

1 Miners, Ranchers, and Cowhands

TERMS & NAMES

frontier
Great Plains
boomtown
long drive
vaquero
vigilante

MAIN IDEA

Miners, ranchers, and cowhands settled in the West seeking economic opportunities.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The mining and cattle industries that developed then still contribute to American economic growth.

ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

Nat Love was born a slave in Tennessee in 1854. After the Civil War, he was one of thousands of African Americans who left the South and went west. In 1869, Love headed for Dodge City, Kansas. He was 15 and now free.

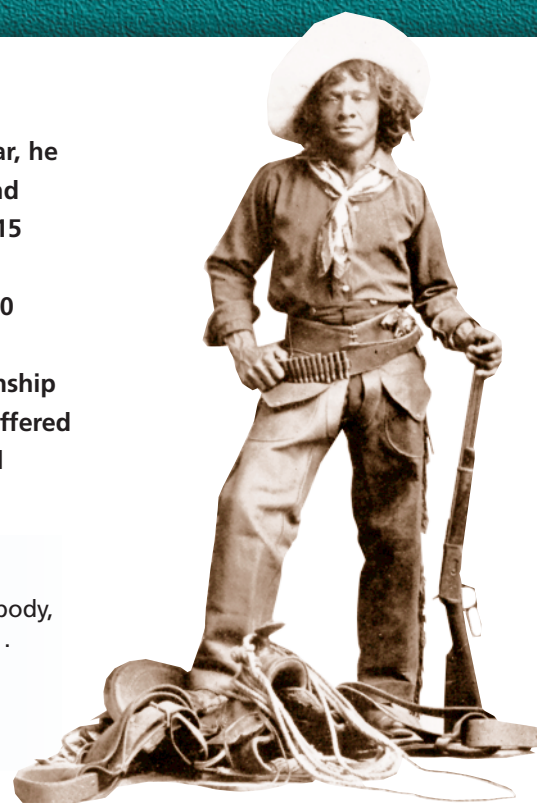
Love's horse taming skills landed him a job as a cowhand. For 20 years, he took part in the cattle drives that brought Texas cattle to Kansas stockyards. He became well known for his expert horsemanship and his rodeo riding and roping. In his 1907 autobiography, Love offered a lively but exaggerated account of his life. He told how he braved hailstorms, fought wild animals, and held off human attackers.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

I carry the marks of fourteen bullet wounds on different parts of my body, most any one of which would be sufficient to kill an ordinary man. . . . Horses were shot from under me, men killed around me, but always I escaped with a trifling wound at the worst.

Nat Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*

As you will read in this section, few cowhands led lives as exciting as that described by Nat Love, but they all helped to open a new chapter in the history of the American West.



Nat Love was an African-American cowhand who became a rodeo star.

Geography and Population of the West

In the mid-1800s, towns such as St. Joseph and Independence, Missouri, were jumping-off places for settlers going west. They were the last cities and towns before the frontier. The **frontier** was the unsettled or sparsely settled area of the country occupied largely by Native Americans.

Many white settlers thought of the **Great Plains**—the area from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains—as empty. (See map on page 156.) Few had been attracted to its rolling plains, dry plateaus, and deserts. However, west of the Rockies, on the Pacific Coast, settlers had followed miners streaming into California after the 1849 gold rush. By 1850, California had gained statehood. Oregon followed in 1859.

The Western Frontier, 1850–1890



GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Maps

- 1. Region** What change took place in the far western coastal area from 1850 to 1890?
- 2. Human-Environment Interaction** Which areas of the West generally were unsettled?

The Great Plains had few trees, but its grasslands were home to about 300,000 Native Americans in the mid-1800s. Most followed the buffalo herds that rumbled across the open plains. Despite the presence of these peoples, the United States claimed ownership of the area.

Railroads played a key role in settling the western United States. Trains carried the natural resources of the West—minerals, timber, crops, and cattle—to eastern markets. In turn, trains brought miners, ranchers, and farmers west to develop these resources further. As the railroads opened new areas to white settlement, they also helped to bring an end to the way of life of the West’s first settlers—the Native Americans.

