TOPIC 8 – THE END OF THE PLAINS INDIANS

The Destruction of the Buffalo

Between 1840 and 1885 the buffalo were hunted to almost extinction; their numbers fell from an estimated 13 million in 1840 to around 200 in 1885.

Settlement on the edge of the Great Plains, the construction of the railroads across the Great Plains, the destruction of the buffalo’s natural habitat and the introduction of new diseases all contributed.

Hunting for sport

- To begin with, buffalo were hunted for food and sport.
- Hunting increased when the railroads reached the Great Plains.
- Special excursion trains were run so that people could go out and shoot buffalo for sport.
- Buffalo hunters were employed to keep the workers on the supplied with fresh meat.

Hunting for hides

- In 1871, an eastern tannery discovered a process to produce high quality leather from buffalo hides. This caused the price of buffalo hides to increase.
- Railroads had reached the Great Plains. Trains could transport the hides east to the tanning industry.
- Hunters were armed with powerful rifles with a long range.
- Hunters killed using a method called a stand which was an extremely efficient way of hunting.
- By 1875 the southern herd had been destroyed. By 1883 the northern herd was destroyed.

Hunting for bones

- It was not until after the hide was removed were the bones of buffalo picked.
- Homesteaders and crews of professional ‘bone pickers’ collected skeletons and took them by wagon to railroad sidings. From there they were sent east to the factories.
- In the east, the bones were ground into fertiliser, or made into buttons, combs and knife handles. Hooves were made into glue.

The Reservations

Government Policy

- From 1825 onwards a system of Indian reservations was developed on the Great Plains.
- The Indians were supervised by government-appointed Indian agents.
- Reservations were intended to keep Indians apart from the homesteaders and ranchers.
- On the reservations the Indians were expected to live as farmers. At first, they were allowed to leave the reservations to hunt for buffalo. However, after conflicts in the 1860s and 1870s they lost this right.
Reservation Conditions

- By the 1870s the Indians were virtually prisoners on their reservations and conditions were bad.
- The reservations were usually on land settlers didn’t want, such as poor farm land. This made it difficult for the Indians to feed themselves, and they became depended on government hand-outs of food.
- The Indians were sometimes badly treated by dishonest Indian agents – housing monies were stolen, food rations were inadequate and medical treatment was not available.

The Destruction of Indian Culture

Territorial – through a series of laws the government reduced the size of the Sioux reservation and split up the Sioux Indians into smaller groups.

Political – in 1885 the government took control of all legal matters; Indians lost any power to punish members of their bands. Communal reservation lands were broken into individual plots by the 1887 Dawes General Allotment Act. This meant Indians did not need to go to their chiefs and became self-sufficient.

Economic – the ban of Sioux leaving the reservations to hunt buffalo destroyed their economy.

Religious – feasts, dances and ceremonies were banned. The power of medicine men was undermined. There was little need for young men to seek visions to give them power in war and in the buffalo hunt.

Educational – children were taken from their parents and sent to boarding school. The Sioux were unable to prevent their children being taken, or their rations would be stopped until they gave in. The children lived under military conditions and were taught to have no respect for their traditional way of life.