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## Making the White Man's West

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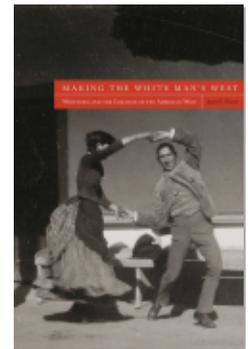
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## 6

### “OUR CLIMATE AND SOIL IS COMPLETELY ADAPTED TO THEIR CUSTOMS”

#### *Whiteness, Railroad Promotion, and the Settlement of the Great Plains*

Dr. William A. Bell, a transplanted English physician and promoter for the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railway, observed in his 1869 book *New Tracks in North America* that the West offered unlimited potential for creating prosperous new towns and generating profits for discerning investors, but its development would require men of vision, courage, and capital to make dreams a reality. The West stood forth as a vast region “where continuous settlement is impossible, where, instead of navigable rivers, we find arid deserts, but where, nevertheless, spots of great fertility and the richest prizes of the mineral kingdom tempt men onward into those vast regions.” In this environment, he continued, “Railways become almost a necessity of existence—certainly of development; and the locomotive has to lead instead of follow the tide of population.”<sup>1</sup> This fact put the western railroads in a difficult position. Instead of simply building a line to tap an existing market, connecting smaller established towns to larger established cities, railroads in the West had the unenviable task of laying thousands of miles of expensive track in the hope of creating a market; the supply,

in many cases, preceded the demand in a strange inversion of capitalism's most sacrosanct principle.

Railroad construction, therefore, carried a great deal of risk, and many failed. An acerbic newspaperman and critic of the bankrupt Northern Pacific Railroad put the railroad's weakness in a different perspective, remarking in 1873—the year the company's collapse helped bring down the financial house of Jay Cooke and propel the nation into an unprecedented economic depression—that the line's failure surprised few, as it amounted to “a wild scheme to build a railroad from Nowhere, through No-man's Land, to No Place.”<sup>2</sup> Such criticism had substance, for indeed many of the West's cities and towns existed as evanescent dreams, living only in the imaginations and on the maps of railroad developers like Bell. These towns would only come to be if the railroads themselves actively recruited settlers to emigrate, but this also gave railroads an opportunity to shape the population of western cities and towns. It was with a sense of urgency that railroads set out to find settlers, and, without exception, the settlers they recruited were descended from old-stock Americans or Northern Europeans. When railroad promoters dreamed of settlers for their lines, they dreamed only in white.

Railroad executives, like most other nineteenth-century Americans, made numerous distinctions between ethnic and racial groups. Certainly, they saw racial divisions between whites and African Americans or Native Americans, but they also discriminated between the ethnic groups of Europe, or as many preferred to call them, the “races” of Europe.<sup>3</sup> “Real” whites, usually defined as those of Northern European ancestry, rated as the most desirable potential citizens. Believed to be hardworking, independent, and intelligent, they allegedly made ideal settlers. Thomas Jefferson eloquently celebrated them as “the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”<sup>4</sup>

A key part of the agrarian myth maintained that white farmers, as virtuous republicans, possessed the temperament to tame a savage wilderness and construct new communities. The settling of new lands, the historian Henry Nash Smith argued, reflected a “collective representation, a poetic idea . . . that defined the promise of American life” and encapsulated a variety of meanings, including “fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth.”<sup>5</sup> Railroad developers therefore reflected deeply held American views of desirability when they set out to recruit settlers.

While frontiersmen needed little help or prodding to head West in Jefferson's time, the trans-Mississippi West, especially the Great Plains, would require more help from both government and industry. The Homestead Act (1862) certainly aided in encouraging settlers to head west and fashion farms for themselves, but given the vast spaces and lack of navigable rivers, cheap land would only mark the beginning. Farmers would need access to markets, access that only railroads could provide.

Railroads therefore took the lead in tying the vast expanses of the Great Plains and the trans-Mississippi West into the nation in the 1860s and 1870s, a turbulent period for the nation. Issues of expansion, capitalism, and citizenship were hammered out by the Civil War and Reconstruction—a period the historian Elliott West believes should be called the “Greater Reconstruction” in that it lasted far longer than the period from 1865 to 1877 and included the integration of the West as much as the South.<sup>6</sup> This period defined the limits of citizenship, expanding it to include African Americans but thwarting the efforts of Chinese Americans to become citizens. The United States incorporated the South and the West during this period through military conquest and economic expansion. Railroads, in both the South and the West, played a key technological role, making this integration possible by shrinking the time needed to traverse the continent from months to days.

Since the prospect of constructing lines into territory that lacked established settlements presented an impediment to expansion, the federal government began to offer many railroads massive subsidies in the form of land grants. Over the course of the nineteenth century, Congress awarded 200 million acres of the public domain to various railroad companies to induce them to build lines.<sup>7</sup> These grants gave railroads ownership of alternating sections of the land through which their lines passed, creating a checkerboard pattern of railroad-owned land and government land. Ranging from ten miles to fifty miles on either side of the track (depending on the particular grant), these grants amounted to thousands and in many cases millions of acres. The grants served as collateral for securing construction money, and they could be sold to settlers to generate much-needed currency for the railroads. The settlers who purchased the land, in turn, created a market for railroads. In time, it was hoped, the settlement of these lands would bring enough people west to make the lines profitable. Still, the building of western railroads in many cases provided a transportation infrastructure that would

not be needed for years or even decades.<sup>8</sup> Building the lines served therefore as merely a prelude to the even more difficult work of bringing settlers.

