

Introduction: The West and America

America developed its West in the nineteenth century, but the West, to no small degree, developed America in the first half of the twentieth. *America's West* tells the story of the West against the backdrop of national developments from the last decade of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth.¹ The West has been and remains culturally, economically, politically, geographically, and demographically dynamic, distinct, and diverse. It has also served as the source of important trends in the cultural arena, in political thought and action at both ends of the ideological spectrum, in economic development, and in natural resource conservation and preservation. While the West was not always at the leading edge of major changes during this period, frequently the region indicated the directions in which the nation was moving and continues to do so into the present.

This book treats the West as a single region but is attentive to the significant demographic, cultural, physiographic, and economic differences among the West's subregions: the Southern Plains (from Texas to Kansas), the Northern Plains (from Nebraska to North Dakota), the Southwest (primarily Arizona and New Mexico), the Pacific Northwest (Oregon, Washington, and Idaho), California, the Great Basin (Nevada and Utah), and the Rocky Mountain West (Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming).² Western writer Wallace Stegner emphasized that there were

¹ A later companion study will examine the West and the nation from the mid-twentieth to the early-twenty-first century.

² This volume's regional definition – from the Plains to the Pacific, and including Alaska and Hawaii, departs from that of Richard W. Etulain and Michael P. Malone, *The American*

“many Wests” and “trying to make a unanimous culture out of them would be a hopeless job . . . like wrapping five watermelons.”³ Yet, the West persists as a coherent regional entity for Americans and people around the world, even with its varied subregions, and despite the supposed flattening weight of corporate influence – chain motels, restaurants, and big-box stores – as well as the changes resulting from immigration and interregional migration.

America's West emphasizes the western region's transformation from the 1890s through the 1940s as well as the West's impact on the nation. In the popular imagination, not to mention school and college textbooks, western history remains largely confined to the nineteenth century; it is a story of mountain men, pioneers, gold rushes, wagon trains, homesteading, transcontinental railroads, cowboys, cattle drives, and Indian wars. By the late nineteenth century, the region was becoming increasingly modernized through vast federal subsidies and massive private financing from outside the region, which together tied the West into an increasingly modern, urban, and industrial national economy. The West's transformation continued in the first half of the new century and was just as important to the national story as its earlier history, but those later developments are less well known.⁴

The West's population was negligible in 1900 when roughly 10 million people lived west of the Mississippi River out of a national population of some 76 million, a little over 13 percent.⁵ Yet by 1950, close to 35 million of the United States's 152 million residents, or almost 23 percent, lived in the area stretching from the second tier of trans-Mississippi western states to the Pacific Coast, and including the territories of Alaska and

West: A Modern History, 1900 to the Present (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), which does not include the noncontiguous Wests. Earl Pomeroy's *The American Far West in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008) covers the same region, but with the exclusion of Texas.

³ Wallace Stegner and Richard Etulain, “On Western History and Historians,” in *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), 145–166, quotation on 156.

⁴ Patricia Nelson Limerick's observations concerning the absence of the twentieth-century West in textbooks, in “The Case of the Premature Departure: The Trans-Mississippi West and American History Textbooks,” *The Journal of American History* 78 (March 1992): 1380–1394, reprinted in Limerick, *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 92–105, still ring true.

⁵ Of those 10 million residents of the West in 1900, more than three-quarters lived in just 5 of the region's 19 states and territories: Texas, 3,049,000; California, 1,485,000; Kansas, 1,470,000; Nebraska, 1,066,000; and Oklahoma, 790,000. See *Historical Statistics of the United States*.

