 in 1920, when Los Angeles's total population was about 570,000. Federal authorities created the Border Patrol in 1924, in part to monitor the US–Mexico border.

African Americans from the South also migrated in ever-greater numbers to Los Angeles and other parts of the West in the early twentieth century, attracted by the prospect of greater economic and social opportunities. One of those migrants was an African American Pentecostal preacher named William Seymour, who in 1906 would lead one of the most significant events in twentieth-century religious history, the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles. That revival attracted crowds of whites, blacks, Latinos, and Asians, many of whom said they received the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. The gift of tongues was frequently mentioned in the New Testament, but until 1906 it had appeared only infrequently in American revivalist movements. Azusa Street birthed a new “charismatic” movement in America. Pentecostal missionaries from America would soon travel around the world. Many regard Seymour's revival as the beginning of the modern Pentecostal Christian movement, which has hundreds of millions of adherents worldwide today.

The national government had a vested interest in seeing the vast West settled by farmers to secure the land and integrate the territories and states into the American republic. The federal government “owned” hundreds of millions of western acres by the 1860s, but it needed homesteaders and railroad companies to build out the infrastructure there. Laws such as the Homestead Act of 1862 offered generous terms to those farmers who would take up the challenge. It supplied 160 acres for a modest fee to any farmer who promised to work the land for five years. The program was wildly successful as over four decades some 600,000 families took western homesteads under the act's provisions. Speculators took advantage of the law to buy up the best well-watered land available, however—160 acres was not worth much if it was in the middle of a desert.

In areas of the Great Plains not suited to agriculture, cattle ranching became common. At first ranchers kept their herds on open ranges on vast stretches of land running from Texas to the Dakotas. The “cowboys” who worked the ranches were a mix of Anglos, blacks, and Mexicans. Cowboys learned most of their cattle-ranching techniques from precedents developed by earlier Mexican ranch workers called *vaqueros*. Many of the cows themselves were Texas longhorns, which originally came from

Mexico as well. Although the longhorns' meat was not the best quality, the cows thrived with little supervision in south Texas. The King Ranch of south Texas, founded in 1853, came to encompass a mind-boggling 1.2 million acres. Even in its "scaled down" modern form, the King Ranch is larger than the state of Rhode Island.

The primary inefficiency in the ranching system in the 1860s was bringing the cattle to market, which involved lengthy cattle drives on north-south routes such as the Chisholm Trail, which ran from the Rio Grande in south Texas all the way to Kansas. There the railroads could take the cattle to points east, especially to Chicago and its vast network of meatpacking plants. Two developments undercut the golden age of the American cowboy and his cattle drives, however. One factor was the widespread fencing of ranch lands, which made the cattle much easier to restrain and manage.

The other factor signaling the end of the cowboys' golden age was the growing reach of the railroads into Texas. The coming of the railroad to Dallas in 1872 signaled the city's emergence as a key center of trade. In just over a year, its population spiked from 1,200 to 7,000. By the 1880s, much of the traditional work of the cowboys had been rendered irrelevant. White ranchers often turned more exclusively to Mexican cowboys after the 1880s because they could pay them less. Many of the former cowboys themselves turned to seasonal agricultural labor, or, ironically, to working for the railroads. One white railroad builder disparagingly observed a "rolling village" of workers laying down track, noting that it was composed of about 400 laborers, "a most conglomerate and strange population, white, negro, and for a short while a few Greeks, with the slow plodding Mexican predominating."

