

Life in the West

What were the motives, hardships, and legacies of the groups that moved west in the 1800s?

Introduction

The vast region that stretches from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean is one of the most extraordinary landscapes on Earth. Tourists come from all over to see its mountains, canyons, deserts, and plains.

For all its beauty, the West was a challenging environment, which is reflected in the names that American settlers gave to its features. Only in the West can you find a mountain range called the Crazies, a scorching desert named Death Valley, a blood-red canyon called Flaming Gorge, or a raging river known as the River of No Return.

Despite its geographic challenges, the West was never empty. Perhaps as many as 3 million American Indians lived there before Europeans arrived, and these first westerners were far more diverse in language and culture than the Europeans who claimed their land.

For most Americans in the early 1800s, however, the West was mostly a blank map. By 1850, it had become the land of opportunity, boasting wide-open spaces and great wealth in timber, gold, silver, and other natural resources. It became a magnet for immigrants and for easterners looking for a new start in life. As Americans began their westward trek, they created new markets for eastern merchants, and in time, the West changed the nation's economy and politics. It also created folklore of “rugged individualism” that has become a lasting part of American culture.

Newspaperman Horace Greeley captured the growing enthusiasm for “going west” when he wrote, “If you have no family or friends to aid you, and no prospect [opportunity] opened to you . . . turn your face to the Great West, and there build up a home and fortune.” In this lesson, you will learn about eight groups of people who turned their faces to the West in the early 1800s. You will learn about their **motives**, the hardships they faced, and the legacies they left behind.

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**Social Studies
Vocabulary**

forty-niners

immigrant

legacy

Lewis and Clark expedition

Mormons

Oregon Trail

rancho

1. The Explorers

In the early 1800s, a number of expeditions set out from the United States to explore the West. The most famous was the **Lewis and Clark expedition**, which was ordered by President Thomas Jefferson.

The major motive behind the expedition was to make friendly contact with Indian groups that might be interested in trade. A second motive was to find the Northwest Passage, a water route across North America that explorers had been seeking ever since Columbus reached the Americas. With the purchase of Louisiana from France in 1803, the expedition gained a third motive—finding out just what the United States had bought.

Up the Missouri River In May 1804, the 45-member expedition left St. Louis, Missouri, in three boats. Jefferson's private secretary, Meriwether Lewis, and his friend William Clark led the expedition. Its members included soldiers, frontiersmen, and an African American slave named York, who worked for Clark.

It was hard going from the first day. Rowing upstream against the Missouri River's

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strong current left the explorers' hands blistered and their muscles sore. Mosquitoes feasted on their sunburned faces.

By summer, the explorers had reached Indian country. Most American Indians welcomed the strangers, and York fascinated the Indians, as they had never seen a black man before. Again and again, wrote Clark in his journal, York allowed his skin to be rubbed with a wet finger to prove “that he was not a painted white man.”

The explorers made camp for the winter near a Mandan village in what is now North Dakota. There, a French fur trapper joined them along with his 16-year-old wife, a Shoshone (shuh-SHOW-nee) woman named Sacagawea (sah-kuh-juh-WEE-uh), and their infant son. As a girl, Sacagawea had been kidnapped from her people by another Indian group. Lewis and Clark hoped she would translate for them when they reached Shoshone country.

To the Pacific and Back In the spring of 1805, the explorers set out once again. As they moved up the Missouri River, rapids and waterfalls slowed their progress. When they hauled their boats by land around these obstacles, the thorns of the prickly-pear cactus pierced their feet. Meanwhile, grizzly bears raided their camps, and game became scarce.

By late summer, the explorers could see the Rocky Mountains looming ahead. To cross the mountains before the first snows of winter closed the high passes, they would have to find horses—and soon.

Fortunately, the expedition had reached the land of Sacagawea's childhood. One day, a group of Indians approached, and to Sacagawea's great joy, they proved to be Shoshone. Learning that her brother was now a Shoshone chief, Sacagawea persuaded him to provide the explorers with the horses they desperately needed.

The explorers made it over the Rockies, but they were more dead than alive. The Nez Perce (nehz pers), an Indian people living in the Pacific Northwest, saved them from starvation. A grateful Lewis wrote in his journal that the Nez Perce “are the most hospitable, honest, and sincere people that we have met with in our voyage.”

As winter closed in, the explorers reached their final destination, the Pacific Ocean. Clark marked the event by carving on a tree, “William Clark December 3rd 1805 By Land from the U. States.”

The Explorers' Legacy After a wet and hungry winter in Oregon, the explorers headed home and finally returned to St. Louis in September 1806, two years and four months after setting out. Lewis proudly wrote to Jefferson, “In obedience to our orders, we have penetrated the Continent of North America to the Pacific Ocean.”

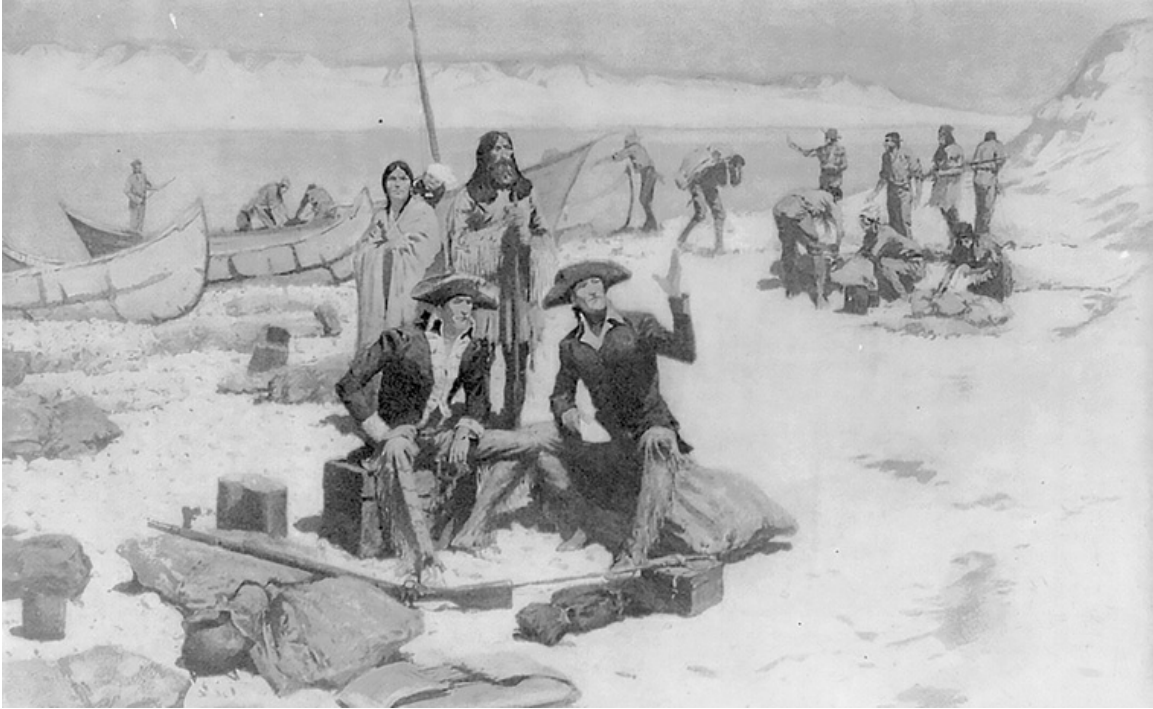
Lewis and Clark had good reason to be proud. Although they had not found the Northwest Passage—for it did not exist—they had traveled some 8,000 miles and had mapped a route to the Pacific. They had established good relations with western Indians. Most of all, they had brought back priceless information about the West and its peoples.

