

### *The Problems of the Gilded Age*

The period following the Civil War in the North is often labeled the Gilded Age because of the appearance that growing cities, large factories, and technological advancements proved America was becoming prosperous and rich. However, northern areas between 1865 and 1900 suffered some of the worst filth, decay, and corruption in the nation. Like its name suggests, this time period enjoyed ostentatious displays of wealth and allowed some of the most dangerous, crime-ridden occurrences of the century. A plethora of problems existed in the North, including the processes of industrialization, mechanization, and urbanization. Other issues involved political corruption, immigration, and problems in big business. Much as the South and West attempted to deal with political, economic, and social problems, the northern Americans struggled to thrive during the nineteenth century.

The development of industrialization prompted most of the other problems in the urban North. Industrialization involves the process of becoming more industrial, a move to a manufacturing economy from a subsistence economy, the making of goods in factories instead of individually, and the increased use of machines instead of manual labor. By 1890, the U.S. was first in the production of steel and other manufactured products. In fact, American production exceeded the production of every other manufacturing nation combined. Industrialization caused a decrease in artisans and skilled labor because work became task-oriented rather than product-oriented. Work divided into many different stages instead of allowing one person to complete an entire product. Working conditions worsened during industrialization because of the tendency toward long work days, little to no safety oversight by the federal government, and over-crowded working spaces. In addition, children and women often worked the same hours as men for less pay. Industrial accidents (such as exploding furnaces in steel factories) caused a number of casualties and dismemberments in the workforce.

Mechanization emerged as industrialization occurred. Machines became much more important to the production process, replacing hand labor in many industries. Transportation became mechanized with the invention of street cars and subways as opposed to walking or riding horses. The idea of Scientific Management became extremely popular because that process cut down on production time and costs. Mechanization in the work force increased the amount of unskilled labor and increased the use of machines to produce goods. Workers were required to run the machines rather than produce the goods by hand. Steel production, which remained a highly specialized field, was a noted exception.

Mechanization also invaded the realm of politics with the creation of political machines. The government systems were usually local in nature and usually corrupt. They often provided goods and services to voters (especially immigrant groups) in exchange for votes. Political machines were led by machine bosses who made friends with leaders in ethnic neighborhoods who in turn convinced voters to cast ballots for the boss in upcoming elections. The machines provided for the needs of the poor and working classes, while also making money for the machine bosses. Many bosses made shady, underhanded deals that resulted in graft and bribes in order to make government contracts and paperwork move faster. Two of the most famous political machines during the Gilded Era were Tammany Hall, led by Boss Tweed, in New York City and the Pendergast machine in Kansas City, Missouri.

The increase in industrialization and mechanization resulted in the growing demand for a larger work force. During the second half of the century, immigration increased dramatically in order to fulfill that need. Reasons for immigration varied among nationalities and ethnicities, but most reasons can be divided into two categories—push and pull factors. Push factors are those that drove immigrants from their former homes and included such problems as religious persecution, conscription or war, famine, the end of feudal system (a political and economic system that provided jobs and living spaces for the masses) and the loss of public land. Pull factors, or those that enticed immigrants to America, included the appeal of the American dream, letters from family members promising riches, and the possibility of property ownership. Immigration increased dramatically during the second half of the nineteenth century. Between 1850 and 1880 approximately 2.5 million immigrants entered the U.S. every decade. Between 1880 and 1890, 5 million immigrants entered the U.S. during that ten year period and swelled the American population.

As immigrants flocked by the millions to the United States, urban centers in the Northeast grew exponentially. In addition, a significant number of small farmers in the North, failed homesteaders in the West, and small farmers in the North, left their farms to work in industrial urban centers and contributed to the swelling populations of northern cities. In 1880, Chicago's population was 500,000 (or one half million); by 1890, its population had tripled to 1.5 million. New York City grew from 2 million in 1880 to 3.5 million in 1890. Class and ethnic based neighborhoods emerged as the cities grew. Class neighborhoods developed in conjunction with technological advancements in transportation that allowed wealthier people to move away from urban manufacturing centers. Immigrants of similar ethnic backgrounds tended to gather in the same neighborhoods because of poverty levels that kept immigrants in lower income housing called tenements, the proximity of the neighborhoods to the factories, neighborhood groceries that carried food from the old countries, and common language and religious festivals. White Protestant attempts to assimilate the mostly Catholic and Jewish immigrants were hindered by ethnic neighborhoods. The re-creation of familiar old world lifestyles in these neighborhoods negated the need for immigrants to become more like the white, middle-class.

