CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: CONQUEST AND SURVIVAL:
THE TRANS-MISSISSIPPI WEST, 1860–1900

INDIAN PEOPLES UNDER SIEGE
On the Eve of Conquest
The Indian Wars
The Nez Perce

THE INTERNAL EMPIRE
Mining Towns
Mormon Settlements
Borderland Communities

THE CATTLE INDUSTRY
Cowboys
Cowgirls and Prostitutes
Community and Conflict on the Range

FARMING COMMUNITIES ON THE PLAINS
The Homestead Act
Populating the Plains
Work, Dawn to Dusk

THE WORLD’S BREADBASKET
New Production Technologies
Producing for the Market
California Agribusiness
The Toll on the Land

THE WESTERN LANDSCAPE
Nature’s Majesty
The Legendary Wild West
The “American Primitive”

THE TRANSFORMATION OF INDIAN SOCIETIES
Reform Policy and Politics
The Ghost Dance
Endurance and Rejuvenation

CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
*The impact of western expansion on Indian societies
*The West as an “internal empire” and the development of new technologies and new industries
*The creation of new communities and the displacement of old communities
*The West as myth and legend

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: THE OKLAHOMA LAND RUSH Thousands gathered for the Oklahoma land rush. Land promised to Indians who had been forcibly relocated in the 1830s was first opened to white settlement in 1889. In a little over two months settlers filed 6,000 homestead claims. The land rush symbolized the movement towards white settlement and reconstruction of the land for commercial agriculture,
ranching, and other industries. This transformation came at the expense of Indian peoples who saw their land taken away and their tribal structure dissolved by the government. The vignette illustrates how the ambitions of manifest destiny were realized.

**INDIAN PEOPLES UNDER SIEGE** The federal government took upon itself to mediate disputes among the old and new inhabitants of the West. Indians had occupied the Plains for more than twenty thousand years and had developed diverse ways of adapting themselves to the environment. The arrival of Europeans brought disease and the need for Indians to adapt to their ways. Legally, Indian tribes had been autonomous nations that the federal government had pressured to migrate west into what had been proclaimed as a permanent Indian Territory. Whites’ desires for western land led the federal government to pressure western Indians into moving to reservations. Farmers found that they were inadequate for the subsistence farming they had known. Nomadic tribes found their freedom curtailed and their buffalo destroyed both by the railroad and white hunting.

With their food supply destroyed and the ways of life undermined, Great Plains tribes saw only two choices, fight or die. White hostility helped foster violence as shown by the 1864 massacre of Cheyenne women and children at Sand Creek, Colorado. The discovery of gold and silver fueled wars. The Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho formed an alliance to protect the Black Hills, wiping out Custer’s regiment before being defeated by the army. One of the bloodiest conflicts was the Red River War of 1874-1875. In the southwest, Apaches under Geronimo waged a ten-year guerilla war. Clashes erupted when whites violated treaties. Even tribes like the Nez Perce, who tried to cooperate with whites, were betrayed. Led by Chief Joseph, the tribe refused to go on to a reservation and fled from Oregon to northern Montana. The federal government broke its promise to return them to Oregon and eventually relocated them to Oklahoma before they were sent to a reservation in Washington.

**THE INTERNAL EMPIRE** Settlers found themselves subjects of an “internal empire” controlled from the east. Mining fostered western expansion. Gold discoveries brought thousands of fortune seekers. But the real prizes went to corporations, which bought out the smaller claims. Although some mining communities eventually became permanent settlements, most were short-lived booms towns. The western labor movement emerged in this rough and often violent climate. Unions often reflected the ethnic prejudices of their members, refusing membership to Chinese, Mexican, and Indian workers. Unions were unable to stop owners from closing down mines when the ore ran out, leaving ghost towns and environmental blight.

Mormons migrated to the Great Basin in Utah beginning in 1846. They shared land and water as they built agricultural communities. The federal government assumed control of the Utah territory. After a series of clashes between Mormons and the federal government over polygamy, Mormon leaders renounced the practice. Territorial rule also threatened the unique Mormon way of life.

