



The Frontier in American Culture: An Exhibition at the Newberry Library, August 26, 1994-January 7, 1995

Richard White, Patricia Nelson Limerick, James R. Grossman

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Log cabins and wagon trains, cowboys and Indians, Buffalo Bill and General Custer. These and other frontier images pervade our lives, from fiction to films to advertising, where they attach themselves to products from pancake syrup to cologne, blue jeans to banks. The authors explore here the USA's pre-occupation with this uniquely American image. Richard White examines the two most enduring stories of the frontier, both told in Chicago in 1893, the year of the Columbian Exposition. One was Frederick Jackson Turner's remarkably influential lecture, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"; the other took place in William "Buffalo Bill" Cody's flamboyant extravaganza, "The Wild West". Turner recounted the peaceful settlement of an empty continent, a tale that placed Indians at the margins. Cody's story put Indians - and bloody battles - at centre stage, and culminated with the Battle of the Little Bighorn, popularly known as "Custer's Last Stand." Seemingly contradictory, these two stories together reveal a complicated national identity. Patricia Limerick shows how the stories took on a life of their own in the 20th century and were then reshaped by additional voices - those of Indians, Mexicans, African-Americans, and others, whose versions revisit the question of what it means to be an American.

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