

“1876: Transition to Modern America” by Don Keko

<http://www.examiner.com/article/1876-transition-to-modern-america>

1876 marked the American centennial. The year also signaled a transition in American history. It spelled the beginning of the end of the Indian Wars. The presidential election led to the end of Reconstruction in the South. The telephone's invention signaled an age of modernity. Even the world of sports changed with the formation of baseball's National League. In many respects, 1876 brought an end of one period and the beginning of another.

The Indian Wars began in earnest in the 17th century. Over the next two centuries, Americans and Indians confronted one another over land and other issues. These confrontations led to atrocities and massacres perpetuated by both sides. As America expanded west, the conflict followed. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Great Plains served as the main battlefield. The Sioux and their allies refused to submit or surrender their sacred land. In 1876, the U.S. government sent George Armstrong Custer to deal with the problem.

Prior to the Battle of Little Big Horn, Sitting Bull had a vision of soldiers falling. The warriors interpreted his vision as a good omen. Meanwhile, General Custer mustered his troops for battle. The flamboyant commander split his forces and chose to attack the main encampment. He successfully used this strategy in the past. However, the warriors were not in the camp. Custer's force was overwhelmed and lost nearly 300 men. The American public reacted in horror and those sympathetic to the Indian's plight changed their view. The U.S. military responded with a scorched earth policy that defeated and devastated the Indians. The Indian Wars were over by 1892.

While the Little Big Horn marked the beginning of the end of the Indian Wars, the presidential election spelled the end of Reconstruction. Following the Civil War, the North hoped to reform the South and provide equal rights to the freedmen. Over the next decade, the South fiercely resisted Northern reform attempts and even resorted to terrorism to achieve their goals. By 1876, voters tired of the Reconstruction issue and wanted peace. Additionally, scandals undercut public confidence in the government. On top of this, an economic depression further sapped public support for the government's reconstruction policy.

Each party nominated a reform candidate for president. However, the Republican Party held little credibility on the issue after eight years of the Grant Administration. Scandal, combined with a sour economy, resulted in the popular election of Democrat Samuel Tilden. However, the Republicans refused to concede. Southern terrorists worked feverishly and violently to suppress the Republican vote and elect Tilden. In the end, a committee was established to determine the winner. The Republican Rutherford B. Hayes won the White House. The Democrats won the recall of northern troops and the end of Reconstruction. Northern troop withdrawals signified to African Americans that they were on their own. By 1900, the status of African Americans was actually worse than under slavery. It took a second reconstruction a century later to finally achieve freedom.

While racial strife dominated military and political affairs, a group of inventors worked on bettering the future. Although Thomas Edison was the foremost of these inventors, Alexander Graham Bell achieved one of the more significant breakthroughs in 1876. He received a patent for the telephone. This invention changed the nature of communications. Before, people needed a telegraph operator to send messages quickly and to decipher the code. After, they merely needed to pick up the receiver and speak. Over 130 years later, the phone remains an important part of daily life and modern communication.

The telephone is not the only invention impacting lives today. In the 1920s, sports became a national obsession. In particular, baseball dominated the period. The first major league incorporated in 1876. The National League formed with eight franchises, two of which, the Cubs and Braves, exist today. Other leagues attempted to rival the NL, but only the American League, founded in 1901, survived. Today, the rival leagues, and their 30 teams, constitute Major League Baseball. The creation of the National League in 1876 serves as the genesis of modern American professional sports.

The American Centennial witnessed major changes within the United States. America's greatest defeat in the Indian Wars forced commanders to redouble their efforts and eventually led to the end of conflict with the Native Americans. Reconstruction ended leaving millions of African Americans to their former masters. Technological advances began changing the nature of the country. Professional sports organized into associations which led to America's love for sports. In many respects, events in 1876 created the nation that exists today.

