

# Chapter Twelve: Barbed Wire

## *Westward Expansion... With An Unexpected Twist*

### **Three Big Things:**

1. Barbed wire became the fencing of choice in the west after the Civil War. It was relatively cheap, withstood a wide range of conditions, and held back even the biggest, most stubborn livestock.
2. Barbed wire favored homesteaders moving west, who tended to be small farmers. It threatened, and eventually helped subsume, cowboy culture and the mythical “open range.”
3. Barbed wire is rarely asked about specifically in history standards, but it’s central to a wide variety of stuff that *is*.

### **Introduction**

There are barbed wire museums in nearly a dozen different states. That’s right – museums devoted exclusively (or at least primarily) to the origins and impact of pokey wires in all its many varieties. The Oklahoma Cowboy Museum boasts over 8,000 varieties of prickly steel yarn. The Devil’s Rope Museum in McLean, Texas, promises “everything you want to know about barbed wire and fencing tools.” The Kansas Barbed Wire Museum in La Crosse has a half-dozen separate displays devoted to the subject, not to mention a gift shop packed with books, t-shirts, and other memorabilia. There are several collections in and around DeKalb, Illinois, the birthplace of barbed wire, and major displays scattered from the Murray County Museum in Georgia to the Paso Robles Pioneer Museum in California.

But... why? It’s fencing. Made of wire. What’s the big deal?

### **Expansion, Technology, and Conflict**

American history is largely a tale of expansion. Many of our most noteworthy conflicts have resulted (at least in part) from our eternal drive to expand and renovate. As “Schoolhouse Rock” waxed so rhapsodically:

*Elbow room, elbow room, got to, got to get us some elbow room. It's the west or bust; in God we trust – there's a new land out there... There were plenty of fights to win land rights, but the West was meant to be; it was our Manifest Destiny!*

Prior to the Civil War, westward expansion was resisted – if not noticeably hindered – by both northeastern businessmen (who didn’t want cheap immigrant labor to have other options) and southern plantation owners (who didn’t want competition from new farmers). During the Civil War, however, businesses were distracted by wartime production and the southern states lost their political influence (having “left the Union” and started a war and everything). Lincoln’s Republicans were able to push through the famed Homestead Act of 1862, and it was on.

The Homestead Act wasn’t the first offering of its sort, but it was arguably the most important. Almost anyone could get a chunk of land out west at minimal cost as long as they were willing to go live on it and improve it. After the war, Americans cranked up their expansion mojo and the country began (or rather, resumed) sprawling westward.

In the meantime, demand for beef was rising. Soldiers needed to eat, and all that meat had to come from somewhere. Then, after the war, a prosperous and victorious North wanted steak for dinner. Creative crossbreeding eventually produced a fairly hearty steer which was nevertheless edible – the Texas Longhorn.

Railroads connecting the west to markets in the northeast didn't quite reach Texas, so the age of the great cattle drives was born as cattlemen drove their steer from wherever they were raised to the nearest railroad – often several states away. Despite its eternal popularity in TV and movie westerns, the era of “git along little doggie” was only about two decades long – from the 1850s to mid-1870s.\*\* After that, the major railroads reached pretty much everywhere, and cattle drives were no longer necessary or practical.

The culture of cattle ranching required easy access to grazing and water. In both law and custom, cowboys could drive their herds pretty much *anywhere* as long as they used a little basic courtesy. This wasn't just “how they did things” – it was an entrenched ethical and legal reality on par with any other “natural right.” Life, liberty, and free use of the open range were as self-evident as they were God-given.

The settlers who began showing up to partake of all that nifty government land had slightly different unalienable truths lodged in their hearts and minds. They'd been marinating since birth in the sacramental wine of private property rights and the obligation of every good American to defend those rights – preferably against savages, but against cowboys as well if necessary. It didn't take long for these disparate American ideals to begin chafing against one another in the most unpleasant ways.

### **Offensive Fences**

Farmers knew in the core of their being that they had every right to their 160 acres, wherever it happened to be; ranchers were just as certain that limiting others' access to water or grazing was both tyrannical and tacky. Either way, farming homesteaders needed better fences if they were going to survive.

This was problematic, given the realities of flora on the Great Plains. There's a reason it's not called the “Great Forest,” the “Big Ol' Woods,” or “Trees-a-Palooza.” Even when settlers could find wood, it was windy on the Plains. It sometimes rained or snowed heavily. Pretty much every season was brutal on wooden fences in one way or another. Some settlers tried rocks, but the difficulty with that system was self-evident. Others built boundaries out of the same sod they used for their homes, only to have them washed or blown away by the elements. Just to really rub it in, the creatures fences were primarily intended to keep out weren't particularly intimidated by wooden posts or nailed boards. Humans could kick them down or pull them up with a little effort; cattle knocked them over and went about their business like they hadn't even noticed.

Barbed wire changed all of that. There are competing accounts of just who deserves primary credit, but the first versions of the stuff were patented in 1867 and several varieties were being mass produced less than a decade later. There were dozens (and eventually hundreds, then thousands) of varieties, but most came down to thin, sturdy steel wire with intermittent “barbs” – ridges, spikes, or other pointy metal shapes – firmly embedded along the entire length. Barbed wire was relatively inexpensive and easy to put up. Wind had zero impact on the thin steel wires; rain and snow had even less. Animals, on the other hand, quickly learned not to test this new “devil's rope.” The barbs were painful enough to discourage pushing through or knocking over this new anathema, but unlikely to do real damage to most livestock.

