SSUSH12 – Evaluate how westward expansion impacted the Plains Indians and fulfilled Manifest Destiny.

As eastern regions of the United States became more industrialized after the Civil War, people seeking rural livelihoods moved farther and farther west. In turn, American Indians had to compete with these newcomers for land. A series of brutal wars ensued as various Plains Indian tribes attacked settlers, wagon trains, and the Army in an effort to protect their lands. While the American population of settlers spanned the continent and fulfilled the Manifest Destiny of Americans to control the lands between and including both coastlines, the American Indians suffered grave consequences.

a. Examine the construction of the transcontinental railroad including the use of immigrant labor.

The construction of the Transcontinental Railroad would not have been possible had a large supply of immigrant labor not been available. Other critical components of the railroad's construction include public investment through land grants and guaranteed construction costs. The federal government granted vast areas of western land to railroad owners. Railroad right-of-ways were 10 miles wide, plus 400 feet so the railroads could sell the land to help finance the cost of construction.

Generally, Irish and German laborers constructed the rail route from east to west. The owners of the Central Pacific Railroad, who were building the line from California initially brought European immigrants from the east but had trouble keeping them working due to the proximity and lure of the gold fields. As replacements, the owners hired available Chinese labor in California and then brought in additional Chinese labor to complete the task. Chinese workers were paid approximately $28-$35 per month (compared to $50 European workers earned) to do the very dangerous work of blasting and laying ties over the treacherous terrain of the high Sierras. The work was very dangerous and many Chinese laborers died in the explosive blasts they ignited to cut the solid rock roadbed. Many others died under landslides and heavy snowfalls before the Transcontinental Railroad was completed.

b. Evaluate how the growth of the western population and innovations in farming and ranching impacted Plains Indians.

The railroad companies contributed to the development of the West by selling low-cost parcels of their western land for farming. Settlers, lured by the Homestead Act of 1862, traveled west on the trains to farm the fertile soil. Western farmers used the trains to ship their grain east and cattle ranchers shipped their steer to eastern butchers. Both farmers and ranchers sold their goods to people who could not easily be reached without railroads. The railroads earned money by transporting settlers west and goods east. As settlers began to populate the west in growing numbers, they brought with them new farming and ranching techniques.

Ranching in the West had been based on the open range system prior to the 1880s. Cattle were branded with the symbol of their owner’s ranch. Property was not enclosed by costly fencing, which meant the branded cattle roamed freely. Cowboys were hired by ranch owners each spring to go on extensive round-ups to collect the cattle belonging to that owner. The round-up could cover hundreds of miles.
given the open-range. The cowboys would then “drive” the cattle to the closest railroad line, which could also be hundreds of miles away and take weeks or even months to complete. The work of the cowboys was difficult and often lonely.

During the late 1880s, the open-range system declined with the development of barbed wire fencing. The new fencing material made it incredibly cheap and easy to enclose even the largest of ranches. The work of cowboys changed as cattle round-ups and drives took on new characteristics centered within the newly enclosed ranches. Plains Indians were impacted by the change in ranching. Many of the nomadic tribes became restricted in their ability to roam freely when land was roped off by barbed wire fencing. Conflict over land claims also escalated as ranchers began to claim larger tracts of land that were also inhabited by American Indians.

Farming in the West was also transformed after the Civil War as more settlers moved to the region. Life was hard for the homesteaders who worked to make a life for their families. New plows were introduced that could tackle the tough sod of the West. With the increased plowing and more scientific methods of farming, the West was a more desirable location for settlers to make a new start. The increased plowing and farming coupled with drought led to environmental challenges that became significant issues in the early twentieth century.

American Indians in the region were impacted by the increased population and farming because once again their land was being claimed by White settlers. The ability of Plains Indians to migrate with the buffalo herd was limited as more farmers sectioned off their land with barbed wire and changed the landscape with their farming methods.

c. **Explain the Plains Indians’ resistance to western expansion of the United States and the consequences of their resistance.**

In 1868, the United States government reached an agreement with many of the Plains Indian tribes when they signed the Fort Laramie Treaty. The provisions stated that in exchange for receiving land set aside for them in the Black Hills of the Dakotas, the Plains nations agreed to not harass or threaten western settlers. The treaty was not very effective after gold was discovered in the Black Hills in 1875. Settlers flooded the area searching for gold in violation of the treaty and warfare broke out.

The Great Sioux War of 1876-1877 culminated in the Battle of the Little Big Horn that resulted in the deaths of most of the United States’ Seventh Cavalry Unit. Even though the Plains Indians won the battle, they still faced insurmountable challenges with the superior numbers and organization of the U.S. Army. The United States government challenged the American Indians by targeting the buffalo and wiping out the Plains tribes' main food supply. While some American Indian bands escaped to Canada, most of the surviving Plains tribes were forced to live on reservations.

One of the great American Indian leaders of the period was the Lakota leader, Sitting Bull (Tatanka-iyotanka). He became a noted warrior as a result of the fighting between the United States and the Lakota in 1863. After continued incursions into Lakota Territory in 1876, Sitting Bull led the coalition of Plains tribes against the U.S. Army. The resulting conflict was the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Afterward,
a large force of U.S. Army troops relentlessly pursued the Plains bands subduing some groups but Sitting Bull led his people into Canada. After five years in exile and unable to feed his people, Sitting Bull returned to the United States and finally agreed to settle on a reservation.

About ten years later, Sitting Bull's tribe was urged to join the new Ghost Dance religious movement that was sweeping through the Plains tribes. The American Indians believed their ceremony would reestablish their ancestral lands and repopulate the buffalo herd, thus restoring the Sioux's lost greatness. As some of Sitting Bull's followers were ordered to be brought back to the reservation, a confrontation with elements of the Seventh Cavalry ensued. As the soldiers began to confiscate weapons from the Sioux, a shot was fired. Some of Sitting Bull's followers may have been convinced that their Ghost shirts would protect them as they resisted the soldiers. This tragic gun battle at Wounded Knee ended in the deaths of over 300 Sioux, including women and children. This was the last major conflict between American Indians and the U.S. Army and signaled the end of resistance to white settlers' westward expansion.