

4 Farming and Populism

TERMS & NAMES

Homestead Act

Exoduster

sodbuster

Grange

cooperative

Populist Party

gold standard

William Jennings

Bryan

MAIN IDEA

A wave of farmers moved to the Plains in the 1800s and faced many economic problems.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Farmers are facing similar economic problems today.

ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

From 1865 to 1900, about 800,000 Swedes left their homeland in northern Europe. Sweden's population was soaring, and good farmland was becoming scarce. Most Swedes were farmers. They were drawn to the United States by the promise of more and better land.

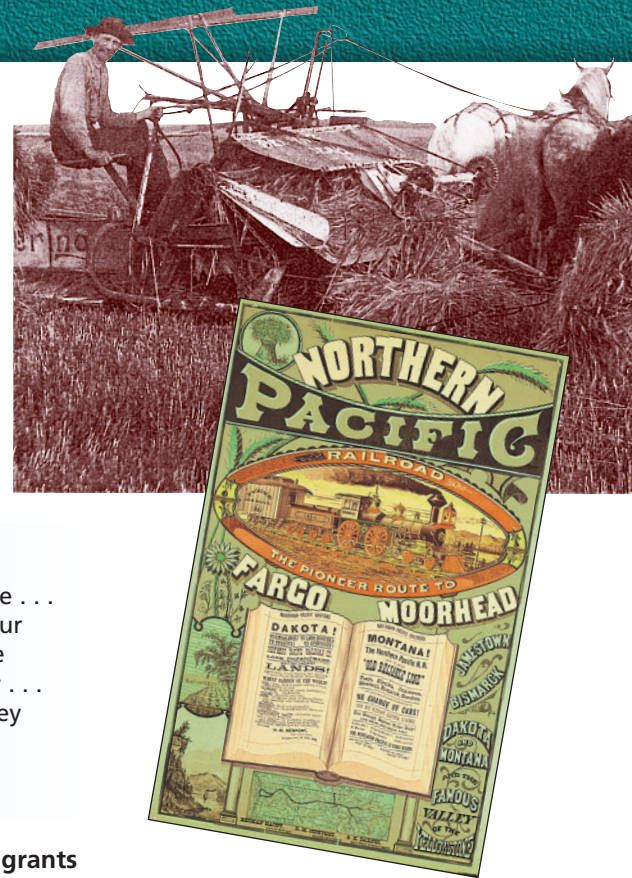
For Olaf Olsson, the acres of free land offered to settlers by the U.S. government was an unbelievable opportunity. Shortly after he arrived in 1869, Olsson wrote home to tell friends and family what awaited them in America.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

We do not dig gold with pocket knives, we do not expect to become . . . rich in a few days or in a few years, but what we aim at is to own our own homes. . . . The advantage which America offers is not to make everyone rich at once, without toil or trouble, but . . . that the poor . . . [can] secure a large piece of good land almost without cost, that they can work up little by little.

Olaf Olsson, quoted in *The Swedish Americans*, by Allyson McGill

As you will read in this section, many Americans as well as immigrants from all parts of Europe shared Olsson's optimism. They uprooted their families to start a new life on the Plains.



Railroad posters advertise lands in the West.

U.S. Government Encourages Settlement

For years, people had been calling on the federal government to sell Western land at low prices. Before the Civil War, Southern states fought such a policy. They feared that a big westward migration would result in more nonslave states. Once the South left the Union, however, the way was clear for a new land policy. To interest both American and immigrant families like the Olssons in going west, the federal government passed the **Homestead Act** in 1862. This law offered 160 acres of land free to anyone who agreed to live on and improve the land for five years.

After Reconstruction ended in 1877, African Americans in the South faced harsh new forms of discrimination. (See Chapter 4.) By 1879,

leaders like Benjamin “Pap” Singleton of Tennessee had convinced thousands to migrate to new homes in Kansas. They compared themselves to the biblical Hebrews led out of slavery in Egypt and called themselves **Exodusters**. One of them, John Solomon Lewis, remarked, “When I landed on the soil of Kansas, I looked on the ground and I says this is free ground.” In all, some 50,000 African Americans settled in Kansas, Missouri, Indiana, and Illinois.

Thousands of European immigrants also sought a new start in the West. Swedes, like Olaf Olsson, joined Germans, Norwegians, Ukrainians, and Russians on the Great Plains. They often first learned about the West from land agents for American railroad companies. These salesmen traveled throughout Europe with pamphlets proclaiming “Land for the Landless! Homes for the Homeless.”

