The Frontier: Myth and Reality
Historical Context of the Frontier/Turner Thesis

- Turner is writing at a moment when the frontier has been “officially closed.
- His argument is profoundly influenced by earlier writers, such as de Crevecoeur.
- Turner’s essay establishes the direction of interpreting American history and culture throughout much of the 20th century.
- While many of his premises have been challenged or discredited, his essay still influences the public’s understanding of the development of American civilization and national identity.
Questions to Consider

• Where does Turner focus his attention?
• How does Turner define the American frontier (in contrast to the European “frontier”?)
• What is the relationship between the American frontier and American society? Does Turner see these as opposites or as interrelated? If they are related, what is the relationship? How does one influence the other?
The Frontier Defined

- Turner believes in a vital link between the American frontier and American civilization (society). The frontier exists to serve society, as a source of renewal and regeneration of the society.

- The frontier transforms Europeans (and European society) into Americans. It is not just a natural space but a vital social space that assists in building a nation.
Relationship of the Frontier to American History and Culture

- Composite Nationality
- Industrial Independence
- American Political Affairs and Legislation
- Growth of Democracy
- Religion and Education
- Intellectual Characteristics (The American Mind)
Composite Nationality

- The “crucible” of the frontier removes people from their original cultures and creates a melting pot where “immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race”.
- The frontier breaks down regional, ethnic and cultural divisions and creates a new national culture.
Industrial Independence

- Technology and industry emerge on the frontier and in response to its conditions.
- The railroad, canal systems, forms of communication, and new developments in industry and agriculture are all products of the frontier.
- These technologies are closely associated with the ideology of freedom. They create the conditions of freedom in America.
When the two lines of the transcontinental railroad met in Promontory, Utah, Leland Stanford drove a celebratory golden spike into the rails.

**Movement** According to the map, what was the westernmost city on the transcontinental railroad?
The Central Pacific and Union Pacific connected their tracks at Promontory, Utah, in 1869, completing the transcontinental railroad.
Political Affairs and Legislation

- American politics and its major legislation are influenced by the frontier.
- Ownership of the land: federal, states, individual?
- Indian Question
- The creation of “States”
- Legislation over land: Louisiana Purchase, etc.
- Slavery
Democracy

- The most important influence of the frontier has been in the promotion and development of democracy (a kind of ideal social / political organization).
- The frontier provides the conditions and environment that allow the American Revolution to occur.
- It produces a kind of individualism that can become the basis for social organization.
However, Turner also recognizes that there is a danger to the kind of democracy that emerges on the frontier, if it threatens to destroy the social framework, a destructive form of individualism.

Therefore, Turner introduces religion and education as social institutions that can regulate and control the negative forces on the frontier.
Religion and Education

- Society both desires the frontier as the site of social expansion and renewal, but it also fears the frontier as the site of lawless, destructive, anti-social behavior.
- Turner views religion and education as institutions of social control that produce certain kinds of social and individual codes of moral and ethical behavior--thus essentially *pragmatic* rather than spiritual.
Across the continent, "Westward the course of empire takes its way" by F. F. Palmer
• These forces are what shape the American character.
• The unique experience of moving into / settling the frontier creates a spirit of independence, democratic institutions, sense of patriotism, and individualism.
• The frontier naturalizes these qualities, and give rise to what Turner and others will call the intellectual traits of America that are created by the frontier.
Turner Thesis

Definition

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Characteristics

Examples

Counter-Examples
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</tr>
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**Examples**

- Frontier settlers, farmers
- Fur trappers, guides
- Buffalo hunters, scouts
- Gold rush miners
- Cowboys on the open range
- Frontier town businesses
- Overcoming adversities
- Women getting voting rights

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### Turner Thesis

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**Counter-Examples**

- Native American societies + cultures
- Mexican societies + cultures
- Canadian societies + cultures
- Eastern USA cosmopolitan culture
- Eastern USA corporate structures
- European, Asian, etc.. cultures
Typical Frontier Myths

- Indians were savage children in the natural wilderness, trapped in “the past”: lacked culture, reason, religion, science, writing, property, and rights
- Europeans/whites brought civilization, reason, progress, and “the future”
- Europeans went west to the frontier, a land of opportunity and freedom from the hard and oppressive European (old) world
- Private property, government, agriculture
Typical Frontier Myths

- Rugged individualism, adventure, violence
- Innocence and benevolent expansion
- Fate and Destiny/Re-invention of identity
- Icons: cowboy, Indian, gunslinger, lawman, covered wagon, log cabin, mountain man, “settlers”, farmer
Frontiersman: half savage-civilized; individualist; strong; true
Pioneers like this family often lived in houses made of sod because there were few trees for lumber on the Plains.
Cowboys eating dinner on the range. A typical chuckwagon, like the one shown here, carried potatoes, beans, bacon, dried fruit, cornmeal, coffee and canned goods.
Homesteaders photographed in the 1880's by Solomon Butcher in Custer County, Nebraska.
Manifest Destiny & Conquest

- Convergence of politics, religion, race, economics, military
- Justify conquest
- Racial supremacy, anti-democratic

Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way by Emanuel Leutze
New York, Nov. 15, 1871.

dear Sir:

So many people ask me what they shall do; so few tell me what they can do. Yet this is the pivot wherein all must turn.

