



The United States of America A General Survey

美国概况

朱锡炎 编著



旅游教育出版社

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Compiled by Zhu Xiyan

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PREFACE

I had a dual purpose in writing the book, *The United States of America—A General Survey*. The first is general; to provide for the common reader of English material written in intermediate English. This common reader is one who has a generalized interest in the United States; in its geography, its economy, its historical development and its customs. Accordingly, I have made an effort to include terms that Americans themselves use, such as nicknames for cities (the Big Apple, Beantown), popular phrases (Ma Bell, Foggy Bottom) and the most frequently used American terms for historical events (the Great Depression, Watergate Scandal). I hope that our common reader will find this book both informative and interesting.

Inasmuch as the author is also a teacher, the second purpose is to provide for our students (future tourist guides) a teaching material. So far as pedagogy is concerned, the text may be used for various ends. These include, in no particular order, the following possibilities:

1. As a text for history course;
2. As a model for student composition;
 - a. using the text as a model, write a description of cities in China;
 - b. Using the text as a model, describe Chinese festivals or holidays;
3. As a source book for long term papers;

e. g. The student will pick a topic—"The Development of Agriculture in the U. S.: 1850--1900", "The Haymarket Massacre", "The Origins of World War II"—do additional research in the library, and write the term paper.

An inventive teacher will find additional uses for this text.

In writing this book, I have resolutely avoided notes and translations in Chinese, first because the most effective language learning occurs when the language is used to explain the language itself. All native speakers of every language are successful in their language because they do not translate; rather, they develop ways of understanding that fit their language level, and even happily skip what they do not understand. The second reason is psychological: if a foreign speaker relies on notes in his native language, he never develops the feeling that is possible to cope with an all-foreign language book. It is largely this feeling that one cannot do it that guarantees that one cannot do it.

Finally, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to my foreign expert colleague at the Beijing Institute of Tourism, Dr. F. A. Kretschmer, for having read this material in manuscript form, for suggesting various changes, and for contributing to the introduction. His assistance was indispensable and invaluable in the process.

Zhu Xiyan

INTRODUCTION

The United States of American is a young country, composed of very diverse people and occupying a large expanse of originally unspoiled resources. These historical givens have resulted in a particular culture and in distinctive social institutions.

In 1776, some 250 years after the establishment of the first colony on the future continental United States, the American colonies declared their independence from their motherland. The history of this independent country, therefore, extends over a scant 215 years, the first 125 of which were dominated by isolationism and an attendant indifference to foreign affairs. As a glance at a world map will show, geography re-inforced this isolationism. The United States was dragged out of this isolation and into involvement with the rest of the world during the first and second world wars, and found itself on stage center of world events with little or no previous experience for the role it was to play. It should surprise no one that its foreign policy was parochial and that it continues to vacillate between involvement and isolationism.

Furthermore, with the exception of the largely ignored American Indians, the United States has no indigenous population. Everyone originally came from somewhere else, often quite recently, where they were unhappy with one aspect or another of their country of birth. (The Blacks are exceptions to this: they were forcibly brought to the

United States as slaves.) Thus, a dominant feature of American culture is the rejection of the values of other countries and a search for "new ways" of doing things. These two factors explain the vanity of American thinking --"our way is best"--and the efficiency of the population is developing and eventually ruining their natural resources. The diversity of the population may also explain its considerable creativity; it undoubtedly explains the US system of government which was designed to reconcile and protect the interests of disparate groups.

Every country is *sui generis*, one of a kind. Young, diverse, geographically isolated and rich in natural resources, the United States developed social institutions that fit the needs of those particular conditions. Certainly, the histories and state of every country may be used as sources of information and as examples of other ways of doing things. However, successful change depends on adapting the model to fit the adapter's national characteristics.

The above views have, to a large extent, influenced the author in his presentation. Realizing that all societies have both good and bad points, the author has attempted to strike a balance in his presentation, to explain rather than condemn, but neither avoiding criticism when criticism is warranted, nor withholding praise when praise is due.

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Chapter I

Panoramic View

1. Geographical position and territory

The United States of America (or the U.S.A. for short) is situated in the central-southern part of North America. The United States is a varied land of forests, deserts, mountains, high plateaux and fertile plains. The continental United States stretches 4,500 kilometers from the Atlantic Ocean on the east to the Pacific Ocean on the west. It borders Canada on the north and reaches south to Mexico and the Gulf of Mexico. A jet plane crosses the continental United States from east to west in about five hours.

The United States has a total area of 9,363,000 square kilometers, which makes it the fourth largest country in the world, next only to the Soviet Union, Canada and China. Its coastline runs to about 22,680 kilometers.

With the exception of Alaska, which borders on northwestern Canada, and Hawaii, which lies in the Pacific 3,200 kilometers from the mainland, all the other states are on the mainland. Alaska is the largest of the 50 states in areas while Rhode Island is the smallest. Washington D.C., the nation's capital, is a district under the special jurisdiction of the U.S. Congress.

Apart from the 50 states, there are some overseas colonies: Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and the Panama Canal Zone in Latin America, and in the Pacific, Midway Island, Wake, Guam, Johnson Island, Jarvis Island, Howland Island, Baker Island, American Samoa and so forth.

2. Physical features and topography

So far as its geographical features are concerned, the large territory of the continental United States can be divided into three basic areas: the Atlantic Seacoast and the Appalachian Mountains in the east; the Central Plains; and the Rockies west to the Pacific Ocean.

