

3.2 The Growing West

Who benefited from the second wave of westward expansion in the United States?

Explore

Mining and Logging Industries

How did the natural resources of the West feed industrialization?

Mining

Manufacturing industries needed resources to power their machines and raw materials from which to make goods. People soon realized that vast amounts of wood, coal, iron ore, copper, silver, and gold lay untapped in the West. Mines sprang up throughout the West, especially in certain mountainous areas that held large mineral deposits. In areas where someone discovered some gold or silver, mining towns would quickly form. Prospectors, or people looking for mineral resources, would move in, causing a population boom. These settlements came to be called boomtowns. However, if the gold or silver in the area became depleted, as it usually did, people abandoned these towns, and the settlements often became “ghost towns.”

Prospectors used various methods to hunt for gold and silver, including panning. One approach involved dipping a pan into a river or streambed. When the prospector brought the pan out of the water, it contained sand, gravel, and possibly gold. Metals such as gold and silver are much heavier than sand. The prospector would swirl the pan around, causing the sand to wash away with the water; and with luck, a small quantity of the precious metal would remain at the bottom.

Some mining sites contained gold and silver deposits, or lodes, deep underground. Because retrieving these metals required heavy equipment, companies, instead of individuals, mined these lodes. In areas that had company mines, boomtowns often had more stability.

Logging

Because people needed wood to build factories, houses, and various businesses, the demand for lumber soared. Before the Civil War, the states of Maine, New York, and Pennsylvania provided most of the lumber for the United States. After the war, as the forests were depleted, logging gradually shifted to the West. By the early 1900s, the West provided most of the lumber for the United States, which is still true today.

The life of a logger was in many ways different from the life of a miner. Miners often worked their claims for months. A logger, also known as a lumberjack, worked at a site for a few weeks and then moved on to another camp. Why do you think this was? Miners would also usually work for themselves, but loggers worked for a company. Loggers lived in large camps that would include a bunkhouse, a cookhouse, and a dining hall.

Both logging and mining took a toll on the environment in the West. Loggers and pioneers often cut down vast areas of forest, leaving the land barren. These acts of deforestation, or the clearing of forests, reduced the natural habitat of native species and contributed to erosion. Without tree roots to hold the soil in place, a large rainstorm would result in muddy conditions and possibly even a landslide. In addition, miners often lost large amounts of minerals by using careless mining practices. These minerals would build up and clog water channels, decreasing a stream’s water-carrying capacity and possibly leading to flooding. The minerals sometimes seeped into the drinking water, and if too much accumulated, the water could become contaminated and unsafe for drinking.