Other explorers added to this **legacy** and helped prepare the way for the settlement of the West. In 1806, the same year Lewis and Clark returned to St. Louis, 26-year-old army lieutenant Zebulon Pike set out to explore the southern part of the new Louisiana Territory. Pike and his party traveled up the valley of the Arkansas River into present-day Colorado, where Pike saw the mountain that today is called Pikes Peak.

Pike went on to explore Spanish territory along the Rio Grande and the Red River. His reports of the wealth of Spanish towns brought many American traders to the Southwest, but Pike was not impressed with the landscape, referring to the West as the “Great American Desert.”

Another famed explorer, John C. Frémont, helped to correct this image. Nicknamed “the Pathfinder,” Frémont mapped much of the territory between the Mississippi Valley and the Pacific Ocean in the 1840s. His glowing descriptions of a “land of plenty” inspired many families to try their luck in the West.

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2. The Californios

Level: A

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If Lewis and Clark had turned south from Oregon after reaching the Pacific, they would have found Spain's best-kept secret: a sun-drenched land called California.

The California Missions In 1769, a Spanish missionary named Junipero Serra (who-NEE-peh-ro SEHR-ra) led soldiers and priests north from Mexico to California. Serra's goal was to convert the California Indians to Christianity. To do this, he established a chain of missions that eventually stretched from San Diego to just north of San Francisco. Each mission controlled a huge area of land, as well as the Indians who worked it.

Although the missionaries meant well, the missions were deadly to native Californians. Indians were sometimes treated harshly, and thousands died of diseases brought to California by the newcomers.

Settlers followed the missionaries to California. "We were the pioneers of the Pacific coast," wrote Guadalupe Vallejo, "building pueblos [towns] and missions while George Washington was carrying on the war of the Revolution." To reward soldiers and attract settlers, the Spanish began the practice of making large grants of land.

When Mexico won its independence in 1821, California came under Mexican rule. In 1833, the Mexican government closed the missions. Half of the mission land was supposed to go to Indians. Instead, Mexico established its own system of land grants in the Southwest and gave most of California's mission lands to soldiers and settlers. The typical Spanish-speaking Californian, or *Californio*, was granted a **ranch**o of 50,000 acres or more.

Life on the Ranchos Life on the ranchos combined hard work and the occasional *fiesta*, or social gathering. Most families lived in simple adobe houses with dirt floors. The Californios produced almost everything they needed at home. Indian servants did much of the work.

The ranchos were so huge that neighbors lived at least a day's journey apart. As a result, strangers were always welcome for the news they brought of the outside world. During weddings and fiestas, Californios celebrated with singing, dancing, and brilliant displays of horsemanship.

In the 1830s, cattle ranching became California's most important industry, with cattle providing hides and tallow (beef fat) that could be traded for imported goods brought by ship. Among the goods that an American sailor named Richard Henry

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Dana carried to California in his trading ship were teas, coffee, sugars, spices, raisins, molasses, hardware, dishes, tinware, cutlery, clothing, jewelry, and furniture.

Because California was so far from the capital in Mexico City, the Mexican government neglected the territory. Soldiers were not paid, and they took what they needed to survive from the people they were supposed to protect. Officials sent to govern California were often unskilled and sometimes dishonest.

The Californios' Legacy In 1846, the United States captured California as part of the war with Mexico. Before long, Californios were a minority in California.

Still, the Californios left a lasting mark. California is full of Spanish place names such as San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. The Californios also introduced many of California's famous crops, such as grapes, olives, and citrus fruits. Most of all, they opened California to the world—and the world soon rushed in.



3. The Mountain Men

The Lewis and Clark expedition **stimulated** new interest in an old industry: the fur

trade. Inspired by the explorers' reports of finding beaver in the Rockies, a Spanish trader named Manuel Lisa followed their route west. In 1807, Lisa led 42 trappers up the Missouri River, and the following year, he took 350 trappers into the Rockies. For the next 30 years, trappers crisscrossed the West in search of valuable furs.

The Trapper's Life The trappers, who were also called mountain men, lived hard and usually died young. During the spring and fall, they set their traps in icy streams, and then in July, they traveled to trading posts to swap furs for supplies or gathered for an annual rendezvous, or get-together.

The rendezvous may have been fun, but the trappers' lives were filled with hazards. Fur thieves, Indians, wolves, and bears attacked them. Mountain man Hugh Glass, for example, was mauled by a mother bear that threw chunks of his flesh to her hungry cubs before friends could rescue him.

Accidents were common, too, and a single misplaced step on a mountain, or a misjudged river rapid, often meant sudden death. Additionally, disease took a heavy toll. Upon asking for news about a party of trappers, one man learned that "some had died by lingering diseases, and others by the fatal [rifle] ball or arrow." Out of 116 men, he wrote, "there were not more than sixteen alive."

Freedom and Adventure Trappers braved this dangerous and violent way of life because of the freedom and adventure it offered. A good example is Jim Beckwourth, an African American fur trapper and explorer from Virginia, who was captured by Crow Indians while hunting beaver in the Rockies. According to Beckwourth, an old woman identified him as her long-lost son, and he was adopted into the tribe. "What could I do?" he wrote later. "Even if I should deny my Crow origin, they would not believe me."

Beckwourth lived with the Crow for six years and became a chief. By the time he left the tribe in the 1830s, the fur trade was in decline, but like other mountain men, Beckwourth continued his adventurous life as an explorer, army scout, and trader. In 1850, he discovered the lowest pass across the Sierra Nevada range, known today as Beckwourth Pass.

The Mountain Men's Legacy In their search for furs, the mountain men explored most of the West, and the routes they pioneered across mountains and deserts became the Oregon and California Trails. Their trading posts turned into supply stations for settlers moving west along those trails.

