The Urban West at the End of the Frontier
Larsen, Lawrence H.

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In the American imagination, the U.S. West remains a rural region that celebrates rugged individualism. When I ask my students to share their perceptions of the West, most usually describe uninhabited wide-open spaces, lawlessness, roaming buffalo, and a pioneering spirit. Despite generations of scholars endeavoring to dismantle romanticized westward expansion histories and narratives fueled by folklore, art, and cultural productions, these interpretations persist in the twenty-first century. Yet the reality of the American West is nothing like these characterizations. The vast area west of the ninety-fifth meridian is one of the most urbanized, most populous, and fastest growing in the nation. According to U.S. Census Bureau data from 2019, the top four fastest growing cities—Phoenix, Arizona; San Antonio, Texas; Fort Worth, Texas; and Seattle, Washington—are located in the West. In addition, six out of the top ten most populous cities—Los Angeles, California; Houston, Texas; Phoenix, Arizona; San Diego, California; Dallas, Texas; and San Jose, California—are also in the West. While this can be attributed to continued postwar growth, in reality, the area’s urban footprint has long
existed. For decades historians have studied these trends by focusing on the American West’s urban experience, developing a robust body of literature on the subject. What scholars of the Urban West have proven time and time again is that cities were important anchors in the settlement and development of the region.

First published in 1978, Lawrence H. Larsen’s *The Urban West at the End of the Frontier* joined emerging scholarship exploring the urban experiences and processes in the American West. In line with historians of the time, Larsen centered cities as fundamentally accounting for the region’s tremendous growth in the latter half of the nineteenth century. *The Urban West at the End of the Frontier* examined twenty-four cities west of the ninety-fifth meridian (west of Kansas City) roughly between 1860 and 1890. Larsen assessed development by surveying urban planning, architecture, sewage, churches, schools, transportation, and police and fire protection. This method allowed the author to provide a holistic look at the urbanization process throughout the vast region of the West while making comparisons to eastern cities of similar sizes. Larsen concluded that urban development in the American West was not necessarily unique; instead, it embodied the “establishment of a society that mirrored and made the same mistakes as those made earlier in the rest of the country.”

Larsen’s methodology and approaches to historical research brought refreshing and provocative models for future studies. *The Urban West at the End of the Frontier* became one of the first scholarly works to “portray a sweep of the western urban experience.” Rather than focusing on a singular city or a region as in previous case studies, Larsen employed a large comparative framework to analyze the growth of frontier cities—a method later replicated by other historians of the Urban West. At the time of the book’s publication in 1978, the region remained understudied, a major obstacle when attempting to synthesize the history of twenty-four cities. Larsen creatively incorporated a variety of primary sources as well as secondary literature such as local histories and emerging scholarship in the field. But what made the study truly novel was his innovative use
of statistical data. Larsen owed his ability to make connections and comparisons between cities in the American West to the 1880 U.S. Census. *The Urban West at the End of the Frontier* primarily relies on the *Report of the Social Statistics of Cities*, a large data set published in 1887. This report compiled information from the 1880 Census regarding cities with a population over 10,000 people in addition to a few secondary cities with regional importance. According to Larsen, “the 222 cities included constituted the backbone of American urban society.” The demographic data included categories such as economics, fire and police protection, industries, cultural institutions, sanitation authorities, schools, transportation, water sources, recreational spaces, and climate, among many others. Without these sources, Larsen’s study would have been unable to vividly depict urban histories and experiences across the West. The *Report of the Social Statistics of Cities* became an impetus for Larsen’s future scholarly work.

Although numerous scholarly studies shed light on particular differences in city-building in the American West, Larsen found different conclusions. To be fair, he agreed that cities were key to our understandings of the West. Larsen, however, did not see a unique urbanization process in the region; instead, city-building in the American West followed a “carbon copy” model from eastern cities. He claimed that city planners ignored incorporating Indigenous and Spanish architectural traditions, that the ethnic and racial composition of the West resembled that of eastern cities, and that climate and the environment posed no unique or unfamiliar urban development challenges.

