

Settling the West

Guide to Reading

Connection

In the previous section, you learned about the Reconstruction of the United States after the Civil War. In this section, you will discover how the Gold Rush attracted settlers to the West and how people began to settle the Great Plains.

Main Idea

- Miners seeking to strike it rich settled large areas of the West. (p. 237)
- Ranchers built vast cattle ranches on the Great Plains, while settlers staked out homesteads and began farming the region. (p. 238)
- The settlement of the West dramatically altered the way of life of the Plains Indians. (p. 241)

Content Vocabulary

placer mining, quartz mining, vigilance committee, open range, long drive, homestead, assimilate

Academic Vocabulary

extract, adapt, prior

People and Terms to Identify

Henry Comstock, Homestead Act, Indian Peace Commission, Sitting Bull, Ghost Dance, Dawes Act

Places to Locate

Great Plains, Wheat Belt

Reading Objectives

- **Trace** the growth of the mining industry and big ranches in the West.
- **Explain** how and why people began settling the Great Plains.

- **Summarize** problems caused by attempts to assimilate Native Americans.

Reading Strategy

As you read about the settlement of the West, complete a graphic organizer similar to the one below listing resources and government policies that encouraged settlement, and the effects of these measures on Native Americans.

Resources/ Government Policies	How It Attracted New Settlers	Impact on Native Americans

Preview of Events



The following are the main History–Social Science Standards covered in this section.



11.1.4 Examine the effects of the Civil War and Reconstruction and of the Industrial revolution, including demographic shifts and the emergence in the late 19th century of the United States as a world power.

11.2.6 Trace the economic development of the United States and its emergence as a major industrial power, including its gains from trade and the advantage of its physical geography.

The Big Idea

Societies change over time. Following Reconstruction, many people moved West in hopes of making fortunes mining newly discovered deposits of gold, silver, and copper needed for industries in the East. As railroads were constructed, settlers also moved to the Great Plains to farm or ranch. This influx of settlers had a profound effect on the lives of the Native Americans who had roamed the Plains for centuries. Hunters and sharpshooters clearing the way for railroads drastically depleted the buffalo herds many Native Americans depended on for survival. Many were forced to relocate or give up their culture by assimilating.

Growth of the Mining Industry

Main Idea Miners seeking to strike it rich settled large areas of the West.

Reading Connection Under what circumstances would you choose to move to another state? Read on to find out what motivated miners to relocate to the western states.

The rich deposits of gold, silver, and copper in the West served the needs of growing industries in the East. They also brought the first wave of settlers that populated the mountain states of the West.

★ *An American Story* ★

Jacob Waldorf arrived in Virginia City, Nevada, in 1873 to seek his fortune in the fabled silver mines of the Comstock Lode. Like many others, he found work at one of the big mining companies. Seven days a week he toiled in a dangerous mine shaft, earning enough to support his family and buy a little stock in local mining companies. As his son John recalled:

“The favorite game with our father was stocks. . . . Mother used to say to me, ‘Some day we’re going back east,’ but for years none of the stocks in which Dad invested showed any disposition to furnish us with the price of transportation.”

In 1877 the stock Waldorf owned skyrocketed in value. “Dad’s holdings rose . . . to \$10,000 and mother began to talk of buying a farm,” John wrote. “The stock kept going upward. Dad was worth \$15,000 for at least a minute.” He waited for the stock to go even higher before selling, but instead it plummeted: “The bottom fell out of Ophi [a mining stock], and Mother’s dream farm fell with it, for Dad was broke.”

Jacob Waldorf overcame this financial setback. Earning the respect of his fellow workers, he headed the miners’ union in 1880 and later served as a state legislator.

—adapted from *A Kid on the Comstock*

The search for wealth brought many fortune seekers like Jacob Waldorf. News of a mineral discovery in an area would start a stampede of prospectors desperately hoping to strike it rich. Early prospectors would **extract** the shallow deposits of ore largely by hand in a process called **placer mining**, using simple

equipment like picks, shovels, and pans. After these surface deposits dwindled, corporations would move in to begin **quartz mining**, which dug deep beneath the surface. As those deposits dried up, commercial mining either disappeared or continued on a restricted basis.