The Southwest experienced a series of clashes between Anglos and Mexicanos over
control of the land. Some Mexicano elites continued to maintain wealth and power, but the majority of Mexicans found themselves trapped in poverty and turned to migratory work or moved to urban areas to work for wages. Mexican women lost status due to the ways of the marketplace. Mexicanos tried to reverse these trends by legal and extra-legal means, and were able to maintain key elements of their traditional culture. But the Anglos gained control, though even in the Anglo communities many were unable to enjoy the fruits of the region, which were controlled by eastern investors and lawyers.

THE CATTLE INDUSTRY The destruction of buffalo opened opportunities for the western cattle industry. Cowboys rounded up herds for $30 a month (at best) and lived under harsh circumstances, stimulating efforts to unionize. The labor force was ethnically diverse. One-fifth to one-third were Indian, Mexican, or African American. Few women worked on the open range, though some 50,000 women worked as prostitutes in the West during the second half of the nineteenth century. Their life was quite harsh and seldom paid well. Personal violence was commonplace in the cattle towns and mining camps. Horse theft rose rapidly during the peak years of the cattle drives. During the 1870s range wars turned violent when farmers, sheep ranchers, and cattle ranchers battled over the same land. By the mid-1880s the cattle business went bust. Overstocking led to herds depleting sparse grasslands. Bad weather in 1885-1887 killed ninety percent of western cattle, and prices plummeted.

FARMING COMMUNITIES ON THE PLAINS The Homestead Act of 1862 promised free land for western settlers. While the Act spurred migration and the railroads made movement possible, most settlers bought land from state governments or land companies. The railroads made the rapid settlement of the West possible, wielding tremendous economic and political power. Over 2 million European immigrants settled on the Great Plains, bringing Old World cultivation techniques and cultural patterns. Although mobility was high, eventually communities flourished in the Great Plains and a social hierarchy developed. Farm families survived by having all members of the family participate in the difficult work. Neighbors would sometimes cooperate on common projects and barter surplus goods and labor. Natural disasters and market swings often forced foreclosures making farming a hard life and not the Garden of Eden imagined by romantics.

THE WORLD’S BREADBASKET Preparing western lands for cultivation was a difficult process, in part because of the tough sod. New technologies greatly increased the amount of land that could be farmed. Through federal aid, land-grant colleges, and other sources of scientific research, farmers developed new techniques for cultivation. But farmers always had to cope with natural forces that were not always cooperative. Most farmers produced primarily for the cash market and adapted their crops accordingly. Larger, wealthier farmers were better able to take advantage of the new technology and scientific expertise.

California led the way toward large-scale commercial farming that defined agribusiness. Fruit and vegetable growers manipulated consumer tastes to create new markets for their products. As farmers came in, they destroyed existing plant and animal
species and introduced new ones. Replacing buffalo with cattle and sheep, animals ate grasses down to the roots and created the possibilities of huge dust storms. Commercial agriculture took a heavy toll on existing water supplies by diverting rivers and lakes for irrigation and depleting aquifers. The federal government responded by creating the Forest Service to safeguard watersheds.

THE WESTERN LANDSCAPE The West and its people came to represent something special about the American landscape. Writers described in great detail the wonder of nature’s majesty. The federal government created national parks in 1871, and sent a team of scientists and photographers to record the region’s beauty. Landscape painters from the Rocky Mountain School piqued the public’s interest in the West. More popular presentations emphasized the West as a source of “vigorous manhood.” Thousands of “dime novels” appeared that portrayed the region in romantic, heroic terms. Wild West show promoters like “Buffalo Bill” Cody brought the legendary West to millions of people around the world.

