People & Events: The Closing of the American Wilderness

In 1893 a young historian addressed the American Historical Association, which was meeting at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Frederick Jackson Turner presented his thesis, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." He began by quoting from the Census of 1890:

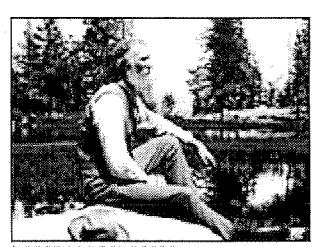
"Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line."

Turner concluded his thesis, "The frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history." As if to confirm Turner, the Columbian Exposition displayed a small log cabin as an artifact.

Turner argued that the frontier had made the United States unique. Due to hardship, residents were forced to become resourceful and self-reliant. They developed strength and "rugged individualism," which in turn fostered the development of democracy. Turner paid no attention to women or the plight of Native Americans.

In many respects, Turner was reflecting the views of his generation. Americans generally thought of the frontier as a primeval wilderness, where men could live close to nature and be purified of civilization's corruption. Many thought of the West as a social safety valve, where the poor could start a new life instead of succumbing to urban problems in large cities.

On a pragmatic level, many people feared the depletion of natural resources. During the 19th century, loggers burned more than 25 million acres of forest each year. Congress passed the Forest Reserve Act in 1891. It allowed the president to preserve timberlands for the nation's use.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Many Americans wanted to preserve the wilderness for its own sake. Naturalist John Muir wrote several articles defending conservation of forests, "not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life." In 1890, after 20 years of Muir's lobbying, Yosemite National Park was created. Sequoia National Park was created shortly thereafter.

Nostalgia for the untamed wilderness profoundly affected photography. Photographers no longer had the mission of accurately presenting unexplored lands. They emphasized artistic interpretation, as unexplored territory became internal. Realistic photographs with a sharp, clear focus made way for a softer focus, and landscapes often appeared shrouded by mists. The Pictorialists, as they became known, portrayed the West as a mysterious, mythical place.

The closing of the wilderness had an enormous influence on both serious scholarship and popular literature. Alice C. Fletcher, an ethnologist at the Smithsonian, held views that opposed Turner's. She lamented the closing of the wilderness, not because it was detrimental to American society, but because it ended a distinct Native American way of life. She wrote a series of articles called "Personal Studies of Indian

Life," which appeared in *Century Magazine* from 1893-1895.

In 1893 *Century Magazine* featured Theodore Roosevelt's articles about his years in the Old West, which he called "Cowboy Land." The glorification of the cowboy was among the most lasting cultural legacies of the Old West.

In July 1893 *Harper's Monthly Magazine* sent writer Owen Wister out West to find material for "short stories of Western life which is now rapidly disappearing with the progress of civilization."

Wister eventually wrote a novel about cowboy life. *The Virginian* was reprinted 15 times within eight months of publication. It was the best-selling book of 1902 and 1903. In its introduction, Wister wrote, "[The West] is a vanished world. No journeys, save those which memory can take, will bring you to it now..."

For Ansel Adams, born in San Francisco in 1902, wilderness was something to be sought out, preserved, and defended.

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previous | return to people & events | next

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