

## Perspectives on the Land

“The Old West”: Today, many of us hear these words and picture a wild land waiting for settlers to tame it. We might also think of battles between American settlers and Native Americans. What were they fighting about?

One answer to this question is *land*. During the mid-1800s, both groups wanted to live on and use the same land in the Great Plains. American settlers were eager to claim the land for themselves. It did not matter to them that Native Americans were already living there. But that wasn't the only reason the two groups did not get along. Settlers and Native Americans also had very different perspectives on nature.

### Native American Perspective

Some Native American groups stayed mainly in one region to farm the land, but many Native Americans, especially in the Great Plains, moved on a regular basis. Over the course of a year, they traveled to places with better weather, more water, and more food. Whether they stayed in one place or moved around, most Native Americans saw land as something to respect and care for. Their goal was sustainable living—which means using the environment in a way that keeps it healthy and useful for people in the years to come.

### Settler Perspective

On the other hand, most settlers saw the land as something to outsmart, change, and conquer. They tore out prairie grass, cleared forests to create farmland, and dammed rivers to create lakes. They tried to transform each area from its natural state into what they wanted it to be. The majority of settlers also planned to stay in one



Courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society

*Settlers in the plains stripped away grassland to transform the prairie into farms. This left little food for the buffalo and other native animals of the prairie. Native Americans depended on these animals for their survival.*

place and expected that region to supply most of their needs. However, as resources were used up or the best lands were settled, settlers moved farther west in search of new land.

### The Conflict

The settlers believed in what they called “Manifest Destiny,” which meant that it was not just their right to settle the continent, but their duty to do so. As they moved across the United States from the 1840s through the 1900s, their population in the Western territories grew. They were not willing to coexist with the Native Americans already living there.

As a result, the U.S. government forced Native Americans to relocate—move—from good farmland to reservations, pieces of land on which only Native Americans would live. The problem with reservations was that they were usually made up of the land that no settlers wanted. Native Americans lost much of their territory and countless lives as the settlers reached for their Manifest Destiny.