Railroad companies understood this dilemma, so they charged their land departments with advertising to prospective settlers. Advertising campaigns, as the Northern Pacific (NP) Land Committee put it, attempted to make "known to the uttermost parts of the Earth the resources and attractiveness" of the lands along their lines.<sup>9</sup> Much of the NP's grant covered the northern Great Plains, a region that, railroad executives hoped, could be transformed into small towns and farms. As the NP's land committee saw it, the settlement of its lands signified another step in the great drama of progress and frontiering that had characterized the development of the nation. The land committee, reflecting on the importance of its colonization project, listed as its purpose "the colonization of an almost 'New World,' whose character is absolutely to depend upon the population which the Northern Pacific brings there, and the communities which it establishes and inspires."<sup>10</sup> The work went well beyond merely selling land. If successful, the railroads would forge an empire whose ultimate success hinged on the quality of settlers. Indeed, when speaking collectively of the "character" of settlements, the land department also implied individual character. The ideal candidates would be hardworking, experienced farmers in search of a better life and material improvement. Any successful colonization plan therefore needed to find such people. If the scheme worked, these farmers would buy substantial portions of the railroad's land, and their produce could be shipped over the rail lines to market, both of which would generate much-needed revenue for the line. They would also have the skills necessary to successfully cultivate new lands. Ideally, then, the countryside would be packed with small farmers, and the natural environment of the Great Plains would give way to orderly farmland.<sup>11</sup>

The first colonization effort, that of the Illinois Central in the 1850s, demonstrated the value of desirable farmers, and railroads consistently targeted farmers who were experiencing the problems caused by technological and industrial development, farmers unable to make a living in countries and regions that suffered from overpopulation or a lack of arable land. Almost without exception, they targeted Northern Europeans because they had been experiencing economic or political dislocations. Railroads considered them hard workers, of the Protestant faith, and racially white. By choosing

to advertise to these groups, railroads actively shaped the racial and ethnic makeup of the towns along their lines. Although less important than farming experience, race and ethnicity clearly factored into the railroads' advertising campaigns—this is what the NP's land committee had no doubt implied when mentioning the character of its would-be settlers.

By the 1870s, immigration to America had become decidedly multinational. People from England, Scotland, Ireland, Northern, Southern, and Eastern Europe, and even China immigrated to America. The Chinese famously labored to carve the Central Pacific Railroad from the stubborn granite of the Sierra, but when they finished their work, they did not reap the rewards. All of these groups sought work eagerly, and many dreamed of owning their own land in the United States. As the major western lines began colonization campaigns in the 1870s, they naturally looked to nationalities already migrating to the United States in substantial numbers. The largest group of immigrants coming into the United States in the 1870s was the Germans (718,182, or 25 percent), then the Irish (436,871, or 15 percent), and Scandinavians, including Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes (243,016, or less than 10 percent of the total). The Irish and Germans in 1860 accounted for nearly 70 percent of the nation's foreign-born citizens and in 1900 still represented 40 percent.<sup>12</sup> Railroad campaigns, however, consciously targeted Germans, Scandinavians, and Englishmen to a much greater degree than the Irish, and when groups like the Italians passed Germans in numbers in the 1890s, the focus remained on the latter.<sup>13</sup>

These campaigns, especially the Northern Pacific's efforts in the Dakotas and Minnesota, left a profound mark. Counting immigrants and their American-born children, the West had the highest foreign-born population in America in the nineteenth century. According to the historian Frederick C. Luebke, "North Dakota's immigrant percentage, an astounding 71.3 percent [in 1900], ranked highest in the country. South Dakota, Nebraska, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Washington, and California all exceeded the national average of 32.1 percent in 1900."<sup>14</sup> In terms of specific ethnic groups, census data revealed a bias toward Northern Europeans in areas where railroads had heavily colonized. Germans, English (including English-speaking Canadians), Norwegians, Swedes, Russians (most of them actually native German speakers, such as the Mennonites), and Danes collectively accounted for 59.1 percent of North Dakota's population in 1900.

The Irish, Welsh, Italians, and Eastern Europeans combined for just over another 10 percent, less than half of the 22.6 percent for the Norwegians alone in the state. The number of Irish (3.6%) was low in North Dakota, while the number of Norwegians was excessively high, a marked contrast to most other western states where the Irish ranked first or second and the Norwegians were statistically insignificant. Percentages of Irish attained their highest levels in mining states, such as Montana (11.3% of the population), California (10.2%), and Nevada (10.0%)—all higher than the national average. In Kansas, with a much lower immigrant population of 25.8 percent, the numbers of desirable European colonists were no less apparent. The largest group by far was the Germans (8.9%, or 131,563 people), followed by the Irish (3.3%), English (3.1%), Swedes (2.4%), and Russians at 1.7 percent (essentially Mennonite colonists).<sup>15</sup> This dominance of Northern Europeans resulted in no small measure from the colonization campaigns of the Northern Pacific and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroads.

Clearly, the West symbolized opportunity for many, but only certain groups received the specific support of the railroads. Eager to attract Northern Europeans, many lines set up immigration agencies in European nations, provided free or subsidized transport to the United States, shipped immigrants' baggage at no charge, and set up offices along their lines to help immigrants select their new homes. The writer Helen Hunt Jackson, touring Oregon in the 1870s, stopped in Portland and visited the office of the Bureau of Immigration of the Northern Pacific Railroad, describing it as "one of the most interesting places in town." The office showcased grains grown in Oregon and Washington, especially on the farmlands east of the Cascades. "Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, [and] Irish," she wrote, jammed into the office. Watching the patient Norwegian land officer answer these immigrants' questions did "more in an hour to make one realize what the present tide of immigration to the New Northwest really is than reading of statistics could do in a year." The land officer was, in fact, the most pleasant surprise for the immigrants. "It was touching," Jackson wrote, "to see the brightened faces of his countrymen, as their broken English was answered by him in the familiar words of their own tongue."<sup>16</sup> This was indeed a warm welcome for immigrants who had traveled thousands of miles. Given the amount of control railroads had over their grants, the ethnic and racial makeup of the Great Plains resulted from no accident, and the composition



FIGURE 6.1. Attracted by climate and promises of cheap land, thousands of Northern European immigrants, like this group of Norwegian immigrants in front of a sod house near Madison, South Dakota, came to America for a better life. Railroads coveted and competed for these groups, believing their experience as farmers and their unquestionably white race made them ideal Americans. *Courtesy, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.*

of this population represented a massive and largely successful effort at social engineering.

