

Settlers Moving West The Native Americans Point of View



When settlers began to spread across the West, they brought their own cultures with them. These cultures were different from the cultures of the Native Americans. Settlers, or homesteaders, began to fan out over the plains. Of course, the lands these settlers claimed for their farms were lands that had long been home to a variety of Native American tribes. While some settlers were sympathetic to the Native Americans, most were not. Many settlers thought the Native Americans were simply in the way, and that they should make room for the settlers. Some of the Native Americans were very unhappy about the newcomers. Often they were sick with measles and other diseases such as cholera and smallpox when they arrived. These deadly diseases spread through the tribes since the Native Americans had never been exposed to these germs and didn't have any immunity. An outbreak of smallpox in 1837 almost wiped out the Mandan tribe of North Dakota and the Lakota and Cheyenne tribes of the Great Plains suffered many deaths from cholera in the 1840's.

The settlers were mostly farmers. They cleared trees, planted crops, and built fences. These fences prevented buffalo from roaming free on the open plains. The Native Americans who lived on the plains depended on the buffalo, 'their supermarket on a hoof', in many ways. The meat of the buffalo was the main element in their diet. The hides of the buffalo were used to make shelter, bedding, and clothing. Bones, horns, and hooves were used to make tools and utensils. During this time, professional hunters came through the plains, killing as many as 1 million buffalo each year. During the construction of the transcontinental railroad in the 1860's, hunters killed thousands of buffalo while clearing the land, often leaving behind the bodies of the buffalo to rot in the sun. After the railroad was completed, it became easier for hunters to send hides back East, and the number of buffalo killed increased.

The government wanted to force the Plains Indians to give up their valuable land. If the buffalo were gone, the government reasoned, the Indians would be forced to give up their land. Sometimes the government made treaties with the Native Americans, granting them the rights to certain lands if they would withdraw from a particular area. The treaties were often signed under threat of violence. Many treaties were broken when more land was needed, or when the land "given" to Native Americans turned out to be more valuable than expected. In the worst cases, the Native Americans were rounded up and forced to leave their homes. When gold was discovered in the Black Hills of South Dakota in 1875, the government wanted to break the treaty given to the Lakota Sioux. When they refused to go, the government sent soldiers to attack them and forcing them to leave the Black Hills and move to reservations. Native Americans faced difficulty adjusting to life on the reservations. These reservations were located in other parts of the country. Poverty levels were high and living conditions were poor. It was easy for Native Americans to become depressed in their new homes. Some turned to alcohol as a way to cope with their unhappiness.