Scholarship of the Urban West proved Larsen’s conclusions somewhat inaccurate as the book’s greatest resource—the 1880 Census—also became its pitfall. Larsen’s focus on what he called “hard facts and statistics” obscured the region’s unique demographics and urban growth complexities. The American West has long been a multicultural space where the experiences of Indigenous people, ethnic Mexicans, Asians, Blacks, and Whites, among others, converged. As such, the cultural and racial dynamics of the region greatly differed
from the East Coast. Diminishing the voices of these underrepresented groups erased the well-established urban networks prior to the American colonization period as well as the reasons why White planners replaced existing architectural features and functions. Additionally, solely focusing on Census data regarding sewage, parks, and other infrastructure undermined the unique environmental challenges people faced in establishing western cities. In 1847, Mormons settled at the base of the Wasatch Mountains in present day Salt Lake City, Utah, where they designed an intricate irrigation system to sustain the community. Phoenix, Arizona, a city not featured in Larsen’s study due to its small population size in the 1880s, serves as another example. When settlers arrived in 1867, they expanded the existing Hohokam irrigation system, enabling the growth of a regional metropolis. Settlers in the American West confronted arid conditions, water scarcity, mountainous regions, and high elevations, among many other challenges. Although city-building might have followed similar patterns from eastern cities, the unique conditions of the West required innovative solutions to enable rapid urbanization of the West at the turn of the twentieth century.

Larsen’s work remains valuable as it provides a window into the evolution of American West historiography in the second half of the twentieth century. For decades, historians had studied the West through a rural lens—an idea perpetuated by Fredrick Jackson Turner’s 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Turner claimed that as settlers moved westward, they tamed the region and brought civilization along with them. The settlement of the West followed a linear development that ended with the rise of cities and industrialization. Turner concluded that 1890 marked the end of the frontier, as the U.S. Census proclaimed no vast land remained uninhabited. While scholars contested Turner’s thesis for much of the twentieth century, it dominated studies of the American West. In 1959, Richard Wade’s The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790–1830, challenged Turner’s view and argued that “towns were spearheads of the frontier. Planted far in advance of the line of settlement, they held the West for the approaching population.”
The publication of *The Urban Frontier* ushered in a new generation of historians, like Larsen, who reframed the study of the region by centering cities in the development of the American West. The *Urban West at the End of the Frontier* also rebutted Turner’s thesis. Larsen’s discussion of William Gilpin, a town promoter and “a prophet” of the Urban West, countered the frontier thesis’s notion of the Rural West. Larsen’s use of the 1880 Census also became a strategic tool to challenge Turner. The *Report of the Social Statistics of Cities* undeniably demonstrated that the Urban West existed prior to the “end of the frontier” in 1890. Although Larsen’s work came in at the tail end of this scholarly wave, he too proved that Turner’s frontier thesis did not represent the realities of the region. Despite moving away from Turner, some historians of this generation remained tied to the concept of the frontier as a process that was too dependent on looking East to understand its development.

By the 1980s, while studies of the Urban West had won the battle, the field of western history had entered a crisis. As Patricia Nelson Limerick explained, “to many American historians, the Turner thesis was Western history. If something had gone wrong with the thesis, something had gone wrong with Western history.” As historians abandoned Turner, American history abandoned the West. Limerick concluded: “Exploding the model made mainstream historians declare that the field was dead.” The newer generation of scholars, led by Limerick, William Cronon, Richard White, and Donald Worster, viewed the term “frontier” as Eurocentric and limiting to the advancement of the field. Unlike other subfields in history, the study of the American West had long resisted the inclusion of social history. This new wave of scholars reinvigorated the field by reframing the West as a place—a complicated space of conflict, conquest, violence, diverse human experiences, and environmental transformation. New western historians and their scholarly works transformed the field and opened the door for new studies of the American West.