Nearly twenty years before the transcontinental lines, the Illinois Central Railroad, a north-south line running through Illinois, received the first government land grant in 1850 and soon launched the first immigration campaign.<sup>17</sup> Building the line and populating the lands along it became the major concerns of the Illinois Central. During construction of the road in the early 1850s, the company employed between 6,000 and 10,000 workers, almost all of whom were foreign immigrants. These laborers, David Neal, the vice president of the Illinois Central, declared, would likely remain in the state after settlement and increase “the population of the country.”<sup>18</sup> Initially, the company employed Irish laborers, but the reputation of the Irish came with them. Reports of drinking and violence made them unpopular with Illinois farmers, forcing the company to prefer married men and especially married German men as laborers, although many Irish remained in the company’s

employ. According to the historian Paul Wallace Gates, the owners of the Illinois Central felt the Germans “were less hardy and less suited to the rugged work required than the Irish, [but] they were steadier and more docile, and in the long run better adapted to the work.” In other words, the company, though worried that the Germans lacked the strength of the Irish, employed them with the hope that they would settle and become ideal citizens. Recruiting German laborers became a top priority of the line, and, as Neal predicted, many remained in the region after its completion in 1856.<sup>19</sup> In addition to their hard-drinking reputation, the Irish, unlike the mostly Protestant Germans, came from a Catholic background; in addition, as many Americans believed at the time, they were of a different race than Englishmen and other Northern European groups.<sup>20</sup> This bias against the Irish as settlers remained long after the completion of the Illinois Central.

The Illinois Central’s executives also sought to find more desirable immigrants, and they pioneered the organized colonization campaign in 1852. Following their success in attracting Germans as first workers and then settlers, the Illinois Central set out to actively recruit Scandinavians. The company hired Oscar Malmberg, a Swedish immigrant and Mexican-American War veteran, as its chief immigration agent. For the next decade, Malmberg flooded Norway and Sweden with pamphlets and personally visited hundreds of villages. Malmberg promised his employer that he could effectively monitor the ports from which these immigrants would depart. He chose the cities carefully, avoiding Southern Europe and Ireland and focusing on “Liverpool, Hamburg, Bremen, Gothenburg, and Christiania.” He included Antwerp and Harve, noting that he spoke French well enough to “attend even to those places if You desire.”<sup>21</sup>

Malmberg considered Norway and Sweden fertile ground for potential colonists, as many experienced farmers there eagerly wished to relocate. In Sweden, Malmberg explained, the rise of tenancy was behind the impulse to leave as small farmers gradually lost control of their lands to larger landholders. In an 1861 letter to an Illinois Central executive, he explained that farmers in Norway stood in a decidedly better position because, unlike Sweden, Norway “enjoys the advantage of having neither a hereditary nor a so called landed aristocracy.” In Sweden, “It is the object of the large gentleman farmer to annex the small farms in his vicinity to his estate. Of the three classes of actual farmers—the peasants—it is the poorest who are gradually being

reduced from being owners to become mere laborers." These peasant farmers "cannot in the long run, after the heavy taxes are paid, support an increasing family." Yet if the peasants could be encouraged to sell and move before being reduced to tenants, they would "have more than sufficient to establish themselves independently on at least a 40 acre lot of the Company's lands." As for the Norwegians, spared the humiliation of tenancy, their mountainous nation lacked much arable land, and, invariably, they too could be convinced to immigrate.<sup>22</sup>

If economic changes at home pushed Scandinavians out of their homelands, then Illinois's climate pulled them toward the prairie state: "The Scandinavian immigrants, a great majority of which choose the state of Illinois for their future homes, being accustomed to a colder climate, seem to prefer the central and northern part of the state; while those from the more temperate Germany, find it easier to acclimatise [*sic*] in any portion of the state."<sup>23</sup> Other factors as well nudged Scandinavians toward the United States. Norway's population, for example, nearly doubled between 1801 and 1865, growing from 900,000 to 1.7 million. This rapid growth overburdened an agricultural system that could not modernize fast enough to feed such a population. Immigration or famine seemed the most likely outcomes of this scenario. Not surprisingly, those who could chose immigration. The first shipload of Norwegians left for the United States in 1825. Seventy-eight thousand claimed the United States as their home in 1865. By 1925 over 800,000 Norwegians had left the old country, almost all of them settling in the United States.<sup>24</sup>

The state of Minnesota also sought to attract Scandinavians. By the 1870s state representatives had been working for almost two decades to convince Scandinavian settlers that the "North Star State" could become a new Scandinavia. Fredricka Bremer, a Swedish writer and feminist, toured the states of Illinois and Wisconsin and the territory of Minnesota in 1850, when the latter had only 4,000 non-Indian residents.<sup>25</sup> When she saw Minnesota she declared, "What a glorious new Scandinavia might not Minnesota become!" Its familiarity would certainly make immigrants feel at home: "The climate, the situation, the character of scenery agrees with our people better than that of any other of the American states."<sup>26</sup> At the time of her pronouncement, few Scandinavians lived in the territory, but that would soon change.

The St. Paul and Pacific Railroad (SP&P), Minnesota's first railroad, acting in concert with the Minnesota Board of Immigration, set out to advance the

cause of Scandinavian settlement in the late 1860s. The board printed advertising pamphlets in Dano-Norwegian, Swedish, German, and Welsh, the latter the only non-Scandinavian language included. "The predominance of Norwegian and other Scandinavian settlers in western Minnesota was thus a deliberate policy enacted by the railroad company and also by the state government," according to the historian Odd S. Lovoll.<sup>27</sup>

Building off the efforts of the SP&P and the state of Minnesota, the Northern Pacific became one of the most aggressive lines in attracting settlers. Congress chartered the NP in 1864, but construction did not begin until 1870 when financial backing came from the banking firm of Jay Cooke. In 1871 the Northern Pacific created a land department charged with bringing settlers to its lands. Workers completed the easternmost portion of the line, through Minnesota, by mid-1871, making the state suitable for large-scale immigration. Projected to pass from Minnesota through the territories of Dakota, Montana, Idaho, and finally Washington, this northernmost transcontinental line crossed a landscape that many critics asserted would be unsuitable for farming. The NP therefore spent a great deal of time convincing would-be settlers that the climate suited them and, in the case of the Scandinavian immigrants they coveted, that was reminiscent of Northern Europe.