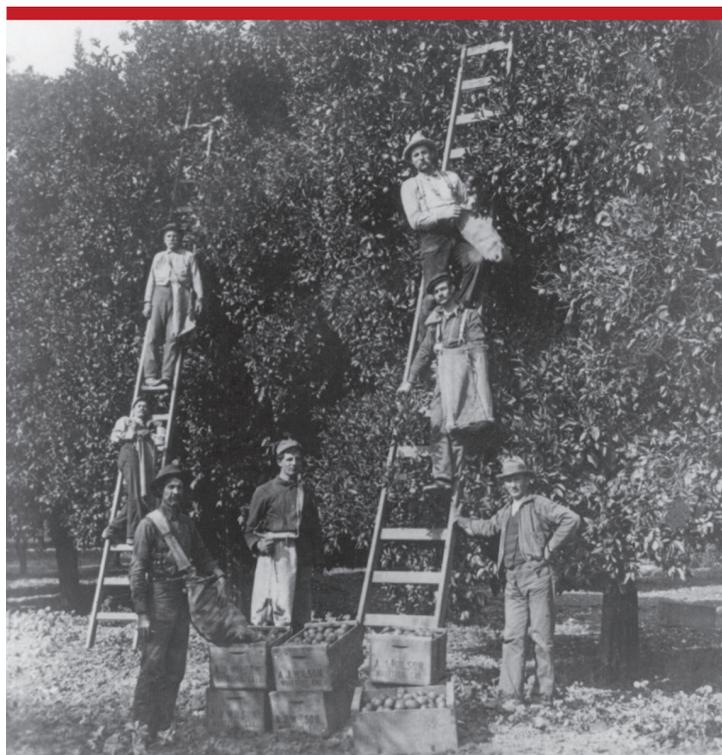
## Farmers Organize

Ranchers, cowboys, and farmers of all kinds often found themselves at odds with corporations such as the railroads, which sometimes charged hefty prices to transport their crops. In the late 1860s, farmers began to establish societies called the "National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry," or simply the Grange. Originally apolitical, the Grange intended to support farmers with social activities and educational opportunities. The Grange illustrated the typical American penchant for joining clubs and societies to address perceived common needs. It represented a critical organization standing between the individual farmer and the government or mammoth corporations. The Grange caught on quickly, with thousands of chapters nationally, especially in the South and the Midwest. A farmers' picnic in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, in 1873 drew 10,000 attendees, more than double the size of the town itself.

Grangers called for cooperative action to benefit the economic interests of farmers, setting prices that fellow Grangers agreed not to undercut and limiting the amount of harvested crops going to market. They used storehouses to preserve grain until prices rose to a profitable level. They lamented the influence of railroad lobbyists, “whose pockets are well filled with money, who want special legislation to replenish their own coffers.” Pro-business leaders scoffed at the Grangers. The *Chicago Tribune* lambasted the “spirit of Grangerism, Workingmanism, Communism, Grievanceism, or by whatever name the present fever among those who assume to themselves the title of the ‘industrial and producing classes.’” Railroad magnate Leland Stanford, the founder of Stanford University (1885), similarly said that Grange-inspired regulations on national corporations were “pure communism.” In spite of farmers’ efforts to organize their efforts, it remained difficult for many farmers to compete on the national market and to make a living. Droughts in the 1880s and ’90s forced many farmers to quit and go back East. From the 1890s forward, American farming gradually turned more commercial and corporate rather than focusing on the efforts of the individual farmer.

To cite just one example, James Irvine, patriarch of the Irvine family of California, was a Scots-Irish immigrant who made a fortune in the California Gold Rush and the subsequent San Francisco real estate boom of the 1850s. The Irvines, who would give their name to a Los Angeles suburb, acquired major property holdings in Southern California, renting farmland to sharecroppers and tenants. Over time the Irvines would expand their company into a host of agricultural, ranching, and mining businesses. By 1910, the Irvine Ranch had become one of the state’s most bountiful and lucrative farms, producing a dizzying array of crops, including avocados, oranges, and sugar beets. The Irvine Ranch would supply a significant share of the army’s sugar rations during World War I.

The settlement of Oklahoma in 1889 represented the last great homesteading rush in American history. The land was initially reserved for Native Americans, especially those who had been forced to leave their tribal lands east of the Mississippi in the early 1800s. However, the American government secured the opening of 2 million acres in the “Unassigned Lands” formerly held by Creeks and Seminoles. In a remarkable episode the administration of President Benjamin Harrison scheduled the opening of the lands for noon on April 22, 1889. Tens of thousands of white and black settlers crouched on the edge of the territory. The government rounded up and evicted the “Sooners” who had established squatter settlements before the scheduled opening. In “Harrison’s Horse Race,” the teeming settlers raced across the Oklahoma plains to capture the best possible homesteads. Towns such as Oklahoma City sprang up overnight, surging from an initial population of 4,000, to 64,000 by 1910.



**Figure 16.5.** *Picking and Packing Oranges in the Orchards, Near Los Angeles, California.* Stereograph showing workers in an orange grove.