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A surprising number of mountain men left another kind of legacy: personal journals. Their stories still have the power to make us laugh and cry—and to wonder how they lived long enough to tell their tales.





4. The Missionaries

Ever since Lewis and Clark appeared among them, the Nez Perce had been friendly toward Americans. In 1831, three Nez Perce traveled to St. Louis to become more educated about the white man's ways. There, the Nez Perce asked if someone would come west to teach their people the secrets of the "Black Book," or Bible.

Several missionaries answered that call, including Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and Henry and Eliza Spalding, who were among the best known. In 1836, both couples traveled west from St. Louis along the **Oregon Trail**.

It was a difficult journey. Narcissa described the Rockies as "the most terrible mountains for steepness." Despite the troubles, the missionaries arrived safely in Oregon, proving that women could endure the journey west.

A Difficult Start On reaching Oregon, the group split up, with the Spaldings working among the Nez Perce and the Whitmans among a neighboring group, the

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Cayuse. Neither couple knew very much about the people they hoped to convert, which resulted in a difficult start.

After three years, the Spaldings finally made their first converts, when Henry baptized two Nez Perce chiefs in 1839. A year later, one of the chiefs had his infant son baptized as well. The child would grow up to be the leader best known as Chief Joseph.

The Whitmans were less successful, as the Cayuse were far more interested in the whites' weapons and tools than in their religion. The couple also offended the Cayuse because they refused to pay for the land they took for their mission or to offer visitors gifts, as was the Indians' custom. Not a single Cayuse converted to the new faith.

A Pioneer's Paradise Marcus Whitman was far more successful at converting Americans over to the belief that Oregon was a pioneer's paradise. "It does not concern me so much what is to become of any particular set of Indians," he wrote. "Our greatest work is . . . to aid the white settlement of this country and help to found its religious institutions."

In 1842, Marcus traveled east on horseback and, along the way, urged Americans to settle in Oregon. On his return, he guided a large group of settlers along the Oregon Trail, and more settlers soon followed. "The poor Indians are amazed at the overwhelming number of Americans coming into the country," observed Narcissa. "They seem not to know what to make of it."

In 1847, measles came west with settlers and swept through the Whitman mission. Marcus treated the sick as best he could. The Cayuse noticed that whites usually recovered, whereas their own people were dying. Rumors spread that Whitman was giving deadly pills to Indians, and the Cayuse Indians attacked the mission, killing both Marcus and Narcissa.

The Missionaries' Legacy Like the Spanish priests in California, American preachers in Oregon hoped their legacy would be large numbers of Christian Indians. In fact, relatively few Indians became Christians. Many, however, died of the diseases that came west with the missionaries.

The missionaries' true legacy was to open the West to settlement. In California, Oregon, and other territories, settlers followed in the footsteps of the missionaries.



5. The Pioneer Women

Women pioneers shared in the danger and the work of settling the West. Most of these women were wives and mothers, but some were single women with motives of seeking homesteads, husbands, or other new opportunities. Pioneer women not only helped to shape the future of the West, but also earned new **status** for themselves and for women throughout the United States.

On the Trail Between 1840 and 1869, about 350,000 people traveled west in covered wagons. Most westward-bound pioneers gathered each spring near Independence, Missouri, where they formed columns of wagons called wagon trains.

The journey west lasted four to six months and covered about 2,000 miles. Wagon space was extremely limited, and pioneers were forced to leave most of the comforts of home behind. When the way became steep, they often had to toss out the few treasures they managed to bring, which left the Oregon Trail littered with furniture, china, books, and other cherished objects.

Women were expected to do the work they had done back home—cooking, washing clothes, and caring for the children—but while traveling 15 to 20 miles a day. Meals on wheels were simple. “About the only change we have from bread

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and bacon,” wrote Helen Carpenter, “is to bacon and bread.”

The daily drudgery wore many women down. For example, Lavinia Porter recalled, “I would make a brave effort to be cheerful and patient until the camp work was done. Then starting out ahead of the team and my men folks, when I thought I had gone beyond hearing distance, I would throw myself down on the unfriendly desert and give way like a child to sobs and tears.”

Trail Hazards The death toll on the trail was high, with disease being the worst killer. Accidents were also common, and people drowned crossing rivers. Indian attacks were rare, but the prospect of them added to the sense of danger.



By the end of the journey, each woman had a story to tell. Some had seen buffalo stampedes and prairie fires on the Great Plains. Some had almost frozen to death in the mountains or died of thirst in the deserts. Regardless, most survived to build new lives in the West. In the Little House books, the author Laura Ingalls Wilder highlighted the strength of women pioneers in stories of her family's life on the American frontier.

One group of pioneer women—African Americans who had escaped from slave states or who were brought west by their owners—faced a unique danger. Even though slavery was outlawed in most of the West, bounty hunters were often able

to track down fugitive slaves. However, for some African American women, the move west brought freedom. For example, when Biddy Mason's owner tried to take her from California (a free state) to Texas, Mason sued for her freedom and won. She later moved to Los Angeles, where she became a well-known pioneer and community leader.

The Pioneer Women's Legacy The journey west changed pioneer women, as the hardships of the trail brought out strengths and abilities they never knew they possessed. “I felt a secret joy,” declared one Oregon pioneer, “in being able to have the power that sets things going.”

Women did “set things going.” Wherever they settled, they established schools, churches, libraries, literary societies, and charitable groups. Annie Bidwell, for example, left behind a remarkable legacy. When Annie married John Bidwell, she moved to his ranch in what is now the town of Chico, California, where she taught sewing to local Indian women and helped their children learn to read and write English. Annie convinced John to give up drinking—he closed the tavern that had been part of his home—and encouraged the building of Chico's first church.

Annie was active in other causes as well, including the movement to give women a right that had long been denied them in the East: the right to vote. Wyoming Territory led the way by granting women the right to vote in 1869. By 1900, a full 20 years before women across the nation would win the right to vote, women were voting in four western states. The freedom and sense of equality enjoyed by women in the West helped pave the way for more equal treatment of women throughout the United States. This was perhaps the greatest legacy of the women pioneers.



6. The Mormons

In 1846, a wagon train of pioneers headed west in search of a new home. Looking down on the shining surface of Great Salt Lake in what is now Utah, their leader, Brigham Young, declared, “This is the place!”

It was not a promising spot, with one pioneer describing the valley as a “broad and barren plain . . . blistering in the rays of the midsummer sun.” A woman wrote, “Weak and weary as I am, I would rather go a thousand miles further than remain.” However, the fact that no one else wanted the valley that Brigham Young claimed for his followers, the **Mormons**, made it attractive.

A Persecuted Group The Mormons were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which Joseph Smith had founded in New York in 1830. Smith taught that he had received a sacred book, *The Book of Mormon*, from an angel and believed it was his task to create a community of believers who would serve God faithfully.

