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ABSTRACT

The people and places of the Old West (Montana, Wyoming, Kansas, Colorado) are found within the pages of four books published between 1994 and 2000. A whole host of settlers, doctors, dentists, butchers, bakers, barbers, and boot makers traveled west during the 1800s to turn an open prairie into a promised land. Short sketches of groups of people and places contributing to the growth or significance of the west's developing urban areas are featured. The paper introduces a series of topics about U.S. history to the students and teachers and suggests the Internet as a useful resource for maps, pictures, photographs, and general information about the Old West. The paper profiles the following: feminists; townspeople; entertainers; and the "queen city" (Denver). (BT)

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## AMERICA'S WEST: THE RISE OF CITIES AND TOWNS

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## AMERICA'S WEST: THE RISE OF CITIES AND TOWNS

A law student writing to his parents in the East after coming to the Kansas territory in the 1850s remarked that a “new western village is truly indescribable in language.” His frustration was not surprising, for there was nothing in the East quite so desperate in appearance yet so full of hope as the town he was helping to build beyond the farthest reaches of civilization.

The would-be lawyer was part of a whole host of settlers—doctors, dentists, butchers, bakers, barbers, and bootmakers—who traveled west during the 1800s to turn an open prairie into a promised land, and as one journalist put it, to “get rich if we can.”

The first emigrants were a rugged and hardy bunch. A clergyman who came to Nebraska in the 1850s wrote that they were rich in the three Ps—poverty, providence, and pluck. Additionally they were endowed with purpose. They set up towns by the thousands, mostly on the plains, where agriculture would feed a growing population. They laid out streets, and achieved a semblance of sophistication with false-fronted buildings. Then they fought fire and flood, put down the lawless, engaged in promotionalisms, and in some instances went on to achieve the glory that had inspired them as they laid out the first street.

The people and places of the old West are found within these pages (*The Old West* 1990; Davis 2000; Davis and Rosa 1994; Ward 1996). Short sketches describing

the contributions of a person or the significance of a place are included. The purpose is to introduce a series of topics to the students and teachers of American history. Interested students can pursue the topics at greater length in some other manner. The Internet is useful for maps, pictures, photographs, and general information.

## **THE FEMINISTS**

A song heard around the sluice boxes of Montana during the 1860s described the beginnings of local amusements: "First came the miners to work in the mine / Then came the ladies who lived on the line." Though most frontier towns had a main street or "line" of saloons that offered dancing, gambling, and female companionship along with drinks, few of them could boast women so resourceful as Josephine Hensley, who came to Helena in 1867.

Josephine had already worked for a few years in the lesser forms of entertainment in Chicago by the time she took her way with the men to Helena at age twenty-three. In this male center of the mining camps, she bought a log building and opened up a hurdy-gurdy house or dance hall, the first in the Northwest to be run by a woman.

The term "hurdy-gurdy" was a throwback to gold-rush days, when barroom music was provided by a raspy old hand organ. Josephine, called "Chicago Joe" by her admirers, actually offered somewhat better entertainment, supplied by a piano, a violin, and a cornet that were played from a small stage off to one side of the main floor. At the back was an extended bar where prospectors could buy drinks for fifty cents for themselves and their lady friends. The women, brought in from Chicago, took a percent of both the bar tab and the twenty-five-cent fee that was collected for dances, and they

could add to their pay by making other arrangements at different times. A kind of respectability was added to the place by the "Duke," a shadowy figure thought to be the discredited member of British royalty, who helped to keep the customers happy and the staff in line.

Partly because her young and pretty Chicago girls outshone most local women, Josephine's place prospered. She moved into better facilities in 1874, put her money in local real estate, and made friends with the rich and famous in Helena's business and political sectors. In 1886, she altered her establishment to include live theater, complete with cubicles on the second floor where her girls could perform favors between the acts.

When her place finally closed at her death in 1899, a local newspaper gave little note. But the people of Helena gave her a fine funeral, and many of the city's most important individuals came to honor her life.

The passage of America's first law giving women the right to vote by the Wyoming legislature in 1869 was meant as a stopgap. It was expected to add fewer than a thousand voters. Although it gave women the right to run for political office, most men figured that the women would want to stay home. But the newly entitled voters were taking a different path. They immediately asked for additional roles for women in politics, a thought so unsettling to the legislature that in 1871 it attempted but failed by a narrow margin to repeal the law.