From 1850 to 1870, the government gave millions of acres of public land to the railroads to promote railroad expansion. The railroads resold much of the land to settlers. This not only made the railroad companies rich, but it also supplied new customers for railroad services. The railroads’ sales pitch worked. In the 1860s, so many Swedes and Norwegians settled in Minnesota that a local editor wrote, “It seems as if the Scandinavian Kingdoms were being emptied into this state.”

ReadingHistory

A. Analyzing Causes How did the railroads help to settle the West?

Life on the Farming Frontier

Once pioneers reached their new homes on the plains, they faced many challenges never mentioned by the land agents. The plains were nearly treeless. So farmers were forced to build their first homes from blocks of sod. Sod is the top layer of prairie soil that is thickly matted with grass roots.

For fuel, the **sodbusters**, as the farmers were called, burned corn cobs or “cow chips” (dried manure). In many places, sodbusters had to dig wells more than 280 feet deep to reach the only water. Blizzards, prairie fires, hailstorms, tornadoes, grasshoppers, and drought added to the misery of life on the plains. Many settlers, such as Katherine Kirk of South Dakota, wondered whether they had the courage “to stick it out.”

Connections TO SCIENCE

SOD HOUSES

To build their dwellings, Plains farmers, or sodbusters, like the Nebraska family pictured here, cut the tough buffalo grass of the prairie into two-or three-foot strips. Then they laid chunks of sod into two rows as walls. The walls were often 36 inches thick.

Prairie grass was thick. Its roots grew outward under the soil, often connecting with one another. This held the sod together. The roots also provided a layer of insulation. So sod houses, or soddies, stayed warm in the winter and cool in the summer. But their roofs leaked rain and dirt, and the walls housed mice, snakes, and insects.



New inventions helped farmers to meet some of these challenges. A steel plow invented by John Deere in 1838 and improved upon by James Oliver in 1868 sliced through the tough sod. Windmills adapted to the plains pumped water from deep wells to the surface. Barbed wire allowed farmers to fence in land and livestock. Reapers made the harvesting of crops much easier, and threshers helped farmers to separate grain or seed from straw. These inventions also made farm work more efficient. From 1860 to 1890, farmers doubled their production of wheat.

The Problems of Farmers

As farmers became more efficient, they grew more and more food. The result was that farmers in the West and South watched with alarm as prices for farm crops began to drop lower and lower in the 1870s.

Economics in History

Supply and Demand

Farmers in the West were having economic problems in the 1880s. The supply of food was increasing rapidly, but consumer demand was growing slowly. To attract more consumers, farmers had to drop the prices of their products.

The farmers were experiencing the **law of supply and demand**. The amount of economic goods available for sale is the **supply**. The willingness and ability of consumers to spend money for goods and services is **demand**. The price of goods is set by the supply of that good and the demand for that good.

At a lower price, businesses produce less of a good because they will make less money. As the price rises, they produce more. Consumer demand works in the opposite way. Consumers want to buy more of the good when the price is lower—after all, it costs them less. They buy less when the price is higher. The actual price of a good results from a compromise—how much consumers are willing to pay and how little businesses are willing to take for the good.

CONNECT TO HISTORY

1. **Recognizing Effects** Suppose farmers found a new market for their wheat—the people in another country, for instance. What effect would that have on price? Why?



See Skillbuilder Handbook, page R11.

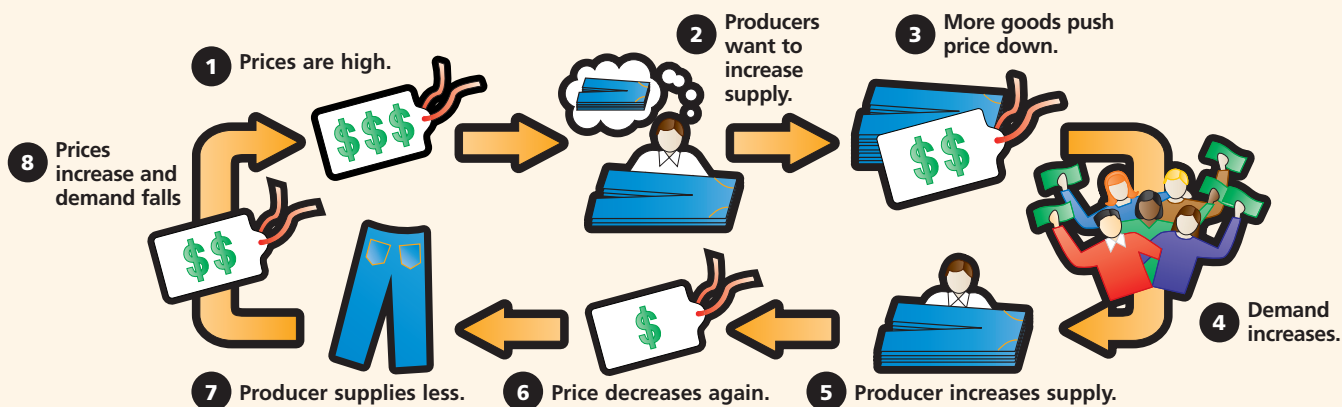
CONNECT TO TODAY

2. **Comparing** How does the price of blue jeans show the law of supply and demand?

