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The American West

Farming the Plains

Topics of Focus

1. What incentives encouraged farmers to settle in the west?
2. Which groups of people moved to the west, and why did they do so?
3. What new ways of farming evolved in the west?



Could you live in a house of dirt?

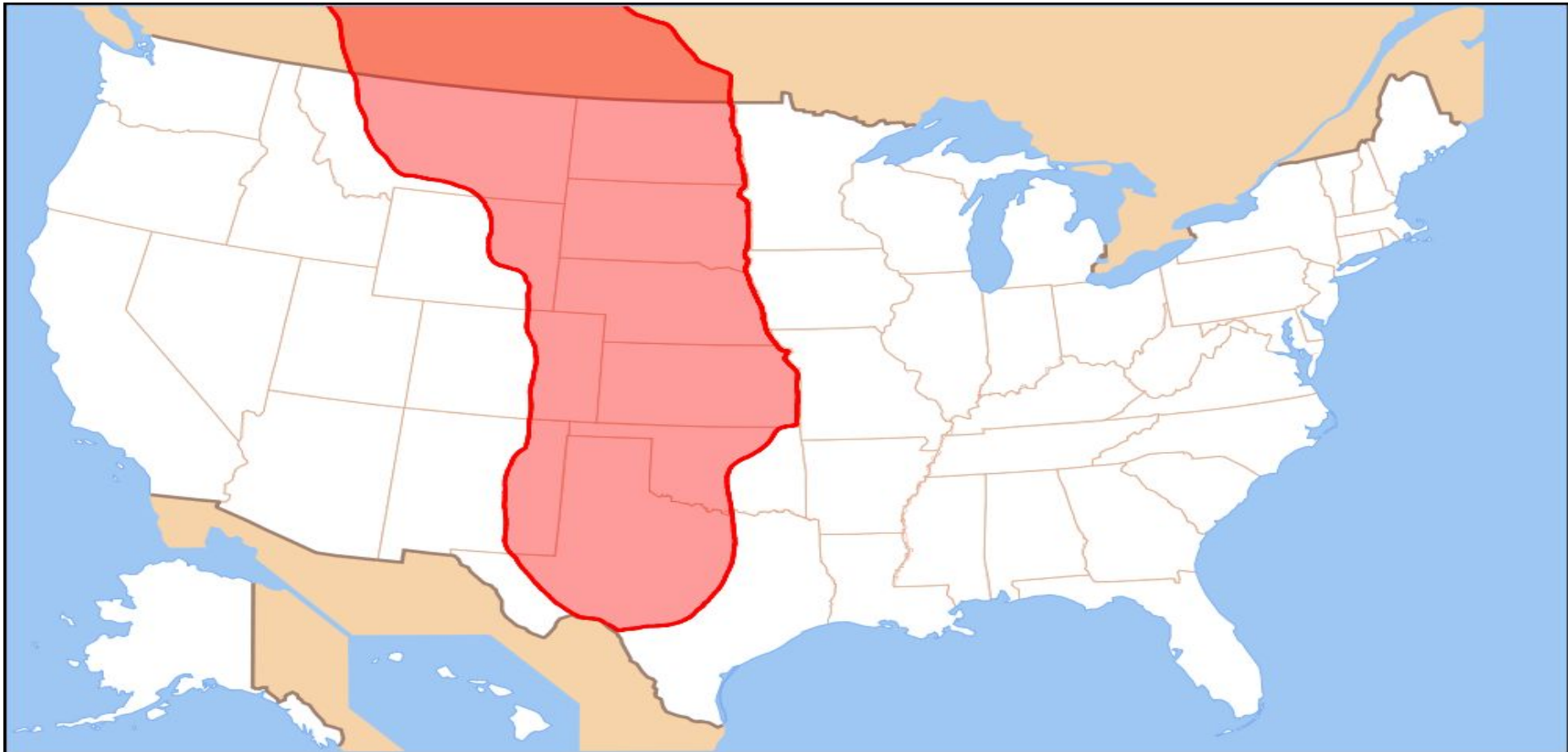
- A **sod house**, or “soddie” was made out of a strip of dense grass with the roots and soil attached
- There was plenty of it on the plains, and it kept the house cool in the summer, and warm in the winter
- Why was there plenty of sod in supply on the plains?
- No trees on the plains



Great Plains

- Great Plains were originally referred to as the “Great American Desert”
- Called this because of the lack of trees, and what was perceived to be uninhabitable
- Eventually, thousands of people would flood to the Plains to build farms





Why do you think conditions were so harsh on the plains?

New Legislation Provides Incentive

- In 1862, 3 acts were passed that turned public land into private property
- **Homestead Act**- Allowed any head of household over the age of 21 to claim 160 acres of land
- In order to receive this land, they had to farm the land for 5 years and build a house on it
- Most of the best land was gone before 1900, but the last piece of land was awarded in 1988
- **Pacific Railway Act**- Gave land to railroad companies to encourage railroad construction
- **Morrill Act**- Gave land to states for colleges of mechanical and agricultural arts
- Significant because it was first time gov't provided assistance for higher education

More Settlement out West

- Railroad companies advertised all over the country and Europe to lure people out west to help with railroad construction
- The **Oklahoma Land Run of 1889** brought tens of thousands of people out west
- Land run resulted from a Cherokee activist finding some 2 million acres of unclaimed land in central Oklahoma that the gov't eventually declared open for settlement
- 50,000 people flooded into OK to claim their land



Closing the Frontier

- In 1890, the Census Bureau issued a report that basically showed that there were so many people settled in the plains that “there can hardly be said to be a frontier line.” This report effectively closed the frontier.
- Historian **Frederick Jackson Turner** believed that the existence of the frontier made the U.S. distinctive. This theory is still disputed...why? Was it really a frontier since the Native Americans inhabited the land before the settlers?



Migrating West

People moving out west typically belonged to one of three different groups

1. White Settlers- Mostly people from Mississippi Valley, middle-class farmers
2. African American Settlers- Began migrating west in 1870's in order to escape oppression from the south
 - Inspired by **Benjamin "Pap" Singleton** create own communities out west, thousands migrated
3. Foreign Settlers- Europeans from Scandinavia, Germany, Ireland, and Russia poured into the Northern Plains
 - Chinese immigrants settled mostly in California, and ended up introducing farming techniques that established California's fruit industry



New Ways of Farming

- Farming was difficult on the plains
- Winters were very cold, with snowstorms from Canada coming down
- Summers were brutally hot, which caused crops to shrivel up and die
- Water was scarce, so settlers used Native American techniques for irrigation
- New kinds of equipment helped to make farming easier on the plains
- Plows with a sharper edge, combine harvesters to cut wheat
- This was all expensive though, which caused many farmers to go into debt
- Large companies saw an opportunity to make money, by establishing **bonanza farms**
- These farms worked like factories with machinery and laborers
- Due to poor growing seasons though, most of them were out of commission by 1890



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