Wyoming's first woman to hold political office was the wizened Esther Morris, one of the West's best-known feminists. Despite a lack of formal education, she was named magistrate for the mining community of South Pass City. She ran her court with a vengeance for almost a year and never had a ruling overturned by a superior court.

Even as the judge was sitting in wait, other women were breaking ground as members of juries. Though newspapers were quick to make fun of them, the women jurors took their responsibilities to heart. In one well-known Laramie court case, a jury of several men and women was sequestered for more than two days trying to come to a verdict. The male jurors, three of whom wanted to free the accused, played poker, smoked tobacco, and drank beer in one corner, while the women, in favor of hanging, sang songs and philosophized nearby. Finally the differences were settled and a verdict of guilty on a lesser charge of manslaughter was reached.

Wyoming's success with women's suffrage prompted women everywhere in the West to seek similar legislation. By 1896, women had won emancipation in Utah, Colorado, and Idaho, and had begun to take on roles in government and other professions all across the frontier. Lillian Heath dressed in denim and carried a gun while taking residency under the only physician in Rawlins, Wyoming. In 1893, she began practice as the town's first specialist in childbirth. Grace Hebard was an engineer, the first woman attorney in the Wyoming territory, a college professor, a golf enthusiast, and the writer of several Western histories. Mary Lathrop proved herself a step ahead as Denver's first woman to practice law and went on to achieve other milestones when she was admitted to the American Bar Association. Susanna Salter, a homemaker in Argonia, Kansas, became the territory's first woman mayor in 1887 after she was put on the ballot as a joke and, infuriated, would not bow out. Estelle Reel, a Laramie, Wyoming, educator, was the first woman to hold a state office, winning the school superintendent's post in 1894 by a comfortable margin. Employed for several months in 1884 in a special program by the Denver police department, Sadie Likens worked ten years as the first regular-duty

policewoman in the West. Oskaloosa, Kansas, in 1888 elected their first woman mayor, Mary Lowman, and five other women to form the first all-female city council in the United States. Mary Lease, a teacher and practicing lawyer, led Kansas farmers in the Populist movement of the 1890s with cries to “raise less corn and more Hell.”

As the vote was won in the territories, there were women in every town who aspired to professions that had been in the past closed to their gender. Most had to work for years to achieve the end. Others became pacesetters almost by accident. But in every case they handled themselves so well that the rights of women would never be questioned again.

## THE TOWNSPEOPLE

The wellspring to a fledgling town, as one writer put it, was a newspaper, and among the first residents of any community was the editor, often brought in by the backers of the town. His purpose, in the early goings at least, was not so much to write on local happenings as to tout the glories of his community for the education of any would-be homesteader among the newspaper’s subscribership.

An editor’s reporting was closely watched by his fellow townspeople, for their survival depended in large part on the outcome of his efforts. Just how provoked they might get about poor work was found out in 1878 by the editor of the *Barber County Mail* of Medicine Lodge, Kansas. Set with broken type, the paper was so hard to read that frustrated townspeople entered the editor’s work place and took him streetside. Covering him with molasses and burs, the editor’s detractors closed out his ordeal by

sending him around town on a wooden rail. The editor soon sold the paper and departed for places afar.

Any town that aspired to greatness needed a hotel, to accommodate would-be homesteaders as well as visitors, and an innkeeper was in most cases among the first to come. His setup was often simple. At one hotel, a person who expressed displeasure at the state of the guest towel was told by his provider that twenty-six other men had used the towel before him and that none had complained.

Along with a newspaper and a hotel, a saloon soon opened to serve the alcoholic beverages and on occasion a variety of amusements that made existence in a harsh land a little more tolerable. Saloonkeepers were especially popular in towns whose likely customers were cowboys and miners. Abilene, Kansas, for its part, counted eleven saloons to serve the five thousand or so thirsty cowboys who arrived with Texas beef. In mining towns, the saloons often stayed open day and night every day of the week to get the last gold piece out of the prospectors.

Few towns were able to bring in the kinds of people who contributed to the ease of life in the East, including leather workers, cobblers, clothiers, woodworkers, and haberdashers. Given the scarcity of such individuals, the first townspeople often had to settle for poor work from unschooled, ill suited or overworked providers of every kind.

Most troubling was the lack of skilled doctors. Many of the physicians who settled in Western towns were forced there by a lack of success in the East, which was in some instances due to a lack of training. But even the competent doctors did not in every case find success on the frontier, where they were expected to attend to complicated



births, perform surgery without adequate pain killers on barroom tables, or excise Indian arrows, a situation not encountered in Eastern cities.

