

AMERICA AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

The National Setting

The decades after the Civil War came to be known as the “Gilded Age”. This term was coined by the great American novelist Mark Twain in order to capture the outwardly showy, but inwardly corrupt nature of American society during the industrialization of the late 1800's as the American nation had established itself as a world power.

The West was won. The frontier -- the great fact of 300 years of American history -- was no more. The continent was settled from coast to coast. Apache war chief Geronimo had surrendered in 1886. Defeat of the Sioux/Lakota at the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 had brought the Indian Wars to a close.¹ By 1900 the Indians were on reservations and the buffalo were gone, destroying traditional ways of life (See photo →). Homesteading and the introduction of barbed wire in 1874 had brought an end to the open range. The McCormick reaper² had made large-scale farming profitable and, by 1900, the U.S. was by far the world's largest agricultural producer. The first transcontinental rail link had been completed in 1869. Three decades later, in 1900, the nation had 193,000 miles of track, with five railroad systems spanning the continent. The gross national product of the U.S. almost doubled, and wages matured by 20 percent. For the first time in history, there was an American middle class.³



Buffalo skulls during the great slaughter of American bison during the 1800s. The number of bison remaining alive in North America declined to as low as 541

In 1859, The world's first oil well had been drilled in Titusville, Pennsylvania. By 1900, major oil fields were being tapped in Kansas, Illinois, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas. The supply of American oil seemed limitless. John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Trust dominated the world's petroleum markets and controlled more than 90% of the nation's refinery capacity. But at the turn of the century, the strength of a nation's industrial capacity was measured by the number of tons of steel it produced, not barrels of oil. In the 1880s Andrew Carnegie had constructed the world's largest steel mill in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and by 1900, the United States was the largest steel producer in the world, turning out 10,000,000 tons a year. Steel meant more jobs, national prestige, and a higher quality of life for many. Suddenly bridges and skyscrapers were not only feasible but affordable, too. Steel fed national growth, accelerating the already booming industrial sector. New wealth and devastating fires⁴ produced a boom in urban construction. Architects Richardson, Hunt, McKim, Mead, and White flourished; Sullivan pioneered the skyscraper (← See photo) and his protégé, the famous architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, was beginning his career in Chicago.



Henry Ford had built his first gasoline engine car in 1892 and the world's first auto race was held in Chicago in 1896. With the founding of the Ford Motor Company in 1903, the age of the automobile was underway. By 1900, telephones were in wide use while the new moving pictures were a curiosity. Guglielmo Marconi was conducting experiments that would lead to the development of the radio, and the Wright brothers were at work on a heavier-than-air flying machine. The gramophone or phonograph, invented in 1877, meant that people could now listen to their favorite music – and speeches – at home. With the help of prominent financial backers like J.P. Morgan and the Vanderbilt family, Thomas Edison set up the Edison Electric Light Company and began research and development. He made a breakthrough in the summer of 1880 with carbonized bamboo as the filament, which proved to be the key to a long-lasting and affordable light bulb. America was electrified!

While many saw these pioneering businessmen and their inventions as “Captains of Industry” (those who had the vision and invested the time and effort to grow the economy) many saw them instead as “Robber Barons” (sing questionable business methods to get ahead). Men such as Rockefeller, Carnegie, Vanderbilt, Gould, and Morgan used many unscrupulous methods including: manipulating the stock market, bribing politicians, cheating stockholders, and ruining competitors. Consumer prices rose as the trusts held by these men came to control entire industries.⁵ Workers were treated very badly by these businessmen and their managers. They were forbidden to strike, paid very low wages, and worked long hours under terrible conditions. Child labor made up over 5 percent of the entire labor force. By the

¹ The massacre at Wounded Knee was the slaughter of 200 Lakota men, women, and children by the U.S. army. The dead were buried in a mass grave, while 20 Medals of Honors were awarded to the U.S. soldiers. To give some perspective, only 3 Medals of Honors were awarded among the 64,000 South Dakotans who fought during World War II. Native Americans continue to ask the government to rescind the medals calling them “medals of dishonor”

² A farming tool or person that reaps (cuts and gathers) crops at harvest, when they are ripe.

³ People who are defined as “middle class” commonly have a comfortable standard of living, significant economic security, considerable work autonomy and rely on their expertise to sustain themselves.