For more about supply and demand . . .



RESEARCH LINKS
CLASSZONE.COM



(See “Economics in History” on page 174.) Wheat that sold for \$1.45 a bushel after the Civil War was 49 cents 30 years later. One reason for lower prices was overproduction. Farmers were growing more food because additional farmland had been opened up and farming methods and machines had improved.

Receiving less money for their crops was bad enough. But at the same time farmers had to spend more to run a farm. New farm machinery and railroad rates were especially costly. Railroads charged the farmers high fees to carry their crops to market. The railroads also usually owned the

grain elevators where crops were stored until shipment. Farmers had no choice but to pay the high costs of storage that railroads charged.

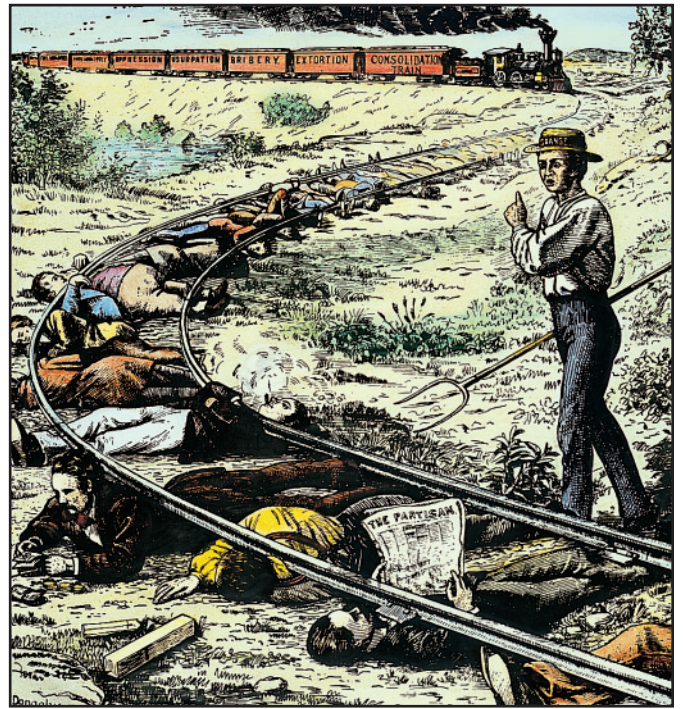
Farmers were angry. They began to work together to seek solutions to their problems. In 1867, farmers had formed the **Grange**, officially known as the Patrons of Husbandry. The group’s main purpose at first had been to meet the social needs of farm families who lived great distances from one another. However, as economic conditions got worse, Grange members took action. They formed **cooperatives**. These are organizations owned and run by their members. The cooperatives bought grain elevators and sold crops directly to merchants. This allowed farmers to keep more of their profits.

Farmers also began to demand action from the government to change their circumstances. For example, Grangers asked states to regulate railroad freight rates and storage charges. Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa did so. In 1877, the Supreme Court backed the farmers in their fight against the railroads. In *Munn v. Illinois*, the Court ruled that states and the federal government could regulate the railroads because they were businesses that served the public interest.

The Rise of Populism

In 1890, several farm groups joined together to try to gain political power. They formed the **Populist Party**, or People’s Party. The Populists wanted the government to adopt a free silver policy, that is, the unlimited coining of silver. Since silver was plentiful, more money would be put in circulation. They believed that increasing the money supply would cause inflation. Inflation, in turn, would result in rising prices. Higher prices for crops would help farmers pay back the money that they had borrowed to improve their farms.

Opponents of free silver wanted to keep the gold standard. Under the **gold standard**, the government backs every dollar with a certain amount

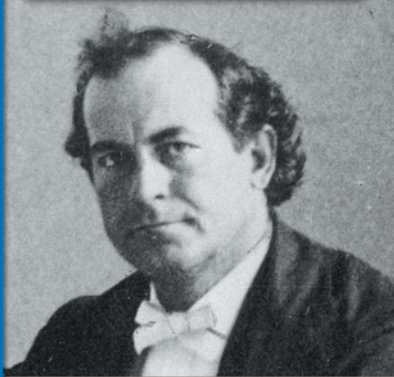


“The Grange Awakening the Sleepers” (1873) shows a farmer trying to warn the country about the menace of the railroads.

