CHAPTER 26

The Great West and the Agricultural Revolution, 1865–1896

# focus questions

1. Describe the clashes between the white population and the Native Americans.

2. Explain how the West “comes of age” and how agriculture becomes a global enterprise.

3. Explain how the growing discontent of farmers transformed into the Populist Party. What were the main objectives of the populists?

4. Describe the main issues of the Election of 1896. How did McKinley and Bryan each represent the major issues?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** After the Civil War, whites overcame the Plains Indians’ fierce resistance and settled the Great West, bringing to a close the long frontier phase of American history.

**Theme:** The farmers who populated the West found themselves the victims of an economic revolution in agriculture. Trapped in a permanent debtor dependency, in the 1880s, they finally turned to political action to protest their condition. Their efforts culminated in the Populist Party’s attempt to create an interracial farmer/labor coalition in the 1890s, but William Jennings Bryan’s defeat in the pivotal election of 1896 signaled the triumph of urbanism and the middle class.

chapter summary

At the close of the Civil War, the Great Plains and Mountain West were still occupied by Indians who hunted buffalo on horseback and fiercely resisted white encroachment on their land and way of life. But the whites’ railroads, mining, and livestock broke up Indian territory, while diseases undercut their strength and numbers. A cycle of environmental destruction and intertribal warfare eventually overcame Indian resistance and soon threatened Native Americans’ very existence. The federal government combined a misconceived treaty program with intermittent warfare to force the Indians onto largely barren reservations.

Attempting to coerce Indians into adopting white ways, the government passed the Dawes Act, which eliminated tribal ownership of land, while often insensitive humanitarians created a network of Indian boarding schools that further assaulted traditional culture.

The mining and cattle frontiers created colorful chapters in Western history. Farmers carried out the final phase of settlement, lured by free homesteads, railroads, and irrigation. The census declared the end of the frontier in 1890, concluding a formative phase of American history. The frontier was less of a safety valve than many believed, but the growth of cities actually made the West the most urbanized region of the United States by the 1890s.

Beginning in the 1870s, farmers began pushing into the treeless prairies beyond the 100th meridian, using techniques of dry farming that gradually contributed to soil loss. Irrigation projects, later financed by the federal government, allowed specialized farming in many areas of the arid West, including California. The closing of the frontier in 1890 signified the end of traditional westward expansion, but the Great West remained a unique social and environmental region.

As the farmers opened vast new lands, agriculture was becoming a mechanized business dependent on specialized production and international markets. Once declining prices and other woes doomed the farmers to permanent debt and dependency, they began to protest their lot, first through the Grange and then through the Farmers’ Alliances, the prelude to the People’s (Populist) Party.

The major depression of the 1890s accelerated farmer and labor strikes and unrest, leading to a growing sense of class conflict. In 1896, pro-silverite William Jennings Bryan captured the Democratic Party’s nomination, and led a fervent campaign against the goldbug Republicans and their candidate William McKinley. McKinley’s success in winning urban workers away from Bryan proved a turning point in American politics, signaling the triumph of the city, the middle class, and a new party system that turned away from monetary issues and put the Republicans in the political driver’s seat for two generations.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Place the dramatic Indian wars in the context of both irresistible white encroachment and the postwarfare history of American Indians. The Sioux experience—from Little Big Horn to Wounded Knee and after—might provide a good focus.

REFERENCE: Robert Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846–1890* (1984).

* Examine the successive phases of economic activity in the Great West: mining, cattle raising, agriculture. Show how in each case an early little person era was ended by the coming of big business and new technology, and how the entry of corporate and investment capital shaped later western development.

REFERENCE: Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987).

* Examine the unique roles of women in the West, including the more typical pioneer farming women of the Great Plains, as well as the more unusual women who made their way in the mining towns and later cities of the Far West. Consider how their experience was similar to that of males in the West, and how it was different.

REFERENCE: Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and Plains* (1988).

* Focus on the bitter labor conflicts of the decade, including the Homestead strike and the Pullman strike. Explain why the use of federal troops in the Pullman strike and the use of Pinkerton’s antilabor agents in the Homestead strike embittered many workers against both industry and the government’s executive and judicial authority.

REFERENCE: Paul Krause, *The Battle for Homestead, 1880–1892* (1992).

