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Introduction

As the American civil war was ending in 1980, the focus turned to the west. There was later a confirmation in the same year indicating that there was a shift of the frontier. This hence raised questions pertaining to the manner in which this frontier was settled in approximately 25 years. With the development of the American nation, there was a shift of the frontier to the west.

In addition to this, the territory known as the final west stretched from Missouri to Pacific Ocean. This vast land was composed of 1. 2 million square miles, which was approximately 40% of the whole nation. The Great American desert was a branded name of this vast area that was labeled by ancient travelers. The annual rainfall of the area is said to be less than 20 inches of rain, thus suggestions have been put forward suggesting this as the cause of the branded name. The dry conditions of this area resulted to great treeless plains that contained prairie grass.

These mountains were rich in lumber and minerals and sloped to Washington, Oregon and California coast areas that were fertile. In spite of possessing a vast wilderness, the West incorporated different types of cultures and surroundings[1].

Development and settlement

The development that took place in the West escalated after the civil war. In 1860s, the initial steps of these developments began and later in 1970s, the development activities increased significantly thanks to the just completed transcontinental railroad that was completed in 1869.

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Transportation changes took effect with the coming of this railroad as Americans could only take a period of one week to travel from one coast to another. Apart from transformation changes, the railroad also contributed to both economic development and capital investment. The Homestead Act of 1862, stories from relatives and friends and advertisements were among the major factors that contributed to the buying and settling on portions of the millions of free acres. These free acres were bought by black freedmen, farmers from the eastern region and Europe's immigrants. These homesteaders underwent numerous calamities as they tried to settle in their newly acquired pieces of land. These calamities were composed of hailstones, thunderstorms, harsh winters, and tornadoes.

The occurrence of these calamities did not deter the spirit to succeed of these settlers as they innovated ways of surviving using the available resources in the plains. For instance, they would use buffalo chips as a source of fuel[2].

Culture and politics

Although the conditions faced by the homesteaders were harsh, they used different activities to adapt to the environment.

They adapted a culture of farming in which they would plant drought resistant crops. Use of windmills and dry farming techniques were also employed for the sole purpose of succeeding in countering the dry and arid area they settled in. On settling on the Great Plains, " these families faced isolation and cultural deprivation" and at the same time, they underwent isolation[3]. Women underwent hardship periods that were accompanied

with periods of loneliness. This therefore led to the women being the first pioneers in development initiatives that involved “ establishment of churches, manifestation of culture and schools”[4]. Later towns developed from families, which translated in communities and later on into towns.

Social development was hence the cause of this transformation. Political organizations were formed that range from alliances to granges. These political organizations acted as the voices of the numerous farmers that lived in the West in a war against the barons of the railroad and eastern bankers[5].

Economy and trade

According to Becker in 1860, the economy of Houston Texas was blossoming, as the area was equipped with over 330 miles of railroad. In addition to this, the city exported three times the amount of cotton it was exporting in 1957. Despite the existence of slavery in this city, the slave ownership rates were minimal as compared to the eastern states.

The railroad access to Mexican ports played a greater role in uplifting the city’s economy. This is evident as the trade merchants would send the cotton acquired in Texas to ships destined for Europe at the Mexican ports and in return, they would acquire bananas and sugar from Cuba, Jamaican rum, gunpowder and many other essential commodities. Increase in trade resulted to Texas becoming the heart of trans-Mississippi region. The civil wars had earlier on devastated the economy of the west but this did not deter the homesteaders from working in a collective form so as to develop the arid area they settled in. Rebuilding of the west infrastructure was a

collective initiative among the leaders, citizens, and businesspersons. The rebuilding of the infrastructure resulted to the west being the central hub of transportation[6]. In Texas wild herds of cattle roamed in vast areas.

In addition to this, there was high demand of beef in Texas. This resulted to cowboys driving these herds of cattle northwards towards the railheads. The cattle activities continued from 1866 up to twenty years later when the market of cattle collapsed. Excess speculation by the “ Eastern and foreign investors created a financial bubble that burst when the worst drought in memory was followed by the brutal blizzard of 1887”[7]. Starvation and freezing temperatures faced thousands of cattle that finally died. Although the cattle industry went on to survive, things did not return to normal[8].

End of an era

According to Etulain and Malone, in 1893, the American Historical Association met in Chicago for the sole aim of participating in the World Columbian Exposition that was celebrating for discovering a new world.

The document presented to these historians on that day would later on end up creating a new discovery of its own. Professor Turner of the Wisconsin University delivered a speech on “ The significance of the Frontier in American History.” Although the speech did not startle the audience, it would later on play a major role in changing the perception of how historians view the American West and the American past. The speech which was known as “ Turner thesis” or “ frontier thesis” challenged the perceptions of American civilization that indicated that European legacies as the major influences in the history of America.

In contradicting this perception, Turner indicated that the American frontier had the major influence in spawning individualism, nationalism, and democracy in the American society. Turner goes on to explain that the presence of the vast area of free land in the west, increase in settlement and the ever progressing recession are some but a few explanation of the American development. The frontier that swept across the country had now come to a halt, as it is evident in the 1890 census. Settlements had now occupied the previous open spaces of the west and hence Turner while concluding his essay indicated the significance in frontier passing.

This was because the frontier's passing symbolizes the end of the first American history period and the beginning of a new era that destined to begin without beneficial influences and bounties of its previous past. Hence, by looking at the previous trends of the past there was a significance difference in closing of an era. A good example is that the Indians did not roam free as before as they were confined after their defeat to forlorn reservations. This was cemented by the Dawes Act of 1887, which was meant to assimilate the Indians into the American main stream as farmers.

Cowboys on the other hand also seemed to be heading for oblivion. Open range stretches of land were shrinking fast and ranchers fenced off their ranches thereby contributing to the buying of hay especially for winter[9].

Conclusion

During the civil war period, America underwent a great transformation in terms of expansion of economy. Drastic increase of population into frontier was witnessed as the population is said to have doubled between 1879-1900.

It was in this era that the west experienced drastic changes in terms of infrastructure development and increase in settlement. Although the land in the west was arid, the homesteaders made use of the available resources thus indicating plenty of vast opportunities that lied in the vast region.

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