ReadingHistory

B. Summarizing
What steps did farmers take to seek solutions to their problems?

AMERICA'S HISTORY MAKERS



WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN
1860–1925

William Jennings Bryan was known as the “silver-tongued orator from Nebraska.” His powerful voice and his strong belief in the “common people” won him two terms in Congress and a presidential nomination at age 36. He made and lost two more bids for president in 1900 and 1908.

Although he never again held elective office, Bryan remained influential in the Democratic Party. Many reforms that he fought for, such as an eight-hour workday and woman suffrage, later became law.

How do you think Bryan was able to influence reform without being elected president?

of gold. Since the gold supply is limited, fewer dollars are in circulation. Inflation is less likely. This protects the value of money by keeping prices down.

In 1892, the Populist Party platform called for free silver to expand the money supply, government ownership of railroads, shorter working hours, and other political reforms. The Populist presidential candidate, James B. Weaver, lost to Grover Cleveland. But he won more than a million votes—a good showing for a third-party candidate.

The Election of 1896

By the next presidential campaign, money issues mattered much more to voters. The nation had suffered through a serious depression, the Panic of 1893. The Republican candidate, William McKinley, favored the gold standard. He warned that “free silver” would mean higher prices for food and other goods.

The Populists joined the Democratic Party in supporting William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska. Bryan urged the Democratic convention to support free silver in his stirring “Cross of Gold” speech.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the street of every city in the country. . . . [We] . . . answer . . . their demand for a gold standard by saying . . . : You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.

William Jennings Bryan, Democratic Convention speech, July 8, 1896

ReadingHistory

C. Analyzing Points of View
What point was William Jennings Bryan making about the importance of farms?

Farmers in the South and the West voted overwhelmingly for Bryan. But McKinley, who was backed by industrialists, bankers, and other business leaders, won the East and the election by about half a million votes. This election was the beginning of the end for the Populist Party.

The Closing of the Frontier

By the late 1880s, fenced-in fields had replaced open plains. The last remaining open land was in Indian Territory. The Oklahoma land rush of 1889 symbolized the closing of the frontier. At the blast of the starting gun on April 22, thousands of white settlers rushed to claim two million acres of land that had once belonged to Native Americans. In May 1890, this part of Indian Territory officially became Oklahoma Territory. In 1890, 17 million people lived between the Mississippi and the Pacific. That year the Census Bureau declared that the country no longer had a continuous frontier line—the frontier no longer existed.



To many, the frontier was what had made America unique. In 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote an influential essay on the frontier. Turner said that the frontier was a promise to all Americans, no matter how poor, that they could advance as far as their abilities allowed. To Turner the frontier meant opportunity, and its closing marked the end of an era.

Thousands of settlers rushed into Oklahoma Territory in 1889 to claim the last open land on the frontier.

ReadingHistory

D. Using Secondary Sources

What did Frederick Jackson Turner believe about the frontier?

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.

Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the American Frontier"

Today many historians question Turner's view. They think he gave too much importance to the frontier in the nation's development and in shaping a special American character. These historians point out that the United States remains a land of opportunity long after the frontier's closing.

In the next chapter, you will learn how an industrial society developed in the East during the same period that the West was settled.

Section 4 Assessment

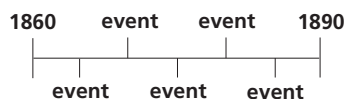
1. Terms & Names

Explain the significance of:

- Homestead Act
- Exoduster
- sodbuster
- Grange
- cooperative
- Populist Party
- gold standard
- William Jennings Bryan

2. Taking Notes

Review the chapter and find five key events to place on a time line as shown.



What do you think was the most important event?

3. Main Ideas

- How did the federal government encourage and support settlement of the Plains?
- Which groups of people moved onto the Plains in the late 1800s? Why did they come?
- Which problems in the 1890s led farmers to take political action?

4. Critical Thinking

Drawing Conclusions

Why did the Grange favor government regulation of the railroads?

THINK ABOUT

- powers of monopolies
- importance of railroads to farmers
- railroad freight and storage rates

ACTIVITY OPTIONS

TECHNOLOGY SPEECH

Pick one invention that helped farmers on the Plains. Plan an **electronic presentation** on the invention or deliver a **sales pitch** to potential buyers.