Credit Mobilier: America's Greatest 19th Century Scandal

<http://www.examiner.com/article/credit-mobilier-america-s-greatest-19th-century-scandal>

The Grant Administration suffered through eight years of scandal. Only the Clinton Administration faced as many major scandals. Interestingly, the worst scandal of the Grant years began under Abraham Lincoln. The Credit Mobilier company bribed congressmen with cash and stock shares in return for continued support. The scandal broke in 1872 and represents one of the four major scandals in U.S. history alongside the Lewinsky Affair, Watergate, and Teapot Dome. In many respects, Credit Mobilier is the worst because it involved both the executive and legislative branches.

George Francis Train and Thomas Durant created the Credit Mobilier company in 1864. Durant served as vice president of the Union Pacific Railroad. The new company served as a front for Union Pacific. Train and Durant hoped to fool the government into believing the two entities operated independently of each other. The pair hoped to hide graft and corruption within the company and then overcharge the government for construction of rail lines.

Credit Mobilier defrauded the government through billing. The front company presented legitimate invoices for construction to Union Pacific. The railroad forwarded the bill to the federal government. The company billed the government for the construction costs per their contract and added a fee to the invoice generated from Credit Mobilier. The company's accounting techniques hid the fraud making discovery impossible.

In addition to the fraudulent accounting and billing, the company moved to secure congressional support to thwart any potential investigations. They sold stock to politicians at a discounted rate in exchange for their support and additional federal funding. Since they purchased the stock at an extreme discount rate, congressmen sold the stock at the market value and made huge profits. At the same time, they voted increased funding to Credit Mobilier.

The public remained unaware of this arrangement between Credit Mobilier and Congress until a newspaper wanted to effect the outcome of the 1872 Presidential Election. The New York Sun opposed Grant's re-election bid and hoped to damage the president with the story. They printed letters from Credit Mobilier's CEO and former Congressman Oakes Ames that claimed they over billed the government by nearly \$20 million. After publication, Union Pacific stock crashed and Grant won re-election.

The Sun's story forced congressional action. The legislature investigated thirteen members of Congress and Ames. The federal government also investigated. The investigations discovered over thirty members of Congress from both parties took bribes. Congress censured Ames and former CEO James Brooks. The scandal implicated future President James Garfield and Vice President Schyler Colfax. For his part, Grant knew nothing of the graft. The scandal just happened to break during his presidency. However, Grant's administration suffered through several major scandals and Credit Mobilier seemed to confirm the perception that he ran a corrupt government.

Credit Mobilier involved the bribery of over thirty members of congress, the sitting vice president, and a future president. The company served as a front to allow Union Pacific to over bill the government for railroad construction. As with many scandals, it broke because a media member wanted to effect the outcome of an election. Although Watergate led to Nixon's resignation and the Lewinsky Affair resulted in Clinton's impeachment, Credit Mobilier is the worst scandal in American history because it involved so many public servants.

Top 10 Moments of the 1870s

<http://www.examiner.com/article/top-10-moments-of-the-1870s>

In the 1870s, America continued to recover from the Civil War. The sectional strife which began two decades earlier continued until the North capitulated in 1877. At the same time, labor strife began in earnest and the country witnessed a technological revolution led by Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell. Meanwhile, the Indian Wars continued and the government moved toward a laissez faire economy ushering in the so-called “Gilded Age.” The following are the top 10 moments of the decade in chronological order.

The Fifteenth Amendment is ratified (1870): Following the Civil War, the Radical Republicans believed the South would accept defeat and comply with the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. Instead, the South fought against black rights from the start of Reconstruction and received support from President Andrew Johnson. President Grant hoped to secure black voting rights through a constitutional amendment. The Fifteenth Amendment guaranteed the right to vote for black men. Unfortunately, the South circumvented the amendment with literacy tests and poll taxes. It would be another century before the federal government enforced the law.