⁴ The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 destroyed thousands of buildings, killed 300 people, and caused an estimated \$200 million in property damage. Legend has it that a cow kicked over a lantern in a barn, which started the fire.

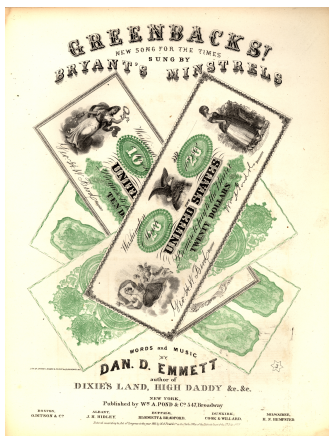
⁵ In this context a trust is the same thing as a monopoly, where specific person or enterprise is the only supplier of a particular commodity, reducing competition, raising costs for consumers, and large profits for businesses. Think of the goal of the board game Monopoly!

early 20th century, the richest 9% of Americans controlled 75% of the wealth.⁶ Yet working families were often forced to rely on two, three, or even four incomes to make ends meet.

National Politics

Across the country, people were beginning to organize mass political movements to try and change society. In 1867, the first such national organization was formed. Led by Oliver Kelley, the Patrons of Husbandry, also known as the Grange, organized to address the social isolation of farm life. Like other secret societies, such as the Masons, Grangers had local chapters with secret passwords and rituals. The local Grange sponsored dances and gatherings to attack the boredoms of daily life. It was only natural that politics and economics were discussed in these settings, and the Grangers soon realized that their individual problems were common. Identifying the railroads as the chief villains, Grangers lobbied state legislatures for regulation of the industry. By 1874, several states passed the Granger Laws, establishing maximum shipping rates. Grangers also pooled their resources to buy grain elevators of their own so that members could enjoy a break on grain storage.

Farmers' alliances went one step further. Beginning in 1889, Northern and Southern farmers' alliances championed the same issues as the Grangers, but also entered the political arena. Members of these alliances won seats in state legislatures across the Great Plains to strengthen the agrarian voice in politics. What did all the farmers seem to have in common? The answer was simple: debt. Looking for solutions to this condition, farmers began to attack the nation's monetary system. As of 1873, Congress declared that all federal money must be backed by gold. This limited the nation's money supply and benefited the wealthy.



The farmers wanted to create inflation, because inflation actually helps debtors.⁷ To create inflation, farmers suggested that the money supply be expanded to include dollars not backed by gold. The first strategy farmers attempted was to encourage Congress to print greenback dollars (← See photo) like the ones issued during the Civil War. Since the greenbacks were not backed by gold, more dollars could be printed, creating an inflationary effect. Inflation could also be created by printing money that was backed by silver as well as gold. This idea was more popular because people were more confident in their money if they knew it was backed by something of value. Also, America had a tradition of coining silver money until 1873.

The Greenback Party and the Greenback-Labor Party each ran candidates for President in 1876, 1880, and 1884 under this platform. No candidate was able to muster national support for the idea, and soon farmers chose another strategy. Out of the ashes of the Greenback-Labor Party grew the Populist Party. In addition to demanding the free coinage of silver, the Populists called for a host of other reforms. They demanded a graduated income tax, whereby individuals earning a higher income paid a higher percentage in taxes. They wanted political reforms as well. At this point, United States Senators still not directly elected by the people; they were instead chosen by state legislatures. The Populists demanded a constitutional amendment allowing for the direct election of Senators.

They demanded democratic reforms such as the initiative, where citizens could directly introduce debate on a topic in the legislatures. The referendum would allow citizens — rather than their representatives — to vote a bill. Recall would allow the people to end an elected official's term before it expired. They also called for the secret ballot and a one-term limit for the President. In 1892, the Populists ran James Weaver for President on this ambitious platform. He polled over a million popular votes and 22 electoral votes.⁸ Although he came far short of victory, Populist ideas were now being discussed at the national level. When the Panic of 1893⁹ hit the following year, an increased number of unemployed and dispossessed Americans gave momentum to the Populist movement. A great showdown was in place for 1896.

In this period of booming growth, the nation experienced a dramatic presidential election. The 1896 campaign was perhaps the most fiercely fought contest since Andrew Jackson's time. Republican McKinley represented Eastern conservative commercial and industrial interests; Democrat William Jennings Bryan stood for Western radical agrarian interests. McKinley was a staunch supporter of high tariffs and the Gold Standard, while Bryan favored easier credit and "free silver." Thirty-six years old, Bryan was known as the "Boy Orator from the River Platte" and compared by some with the river itself -- "a mile wide and an inch deep."¹⁰ His "Cross of Gold" speech became famous: "You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold," he thundered in support of free silver.

