

The West: Cultures Meet

Long before Europeans arrived in the West, many different Native American groups lived throughout the region. These groups included major cultures, including the Shoshone, the Paiute, the Yokuts, the Pomo, and the Makah. Each Native American group in the West had its own culture. People living near the arid Great Basin, such as the Shoshone and the Paiute, were nomads. They survived on hunting small animals and gathering wild seeds and roots. The Pomo and Yokuts who lived in present-day California also hunted wildlife but made flour from acorns taken from the forests.

Rivers made long distance travel possible in the West. It was faster to canoe on a river than walk through dense forests. The early peoples of the West used the river systems to create trade networks throughout the region. For example, the Dalles- a waterfall on the Columbia River- was a major trading center. People traveled great distances to exchange goods. The Chinook people were among the most successful traders and invented a language to communicate with various trading groups.

By the 1800s, settlers in the eastern part of the country knew little about the West. In 1804 an expedition led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark explored the region. A Shoshone woman, named Sacagawea served as their guide from the Dakotas until they reached the Pacific Ocean. The Rocky Mountains were a great barrier to westward travel. At first only fur trappers and Native Americans were skilled enough to travel through.



One of the successful routes was through the South Pass- an opening near the point where the states of Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado meet. The South Pass would serve as a doorway for eastern settlers and their wagon trains moving westward.

By the mid 1800s, the Pony Express delivered mail across the continent, starting in St. Joseph, Missouri and ending in California. The telegraph was soon invented that could relay coded messages over wires. To improve transportation between the east and west, the United States government built a transcontinental railroad. Two teams of workers started, one from Nebraska and one from California. They met at Promontory, Utah in 1869. Now the railroad brought ever more settlers westward for new opportunities.