One reason immigrants and other working class people engaged in factory work was the hope of attaining the American dream of becoming wealthy. The “rags to riches” dream emphasized American individualism and focused on the belief that everyone can work hard and improve his or her lot in life. Eventually hard work coupled with proper behavior would result in rising from a working-class life to one of wealth. Horatio Alger wrote several stories about young boys who worked hard and improved themselves and attained the American dream. Usually the heroes of Alger's books were young boys who were employed in menial jobs or spent their money unwisely. Almost always, an opportunity for the young boy to improve his lot in life presented itself, and, with hard work and determination, the boy became a respectable member of society. In reality, however, “rags to riches” often meant rising from working class to middle class status if it happened at all. Men usually became members of management, doctors, lawyers, or small business owners, while middle class women were employed as secretaries or switchboard operators. During the late 1800s, Andrew Carnegie became the epitome of the “rags to riches” story. Carnegie was the son of working class parents who worked himself up from a working-class job to create his own company, Carnegie Steel, in 1873. By 1901, the company was sold for \$450 million and provided Carnegie with a huge amount of wealth for the rest of his life.

While Andrew Carnegie represented the success of the “rags to riches” scenario, other business leaders used their power, influence, and wealth to become millionaires and billionaires, often at the expense of their workers’ needs. Some businessmen used horizontal integration, or the purchasing of all the companies that produce the same thing, in order to solidify their wealth. Examples of these businessmen include John D. Rockefeller of Standard Oil and J.P. Morgan’s United States Steel Corporation, which was worth \$14 billion in the 1880s. Carnegie sold his company to Morgan, who purchased as many steel companies as he could. Vertical integration provided another way by which businessmen could solidify their wealth. Vertical integration involved buying a number of different types of businesses or plants that would allow control of the means of production or all the steps for producing goods. Carnegie used this method in Carnegie Steel when he bought and controlled mines, railroads, and steel refineries, all of which helped him produce finished steel. Both of these methods eventually led to monopolies in many industries. For example, Cornelius Vanderbilt bought and controlled the top seven railroad companies and could control the prices of railroad transportation of goods and materials because his monopoly provided few other options for shipping products.

### **What were the problems of the Gilded Age?**

- |           |           |
|-----------|-----------|
| <b>1.</b> | <b>5.</b> |
| <b>2.</b> | <b>6.</b> |
| <b>3.</b> | <b>7.</b> |
| <b>4.</b> | <b>8.</b> |

### *Fixing the Gilded Age*

The problems of industry, the cities, and big business caused many Americans to call for ways to reform the rapidly changing nation. Two early examples of this movement include Andrew Carnegie’s “Gospel of Wealth” and the creation of labor unions. The Gospel of Wealth was based on the concept of Social Darwinism or Survival of the Fittest, termed by Herbert Spencer in the 1850s and loosely rooted in Charles Darwin’s theories on natural selection and evolution. Survival of the Fittest provided justification for why the millionaires had become millionaires. They were clearly better than the rest and were the most “fit” of all businessmen. Carnegie’s view of the Gospel of Wealth differed from this belief. He felt that his wealth gave him a responsibility to give back to the community and to provide benefits that employees and community members would never be able to enjoy without the charity of the rich. Carnegie’s generosity led to the creation of a series of Carnegie libraries, parks, and community centers in several towns and cities across the North. Probably the most famous of all Carnegie’s contributions to society is Carnegie Hall in New York City’s theater district, which provided a world class theater for performing arts.

Labor unions also challenged big business and the dangers of industrialization during the late nineteenth century. Early labor unions include the National Labor Union (founded in 1867) and the Molly Maguires (a union based on violent intimidation that failed to make many lasting achievements). Two more important and successful unions were the Knights of Labor and American Federation of Labor (AFL). The Knights of Labor was founded in 1869 as a secret

fraternal order. In the 1870s, the union was led by Terrance Powderly and lost its “secret” nature by opening membership to “everyone who works.” Goals for the union included an eight hour work day, the abolition of child labor, and reworking of the wage system to more adequately spread the wealth to those who labored. The American Federation of Labor formed in 1881 and focused on unionizing skilled labor such as steel workers. Led by Samuel Gompers, this group excluded women, African Americans, unskilled labor, and children and focused on receiving shorter days and better pay for skilled workers. By focusing on a small portion of the labor force, Gompers believed his union could more easily win concessions for its members.

*“Redeeming” the South Politically and Economically*

After the Compromise of 1877 ended Radical Reconstruction in the South, a number of southern Democrats banded together with the intention of returning the South to what they perceived was its former glory. Called Redeemers, these southern leaders primarily emerged from two different areas of the southern landscape. First, a number of Redeemers were members of the old elite planter class or those that had owned a significant number of slaves before the beginning of the Civil War. However, the end of slavery destroyed the wealth of many southern slave owners. Old planter elite from such states as Alabama and Mississippi became members of the Redeemers, while old planter elite from such states as South Carolina and Georgia suffered more financial distress following the emancipation of slaves. In those states and most of the rest of the former Confederacy, the bulk of Redeemers emerged from a new business class comprised mainly of financiers, railroad developers, industrialists, and merchants. This new middle class capitalized on the need for a new southern economy after the end of slavery and, as a class, gained a significant amount of financial and political power in the late 1870s and 1880s.