The land department of the Northern Pacific extolled the virtues of Minnesota and its "bracing" climate. In the September 1872 edition, *Land and Emigration* (the NP's London-based emigration newspaper) described Minnesota's climate as like a physician who "first cleanses the blood and rouses the liver, then gives the patient what is known as the 'Minnesota appetite,' and prompts him to action in the open air, and he is soon on the highway to robust health."<sup>28</sup> In a circular addressed to soldiers and sailors, the land department attributed to Minnesota a "climate [that] is unusually healthful, with cold, dry winters, total exemption from fever and ague, and a rapid growing season of ample length."<sup>29</sup> It never made clear, however, just how cold those cold, dry winters could be.

The NP used the similarity of the climate of Minnesota and the Dakotas to that of Scandinavia as one selling point to attract people, but the company had long sought to attract Scandinavians, first as laborers and then as settlers, for the simple reason that Americans considered them desirable, hardworking, and white. The NP hired the Scandinavian Emigrant Agency to furnish

the line with laborers, a necessity since no local labor force existed to build the road. In a January 22, 1870, letter, the agency promised to deliver 100 laborers to the construction site within three weeks of receiving the request. The initial hundred “will be of different nationalities, but are railroad laborers.” In the future, however, “when European Emigration begins, say from the first of April, we shall be able to furnish Germans and Scandinavians entirely.” Johnson and Peterson, the heads of the agency, explained that these were not unattached bachelors but hardworking family men: “The Lake Superior and Mississippi RR Co. prefers these people to any others, and one thing is certain, that they are all strong and healthy, accostomed [*sic*] to as hard labor as any people, [and are] industrious and honest.” Most important, many laborers would buy land and become permanent residents. All the railroad companies, they concluded, longed to obtain “this Class of Emigration to settle along the line of their roads.”<sup>30</sup>

With track through Minnesota by 1871, NP headquarters charged the land committee with bringing permanent Northern European settlers. The committee, created in 1871 with Frederick Billings as its head, quickly set about organizing the colonization strategy for the line. It selected John S. Loomis, president of the National Land Company—an organization that worked with the Kansas Pacific Railroad on colonization in Kansas and Colorado—as the head of the new land department. Loomis outlined a plan for how to operate the line’s land company in a February 1871 letter to Billings. Advertising material would be printed in several European languages, and relationships with leading citizens and religious figures in European countries would be cultivated so that they, too, would promote immigration. Offices would be set up in England, Holland, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries to spread the word about immigration.<sup>31</sup>

In 1872 the company hired George Sheppard as the agent in the London office to oversee operations in Europe. Sheppard, an Englishman who had lived a large part of his life in the United States, was a perfect choice to head the European side of the railroad colonization campaign. He had led a colony of English immigrants to Iowa in 1850 and was thus acquainted with the numerous problems and pitfalls that plagued immigrants. George Hibbard, the NP’s superintendent of immigration, marveled at his work. In mid-1872 Hibbard declared, “We are sending forward a good stream of first class settlers and I am happy to report that the tide has commenced flowing from Europe

every day bringing us a few good emigrants from Mr. Sheppard who seems to have got things thoroughly organized on the other side [of the Atlantic].”<sup>32</sup> By the end of the year, everything appeared to be in place for successful colonization. Hibbard wrote to Sheppard thanking him for “the apparently successful efforts which you are making in Europe to promote immigration to our rich and fertile lands. I have spent the last five months on the line of our road in Minnesota and Dakota, and have met with all of the parties sent out by you during the summer and can congratulate you upon the success of your labor in awakening an interest in so good a class of farmers, and others, and think we can confidently expect a good harvest from the seeds sown this season.”<sup>33</sup> In addition to permanent agents, the company also employed prominent immigrants, among them Dr. J. P. Tustin, a Scandinavian minister who traveled throughout Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. In meetings with church officials and in lectures, Tustin worked to convince emigrants to choose the Northern Pacific over the other lines competing for them.<sup>34</sup>

Piecemeal settlement of lands by individual families, however, would be too slow and less profitable. The solution, as the Illinois Central discovered, should be colony settlement. The NP’s land department targeted two groups in its advertising campaigns: Union Army veterans and Northern Europeans. Following the Civil War, Congress amended the Homestead Act to make it easier and more affordable for former soldiers and sailors to purchase land in the West. The 1870 and 1872 amendments to the 1862 Homestead Act allowed veterans to file 160-acre claims on the alternating sections of government land within the limits of railroad land grants—double the acreage allowed to non-veterans inside railroad holdings. In Minnesota the NP owned twenty miles of land on either side of its line, and in the territories farther west it owned fifty miles on either side. The proximity to the railroad made the land (including the alternate sections of government land) inside the NP’s grant worth more than land outside the railroad holdings. The Northern Pacific’s circular for soldiers explained, “Settlers will find it to their advantage to go in groups or colonies. Fifty or one hundred persons combining may secure, on favorable terms, all the land held by the Railroad Company in a township.” These colonies would be instant towns, with all the necessary occupations already in place, and the isolation and hardship of the frontier period would be bypassed. Civilization, shipped en masse at affordable rates, would appear in the form of “good government, good neighbors, morality,

security to property, comfort and prosperity.”<sup>35</sup> For soldiers, these colonies could be composed of the numerous veterans’ organizations that appeared after the war, such as the Society of the Army of the Cumberland and the Grand Army of the Republic, both of which, along with the Northern Pacific Railroad, proved instrumental in getting Congress to approve the amendments to the Homestead Act.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, small farming communities in Europe could be induced to settle in large numbers. The circular listed the names of five colonies that had already settled (or were prepared to settle) on the company’s lands. All of these colonies constituted either former Union soldiers or foreigners, but often little difference existed between them. The heavily Norwegian western part of Minnesota included both Union veterans and immigrants. “So many earlier soldiers were among the first settlers in the Park Region [of western Minnesota] that a list of them looks like a roll call of the [Norwegian] Fifteenth Wisconsin Regiment,” writes the historian Hjalmar Rued Holand.<sup>37</sup>