Oklahoma became a state in 1907. In 1912, New Mexico and Arizona became the last two of the contiguous forty-eight states to join the Union. Although the Compromise of 1850 had contemplated statehood for New Mexico six decades earlier, some in Congress were reluctant to admit it as a state because some perceived it as being too culturally Hispanic. A House committee in 1892 worried that the “people of New Mexico are not Americans. . . . They speak a foreign language and . . . they have no affinity with American institutions.” Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana, who chaired the Senate’s committee on territories, also opposed the admission of New Mexico because of its Hispanic characteristics. He and other senators contrasted the “Mexican” population of New Mexico with the majority white “American” population of Arizona. Even Beveridge admitted in 1906, however, that some whites viewed New Mexico as a haven of Mexicans and “greasers” (an anti-Mexican epithet) simply because of its name. Beveridge noted hopefully that a majority of the “Mexicans” in New Mexico were actually descended from pure Spanish ancestry and “draw their blood for four hundred years from the very proudest nation on this globe.” He proposed that if

admission were handled properly, the United States could create “a situation ideal for the Americanizing within a few years every drop of the blood of Spain.” Many white Americans were less confident about the successful assimilation of people of indigenous American ancestry, whether they were of mixed blood or not.

In 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner delivered one of the most influential papers in the annals of American historical scholarship, arguing that the settlement of Oklahoma and the rest of the West represented the closing of the frontier era of American history. In some obvious senses this was true, as only Hawaii and Alaska remained to be added to the American union. But economic “rushes” were not over, nor were massive shifts of population due to internal migration or the arrival of new immigrants from Europe, Asia, or Central America. Still, the end of the frontier immediately produced an enduring nostalgia in American culture for the “Wild West.” Edison Studios, an early movie company founded by inventor and entrepreneur Thomas Edison, began to produce western-themed films by the late 1890s. Most importantly, in 1903, Edison Studios made a major mark on the history of filmmaking with *The Great Train Robbery*, the “first Western with a recognizable form” and one of the world’s first action films. The twelve-minute movie followed what became the classic western and action-film script, with “crime, pursuit, showdown, and justice.” The western genre has been an endless source for entertainment and literature in America, from the films of John Wayne and Clint Eastwood to TV shows such as *Gunslinger* and *Little House on the Prairie*, to the books of authors such as Cormac McCarthy and Larry McMurtry.

### Coming to America’s Cities

In spite of the romance of the West, between 1860 and 1920, America became profoundly urban. On the eve of the Civil War, only about one-sixth of Americans lived in towns of 8,000 people or more. By 1920, half of all Americans lived in towns that size. In tandem with the closing of the frontier, America was also transforming from a rural, agrarian, farming nation to one of cities, businesses, and factories.

The sources of the new urban populations were varied. Some were internal sources. Many African Americans sought to move out of the former slave states as opportunity allowed. Thousands of African Americans went to northern and western cities starting in the 1880s. Then, beginning in the 1910s, millions more African Americans left the South. All told, some six million blacks left the southern states between 1910 and 1970, a mass exodus historians call the “Great Migration.”

Another major source of urban growth in the late 1800s was immigration from overseas, especially central and eastern Europe. Improvements in steamship technology

made the transatlantic journey cheaper and quicker for Europeans seeking employment, freedom from persecution, or just a new life in America. Ships traversing the Atlantic switched from sail to steam propulsion and from wooden hulls to iron and finally to steel, which came to dominate ship construction by the 1890s. Crossing the ocean under wind power could take months; by steam it generally took ten days.

By the late 1870s, the tide of immigration, mostly from Europe, became a flood. Between 1877 and 1890 alone, 6.3 million new arrivals entered the United States. Even more would arrive before World War I. This influx rapidly changed the character of the American population, particularly in cities. By 1890, some 15 percent of the national population had not been born in the United States. Cities such as Chicago and New York were utterly transformed. By 1890 and 1900, respectively, four-fifths of these cities' populations were foreign born, or at least had parents who were not born in the United States.

### **Russian Jewish Immigration**

Sometimes economic and political instability prompted the immigrants' decisions to leave their homeland. In the 1840s, from opposite sides of the globe, the Irish potato famine and China's Taiping Rebellion (1848) sent hundreds of thousands of migrants to the East and West Coasts, respectively. In the 1880s, farmers under economic distress in countries such as Italy looked for better opportunity in the United States. Vast numbers of Russian Jews fled persecution beginning in the 1870s. Anti-Jewish hatred had exploded in major Russian cities and in small Russian towns. Tens of thousands of Jews were expelled from Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Kiev. In 1881–1882, more than 200 Russian towns saw the outbreak of anti-Semitic pogroms, or riots. Many displaced Jews ended up in American cities: between 1880 and 1900, 500,000 Russian Jews arrived in the United States. Another 1.5 million came between 1900 and 1914, with 125,000 Russian Jews arriving in America in 1906 alone.