Smith's followers lived in close communities, working hard and sharing their goods. Yet, wherever they settled—first New York, then Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois—their neighbors **persecuted** them.

Many people were offended by the Mormons' teachings, especially their acceptance of polygamy—the practice of having more than one wife. Others resented the Mormons' rapidly growing power and wealth, and in 1844, resentment turned to violence when a mob in Illinois killed Joseph Smith. After Smith's death, Brigham Young took over as leader of the Mormons and decided to move his community to Utah, where they might be left alone to follow their faith in peace.

West to Utah Young turned out to be a practical as well as a religious leader. “Prayer is good,” he said, “but when baked potatoes and pudding and milk are needed, prayer will not supply their place.”

Young carefully planned every detail of the trek to Utah, and the pioneers he led west stopped along the way to build shelters and plant crops for those who would follow. Even with all this planning, the journey was difficult. “We soon thought it unusual,” wrote one Mormon, “to leave a campground without burying one or more persons.”

When he arrived at Great Salt Lake, Young laid out his first settlement, Salt Lake City. By the time he died in 1877, Utah had 125,000 Mormons living in 500 settlements.

To survive in this dry country, Mormons had to learn new ways to farm, so they built dams, canals, and irrigation ditches to carry precious water from mountain streams to their farms in the valley. With this water, they made the desert bloom.

The Mormons' Legacy The Mormons were the first Americans to settle the Great Basin and pioneered the farming methods adopted by later settlers of this dry region. They also helped settlers make their way west, with Salt Lake City quickly becoming an important stop for travelers in need of food and supplies.

To the Mormons, however, their greatest legacy was the faith they planted so firmly in the Utah desert. From its center in Salt Lake City, the Mormon Church has grown into a worldwide religion with more than 11 million members.



7. The Forty-Niners

In 1848, a carpenter named James Marshall was building a sawmill on the American River in northern California when suddenly he spotted something shining in the water. “I reached my hand down and picked it up,” he wrote later. “It made my heart thump, for I felt certain it was gold.”

When word of Marshall's discovery leaked out, people across California dropped everything to race to the goldfields. “All were off to the mines,” wrote a minister, “some on horses, some on carts, and some on crutches.”

The World Rushes In By 1849, tens of thousands of gold-seekers from around the world had joined the California gold rush. About two-thirds of these **forty-niners** were Americans, but the motive of fortune also brought settlers from Mexico, South America, Europe, Australia, and even China.

The forty-niners' first challenge was simply getting to California. From China and Australia, they had to brave the rough crossing of the Pacific Ocean. From the East, many traveled by ship to Panama in Central America, crossed through dangerous jungles to the Pacific side, and boarded ships north to San Francisco.

Others made the difficult journey overland.

Most forty-niners were young, and almost all were men. When Luzena Wilson arrived in Sacramento with her family, a miner offered her \$5 for her biscuits just to have “bread made by a woman.” When she hesitated, he doubled his offer. “Women were scarce in those days,” she wrote. “I lived six months in Sacramento and saw only two.”

Life in the Mining Camps Wherever gold was spotted, mining camps with names like Mad Mule Gulch and You Bet popped up overnight. At Coyote Diggings, Luzena found “a row of canvas tents,” but a few months later, “there were two thousand men . . . and the streets were lined with drinking saloons and gambling tables.” Merchants made fortunes selling eggs for \$6 a dozen and flour for \$400 a barrel.

With no police to keep order, the camps were rough places. Miners frequently fought over the boundaries of their claims, and they took it on themselves to punish crimes. “In the short space of twenty-four hours,” wrote Louise Clappe, “we have had murders, fearful accidents, bloody deaths, a mob, whippings, a hanging, an attempt at suicide, and a fatal duel.”

Digging for gold was hard and tedious work, and the miners spent long days digging up mud, dirt, and stones while standing knee-deep in icy streams. All too soon, the easy-to-find gold was gone. “The day for quick fortune-making is over,” wrote a miner in 1851. “There are thousands of men now in California who would gladly go home if they had the money.”

The Forty-Niners' Legacy By 1852, the gold rush was over. While it lasted, about 250,000 people flooded into California. For California's Indians, the legacy of this invasion was dreadful, with warfare and disease reducing their number from about 150,000 in 1848 to just 30,000 in 1870. In addition, many Californios lost their land to the newcomers.

The forty-niners also left a prosperous legacy. By 1850, California had enough people to become the first state in the far west. These new Californians helped to transform the Golden State into a diverse land of economic opportunity.

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8. The Chinese

Level: A

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Gam Saan, or “Gold Mountain,” was what people in China called California in 1848. To poor and hungry Chinese peasants, Gam Saan sounded like a paradise. There, they were told, “You will have great pay, large houses, and food and clothing of the finest description . . . Money is in great plenty.” By 1852, more than 20,000 Chinese had ventured across the Pacific to California, and that year, one of every ten Californians was Chinese.

An Uncertain Welcome At first, the Chinese were welcomed. Lai Chun-Chuen, an early **immigrant**, observed that they “were received like guests” and “greeted with favor.” In 1852, the governor of California praised Chinese immigrants as “one of the most worthy classes of our newly adopted citizens.”

As gold mining became more difficult, however, attitudes toward immigrants began to change. A miner from Chile complained, “The Yankee regarded every man but . . . an American as an interloper [intruder] who had no right to come to California and pick up the gold.” The Chinese, too, came under attack.

American miners called on the government to drive foreigners out of the goldfields. In 1852, the state legislature passed a law requiring foreign miners to pay a monthly fee for a license to mine. As the tax collectors arrived in the camps, most of the foreigners left. One traveler saw them “scattered along the roads in every direction,” like refugees fleeing an invading army.

The Chinese Stay The Chinese, however, paid the tax and stayed on. When the miners' tax failed to drive off the Chinese, Americans tried to force them into leaving. Whites hacked off the long *queues* (kyus), or braids, worn by Chinese men and burned the shacks of Chinese miners. Beatings followed burnings.

Discouraged Chinese immigrants left the mines to open restaurants, laundries, and stores in California's growing cities. “The best eating houses in San Francisco,” one miner wrote, were those opened by the Chinese. So many Chinese settled in San Francisco that local newspapers called their neighborhood Chinatown. Today, San Francisco's Chinatown remains the oldest and largest Chinese community in the United States.

Other Chinese put their farming skills to work by draining swamps and digging irrigation ditches to water arid fields in California's fertile Central Valley. In time, they would help transform California into America's fruit basket and salad bowl.

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The Legacy of the Chinese Immigrants Most of the Chinese who came to California in search of gold hoped to return to China as rich men. A few did just that, but most stayed on in the United States. Despite continued prejudice against them, their hard work, energy, and skills greatly benefited California and other western states. “In mining, farming, in factories and in the labor generally of California,” observed a writer in 1876, “the employment of the Chinese has been found most desirable.”

