



## The Western History Association

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Author(s): Carlos A. Schwantes

Source: *The Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Jan., 1987), pp. 39-55

Published by: [Western Historical Quarterly, Utah State University](#) on behalf of [The Western History Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/968927>

Accessed: 28/04/2013 00:13

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# *The Concept of the Wagers' Frontier: A Framework for Future Research*

CARLOS A. SCHWANTES

Historians have long accorded unskilled and semiskilled laborers a significant role in the early industrial development of the American West. Loggers, miners, migratory harvest hands and construction workers, and even wage-earning cowboys appear in numerous books and articles on such traditional themes as the forest, mining, and ranching frontiers. They figure prominently in histories of radical labor and industrial violence in Rocky Mountain mining camps, California's "factories in the field," and North Pacific timber towns.<sup>1</sup> But few historians have systematically studied this class of western labor as a distinct group, explored the range of experiences that cut across occupational and national boundaries, or asked whether such workers possessed attitudes and outlooks significantly different from their counterparts in the East or

Carlos A. Schwantes is associate professor of history, University of Idaho, Moscow.

The concept of the wagers' frontier had its genesis in Walter Nugent's NEH-sponsored summer seminar on the American frontier, held in Bloomington, IN, in 1984.

<sup>1</sup>Examples of such books include Ronald C. Brown, *Hard-Rock Miners: The Intermountain West, 1860-1920* (College Station, TX, 1979); James W. Byrkit, *Forging the Copper Colar: Arizona's Labor-Management War of 1901-1921* (Tucson, 1982); Joseph R. Conlin, *Big Bill Haywood and the Radical Union Movement* (Syracuse, NY, 1969); Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941* (Berkeley, 1981); James H. Ducker, *Men of the Steel Rails: Workers on the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, 1869-1900* (Lincoln, 1983); James C. Foster, ed., *American Labor in the Southwest: The First One Hundred Years* (Tucson, 1982); Vernon H. Jensen, *Heritage of Conflict: Labor Relations in the Nonferrous Metals Industry up to 1930* (Ithaca, NY, 1950); James R. Kluger, *The Clifton-Morenci Strike: Labor Difficulty in Arizona, 1915-1916* (Tucson, 1970); Jerry Lembcke and William M. Tattam, *One Union in Wood: A Political History of the International Woodworkers of America* (New York, 1984); Richard E. Lingenfelter, *The Hardrock Miners: A History of the Mining Labor Movement in the American West, 1863-1893* (Berkeley, 1974); George S. McGovern and Leonard F. Guttridge, *The Great Coalfield War* (Boston, 1972); Zeese Papanikolas, *Buried Unsong: Louis Tikas and the Ludlow Massacre* (Salt Lake City, 1982); Alexander P. Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1971); Carlos A. Schwantes, *Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism, and Reform in Washington and British Columbia, 1885-1917* (Seattle, 1979); Robert W. Smith, *The Coeur d'Alene Mining War of 1892: A Case Study of an Industrial Dispute* (Corvallis, OR, 1961); George G. Suggs, Jr., *Colorado's War on Militant Unionism: James H. Peabody and the Western Federation of Miners* (Detroit, 1972); and Mark Wyman *Hard Rock Epic: Western Miners and the Industrial Revolution, 1860-1910* (Berkeley, 1979). For a more complete bibliography of Northwest regional labor studies see Carlos A. Schwantes, "The History of Pacific Northwest Labor History," *Idaho Yesterdays*, 28 (Winter 1985), 23-35.

Europe.<sup>2</sup> How, for example, did a pioneering generation of western laborers reconcile the dependency inherent in wage earning with the individual opportunity popularly equated with frontier life? Did many even perceive this dichotomy, and if so, was it in any way related to the outbursts of violence that punctuated labor relations in the West? Did people migrating west expect to become or remain wageworkers, or was it a condition thrust upon them by default when their crops or businesses failed? Such questions are difficult to answer, given the historian's tendency to study western labor by individual industries or to regard it as essentially no different from that in other regions.<sup>3</sup>

My purpose is not to answer these specific questions in the pages that follow (indeed, any one of them warrants a separate essay), but rather to suggest a framework for exploring these and similar questions. That framework is the concept of a North American wageworkers' frontier, an alternative to the prevailing tendency to fragment historical treatment of western labor. Certainly there are legitimate reasons for studying workers by individual industries or from a national perspective, but in the process any special regional features of western labor may be minimized or ignored.<sup>4</sup>

The rapid expansion of wagework in the United States and Canada and the most intensive phase of the exploitation and settlement of the western third of the continent were roughly contemporaneous processes that occurred during a seventy-year interval bracketed by the California gold rush and World War I. Yet, at first glance, the terms *frontier* and *wagework* seem to describe mutually exclusive conditions, and that is, perhaps, a primary reason why historians have ignored the concept of a distinct wageworkers' frontier. Apparently they regard urbanization, large-scale industrial

<sup>2</sup> Notable exceptions include Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago, 1969), 19-35; David Jay Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier, 1897-1919," *Canadian Historical Review*, 58 (June 1977), 154-75; Carter Goodrich and Sol Davison, "The Wage-Earner in the Westward Movement, I," *Political Science Quarterly*, 50 (June 1935), 161-85; and "The Wage-Earner in the Westward Movement, II," *Political Science Quarterly*, 51 (March 1936), 61-116. The purpose of the latter two essays is to disprove the notion that a substantial number of Eastern wageworkers moved to Western lands. The authors say little about the origin of Western wage earners and provide only skimpy data about the wage earning Easterners who moved west to industrial jobs.