The West continued to captivate American imagination. The public sought depictions of bold cowboys and exotic savages. Depicting both realistic and imaginary scenes, artists like Charles Schreyvogel, Charles Russell, and Frederic Remington helped to shape Americans’ perception of the region. Scholars like Lewis Henry Morgan and Alice Cunningham Fletcher studied Indians and began to develop a scientific understanding of their lives. Interest in Indians spread throughout the public as groups like the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts incorporated a large dose of tribal lore into their character-building programs.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF INDIAN SOCIETIES The federal government’s tradition of treating Indian tribes as separate nations ended in 1871. Reformers like Helen Hunt Jackson advocated policies designed to promote Indian assimilation and eradicate distinct tribal customs. The Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 severed individual Indian relationships with their tribes by breaking up tribal holdings and allotting 160 acres of land to individuals. It was a disaster for most Indians who received poor land, little training, and inadequate tools for farming. They lost most of their land and did not become integrated into white society. A Paiute prophet, Wovoka, had a vision that a divine judgment was coming and led the Sioux to practice the Ghost Dance. White authorities grew fearful. An incident led whites to gun down 200 people at Wounded Knee. Those tribes that survived best were those living on land unwanted by whites. A majority of tribes dwindled to the brink of extinction; some even disappeared. Small minorities like the Navajo, Hopi, and northwestern tribes managed to adapt to the new situation or were sufficiently isolated to survive. But the traditional way of life for most was gone. It was several generations before a resurgence of Indian sovereignty occurred.

CONCLUSION The transformation of the West reflected the popular image of a boundless source of wealth as well as the reality of the harsh conditions that made securing that wealth difficult.

Lecture Suggestions
1. A theme that can be explored is the sense of inevitability of the conflict between whites and Indians. Go through the value systems of each group—their attitudes towards land, government, individual versus group, etc. Given the enormous cultural differences between the two groups, conflict was likely, even assuming the best of intentions.

2. Students frequently have swallowed a myth that independent people without government involvement settled the West. Explore the ways that western settlement was heavily dependent on an active role for federal and state governments.

3. Students who are not from the West frequently have romantic assumptions about it. Explain the myth of the West and how it contrasted with the reality of people’s lives.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways did the federal government enable the West to be settled and developed? Does this challenge our assumptions about westerners being independent of the federal government?

2. What role did railroads play in western development? Why were westerners so angry at railroads by the end of the nineteenth century?

3. Why were Indians unable to resist white incursion?

4. Reformers considered the Dawes Severalty Act to be a humanitarian gesture. Why did it turn out to be so terrible for the Indians?

5. One of the themes in the chapter is that westerners were regularly participating in a large commercial market. Does this contradict our images of rugged individualistic westerners?

6. How did farmers “tame” the West? Or did the West “tame” the farmers?

Out of Class Activity

One of the ways that Americans re-create the West is through the movies. Students could view classics like “The Searchers,” “Stagecoach,” and “Little Big Man,” along with more recent movies like “Dances With Wolves” and "Unforgiven." They could view satires like “Blazing Saddles.” They could then examine the myth of the west and how that myth has changed.

If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject

In Chapter Fourteen Patricia Limerick’s *Legacy of Conquest* (Norton, 1987) and Richard
White’s *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own* (Oklahoma, 1991) were recommended as introductions to the “new” western history. They would be very helpful for dealing with this material as well.

**Audio Visual Aids**

“The West” An acclaimed multi-part documentary covering numerous aspects of the West in loving detail. Produced by Ken Burns and directed by Stephen Ives. (Color, 16 Hours, 1996)

“Westward Movement: Settling of the Great Plains” Uses authentic photographs, documents, and illustrations. Reviews geographic and cultural factors hampering permanent settlement and describes the developments that made settlement possible. (Color, 17 minutes, 1963)
“North American Indian Part II: How the West Was Won...And Honor Lost” Discusses treaties signed with Indians and covers the movement westward. It describes the influence of buffalo in Indian life. It recounts the Battle of Wounded Knee and the final wars ending with the defeat of Geronimo in 1886. (Color, 25 minutes, 1971)

“Railroads and Westward Expansion—1865-1900” Explains how the transcontinental railroad was constructed. Shows railroads’ importance in settling the Great Plains and the West. (Color, 16 minutes, 1978)