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Driven by dreams – Men in the West

Explain the main points of the attached text in your own words.

The text states that men in general, but especially in the 1800's, were eager and driven to seek a different lifestyle, another type of civilization. It was mostly the young men that were adventurous and went out to explore the other possibilities that seemed like the better alternative for a lot of people. They were attracted to the promise of possible prosperity and the chance of a fresh start of a new life where they could participate in decision makings and be in charge themselves. Another main point in the text is the everlasting desire of freedom.

Why did people go West?

Even though going West meant heading towards a more wild and unsafe place, the thing that made them go there anyway was the prospect of being able to create exactly the life that they dreamed of – making dream into reality whether it was prosperity or owning their own land.

What characterized the men of the West?

The men of the west were mostly young men with a high level of energy who didn't feel they were accountable to anyone but themselves. In the text they refer to a scholar named Carl Becker who described the men of the West as men of faith, idealists and individualists. He characterises these qualities as American qualities. Historian Frederick Turner saw the men of the West as having a practical mindset, and being strong and tough. A third man, James Hall, expresses that the men are "tenacious of their honour, and quick in their resentments". What catches my eye about these three statements about the men of the West is that they all mention the love of freedom that the men of the West have. Frederick Turner says that they had a "buoyancy and exuberance that comes from freedom", and James Hall says that they are "spirited lovers of liberty". This is what makes them a classic symbol of American values.

What was the West like?

The first thing the text describes about the west is: "… to many, the West was a rowdy amalgam of raider and trader, lynch and outlaw, a land governed by gunplay and gambling, ruled by prejudice…" This does not sound like a nice place in which to settle down. Although it is described

with all these negative words, these settlers get a special bond between them as they become a community and "kin".

Why was the West so violent?

One of the reasons the west was so wild was partly due to the men turning to hard drinking and wanting to be manly and heroic which caused them to do reckless and violent things. This is shown by the term "to be game" which meant that a man would take on any challenge, even though it could be criminal. The text takes an example with a 15-year old boy who believed that he could not be anything in life, if he had not shot someone. Another reason was the diversity of men who couldn't get along due to their jobs. Like sheepmen and cowmen who didn't get along because of their animals' needs.

The text also refers to the amount of weaponry and the rootlessness as a reason for the violence. Because the men did not have an allegiance to the state, town or territory, they did not feel they had any responsibility towards the place. Some men did not even want to settle in West, they just came there to make a fortune and then go back to where they came from which made them less bound to take responsibility for their actions. As the philosopher Carl Becker says, the American man cares more for making money than the money itself, because this would represent "struggle, achievement and progress".

It was violent because they all wanted a part of the riches they could find. In one way they could be a close knit community, but they were still against one another because they all wanted to achieve the same thing.

Discuss why the cowboy has become such an important symbol of the American dream.

I think the reason the cowboy has become such an important symbol of the American dream is that the cowboy is not restrained by anything. He does what is necessary to achieve what he finds important, and does not have to put anyone's needs over his own unless he chooses to. Another reason could possibly be that the cowboy does not rely on others to help him but that he has to do it himself. If there is a threat of any kind towards his safety, he will do something about it. He can protect himself. The passion for protecting oneself is still very important for Americans. This can

be seen in the way that Americans believe it is a part of their freedom to own guns and that the laws or restrictions towards the sale of guns of different kinds are very different from laws about guns in Europe, for instance. A lot of people in the US still have that old mentality of the cowboy; they do not rely on others to do what they can do for themselves. They will not even rely on the police to protect them; they want to be able to do those things themselves. I cannot quite make out if it is a lack of trust or merely a wish to be able to fend for their own lives, and have a chance to protect the ones they love.