

History 118 US Since 1877 Discussion Transcript for February 11, 2021

Main Reading: Yawp, chapter 17 and Donoghue website

Historians like Frederick Jackson Turner once wrote wistfully about the “closing of the American frontier,” worried that the settling of the West might initiate a decline in they celebrated as the self-made ethos of American culture. Today, historians are more inclined to debate whether or not to label what happened to Native Americans in the nineteenth century as a form of genocide. Students in History 118 received a general overview of evolving US Indian policy in the post-Civil War era from the American Yawp chapter and also a more focused examination of the assimilationist goals of the Carlisle Indian School through an exhibit by Dickinson student Amanda Donoghue. Here are selections from student comments:

US INDIAN POLICY OVERVIEW

STUDENT COMMENT: Many Americans started moving westward after the civil war for many reasons. Some of these reasons include the gold rushes in California, Colorado, Montana, Nevada, and Idaho from 1848 to 1874 that caused over 100,000 Americans moved into the rocky mountain region. Some Americans, the Mormons, settled in the west to escape religious precaution. Many migrants moved out west because of the Homesteads act of 1862 which gave men to opportunity to claim land in the west. The influx of Americans moving westward, and the construction of the railroad caused more trouble with the relations between America and the indigenous population that often lead to violence. 250,000 indigenous people were still living west of the Mississippi as of the late nineteenth century. The wave of Americans expanding west pushed the native population in to smaller and smaller reservations in unideal locations for their living style. The Indian Wars were the conflicts that happened between indigenous people and America. Some major conflicts include the Dakota War (1862), the Sand Creek Massacre (1864) and, the Battle of Little Bighorn (1876). The tension caused by these conflicts caused congress to create the Board of Indian Commissions that had power over the affairs with natives and assimilating them into Christian society. They moved them to reservations overseen by protestant churches that destroyed their ways of life and culture. The railroads went through native lands and cattle farms restricted migration patterns. Native resistance was ended after Wounded Knee when 150-300 indigenous people were killed by American militia men in December 1890.

WILD WEST MYTHS

STUDENT COMMENT: There is a discrepancy in the public memory of the 19th century life in the Midwest and in the Plains. As the chapter illustrates, the harsh life of the Plains and the Midwest had been replaced with nostalgic romantic narratives of the wild west. Through the romanticizing characters like Calamity Jane and the popularity of travelling shows like William Frederick “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,” the West becomes known for “cowboys, Indians, sharpshooters, cavalymen, and rangers.” It downplays the difficulty of these jobs and the unstable financial element of living in the Plains or in the Midwest. Most cowboys made \$20 to

\$25 a month and twice that if they had some experience. It also erases the bloodshed and violence Indigenous people had to endure to make way for the rangers, cowboys and the pioneering farmer.

FATE OF BUFFALO

STUDENT COMMENT: This week's reading discusses Native Americans role in the American west. As stated in the textbook, Native people had lived there for over "ten millennia" and by the late 1800's there were still "250,000 Native people" living in the American West (YAWP, 17), but then everything changed. The great influx of new settlers, American capital, and military pushed native groups to different, much smaller reservations. Moreover, while expansion for American authority was later seen as a success by many, it was also a tragedy for thousands of people, and even animals, as I am about to talk about. Of course, the tragedy for Native people who lived out west and were affected by new American settlers is a little more obvious, but animals were also greatly affected by this. Many American migrants came out west during the "gold and silver rushes" (YAWP, 17), but there were also people who came out west for bison. Now one may be thinking: "Bison? Why would people come out west for bison?" Well, bison have very "tough leather" skin which provided material to the "booming clothing industr[ies]" in the east (YAWP 17). In fact, bison skin was so valuable there was even a well know slaughter of them in the 1870's. In fact, in the mid 1800's there were millions of bison roaming from Minnesota to Louisiana, but by the 1880's there were only a few hundred. There is a primary source in this chapter of YAWP by William T. Hornady writing about "the Extermination of the American Bison (1889)" (YAWP, 17). He discusses the near extinction of these animals and how it is about the greed of man, and not utilizing what resources one truly has at their disposal from nature. He also discusses implications for the future and how it would be "deplorable if the remorseless slaughter we have witnessed during the last twenty years carries with it no lessons" (YAWP, 17). I found this quote very interesting because, although it was over 100 years ago, it holds so much weight today. There are so many animals that are either on the endangered species list, like Black Rhinos or Amur Leopards, or one's that were decimated, like Humpback whales, by commercial whaling in the 19th and early 20th century, and then protected under the Endangered Species Conservation Act, with their population now increasing. Either way, Hornady's account of American bison in the 1800's is applicable not only to other animals and conservation efforts today, but also ties back into the original textbook chapter of how greedy people were for furthering their factories in the east, with bison and other riches found in the west, when it wasn't even their territory to begin with.

