The American frontier—the western land we popularly associate with the “Wild West”—remains one of the most internationally famous symbols of the United States. Around the world, cowboys, Native Americans, and pioneers in covered wagons all represent the American ideals of individualism, adventure, and self-reliance. However, by the late 1800s, that way of life had become more legend than reality.

In 1846, only a few hundred people lived in San Francisco, and the rest of West Coast was even more sparsely populated. Between the West and the great cities of the East were unregulated territories populated by Native Americans, Mexicans, and a few intrepid pioneers. It took a traveler two or three months to get to California, which could only be reached on horseback or on a long ship ride around South America.

The California Gold Rush of 1848 was one of the first events that made the West seem like an attractive destination, especially to adventurers and young men hoping to strike it rich. San Francisco’s population swelled from hundreds to tens of thousands, and the idea of connecting all American land together began to seem like a more desirable project.

Still, Americans did not get serious about moving West until the end of the Civil War, which settled the controversial issue of slavery and signified that the United States was united again—or well on its way. The biggest step toward closing the American frontier (making it seem less inaccessible and less “wild”) was the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, which began operation in 1869. Travel by rail shortened the journey to California from months to days.

The phrase “Wild West” suggests a landscape covered by small, dusty towns and roaming herds of cattle, but in reality almost all people living in the West during the late 19th century lived in cities built along railroad tracks. As railroads expanded and European Americans moved west, they drove Native Americans into smaller and smaller territories. The lives of Native Americans living on open plains were threatened not just by removal but also by the behavior of soldiers and railroad travelers, who slaughtered more than 60 million bison on the Great Plains, firing at them from the windows of passing railroad cars. Within less than a century, the Great Plains themselves were transformed into farmland, and game animals that had lived on the original grasslands were all but extinct.

From 1884 to 1912, the Western Territories were gradually transformed into states: Nebraska, Wyoming, Idaho, Arizona. Much of this aggressive settlement and annexation was driven by a devotion to Manifest Destiny, the belief that Americans were destined to conquer all central territory of the North American continent. American exceptionalism—the belief that the United States is a unique country in which anything might be possible—also played a role in the rapid expansion that closed the American frontier.

By 1910, the United States was beginning to look like the country we know today. Its coasts were unified, its territories were uniformly governed and organized, and its armies were about to assert their
significance in Europe in the First World War. The bigger question of individual American identity—who is an American, and who isn’t—was about to become a more explosive issue.

In 1859, English scientist Charles Darwin published a book called *On the Origin of Species*, which presented compelling evidence of “evolution,” the theory that all life on Earth evolved over billions of years from a common ancestor. Before Darwin’s theories became popular, most Europeans and Americans believed that the God worshipped by Christians simply created life as it is, while a few others believed that mysterious fluids made animals adapt to their environments.

Darwin rejected those ideas, claiming that all animals, even human beings, evolved through a process he called *natural selection*. All lifeforms will periodically mutate, Darwin explained, and those organisms with the most useful mutations will survive and reproduce. Organisms that have not mutated, or that experienced less useful mutations, die off without reproducing. That’s why the same type of bird might have a different beak or different wings in different environments.

Darwin’s ideas were shocking and controversial in a time when many people thought that the Bible was a 100% literal and accurate reflection of the past, and that human beings were a special, chosen race, rather than the most successful of many ape-like creatures. The effect of Darwin’s theories on American society was profound, and sometimes unsettling. In the late 19th century, some elites and aristocrats applied scientific theories about natural selection and the “survival of the fittest” to culture and the economy. Was the political dominance of white, European races a reflection of natural, biological superiority over people from Africa and Asia? And was the unprecedented wealth of the upper classes a reflection of their natural superiority to poor immigrants and workers? (To many white leaders, the answer to both questions was “yes.”)

Applying Darwin’s biological ideas to human society was called “social Darwinism,” and it resulted in many Americans of the late 19th-century—especially wealthy, elite citizens—embracing a form of capitalism that was entirely unregulated. Workers received barely anything for their efforts and worked six or even seven days a week, for up to twelve hours a day. Meanwhile, leading industrialists (the factory owners and their investors) led unimaginably extravagant lifestyles. For that reason, American writer called Mark Twain referred to the century’s final decades as the “Gilded Age,” meaning they were covered with a thin sheet of golden luxury while underneath was a great deal of poverty and misery.

The excesses of the Gilded Age led to the early 20th century’s Progressive Era, which made corruption and greed the most important social issues of the times and championed workers’ and women’s rights. Women had been seriously organizing for the right to vote since 1848, when activists gathered at the Seneca Falls Convention to push for greater social and gender equality. However, the right to vote wasn’t extended to all American women until the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920.

Women’s rights weren’t the only controversial topic of the early 20th century. The identity of America itself was a crucial point too, as many white Protestant men sought to maintain their status as the chief representatives of American ideals. The Ku Klux Klan rose to power for the second time in 1915 to
terrorize black Americans and keep them from acting on laws guaranteeing their equality, and immigration laws in the 1920s made it difficult for anyone but Northern Europeans to become citizens. For decades, it was basically impossible for people from Asia, Arabia, and Africa to immigrate to the United States. And if they did manage to reach America, they found that the nation's ideals of freedom and equality did not necessarily apply to them.