<sup>3</sup> Exemplifying the latter trend is Philip S. Foner's Marxist-oriented multivolume set, *A History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, 6 vols. (New York, 1947-1982).

<sup>4</sup> The prevailing historical tendency is continued in Michael P. Malone's informative 1983 anthology in which treatment of labor is scattered through several of its seventeen essays: *Historians and the American West* (Lincoln, 1983). The peculiarities of the wageworkers' frontier in Canada warrant a separate study. Basic sources for such a study are cited in bibliographies contained in A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto, 1977); Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980* (Toronto, 1983); David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men* (Toronto, 1978); Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto, 1976); and Schwantes, *Radical Heritage*.

development, and the concomitant formation of a pool of wage labor as prima facie evidence that an area's frontier phase had passed.<sup>5</sup>

The frontier or classic West was simply no place for wageworkers. The classic West, in the words of Richard Maxwell Brown, was the "pioneer West or the old West, with its distinctive mythology focusing on mountain men, cowboys, Indians, prospectors, gunfighters, and outlaws." Presumably, any sizable community of wageworkers belonged to what Brown called the counterclassic West of urbanization, industrialization, and technological advancement. In actuality, however, the two Wests overlapped frequently, and one such conjunction was the wageworkers' frontier. When, for example, the gunslinger mentality of the classic West was employed in the complex new business of labor relations, industrial violence was often the result.<sup>6</sup>

The chronological and geographical boundaries of the wageworkers' frontier were no more precise than those of other, more familiar frontiers; yet, like them, the wageworkers' frontier possessed a unity and a coherence derived from its distinguishing characteristics. It was foremost a predominantly male community of manual labor dependent upon others for wages in the extractive industries of the sparsely settled Rocky Mountain and Pacific regions of the United States and Canada. During its heyday in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it also represented a zone of extremely rapid transition from wilderness to industrial, post-frontier society. For all its image of youthful vitality, the wageworkers' frontier was a fragile entity forever at the mercy of the outside world's pricing of its basic commodities—coal and nonferrous metals, timber, fish, wheat, fruit, and other agricultural produce. All were shipped out of the West because the Rocky Mountain and Pacific regions contained too few people—a mere 5 percent of the United States total in 1900—to constitute a viable home market. Settlements on the wageworkers' frontier tended to resemble factory towns in Pennsylvania or Massachusetts, except that they were frontier-urban and, more important, located in the West. This meant that residents of these urban-industrial islands lived in close proximity both in time and place to attitudes and ways of life rooted in the classic American West of symbol and myth.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps responsible for establishing this pattern is Frederick Jackson Turner. Significantly, in his best-known essays discontented urban wageworkers moved to the frontier to become agrarians, and not to remain proletarians locked into an oppressive and discontent-breeding state of economic dependency similar to that which they hoped they had left behind. Even when Turner spoke of the mining frontier, the most industrially oriented of his categories, he was in most instances alluding to entrepreneurial activity: *The Frontier in American History* (1920; reprint, Huntington, NY, 1976).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Maxwell Brown, "The New Regionalism in America, 1970-1981," in William G. Robbins, Robert J. Frank, and Richard E. Ross, eds., *Regionalism in the Pacific Northwest* (Corvallis, OR, 1983), 71-75; and Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 3.

Like all frontiers, in other words, the wageworker's frontier was not merely a particular physical place or even a process of change. It was both of these combined with the psychological environment created by the awareness of living and working in a region that brought to mind special images and associations. Foremost among these was the romantic notion that the West was synonymous with great personal opportunity. This sense of western advantage found clear expression in the assertion that workers in the West must organize to prevent themselves from being reduced to the downtrodden status of eastern labor. It must be noted that certain specific attributes of the wageworkers' frontier were common to other regions of the United States, or the country as a whole. "Golden America" was an image fixed in the mind of immigrants regardless of whether they came to the East or West coasts. But distinguishing the wageworkers' frontier was the way in which national beliefs and social patterns were altered to create historical and statistical anomalies.<sup>7</sup>

Before we examine the special psychological and social attributes of the wageworkers' frontier, let us attempt to visualize its physical dimensions at its height around 1890. Imagine a matrix superimposed on a map of North America west of the 100th meridian: here a series of dots representing mining and timber camps and smelter and sawmill towns were linked together by railway lines—the "metropolitan corridors" that crisscrossed the open spaces inbetween. Less easily depicted in this matrix are the temporary communities of migratory muscle, represented by men who harvested grain and produce or graded new railway lines and then dispersed only to recollect on other jobs or to winter in the cheap hotels, soup kitchens, bars, socialist clubs, and hiring halls of the West's larger cities. Some of the dots cluster together—like the mining camps of Idaho's Coeur d'Alene region or British Columbia's Kootenay Mountains or the great ranches

<sup>7</sup>Lawrence H. Larsen, *The Urban West at the End of the Frontier* (Lawrence, KN, 1978); Walter Nugent, *Structures of American Social History* (Bloomington, IN, 1981), 98-100; Rodman Wilson Paul, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West, 1848-1880* (New York, 1963); and Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA, 1950). A convenient source of regional economic statistics is Harvey S. Perloff et al., *Regions, Resources, and Economic Growth* (Baltimore, 1960). Some might argue that the Great Lakes timber and mineral country and the oil fields of the Southwest that opened in the early twentieth century also belong to the wageworkers' frontier. It appears that the North Country had a mystique all its own, distinct from that of the classic West with its promise of abundant, easily acquired arable land. As for the oil country, C. B. Glasscock writes in his 1938 classic, "The newly opening Oklahoma oil fields were closer to civilization, both in time and space, than were the great mining developments of the preceding half century. Modernized small cities such as Tulsa and Oklahoma City were only a few hours away. Great commercial and industrial centers such as Kansas City, St. Louis, and Chicago could put men upon any piece of land within the entire state of Oklahoma as quickly as a Tulsa resident could have reached Muskogee a few years earlier." C. B. Glasscock, *Then Came Oil: The Story of the Last Frontier* (Westport, CT, 1976), 227. Also see Roger M. Olien and Diana Davids Olien, *Oil Booms: Social Change in Five Texas Towns* (Lincoln, 1982).