The NP also eagerly targeted the Mennonites, a group that would eventually settle in several places along the NP’s lines. Although many of the Mennonites would not settle in the Northwest until the 1880s and 1890s, the vanguard began to relocate in the 1870s. Ethnically German, the Mennonites had settled on the southern Russian steppe to avoid military service, a prohibition based on a fundamental tenet of their religion. They had played a tremendously important role in developing Russia, but Czar Alexander II decided to force the pacific religious sect to submit to military service. Beginning in 1883, therefore, all Mennonites would have to participate in the draft. This decision prompted many to search for another nation to call home.

George Hibbard, eager to convince this group to settle along the NP’s lines, brought everything he could to his campaign, including introducing them to the famous financier Jay Cooke. In a May 19, 1873, letter to Cooke, Hibbard outlined the importance of these colonists. He explained that a party of 5 Mennonites had arrived on an inspection tour of the line’s land. As many as 40,000 Mennonite families would follow to avoid mandatory military service in Russia. “I need not say to you,” Hibbard wrote, “that it is of the utmost importance to our Company that we secure the location of this body of men and I hope no stone will be left unturned to accomplish this object.” Although the Canadian government and other rail lines also courted the Mennonites, Hibbard felt the NP could win since “our climate and soil

is completely adapted to their habits and customs." Although of a religious persuasion unfamiliar to most Americans, they were "the best class of settlers we could possibly secure for our rich and fertile lands."<sup>38</sup>

One of the NP's chief competitors for the German Mennonites was the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe (AT&SF). The AT&SF in the early 1870s had been busy surveying its landholdings in an effort to attract colonists. Although less extensive than the NP's massive grant, the Santa Fe line nevertheless controlled 3 million acres in Kansas, an area larger than the state of Connecticut.

By 1870 the AT&SF had begun to actively survey its Kansas landholdings under the direction of its land commissioner, D. L. Lakin. Lakin resigned in 1872 and A. E. Touzalin assumed control. Touzalin set out to recruit immigrants to the lands that were surveyed and ready for settlement. He aggressively courted the Mennonites, assigning a German-speaking agent, Carl Schmidt, to guide the Mennonite's representative, Cornelius Jansen, around the Santa Fe's lands in the summer of 1873. Jansen, a Mennonite and Prussian consul to the Russian government, was instrumental in convincing the Mennonites to leave Russia before they lost their privileges in 1883. Schmidt continued his efforts for most of the next decade, visiting Prussia and Russia and recruiting settlers from both nations. Schmidt's efforts largely succeeded, and by 1883 an estimated 15,000 Mennonites (from Russia as well as Germany, Prussia, and Switzerland) had settled on lands along the Santa Fe's line. By 1905 nearly 60,000 had settled in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Colorado.<sup>39</sup> Like the NP, the AT&SF was eager to attract them because of their extensive experience as dryland farmers on the Russian plains, and indeed they proved to be excellent and innovative farmers, introducing the new Red Turkish wheat that helped transform Kansas into the nation's top wheat producer. Reflecting on their success, the historian Glenn Danford Bradley observed in 1920, "These people have proved their worth as farmers, colonizers, and citizens of the highest type . . . They have contributed much to the wealth and higher morale of Kansas. They are ideal citizens."<sup>40</sup> They indeed embodied such American values as thriftiness, temperance, and hard work and therefore made ideal citizens.

Even smaller lines looked to Northern Europe for desirable settlers. The Denver and Rio Grande Western (D&RGW), a Colorado-based railroad with standard-gauge and narrow-gauge track (the latter designed for navigating through tight mountain corridors), made most of its money servicing mining

towns.<sup>41</sup> Yet it, too, had aspirations of attracting farmers to Colorado's plains and mountain valleys. William Jackson Palmer, an ambitious thirty-five-year-old Civil War veteran and former Kansas Pacific employee, founded the D&RGW. Palmer worked to secure the Kansas Pacific's connection to Denver, but he had a much grander plan to leave and start his own railroad. In January 1870 Palmer launched his scheme for a north-south railroad running along the Front Range of Colorado's Rocky Mountains. He wrote to Mary Lincoln Mellen, his fiancé, of his plans: "How fine it would be to have a little railroad a few hundred miles in length, all under one's own control with one's friends . . . to be able to carry out unimpeded and harmoniously one's views in regard to what ought and ought not to be done."<sup>42</sup> Palmer imagined Colorado's Front Range as his own personal kingdom, a perfect society free of the problems of the East.

Palmer's new mother-in-law, however, worried about her daughter, a wealthy eastern girl, being transported to the rough-and-tumble Colorado frontier. Palmer laughed off her concerns in an 1871 letter to his young bride. "It is more dangerous," he explained, "to live in proximity of a great city such as New York than it would be amongst the Indians on the Plains." Instead of fearing the move to the West, the Mellen family should be glad to leave the East behind. Emigration to the young states and territories would create "a new and better civilization in the far West." The East, conversely, forced people to live in close and unsuitable conditions: "We [the Anglo-Americans] will surrender that briny border [of the Eastern Seaboard] as a sort of extensive Castle Garden to receive and filter the foreign swarms and prepare them by a gradual process for coming to the inner temple of Americanism out in Colorado, where Republican institutions will be maintained in pristine purity."<sup>43</sup> Castle Garden in New York predated the more famous Ellis Island as the major port of entry for thousands of immigrants, and Palmer, like others, hoped to keep the meanest (in both senses of the word) of these immigrants far from Colorado.

