

The Great West Illustrated, 1869

Introduction

The exploration and settlement of the American West coincided with the development of the medium of photography. Photographic images, reproduced in books and newspapers and available for purchase on their own, helped shape Americans' perceptions of the West by reinforcing ideas about the region as a pristine wilderness of spectacular natural wonders; as a symbol of the future and the realization of manifest destiny; and as a land of economic opportunity, where fortunes could be made by extracting natural resources.

Andrew J. Russell, who served as a photographer with the United States Military Railroad during the Civil War, was hired after the war by the Union Pacific Railroad to photograph the progress made along the track line that extended from Laramie, Wyoming, to Promontory Summit, Utah. Russell's incredible images depicting nature scenes and feats of engineering were collected and published in *The Great West Illustrated*, an 1869 book, according to its preface, "calculated to interest all classes of people, and to excite the admiration of all reflecting minds as the colossal grandeur of the Agricultural, Mineral, and Commercial resources of the West are brought to view."

The four images from *Great West Illustrated* featured below capture the drama of railroad construction and the rugged beauty of western landscapes. Russell took the first photograph here, "High Bluff, Black Buttes," in the mountains of Wyoming. The figures in the image stand above the expanse of landscape. The second photograph is of a group of men "Among the Timber at the Head of the Little Laramie River." In an annotation for this image, Russell noted that "A number of gold mines were discovered . . . in this vicinity, during the summer of 1868."

While the first two images display the great natural beauty of the West, Russell's photographs also depict man's achievements and influence on the landscape. "Laramie Hotel, Laramie City" shows the title hotel, which the photographer noted would "compare very favorably with those of the best . . . in any State of the Union." The rail tracks are visible in the foreground. The final image here emphasizes the actual construction of the railroad. In the annotation for "Gen. Casement's Construction Train," Russell notes that "The workmen have lived on the cars of this train since the commencement of the building of the road."

Photographs are not objective records to be accepted as truth. Many photographers of the West saw themselves as storytellers, and their images, often presented with notes or other text, reveal the attitudes and cultural constructions of their day. We can "read" these photographs just as we would read letters or diaries, as primary sources to be examined and interpreted using the

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information they provide and the context of their time.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction, closely examine the images, and apply your knowledge of American history to answer these questions.

1. What do you think Russell was trying to convey in each photograph? How did he make his points?
2. How do Russell's annotations influence the meaning of his photographs?
3. Imagine that you were a young person in 1869. Would these photographs make you want to find your future or fortune in the West?

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Image



“High Bluff, Black Buttes,” from *The Great West Illustrated* by Andrew J. Russell, 1869. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04348, p21)

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Image



"Among the Timber, at Head of Little Laramie River." (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04348, p19)

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Image



"Laramie Hotel, Laramie City." (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04348, p15)

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Image



"Gen. Casement's Construction Train." (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04348, p44)