and orchards of California's Central Valley. They bear names such as Butte, Bisbee, and Everett; and Larimer Street in Denver and Skid Road in Seattle, two typical extensions of the wageworkers' frontier into the West's urban centers. Every metropolis in the region had one such district.<sup>8</sup>

The matrix depicting the physical dimension of the wageworkers' frontier was ever in a state of flux. It expanded as new agricultural lands and timber and mining camps were opened, and simultaneously contracted when older camps were abandoned with the depletion of natural resources or, as infrequently happened, when one of the raw, socially unstable communities survived and matured. If projected back to the 1850s and early 1860s, the matrix would shrink considerably. At that time it would not exist as a connected entity at all, but only as a series of widely separated pools of wage labor in the West's mining regions, most notably California's Mother Lode country, Nevada's Comstock Lode, and the Rocky Mountain camps west of Denver. Its physical limits expanded to their greatest extent after the construction of a railway network between 1869 and 1893 spurred aggressive exploitation of the West's forests and fields. In fact, except for its early manifestations in the hardrock mining country and in the timber and coal towns of the Pacific Northwest coast that were part of a seaborne system of commerce, the wageworkers' frontier was a child of the steel rail.<sup>9</sup>

The wageworkers' frontier originated not long after the California gold rush of 1848 to 1849, when thousands of restless young men headed for the diggings. With very little capital required to purchase necessary outfits and supplies, the miners were essentially footloose, independent entrepreneurs working placer claims. But the situation soon changed, as more expensive forms of placer mining and then lode mining were introduced. Costly flumes, shafts, stamp mills, and smelters were beyond the means of most individuals and many partnerships. The lonely, unkempt professional prospector remained a central figure in western folklore, but more typical was the individual who had come west to seek his fortune as a prospector and ended up as an employee of one of the new, heavily capitalized mining companies. Well into the 1890s, when timbermen began shifting their attention from the Great Lakes to the forests of the Pacific Northwest, a

<sup>8</sup>John R. Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene* (New Haven, CT, 1983); Carleton H. Parker, *The Casual Laborer and Other Essays* (New York, 1920); Michael Malone, *The Battle for Butte: Mining and Politics on the Northern Frontier, 1864-1906* (Seattle, 1981); Murray Morgan, *Skid Road: An Informal Portrait of Seattle* (New York, 1951); Thomas J. Noel, *The City and the Saloon: Denver, 1858-1916* (Lincoln, 1982); and R. D. McKenzie, "The Ecological Approach to the Study of the Human Community," in Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie, *The City* (1925; reprint, Chicago, 1967), 78-79.

<sup>9</sup>Paul, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West*, 37-55; and Duane A. Smith, *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps: The Urban Frontier* (Bloomington, IN, 1967).

high concentration of the workforce on the wageworkers' frontier remained in mining.<sup>10</sup>

Many an early western miner, thinking of his wage-earner status as only temporary, drifted from job to job. "I had turned a hand to nearly every kind of employment common to the Pacific country, in six years of knocking about on the Pacific Coast," recalled a pioneer wageworker of his experiences in the Comstock in 1870, "but I had never yet helped to operate a wood flume, and as the pay was satisfactory, and the employment novel and likely to be exciting, I very promptly accepted the offer." Beginning in the 1850s, many such casual laborers drifted in and out of San Francisco, which, despite its cosmopolitan character, was for several decades an integral part of the wageworkers' frontier and home during the off-season and hard times to an army of industrially desperate men. Hordes of drifting unemployed men choked the local job market, intensified competition for work, and depressed wages. Conversely, during boom times high wages in the mines drove up the pay scale in San Francisco as well as in agricultural areas bordering mining regions.<sup>11</sup>

Like the cities of the Pacific Northwest and Rocky Mountains at a later date, San Francisco early developed two identifiable communities of wage-labor—sedentary "home guards" and migratory "bindlestiffs"—although the dividing line between them often was blurred. Alternating prosperity and adversity drove some men back and forth across it, while others seemed permanently anchored by temperament or lack of education or skills to the migratory way of life. The home guards put down roots, raised families, and, if unionized, after the 1880s accepted to some degree the conservative outlook of the American Federation of Labor or the railway brotherhoods. From their enclaves, on the other hand, the mobile, industry-rather-than-craft oriented bindlestiffs nurtured a tradition of all-inclusive unionism and a spirit of militance that extended from the Knights of Labor in the 1880s to the radical Industrial Workers of the World three decades later. Home guards and bindlestiffs occasionally cooperated on labor matters, but more often they did not. Even so, home guards often manifested attitudes commonly held on the wageworkers' frontier, which

<sup>10</sup>Ira B. Cross, *A History of the Labor Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1935), 10-18; and Ralph Mann, *After the Gold Rush: Society in Grass Valley and Nevada City, California, 1849-1870* (Stanford, 1982).