The Chinese not only helped to build the West, but they also made it a more interesting place to live. Wherever they settled, Chinese immigrants brought with them the arts, tastes, scents, and sounds of one of the world’s oldest and richest cultures.



Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you learned about the people who settled the West in the 1800s.

The Explorers Explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark went west to find the Northwest Passage and to establish friendly relations with native people. The expedition helped prepare the way for future settlement.

The Californios In California, Spanish-speaking settlers followed in the footsteps of missionaries. The Californios' way of life centered on the rancho and the raising of cattle.

The Mountain Men Valuable beaver furs—and a life of freedom and adventure— attracted fur trappers to the West. Many of these hardy mountain men stayed on as scouts, guides, and traders.

The Missionaries People traveled to Oregon and other western territories in hopes of converting Indians to Christianity. Although they made few converts, the missionaries attracted other settlers to the West.

The Pioneer Women Many women pioneers sought new opportunities in the West. Besides working to establish homes and farms, women often brought education and culture to new settlements.

The Mormons Mormon pioneers traveled to Utah in search of religious freedom. They built cities and towns and introduced new methods of farming to the dry plains.

The Forty-Niners Gold seekers from all over the world rushed to California in 1849. Few became rich, but many stayed to help build the new state's economy.

The Chinese The gold rush attracted thousands of Chinese immigrants to California. Although they often had to fight prejudice, most of them remained in the United States, working as laborers and starting new businesses and farms.

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Reading Further

Gold Rush Pioneers

During the gold rush of 1849, thousands of fortune seekers flocked to California. Most of them were white American men, but women, African Americans, Californios, and people from around the world also caught “gold fever.” Although they all dreamed of riches and a better life, what they found in California rarely lived up to their dreams. However, through hard work, these fortune seekers helped build a new state.

Luzena Wilson and her husband, Mason, were living on a farm in Missouri when they heard about the discovery of gold in California. “The gold excitement spread like wildfire, even out to our log cabin in the prairie,” she later recalled.

As we had almost nothing to lose, and we might gain a fortune, we early caught the fever. My husband grew enthusiastic and wanted to start immediately, but I would not be left behind. I thought where he could go I could, and where I went I could take my two little toddling babies . . . I little realized then the task I had undertaken. If I had, I think I should still be in my log cabin in Missouri. But . . . it sounded like such a small task to go out to California, and once there fortune, of course, would come to us.

The Wilsons packed up their wagon and traveled overland to Sacramento, California, arriving in September 1849. In Sacramento, they sold their oxen and bought a share in a hotel business, which soon prospered with Luzena serving as

cook and manager. However, throughout the next few years, their fortunes would rise and fall and rise again.

After a few months, a severe flood swamped Sacramento and wiped out the Wilsons' business. Nevertheless, they decided to start again and moved to the mining town of Nevada City, a town rich from gold strikes. "Everybody had money, and everybody spent it," Luzena recalled. "Money ran through one's fingers like water through a sieve." She started cooking meals for miners, and the Wilsons soon opened another hotel, the El Dorado, which became a booming business before long.

In March 1851, disaster struck when a fire raged through Nevada City and burned much of the town, including the El Dorado. Once again, the Wilsons lost nearly everything, but they were still determined to succeed. They moved to a valley west of Sacramento, where they farmed hay for livestock and started another hotel.

They established a business on the road from Sacramento to San Francisco and prospered once again, but this time their fortune lasted. Other settlers came and put down roots, and eventually, the town of Vacaville was born. Luzena Wilson and her husband remained there for the rest of their lives. Although they had not struck it rich, they were able to build a life in California.



An Irish Immigrant's Story

Thomas Kerr also found life in California a challenge. Unlike the Wilsons, he never enjoyed much success, and in fact, he never even made it to the gold country.

Kerr left his native Ireland during the great famine of 1845–1850, during which a disease destroyed the Irish potato crop, causing hunger, hardship, and death. Along with many other Irish, Kerr decided to try his luck in America, so he said goodbye to his wife and child and sailed to San Francisco, arriving in March 1850.

Kerr tried to earn money to pay his passage to the goldfields. However, work was hard to find in San Francisco, and costs were high. He eventually got a job building a house near Sacramento, which was as close as he would ever get to the gold country.

The job paid very little, the work was hard, and the conditions were tough. Kerr wrote in his journal, “God knows any money a man earns in California, its dearly won, for he deprives himself of all the comforts . . . in addition to being burned up with a scurching sun . . . and eaten alive by Muskeatoes [mosquitoes].”

Kerr returned to San Francisco, where his wife and child joined him in 1852, and he continued to get odd jobs, ending up in the grocery business. However, he never made the fortune he imagined. “People may talk . . . about the Gold of Calafornia,” he wrote, “but its very difficult to obtain it.”

A Chilean Migrant's Tale

Many other foreigners also arrived in California hoping to strike it rich, including approximately 7,000 Chilean immigrants. Many, such as Vicente Pérez Rosales, had already worked as miners in Chile.

Pérez came from a wealthy, landowning family that had lost its fortune in the 1820s. He had tried his hand at various jobs since then, including gold mining and cattle ranching, but found little success. After he had learned of the gold strikes in California, he left Chile in late 1848 with several business partners on a ship bound for San Francisco.

Pérez was not confident that his group would find gold, but he did believe they could profit from the gold rush. “We felt sure only a lazy man could fail to make money,” he wrote in his journal, “and we were willing to work hard. But little did we know what we faced.”

Pérez and his party soon headed for the gold country, where they worked at various gold diggings and had some success, but not enough to justify their efforts. “There was plenty of gold,” Pérez wrote, “but not enough for all the men in California looking for it.” Competition for gold claims was fierce, and violence often broke out, with much of it directed at foreign miners, particularly Mexicans, Chileans, and Chinese. Therefore, Pérez and his party eventually fled the goldfields.

Seeking another way to earn a living, they opened a stand on a street in Sacramento and sold such goods as cheese, peaches, and beef jerky. However, an epidemic of disease struck the city, and once again they had to flee. Pérez recalled,

We had been miners and had failed at that . . . Then we had become merchants, and . . . that too, as they say, came tumbling down. We had begun to think that, with our luck, if we started a hat factory we could expect men would be born without heads!
—Vicente Pérez Rosales,

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Diary of a Journey to California, 1848–1849



After that, Pérez started a restaurant in San Francisco. However, after initial success, that business failed too. Pérez and his partners had already decided to return to Chile in late 1850 when a fire broke out in San Francisco and burned down their building. They barely escaped with their lives, and two months later, they were back in Chile.