Rose Cohen was just one of these millions of Russian Jewish immigrants. She had grown up in a tiny Russian village in Belarus, and her family lived in a log house with a thatched roof. Her home had few books other than the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), but once she learned to read, she read the Hebrew Bible through again and again. Suffering under the persecution of Russian authorities, Rose's father went to America first. Then in 1892, when Rose was twelve, she and her aunt traveled by train to Hamburg, Germany, where they took a steamship to New York City. She reunited with her father and began working at a clothes-making sweatshop. Dismayed by the terrible working conditions at the sweatshop, Rose was relieved to encounter a representative



**Figure 16.6.** Jews in New York City praying on Brooklyn Bridge.

of a workers' union. He lamented how the girls had to work: "Fourteen hours with your back bent, your eyes close to your work you sit stitching in a dull room often by gas light. . . . The black cloth dust eats into your very pores. You are breathing the air that all the other bent and sweating bodies in the shop are throwing off, and the air that comes in from the yard heavy and disgusting with filth and the odor of the open toilets." He insisted that by themselves they could do nothing to combat their ill treatment, but together they could. Rose immediately announced, "I want to join the union."

Cohen also encountered a series of Christian missionaries in New York as well as Jews who had become Christians. When she realized that the missionaries wanted to convert her, she stuck her fingers in her ears, thinking it might be sinful even to listen. But soon she did begin to read the Christian Bible, with the New Testament, improving her English as she pored over the unfamiliar words. But she kept Christianity itself at bay. For her family, "a Jew who forsook his own religion, his own people, was worse than a Gentile, worse than a heathen." She found Christianity intriguing, but she ultimately could not countenance betraying her family by converting.

Immigrants most commonly arrived in New York City, which made Ellis Island its chief immigration inspection station starting in 1892. But many other ports received immigrants too. For example, tens of thousands of European immigrants, including many Russian Jews, arrived at Galveston, Texas, between 1906 and the beginning of World War I. By the early 1900s, Jewish leaders had already begun to worry about overcrowding in New York City's Jewish neighborhoods, so they directed immigrants elsewhere. Gershom Geifman was one of those newer immigrants. Geifman left Ukraine in 1911, fleeing anti-Jewish persecution. He shipped out of the German port of Bremen. When he came to Galveston, he was welcomed by a prominent local rabbi and other Jews helping the new arrivals get their bearings. Right away Geifman took a train north to Rock Island, Iowa, where he got a job as a custodian at a John Deere factory, which made farming equipment. (Five of Geifman's brothers also settled in the "Quad Cities" area of Iowa.) He soon lost that job because he could not speak English, and he became a door-to-door broom salesman. Geifman eventually made enough money to own a chain of grocery stores as well as various real estate ventures.

### **Chicago and the New Urban Pattern**

New York's growth is well-known because of the city's role in receiving immigrants such as Rose Cohen. But Chicago's story was perhaps the epitome of urban growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with all of the grandeur and squalor that came with that expansion. Chicago had only been incorporated in 1837, but it quickly grew into one of the nation's key railroad hubs. On the eve of the devastating Chicago fire of 1871, the city already had about 300,000 residents. But with floods of immigrants coming to the city from Poland, Italy, and other central and eastern European locations, the city's population exploded tenfold to 3 million by the mid-1920s. As a new Chicago rose out of the ruins of the Great Fire, architects erected new skyscrapers that reflected the primacy of business. Steel building materials and the advent of elevators permitted these buildings to reach much higher than ever before. One of the key builders in Chicago said that the skyscraper office building reflected the "ideas of modern business life: simplicity, stability, breadth, dignity." Where church steeples once dominated the skylines of pre-Civil War cities, now office buildings immediately caught one's eye. Chicago's 1885 Home Insurance Company Building, while only ten stories tall, served as a prototype for much larger skyscrapers across the country.

Cities also developed distinctive downtown areas in this era, facilitated by streetcars, elevated trains, and eventually subways. The Chicago "L," or elevated train network, began service in 1892. The urban train systems soon made possible the development

of suburbs farther away from the crowded urban core. Housing distant from the downtown area was often reserved for middle- and upper-class whites, while immigrants and native-born poor people stayed in the city center. Some of the tall buildings erected in downtown areas became apartment buildings, or tenements. These often packed vast numbers of people into small areas, with as many as sixteen families sharing just two toilets per floor. By 1890, almost half of New York City's residences were in tenement buildings.