Hawaii. The trend has not abated. By the start of the twenty-first century, roughly 100 million of the nation's 282 million residents, about 35 percent, resided between the Plains and the Pacific. Today the percentage is higher still.⁶

American politics reflected the country's demographic tilt west. The region was home to the nation's president (either as birthplace or state of residence) for most of the years from 1953 to 2016. Moreover, the West's shift away in the last third of the twentieth century from the liberal orientation nurtured during the Progressive Era, New Deal, and Great Society years, had much to do with the influence of western conservative forces pushing back against federal social programs and regulation of private business. That conservative ascendancy was halted in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, partly because of new demographic realities most evident in the West. In 2005, Texas joined California, Hawaii, and New Mexico as one of the nation's four majority minority states, and by 2013 California's Hispanic population outnumbered its white population; Texas is trending in the same direction.⁷ With the issues of border security and immigration at the forefront of contemporary political debates between the Democratic and Republican parties, it is likely that the changing demography of the West will continue to influence national elections.

These contemporary developments grew out of changes in the first half of the twentieth century, when western states worked hard to attract new residents and lobbied the federal government to make massive infrastructural investments in the region. The war against Mexico and subsequent seizure of half of that nation's territory in 1846–1848, and the conquest, displacement, and confinement of Native peoples across the West during and after the Indian Wars in the second half of the nineteenth century, are disturbing and well-known developments. Less known is the vital role of the federal government during World War II and the Cold War in expending tens of billions of dollars in subsidies to finance massive new industrial infrastructure and military bases across the region, thereby creating the nation's largest regional landscape of war. The federal government had played a central role in nineteenth-century western frontier development by underwriting railroad building, homesteading, and the conquest and control of indigenous peoples. And Washington, DC, continued to shape the region just as dramatically in the twentieth century through

⁶ The 2017 figure is almost 36 percent.

⁷ The District of Columbia is also majority minority.

massive dam construction projects and water initiatives. A series of mineral booms in California, Colorado, Nevada, and other far western states from the mid to the late nineteenth century altered the region's landscape and economy. Those extractive transformations continued throughout the twentieth century in the form of copper, coal, uranium, and precious metals mining from the Great Plains to the West Coast.

Furthermore, nearly a century and a half after the establishment of the first national park (Yellowstone, 1872), approximately half of the land mass of the 13 far western states (including Alaska and Hawaii) remains "America's West" – publicly owned and federally managed parks, forests, preserves, and recreation areas that play a vital role in defining the region for both the nation and the world. And today, after a century and a half of efforts by the national government to manage those public lands, western local interests continue to push back in the courts and in local and state legislatures against the very notion of federal landownership, as they have since the 1890s. The Sagebrush Rebellion of the 1970s and 1980s, and the more recent armed standoffs between federal agents and local rancher Cliven Bundy and his supporters in southwestern Nevada (2014), and at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Southeast Oregon (2016), involving Bundy's sons and various militia members, are reminders of the deep anger and resentment of some westerners toward the government. Secessionist movements, by 11 counties mostly in northeast Colorado and by Siskiyou County in northern California in 2013, also reflect tensions against federal regulations in the rural West as well as intrastate divides between rural regions and urban/suburban centers. However, these confrontational moments and "independence" movements are a departure from the long tradition of more constructive western efforts at the local level to bend federal policies toward regional needs.

Popular conceptions of the geographic West have shifted over time. For example, the West for the characters in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is not San Francisco, Los Angeles, or Denver, but Chicago, where, in 1893, the entertainer William F. ("Buffalo Bill") Cody celebrated the Wild West of yesteryear before millions of spectators and the academic Frederick Jackson Turner declared that the frontier had closed. During the first half of the twentieth century the Great Plains states were generally considered western – Texas being the partial exception, with its amalgam of southern political institutions and western culture. *America's West* includes the Plains states, from the Dakotas to Texas, along with 11 of the 13 states of the US Census West; Alaska and Hawaii, which both gained statehood in 1959, receive only limited coverage.