An African American Forty-Niner's Success

Although the gold rush did not bring great wealth to many forty-niners, some did find gold and achieve their dreams. This was the case for hundreds of enslaved African Americans who were brought west to work in the goldfields and then managed to win their freedom.

Among these African American miners, Alvin Coffey stands out as a particular success. In April 1849, he set out from Missouri with his owner, Dr. Bassett, who put him to work digging for gold. In his memoirs, Coffey recalled, “We dug and dug to the first of November. At night it commenced raining, and rained and snowed pretty much all the winter. We had a tent but it barely kept us all dry.”

By the next year, Coffey had mined \$5,000 in gold, but Bassett kept the money and took Coffey back to Missouri, where he sold him to another man. The new owner was kinder and agreed to let Coffey buy his way to freedom. In 1854, Coffey returned to California and earned \$7,000 in the goldfields, enough to buy freedom for himself and his family.

Coffey settled down in northern California and became a prosperous farmer, and his children and grandchildren prospered, as well. For Alvin Coffey, the gold rush had lived up to its promise.

The Results for California

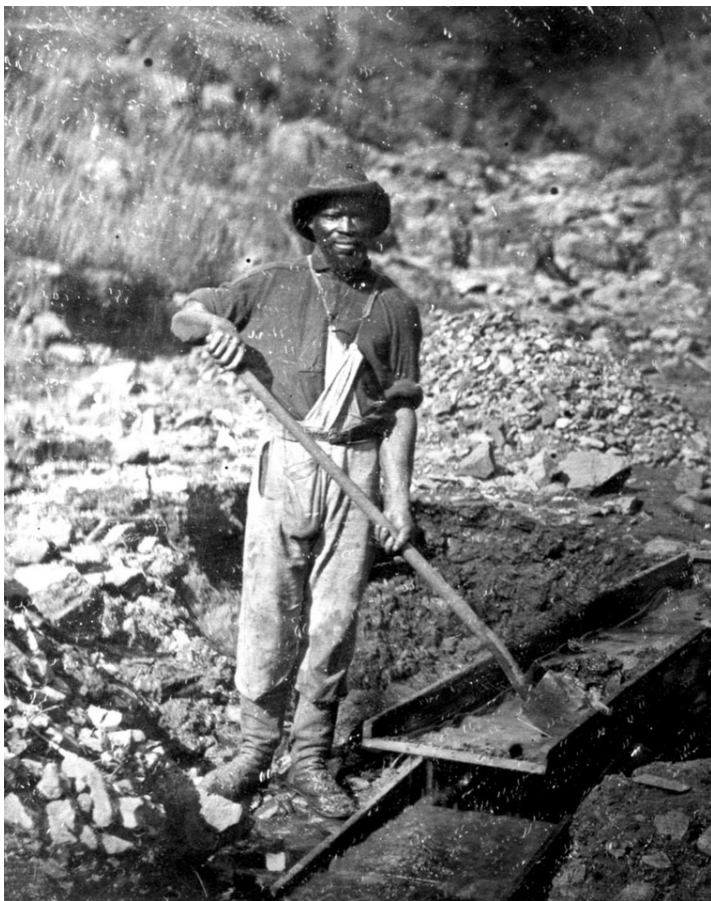
The gold rush also brought statehood to California. Vicente Pérez Rosales was there to witness the election of the new California legislature, an event that included parades, campaign speeches, and even fistfights between rival candidates. Overall, though, he was impressed by the peaceful nature of the election and recalled, “There was no pistol shooting. Arms on that day were silent.” He also noted,

How different it all was from the way these things are handled in other countries. Not only that, but once the election was over all the voters accepted the man elected . . . They dropped the private preferences to hail the majority's choice, and showed as much enthusiasm . . . as if they had contributed to his triumph themselves.

The gold rush had helped lay the foundation for California's political and economic future, and it appeared, in 1850, that that future would be very bright indeed.

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Women and Gender Roles in the Frontier West

Life for women living in the frontier West could be complicated. Some groups had social, political, professional, or economic power in the region. Others did not. Sometimes, a woman's skills and contributions were hidden, misunderstood, or even illegal. The western frontier of the United States stretched across many states and territories, and many types of women helped define and shape its history.

Female Homesteaders and Landowners

To encourage women to settle in the Great Plains, thousands of single, divorced, or widowed women were given an opportunity that they did not have in other parts of the nation. The 1862 Homestead Act allowed these women to own 160 acres of land in their own names. Usually, men were the ones who controlled land. Many female homesteaders had European or Scandinavian roots. They were women from English, Scottish, Italian, German, Danish, Swedish, and several other

backgrounds. There were also women who were African-American, Jewish-American, and Lebanese.



North Dakota was a popular destination for female homesteaders. Children came to places like Hettinger County and Bowbells with their mothers because most women brought family or friends with them. Some women arrived in the area alone. A few were there to help out their male relatives, and those women received some sort of payment for their efforts. Female homesteaders did work the land, but it was not uncommon for them to also pursue outside careers. Some did traditional types of work like teaching or nursing, while others chose more unconventional paths like journalism, photography, and managing real estate. There is evidence that female landowners in North Dakota rented their land to others, sold their original land in order to buy land in another location, or traded their land for commercial buildings or businesses.

In California, María Rita Valdez operated Rancho Rodeo de las Aguas, which sat in what is now the glamorous area of Beverly Hills. (Famous Rodeo Drive takes its name from this ranch.) Other Latina women and their families controlled land in

Southern California and San Francisco, as well as in places outside the state like Phoenix and Santa Fe. These women believed in defending their property rights in court, and they turned to the legal system to help them exercise their authority and protect their rights as landowners.

Three Women and Their Work

Though not a homesteader, Linda Slaughter arrived in the Dakota Territory from Ohio in 1872. She became involved with the journalism, history, and education of the area. Slaughter served as a deputy school superintendent and wrote for more than one of the Territory's newspapers. At first, she was against women having the right to vote, but by 1888, she had changed her mind and become a supporter of the women's rights movement.

Susanna Madora Salter, known by the first name Dora, also came west from Ohio. She moved to Kansas with her family when she was 12 and enrolled in college when she was 16. Less than eight years after she graduated, Dora Salter was elected mayor of the town of Argonia. Historical accounts show that she never campaigned for the office. In fact, there is speculation that her name was placed on the ballot as a joke. Whether that is true or not, there is no doubt that Dora Salter received two-thirds of the vote in the election for mayor, and she served as Argonia's leader for a year. This political accomplishment not only made her the first female mayor in Kansas, but some experts believe that she was likely also the first female mayor in the nation.

