

## Gilded Age (A test for the “New Birth of Freedom”)

### “Gilded Age” Overview (approximately 1870-1900)

- Name was coined by Mark Twain in 1873---not just a writer but a social critic as well
- **On the surface**, the country was “Gilded” (similar to other periods/decades)—Era of Good Feelings (1817-1825), 1920s, 1950s, 1980s
  - slavery, nullification, and secession finally dealt with during Civil War---no more compromise on these issues
  - Union was preserved
  - Manifest Destiny picked up where it left off prior to the Civil War (“Closing the Frontier”)
  - Industrial revolution truly hit America
    - 1<sup>st</sup> vs. 2<sup>nd</sup> phase
      - 1<sup>st</sup> Phase (1820s, 1830s—mostly in transportation)
      - 2<sup>nd</sup> Phase (late 1800s)---inventions that made the production of goods extremely efficient
    - rapid industrialization
    - U.S. became the first manufacturing country in the world
  - Big business on the rise (Modern Capitalism)
    - true beginning of stock market (allows business leaders to raise capital for further investment)
    - use of monopolies, trusts, pools, etc. to consolidate power
  - Immigration at an all time high (cheap labor)(diversity)
  - The “experiment” seemed to be working
- **In reality**, a host of very serious issues lurked under the surface
  - Corruption rampant in politics and business (bribery widespread)
  - Rise of the “Political Machines” to maintain power
  - Native Americans placed on reservations (land the white man did not want)
  - Jim Crow laws allowed to take root in the south---Plessey v. Ferguson (1896)
  - Women still treated as second class citizens
  - Little to no regulation in the factories
    - long hours, dangerous conditions, and no job security (labor unions had difficulty forming)
  - Immigrants discriminated against (from Southern and Eastern Europe---not WASPS)
  - Modern Capitalism at the time was really a rich, white man’s game supported by friendly government policy
    - farmers, factory workers, minorities, women, etc. left out (skeptical---need a voice)
  - Materialistic society begins to form (success defined by possessions)
  - Large gaps in society developing
    - e.g. rural/ urban, liberal/conservative, laborer/employer, industry/agriculture, creditor/debtor, republican/democrat

### Conditions/Life in the East, West, and South

- East---industry, wealth, modernization of cities, diversity of population
- West---romantic image of the cowboy and wild west (not really, life actually miserable)
- South---America's 3<sup>rd</sup> World Country (disease, poverty, corruption, high murder rate, value of region very low)
  - basically ignored by the Government
  - 80% of blacks lived in South (became scapegoat for problems)
  - not very diverse compared to the rest of the nation
  - no big cities (N.O. was largest---15<sup>th</sup> in nation)
  - relative absence of industrialization
  - overwhelmingly agricultural (stuck in time---still farming like it is 1800)
  - per capita income was 60% of rest of country
  - low taxation because of poverty thus no schools, roads, hospitals, etc. can be built
  - Why is South so poor?
    1. one crop agriculture subject to fluctuation and didn't have corner on market any longer  
(other countries now competing with production of cotton)
    2. Farmers don't use chemical fertilizer or other advances in farming techniques
    3. land in south (thin layer of top soil on top of clay that gets washed away)
  - Bottom Line----when people are poor, ignorant, and desperate they do bad things  
e.g. lynching, corruption

### Politics in the Gilded Age

- Presidents of the Gilded Age ("forgettable presidents")
  - Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Chester A. Arthur, Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison
- huge voter turnout during the period (80% of eligible voters voted in the 3 decades following the civil war)—political machines, ethnic party loyalties contribute greatly to this turnout
- No dominant political party during the time ("political seesaw")
  - presidential elections were very close
  - control of the House of Representatives switched six times
  - candidates were afraid to take bold, firm stands
- few differences on economic and political issues
  - tariff, currency, civil-service reform
- only noticeable differences in political parties were on moral issues
  - Republicans (traced lineage to Puritanism) stressed strict personal morality that government should regulate in the community
  - Democrats professed toleration of differences in an imperfect world (no single moral standard for society)
- Patronage (spoils system) was practiced by both parties to survive
  - giving of jobs in return for votes
- despite the faults of Politicians during the period, the wounds of the Civil War healed and economic expansion was unprecedented