Individuals like Palmer, men with grand plans and visions for this supposedly unpeopled frontier, populated the West. Unlike many visionaries, Palmer actually brought his vision to life. The D&RGW, however, did not receive a grant of lands, like most of the other western lines, but with the help of his friends Alexander C. Hunt—for a time Colorado's territorial governor—F. Z. Salomon, and Irving Howbert, Palmer quietly set up a railroad company and

began to purchase the nearly worthless land along the imaginary line. He purchased, among other acquisitions, 9,312 acres for the "Fountain Colony," soon to be called Colorado Springs.<sup>44</sup>

The job of attracting people to this colony fell to Palmer's enthusiastic and articulate friend Dr. William A. Bell. Bell had befriended Palmer when the two worked on the 1867 surveying party that laid out the Kansas Pacific line. He and Palmer became lifelong friends and business partners. Bell, a native Englishman, felt his homeland, with its masses of urban poor, was the perfect place from which to draw settlers.

England had a surplus population and a lack of land. Poverty and despair, he noted, made it susceptible to radical notions like Marxism. In England, he wrote, "we require depletion [of our population]. The abject poverty which now stares us in the face is becoming unendurable. How can our destitute artisans educate their children when they are clothed with rags? Or what do starving parents care for school reform? Equilibrium between the demand and the supply o[f] labour must be attained; and wholesale emigration is the only means by which this can be accomplished."<sup>45</sup> He concluded, "If we, as a nation, persist in keeping down labour by feeding millions of unproductive paupers at home, instead of helping them to find employment elsewhere, we shall richly deserve to be overpowered by that rabble form of democracy which aristocratic England dreads so much."<sup>46</sup> Thus immigration to America could provide a kind of safety valve for England, siphoning off a substantial portion of the population and undercutting the desperation that fed extremist ideologies.

Why not, therefore, relocate the surplus population in a region conducive to its settlement. Bell observed, "Though [the West] is almost without tillage or inhabitants, it is not like Africa, Central Asia, or even South America, in being far removed from the present limits of Anglo-Saxon occupation." Instead, as an outpost of Anglo-Saxon civilization, it "contain[ed] cradles for nations which are destined to spring from our own hardy and prolific stock."<sup>47</sup> Later, Bell returned to the theme of America, the West particularly, as an Anglo-Saxon stronghold: "The United States being a foreign country ought not to affect the question [of English immigration] in the least. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, all or any one of our colonies may soon become independent of the mother country; and perhaps it is better for both that they should before long dissolve partnership. It is, however, our desire, and also greatly to

our advantage, to remain on the best terms with our American neighbours." Only the Irish of all the peoples in the United States hated England, and if they came to form the dominant population in America, then war would soon follow. For that reason, Bell claimed, "the ascendancy of the Saxon and Teutonic elements in the States" must be cultivated.<sup>48</sup>

Dr. Bell, having returned to England after the Kansas Pacific survey, set out to raise interest in Palmer's railroad scheme. He massaged investment money from his father's wealthy friends but also tirelessly promoted immigration to D&RGW lands. Bell expected his colony to be composed of British workers and artisans who would desire to relocate to a village in the temperate and healthful climate along Colorado's Front Range.<sup>49</sup> Bell's vision, though never fully implemented, became the town of Colorado Springs. The company's pamphlets, perhaps with help from Bell, convinced so many English immigrants to settle there that promoters soon dubbed the town "Little London."<sup>50</sup> The arrival of the railroad in the colony town (also owned by Palmer and his investors) in the fall of 1871 marked the completion of the railroad's first sixty miles. From nothing, Colorado Springs had grown to 800 people by the spring of 1872, and by year's end Palmer claimed a population of 1,500.<sup>51</sup>

The colonization enterprise chiefly concerned itself with attracting Northern European farmers. Alexander C. Hunt wrote to Palmer in 1872 complaining that while Colorado Springs was indeed growing, its settlers were "suited only as denizens of towns, the smallest sprinkling of whom being hardy husbandmen or Tillers of the soil, which, are the ones most needed—Every one cannot be a Shopkeeper; there must be some to buy, indeed, there should be One Hundred buyers to every seller." With tens of thousands of acres at their disposal, they needed to "secure emigration of a character to make these lands remunerative, and, at the same time, stimulate business upon the line of our road." Hunt proposed a campaign to target Scottish, Swiss, French, German, and Scandinavian communities: "Instruct [the company's agents] to go into rural districts, alone; (keeping clear of towns) hold public meetings; explain fully and fairly the advantages our country offers; recruit none, save those, able to pay their own passages, and have something left on arriving here." These settlers could then be sold, on credit if necessary, 40-acre tracts that would support their families and generate enough of a surplus to provide produce that would travel over the company's lines, and in time the area might be able to export wheat and meat all the way to the "Extreme East."<sup>52</sup>

Hunt noted that the Mormons had been experiencing tremendous success targeting these groups of people: "This plan I believe to be exactly the one adopted by the Mormons." Discounting the possibility that these immigrants were true believers, he noted, "The question of the Mormon Religion has little or nothing to do with the Yearly influx of the Laboring classes into the Salt Lake basin. It is the Material need, of this class of people, that is appealed to, rather than their Spiritual wants or prejudices. Half fare tickets, Cheap lands on arrival, Healthy Salubrious climate, Rich soil, and [a] number of Old friends to settle together, are the chief inducements, that assume success to the Mormon Elders who go abroad to recruit for the Church of the Latter-day Saints." With an active recruiting campaign, Hunt asserted, "many of these same people might choose to locate upon leased lands along the Fountain, and the Arkansas valles, while the Merchants that might come along, would find ready employment in the Towns and Cities."<sup>53</sup>