Kate Cleary was born in Canada, but she came to Nebraska with her husband in 1884. More of a writer than a journalist, Cleary wrote novels, stories, and poems that appeared in well-known newspapers and magazines of the time. Much of her work was about pioneer life in the rural villages of Nebraska. Sometimes she wrote about nature or about the hardships that people endured on the Plains. Other writings were more humorous and gently mocked society.

A Woman Transformed

Charley Parkhurst came west to California and worked as a stagecoach driver, but not even his friends knew his closely-guarded secret until his death in 1879. Some were so shocked by the secret that they refused to believe it was true. Charley Parkhurst was actually a woman who had spent life out West living and working as a man. He even voted as a man. No one knows for sure why Charley made the choice he did. Driving a stagecoach was a dangerous job that women

would not have been allowed to do, but some historians think Charley could have made the decision to live as a man after he had a fight with an uncle back East. Other experts have suggested the theory that he might have been disappointed about a romantic relationship.

Whatever his reasons, Charley Parkhurst became a skilled stagecoach driver who transported mail, gold, and passengers. Although the routes were dangerous, people used stagecoaches to travel long distances and to communicate with faraway communities. Charley was able to lead his team of horses over rough terrain. Historical accounts say that Charley was robbed many times, and he was even forced to shoot someone who tried to rob him twice. He also drank whiskey and chewed tobacco, which probably helped cause the tongue cancer that killed him at the age of 67.

A Female Outlaw

Belle Star did not transform herself in the same way that Charley Parkhurst did, but she did take advantage of an opportunity in the same way that many men in the West did. The only problem was that the opportunity was not a lawful one. The story of the western outlaw is told in many examples of stories, tales, newspaper accounts, and historical records, but the word outlaw does not always mean the person was a man. Belle Starr was born as Myra Belle Shirley in 1848. She and her family lived a respectable middle-class life on a small farm near Carthage, Missouri where her father ran a business as an innkeeper. Then the Civil War erupted, which caused the death of Belle's brother, led to financial ruin for the inn, and prompted her family to leave Missouri for Texas.

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There, Belle started to become romantically involved with men who were considered to be of “questionable character” because they were robbing banks and trains. In 1866, she married one of them, a man named James Reed. By 1869, Belle was committing crimes with her husband. She helped him to steal cattle, horses, and money in the area around Dallas. Belle wore plumed hats and velvet skirts as she rode on her mare and led her outlaw life. This is how she came to be known as the “Bandit Queen.”

Reed was killed by a member of his own gang in 1874, and Belle was then on her own and in trouble with the law. She ended up in the Oklahoma Indian Territory, where she again started stealing cattle and horses. Belle also met a Cherokee man named Sam Starr who became her new husband and partner in crime. The two of them lived this way for almost ten years until both were arrested in 1883 for stealing horses and sentenced to five months in federal prison.

Sam Starr also died a violent death in 1886, and Belle became involved with a third man who liked to commit robbery. When he was arrested three years later and sent to Arkansas to face charges, Belle went with him on this journey. For

some reason, however, she decided to turn back before they reached Arkansas. As she was returning home in February 1889, Belle was fatally ambushed by two shots to the back. No one was ever convicted of her murder.

The Different Statuses of Non-White Women

American Indian women who were from Great Plains tribes had a great many responsibilities. These included work like clearing fields, planting, hoeing, and harvesting crops, digging pits for storing food, collecting wild plants and firewood, cooking, hauling water, washing dishes, and raising children. White travelers who encountered these American Indians and usually only saw them for a very short time, were amazed at the amount of work that American Indian women had to do compared to the work that men did.



What the travelers did not understand was how the Plains Indians divided their labor and viewed the concepts of ownership and authority. Since men were often away doing dangerous fighting or hunting, women were highly respected for the many tasks that they did to maintain village life. In the Pawnee and Omaha tribes of Nebraska, women owned the lodge, tepee, and its contents. They were also in charge of the fields, the seeds, the farm equipment, and the decision to trade surplus crops. Women had the authority to choose where to camp during a bison hunt. They also had the right to divorce, and since women claimed ownership of

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the lodge, an unkind husband could be left with his horse and weapons but have no place to live.

By contrast, many female Chinese immigrants traveled to the western regions of the United States during the late 19th century, but they did not spend their time being politicians, driving stagecoaches, or writing stories. They also did not receive a great deal of respect either. These women were forced to work in the inns, laundries, and saloons of the mining camps that were spread throughout California, Idaho, and the Rocky Mountains. Most came from extremely poor families who had sold the women into this type of “unofficial” slavery.

Arranged marriages were also not uncommon with Asian and American Indian women. Chinese and Japanese women came as “picture brides” from their homelands to be married to men who had only seen grainy photographs of them. Historians believe such marriages usually happened due to pressure to marry from a woman’s parents, as a means to escape poverty, or for the purpose of hiding a damaged reputation. Men were expected to pay for all costs, including the woman’s travel to the United States and any wedding expenses. The Plains Indians frequently handled an arranged marriage with the help of a middleman and the payment of a “bride price.” This was intended as a method of compensation since the woman’s family would lose her labor.

Victoria Bartolomea Comicrabit (Victoria Reid)

Born in 1808, Victoria was a member of the San Gabriel Indians of California. Spanish friars introduced her to Hispanic customs and traditions. When she married another American Indian named Pablo Maria, the two of them converted to become Catholic and were given mission land. Under the Spanish colonial system, Victoria owned the property and had social status that was equal to other prominent California families. When her husband died, Victoria inherited the couple’s land.

Victoria then married Scottish trader Hugo Reid in 1836, which would turn out to cost her dearly. In the Spanish colonial system, it would have been better for Victoria if she had remained a widow. She would have kept the right to work her land, maintained her respected status in the community, and had the means to care for her four children. Her marriage to Reid gave him the ability to waste the income from her land, and Victoria became penniless upon his death.

Water in the West

When western settlement first started in the United States, the region had a small population. Landowners routinely changed the ways that rivers flowed so they would have enough water for whenever they needed it. This was the “first come, first served” principle. Whoever got to a water source first had the chance to use that water.



By the early to mid-1800s, Mormon settlers had arrived in Utah, and they needed access to water in order to live and raise crops. The settlers created a system for water use based on their religious beliefs. It was called the “beneficial use” system, and its central idea was that everyone should share the available water resources.