I believe that each of us who has his place to make should go where men are wanted, and where employment is not bestowed as alms. Of course, I say to all who are in want of work, Go West!

But what can you do? and how can your family help you? Your mother, I infer, is to be counted out as an effective worker. But what of the rest? And you – can you chop? Can you plow? Can you mow? Can you cut up Indian corn? I reckon not. And in the west it is hard to find such work as you have been accustomed to. The conditions of living are very rude there.

On the whole I say, stay where you are; do as well as you can; and devote every spare hour to making yourself familiar with the conditions and dexterity required for the efficient conservation of out-door industry in a new country. Having mastered these, gather up your family and Go West!

Yours,

Horace Greeley

R.L. Sanderson,

Duxbury, MA
Indians
Weakness of Turner’s Frontier and Frontier Realities?

• Exclusions: Indians, Mexicans, Chinese, Irish, African-Americans, Women...
• Ignored interdependence of groups
• Simplifies complexities
• Federal government, environmental history
• US as culmination of humanity
• Democracy = expansion: endless expansion?
• Superiority and self-serving
• Other frontiers? (Canada, Mexico... )
**Myth and Reality in the Wild West**

No episode in American history has given rise to as many myths as the Wild West. Writers of dime novels, popular in the East, helped create the myths in the years after the Civil War. Even today, popular books, television shows, and movies continue to portray the West in ways that are more myth than reality.

**Myth:** The cowboy was a free-spirited individual.

**Reality:** Most cowboys were employees. Many joined labor unions and even went on strike.

**Myth:** Western cowtowns were wild places where cowboys had gunfights, and there was little law and order.

**Reality:** Most were orderly cities with active law enforcement. Showdowns rarely, if ever, occurred.

**Myth:** Almost all cowboys were Anglo Americans.

**Reality:** About 25 percent of cowboys were African Americans, and 12 percent were Hispanic.
Manifestations of the Frontier Myth

- 150 other shows
- Thrills & excitement
- Indians as aggressors
- Settlers as victims
- Conquerors as victims
- Patriotic/nationalistic

Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World - Circus poster showing cowboys rounding up cattle and portrait of Col. W.F. Cody on horseback. c.1899
Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Parade
American Mutoscope and Biograph Company
©July 2, 1902
Manifestations of the Frontier Myth

- Frederick Remington
- Sculptor and painter
- Rugged, male, Anglo
- Fundamentally shaping nation’s idea of the West

Broncho Buster by Frederic Remington
Manifestations of the Frontier Myth

- Western Dime novels
- Recycling storylines for mass production
Manifestations of the Frontier Myth

• “Westerns”
• Mass production, low culture, consumer culture
• Standard stories about American greatness, progress, exceptionalism, simplification
Manifestations of the Frontier Myth

- TV programs
- Constructing a modern American “hero”
- Cold War (good vs. bad)
- “Consensus” on American tradition & identity
Manifestations of the Frontier Myth

- Selling the idea of the American West
- Commodification of freedom and individualism
- Consumer culture
Here comes Wrangler with the authentic shirts of rodeo champions.

Tough as your spirit.
Chevrolet's striking Bel Air Sport Coupe, with 3 great new series, Chevrolet offers the widest choice of models in its field.

How Chevrolet’s new high-compression horsepower takes you more places on less gas...
Modern Cowboy Politics

- Ronald Reagan
- Anti-Communist
- Cowboy actor
- Cowboy president
- “Anti-big gov’t”
- “Won the Cold War”
Modern Cowboy Politics

- George W. Bush
- Rich/influential family
- Yale “educated”
- Reinvention of identity to fit Western Iconography
- Cowboy hat, boots
- Ford pickup truck; Crawford Ranch
- “Wanted: Dead or Alive”
Persistence of the Frontier Myth

- American anti-intellectualism
- “Exceptionalism”
- American Dream: hard work, self-reliance, opportunity, righteousness...
- Not reality, but real hopes and dreams
- Simplification and feel good story
- Nationalistic and patriotic