Works like Larsen’s *The Urban West at the End of the Frontier* served as a prelude to the rise of New Western History and inspired numerous studies of cities across the region. Generations later,
scholars like myself continue to examine the American West’s urban experiences through different vantage points, lenses, and intersections across time and space. Larsen’s scholarship laid an important foundation for both urban and western historians. At the end of the day, scholars of the Urban West—both historically and presently—have had one common goal: to emphasize the centrality of cities in the making of the American West.

Throughout his career, Larsen’s scholarship ventured into a plethora of topics, but his interests in the histories of cities, urbanization, and the West remained. *The Urban West at the End of the Frontier* became a model for his later books analyzing urban growth across the United States during the Gilded Age. Larsen argued that the decade of the 1880s was “of crucial importance in shaping the American urban network and forging a national economy.” His interest in the decade and the large data set from the *Report of the Social Statistics of Cities* gave Larsen an opportunity to explore city-building on a national scale. In 1985, he published *The Rise of the Urban South*. In the book’s prologue, Larsen expressed his hope to complete four volumes analyzing “the sectional aspects of urban growth” in this period, promising “monographs on the Midwest and Northeast to come.” Thirty years later his final book, *Prospects of Greatness: The Rise of Midwestern Cities during the Gilded Age*, became the third volume on his ongoing analysis of city-building in the United States. While the latter volumes followed his original approaches, methodology, and analyzed the same themes in city-building, his evolution as an urban historian is noticeable.

Lawrence Larsen passed away in 2017, leaving behind a prolific career. He was a professor of history at the University of Missouri–Kansas City (UMKC) for thirty-six years, where he taught courses on the American West, archival methods, and local and urban history. Larsen was the author or coauthor of seventeen books on various subjects, including a biography on notorious Kansas City political boss Tom Pendergast, a study of Western Missouri’s Federal District Court, and a pictorial history on the establishment of the University of Kansas Medical Center. After his retirement from UMKC
in 2000, he completed other works, including the final volume for *A History of Missouri*. Larsen often coauthored books with his wife Barbara J. Cottrell, an archivist at the National Archives with the Records Administration–Central Plains Region in Kansas City. Together, the two published an urban biography on Omaha, Nebraska, a book on the American Fur Company’s 1859 Missouri River Expedition, and their volume on Midwestern cities, which was published a month after Larsen’s death.

I arrived at UMKC in fall 2016, long after Larsen retired. Although we never met and our approaches to researching and writing history greatly differ, our scholarly interests and professional careers connect in many ways. Every year I teach “Rise of the City in the United States,” a course developed and taught by Larsen during his tenure. His long-standing archival internship supervision left a blueprint for the History Department’s Public History emphasis, a program I now direct. Larsen unknowingly passed the baton to me. I carry his legacy forward not only through my own scholarly work on the Urban West but also by dispelling the myths of the region and in training the next generation of historians.

Lawrence Larsen never presented his work as the definitive studies of urbanization across the United States. In the three volumes, he admittedly hoped his books further encouraged new scholarship in the field. Although *The Urban West at the End of the Frontier* has been out of print, this new digitized version now joins Larsen’s other volumes—already available in an electronic book format—in an effort to illustrate a comprehensive view of American urbanization during the Gilded Age. I too hope that digital accessibility to these works produces new scholarly works on a topic and decade Larsen believed to be critical to U.S. history.

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NOTES TO FOREWORD

1. Historians have long debated about the boundaries of the American West. For the purpose of this essay, I employ Lawrence Larsen’s boundaries: the ninety-fifth meridian meaning anything west of Kansas City.


4. Larsen, Urban West, xii.


12. Larsen, Urban Frontier, 2.


16. I would like to thank my colleague James S. Falls, professor emeritus of history, for helping me gather details of Larsen’s career at UMKC.

17. Lawrence H. Larsen and Nancy J. Hulston, Pendergast! (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997); Lawrence H. Larsen, Federal Justice in Western Missouri: The Judges, the Cases, the Times (Columbia:


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