<sup>11</sup>*Overland Monthly*, 19 (January 1892), 45; Cross, *A History of the Labor Movement in California*, 25-28; Roger W. Lotchin, *San Francisco, 1846-1856: From Hamlet to City* (New York, 1974), 84-87; and Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860-1897* (New York, 1945), 367. Among the studies of casual labor in the West are Parker, *The Casual Laborer and Other Essays*; Roger A. Bruns, *Knights of the Road: A Hobo History* (New York, 1980); and Carlos A. Schwantes, *Coxey's Army: An American Odyssey* (Lincoln, 1985). See also Donald Avery, "Dangerous Foreigners": *European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1931* (Toronto, 1979), 16-64.

had served for many as a way station to a more stable way of life. Reflecting one such attitude was the promotion of industrial unionism within the American Federation of Labor, a regional tendency especially pronounced on Washington's Puget Sound and an irritant to the federation's national leadership.<sup>12</sup>

Coexistence between home guards and bindlestiffs gave a frontier character to union labor in metropolitan areas of the Rocky Mountain and Pacific regions. Frontier characteristics can be discerned in the unusual demographic pattern prevailing in some western cities in 1900. The federal census that year ranked cities with populations of twenty-five thousand or more by the percentage of males. Butte, Montana, situated atop one of the world's great copper bonanzas, ranked third with a population 60 percent male, a percentage typical of mining settlements. But even more significant was the city that ranked first—Seattle, Washington, which had a population that was 64 percent male. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Percent Male Population, 1900

Rank	City	Population	% Male
1.	Seattle, Washington	80,671	63.87
2.	South Omaha, Nebraska	26,001	61.04
3.	Butte, Montana	30,470	59.64
4.	Portland, Oregon	90,426	58.75
5.	Spokane, Washington	36,848	57.44

Source: United States Bureau of the Census, *Proportion of the Sexes in the United States*, bulletin no. 14 (Washington, DC, 1904), 20.

San Francisco, by contrast, was 54 percent male, and older industrial centers in the East generally approximated 50 percent or less.<sup>13</sup> (See Table 2.)

Men employed as miners, loggers, or harvest hands in the West seldom worked alongside women. Off the job, a variety of situations prevailed. In those mining towns that survived, the ratio of males to females tended to become equal as miners got married and raised families. But in logging camps, which were essentially crude, makeshift worksites in the woods and even less an urban community than the rawest mining camp, there were

<sup>12</sup>Parker, *The Casual Laborer and Other Essays*; Robert L. Tyler, *Rebels of the Woods: The I. W. W. in the Pacific Northwest* (Eugene, OR, 1967); Charlotte Todes, *Labor and Lumber* (New York, 1931); Norman H. Clark, *Mill Town: A Social History of Everett, Washington . . .* (Seattle, 1970), 47-48, 80-82; Carlos A. Schwantes, "Leftward Tilt on the Pacific Slope: Indigenous Unionism and the Struggle against AFL Hegemony in the State of Washington," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 70 (January 1979), 24-34; and David Jay Bercuson, "The One Big Union in Washington," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 69 (July 1978), 127-34.

<sup>13</sup>United States Bureau of the Census, *Proportion of the Sexes in the United States*, bulletin no. 14 (Washington, DC, 1904).



Table 2: Percent Male Population, 1900

City	Population	% Male
Cincinnati, Ohio	325,902	48.2
Chicago, Illinois	1,698,575	50.8
Cleveland, Ohio	381,768	50.5
New York City	3,437,202	49.6

Source: United States Bureau of the Census, *Proportion of the Sexes in the United States*, bulletin no. 14 (Washington, DC, 1904), 20.

few females until after World War I. In most locales, blacks remained a rarity both on the job and off. One exception was Roslyn, Washington, a coal-mining town in which blacks constituted 11 percent of the 2,800 inhabitants in 1900. Roslyn's black population dated from the early 1890s when blacks were brought in as strikebreakers. On the wageworkers' frontier the largest racial minority was Asian, particularly the Chinese. They were frequent subjects of hostility by Caucasians, who were themselves far more divided ethnically than some historians have believed.<sup>14</sup>

The West had two other distinctive population characteristics. In 1890, for example, it had a higher percentage of foreign-born residents than any other region, including the North Atlantic, which was then experiencing a great influx of newcomers from Europe. The West also numbered more than twice as many one-person households as elsewhere. (See Table 3.)

These figures only underscore what was popularly believed—that the wageworkers' frontier was synonymous with unusual geographical mobility. A visitor to the Pacific Northwest observed in 1884 that "the people of the Pacific coast are strangely nomadic—a fact especially true of the unmarried. You can hardly enter into conversation with a working-man who can not give you some account of almost any settled district west of the Rocky Mountains, often including the Sandwich Islands, Australia, and the Chinese ports." As late as the eve of World War I, it was common to find loggers traveling from California to Alaska in a single season and miners living in Montana one month and Nevada or Arizona the next.<sup>15</sup>

Most of these men belonged to one of three categories already alluded to: coal and metal miners, loggers and sawyers, and harvest hands. They might be further described as drillers, blasters, muckers, stationary engineers, pickboys, and others employed in mining; fallers, buckers, choker setters, whistle-punks, and the like who harvested and processed wood; and

<sup>14</sup>United States Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census: Population*, pt. 1, vol. I (Washington, DC, \_\_\_\_\_), 609ff; Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 25-27; and Philip S. Notarianni, Jr., and Joseph Stipanovich, "Immigrants, Industry, and Labor Unions: The American West, 1890-1916," *Journal of Historical Studies*, 3 (Fall/Winter 1978), 1-14.

<sup>15</sup>Ernest Ingersoll, "From the Fraser to the Columbia," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 68 (May 1884), 871; and *Industrial Union Bulletin* (November 9, 1907), 1.