Almost as unusual as qualified doctors were educated teachers. The offer of a place to stay rent free at the homes of students scarcely made up for the vexations of teaching in a rickety old schoolhouse for the pay of ten to thirty-five dollars a month. And even that amount was anything but regular; contracts were applicable only when school was in session, and youngsters on the prairie went to school for only part of a year, if at all. Understandably, most teachers saw their job as a temporary inconvenience on their way to marriage or some more lucrative kind of employment.

Far more usual in Western towns were attorneys. The money was good; lawyers could make a thousand dollars a month simply by handling land claims or mining claims, two principal sources of dispute in court. Another reason for the plethora of lawyers was the ease of becoming one in the West. To gain admittance to the bar, the would-be lawyer simply had to be of age or twenty-one in most cases, give proof of sound moral judgment, and pass an examination before a magistrate, who in most instances kept his inquiry to a few familiar questions since he no doubt had little formal training himself. Before the Civil War made him a hero on the battlefield, William Tecumseh Sherman was admitted to the Kansas bar simply by showing that he had a wealth of general information.

No town was successful without a blacksmith, whose specialized skill or knowledge was needed to tend to horses and oxen, fix plows, mend wagons, and provide other services for the local residents and surrounding communities. In fact, so important

was this artisan that town citizens often offered blacksmiths free land as reason to move to their communities.

But the most needed townsperson of all was the man or woman who ran the principal focus of an infant town's business district, the country store. Called a shebang, possibly after the Gaelic *shebeen*, or public bar, the store owner sold liquor in bottles and otherwise, along with just about anything else that a settler might need. Not one square inch of space was left unused. On one wall was shelving for groceries; on another, a counter set up for clothes, ribbons, and accessories. Metal goods and household equipment, along with the owner's workstation, occupied the rear. From the ceiling hung the sides of beef, slabs of bacon, kitchen pots, and washing pans. Placed around the floor were kegs and barrels full with sugar, vinegar, flour, and molasses; boxes and cans of coffees and teas and sugars and spices; sacks and bags of whatever vegetables the time of year offered; and large see-through jars of candy canes and peppermint sticks. Everyone within a reasonable distance stopped in at the shebang, stood over the counters of goods, stayed amid the aromas and the comfort of the wood-burning stove, and came away with a greater sense of purpose.

## **THE ENTERTAINERS**

As hard as it was, the townsman's life was far from grim. Across the prairie came a changing scene of entertainers, bearing up under difficult conditions to offer the article of amusement. The types and kinds were full of variety and interest, ranging from animal fights and boxing matches to Gilbert and Sullivan musical dramas and the readings of Shakespeare. Bridging the differences between cultured and crude were marching bands,

song-and-dance acts, live theater, and just about every possible type of act ever performed.

Local forms varied, but certain types of amusements were favored almost everywhere. When John Robinson's Great World Exposition came to the West, spectators cheered to its review of thirty-one chariots, four steam organs, sixty cages, eight bands, and two calliopes. The circus itself offered one thrill after another: Lulu, the illustrated woman; Zola, riding a cycle over a wire sixty feet high; Zenobia, thrown two hundred feet by a Roman catapult; and twenty-eight female Siberian roller bladers.

The patent-medicine extravaganza could be nearly as entertaining. To hawk his elixirs, the patent-medicine man not only relied on his salesmanship and voice, but often hired companies or bands of fire-eaters, sword swallowers, acrobats, and songsters to bring to a frenzy a crowd of thrill-seeking onlookers. And everyone enjoyed a tough fight, whether between dogs, bears, badgers, or men. The fights between men were usually set up in saloons, and they were not so much displays of ability as tests of stamina, for boxers as well as audiences. An 1867 bout in Cheyenne between John Hardey and John Shannessy for a cash prize of a thousand dollars ran more than a hundred rounds. Each round lasted until one or the other was beaten to the mat, at which point the two went to their corners for thirty seconds. The referee, probably tired himself, finally ended the fight ruling that Hardy had won on a foul.

As well as doubling as a site for prizefights, the saloon provided the place for many other kinds of amusement, including the indulgence of drinking. When it came to having a good time at the end of the trail, most men and some women on the frontier turned to beer or bourbon, or often a house brew with the name Tarantula Juice, Skull

Bender, or Redeye. A shot of such stuff was enough, as one veteran drinker explained it, to make a bird spit in a snake's eye.

