

**DECISIVE EPISODES  
IN  
WESTERN HISTORY**

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Decisive episodes in western history by Laenas G. Weld

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DECISIVE EPISODES IN WESTERN  
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As you travel along some highway, turning aside to avoid this pitfall or that rock or some snag in your way, always watching your next footstep and taking only casual note of the trees, the buildings, or even the fields, groves, and hills as you pass them, it may suddenly occur to you to look back and see how far you have come and what the way is like. When behold! There is spread out before you a landscape beautiful, always beautiful—for mere perspective is pleasing, regardless of its content. You see now the relation and extent of the groves and meadows and uplands passed, the quiltlike pattern of the fields, and the road itself along which you have traveled. But the pitfall, the rock, the snag which threatened to trip you, also the flowers which you plucked and threw aside, the spring at which you refreshed yourself—these details have disappeared, obscured by larger features of

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which you took no note in passing. It was a very ordinary country as you journeyed through it; but now, as you look back upon it, the view affords a prospect of singular interest and you only wish that the haze in which the landscape has become enveloped would lift a bit that you might see a little more clearly.

And like unto this is History. In it we see the perspective of once current events and relations, which have drifted into the past, where all minor and merely personal incidents are obliterated; and over which tradition, in its quality of mercy, spreads the haze which softens down the hard lines and blends the inharmonious tints that ever mar the present.

When the development of our Middle West shall, with the lapse of time, have assumed the proper perspective it will afford one of the most marvelous and thrilling chapters in history. We who are familiar with only its later and more complex phases have seen enacted a drama bolder than playwright has ever dared to conceive. The kinetoscopic process by which a wilderness has been transformed into a garden, an organized society evolved from the most heterogeneous ele-

ments, a liberty-loving yet law-abiding people assembled out of the fugitives from European tyranny and oppression — this has no parallel in the annals of human progress.

In the later phases of this development the railway has been the pioneer. After feeling its way along the most fertile valleys and across the fairest stretches of prairie from one commercial vantage point to another, the railroad took up the task of transporting, not only the populations of whole districts, but also the very buildings for their habitation; not only the materials and implements of agriculture, but also the products of agriculture and the proceeds yielded by these products in the eastern markets; took up the task, in fact, of earning the money to pay its dividends, to redeem its bonds, to improve its roadbed and equipment and to carry its operations into new fields and push still farther west the borders of up-to-date civilization. Indeed, the study of the settlement of the West — beyond the Mississippi and, even more so, beyond the Missouri — is a study in transportation.

But this rapid development has been the sequel to three centuries of preparation. Of these cen-



turies the first two were, roughly speaking, devoted to the solution of the purely geographical problems presented by the great interior wilderness of North America; the third, to social and political establishment.

No event had ever before so disturbed the world's equilibrium as the discovery of America. As the extent and resources of the new continent gradually revealed themselves, the significance of the discovery became more and more apparent. Europeans were fairly staggered at the wider outlook upon the world afforded by the voyages of Columbus, Vasco da Gama and Magellan — at finding themselves in such new and unsuspected relations to the planet upon which they lived. As the round globe revealed itself, the ancient mythical boundaries betwixt the known and the unknown, with all their vague terrors, were swept away. To the peoples of Europe a vast field for adventurous exploitation was suddenly thrown open. The future no longer lay before them upon the same dead level as the past. It loomed up before them, presenting practical problems of a new sort, problems for the solution

of which they were little prepared, either by experience or by their natural proclivities.

Thus, while enthusiasm was high, progress was slow. Between Europe and the new continent lay a thousand leagues of ocean; the navigation of which, though it had lost its mythical terrors, was still attended by real dangers of a very substantial sort. The perilous passage made, the bold adventurers faced a continent for the most part inhospitable. Such welcome as they were occasionally accorded by the aboriginal inhabitants was easily, and usually, turned to sullen suspicion. It was before the days of canned provisions and the many collapsible and portable contrivances which to-day make of such expeditions, relatively at least, mere "outings".

In the South the Spaniard looted and destroyed two civilizations in his lust for gold and was lured through vast wildernesses in the vain search for yet other Eldorados. In the North the Frenchman scoured still vaster territories in his equally rapacious, though less demoniacal, quest for furs. In the middle land, between the sub-tropic heat and the sub-arctic cold, the sturdy

Englishman, while despising neither gold nor furs, grubbed a safer living from the soil.

Spain was soon shorn of her prestige; but her just and inevitable reward was long — too long — delayed. The record of her atrocities in the New World closed only as the waters of Havana Harbor closed over the *Maine*. Above the scenes enacted at Manila and at Santiago there may well have hovered the avenging angels of Montezuma and Atahualpa. But the career of Spain this side of the sea is of little concern to us, except that, through meddling with it, it has of late years bequeathed to us our full share of the “white man’s burden” and “the big brother’s responsibility”.

Not so with the rival careers of France and of England in America. From that rivalry, as it deepened into struggle and from struggle into the death grip, was developed American independence. We are familiar with the story. As school boys we learned it and dwelt upon its incidents with patriotic pride. But there are many features of the story as ordinarily told which, from our western point of view, need emphasizing. Its perspective is quite different as we see