The cities had terrible difficulties keeping up with the pace of growth and the teeming masses of people. There were few systematic efforts at waste disposal, and the rules cities made regarding dumping and disposal were often ignored. This problem became especially acute as cities such as Chicago developed large-scale industries, including meat processing and the massive quantity of carcasses and bones it left behind. Chicago, which became the hub for processing the cattle of the Great Plains, developed the "Packingtown" district, one of the most active and lucrative industrial sites in the world in the early 1900s. More than 75,000 people lived in Packingtown's six square miles by 1920. Many of them were foreign-born and Roman Catholic. The majority of Packingtown's residents worked for the great meatpacking factories, especially those of Gustavus Swift and Philip Armour. Infant mortality, disease, and workplace injuries were all epidemic. Union organizing in the late 1910s helped alleviate some of the worst problems, but workers often divided among themselves along racial lines. Companies could play on tensions between European immigrants and African Americans, who composed about a third of Chicago's meatpacking workforce by the early 1920s.

Chicago struggled to maintain basic sanitary conditions in the city, especially in and around Packingtown. Leaders found it impossible to keep an uncontaminated water supply, no matter how far out into Lake Michigan they put the intake pipes. Already by



**Figure 16.7.** The Chicago Building of the Home Insurance Company of New York. Poster showing America's first "skyscraper," 1885, by architect William LeBaron Jenney.



**Figure 16.8.** Row of tenements, 260 to 268 Elizabeth St., New York, in which a great deal of finishing of clothes was done.

the middle of the Civil War, before the meatpacking boom set in, empty fields around the processing factories were littered with the decaying skin and bones of sheep, cattle, and other animals, with accompanying swarms of flies and rats and intolerable odors. The Chicago River, likewise, became an open sewer, with trash, industrial waste, and human excrement.

Late nineteenth-century American cities smelled horrible, especially in the summers. Horses and horse-drawn carriages remained common modes of transportation, and the horses left countless tons of undisposed-of manure in the streets. Many homes and tenements also had outhouses. The *Chicago Times* in 1880 expressed revulsion at the “solid stink” that had enveloped the city. “The river stinks, the air stinks. People’s clothing, permeated by the foul atmosphere, stinks.” The *Times* was so disgusted that it waxed philosophical. “No other word expresses it so well as stink. A stench means something finite. Stink reaches the infinite and becomes sublime in the magnitude of odiousness.”

The writer H. L. Mencken recalled how his childhood home in Baltimore had an outhouse with a foul-smelling sewage pit. African American workers would come every spring with a disposal wagon to pump it out and then fumigate the pit by burning

buckets of tar in it. The Baltimore sewers emptied into the city's Back Basin. Mencken lamented that the Basin was relatively stagnant, so it "began to acquire a powerful aroma every Spring, and by August smelled like a billion polecats."

### **Ministering to the Needs of the City and the World**

The plight of the cities led many churches and social reformers to experiment with new means of ministering to the needs of the urban poor. Many of these efforts led to "settlement houses" that catered especially to young women. The most famous settlement was Chicago's Hull House, founded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr. Addams and Starr's experiment was based on moral principles but was also relatively secular in focus. It offered classes for neighborhood residents as well as day care and assistance for fair employment. Addams described Hull House's animating principles as "close cooperation with the neighborhood people, scientific study of the causes of poverty and dependence, communication of these facts to the public, and persistent pressure for reform."

Jews, Catholics, and most major Protestant denominations also opened settlement houses in American cities, many of them inspired by the ideals of the "Social Gospel," or the idea that Christian principles were better lived out in practice than merely discussed. (More conservative Christians worried that the Social Gospel was more "social" than "gospel," however.) For example, Baptists in Orange, New Jersey, near Newark, opened a missionary outreach chapel ("a sort of Settlement House") for Catholic Italian immigrants and their families in 1908. In addition to Sunday morning and evening services, the new building hosted a Sunday school and weeknight lectures that drew hundreds of attendees, even those "indifferent or hostile to religion." Other classes taught cooking and "industrial arts" to girls. The leaders of the Baptist mission all believed "in the value of preaching the Gospel," the church noted, but "they felt that they must first of all open the minds, instruct, educate these people [the Italians] to adjust themselves to life in this strange country, and help them to see and lay hold of what is best in American life, to truly Americanize so that they may become good and intelligent citizens." A Baptist periodical commended the church for not forgetting the "strangers within the gates."