Table 3: Context of the Wageworkers' Frontier:  
Selected Regional Statistics, 1890

	<b>% total population foreign born</b>	<b>% households having one person</b>
United States	14.77	3.63
North Atlantic	22.34	3.23
South Atlantic	2.35	3.45
North Central	18.16	3.43
South Central	2.93	3.00
West	25.46	10.15

Source: United States Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census: 1890, Part 1- Population*, 3 (Washington, DC, 1892) p. 79, 117.

the separator men, oilers, team drivers, sack sewers, and others who made up a harvest crew. Joining them was a mixed lot of itinerant railroaders, construction workers, cannery hands, longshoremen, sailors, and general casual laborers. Little is known about any one of these men, although at least one went on to become a justice of the United States Supreme Court: on the eve of World War I, young William O. Douglas was harvesting wheat in eastern Washington. He later recalled a fellow casual laborer named Blacky, a man perhaps thirty years old, who kept all his worldly possessions—a pair of high heel shoes bought for a girlfriend in Seattle and a single shirt—in an old, battered suitcase. To Douglas, Blacky was typical of those likely to remain permanently anchored in this class of manual labor. Others, possessing a bit more skill and drive, circulated freely from one job category to another, for occupational boundaries in all but the most skilled trades did not mean much on the wageworkers' frontier.<sup>16</sup>

Also keeping western wage earners on the move were other, even more fundamental causes, such as a frequent scarcity of labor and the lure of high wages. Moreover, the boom-and-bust economy of the region's extractive industries and the seasonal alternations of work and idleness, placed a premium on a worker's physical mobility and a broad definition of his job skills. Intensifying the feeling of rootlessness was the act of migrating to the West, which in itself tended to sever the close and stabilizing ties of family, neighborhood, and church. The percent of a city's population born in the state or territory in which it is situated offers a convenient measure of long-standing ties between residents and the community. The low

<sup>16</sup>William O. Douglas, *Go East, Young Man: The Early Years* (New York, 1974), 76-77; and Parker, *The Casual Laborer*, 70-74. Here Parker provides statistics on the casuals in California in 1913-1914.

figures for residents of those western cities most intimately associated with the wageworkers' frontier in 1900 clearly distinguishes them from eastern and midwestern population centers and from western ones that had lost close ties to frontier wage-labor. (See Table 4.)

Table 4: Percent of Population Born in State or Territory in Which City is Situated, 1900 (A) and Total Percent of Population Born Outside the United States, 1900 (B) (in Ascending Order)

<b>WEST:</b>	<b>(A)</b>	<b>(B)</b>	<b>ELSEWHERE:</b>	<b>(A)</b>	<b>(B)</b>
Seattle	14.5	27.3	Chicago	45.3	34.6
Spokane	15.3	21.3	Boston	50.9	35.1
Butte	17.4	33.5	Detroit	54.3	33.8
Tacoma	20.0	29.3	Cleveland	54.8	32.6
Pueblo	21.4	16.7	New York	55.0	37.0
Denver	24.0	18.9	Birmingham	57.6	4.6
Los Angeles	27.0	19.5	Pittsburgh	61.9	26.4
Portland	28.5	28.6	Indianapolis	62.0	10.1
Oakland	45.0	25.8	Philadelphia	65.3	22.8
San Francisco	45.3	34.1	Norfolk	72.7	3.7
Sacramento	49.2	23.0	Atlanta	77.8	2.8
Salt Lake City	51.0	23.8	New Orleans	78.8	10.6

Source: United States Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census: 1900, Part 1- Population*, 1 (Washington, DC, 1901).

The rapidity with which western wilderness areas were transformed into industrial communities lacking any sense of preexistence or orderly change apparently diminished or at least confused residents' perceptions of the burdens of tradition. Even though conservative forces sought to replicate in the West the world they left behind in the East, the wageworkers' frontier remained raw and unformed in contrast to two-hundred-year-old eastern communities dominated by well-established agricultural and commercial elites that might, for example, use their surplus capital to start a local mill complex. Some of the mines and mills on the wageworkers' frontier were actually larger and more heavily capitalized than those in the East, but the juxtaposition of sophisticated technology with a primitive environment and a rudimentary social structure created the popular impression that in the West anything was possible. Under such circumstances belief in America's Horatio Alger myth apparently intensified. It was popularly asserted that on the wageworkers' frontier the man wielding the pick and shovel might one day with a little luck and hard work become the boss. Sometimes that did happen, although the West's counterparts to Andrew Carnegie and other outstanding examples of upward social mobility remained generally less known (and less wealthy). Far more common was

the western wage earner who kept searching for, but never quite realized, his dreams of success, a marginal state especially hard to accept in a region where it was widely claimed that anyone who worked hard would get ahead.<sup>17</sup>

Pioneer residents of the classic West probably remained unaware of the existence of the wageworkers' frontier, or were at least untroubled by it, until an outburst of violence took them by surprise. Bitter strikes, for example, broke out in the lode-mining towns of Grass Valley and Sutter Creek, California, in the late 1860s and early 1870s. The intervention of the governor and militia in the Sutter Creek trouble in 1871 made otherwise unconcerned people conscious of mining unions and the great discontent among the Irish, Cornish, Austrians, and Italians who comprised the local workforce.<sup>18</sup>

