

The Gilded Age 1878-1897

The Gilded Age was an era of extreme wealth for a few and poverty for many in the United States. "Gilded" means covered over with gold. The Gilded Age received its name because many problems were covered up or ignored by the government and the wealthy.

The wealthy grew even richer because they owned the factories, banks, and businesses and had almost total control over working conditions, wages, and working hours. Many workers, including children, worked long hours for very little pay in unsafe workshops and factories. Large numbers of immigrants and freed slaves who traveled to cities for work found themselves living in harsh conditions and working under harsher conditions.

The writer who named this era was none other than Mark Twain, who, with a coauthor, described vicious politicians and greedy industrialists in a book called *The Gilded Age*. Other political novels were published and became a type of social protest that grew stronger through the end of this era. Many people saw the injustices and inequalities created by industrialism, so this era led to an age of great social and government reform.

During the Gilded Age, the wealthiest 1 percent of U.S. citizens were extremely wealthy. Ninety percent of the wealth in the country was owned by just 10 percent of the population. That left only 10 percent of the money for 90 percent of the population.

Exercise

1. What does "gilded" mean? _____

2. Why was this time in history named the Gilded Age? _____

3. Describe some differences between the wealthy and the poor during the Gilded Age. _____

4. Who named this time period? How? _____

5. What form of social protest emerged in reaction to the unequal distribution of wealth? _____