ReadingHistory

A. Making Inferences Why were railroads so important to the West?

Mining in the West

In 1859, gold and silver strikes drew fortune seekers to Colorado and Nevada. As many as 100,000 miners raced to the Rocky Mountains in Colorado after gold was discovered near Pikes Peak. Also in 1859, prospectors hit “pay dirt” at the Comstock Lode in western Nevada. (A lode is a deposit of a valuable mineral buried in layers of rock.) From 1859 to 1880, the Comstock mine produced some \$300 million in silver and gold.

Nearby Virginia City, Nevada, became a **boomtown**, a town that has a sudden burst of economic or population growth. Population jumped from 3,000 in the 1860s to over 20,000 in the 1870s. The writer Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, captured the excitement of life there.

Vocabulary

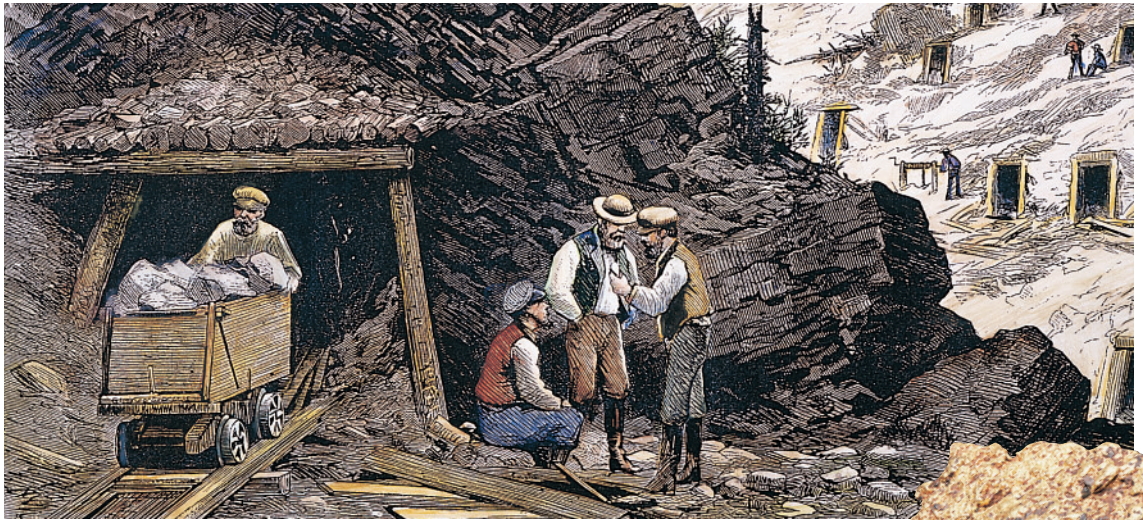
strike: valuable discovery of a precious mineral

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

The sidewalks swarmed with people. . . . Money was as plenty as dust; [everyone] considered himself wealthy. . . . There were . . . fire companies, brass bands, banks, hotels, theaters . . . gambling palaces . . . street-fights, murders, . . . riots, . . . and a half dozen jails . . . in full operation.

Mark Twain, *Roughing It*

Other major strikes took place in the Black Hills of South Dakota in 1874 and at Cripple Creek, Colorado, in 1891. In 1896, gold was discovered in



Canada's Yukon Territory. News of the strike set off a fresh epidemic of gold fever. Prospectors rushed to the Yukon's Klondike region.

The chance to strike it rich drew Americans from both East and West coasts. Gold fever also attracted miners from other parts of the world, including Europe, South America, Mexico, and China. Unfortunately, few prospectors became rich. Most left, disappointed and broke.