Of more general impact on Californians were the great railway strikes of 1877 and the anti-Chinese agitation of San Francisco's Kearneyites. For inhabitants of the remote Pacific Northwest, awareness of worker discontent in their midst came a decade later, after completion of two additional transcontinental railways, when anti-Chinese demonstrations and riots convulsed Puget Sound communities and several interior mining camps. Completing the process in the turbulent 1890s were episodes of industrial violence in hardrock mining regions of the Rockies, the Coxey movement, and the Pullman strike. The unsettling confrontations of the late nineteenth century raised the consciousness of the westerners. As the easterners were frightened by the outbursts in their region, so were the westerners in their's. The difference between the two was that westerners were inclined to blame their troubles on malefactors in the East—on Wall Street, Congress, or some other convenient "outside" force—even when troubles were local in origin.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (New York, 1966), 97-116; Thomas C. Cochran, *Frontiers of Change: Early Industrialism in America* (New York, 1981), 50-77; Earl Pomeroy, *The Pacific Slope: A History of California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, and Nevada* (New York, 1965); Gunther Barth, *Instant Cities: Urbanization and the Rise of San Francisco and Denver* (New York, 1975); and Richard H. Peterson, "The Frontier Thesis and Social Mobility on the Mining Frontier," *Pacific Historical Review*, 44 (February 1975), 52-67. The rags to riches to rags legend of one famous mining entrepreneur is discussed in Duane A. Smith, *Horace Tabor: His Life and the Legend* (Boulder, 1973). See also, John Fahey, *The Days of the Hercules* (Moscow, ID, 1978).

<sup>18</sup>Paul, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West*, 94-95.

<sup>19</sup>Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 113-37; Carlos A. Schwantes, "Protest in the Promised Land: Unemployment, Disinheritance, and the Origin of Labor Militancy in the Pacific Northwest, 1885-1886," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 13 (October 1982), 373-90; and Robert V. Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence* (Indianapolis, [1959]), 307-19. Richard Slotkin observes that conservative journalists in 1877 metaphorically equated the railway strikers and Chief Joseph's Indians, both being savages that posed clear and unambiguous threats to society. This thought-provoking line of inquiry should prompt researchers to probe anew the literature of labor-related violence on the wageworkers' frontier in an effort to understand what it symbolized to Americans at that time. Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York, 1985), 480-89.

Americans, and not just those living in the West, had considerable difficulty comprehending the rise of wagework and its concomitant discontents. In 1850 in the North, work was still largely something one did for oneself. But by 1870, when the first complete occupational census was made, 60 to 70 percent of northern workers were employees. During the last four decades of the century a noticeable tension existed between the long-standing ideal of self-employment and the reality of work for wages, an undesirable but temporary condition, many Americans thought. When the Knights of Labor proposed the "emancipation of the wealth producers from the thrall-dom and loss of wage slavery," they were voicing a commonly held belief in a language charged with meaning for people who had seen the Civil War emancipate chattel slaves. Wendell Phillips was the best known of several abolitionists who declared war on wage slavery in the late 1860s and early 1870s. To the venerable editor of *The Nation*, E. L. Godkin, the wage slave was simply a helpless conscript in the economic battle, subject to every whim of his boss. In the popular desire to emancipate the wage slave, the notion of free land in the West played a major role. Frederick Jackson Turner's discussion of the significance of the frontier served to give the free-land safety-valve concept a measure of scholarly respectability.<sup>20</sup>

If Turner was relatively circumspect in his evocation of the free-land safety-valve concept, some of his followers were not, making such exaggerated claims for the efficacy of its operation that they prompted a vigorous counterattack. In one of the most witty of the anti-safety valve critiques, Fred Shannon, in 1945, buried the concept under a mass of statistical evidence suggesting that far more Americans moved from farm to city than the other way around. Unlike Turner, Shannon saw clearly that wageworkers migrating from the East to the West often remained in a state of dependency, having simply "exchanged drudgery in an Eastern factory for an equally ill-paid drudgery (considering living costs) in a Western factory or mine." What Shannon failed to figure into his simple equation was any hint of the psychological environment of the West, particularly the dreams

<sup>20</sup>Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago, 1978), 30-64; Irwin Yellowitz, *Industrialization and the American Labor Movement, 1850-1900* (Port Washington, NY, 1977), 37-46; E. V. Smalley, "Discontent of the Laboring Classes," *Northwest Magazine* (February 1886), 25; Norman J. Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States, 1860-1895: A Study in Democracy* (New York, 1929), 74; Gerald N. Grob, *Workers and Utopia: A Study of Ideological Conflict in the American Labor Movement, 1865-1900* (Chicago, 1969), 44-47, 51; Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Ithaca, NY, 1973), 288-89, 302; David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (New York, 1967), 25-44; John Swinton, *A Momentous Question: The Respective Attitude of Labor and Capital* (Philadelphia, 1895), 53-55; and Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York, 1973), 108-9, 198. See also Barry Herbert Goldberg, "Beyond Free Labor: Labor, Socialism, and the Idea of Wage Slavery, 1890-1920" (doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1979).

and aspirations that workers newly arrived from the East brought with them.<sup>21</sup>

Admittedly, it is not easy to determine what wageworkers thought about their move west. Unlike the Oregon Trail pioneers, for example, they wrote few personal accounts of their experiences. But the fragmentary historical record that is available suggests that wageworkers, like others moving to the West, equated the region with unusual opportunity—it offered them a chance to begin anew, to improve their lot, if not dramatically, then at least enough to make the long move west worthwhile. Perhaps typical were the sentiments voiced by a group of emigrant families who left Pittsburgh for the Pacific Northwest in the early 1880s. “Cannot we make a living here?” they responded to a reporter questioning them about their impending move. “Well, yes, sort of a living. But every year it is becoming more difficult, as the different trades and avocations become more and more crowded by foreign immigrants, giving employers an opportunity to reduce wages. . . . We hear the most encouraging reports from Washington Territory, and believe it is just the place for poor men to go.” And so they traveled west, apparently carried along as much by illusion as by railway car or sailing ship.<sup>22</sup>

