



Migration in the U.S. and Europe

Parallels, differences and the legend of the frontier

by Herbert R. Jacobson



(Collage: *rijo*)

When we were exchanging our family histories, Gerhard, you made an exceedingly interesting and insightful observation when you compared your family's move from the German-Dutch border to Upper Silesia around 1763 to that of the settlers who moved into the Great Plains of the United States after the 1870s, pointing out how they were alike in so many ways, but so different in outcome. You said German settlers were granted a small piece of farm land but had to depend on the mercy of the aristocratic land owner to survive, a situation which essentially lasted until 1918, and that the early American settlers, like the Germans, were induced to move into the plains by the promise of free land from the railroads, where they, too, were at the mercy of the railroads. The difference was the plains farmers were able to free themselves from dependency and profit from their labor. Why?

The term *Western Movement* in American history often creates an image of American settlers moving steadily across the continent from east to west. This was far from the way it happened, as Herbert Eugene Bolton reminds us. He was a student of Frederick Jackson Turner,

an early American historian famous for his thesis on how western movement and the frontier shaped American thinking and culture. Bolton challenged this thesis in his book *The Spanish Borderlands*, arguing that the whole southern border of what was to become the United States was already settled from Florida to California by a string of Spanish forts, missions, and communities. Americans who traveled west by land or by sea did not find a frontier because the area was settled by the Spanish, and later administered by the Mexicans after the Mexican Revolution. Many of the new arrivals went to work for the Mexicans, and some became Mexican citizens in order to receive large land grants. Bolton's thesis was never as well-known as Jackson's. Maybe Americans were more comfortable with the idea that we settled and tamed a wild frontier rather than taking Mexican settlements by force in the war with Mexico.

Regardless of the view, an important point was that the American immigrants who moved west into the borderlands did not settle in the central plains. This area of the US was settled much later, and was, in a sense, a frontier if you ignore the Indians, which we did. Interestingly the Great Plains Indians made famous by Wild West shows and later Hollywood were relatively new to the area too. It was almost impossible to survive in the plains because of the near absence of rivers and lakes, but some scattered Indian settlements clung tenuously to the banks of the few rivers that traversed the area. Indians were able to fully exploit the plains' resources only after they had captured horses that had escaped from the Spanish along the borderlands. Spanish horses opened the plains to the Indians and allowed them to follow and hunt buffalo on their annual migration.

It was the *Iron Horse* that opened the plains to the Americans who lived east of the Mississippi River. The U.S. government gave land to the railroads to encourage them to build into, and across, the plains. The railroads in turn gave the land free to settlers. The railroads weren't dumb. They knew they had the settlers in the palm of their hand - even those who had received land directly from the government - since they had complete control over what went into or out of the plains. Everything the settlers needed had to be shipped on the railroad. Usually the railroad shipped goods in at a reasonable cost. But when the settlers tried to ship their crops out to markets in the east, the railroad virtually robbed them by charging sky high freight prices. Farmers went broke and some starved while the railroads grew fat. The farmers eventually organized to fight back in what was called the *Populist Movement*. It was not very successful because it was so narrowly focused on the agricultural interests of the plains farmers and later those in the southern U.S. It lacked broad appeal.

Plains farmers were facing a situation not so different from feudal serfs. The feudal period came to an end in England and on the continent, or least France, in very different ways. The problem for the feudal landlords was they were receiving rents established hundreds of years before and inflation made these rents worthless. English landlords were able to break the feudal guarantees and throw the serfs off the land, allowing them to lease the land to the highest bidder. In contrast the continental landlords were unable to break the feudal contracts even after protracted bloody attempts. Faced with failure they began to put fees on everything, tolls on roads and bridges, taxes on mill use which only they could own, taxes on baking bread in their ovens which only they could own, and taxes on anything else they could think of and get away with. This is what the railroads did to the farmers in the American Great Plains. The railroads got nothing from the land but charged like crazy for the transportation which they totally controlled. It was not feudal but it was very similar, and railroad owners were often referred to as the *Robber Barons*.

In France the king used the landlords' problems to break the feudal system in which the aristocracy held the real power. He gave these noble landowners who couldn't make money from their land the right to collect taxes on a national scale such as the famous salt tax and taxes on waterways. These taxing rights kept the aristocracy wealthy. However, the king was no fool. The nobles had to stay at his court to keep this taxing right and not on their land where they could raise, organize and control private armies with their new wealth that would challenge royal power. The king controlled them instead of their controlling him. It was the beginning of a national, centralized government, and the beginning of the end of the feudal system in France.

The *Populist Movement* failed, but a new and successful movement developed in the U.S. that began controlling the *Robber Barons* through state and federal regulations. It was called the *Progressive Movement* and grew from universities, progressive politicians, labor leaders, and the members of the upper class who saw their wealth threatened by workers unrest. The University of Wisconsin was a leader, along with Teddy Roosevelt. Its interests were far broader, including labor as well as farmers, social issues, and environment issues. Federal legislation was finally adopted that regulated the railroad rates and farmers of the Great Plains began to reap the benefits of their labor.

The English landlords, who threw the serfs off their land, planted the seeds of their own demise. The hundreds of thousands of unemployed serfs provided the labor needed for the Industrial Revolution. Later the industrialist, like the American *Robber Barons*, would use their wealth to control the landlords, and the power of landownership gave way to the power of

capital. Both German and American farmers were enticed with the promise of land and both were exploited by those giving the land, but that was the end of the similarities. German landlords held on to their land, were tied to their land as much as their tenants, and in turn open to exploitation, while the Railroad Barons quickly converted their land into capital to be invested whenever and wherever they could make the most profit.

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