The book's opening chapter examines the 1890s, when the nation was in the grip of a depression and witnessed violent strikes by labor unions and equally violent responses from the police, National Guard units, and private militias. A widespread rebellion of farmers against bankers, merchants, and railroads profiting from their labor led to takeovers of state governments in the South and Midwest. Mob attacks on former slaves and their descendants, as well as their systematic segregation, economic oppression, and political disenfranchisement, characterized race relations in the so-called New South. Concerns over immigration, particularly the influx of people from Southern and Eastern Europe, were pervasive across the Northeast and Midwest, along with accompanying fears of urban overcrowding and disease. Violent repression and formal exclusion of the Chinese, and an assault on Native American cultures and landholdings, characterized the West. Political corruption was rampant across the nation. Such developments contributed to a growing sense of crisis over the nation's future. The notion that the western frontier was closing helped explain both the ominous domestic developments and the push toward overseas empire through the conquest of foreign peoples in Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific.

The first two decades of the new century, encompassing the administrations of Theodore Roosevelt (1901–1909), William Howard Taft (1909–1913), and Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921), are treated in Chapters 2 and 3. In many respects the West was more progressive than the nation in this period. Women's suffrage, for example, came to the region ahead of the nation, and political reforms designed to make the electoral and legislative systems more responsive to the will of the people were particularly popular. However, conservative pushback against the more liberal developments of the era also found some powerful beachheads in the West. Chapter 4 examines 1920s cultural conflicts as they manifested across the region, particularly the Red Scare, the second Ku Klux Klan, and a series of racially motivated policies directed at westerners of color. The Klan proved to be a major force in parts of the West, including the Southern Plains and the Pacific Coast, and controlled numerous state legislatures in the region during the first half of the decade.

The next two chapters focus on the pivotal decade of the 1930s. Chapter 5 charts the New Deal's impact on the West, especially its massive public works projects, work relief initiatives, and conservation measures. By most accounting, westerners benefited more from the 1930s federal programs than residents of any other region. Chapter 6 highlights the fortunes of the West's peoples of color during the Depression decade,

including minority rights and labor initiatives. The chapter also explores the role of New Deal photographers and independent writers in exposing the plight of migrant agricultural workers in the West.

Chapter 7 addresses the massive demographic, political, and economic changes wrought by the rapidly expanding defense industry that accompanied World War II and the first years of the Cold War. Chapter 8 explores the theme of “the Good War” against the backdrop of racially motivated policies that continued to characterize the region, most lamentably in the rounding up of loyal Japanese and Japanese American citizens residing on the West Coast and their confinement in camps in the Intermountain West. The study closes with the rebirth of American exceptionalist thinking grounded in selective memory of the American frontier experience, as the Cold War began to take shape in the late 1940s.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the West’s population had increased by more than 400 percent since 1890, while the national rate during those six decades was about 250 percent. The West had become an even more remarkably diverse, multiracial region whose residents had come north from Mexico, east from the Pacific World, west from Europe and the eastern United States, as well as south from Canada. The region had also become a hydraulic landscape, reengineered with electricity-generating dams on all its major rivers to provide power, flood control, and a reliable water supply to arid and semiarid lands. The West was a martial landscape dotted with military bases, weapon testing ranges, including nuclear test sites, and secret laboratories. Additionally, the region was a metropolitan landscape – the most urbanized population of any American region – distinguished by wider spaces between its population centers than was the case in other parts of the country and larger distances between home and work, owing to so much of the West’s urban and suburban infrastructure having developed during the automobile age. More than ever before, the West’s dramatic natural landscapes (military sites aside!) had become a cherished set of increasingly popular public landscapes, often featuring comfortable amenities to enhance the visitor experience, but protected from unregulated development and resource extraction.

These major transformations had occurred over the course of a single lifetime.⁸ For a child in the 1890s who had reached old age by 1950,

⁸ Life expectancy in the United States was about 40 years in 1890 and around 65 years by 1950.

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the West, distinctive natural features aside, would surely have seemed more thoroughly changed and less readily recognizable than any other American region. And, as it developed during this period, the dynamic West in turn played a major role in shaping the course of the nation's history.