(1) The Atlantic Seacoast and the Appalachian Mountains

The Atlantic Seacoast, the nearest to Europe from America, was the first to be settled by immigrants. The Southeastern Coastal Plains are plains washed by the Atlantic Ocean and, farther south, by the Gulf of Mexico. They stretch from New York southward through Florida down to the estuary of the Rio Grande. They are lowlands of up to 200 meters above sea level, hence the name "tide-water region." The Atlantic Coastal Plain is only a few dozen kilometers wide in its northern part, but it extends to a width of 350 kilometers in its southwestern part.

To the west of this coastal plain lie the Appalachian Mountains, which extend from Maine southwest into central Alabama—with special names in some areas. These are old mountains, largely eroded away, with

rounded contours, and forested as a rule to their summits. Few of these rise much above 1,100 meters, although the highest, Mt. Mitchell in North Carolina, reaches 2,037 meters. The Appalachian Mountains do not run directly north to south but rather northeast to southwest, covering a distance of about 3,000 Kilometers.

(2) The Central plains

The Central Plains lie between the Appalachians in the east and the Rocky Mountains in the west, and stretch from the Great Lakes in the north to the Gulf of Mexico in the south, covering nearly half the area of the U.S. proper. They may be subdivided into two parts: (a) the Central Lowlands and (b) the High Western Plains.

(a) The Central Lowlands extend from the U. S. -Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico. These vast lowlands lie in the basin of the Mississippi River. Towards the southeast they merge into the Atlantic Coastal Plains; westward they rise gradually to the High Plains at the base of the Rocky Mountains. The soil here is fertile, the climate favorable, and the rainfall is moderate. Because of this, it is the most important agricultural area in the United States, known variously as "the Barn of America", "the Corn Belt", and so on.

(b) Towards the west, the Mississippi lowlands rise gradually to the High Western Plains. These extend from eastern Montana, through Wyoming and eastern Colorado, and southward into Texas. The High Plains are crossed by the Missouri River and other tributaries of the Mississippi River which have cut deep canyons. Apart from the river valleys, the High Plains consist of the

great prairies, where millions of head of cattle graze. This area was very important for beef production, although now large tracts of land in this area have been turned into farmland. It remains nonetheless another important part of the "Barn of America."

(3) The Rockies west to the Pacific Ocean

To the west of the Great Plains rise the Rocky Mountains. These majestic mountains stretch all the way from Mexico to the Arctic. These Western Highlands are the most elevated and rugged regions of the United States. Here are found the Western Cordilleras or the Rocky Mountain Range which consists of three main chains—the Coastal Range, the Cascade Range and the Rocky Mountains proper.

The striking and varied scenery of the Rockies explain the establishment of the many national parks here—38 in all. The most famous is Yellow Stone National Park which covers an area of about 9,000 square kilometers. In this park there are deep canyons, towering waterfalls, great caves far beneath the earth, hot springs and dense virgin forests. The National Grand Canyon Park is also world-renowned. This canyon, about 400 kilometers long and 2 kilometers deep, was cut by the Colorado River. Between the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the Rocky Mountains there is another large area of 170,000 kilometers which is desert. Here lies Death Valley, 86 meters below sea level, the driest and hottest place in the States. The Coastal Valley Plains along the Pacific are narrow, and in many places the mountains plunge directly into the sea. The most extensive lowland near the west coast is the Great Valley of California, and

the Columbia lying between the Sierra Nevada and the Coast Ranges. In these western ranges of the continental US there are 71 peaks that rise to an altitude of 4,300 meters or more, Mt. Whitney in California at 4,418 meters, being the highest. Some other valleys here include the Great Central Valley, Willamette Valley and Silicon Valley, the center of the electronic industry in America.

Separated from the continental US by Canadian territory, the state of Alaska occupies the extreme northwest portion of the North American continent. A series of precipitous mountain ranges separate the heavily indented Pacific Coast on the South from Alaska's broad central basin. The Alaskan Peninsula and the Aleutian Islands, sweeping west far out to sea, consist of a chain of volcanoes, many of which are still active.

The State of Hawaii consists of a group of Pacific islands formed by volcanoes rising sharply from the ocean floor. The highest of these volcanoes, Mauna Loa, (4,168 meters) is still active also.

3. Rivers and Lakes

The United States enjoys abundant fresh water. The country for the most receives more than enough rainfall for agriculture.

The Mississippi River, often called the "Father of Waters", is the most important and largest river in America. The main stream of the river, rising in Lake Itasca to the west of Lake Superior, flows for 3,950 kilometers, but it has become customary to take the largest tributary of the Mississippi—the Missouri River—as the upper reaches in measuring the length of the

Mississippi; following this custom, the Mississippi would stretch for 6,400 kilometers.

The Mississippi River system consists of the main river itself and more than 40 tributaries which drain 28 states, for a drainage area of 3,222,000 square kilometers. Nearly all the rivers West of the Appalachian Mountains and east of the Rockies flow toward each other and empty into this large river. The Mississippi also receives many long tributaries from the Rockies, the principal ones of which are the Missouri River, the Red River, the Des Moines River and others. The Ohio River, which is fed by the Tennessee River and meets with the Mississippi below St. Louis, contributes over half of the water of the Mississippi.

In the lower part of its course the Mississippi meanders through the plain and deposits significant amounts of sediment on its bed. The lower Mississippi and its tributaries, notably the Ohio, are subject to great floods, which, nevertheless, spread alluvia over the land and so increased its fertility.

The most notable of the rivers to the east of the Appalachians are the Hudson River, the Delaware River and the Potomac River. The Hudson River, emptying into New York Bay, provides passage from the Great Lakes through the Erie Canal to the Atlantic and provides a rich hinterland for New York state and the Pennsylvania industrial area. The Potomac River, on whose banks the U. S. capital is situated, is the dividing line between the North and the South.

Another important river in the southwestern part of the country is the Rio Grande, about 3,200 kilometers an important irrigation source for both the southwestern