Mining required large amounts of water from rivers and streams, but water was not an unlimited resource in the West. Thus, the California Gold Rush caused the development of a new system for establishing water rights. It was called the Prior Appropriation Doctrine, and several western states still use versions of it today. Back in the mid-1800s, this policy had four parts:

- **“First in time”/“First in Right”:** Miners who made a claim first were protected from any other miners who might come along later and try and claim the same water resource. This part of the Prior Appropriation Doctrine was also considered legally binding in court.
- **Priority:** During periods of water shortage, time was used to rank water rights. Anyone with senior water rights had made their claims before others. Senior users were entitled to all of the water that they were allowed to have under their claims. People who had made their claims later had junior rights. For a year with normal rainfall, a user with junior rights would likely receive plenty of water. When there had been little rain, however, a user might not have gotten any water if he only had junior rights.
- **Diversion and “Water Duty”:** A diversion was usually like a ditch or canal that was created to connect a water user’s land to a resource like a flowing stream. Diversions made it possible to somewhat measure the amount of water that was used. A “water duty” decided how much water that a user could take from a resource. This amount was determined by math. It involved figuring out the amount of water that was needed per acre in order to successfully irrigate, or provide water to, growing crops. Then, calculations were done to compute the number of acres that were irrigated. Any water that was not used was “owed” back to other people in the area.
- **The “Use It or Lose It” Principle:** Since a diversion could measure the amount of water that a person used, you might think that there were strict limits on water so that people did not waste it. However, this was not the case. Miners who were not making “beneficial use” of their water were forced to give it up to other miners. There were also no restrictions about the amount of water that an individual could use. Miners or companies were allowed to have as much water as they wanted as long as they could put it to use. This was true even if there would not be any water left for anyone who came into the area later. No rules were in place to protect natural habitats either, or to make sure that the region’s streams and rivers would not permanently run dry.

Arguing About the Colorado River

In the early 1920s, California and six other western states negotiated about how to share the water resources of the Colorado River. However, there turned out to be a major flaw in the process. The region was experiencing an unusually wet period of weather in the first part of the 20th century, so the states expected to always be able to share that amount of water.

When the weather later turned back into the arid dry climate that was more common in the region, the states realized that the Colorado River would not continue to provide as much water as they originally planned. To this day, the West continues to deal with the long-term effects of these incorrect estimates. The equitable division of water in western states continues to spark fierce debate.

The issue of water rights does not only include the amount of water that humans need to survive in the West. Some also want to use water resources to maintain and save the region's plants and animals. The Colorado River Delta used to be a vast environment of wetlands, but now only a fraction of that habitat still exists. Change has occurred because the Colorado River no longer regularly reaches large bodies of water like the Gulf of California unless there has been an extremely wet period of weather. Sediment is also not deposited along the Colorado in the same amounts that it used to be. Therefore, some aggressive new species of plants and animals have begun to change the ecosystem.

Over the years, a set of agreements have been drafted to try and settle disputes about how to use the Colorado River's water supply. Known collectively as The Law of the River, these documents include international treaties with Mexico, agreements between individual states, a Supreme Court decision between California and Arizona, and many other federal statutes and regulations.

The Explorations of Jedediah Smith and Kit Carson

In the early 1800s, many trailblazers answered the call of Manifest Destiny, setting out west to look for opportunity and new beginnings. Among these trailblazers were Jedediah Smith and Kit Carson.

Jedediah Smith

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Jedediah Smith was born in 1789 in Bainbridge, New York. When he was 22, Smith began his travels west when he joined General William Ashley on a fur-trapping expedition to Missouri. Smith soon set out on a fur-trapping expedition further west when he passed through the Black Hills region in South Dakota. From there, he trekked through the Rocky Mountains in Wyoming where he encountered a group of Crow Indians who informed him about a path that would easily take him through the range. This path would later be called the “South Pass.” Many other fur trappers and explorers would follow in Smith's footsteps and cross the Rockies through the South Pass.

A few years later, in 1826, Smith led the first overland expedition to California through the southwest by traveling from the Great Salt Lake in Utah and crossing through the Mojave Desert and San Bernardino mountains. Smith then returned from California by crossing the Great Basin, which was so hot that Smith and the other members of his party had to bury themselves in sand to stay cool.

Upon his return in 1827, Smith summarized his expedition in a letter to the superintendent of Indian Affairs. This is how he describes his return to the Great Salt Lake:

After travelling twenty days from the east side of Mount Joseph, I struck the S.W.

corner of the Great Salt Lake, travelling over a country completely barren and destitute of game. We frequently travelled without water sometimes for two days over sandy deserts, where there was no sign of vegetation and when we found water in some of the rocky hills, we most generally found some Indians who appeared the most miserable of the human race having nothing to subsist on (nor any clothing) except grass seed, grass-hoppers, etc. When we arrived at the Salt Lake, we had but one horse and one mule remaining, which were so feeble and poor that they could scarce carry the little camp equipage which I had along; the balance of my horses I was compelled to eat as they gave out.

Smith continued exploring the west. He made a second trip to California and went north toward Oregon Country. In 1831, Smith went on a trip to Santa Fe in New Mexico where he was killed by Comanche Indians. Smith's explorations and discoveries led many others to settle in the West.

Kit Carson



Christopher "Kit" Carson was born in 1809. At the time, his family resided in

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Madison County, Kentucky, but they soon relocated to Missouri. Young and restless, Carson ran away when he was a teenager to join a wagon train headed toward Santa Fe. Carson learned trapping skills during his stay in New Mexico.

Carson's life as a fur trapper took him on expeditions to California and the Rocky Mountains. He also traveled with and lived among American Indians.

But perhaps Carson is best known for his expeditions with John C. Frémont. In 1842, Frémont hired Carson as his guide during his expedition to map the Oregon Trail. Together they traveled from Missouri through the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains. Then in 1843, they went on a second expedition to map the rest of the Oregon Trail from the South Pass to the Columbia River in Oregon.

In 1845, Carson and Frémont went on a third expedition together to further explore Oregon and California. Carson describes his third expedition with Frémont to California:

Here our guide left us, and we struck for California. Our course was through a barren, desolate and unexplored country till we reached the Sierra Nevada which we found covered with snow from one end to the other. We were nearly out of provisions, and cross the mountains we must, let the consequences be what they may. We went as far in the snow as we possible could with animals, then was compelled to send them back. Then we commenced making a road through the snow. We beat it down with mallets. The snow was six feet on the level for three leagues. We made shoes [and walked] over the snow to find how far we would have to make a road. Found it to be the distance afore stated.

After we reached the extremity of the snow, we could see in the distance the green valley of the Sacramento and the Coast Range. I knew the place well, had been there seventeen years before. Our feelings can be imagined when we saw such beautiful country.

That was the last of Carson's and Frémont's expeditions, but in 1846, they participated in the Bear Flag Revolt, in which California revolted against Mexican rule. After that, Carson began a career in the military. He was involved in the Mexican-American War and the Civil War.

- Letter to General William Clark, Supt. of Indian Affairs by Jedediah Smith, Litle Lake of Bear River, July 17, 1827, p. 193..

Entire Selection: <https://archive.org/details/ashleysmithexplo00dalerich>

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- *Kit Carson in California: With Extracts from His Own Story* by Charles L. Camp, 1922, p. 120.

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