This nasty little innovation shifted the balance of power in the west considerably. Pretty much anyone could now easily stake out and claim any section of land they wished, whether they legally owned it or not. Sure, you could sneak in and cut the wires (and hope you weren't shot), but unlike wooden fences they could be repaired and replaced just as quickly. You could try to go over, under, or through, but the wire discouraged this. No matter how tough or clever you were, that stuff *hurt*.

Just to complicate matters further, some rogue souls began raising sheep instead of cattle. Sheep provided meat, milk, and wool, and proved an economically viable alternative in areas already saturated with moo-cows. Sheep grazed like crazy, however, which required even more fencing to be erected – thus proving doubly-problematic for old school cowboys still trying to get their lil’ doggies along. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, cowmen and sheep herders became quite hostile and regularly violent towards one another, particularly in Arizona, Texas, Wyoming, and Colorado. Barbed wire wasn’t exactly the *source* of the conflict, but it’s difficult to imagine these “Sheep Wars” occurring without it.

Barbed wire wasn’t the only reason homesteaders and private property took over the west, but it was arguably the deciding factor. As to cattle drives, it would be unfair to pin their demise entirely on this one innovation. The railroads finally reached Texas. There were a few brutal winters in the 1880s which killed tons of livestock (literally). And of course there were all those annoying sheep. But there’s no denying the impact of wave after wave of desperate settlers now armed with the ability to slice the frontier into private little homesteads defended by cheap, durable, pokey wire.

### **How Do I Remember This?**

If you’ve endured any version of the musical *Oklahoma!*, you probably remember the hootenanny in which the ensemble sings that “the farmer and the cowman should be frieeends!” Imagine this particular number concluding with the “farmer” contingency busting out a large role of barbed wire (with wooden posts already attached every few feet) and wrapping up the cowmen en masse, who then remain cut off from the festivities until they die. (The rest of the ensemble, of course, would continue singing “territory folks should stick together; territory folks should all be pals!”, oblivious to the plight of the outdated cowpokes rapidly losing both relevance and consciousness just off stage.)

If you’re not familiar with this particular number, that’s what YouTube is for. It’s an annoying little tune, making it all the more likely the memory will stick. You know, like barbed wire.

### **Making The Grade: What You’re Most Likely To Be Asked**

It’s unlikely you’ll be asked about barbed wire *specifically*, or at least not in isolation. Typically, it comes up in conjunction with the settling of the West in the latter half of the 19th century, the end of the “cattle drive era,” or the end of “open-range ranching” (the dates of which vary from source to source).

1. Open-range cattle ranching dramatically declined in the late nineteenth century due to...? (A) the rise of barbed wire fencing across the Great Plains, (B) declining beef prices due to overproduction, (C) backlash from the Plains Amerindian tribes against homesteaders and ranchers, or (D) the segmentation of the plains by railroads.

2. Which new technology proved a substantial advantage to homesteaders over open-range ranchers on the plains? (A) steel plows, (B) rifled barrels, (C) the windmill, or (D) barbed wire.

If presented with a more open-ended prompt, you’ll want to include other factors in the demise of cattle drives and/or open range ranching (note that these are not the same thing even though they have much in common).

3. What led to the end of the great cattle-drive era of the late nineteenth century? (railroads reached Texas, several brutal winters 1885-1887, falling beef prices, and all those landowners with their annoying barbed wire)

4. What led to the end of open-range ranching in the late nineteenth century? (overgrazing, those same brutal winters 1885-1887, homesteaders with barbed wire, and to a lesser extent those darned sheep; it wouldn't hurt to bring up the Homestead Act, Morrill Land Grant Act, and/or Pacific Railway Act)

APUSH or other advanced courses like to ask the same basic things with bigger words:

5. Explain how technological advances, large-scale production methods, and the opening of new markets encouraged the rise of industrial capitalism in the United States. (This prompt is primarily concerned with the Second Industrial Revolution, but you'll sound totes academic if you work in something relevant from further west – like barbed wire and the expansion of the railroads.)

Don't be surprised if you get a map of migration during this time period showing westward movement of some sort and a prompt asking about the "migrations that accompanied industrialization" and how they "transformed both urban and rural areas of the United States and caused dramatic social and cultural change." (This particular phrasing is from the APUSH Key Concept Outline, but the same ideas appear in other ambitious curriculums as well.)

6. Between 1865 – 1900, large numbers of migrants moved to the West in search of land and economic opportunity, frequently provoking competition and violent conflict. Explain one federal government action supporting this migration, one source of competition and conflict, and one long-term impact of these shifts.

Just TRY to tell me you're not giddy with the possibilities of THAT one!

In short, barbed wire is an excellent detail to work into almost any short answer or essay related to westward expansion after the war, particularly if the prompt involves conflicts between homesteaders and the Plains Indians or between homesteaders (largely farmers) and cattlemen. It's also a powerful example of technology changing how and where people live, impacting the environment as well as the economy – literally reshaping everything else that was possible (or not) wherever it was utilized.

And despite its relative simplicity, barbed wire was (and is) a *technology*. Like many other examples of technological progress, it helped some and annoyed others, but impacted almost everyone in one way or another.

Hang on – this is where it gets deep:

You can resist technological change, or even fight against it, but just as the winds and rains pass right on through that barbed wire without measurable impact, technological progress does what it's going to do, with or without our cooperation. We can seize it and utilize it to our own ends or let it pass us by... but pushing back against it usually just leaves us cut up and wincing a bit from the results.

I'll give you a moment to find some tissue before we move on.

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\*\*OK, technically there were still cattle drives until the early twentieth century, but they were far less common. Just because your grandma still has a rotary dial phone doesn't mean cell phones didn't take over how we make calls a generation ago. You want to celebrate the handful of cattle drives taking place in 1907 or whatever? Live it up, pardner.