In addition to giving customers a place to drink and gamble, many saloonkeepers featured another favorite, women, at times the only women for hundreds of miles. Available women seemed to come to the towns in a tie with the saloons. There, on most days, they mingled with the cowboys or prospectors or railroad men, sang a song if they could sing, served up drinks, brought men into back rooms for rendezvous, and shared all proceeds with the owner. More career oriented were the touring taxi dancers, women brought in as dance partners for men who would pay twenty-five cents for each dance. Some dance hall girls were little more than prostitutes. But others could have gone to church, widows, married women with bad husbands, many with children, good women whose job was just to be friendly to customers.

Many saloonkeepers, anxious to make ends meet and more, added to their establishment a stage for song-and-dance acts and live theater. One such hall for the performing arts, in the mining camp of Georgia Gulch, consisted for the most part of two surfaces dug out of the hillside to serve as seating and stage area. Especially popular was an extended bar with several bartenders who sold beer at fifteen cents a glass and the Redeye for twenty-five cents a drink. The players' dressing rooms were set off from the front by bed linen, and at curtain time the ticket booth was the casing in which the performers' instruments had come.

Despite the frontier appearance, these theaters drew not only local talent but paid professionals as well, people like Eddie Foy, who became one of the best-known stage performers of his time. A joke-popping song-and-dance man, Foy often satirized local

customs, a part of the act that fell through on at least one occasion. In 1878, as an upstart of twenty-two, Foy was to open in the Dodge City *Comique* (pronounced “Comikew” by the cowboys), a combination saloon, dance hall, gambling house, and theater. Having met such notable townsmen of Dodge as Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, and Bat Masterson, and finding them friendly and quiet, Foy was encouraged to make fun of his hosts from the stage.

As one person remembered, he dressed “pretty loud” and had a kind of New York strut, and made some unpleasant remarks about the cowboys. The audience’s reaction was to lasso him, dunk him in a watering trough, send him around on horseback, and take other fun-loving liberties with him, just to show their sense of humor. But with a youthful exuberance, Foy took the abuse in stride. He later wrote that he was determined to be unconcerned and not let them know that they were scaring him, even if they broke every bone in his body. The cowboys liked his pluckiness and, after playing a few more jokes on him, which Foy took in good part, they welcomed him and his humor. Foy continued his act in Dodge that summer and went on to make the Western swing of cow towns and mining camps.

Of all the individuals who performed on the Western stage during the last of the 1800s, one of the most improbable performers was Oscar Wilde. The Irish writer came in 1882 on a lecture tour, a popular pastime during that period. People heard lectures from activist Amelia Bloomer on everyday dress for women, minister Henry Ward Beecher on slavery, P. T. Barnum on alcohol abuse, and Victoria Woodhull on open marriage. Wilde’s topic was Aestheticism, or the philosophies and psychologies of the beautiful.

Wilde was known everywhere as the person satirized in the Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera *Patience*, which mocked the veneration of Aestheticism. Audiences soon found out that the real Oscar Wilde almost outshone his satirized self in grace and propriety. His knee trousers were greeted as the most ludicrous dress ever seen in the West. When he came to Denver to discuss the subtleties of interior decoration, his walk was described by a journalist as languid and dreamy, and caused a great laughter. Wilde, however, did not mind. For his part, he found the trip rewarding from a financial standpoint. All of his expenses were paid, and his income often topped a thousand dollars a month.

In Leadville, home to the Matchless Silver Mine, Wilde began his discourse with an admonition to the miners to study Gothic art. He beseeched his audience to consider gold not as wealth but as the substance of fine art. Reminiscing on events here later, he said that he recited excerpts from Renaissance sculptor Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography to the miners, and they seemed greatly pleased. He was chided by his audience for not having brought the master with him. He explained to them that the sculptor had been dead for many years, which prompted the question, "Who shot him?"

When the townspeople got over Wilde's visit, they gave him a key to the city. And the local paper, impressed by the way he played at poker and held his whisky, paid the highest praise, "There is no piousness in him."

## THE QUEEN CITY

Despite the monetary rewards of the tour, the Western half of Wilde's visit to America was not an especially beautiful experience. The prairies, he said, reminded him

of the paper used for absorbing excess ink from a freshly written letter. The buildings fared little better. He wrote that the Mormon Tabernacle had the shape of a soup-kettle and trim fit for a jail.

But Denver sparkled. By the time Wilde came through, the city was the wealthiest community west of the Mississippi, with mansions, opera houses, and other symbols of sophistication. Ten years later, no less an urbanite than renowned journalist Richard Harding Davis described Denver as a smaller New York.