The Redeemers were primarily concerned with three major issues—returning the South to “home rule,” reestablishing social conservatism, and creating opportunities for economic development of the South. Returning the South to home rule included electing Democrats into political offices and ridding local and state governments of Radical and moderate Republicans. This also included removing any African American officials who had been elected during Reconstruction and continuing to fight for state autonomy (independence) instead of increased federal powers over the states. Social conservatism consisted almost exclusively on maintaining the social hierarchy of whites over blacks that had existed in the antebellum South. Black Codes had helped continue the system of white control during Reconstruction, while the development of Jim Crow laws after Reconstruction cemented divisions between the two races. Finally, Redeemers sought to economically development the South from an agrarian economy to one based on the processing of natural resources and minor industries. By developing these basic industries, the South would not have to remain as dependent on the production of cotton as it had before the Civil War.

**What were the three goals of Redeemers?**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

When the Redeemers swept back into political power after the end of Reconstruction, they implemented a series of new policies for reestablishing local control. The solution for most of the problems involved lowering taxes, reducing spending which resulted in decreased social

services, and eliminating support and funding for public schools. By doing each of these things, the state governments of the former Confederate states effectively ended governmental support for organizations and policies that provided for former slaves and instead helped bolster white supremacy.

Most of the major industries that Redeemers supported in the South depended on the development of natural resources. These included growing or mining the resources and primary manufacturing of them. Industries included the tobacco, lumber, textiles, mining, and steel and iron industries as well as the building of railroads. Textile factories, in particular, depended on an increased number of working women because so many southern men had died during the Civil War. As a result more southern women remained unmarried than ever before and were forced to work in order to support themselves.

Although the increase of industries in the South helped alleviate the South's dependence on cotton, agriculture continued to play an important role in the South's economy. Sharecropping became the most prolific method of farming following the Civil War. Large land-holders needed a cheap labor supply to take the place of freed slaves while many poor white farmers lost their land as a result of high land taxes. Former slaves also needed employment, and many of them lacked job skills other than those learned during slavery while working the fields. The high price of cotton immediately following the Civil War's end helped create the system of sharecropping while attempts to segregate the races contributed to its longevity.

Most blacks became a part of this system because many land owners wanted to recreate the system of slavery as closely as possible. A number of land owners were former slave owners who gladly re-employed their former slaves in an attempt to keep African Americans in legal subjection to them. Many sharecroppers, both black and white, became tied to the land because of the cycle of poverty. In most cases, land owners created a system in which a small store sold the products and equipment people would need for the year for crops and living. These small general stores sold their goods on credit, which would be paid back after the year's crops were harvested and sold at market. The stores charged high interest rates that almost always left sharecroppers owing more to the store than they produced each year. This led to a continuing cycle of debt that kept sharecroppers constantly working to fulfill their contractual obligations. This prohibited many African Americans from being able to leave the land on which they worked and resembled slavery.

#### *Creation of Jim Crow Laws*

While economic and political policies both helped relegate African Americans to second class status in the South, the development of legal segregation solidified it. Jim Crow laws were a system of laws that were put into place to codify the racial hierarchy that was in place before the American Civil War. These laws were based on the idea that poor whites and poor blacks had very similar interests and could join together to challenge the redeemers in the South. Jim Crow laws helped make sure poor whites and blacks were kept separate.

Some of the earliest forms of Jim Crow laws were based on the earlier Black Codes. The poll tax was a tax that was due when a registered voter attempted to vote. It effectively excluded all poor from voting, not just blacks, because many could not afford to pay. The poll tax was

necessary for maintaining white supremacy because the Fifteenth amendment guaranteed voting for all races. Literacy tests were usually given from the U.S. Constitution to prove understanding of the written language and reading skills. In other words, these tests determined whether the voter was educated enough to interpret the voting ballot. These tests were highly subjective and usually resulted in excluding all blacks while allowing whites to vote, regardless of how well they performed on the test. Another Jim Crow law, the grandfather clause allowed only those men whose grandfathers were registered to vote in 1867 to vote in the “redeemed” South. Since the fifteenth amendment was not passed until 1870, almost all African Americans were excluded. This law was so effective that the number of eligible black voters in the state of Louisiana declined from over 130,000 black eligible voters in 1894 to less than 1300 in six years (by 1900).