As suggested by the Baptist church's concern to "Americanize" the immigrants, the flood of immigration in the period prompted anti-immigrant political organizing. Leaders of these groups worried that the immigrants would dilute the traditionally white and Protestant character of dominant American institutions. The Immigration Restriction League was founded in Boston in 1894. It was especially focused on

population control and eugenics, or the idea that superior races should protect themselves from the genetic qualities of inferior races, especially by protecting against intermarriage. One of the founders of the Immigration Restriction League explained that the crisis of immigration was “a race question, pure and simple. . . . It is fundamentally a question as to what kind of babies shall be born; it is a question as to what races shall dominate in this country.” Some critics worried that so many of the new immigrants were Roman Catholics while others worried that some of the newcomers adhered to radical political philosophies such as socialism (government ownership of businesses) and communism, which emphasized class conflict and the abolition of private property. The Immigration Restriction League successfully convinced Congress to adopt a literacy test requirement before admitting new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. But President Grover Cleveland vetoed the literacy test law, believing it violated America’s historic commitment to welcoming immigrants. Such an immigration test did finally become law in 1917, however, as Congress overrode a veto of President Woodrow Wilson.

Christian evangelists such as Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday focused primarily on the spiritual rather than social needs of the city. Whatever trouble a city dweller was having was likely a result of poor personal choices and a lack of dependence on God, the evangelists preached. Sunday was a former professional baseball player who had experienced conversion in Chicago in the late 1880s. In the early 1890s, he began working with the Chicago Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) before launching his own itinerant preaching career. Sunday’s flamboyant style complemented his message of faith in Christ, hard work, and personal decency, much in the tradition of the great revivalist Charles Finney. Many leading businessmen of the day, including Philip Armour, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and J. P. Morgan, donated to Sunday’s ministry. Sunday often spoke in the rhetoric of business too: “Keep your account straight so when the Great Bookkeeper calls for a statement, your account will show a balance in your favor,” he preached. Critics painted Sunday as a tool of big business, distracting from their abuse of workers with an overly spiritual emphasis.

Aside from evangelism in America, Moody and his associates kept promoting the interests of overseas missions too. The most dynamic Protestant missionary movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM), which began in 1886 at a conference at Moody’s Mount Hermon School in Northfield, Massachusetts. The watchword of the SVM was “the evangelization of the world in this generation.” The missionaries believed that rapid improvements in transportation and communication made it possible for the Christian gospel to be preached to “all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues,” as the book of Revelation

put it. Doing so might set the stage for the return of Christ. Prominent missions advocate John R. Mott wrote in his popular book *The Evangelization of the World in This Generation* that “hundreds of millions are today living in ignorance and darkness, steeped in idolatry, superstition, degradation and corruption. . . . The burning question for every Christian then is, shall hundreds of millions of men now living, who need Christ and are capable of receiving help from Him, pass away without having even the opportunity to know Him?”

The SVM inspired thousands of students and other Americans to go on the mission field. One of them was Samuel Zwemer, who was born in 1867 in Michigan to Dutch immigrant parents. He joined the SVM when he was a student at Hope College. In seminary Zwemer studied Arabic and believed God was leading him to become a missionary to Arabia, the home of Islam’s sacred sites. Zwemer would serve for decades in Arabia and Egypt before becoming a professor of missions at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1929. Like many American Christian missionaries in the Muslim world, Zwemer saw relatively few Muslim conversions to Christianity during his ministry. But he became the era’s most influential Christian author on Islam, writing and editing almost fifty books about Muslims and missions.



**Figure 16.9.** Billy Sunday.

## Big Business and the American Economy

The new business titans such as J. P. Morgan in banking, Andrew Carnegie in steel, and John D. Rockefeller in oil revolutionized and exercised unprecedented dominance in their fields. Morgan made his fortune in helping finance the phenomenal growth in industry and transportation after the Civil War, especially in the railroad business. Another financial disruption in America in 1893 devastated many of the leading

railroads, opening an unprecedented opportunity for consolidation in the industry. When the nation's gold reserves became dangerously low in 1895, Morgan personally assured President Cleveland that he would stabilize the US currency through action in international financial markets. His plan worked. By 1900, Morgan had become the key player in American finance and transportation networks, ending the speculative era of American railroads and reducing the number of railroad companies to a relatively small number, many of them controlled by Morgan's company.

Andrew Carnegie's impoverished family immigrated from Scotland to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the late 1840s. An incredible drive to succeed plus an uncanny sense of timing would turn Carnegie into one of the richest men in the world and make Pittsburgh one of the world's key centers of steel manufacturing until the 1970s. Along with oil, steel (an alloy of iron and carbon) became one of the essential new products of the global industrial economy of the post-Civil War era. In construction and transportation sectors, steel's toughness and durability made it ideal to use in everything from skyscrapers to railroad tracks and steamboats.