GENOCIDE QUESTION

STUDENT COMMENT: Much of the former interpretations of western expansion held by Americans who did not settle westward, which were fabricated or exaggerated by works such as "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" starting in 1883 and Frederick Jackson Turner's Thesis in 1893, trivialized the genocide of Native Americans and their culture while also justifying their displacement. Turner deemed native cultures savage in his essay "The significance of the Frontier in American History," with white American culture seeking to rectify their "uncivilized" way of life, although not mentioning the significant work of Chinese and Mexican immigrants during economic expansion. The travelling show perpetuated the same outlook on this history,

in addition to portraying Native American attacks stopped by the spectacular might of cowboys. Parts of these imaginations are still held in popular culture not only in North America, but internationally as well (particularly in parts of Germany with the works of Karl Marx). Although instances of violence provoked by Native Americans took place, such as the killings done by a band of Dakota in 1862, they were arguably caused by settlers leaving native peoples hungry, taking precious land and driving the American buffalo to near extinction. Furthermore, the acts of violence done by United States troops not only in retaliation, such as the hangings taking place after the Dakota war ... but also in brutality, such as the Sand Creek Massacre of 200 Cheyenne in 1864 led by militia ordered by John M. Chivington. There is no doubt that in addition to military force, that the slaughter of the bison in the 1870s for food and leather contributed to the degradation of native peoples.

CARLISLE INDIAN SCHOOL & MORE ON CULTURAL GENOCIDE DEBATE

STUDENT COMMENT: In analyzing the Donoghue site, the complex history surrounding Chancellor Joshua Lippincott of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School is intriguing and highlights the "moral ambiguity" of history. It mentions the story of "a 12-year-old Native Cheyenne boy named Willie Hansel," who faces "permanent separation from his two sisters, the only family he had left" (Donoghue). In Hansel's case, he prepares to leave for school "across the country" in the fall of 1882. However, after his physical exam, "the doctors had discovered a problem with his health and declined his acceptance into the school" (Donoghue). Even so, Lippincott "took pity" on behalf of Hansel, allowing him to still enroll at the Carlisle Industrial School. Although Lippincott is seen as a savior at the time, Willie "would have to abandon his culture, lifestyle, and history, and learn to adapt to the ways of white American civilization" (Donoghue). From a present-day historian's perspective, Lippincott's actions bring more harm than good, forcing Hansel to assimilate into a more "civilized" white society. John Lewis's *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* provides the framework to the purpose of morality, as his "framework" resonates with a more in-depth study of events concerning "cultural genocide" in American history (Donoghue). Reading the article "Were American Indians the Victims of Genocide?" by Guenter Lewy on the Donoghue site speaks volumes on the prolonged plight of Native Americans, as "an estimated 12 million in 1500 to barely 237,000 in 1900 represents a "vast genocide . . . , the most sustained on record" (Lewy). It muddles Joseph Lippincott's legacy, as it "makes us argue, and teaches us to embrace the complicated world of human choice" (Donoghue). Therefore, the past cannot be forgotten in determining the morality of one's actions in the present, as history does not set in stone; instead, it is a living and breathing document that grows with a greater understanding of the horrors of the past.