



ARTICLES

Immigration And The American West: The Myth Of The Garden

Now, on the cusp of global migration spurred by social unrest, economic uncertainty, and—we increasingly hear—climate change, we must hope, as Walt Whitman imagined in “Passage to India,” for human—not national—solutions.

August 23, 2020 | [Dallas](#)

Immigration and migration have always been part of the American story. One of our foundational myths is that the United States is a land of boundless opportunity—there for the taking by the industrious and the brave. And for the better part of two centuries, immigrants and migrants took this myth to heart and followed its pull westward.

In his seminal 1893 essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner proposed a “frontier thesis,” which suggested that American democracy—American culture, really—was forged on the ever-moving western frontier.

Federal laws such as the Northwestern Ordinance and the Homestead Act fueled western expansion by two distinct groups. As Turner puts it, “Obviously the immigrant was attracted by the cheap lands of the frontier, and even the native farmer felt their influence strongly. Year by year the farmers who lived on soil whose returns were diminished by unrotated crops were offered the virgin soil of the frontier at nominal prices. Their growing families demanded more lands, and these were dear.”

Other federal legislation indirectly fostered western development. For example, Turner notes that “Railroads, fostered by land grants, sent an increasing tide of immigrants into the Far West.” But the relationship between western migration and law was reciprocal: “the mining experience in the lead regions of Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa was applied to the mining laws of the Sierras, and [e]ach tier of new States has found in the older ones material for its constitutions.”

Turner’s frontier thesis has fallen out of favor among more recent historians, in part because of its glaring racial and gender elisions. Nonetheless, romantic notions of the frontier and Americans’ supposed “westering” impulse continue to charm literary imaginations and influence views of immigration at the level of policy.

Half a century after Turner’s essay, Henry Nash Smith, in “Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth,” picked up the frontier thesis and examined it through the lens of literary texts, both high and low. Smith’s analysis ranges widely and suffers from some of the same blindness that plagued Turner’s—e.g., the free, “virgin” land was, in fact, already inhabited by Indigenous people. But I think he’s right to associate a significant strand of our Western mythology with the influx of European immigrants into the “Garden of the World.”

Smith begins “Virgin Land” with a question: “What is an American?” With respect to populating the West, Thomas Jefferson posited that it would be accomplished by fledglings flying from the “original nest” of the English colonies. So, from the outset, there is more than a hint that the answer to Smith’s question—in the context of transcontinental expansion—is tangled up with notions of English (or at least European) hereditary identity.

This squares with my own experience growing up in western Kansas, where many of the small farming communities dotting the high plains bore specific European traces in the surnames of its residents. Prairie View had its De Boers, Van Diests, and Van Loenens; Jennings its Flaskas, Prohaskas and Vatopkas; Leoville its Demperwolfs, Heitmans, and Reicherts. But by the middle of the last century, these communities had mostly lost their ethnic identities, save such things as a Holland Street in Prairie View, an annual Czech festival in Jennings, and a magnificent Germanic-influenced Catholic Church in Leoville, whose twin bell towers rise 10 stories above the surrounding table-top-flat farm ground.

Although I am not an ethnographer, my sense is that these communities fit nicely within the “garden” myth, i.e., the original farmer-settlers came for the abundant cheap land and grouped themselves according to shared religious and cultural beliefs. Indeed, more than 70% of the immigrants that arrived in Kansas in the two decades after passage of the Homestead Act (1862) were farmers. Although that’s more or less the story of my own family (my grandfather often told of coming to Kansas in a covered wagon as a child), that’s not, of course, the whole story.

Beginning with the Indian Removal Act of 1830, multiple tribes from the upper Midwest and Great Lakes regions were forced out onto the Kansas plains. Others, such as the northern Cheyenne, who were relocated to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) and attempted to return to their historical homeland in the Black Hills of South Dakota, are mostly remembered only for committing what has been labeled the “Last Indian Raid in Kansas,” just a few miles from where I grew up.

And after the Civil War, African Americans, fleeing meager opportunities in the South, established new colonies on the plains, the most well-known of which, Nicodemus, still standing one county south of my home town, flourished until being bypassed by the railroads.

Reading large swaths of the population out of the western immigrant experience is not the only failure of the myth of the garden. It also fails to account for the closing of the frontier that was officially acknowledged after the census of 1890. Indeed, fretting over the disappearance of “free land” and the notion that opportunity had become a zero-sum game had already influenced immigration crackdowns, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, that rage to this day.

The “Garden” also proved to be no garden, in part because the American West is largely arid and the belief that “rain follows the plow” proved a fallacy. This led to the disastrous Dust Bowl and the migration of countless “Okies” (which included many Kansans, Texans, and others) to California. But California could not redeem the myth. For as John Steinbeck argues in “The Grapes of Wrath,” “There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success.”

Now, on the cusp of global migration spurred by social unrest, economic uncertainty, and—we increasingly hear—climate change, what’s left of frontier mythology must surely fade. So we must hope, as Walt Whitman imagined in “Passage to India,” for human—not national—solutions:

The earth to be spann’d, connected by network, The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage, The oceans to be cross’d, the distant brought near, The lands to be welded together.

Randy D. Gordon is a partner at Barnes & Thornburg and co-chairs its antitrust practice group. He is executive professor of law and history at Texas A&M University.

Reprinted with permission from the “Aug. 23 edition of the “Texas Lawyer”© 2020 ALM Media Properties, LLC. All rights reserved. Further duplication without permission is prohibited, contact 877-257-3382 or reprints@alm.com.