A veritable avalanche of promotional literature did more than anything else to nurture the dream of special opportunity awaiting wageworkers who moved west. In the late nineteenth century, tens of thousands of pamphlets issued by railroads, regional boosters, and other dream makers, hammered home the point that the West offered unusual opportunity to all comers. While most such pamphlets were oriented toward agrarians, the publicists’ potential to swamp the West Coast labor market with newcomers so alarmed the Oregon Knights of Labor that they urged the governor to abolish the state’s immigration board, which in the mid-1880s distributed thousands of pamphlets promising that “every man who is able and willing to work with his hands can find some employment at fair wages, especially those who are fitted for farm work. Railroads, public works, mines, mills, logging camps, fisheries and farms all require labor.” The Oregon Immigration Board, even after it lost its state support and became a private organization, continued to issue brochures describing the natural

<sup>21</sup> Ellen von Nardroff, “The American Frontier as Safety Valve—The Life, Death, Reincarnation, and Justification of a Theory,” *Agricultural History*, 36 (July 1962), 123-42; and Fred A. Shannon, “A Post Mortem for the Labor-Safety-Valve Theory,” *Agricultural History*, 19 (January 1945), 36.

<sup>22</sup> *West Shore* (May 1884), 160. This episode lends credence to the argument of an indirect safety-valve: Norman J. Simler, “The Safety-Valve Doctrine Re-Evaluated,” *Agricultural History*, 32 (October 1958), 250-57. A Seattle newspaper observed that newcomers to the Pacific Northwest often believed the region was an Eldorado “where bonanzas lie around loose, and they will pick up a speedy fortune, or at least live easily off the surplus fat of the land.” Inevitably they were doomed to disappointment. *Seattle Daily Press*, 26 May 1886. For a discussion of promotional literature and workers see Schwantes, *Radical Heritage*, 6-11.

resources of the Pacific Northwest as “boundless” and offering the laborer “a comfortable home with employment always ready to his hand at good wages.” The author of a Union Pacific brochure issued in 1889 went so far as to claim that the Pacific Northwest had never suffered a strike or lockout—an appealing message, no doubt, but one that deviated considerably from the truth. Whatever their claims, the authors of such pamphlets not only promoted immigration but also the mythology of the classic West. They left little doubt that farmers and wageworkers would be better off living “in the Great West.” Perhaps the wageworker might even acquire the means to become a farmer and thus emancipate himself from “wage slavery.” “He need not long remain in the condition of a laborer,” promised Oregon’s Immigration Board. “This certainty of rising in the social scale must stimulate the immigrant.”<sup>23</sup>

The belief that those who emigrated to the wageworkers’ frontier were living in close proximity to easily available arable land was compelling. “Many seem to be too eager to get on to land,” a Washington Territory writer in the *West Shore* observed of wageworkers in 1878, but added that they “take such as is worthless, or too hard to clear, and such become disgusted with the country.” Yet the promises of the promotional literature remained compelling, especially to wageworkers unable to see for themselves that much of the best land in California was monopolized by a few individuals, or that the West’s so-called free land was often unfit for agriculture. So powerful was the dream that in the 1894 protest platforms and manifestos issued by Rocky Mountain and Pacific Slope contingents of Coxey’s Army, thousands of jobless westerners demanded that the federal government fund the irrigation of arid lands. This, they believed, would provide them work constructing dams and canals and an opportunity to claim a well-watered homestead afterwards. In fact, some wageworkers did acquire logged-off and other marginal lands where they lived a hardscrabble existence, alternating between agricultural pursuits and seasonal jobs in nearby sawmills or railway construction camps.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Salem Oregon Statesman*, January 14, 1887; Oregon State Board of Immigration, *Oregon as It Is* (Salem, 1885), 25; Oregon State Board of Immigration, *The Pacific Northwest: Its Wealth and Resources* (Portland, [1891]), 4; Union Pacific Railway Company, *Wealth and Resources of Oregon and Washington, the Pacific Northwest* (Portland, 1889); *West Shore* (May 1884), 160; Carlos A. Schwantes, “Blessed are the Mythmakers? Free Land, Unemployment, and Uncle Sam in the American West,” *Idaho Yesterdays*, 27 (Fall 1983), 2-12; and Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1981). See also David M. Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains* (Lincoln, 1971).

<sup>24</sup> *West Shore*, 3 (March 1878), 109; Donald L. McMurry, *Coxey’s Army: A Study of the Industrial Army Movement of 1894* (Boston, 1929), 183; *Solidarity* (1 November 1913), 2; *Portland Oregonian*, 17 April 1886; Schwantes, “Blessed are the Mythmakers?” 2-12; Avery, “*Dangerous Foreigners*”, 25-27; Richard White, “Poor Men on Poor Lands: The Back-to-the-Land Movement of the Early Twentieth Century—A Case Study,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 49 (February 1980), 105-31; and Norman Clark, *Washington: A Bicentennial History* (New York, 1976), 138-39.