The Bessemer process of producing steel helped factories produce higher-grade and more uniform steel products. Although the process was pioneered in England in the late 1850s, America emerged as the dominant steel producer in the world by the late nineteenth century. This also energized an expansion in the mining of iron ore and coal, which fueled the steel furnaces. Although industrial expansion was often rooted in the Northeast and Midwest, Alabama saw a great rise in steel production and ore mining in the late nineteenth century. This was one of the few nonagricultural sectors where poor white and black southerners could find work. African Americans dominated the ranks of the iron ore miners in Alabama and composed a near majority of steel workers there by the 1910s.

But the center of the steel industry was Carnegie's Pittsburgh. Carnegie took his first job in a cotton mill, where he made \$1.20 a week. But by his early twenties, he was climbing the ladder in the railroad business. As he began to make more money, he showed a great knack for management and investing, putting money into all the industries served by the railroads, including coal, lumber, and iron. In the early 1870s, the US government placed a protective tariff on steel imports, so Carnegie decided to move into the steel business, opening a factory outside of Pittsburgh. When the depression of 1873 began, Carnegie solidified his commitment to steel by selling all his other businesses. Carnegie rightly predicted that when the dust settled from the depression, the steel business and all the others it served would enter a boom phase, and he was ready for it when it came. Pittsburgh was the perfect site for the expansion of Carnegie's steel empire. In addition to good railroads, the city stood at the confluence of the two rivers

that formed the Ohio River. It was also close to abundant coal mines and had a ready supply of new immigrant labor from southern and eastern Europe.

Carnegie came to dominate the steel industry through efficiency and “vertical integration” of the industry—in other words, controlling all aspects of steelmaking from the ore mines to sales, distribution, and construction. Carnegie’s steel frames would go into making new structures, including the Brooklyn Bridge, a number of the early skyscrapers, and the Washington Monument in Washington, DC. The efficiency and scale of production took a toll on workers, however. Labor unions had demanded and often secured an eight-hour workday, but Carnegie insisted that having two twelve-hour shifts was better for productivity. When the steel mills also cut wages in the early 1890s, workers tried to strike. When the factory managers sought to break the strike, a gun battle broke out at Carnegie’s Homestead factory in July 1892. Eight people were killed in the firefight. The protesting workers occupied the steel plant until Pennsylvania sent in the National Guard to break up the strike.

The clash at the Homestead factory damaged the public reputation of Carnegie’s steel business, but in practice it signaled the victory of the management over union organizers. Wages continued to fall, and the twelve-hour day became standard. As efficiency spiked, the mills laid more workers off. Within five years of the Homestead incident, the factory’s number of employees had dropped by 25 percent. For those who remained, working conditions were dangerous. One study discovered that in 1907, 250 out of every 1,000 men who worked a full year were injured on the job in the steel industry. Those suspected of trying to reorganize the unions were monitored and often fired. One worker at the Homestead factory complained that “they own us body and soul; our bread and butter depends on our silence” about working conditions or organized protests.

By 1900, Andrew Carnegie had built Carnegie Steel into the world’s largest industrial company. Shockingly, in 1901 he decided to sell the business. J. P. Morgan was one of the only people in the world who could possibly pay the price required. In a legendary exchange Morgan dispatched an associate to go to Carnegie and “find his price.” When Carnegie proposed selling out for almost a half a billion dollars, Morgan accepted, creating the U.S. Steel Corporation out of Carnegie’s business and his other steel holdings. It was the first company worth more than a billion dollars.

Just as steel undergirded the era, the rise of oil lubricated the age of industrial expansion. Mechanization and turbines required oil for greasing, and oil-derived kerosene became the most common way to fuel lamps in American homes in the days before electrification. (The mass production of gasoline awaited the advent of the gasoline-powered automobile.) Oilmen began drilling in Pennsylvania in 1859, and in 1867 John

D. Rockefeller opened Standard Oil Company in Ohio. Rockefeller relentlessly consolidated the oil business, using Carnegie's principle of vertical integration but also employing "horizontal" integration by trying to establish a monopoly over petroleum refining. Rockefeller became so powerful that he could dictate transportation terms to the railroads, and his company paid politicians for favorable treatment. By the early 1880s, Standard Oil controlled the vast majority of the oil refinement business in America. Its reach was global, shipping oil and kerosene to South America, Africa, and Asia. In China, Standard Oil engaged in cutthroat competition with British, Dutch, and French firms, which imported oil products from places such as Russia and the Dutch East Indies.