Grant crushes the Ku Klux Klan (1872): Southerners used violence to block enforcement of the Fifteenth Amendment and oppress blacks and their white allies. The group sought to “redeem” the South for the Democratic Party and reinstitute white supremacy. The Klan resorted to extreme violence and murder to achieve their goals. In response, Congress passed several acts designed to end racial violence. President Grant used the Klan Acts to prosecute the terrorists and restore order to the South. However, similar groups emerged in 1874 and reinitiated their white supremacist campaign. By this point, the Grant Administration lacked the political capital to act.

The Panic of 1873 (1873-1879): Scandal and economic depression sapped Ulysses S. Grant’s political power. In 1873, bank failures in Vienna spread throughout the world. In the United States, bank failures combined with a railroad bubble to collapse the economy. The depression lasted six years and helped lead to the end of Reconstruction.

Invention of the Telephone (March 10, 1876): Alexander Graham Bell and several other inventors competed to create the first telephone. Bell defeated his opponents when he created the first instrument that allowed clear bi-directional speech. The phone dramatically changed communications and displaced the telegraph. The phone remains a key component of modern life over 130 years later.

United States v. Cruikshank (March 27, 1876): On April 13, 1873, a white paramilitary force attacked a group of black freedmen in Louisiana. The Democratic partisans murdered over 100 people, many of them unarmed, and a number of them after surrender. The government indicted and convicted several members of the mob. The Supreme Court overturned the convictions claiming the Fourteenth Amendment guarantees of due process and equal protection did not apply to individuals. This decision was one in a series of erroneous decisions the Supreme Court made designed to invalidate the Fourteenth Amendment.

Custer’s Last Stand (July 25, 1876): The Sioux won a dramatic and overwhelming victory over the U.S. Cavalry at Little Big Horn. Prior to the battle, Sitting Bull experienced several visions which inspired his people. Crazy Horse led the Indians into battle against General George Armstrong Custer and the Seventh Cavalry. Custer made a series of mistakes which lead to the annihilation of his command. The Native Americans lost around 100 people, most of whom were women and children, while Custer lost 268. In the aftermath, the defeat horrified Americans and sapped support for native peoples. The U.S. government responded ruthlessly with a scorched earth campaign. In the end, the Indians won the Battle of Little Big Horn, but it cost them the war.

The Compromise of 1877: Democratic candidate Samuel Tilden won the popular vote in the 1876 Presidential Election. However, the Republicans challenged the results in three Southern states. White supremacists used violence to intimidate voters and secure many areas of the South for the Democrats. The Democrats agreed to surrender the electoral votes of Louisiana, Florida, and South Carolina to the Republicans. In return, the Republicans surrendered the South and ended the occupation. The so-called Compromise of 1877 ended Reconstruction, allowed the South to manage their own affairs, and left millions of African Americans to their former masters.

The Railroad Strike of 1877 (July 14-August 28, 1877): As a result of the Panic of 1873, railroads cut workers' pay by 10%. This action combined with poor working conditions convinced many workers to strike following another proposed pay cut. The work stoppage began in Martinsburg, West Virginia against the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The strike, and violence, spread throughout the country. In response to the violence and economic dislocation caused by the strike, President Hayes used federal troops under the command of General Winfield Scott Hancock to end the unrest. Throughout the period, the federal government always sided with management over labor. Theodore Roosevelt changed this when he remained decidedly neutral in labor relations.

The Phonograph is invented (November 21, 1877): The first device able to broadcast sounds was patented in 1857. Twenty years later, Thomas Edison created the phonograph. Interestingly, he was actually trying to create an early answering machine. Edison unveiled his invention in November 1877. The phonograph remained relevant until the 1980s and 1990s when other technologies replaced it. However, people still own record players and some artists still like to record onto vinyl.

Edison invents the lightbulb (October 22, 1879): Thomas Edison built on nearly a century of research to create his lightbulb. After much experimentation, he discovered the carbon filament. His initial successful test lasted over 13 hours. Although a prolific inventor, Edison is best remembered for his light bulb. Electric light itself symbolized the modernizing forces at work in the late 19th century.