Thwarted dreams, however, have a way of creating bitterness. "Like the pioneers of an earlier day, workingmen who travel westward are for the most part imbued with the restless spirit of enterprise, born of the desire for improved conditions. But unlike the pioneer seeking a homestead and finding it, the modern wage worker who 'goes west' finds no alternative except to hunt for a master," lamented a member of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1909. The radical Wobblies, no less than the wageworkers who moved west in the 1860s and 1870s, sought to reconcile dependency with the success mythology of the classic West.<sup>25</sup>

Western wage earners faced many of the same problems as their counterparts elsewhere in Gilded-Age America—unemployment, lax or nonexistent mine and factory safety inspection, long hours, and irregular wages. But life on the wageworkers' frontier posed additional problems. Besides the unrealistic hopes raised by the promotional literature, there was a feeling of extreme economic vulnerability created by companies hiring Chinese labor. Although such employers complained that they hired the Chinese only when white labor was unwilling or unavailable to work, Caucasians saw the situation otherwise. They believed that they not only faced a potentially unlimited supply of competitors imported from Asia, but that they also represented the cutting edge of western civilization on North America's Pacific frontier. Hostility to Chinese labor, which sprang from racism and cultural prejudice as well as from perceptions of economic vulnerability, united Caucasian workers of all nationalities against the companies that used cheap, imported labor allegedly to drive down wages. Anti-Asian hostility was not unique to the wageworkers' frontier, but it was universal there and served as the basis for several violent protests and third-party insurgencies. It was pressure from members on the wageworkers' frontier that eventually led the American Federation of Labor to adopt an anti-Chinese stance.<sup>26</sup>

The closing of the wageworkers' frontier did not occur at a specific time, nor was it unusually dramatic. In some locales the end came when the coal or ore ran out or the land was logged off. A drop in the price of precious metals or competition from California oil also contributed to the demise. It came when one-time frontier communities achieved a measure of economic and social maturity and when a new generation of workers accepted the fact that they were likely to spend their lives working for wages. Changing technology played a role too. When electricity came to the metal mines of north Idaho during the 1890s, for instance, it became possible

<sup>25</sup> *Industrial Union Bulletin* (27 February 1909), 2; and Shannon, "A Post Mortem for the Labor-Safety-Valve Theory," 37.

<sup>26</sup> Schwantes, "Protest in a Promised Land"; Ingersoll, "From the Fraser to the Columbia," 871; Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 271-73; and Robert Edward Wynne, *Reaction to the Chinese in the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia, 1850-1910* (New York, 1978).



to operate them year-round instead of shutting down when winter weather froze the water power. The widespread use of gasoline-powered combines, beginning in the 1920s, significantly reduced the need for labor on the bonanza wheat ranches, often by as much as two-thirds or more. This, together with the availability of cheap used cars and all-weather highways, had an impact on migratory harvest workers. In the Pacific Northwest, single males were replaced by married men, often Hispanics, who took their families with them. The same automotive technology made it possible for an increasing number of loggers to adopt a more stable life pattern, to settle in communities with their families and drive to work.<sup>27</sup>

The nation's rail mileage peaked in 1916, and by that year railroad construction camps populated by a floating population of single males had largely become a relic of the past. World War I brought other significant changes too. The federal government mandated improved working conditions in the logging camps that, in a practical sense, stole the thunder of the Wobblies. Where an effort was made to create some sense of a true urban community in the camps, it tended to "decasualize" the lumberjack. The coming of the draft in 1917 had a nationalizing effect on America's workers, taking loggers and miners from the remote reaches of the wageworkers' frontier and placing them in bivouacs and trenches alongside pipefitters and carpenters from Brooklyn, Norfolk, and elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

It would be a mistake to argue that the wageworkers' frontier existed much past World War I, yet vestiges of it certainly lingered on in the forests and mines of the West as late as the 1960s. Butte, Montana, long maintained the image of a roistering mining camp, and conflict between the classic and counterclassic Wests served as the basis for Ken Kesey's novel *Sometimes a Great Notion*, which was set in an Oregon Coast logging town in the early 1960s.<sup>29</sup>

Many aspects of the wageworkers' frontier await in-depth exploration, and many fundamental questions remain to be answered. Even so, the concept of a wageworkers' frontier appears to provide a useful framework for an integrative approach to the history of work, industrial violence, and

<sup>27</sup> John Fahey, *The Ballyhoo Bonanza: Charles Sweeny and the Idaho Mines* (Seattle, 1971), 112-15; Warren James Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), 33. Reynold M. Wik, *Henry Ford and Grass-Roots America* (Ann Arbor, 1972); Alex C. McGregor, "From Sheep Range to Agribusiness: A Case History of Agricultural Transformation on the Columbia Plateau," *Agricultural History*, 54 (January 1980), 11-27; and James H. Shideler, *Farm Crisis, 1919-1923* (Berkeley, 1957), 8, 80.

<sup>28</sup> Harold M. Hyman, *Soldiers and Spruce: Origins of the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen* (Los Angeles, 1963); and Robert L. Tyler, "The United States Government as Union Organizer: The Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 47 (December 1960), 434-51.

<sup>29</sup> Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* (New York, 1964); and Brown, "The New Regionalism in America," 75.

political insurgency in the American West. It offers a different perspective on the tensions that occasionally erupted between eastern-oriented trade unions and their western affiliates; it suggests anew why the Wobblies were strongest in the developing parts of the West. Viewed in the context of the wageworkers' frontier, the labor history of the American West no longer appears to be a mere sideshow to pivotal developments taking place in the industrial centers of the East.



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**Selected Essays  
Occasional Paper No. 1**

*Edited by Donna P. Koepp*

*Map and Geography Round Table  
American Library Association*

SPECULUM ORBIS PRESS CHICAGO  
207 West Superior, Chicago, Illinois 60610  
1986 \$18.95 ISBN No. 0-932757-01-4

### **ESSAYS BY**

**Kenneth Nebenzahl**  
**Robert S. Martin**  
**Frank N. Schubert**  
**James A. Coombs**

**Charles A. Seavey**  
**Robert W. Karrow, Jr.**  
**Norman J.W. Thrower**  
**John B. Garver, Jr.**