



The West the Railroads Made

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Rail Conflict

European Immigrants

By David Jepsen

Millions of newcomers from throughout Europe sought out new homes in the West in the nineteenth century, especially in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana. The railroad was sometimes how they came or why they came.

European presence in the West started in the seventeenth century. Spanish colonizers set up missions in the upper Rio Grande Valley in what is now Texas and New Mexico. Two hundred years later Europeans kept up their western movement, seeking cheap land, better economic opportunity, or religious freedom. Development of railroads spurred this western migration by offering easier transportation and new job opportunities.

As the chart below shows, a significant percentage of the populations of the four Northwest states were of European origin at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹ Many were farmers who turned open prairie into farmland. Others were laborers, working in the coal and copper mines or on the transcontinental railroads. Others still settled in cities, from German Jews who set up shops in Portland to Swedish fishermen in Seattle.²

Country of Origin	Montana	%	Idaho	%	Wash.	%	Oregon	%
England	17,117	7.0	7,290	7.9	25,519	4.9	16,394	4
Germany	18,482	7.6	8,579	5.3	43,555	8.4	36,547	8.8
Ireland	27,591	11.3	5,643	3.5	23,548	4.6	14,058	3.4
Norway	5,679	2.3	2,766	1.7	18,814	3.6	5,566	1.4
Scotland	6,023	2.5	3,044	1.9	10,013	1.9	6,542	1.6
Sweden	8,212	3.4	5,522	3.4	21,361	4.1	8,270	2
Totals	83,104	34.1	32,843	23.7	142,810	27.5	87,377	21.2



This 1892 image is of an unidentified railroad worker and his wife near a Northern Pacific construction site, probably in Idaho. [click to zoom >](#)



This broadside, written in Swedish, encourages settlement by promoting mining, logging and agricultural resources in Washington state. [click to zoom >](#)

1. *European Immigrants: American West Community Histories*, ed. Frederick Luebke, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998, xi-xiii.

2. *European Immigrants: American West Community Histories*, ed. Frederick Luebke, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998, xi-xiii. Number and Percentage of Total Population of Foreign-Born White Persons Plus Native-Born persons of Foreign Parentage (First- and Second-Generation Immigrants) by Country of Origin in the States and Territories of the American West in 1900; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census Reports, vol. 1 Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, pt. 1 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1901), cxcvi-cvcvii; as appeared in *European Immigrants*, xi-xiii.