The Big Strike in Nevada The story of the Comstock Lode is similar to other stories of gold, silver, and copper strikes throughout the West. In 1859 a prospector named **Henry Comstock** staked a claim in Six-Mile Canyon, Nevada. The sticky, blue-gray mud found there turned out to be nearly pure silver ore. News of the Comstock strike brought hordes of miners to Virginia City, Nevada. Almost overnight the town went from a frontier outpost to a boomtown of about 30,000, boasting an opera house, shops with furniture and fashions from Europe, several newspapers, and a six-story hotel with the West’s first elevator, called a “rising room.” When the silver veins were exhausted several years later, the mines closed. Without the mines, the town’s economy collapsed, and most of the townspeople moved on in search of new opportunities. This cycle of boom and bust—from boomtown to ghost town—was repeated throughout the mountainous West.

▼ *Miner working the Comstock Lode*



During the booms, crime posed a serious problem. Prospectors fought over claims, and thieves haunted the streets and trails. Law enforcers were scarce, and self-appointed volunteers sometimes formed **vigilance committees** to track down and punish wrongdoers. In some cases, they punished the innocent or let the guilty go free, but most people in these communities respected the law and tried to deal firmly but fairly with those accused of crimes.

Mining towns such as Virginia City at first were inhabited mostly by men, but soon they attracted more women. Some women owned property and were influential community leaders. Others worked as cooks or in laundries. Still other women worked at “hurdy-gurdy” houses (named after the mechanical musical instrument), where they danced with men for the price of a drink.

Other Bonanzas Mining also spurred the development of Colorado, the Dakota Territory, and Montana. The discovery of gold near Pikes Peak in 1858 set miners on a frantic rush. Inspired by the phrase “Pikes Peak or Bust,” many panned for gold without success and headed home, complaining of a “Pikes Peak hoax.”

In truth, there was plenty of gold and silver in the Colorado mountains, but much of it was hidden beneath the surface and hard to extract. One of the richest strikes occurred in the late 1870s in Leadville, named for deep deposits of lead that contained large amounts of silver. By the summer of 1879, as many as 1,000 newcomers per week were pouring into Leadville, creating one of the most famous boomtowns to dot the mining frontier.

Overall, operations at Leadville and other mining towns in Colorado yielded more than \$1 billion worth of silver and gold (many billions in today’s money). This bonanza spurred the building of railroads through the Rocky Mountains and transformed Denver, the supply point for the mining areas, into the second largest city in the West after San Francisco.

The discovery of gold in the Black Hills of the Dakota Territory and copper in Montana led to rapid development of the northern Great Plains. Miners flooded into the region in the 1870s. After railroads were built in the 1880s, many farmers and ranchers moved to the territory. In 1889, Congress divided the Dakota Territory and admitted North Dakota and South Dakota, as well as Montana, as new states.

 **Reading Check** **Explain** How did the discovery of new mines affect settlement of the West?

Ranching and Farming the Plains

 **Main Idea** Ranchers built vast cattle ranches on the Great Plains, while settlers staked out homesteads and began farming the region.

Reading Connection When you think of cowhands, what images come to mind, and from what sources do these images derive? Read on to learn about the realities of life as a cowboy in the West.

While many Americans headed to the Rocky Mountains to mine gold and silver after the Civil War, others began building vast cattle ranches and farming homesteads on the **Great Plains**. This region extends westward to the Rocky Mountains from around the 100th meridian—an imaginary line running north and south from the central Dakotas through western Texas.

Ranching the Plains In the early 1800s, Americans did not think cattle ranches on the Great Plains were practical. Water was scarce, and cattle from the East could not survive on the tough prairie grasses. Farther south, however, in Texas, there existed a breed of cattle **adapted** to living on the Great Plains.

The Texas longhorn was a breed descended from Spanish cattle that had been brought to Mexico two centuries earlier. Ranchers in Mexico and Texas had allowed their cattle to run wild, and slowly a new breed—the longhorn—had emerged. Lean and rangy, the longhorn could easily survive in the harsh climate of the Plains, and by 1865, as many as 5 million of them roamed the grasslands of Texas.

Mexicans had introduced cattle ranching in California, New Mexico, and Texas before these areas became part of the United States. The industry grew in part because of the **open range**—a vast area of government-owned grassland. The open range covered much of the Great Plains and provided land where ranchers could graze their herds free of charge and unrestricted by the boundaries of private farms.

Mexican cowhands developed the tools and techniques for rounding up and driving cattle. These Hispanic herders taught American cowhands their trade and enriched the English vocabulary with words of Spanish origin, including “lariat,” “lasso,” and “stampede.”

Prior to the Civil War, ranchers had little incentive to round up the longhorns. Beef prices were low, and moving the cattle to eastern markets was not practical. Two developments changed this situation: the