The city's beginnings were both propitious and portentous. For the first several years after Denver was settled in 1858, people of the tiny town swung between expectations of tremendous success and nagging fear that the town would disappear. Like many other frontier towns, Denver grew from a vision of gold. But the first strike nearby tested so poorly that within a short time the people who had headed west were returning east again, the worse for wear.

In 1859 another strike, thirty miles distant, made a few men rich. But it also proved to be a difficult way for most of them to get a little gold with pick or pan. With virtually nothing on which to base their belief, a few determined individuals stuck to the notion that one day Denver would make it big. And it did, in both gold and silver.

Meanwhile, it seemed that Denver was destined to fail. Even its founding on Cherry Creek made life rough. Neither the creek nor a nearby river filled with enough water to carry boats or barges of any shape or size, except in times of the most ruinous floods. The Rocky Mountains posed a formidable barrier to movement farther west. Indians in the area were ready to fight to the death to keep the land they called home under an 1851 agreement. Local weather was unpredictable, able to drop snow in the

spring, but not to be relied on for enough rain to plant a field without a system of canals or controlled flooding.

Despite the 1863 fire that wiped out the city's business district and the 1864 flood that obliterated half the town, Denver's people moved ahead. The way never seemed more uncertain than in 1868, when the Union Pacific announced that it would lay track to the north of Denver by a hundred miles. The city's founders were flabbergasted. They had assumed that the railroad would make a stop in Denver. But geography was the intervening factor. Chief engineer Grenville Dodge decided that another pass offered an easier way through the mountains.

Denver's survival without a railroad was not promising. Several businesses even moved their headquarters to the new town of Cheyenne on the railroad's northern line. A company spokesperson announced that Denver was dead. But reports of the city's demise were premature. Within months, the money was raised to support a new line between Denver and Cheyenne. That was just the beginning to a frenzy of railroad construction; a crisscrossing of lines going in every direction and putting Denver back on track.

These new railroads were chasing a new dream: silver. By the early 1870s the luster had worn off the rush for gold, leaving only the prospect of extreme work for little pay. But just as Denver began to reel from this latest calamity, its fate turned again. In 1869, prospectors had learned that much of the rock they had been pushing aside in their probe for gold was high-grade silver ore. Railroads made millions taking the ore out of the mines and bringing in everything from practical necessities to luxuries.



By 1876, the rush had not ended, with each new strike giving up richer deposits. That same year, Colorado was given statehood. As the political and cultural center of the newest state, Denver boomed from four thousand people in 1870 to thirty thousand in 1880. Ten years later, it had grown to a hundred thousand. That included a considerable number of the state's wealthiest individuals, whose extravagance was seen in places like the Windsor Hotel.

Completed in 1880, the multistoried, three-hundred-room hotel cost its benefactors three hundred thousand dollars. Another two hundred thousand dollars was put into three elevators and a dance floor suspended on cables to give a made-to-order bounce. Three thousand silver dollars set a barroom floor. Rooms had gaslights and chimneys. There were sixty bathtubs, a guest pool, and several saunas. For meals, guests could dine on frogs legs, fruit preserves, prairie chicken, trout, deer and bear meat, then finish the evening off with homemade ice cream from the hotel's steam-powered refrigerator.

With bad economic times in 1893 silver prices plummeted. Self-inflicted gunshot wounds and crime were everywhere, and people made rich by silver saw their businesses crash almost as quickly as they had put them up. But Denver's luck was far from spent. The good times had sheltered the city from ruin. Blessed by the infrastructure set up by city planners and a base in agriculture and industry, the city survived the crisis. Before the decade was through, the townspeople of Denver came up with one more miracle, the Cripple Creek gold rush, which would far exceed all previous finds.

So in this manner to Denver, the Queen City, came all the wonderful things wished for by all those who had come to take the first steps in building a new urban

society. The town had many chances to disappear and become but a memory in the passing of the West. But Denver was stubborn. It was also fortunate in the hardiness of its people. As one preacher put it about the townspeople he came across in Kansas in the 1850s, these men and women had not come as passers-by to see how things might go. They had come to settle the place and see it done.

The people and places of the old West were found within these pages. Short sketches describing the contributions of a person or the significance of a place were included. The purpose was to introduce a series of topics to the students and teachers of American history. Interested students can pursue the topics at greater length in some other manner. Papers and projects are a possibility.

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