“The Permanently Unfinished Country”: 500 years of American Immigration

Instructor: **Douglas Kenning**

Heather Cox Richardson
Letters from an American
heathercoxrichardson@substack.com

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In the spring of 1890, Republicans were convinced they would win the upcoming midterm elections.

Thanks to their management of the economy, they insisted, the United States was on its way to becoming the most advanced nation in the world. Technology had brought new products to the country—bananas, for example—and upwardly mobile Americans had enough leisure time and money to celebrate weddings with special dresses and cakes, and to give their children toys on their birthday. Massive factories like that of industrialist Andrew Carnegie in Homestead, Pennsylvania, churned out steel to make buildings like Chicago’s Home Insurance Building, completed in 1885, its 10 stories making it so astonishingly high it could only be called a “skyscraper.”

This innovation was possible, Republicans believed, because they had protected the ability of men like Carnegie to run their businesses as they saw fit. With tariff laws guaranteeing that domestic industries would not have to compete with foreign products, businessmen could both innovate and collude with their colleagues to raise prices, bringing profits that would enable them to develop their businesses further. That development paid the country in jobs, permitting all Americans to enjoy a rising standard of living.

Indeed, Carnegie wrote in 1889, “Individualism, Private Property, the Law of Accumulation of Wealth, and the Law of Competition” were the very height of human achievement. While the new economy created great disparities of wealth, he thought those differences were inevitable and a good thing. The money flowing up to the top meant that the country’s wealthiest men could build libraries and concert halls and universities and art collections to raise the cultural standards of the whole country.

Newspapers celebrated the leading industrialists as the nation's heroes, and Republicans took credit for creating the environment for them to work their magic. Across the country, men served by the new economy cheered on its leaders.

But plenty of Americans could see that the nation was not in the rosy shape Republicans claimed. On shop floors in eastern factories, workers shoveled coal or worked looms for fourteen to sixteen hours a day for pennies, and if their health broke down or they lost a limb, they were out of both work and luck. In the West, rains had failed for five years, and the hot winds baked crops dry in two days. "This would be a fine country if only it had water," a hopeful farmer said in a western joke. "Yes, and so would hell," was the punch line. Farmers were saddled with high-interest mortgages, middlemen who skimmed the profits when crops went to market, and freight charges from railroad monopolies that took the rest.

To those asking for the government to address the needs of workers and farmers, Carnegie said: "The Socialist or Anarchist who seeks to overturn present conditions is to be regarded as attacking the foundation upon which civilization itself rests."

In the summer of 1890, Republican lawmakers, too, pushed back on those criticizing their pro-business policies. Hardworking farmers were doing just fine, they said; reports of high mortgages that farmers couldn't repay were "a libel upon the thrift and economy, as well as the honesty and intelligence of the Western farmer." Those few farmers who really were in trouble had only themselves to blame. They had "extravagant notions," rejecting pork and potatoes in favor of chicken and angel food cake.

Ultimately, farmers were lazy, wanting "a sort of paternal government" to take care of them. President Benjamin Harrison assured an audience in Topeka, Kansas, that life was made up of averages, and that their poor year should not dash their hopes for the future (although he didn't have any suggestions for how they should feed themselves in the meantime).

Far from the policy struggles of the Republicans and Democrats back East, in the summer of 1890, a new movement began, quietly, to take shape. In western towns, workers and poor farmers and entrepreneurs shut out of opportunities by monopolies began to talk to each other. They discovered a shared dismay over a government that seemed to work only for the rich industrialists, and anger that they seemed to be working themselves to the bone only to have the fruits of their labor taken by the rich. "Wall Street owns the country," western organizer Mary

Elizabeth Lease told audiences. “It is no longer a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street.”

Westerners suffering in the new economy began to come together. Reviving older Farmers’ Alliances, they distributed literature across the country explaining how tariffs worked and how railroad monopolies jacked up prices. Existing newspapers began to echo their arguments, and where there weren’t local newspapers, Alliance members began to print them.

They offered a different vision of the country’s political economy, defending the idea that the government should treat everyone equally. Alliances declared that they shared the same interests as workers, and called for “the reform of unjust systems and the repeal of laws that bear unequally upon the people.”

They also redefined what it meant to be a success in America. Rather than the cutthroat individualism of those like Carnegie, they called for reviving an older tradition, one in which “manliness” meant honesty, generosity, community-mindedness, and dignity. They called for “a manly, honest defense of popular rights, a clear cut expression of principles, a bold demand for the restoration of that of which they have been despoiled under the deceitful forms and names of law.” Their emphasis on reason and honorable conduct meant that they rejected the era’s political fights for dominance, and so there was room in their political coalition for women and often, despite the era’s Jim Crow walls, for Black farmers.

Those who listened to this movement were not radicals. They didn’t want to change the American system so much as return it to its traditional promise of equality before the law and equality of access to resources. Their solution to the industrialists’ control of the government was to require direct election of senators—so industrialists could not buy up legislatures to pick the man the industrialist wanted—regulation of railroads, lower tariffs, a graduated income tax, easier credit, better working conditions, and higher wages.

Back east, politicians were aware enough of the rising anger that Republican leaders prodded President Harrison himself into a western tour—“It will be a tiresome trip and I… dread it,” the president wrote—but they weren’t terribly concerned. They weren’t reading the new newspapers or going to the picnics and barbecues. They dismissed news about the growing groundswell as impossible.

They missed the major political story of the year.

While congressmen and eastern newspapers fought over every scrap of Washington political gossip, western farmers and workers and entrepreneurs had organized. New newspapers, letters, barbecues, lectures, and picnics had done their work, educating those on the peripheries of politics about the grand issues of the day. When the votes were counted after the November 1890 election, the Alliances had carried South Dakota and almost the whole state ticket in Kansas, and they held the balance of power in the Minnesota and Illinois legislatures. In Nebraska and Iowa, they had split the Republicans and given the governorship to a Democrat. They controlled 52 seats in the new Congress, enough to swing laws in their direction.

While the Alliance movement itself wouldn't last, its demands would shape not only the laws of the Progressive Era, including the graduated income tax, the direct election of senators, and the regulation of business, but also the concept of "manliness." President Theodore Roosevelt, who spent his life defining what it meant to be a powerful man, worked to defend ordinary Americans from the overreach of corporations, and to use the government to help everyone rather than a select few.

This letter is for the musician I met this week whose work takes her all over the country. She said that in her travels lately she feels something powerful building under the radar, and asked me if such a thing had ever happened before.