Early miners used panning and sluicing to wash sand and gravel from a stream to separate out any bits of precious metal, as you read in Chapter 3. Large mining companies moved in after surface mines no longer yielded gold or silver. Only they could buy the costly, heavy equipment needed to take the precious metals from underground. Water cannons blasted away hillsides to expose gold deposits. In other places, workers sank shafts thousands of feet into the ground to create underground mines. These new methods recovered more precious metals, but in the process stripped hillsides of vegetation and left rivers polluted.

Paid workers in company mines replaced independent prospectors. The work was hard and dangerous. Dust caused lung problems, and deadly cave-ins could trap miners hundreds of feet below the surface.

By the 1890s, the mining boom was over. Many mines closed because the costs had become too high, and the quality of the ore had dropped. Jobless workers moved elsewhere. Once-thriving communities became ghost towns. Still, the mining boom had lasting effects. Nevada, Colorado, and South Dakota all grew so rapidly that they soon gained statehood.

Miners brought ore, like the gold nugget shown, from underground mines that dotted the hillsides.

ReadingHistory

B. Recognizing Effects Why did large mining companies replace individual prospectors?

The Rise of the Cattle Industry

The cattle trade had existed in the Southwest since the Spanish arrived there in the 1500s. But cattle herds remained small until the Civil War. There were few buyers for Western beef because there was no efficient way to get the beef to markets in the more heavily populated cities of the East. The ranchers mostly sold their cattle locally.

The extension of railroad lines from Chicago and St. Louis into Kansas by the 1860s brought changes. An Illinois livestock dealer named Joseph McCoy realized that railroads could bring cattle from Texas ranches to meat-hungry Eastern cities. Cowhands had only to drive cattle herds north from Texas to his stockyards in Abilene, Kansas. From there, the beef could be shipped to Chicago and points east by rail car.

McCoy's plan turned cattle ranching into a very profitable business. Cattle fed on the open range for a year or two and cost the rancher nothing. Ranchers then hired cowhands to round up the cattle and take them to Abilene. There they were sold for as much as ten times their original price. The success of the Abilene stockyards spurred the growth of other Kansas cow towns, including Wichita and Dodge City. The cattle drives to cow towns along the railways were called the **long drives**.

Over time, cowhands followed specific trails across the plains. The first was the Chisholm Trail, which stretched from San Antonio, Texas, to Abilene, Kansas. It was named for Jesse Chisholm, a trader who marked the northern part of the route. From 1867 to 1884, about four million cattle were driven to market on this trail. As cattle raising became more profitable, ranching spread north across the plains from Texas to Montana.

ReadingHistory

C. Reading a Map

Use the map on page 179 to locate the Chisholm Trail.

Vaqueros and Cowhands

The first cowhands, or *vaqueros*, as they were known in Spanish, came from Mexico with the Spaniards in the 1500s. They settled in the Southwest. The *vaqueros* helped Spanish, and later Mexican, ranchers manage their herds. From the *vaquero*, the American cowhand learned to rope and ride. Cowhands also adapted the saddle, spurs, lariat (which they used to rope a calf or steer), and chaps of the *vaqueros*.

About one in three cowhands in the West was either Mexican or African-American. Many Mexican cowhands were descendants of the *vaqueros*. Some African-American cowhands were former slaves. They came west at the end of Reconstruction because the enactment of Black Codes in the South put restrictions on their freedom. Also among the cowhands were a large number of former Confederate and Union soldiers.

Background

Chaps, from the Spanish word *chaperejos*, were seatless leather pants worn over trousers to protect legs from scrub brush, snakes, and cactus.

daily life

LIFE OF A COWHAND: THE ROUNDUP

During some parts of the year, the cowhand's life was downright dull. While cattle grazed on the open range, cowhands sat around the ranch, repairing their gear and doing odd jobs. The pace quickened at roundup time in the spring and fall.

For several weeks, 150 to 250 cowhands from nearby ranches rode hundreds of miles locating cattle. Cowhands from each ranch collected their cattle, removed sick or weak animals, and branded new calves. Then the cowhands were ready for the long drive. A roundup by *vaqueros* is shown in this painting by James Walker.

