

3.2 The Growing West

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

Explore

Life on Farms

How did families on farms in the West survive?

The main cash crop grown on Western farms was wheat, especially in the Dakotas, Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. Other cash crops included potatoes, barley, corn, and oats. Farmers reserved as much land as they could for growing cash crops to sell, but they also had to be self-sufficient. Sometimes, the nearest town was hundreds of miles away. As a result, farmers had to provide their own food, shelter, and clothing using the materials available to them.

Farm families survived by eating foods they grew or raised. Common foods included corn muffins, wheat bread, pork, chicken, and mutton. Many farms had at least one cow that supplied the milk and cream necessary to make several dairy products, including butter and cheese.

Many farmers made their first shelter by digging holes into hillsides. On the prairie, they used sod cut from the ground as building material for houses. These sod houses used little wood, which was scarce on the prairie, and kept cool during the summer and warm during the winter. However, they were naturally extremely dirty. If farmers earned enough money from selling crops, they could have lumber shipped in to build a larger house.

Clothes during this period were often made out of wool or cotton. Wool, spun from the fleece of a sheep, kept farmers warm during the freezing winters. Denim was a sturdy cotton fabric that men wore for manual labor. Farm women usually wore calico dresses, along with sunbonnets to protect their eyes from the bright sunlight of the Great Plains. The fabric for this attire also was made from cotton. Like denim, calico cloth was produced in the textile mills in the East, and then shipped to towns along the railroad.

In addition, farm families often faced severe weather conditions, including thunderstorms, tornadoes, and dust storms.

The hail-storm of 1881 was one of the last northwesterners to visit Jefferson county, and the most destructive. In its pathway all crops were beaten into the ground; trees stripped of limbs and foliage; livestock killed and injured; houses riddled like sieves; all glass windows facing the storm were as paper before it.

—from Pioneer Tales of the Oregon Trail by Charles Dawson

As farms grew in size, farmers cut down more and more natural vegetation. Also, many farmers grew wheat, which did not adequately protect the soil. For these reasons, dust storms became more severe. Eventually, during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, these storms devastated many farms in the West.