* Examine the 1896 election as a crucial election in American history. Show how Mark Hanna and McKinley effectively organized the forces of the new urban industrialism against Bryan’s agrarian-based crusade.

REFERENCE: Stanley L. Jones, *The Presidential Election of 1896* (1964).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Focus on one of the notable Indian chiefs (for example, Sitting Bull, Chief Joseph, or Geronimo). Examine their roles as leaders of their people both in resistance to white conquest and under the forced circumstances of reservation life. Consider their subsequent role as continuing symbols in later American history and culture.
* Discuss the validity of the frontier thesis first advanced by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893. (See *Expanding the “Varying Viewpoints”* for an excerpt from Turner’s famous essay.) Consider how his use of the word *frontier* contrasts with common understanding, in which the term refers almost entirely to the post–Civil War frontier of the Great West.
* Examine the life of the typical homesteader on the Great Plains, perhaps drawing on literary works such as those of Ole Rolvaag or Willa Cather. Consider why such a person might be led to join the Farmers’ Alliances. Perhaps compare the condition of pioneer farmers with those in the South, white and black. (See boxed quote on page 586.)
* Consider the rapid rise and fall of the Populists in both the West and the South. Consider the attempt by Populists such as Tom Watson to overcome racial division, and explain the reasons he and other disillusioned reformers later turned to a vicious racism. (See boxed quote on page 594.)
* Examine Hanna’s free-spending policies in the 1896 election. Assess what role campaign spending (and other political tactics) may have had in defeating Bryan, compared with the deeper social and political forces that kept most of the urban working class from supporting the pro-silver campaign.
* Analyze the long-term significance of the Republican victory in 1896. Consider McKinley as a symbol of triumphant urban industrial capitalism and the harbinger of an age of Republican political domination.
* Have the students read Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893) in David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper’s (Editors), *The American Intellectual Tradition: Volume II—1865 to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

# character sketches

## Sitting Bull (1834–1890)

Sitting Bull was the Sioux chief and shaman (medicine man) who organized the Indian coalition that defeated Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn.

His Indian name was Ta-tan-ka I-yo-ta-ke, which translates literally as “Sitting Bull.” As a young warrior he had led the Sioux against their traditional enemies, the Crow. He was friendly for a time with Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet, a Catholic priest who tried unsuccessfully to convert him to give up warfare.

Sitting Bull brought together over four thousand Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and others in a single encampment before Little Big Horn. He did not fight in the battle himself because his job as shaman was to create the good medicine that would bring Indian victory.

After his return from Canada and surrender, he remained extremely hostile to whites. He participated in the Ghost Dance revival and agitation on a Sioux reservation and was shot by Indian police sent to arrest him.

**Quote:** “I don’t want a white man over me. I don’t want an agent.… I want to do right by my people, and cannot trust anyone else to trade with them or talk with them.” (1882)

REFERENCE: Robert Utley, *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* (1993).

## Chief Joseph (1840–1904)

Chief Joseph was the Nez Percé leader whose campaign against the U.S. Army in 1877 is considered a military classic.

Joseph’s Indian name was Hinmaton-Yalaktit, meaning “Thunder-Coming-Across-the-Water-onto-Land.” He had maintained peaceful relations with whites for years, but when some white civilians killed some Nez Percé, a group of young braves retaliated by killing whites, and the army under General O.O. Howard (former head of the Freedmen’s Bureau) was sent after Chief Joseph.

His maneuvers in defeating and eluding the army for over fifteen hundred miles were carried out with women and children in tow. He compelled his warriors to fight only against soldiers and not to kill or steal from white civilians. General Howard and other military personnel who met him after his surrender were all impressed by his intelligence and humanity.

His tribe was first moved to Oklahoma, where many of its members died, and then to the Colville reservation in Washington.

**Quote:** “I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed.… It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death.… From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever.” (Statement of surrender, 1877)

REFERENCE: Merrill D. Beal, *“I Will Fight No More Forever”: Chief Joseph and the Nez Percé War* (1963).

## Helen Hunt Jackson (1830–1885)

Jackson was the writer and advocate of Indian rights, whose book *A Century of Dishonor* was one of the first to advocate more humane policies toward Native Americans.