Although some farmers would settle, especially in the Arkansas River valley, the residents near Colorado Springs remained "denizens of towns." Dr. Bell seemed particularly eager to recruit among them. Bell, as the line's public relations officer, exploited the Little London idea, describing the area in florid prose in the pages of English newspapers, but the arrival of Charles Kingsley, the canon of Westminster Abbey, in 1874 provided a wealth of publicity. Kingsley had fallen ill while visiting San Francisco, and doctors recommended he convalesce in the drier air of Colorado Springs. Bell used the canon's month-long stay to showcase to Englishmen Colorado Springs's cultural and climatic suitability for all of the nation's social classes. Young Englishmen like himself could acquire large estates, complete with herds of cattle and sheep, while tenant farmers and artisans could also establish themselves in the colony. Ironically, Kingsley hated the town and wanted to move on as soon as his health improved. Bell left that fact out of the advertisements.<sup>54</sup>

Dr. Bell, in an 1874 pamphlet that was characteristic of his advertising strategy, outlined the numerous advantages of Colorado Springs for English immigrants. Members of all of England's social classes would find opportunity and betterment on the Front Range. The small farmer, struggling in a nation of insufficient land, could be transplanted to Colorado and "would come up again in prosperity without a shadow of a doubt, unless something inherent in the individual himself prevented him from doing so." Farmers would benefit from Colorado's growing population and relative isolation. Distances

from settled farming areas in the East were so great that Colorado offered the opportunity to create a home market that precluded competition from other regions. Farmers could therefore expect to turn a tidy profit feeding miners and urban dwellers. Tradesmen and middle-class businessmen would similarly find ample opportunity in Colorado, and even England's upper class, facing tremendous changes and feeling the social problems caused by a shortage of land, could find a home in Colorado. Bell wrote, "I refer to the sons of men of more or less wealth, who, being obliged to make a living for themselves in these days of large expenditures and many wants, have not, unfortunately for themselves, had the opportunity of acquiring business habits, or any knowledge capable of being turned to practical account." These wealthy men made ideal settlers: "A selected few of such men could, I am convinced, make their way as colonists. With more capital than the average of colonists at his command, with intelligence and common sense, such a man could easily find in the young community many channels for turning his abilities and money to very profitable account, and, becoming wiser by experience, could in a few years gather up a competency." He finished by reminding his readers that Colorado abounded "in natural resources, [and was being settled] by an energetic and hard-working community of Anglo-Saxons."<sup>55</sup>

Even the Englishman Edward Money, whose criticism of western immigration and railroad agents was caustic, found much to appreciate in Colorado Springs and the surrounding area. Money, in fact, purchased a ranch near the town, hoping to settle there with his sons and have land enough for all of them (if Americans viewed the West in Jeffersonian yeoman farmer terms, Englishmen seemed prone to imagine themselves as feudal barons—and, indeed, in many ways men like Money and Bell imagined the West as a place out of time, an anti-modern refuge for traditional English values). He soon returned to England, however, because pioneer life did not suit him, lamenting, "The want of intellectual pursuits, the absence of society, the lack of a woman's influence, and the many charms connected therewith, wearied me sadly. In two words I found I was too old for the life, and, that I could not, at my age, adapt myself to such great and violent changes."<sup>56</sup>

Money did think Colorado Springs had potential, offering English immigrants an opportunity at a better life. He quoted extensively in his *The Truth about America* from the English authors of *Colorado Springs and Manitou*, a book that outlined the many advantages the area's health resorts offered to

English health seekers and settlers. Mrs. Simeon Dunbar, one of the book's authors, observed, "The society is the very best; people of culture and refinement, and many possessing much wealth, have been attracted here by the climate and surroundings, and these have drawn others of like taste and habits, till [*sic*] on this little mesa where the mountains and the plains meet, there was grown up in a few short years a city of nearly six thousand people 'the cream of eastern society.'" She explained that while many of these wealthy were invalids, many healthy men also settled in the area. They included "men of means from the East owning large herds of cattle and sheep that roam over the great western plains from Montana to Mexico," and "others interested in the mineral wealth of the Rocky Mountains . . . have also settled here."

Mrs. Dunbar especially approved of Colorado Springs's population: "Unlike many of the towns and cities of the West, Colorado Springs is not cosmopolitan; it has scarcely any French, German, or Irish element[s]. The people are from the older states of the Union, and from Canada, England, and Scotland; hence an entirely English-speaking community. The people as a whole are probably better educated and possess more wealth than those of an eastern town of the same size. It is more New-England-like in the general makeup of its social, religious, and educational characteristics than any town west of the Mississippi." The community was composed of Anglos, and even "the poorer people are a respectable class who have received some social and educational advantages; none but enterprising or well-to-do people would ever cross the plains to establish a new home in the West."<sup>57</sup> The homes of Colorado Springs, another writer observed, were the finest in the state because "many cultured people have come hither for their health and . . . the colony organization has done much to improve and adorn the town."<sup>58</sup>

Here then emanated familiar tropes: a town with potential, a small but desirable population, far enough from larger cities with their inferior populations, and all waiting for vigorous Anglo-Saxon settlers. Colorado Springs may have boasted a wealthy and elite population, but in all other respects it sounded like any of the scores of other small towns heavily promoted by railroads, and implicit in this promotion were notions of racial and ethnic desirability.

At the same time lines like the Northern Pacific, AT&SF, and D&RGW competed to lure European settlers onto their lands, tens of thousands of African Americans set out for the West, but no lines sent agents into southern states to convince them to do so. Despite this fact, tens of thousands of African

Americans headed to Kansas in the 1870s, creating such towns as Nicodemus, but they received a chilly reception. Kansas governor John Pierce St. John worried, "Indications are that we will be over run with them [African Americans]."<sup>59</sup>