The "Wild West"

At first, the rapidly growing cow towns had no local governments. There were no law officers to handle the fights that broke out as cowhands drank and gambled after a long drive. A more serious threat to law and order came from "con men." These swindlers saw new towns as places to get rich quick by cheating others.

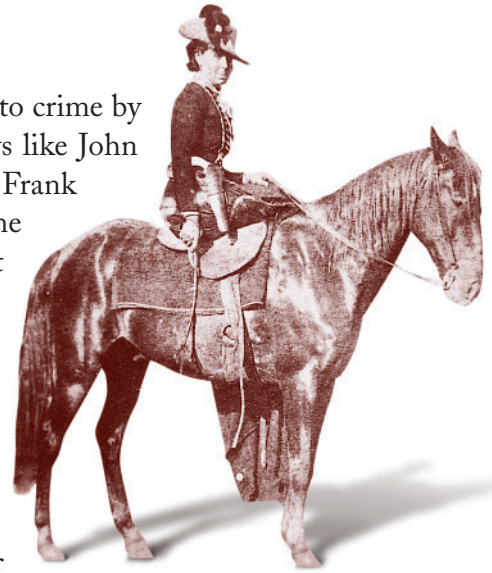
Vocabulary

con man: a person who cheats victims by first gaining their confidence



Some Union and Confederate veterans were led to crime by hard feelings left over from the Civil War. Outlaws like John Wesley Hardin, “Billy the Kid,” and Jesse and Frank James made crime a way of life. Some women became outlaws, too. Belle Starr, better known as the Bandit Queen, was a legendary horse thief.

For protection, citizens formed vigilante groups. **Vigilantes** were people who took the law into their own hands. They caught suspected criminals and punished them without a trial. Vigilante justice often consisted of hanging suspects from the nearest tree or shooting them on the spot. As towns became more settled, citizens elected a local sheriff or asked the federal government for a marshal. These law officers would arrest lawbreakers and hold them in jail until the time of trial.



Bandit Queen
Belle Starr sits atop a horse she just might have stolen.

End of the Long Drives

For about 20 years, the cattle industry boomed. As the railroads extended farther west and south into Texas, the long drives grew shorter. The future looked bright. But by 1886, several developments had brought the cattle boom to an end. First, the price of beef dropped sharply as the supply increased in the early 1880s. It fell from more than \$30 a head to \$7. Then came the newly invented barbed wire. As more settlers moved to the Great Plains to farm or raise sheep, they fenced in their lands with barbed wire. The open range disappeared, and cattle could no longer pass freely over the trails. Finally, in the harsh winter of 1886–1887, thousands of cattle on the northern Plains froze to death. Many ranchers were put out of business.

Meanwhile, as the mining and cattle industries were developing, the Native Americans of the Great Plains were being pushed off their land, as you will read in the next section.

ReadingHistory

D. Analyzing

Causes What caused the decline of cattle ranching on the open range?

Section 1 Assessment

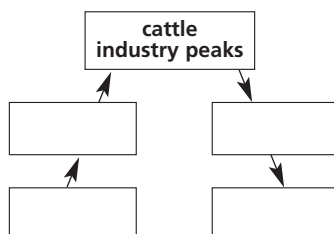
1. Terms & Names

Explain the significance of:

- frontier
- Great Plains
- boomtown
- long drive
- *vaquero*
- vigilante

2. Taking Notes

Use a diagram to review the rise and fall of the cattle industry.



3. Main Ideas

- What economic opportunities drew large numbers of people to the West beginning in the 1860s?
- How did the transcontinental railroad spur Western settlement?
- What did cowhands learn from the *vaqueros*?

4. Critical Thinking

Evaluating Could cattle ranchers have stopped the decline of the cattle industry that occurred in the late 1880s?

THINK ABOUT

- economic causes
- impact of weather
- changing settlement patterns

ACTIVITY OPTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS

MUSIC

Do research on a legendary figure of the West such as Wyatt Earp, “Calamity Jane,” or Nat Love. Then write a **biographical sketch** or **song** about the person.