A vivacious, intelligent, charming New Englander, Jackson turned to writing after her first husband was killed and her two young sons died. She became a very popular poet and novelist. Her novel *Mercy Philbrick’s Choice* was based partly on the life of her schoolmate and friend Emily Dickinson.

She became interested in Indians after moving to Colorado with her second husband. Although Jackson did a good deal of research for *A Century of Dishonor,* she really understood little of Indian culture. Her subsequent novel about California Indians, *Ramona,* was a greater popular success. She also carried on a public controversy over Indian policy with Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz.

**Quote:** “[This Congress] could cover itself with the lustre of glory as the first to cut short our nation’s record of cruelties and perjuries—the first to attempt to redeem the United States from the shame of a century of dishonor!” (*A Century of Dishonor,* 1881)

REFERENCE: Siobhan Senier, *Voices of Indian Assimilation and Resistance: Helen Hunt Jackson, Sarah Winnemucca, and Victoria Howard* (2001).

## Mark Hanna (1837–1904)

Hanna was the Cleveland businessman who engineered McKinley’s election in 1896 and later became a prominent Republican senator.

He came from a strong antislavery Quaker background, which jeopardized his marriage to his first wife because she was an equally strong Democrat. Hanna made his fortune in coal and iron but focused much of his energy on forging an alliance between business and politics.

McKinley’s political fortunes had declined for a time, until Hanna became interested in his ideas and began to promote McKinley for Ohio governor. He also got other business leaders to substantially aid McKinley’s personal finances. Hanna was later elected senator by a very narrow margin amid charges of bribery of state legislators.

Hanna was genial and popular with both businesspeople and politicians, whom he liked to bring together. Although a staunch conservative on most issues, he favored labor unions and was so generous to workers that his own companies never had a strike.

**Quote:** “I am glad that there is one member of the Convention who has the intelligence to ascertain how this nomination was made. By the people. What feeble efforts I have contributed to the result, I am here to lay at the feet of my party.…” (Statement after McKinley’s nomination, 1896)

REFERENCE: Wayne Morgan, *William McKinley and His America* (1963).

## Eugene V. Debs (1855–1926)

Debs was a railway union leader who became the top socialist in the United States and the frequent presidential candidate of the Socialist Party.

Debs’s parents were French immigrants who settled in Indiana. During one period, he worked three full-time jobs—as a grocery clerk, as a city clerk, and as secretary-treasurer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen.

When Debs was released from jail after the Pullman strike, there was a huge celebration in Chicago. He was always much-loved in his home town of Terre Haute, even by most people who disliked his socialism. A heavy drinker, Debs often had to be pulled away from his liquor by fellow socialists.

He was passionate, warmhearted, eloquent, and simple. Workers everywhere loved him and thronged to watch him jab his bony finger in the air and denounce capitalism, even if they did not vote for him.

**Quote:** “While there is a lower class I am in it.… While there is a soul in prison I am not free.”

REFERENCE: Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (1982).

## William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925)

Bryan was the eloquent three-time-losing presidential candidate who later became Wilson’s secretary of state and the prosecuting attorney in the Scopes evolution trial.

He began his career as a small-town Nebraska lawyer and journalist and retained a small-town outlook throughout his career. When not campaigning for president, he traveled widely as a Chautauqua lecturer. Two of his most popular lectures on religion were “The Prince of Peace” and “The Value of an Ideal.” His voice was a remarkable instrument, which could carry with perfect clarity to the back of a crowd of thousands.

Although he became secretary of state, Bryan knew almost nothing about foreign policy or the world beyond the United States. On a visit to Turkey, he once asked the foreign-service officers, “Where are the Balkans?”

Bryan had long been an active crusader in Fundamentalist causes before becoming involved in the Scopes trial. He was deeply humiliated by Darrow in the trial and died shortly afterward.

**Quote:** “The poor man who takes property by force is called a thief but the creditor who can by legislation make the debtor pay a dollar twice as large as he borrowed it is lauded as the friend of sound currency. The man who wants the people to destroy the government is an anarchist but the man who wants government to destroy the people is a patriot.” (Congressional speech, 1893)

REFERENCE: Paolo Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan* (3 Vols., 1964–1969).

## John Peter Altgeld (1847–1902)

Altgeld was the Illinois governor whose pardon of the Haymarket anarchists and support for organized labor made him a hero to reformers and a hated figure among conservatives and businessmen.