Cain Sartain, an African American from Louisiana, wrote to the governor in 1879 about the prospect of emigration. He asked if "life and property is [*sic*] secure" and if "the right of franchise is respected." Given the imposition of Jim Crow laws and southern "Redemption," these were not minor concerns. Sartain explained, "There is [*sic*] a great number of my race of people in my state [who] are determined to leave it . . . They are a poor people but a hard working class of people, and anything like a half a showing and they will prosper."<sup>60</sup> Governor St. John showed some sympathy for the plight of the Exodusters, and emigrants inundated his office with letters discussing the deplorable conditions they endured. He therefore tried hard to dissuade these emigrants, warning that Kansas did not live up to the promoters' rhetoric as a promised land. In a reply to Roseline Cunningham's letter, the governor warned that Kansas did not have an office of emigration and could not provide any aid to would-be emigrants: "I am informed that parties have represented to the colored peoples in your state that by coming to Kansas they would receive 40 acres of land [and] a mule." Indeed, since the end of the Civil War, this hope had taken on mythic proportions. "All such representations," he continued, "are without any foundations whatsoever in fact, and are intended to deceive the colored people." He explained that all settlers had the right to purchase lands in the state, which ranged from \$2.25 to \$10.00 per acre. These lands, he warned, remained unimproved and would require a team of horses and sufficient capital to improve them. Certainly, many black emigrants had managed to establish themselves in Kansas, but "I would advise, however, the colored people not to come to any of the Northern States entirely destitute." Should Cunningham and others decide to emigrate to Kansas, the governor promised them fair treatment and freedom, but unless they could locate a desirable tract of land and pay their own way to get started, it would be better for them not to come.<sup>61</sup>

The Kansas Pacific even sent potential black emigrants a form letter explaining that all the good farmland had been settled, that laborers could not find work, that the weather tended to be capricious, and that would-be emigrants needed at least \$500 to get started. The writer Ian Frazier has wryly observed, "It was probably the only time in history that a railroad ever told

the truth of the situation to a prospective settler.”<sup>62</sup> Such discouraging pronouncements attempted to dissuade potential black settlers, and, indeed, in only one instance did a railroad actively recruit African Americans.

In Mississippi a new scheme for African American settlers owed its existence to the Louisville, New Orleans and Texas Railroad (LNO&T), owned by Collis P. Huntington (of Central Pacific fame) and R. T. Wilson. George McGinnis, the land commissioner for the LNO&T, hoped to attract white settlers to the company's lands, but whites proved reluctant to settle the swampy, malaria-prone lands in the Mississippi Delta. Believing that blacks could endure the heat and malaria and eager to find someone willing to settle the lands, McGinnis approached Isaiah T. Montgomery. Montgomery, a former slave on Joseph Davis's (brother of Jefferson Davis) plantation, had become a businessman and leader of the black community in Vicksburg. He agreed to lead the colony, and in 1886 Montgomery and the rest of the colony members carved out the town of Mound Bayou. The town grew to 400 residents and 2,500 farmers in the surrounding countryside by 1904, but by 1915, following the closing of the bank and sawmill, Mound Bayou entered a period of slow decline.

Yet its very existence provided a rare case of a railroad actively promoting its land to black farmers.<sup>63</sup> It was telling, perhaps, that this happened in the Mississippi Delta, where African Americans had long been a presence; where notions of climate and race made the land appear suited only for blacks, supposedly able to endure malarial climates; and where whites did not try to compete with them for the land. In the West, by contrast, railroads did not actively recruit African Americans as settlers. Explaining why western railroads refrained from advertising to southern blacks is difficult because railroad land companies do not seem to have even entertained the notion—with the exception of the Kansas Pacific's letter clearly intended to dissuade potential black settlers. Several explanations, however, are probable. First, western railroads wanted settlers with experience in similar climates. The Mennonites, who had settled the Russian steppe, made ideal farmers for the Great Plains, and several rail lines courted them. Second, railroads desired settlers who could, for the most part, pay their own way and who had enough capital to begin the process of farm building. Third, the black towns in Kansas and elsewhere encountered a chilly reception from local whites. In Oklahoma, for example, whites expressed open hostility, worried about plans to convert

the state into a black stronghold.<sup>64</sup> Finally, railroads wanted “desirable” emigrants, and, whether consciously or not, they believed settlers should be white. Whatever the causes, the transcontinental lines—desperate for settlers to populate their extensive land grants—ignored a large, nearby, and willing group of immigrants in favor of those on the other side of the Atlantic.

The last third of the nineteenth century saw a tremendous influx of new immigrants into the United States. Millions of people left their homes in Europe and Asia and set out for America. Asians faced tremendous discrimination and found entrance into America barred through acts like the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Desirable immigrants would be European. Yet most Americans further divided European immigrants into desirable and less desirable groups. Without exception, western promoters rated Northern Europeans as the most desirable. The English, Scots, Welsh, Norwegians, Germans, Swedes, and Russo-German Mennonites were all groups Americans felt could enter the country and be productive citizens.

Railroads, by actively recruiting these groups, indelibly shaped the ethnic landscape of the West. Railroads stressed most of all that they desired experienced farmers for their lines, but in practice they limited their search for experienced farmers to Northern Europeans, ignoring Southern Europeans, Asians, and African Americans—all of whom likewise faced dislocation from their homelands. Although the railroads do not appear to have overtly discriminated against these groups, by sending agents to England, Scandinavia, Prussia (and Germany after unification), and the Russian steppe, they nevertheless created territories dominated by supposedly desirable ethnic groups. The railroads wanted to tie the nation together and gain a tidy profit, but by attracting Northern Europeans they also created, especially on the central and northern plains, societies that were rural, Protestant, and white.

The *Great West*, a promotional pamphlet of the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad (CRI&P), described the land along its lines as “a land of Goshen, literally flowing with milk and honey.” The CRI&P had created a land of peace and harmony, populated by people from

every corner of the habitable globe . . . The exiled sons of Erin here cultivate their own lands in peace, the economic Highlander no longer grieves for the heather clad barrenness of his Scottish moors . . . the wearied workers from English mines and looms, the laborer from his ill rewarded toil, gladly nestles

with his family upon these teeming lands and becomes independent; the hardy Norsemen, the Swede, the Dane, the Bohemian, the ever industrious German, the toiling sons of far off lands, all gather together, in undivided harmony, bound in a golden link of brotherhood by mutual usefulness and an equal prosperity.<sup>65</sup>

As the origins of these ideal settlers indicated, however, this brotherhood proved anything but colorblind.

## NOTES

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