

ISSUE 2



Was the Wild West More Violent Than the Rest of the United States?

YES: David T. Courtright, from "Frontiers," in Ronald Gottesman and Richard Maxwell Brown, eds., *Violence in America: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1999)

NO: Robert R. Dykstra, from "To Live and Die in Dodge City: Body Counts, Law and Order and the Case of *Kansas v. Gill*," in Michael A. Bellesiles, ed., *Lethal Imagination, Violence and Brutality in American History* (New York University Press, 1999)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Professor of history David T. Courtright argues that the cattle, mining, and lumbering Western frontiers were extremely violent because these regions were populated by young, single, and transient males who frequented saloons and prostitutes, and engaged in fights.

NO: Professor Robert R. Dykstra argues that Dodge City had a low crime rate in the decade 1876–1885, and in the murder case of *Kansas v. Gill*, it conducted a jury trial "according to conventions nurtured through a thousand years of Anglo-American judicial traditions."

In 1893, the young historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861–1932) delivered an address before the American Historical Association entitled *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Turner's essay not only sent him from Wisconsin to Harvard University, but also became one of the most important essays ever written in American history. According to Turner's thesis, American civilization was different from European civilization because the continent contained an abundance of land that was settled in four waves of migration from 1607 through 1890. During this process, the European heritage was shed, and the American characteristics of individualism, mobility, nationalism, and democracy developed.

This frontier theory of American history did not go unchallenged. Some historians argued that Turner's definition of the frontier was too vague and

imprecise; he underestimated the cultural forces that came to the West from Europe and the eastern states; he neglected the forces of urbanization and industrialization in opening the West; he placed an undue emphasis on sectional development and neglected class struggles for power; finally, his provincial view of American history prolonged the isolationist views of a nation that became involved in world affairs in the twentieth century.

Younger historians have begun to question the traditional interpretation of Western expansion. For example, older historians believed that growth was good and automatically brought forth progress. New historians such as William Cronin, Patricia Limerick, and others, however, have questioned this assumption in examining the disastrous ecological effects of American expansionism, such as the elimination of the American buffalo and the depletion of forests.

Turner's romantic view of the frontier became popularized in the literature of the West from the 1860s through modern times. As America went through its Industrial Revolution with factories manned by immigrants pouring in from Europe and Asia and second- and third-generation farmers diminishing in numbers, a mythic view of the frontier developed. The publishing house of Beadle and Adams had five million of its dime novels in circulation. Its most prolific hero was William F. Cody, a real person glamorized as "Buffalo Bill, the King of the Border Men." Buffalo Bill or his ghostwriters produced 121 novels—all with the same formula. Cody's Wild West shows toured the United States and Europe and featured reenactments of such famous episodes as Custer's Last Stand "at the battle of Little Bighorn in 1876." Buffalo Bill even hired the aged Sitting Bull one season to ride around the arena once per show. The rest of the time, Sitting Bull sat in his tent signing autographs in the fashion of today's retired athletes.

The prototype Western for the twentieth century and beyond is found in Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian*. Written in 1902, it went through six printings its first year and remains in print today. The hero, a southerner gone to Wyoming, is forced at the end to kill his former best friend and his rustling partner. *The Virginian* legitimized the use of violence on the frontier. The good guys would use force only when necessary against the bad. Since Wister, novelists such as Louis L'Amour (whose 80-plus novels have sold over 100 million copies), motion pictures, radio, and television have perpetuated the mythical West.

"The United States," says Richard Hofstadter, "has a history but not a tradition of domestic violence" for two reasons. First, it lacks an ideological and geographical center; second, "we have a remarkable lack of memory where violence is concerned and left most of our excesses a part of our buried history. . . . What is most exceptional about the Americans is not the voluminous record of their violence, but their extraordinary ability, in the face of that record, to persuade themselves that they are among the best-behaved and best-regulated of peoples."

Since Professor Hofstadter wrote those words in 1971, a number of studies have attempted to systematically study the American history of violence. One major question is whether or not the late-nineteenth-century West was more violent than other parts of the country.