⁶ This inequality of wealth is about the same today. Many historians say we are living through a "Second Gilded Age"

⁷ If a farmer owes \$3,000 and can earn \$1 for every bushel of wheat sold at harvest, he needs to sell 3,000 bushels to pay off the debt. If inflation could push the price of a bushel of wheat up to \$3, he needs to sell only 1,000 bushels.

⁸ There were approximately 11.7 million people who voted in the 1892 election and 444 electoral votes.

⁹ A serious economic depression in the United States that marked by the overbuilding and shaky financing of railroads, resulting in a series of bank failures. Compounding market overbuilding and the railroad bubble was a run on the gold supply.

¹⁰ Impressive at first but with experience, found to be stupid or unimaginative.



However, Republican William McKinley of Ohio (← See photo) was elected president in 1896 and re-elected in 1900. He looked every inch a president. Young reporter William Allen White said of him after an interview: "He was the statue in the park speaking." A dignified, reserved man, McKinley was the last of the old-style, low-key presidents, generally considered to have been a good but weak man. He was promoted into the White House by his friend, Ohio party boss Mark Hanna; he was bullied into a war with Spain in Cuba by the sensationalist New York press and a nationalist Congress; and he was trapped into acquiring the Philippines by his Assistant Secretary of the Navy, a young Theodore Roosevelt.

McKinley was the last of five Civil War veterans to serve in the White House, signaling the end of the post-war era. He was also the fifth of the six Ohio presidents to serve during the fifty-year period 1868-1908. The ascendancy of Ohio and the Midwest in national politics demonstrated that the United States was no longer a nation oriented to the Atlantic seaboard. It stretched, as Katharine Lee Bates's 1895

anthem, *America the Beautiful*, put it, "from sea to shining sea."

Immigration

Many new immigrants arrived during this time from Southern and Eastern Europe, and some would come from as far away as Asia. The vast majority of new immigrants were Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. And due to an increased persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe, many Jewish immigrants sought freedom from torment. Very few newcomers spoke any English, and large numbers were illiterate even in their native tongues. None of these groups hailed from democratic regimes making the American form of government as foreign as its culture. Until cut off by federal decree (ex. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) Japanese and Chinese settlers relocated to the American West Coast. The new American cities became the destination of many of the most destitute. Once the trend was established, letters from America from friends and family beckoned new immigrants to ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown, Greektown, or Little Italy. This led to an urban ethnic patchwork, with little integration.

In New York City—where the population doubled every decade from 1800 to 1880—buildings that had once been single-family dwellings were increasingly divided into multiple living spaces to accommodate this growing population. Known as tenements (See photo →), these narrow, low-rise apartment buildings—many of them concentrated in the city's Lower East Side neighborhood—were all too often cramped, poorly lit and lacked indoor plumbing and proper ventilation. By 1900, some 2.3 million people (a full two-thirds of New York City's population) were living in tenement housing. Despite the horrors of their living conditions and factory work, many agreed that the wages they could earn and the food they could eat surpassed their former realities. Still, as many as 25% of the European immigrants of this time never intended to become American citizens. These so-called "birds of passage" simply earned enough income to send to their families and returned to their former lives.



Laundry hanging outside tenement buildings in New York City.

During the age when the Statue of Liberty beckoned the world's "huddled masses yearning to breathe free," American diversity mushroomed. Each brought pieces of an old culture and made contributions to a new one. Although many former Europeans swore to their deaths to maintain their old ways of life, their children did not agree. Most enjoyed a higher standard of living than their parents, learned English easily, and sought American lifestyles. At least to that extent, America was a melting pot. But not everyone was thrilled about this. Nativists and labor unions campaigned for immigration restriction, blaming immigrants for violent protests such as the Haymarket riots in Chicago and the Homestead Strike at Carnegie's steel mill in Pennsylvania. A favorite plan to push back against immigration was the literacy test to exclude workers who could not read or write their own foreign language. Congress passed literacy tests, but presidents - responding to business needs for workers - vetoed them.

Homework: In at least two paragraphs – why did Mark Twain coin the term “Gilded Age” for this era of history? Use specific examples from the reading and make sure to type your answer.