Altgeld was born in Germany and spent most of his youth as a poverty-stricken farm laborer in Ohio and elsewhere in the Midwest. He essentially educated himself by reading, especially in the law, and began a career as a prosecuting attorney and judge in Missouri and Illinois.

In 1892, Altgeld was elected the first Democratic governor of Illinois since the Civil War. The case of the Haymarket anarchists came to him for review shortly afterward, and his thorough study of the trial and the evidence convinced him that justice had not been done. The political furor set off by his pardon of three of the convicted men escalated when he protested President Cleveland’s use of federal troops in the 1894 Pullman strike as unnecessary and unconstitutional. Aroused Republicans mounted a strong campaign against him in 1896, and his political career was ended by his defeat.

**Quote:** “There is no situation in Illinois which warrants the sending of federal troops. It is not soldiers that the railroads need so much as it is men to operate trains.” (Statement, 1894)

REFERENCES: Harry Barnard, *Eagle Forgotten: The Life of John Peter Altgeld* (1938); Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (1984).

# great debates in american history

## Great Debate (1890–1896):

Government, finance, and the farmer: Should the government adopt monetary and other measures to aid American farmers and laborers?

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| ***Yes:*** Reformers: Populists led by Ignatius Donnelly, Jerry Simpson, and others; writers like Henry George and Henry Demarest Lloyd; free-silver Democrats like William Jennings Bryan and Richard Bland. |  | ***No:*** Conservatives: most Republican businesspeople and politicians like William McKinley and Mark Hanna; gold Democrats like Cleveland; most eastern newspapers and economists. |

ISSUE #1: Free silver. Should the United States adopt free coinage of silver and thereby inflate the currency to aid farmers?

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| ***Yes:*** Reform Democrat William Jennings Bryan: “To recapitulate, there is not enough of either metal to form the basis for the world’s metallic money; both metals must therefore be used as full legal tender primary money.… If metallic money is sound money, then we who insist upon a base broad enough to support a currency redeemable in coin on demand are the real friends of sound money.… If all the currency is built upon the small basis of gold those who hold the gold will be the masters of the situation.” |  | ***No:*** Conservative Republican William McKinley: “Now they tell you that free silver is the panacea for all our ills.… As free wool degraded your industry so free silver will degrade your money.… We do not propose now to inaugurate a currency system that will cheat labor of its pay. The laboring men of this country whenever they give one day’s work to their employers want to be paid in full dollars good everywhere in the world. We want in this country good work, good wages, and good money.” |

ISSUE #2: The tariff. Should the government maintain high protective tariffs against foreign imports?

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| ***No:*** Reform Populist Congressman “Sockless Jerry” Simpson of Kansas: “The enormous amount collected for this extraordinary privilege … fell heavily upon the agricultural classes. They are the consumers of sugar and window glass and of all those things that the four hundred and fifty trusts that have been formed under your protective system produce, and that is what has brought the agricultural interests of this country to poverty and bankruptcy today.” |  | ***Yes:*** Conservative Republican William McKinley: “[The protective system] has dignified and elevated labor; it has made all things possible to the man who works for a living and cares for what he earns; it has opened to him every gateway to opportunity. We observe its triumphs on every hand: we see the mechanic become the manufacturer, the workman the proprietor, the employee the employer. Is this not worth something? Is it not worth everything? The Republican Protectionist would give the first chances to our people, and would so levy duties upon the products of other nations as to discriminate in favor of our own.” |

ISSUE #3: Trusts. Should the federal government act more forcefully to control trusts?

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| ***Yes:*** Reform Democrat William Jennings Bryan: “Every trust rests upon a corporation, and every corporation is a creature of law. The corporation is a man-made man.… My contention is that the government that created must retain control, and that the man-made man must be admonished, ‘Remember now thy creator.’… What government gives, the government can take away. What the government creates it can control.… In my judgment a government of the people, by the people, and for the people will be impossible when a few men control all the source of production and dole out daily bread to all the rest on such terms as the few may prescribe.… It will be a government of the syndicates, by the syndicates, and for the syndicates.” |  | ***No:*** Conservative Democrat W. Bourke Cockran: “For the same reason I would suppress the monopoly built on favor I would protect the monopoly created by excellence. There is no way to suppress a monopoly arising from conspicuous merit except by the suppression of merit. If the producer of the best commodity may not dominate the market for that particular article, neither should the possessor of particular ability in any other department of human endeavor.… Mr. Bryan’s position is that monopoly in private hands is always oppressive. Instead of distinguishing between corporations which dominate the market by excellence and those dominating it by favor, he appears to distinguish between those which are successful and those which are not.” |

ISSUE #4: Government aid to farmers. Should the federal government adopt measures such as the subtreasury plan to provide economic aid to indebted farmers?