In 1882, Standard Oil consolidated its far-flung companies and properties into the Standard Oil Trust, one of the first major efforts to establish a legal and financial monopoly of a business sector, controlled by a small board of trustees. "Trust" became common parlance for a monopoly that sought to eliminate competition, which was often bad for consumers and for workers. The invention of the trust precipitated a political backlash, and Congress overwhelmingly passed the Sherman Antitrust Act in 1890, designed to require sprawling multistate and multinational trusts like Standard Oil to dissolve.

It took decades of legal challenges to bring down the Standard Oil Trust, however. In the meantime, Ida Tarbell, a reformist, "muckraking" journalist who had seen her father's small oil business gobbled up by Standard Oil, emerged as one of Rockefeller's most relentless critics. "It takes time to crush men who are pursuing legitimate trade," Tarbell wrote. "But one of Mr. Rockefeller's most impressive characteristics is patience. . . . He was like a general who, besieging a city surrounded by fortified hills, views from a balloon the whole great field, and sees how, this point taken, that must fall; this hill reached, that fort is commanded. And nothing was too small: the corner grocery in Browntown, the humble refining still on Oil Creek, the shortest private pipe line. Nothing, for little things grow." In 1911, the Supreme Court finally decided that the Standard Oil Trust violated the Sherman Antitrust Act and ordered that it be broken up into its state-based components. These new, smaller companies included Mobil, Chevron, and Exxon Oil. These companies would themselves become global behemoths in time, but the American government had taken a stance against monopolies, especially ones that used coercive tactics to suppress competition.

## **An Age of Invention**

The rise of large-scale industrial capitalism did not focus just on the mass production of basic materials such as oil and steel but also on new inventions that revolutionized

home life and communication. Some of these, like the Bessemer process in steel, vastly streamlined the production or use of existing technologies. Steady improvements in telegraph cables meant that many of the world's cities, even beyond the United States and Europe, were connected by cable by the end of the nineteenth century. This meant that agents of global companies such as Standard Oil could use the telegraph to communicate quickly about developments on the other side of the world.

Although the telegraph remained one of the most transformative inventions in human history, the late 1800s saw the advent of the device that would replace it: the telephone. Alexander Graham Bell, a Scottish immigrant living in Boston, invented the telephone in 1876. It could convert sound waves into electrical impulses, and then back to sound on the receiving phone. Bell's company, American Telephone and Telegraph, came to dominate the market for phones and phone services for more than a century. (In 1982, the AT&T company, under antitrust pressure from the government, agreed to let go of its regional phone service companies, setting the stage for a flowering of new telecommunications companies and technologies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.) By 1905, there were 10 million phones in service in the United States. Household telephones remained a luxury, however, and telephones often came last to homes of the rural South and to impoverished sections of major cities.

Thomas Edison is rightly known as one of America's greatest inventors. Perhaps his most transformative invention was the electric lightbulb, or incandescent lamp. He also developed a sophisticated system for delivering electrical current to homes and businesses, to make lights and other electric-powered goods usable. Edison's company opened the coal-fired Pearl Street power station in New York City in 1882, the same year he opened a hydroelectric station in Appleton, Wisconsin. By 1900, thousands of power stations were illuminating about 2 million electric lights across the nation. Electrical power and light revolutionized everything from the urban environment, especially at night, to the working capacity of factories.

Electrification came first to the homes of wealthy urbanites; by 1907, only 8 percent of homes were running on electricity. But that number went up steadily to 68 percent of American homes in 1930. As part of the New Deal in the 1930s, President Franklin Roosevelt established initiatives promoting rural electrification. As was so often the case, the poor and those in rural areas were the last to benefit from these technological changes. The electrification of homes created a new market not only for lightbulbs, but for domestic appliances, such as irons, toasters, electric clocks, vacuum cleaners, and washing machines. Later came refrigerators, stoves, and electrical heaters.

Even places such as Luna Kellie's Nebraska were transformed by electrification. Just twenty-five miles north of Hastings, Nebraska, the town of Grand Island got its

first electrical company in the mid-1880s, only ten years after Kellie's family had arrived on the Nebraska frontier. Then, in the mid-1890s, Grand Island got a power plant. It could only supply enough power to illuminate 900 light bulbs, but the threshold had been passed. America was swiftly entering the era of electricity. Electrical power would bring a whole range of changes and new technologies, the implications of which continue to unfold today.

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