By the 1890s, Jim Crow laws took the form of Supreme Court decisions in two major court cases that impacted race relations until the 1950s. In 1896, the Supreme Court reached a decision commonly known as *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The case concerned an African American man who sued the railroad industry for refusing to allow him access to a first class railroad car although he had purchased a ticket for that car. His race superseded his ability to use the more expensive ticket. The court’s decision made it legal to segregate public transportation on the basis of race as long as the facilities were “separate but equal” until the decision was overturned in 1954. The *Cummings v. County Board of Education* court case of 1899 legalized segregation in public education and established all-white schools in towns even if there was no black school. In other words, the *Cummings* case allowed for separate facilities regardless of their equality. As a result, public facilities for African Americans deteriorated and educational opportunities decreased for members of many black communities. (These laws also coincided with Redeemers’ attempts to decrease funding for public schools.)

By the end of Reconstruction in 1877, the Ku Klux Klan was in decline—largely because vigilante violence replaced the KKK and other secret societies in perpetuating racial hierarchies and terror in the South. Vigilante justice usually involved southern whites taking the law into their own hands and punishing blacks or whites who helped blacks. Because the vigilantes were almost never punished, secret societies were no longer needed to keep blacks and white sympathizers intimidated. The most brutal form of vigilante justice was lynching, which reached its height in the South during the 1890s. Lynching became part of a “rite of passage” mythology in the South for young white males and females. A typical lynching usually included a white mob that engaged in violence against an African American (almost always male). The mobs often were sparked by an accusation of a black man against a white woman in a sexual nature. The most common forms of lynching usually occurred in the forms of being burned alive, castration and mutilation, hanging, or a combination of the three.

Although all areas of the country experienced lynchings, most were concentrated in the former slave states. One particularly brutal lynching occurred in May 1916 near Waco, Texas, when a seventeen-year-old mentally challenged boy named Washington was accused of murdering Lucy Fryer, a white woman. Washington had been a manual laborer on her farm and confessed to the murder. After an extremely brief trial, the jury deliberated for four minutes before a guilty verdict was read. Following this, a white mob formed, beat Washington, dragged him to a suspension bridge, and prepared a bonfire over which to burn him. While waiting for the bonfire to catch completely, members of the mob beat him with bricks and shovels. What followed was

ghastly: “Fifteen thousand men, women, and children packed the square. They climbed up poles and onto the tops of cars, hung from windows, and sat on each other's shoulders. Children were lifted by their parents into the air. Washington was castrated, and his ears were cut off. A tree supported the iron chain that lifted him above the fire of boxes and sticks. Wailing, the boy attempted to climb the skillet-hot chain. For this the men cut off his fingers. The executioners repeatedly lowered the boy into the flames and hoisted him out again. With each repetition, a mighty shout was raised.” (taken from the website [www.withoutsanctuary.com](http://www.withoutsanctuary.com))

### **What were the Jim Crow laws that were put into place in the South?**

- |    |    |
|----|----|
| 1. | 4. |
| 2. | 5. |
| 3. | 6. |

Jim Crow laws were intended to legally and economically oppress African Americans. However, many southerners were angered by how quickly young southerners began to dismiss the importance of Confederate history and the sacrifices made by Civil War veterans and their families. Many southerners sought to solidify the importance of Confederate history in those who were born after the Civil War, such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

The United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) was formed by Southern women whose main purposes were to honor Confederate veterans and dead, educate the next generation about Confederate values, and vindicate the South. Founded in 1895, the UDC was the first group to support monument building in southern towns and cemeteries in order to glorify Confederate Civil War veterans. The American holiday, Memorial Day, is a result of this tradition. Besides honoring the dead, the UDC sought to create benevolent societies and other organizations that would benefit veterans and their families. In order to perpetuate the belief that the Confederacy had fought for a glorious cause, the UDC influenced generations of southern children through the educational system. The UDC sponsored essay contests that awarded prizes for the best stories about the antebellum South, collected materials about the benefits of slavery for libraries and museums, and approving textbooks and readers for schools. One reader, entitled *The Ku Klux Klan or the Invisible Empire*, helped glorify groups that terrorized blacks in the South. The UDC also sponsored scholarships for northern school children who wrote stories about the glory of the South. As a result of these activities, the UDC successfully solidified the Lost Cause in American history. In other words, the slave South became a place that represented an idyllic culture that was disrupted and ruined by the invading Yankee army. Southerners held onto this belief, which justified the continual oppression of African Americans as the years passed and helped solidify the system of Jim Crow and racism in America.

### **What were the purposes of the UDC?**

- |    |    |
|----|----|
| 1. | 3. |
| 2. |    |