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| ***Yes:*** Texas Populist Harry Tracy: “Now if the government can loan these bankers money at one percent on collaterals, why can’t the government loan it to the people on their collaterals? If the government can bridge the bankers over a close money market and keep them from having to sacrifice their collateral, why can’t the government do the same by the people? What a burlesque on democratic government for 4000 men, because they are rich, to enjoy privileges that are denied 65,000,000 people.” |  | ***No:*** Conservative Democrat Secretary of Agriculture J. Sterling Morton: “The free and independent farmers of this country…are not mendicants; they are not wards of the Government to be treated to annuities, like Indians upon a reservation.… Legislation can neither plow nor plant. The intelligent, practical, and successful farmer needs no aid from the Government. The ignorant, impractical, and indolent farmer deserves none.” |

REFERENCE: Paul Glad, *McKinley, Bryan, and the People* (1964).

# questions for class discussion

1. Why has the Plains Indians’ resistance to white encroachment played such a large part in the popular American view of the West? How is that mythical past related to the Indians’ actual history? (See boxed quotes on page 575, 576, 577, and 580.)

2. What was romantic about the final phases of frontier settlement, and what was not? (See section Examining the Evidence on page 590 and section Thinking Globally on pages 592-593.)

3. Why was the “passing of the frontier” in 1890 a disturbing development for many Americans? Was the frontier more important as a particular place or as an idea?

4. Was the federal government biased against farmers and workers in the late nineteenth century? Why or why not?

5. Was McKinley’s election really a conservative one, or was it Bryan and the Populists who represented the agrarian past resisting a progressive urban American future? (See boxed quote on page 602.)

# CONTENDING VOICES: JAMES McLAUGHLIN VS. BLACK ELK

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. How did Indian Service agent McLaudhlin argue that the Ghost Dance was an impediment to Indian assimilation and progress?

2. How did Oglala Sioux chief Black Elk describe the assimilation championed by McLaughlin?

3. What did General Philip Sheridan argue were the roots of Indian resistence to whites?

# makers of america: the plains indians

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. Compare the Plains Indians’ history and culture, especially before the coming of the whites, to that of the Iroquois. (See Chapter 2.) How does this comparison prove the assertion that the cultures of various Indian peoples differed greatly?

2. In what ways did the Plains Indians benefit by the transformation of their way of life brought about by the horse? In what ways were they harmed?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Examine some photographs or artistic representations of Plains Indians from the late nineteenth century. Discuss what features of their culture are portrayed.
* Use the map of Indian reservations in the text (p. 581) to consider where the Plains Indians were particularly concentrated after the era of warfare ended. Consider what areas of the United States still have substantial populations of such plains peoples as the Sioux, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Crow, and Comanche. (Remember that the Oklahoma Indian territory included many originally eastern Indian peoples such as the Cherokee and the Choctaw.)

# varying viewpoints

**Expanding the View**

* Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893).

A view of the West as a place permanently shaping the formerly European American character:

“The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development.… This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.… In this advance, the frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization.…”

* Richard White, *The Middle Ground* (1991).

A view of the West as the product of the interaction of whites and Indians:

“[The West] is not a traditional world either seeking to maintain itself unchanged or eroding under the pressure of whites. It is a joint Indian-white creation.… The real crisis came…when Indians ceased to have power to force whites onto the middle ground. Then the desire of whites to dictate the terms of the accommodation could be given its head.… Americans invented Indians and forced Indians to live with the consequences.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

1. What does each of these historians understand to be the essential characteristics of the West?

2. How does White’s assessment differ from Turner’s view of the frontier as a “meeting point between savagery and civilization”?

3. How would each of these historians interpret the Plains Indian wars and the confinement of Indians on reservations?