

Rediscovering America: The Real American Cowboy: Teacher's Guide

Grade Level: 6-8

Curriculum Focus: U.S. History

Lesson Duration: One class period

Program Description

African-American. Hispanic. Female. The real American cowboy bears little resemblance to their Hollywood counterpart. American cowboys led a rough and lonely existence, often left to themselves on the high plains of American Midwest, as they rounded up cattle, tended vast ranches, and lived life constantly on the move. Take a look at the real cowboy's world through historical film clips, archival photographs and demonstrations of the tools of the cowboy's trade.

Onscreen Questions and Activities

- Pre-viewing questions:
 - Why was the cook so important to the cowboy's work? (*The cook also served as doctor, veterinarian, and boss for the cowboys during the trail drives.*)
 - What are the historical roots of the American cowboy? (*The American cowboy has its roots in the traditions of the Mexican cowboy. Many terms such as "lasso," "lariat," "chaps," and "rodeo" were also taken from Mexican culture.*)
 - Discuss the significance of calling the cowboy a myth.
 - How was your idea of the cowboy's work different from that described in the documentary?
 - Activity: Choose a movie you have seen that presents a certain image of the cowboy. Write an analysis of the film comparing it to this documentary. What are the differences between the images of the cowboy in the film and the documentary?
-

Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

Students will understand:

- Old West cowboys produced a category of literature.
- People still write cowboy poetry.
- Cowboy poetry or songs have certain characteristics.

Materials

- *Rediscovering America: The Real American Cowboy* video and VCR, or DVD and DVD player
- Text of the song "Whoopee Ti-Yi-Yo" (see Procedures)
- Computer with Internet access

Procedures

1. Explain that much oral literature tends to be poetry and lyrics because those forms are easier to memorize than prose. The original American cowboys, like other inventors of oral literature, couldn't carry heavy books with them; furthermore, some early cowboys, like other creators of oral literature, might have been illiterate – and forced to memorize songs and poems rather than write them down. This project gives students an opportunity to analyze a classic cowboy song – anthologized since its creation in the 1880s. In addition, students will have a chance to compare and contrast 19th-century cowboy literature with cowboy material being produced today.
2. Share the following quotation, Cowboy Poetry Online (<http://www.clantongang.com/oldwest/trade.htm>), with your students:

Cowboy poetry is as old as cowboys themselves! For lack of better things to do after a hard day on the range, cowboys of the Old West would sit around the camp fire at night and entertain one another with poems, tall tales known as "windies," or just plain good ol' stories.

Ask students to share any situations in which they themselves have sat around, usually in the outdoors, with friends or relatives and entertained one another with poems, songs, and stories. (Sharing of oral literature is often a part of camping out and long car trips. Perhaps some of your students have had opportunities to stay with or travel with working cowboys; if so, can they verify the role of oral literature on the range or the dude ranches of today?)

3. Ask students to name or perform cowboy literature that they have heard before. Then share the words to the following song with them. (Before you begin, you may want to define the following terms for them: *cowpuncher* is just another name for "cowboy"; *dogie* means "a motherless calf on the range" and is pronounced with the long o sound; *cholla*, pronounced "choya," is Spanish for "cactus.")

Whoopee Ti-Yi-Yo

As I was a-walkin' one mornin' for pleasure,
I spied a cowpuncher a-lopin' along.
His hat was throwed back and his spurs was a-jinglin'
And as he approached he was singin' this song:

Chorus

Whoopee ti-yi-yo, git along little dogies,



For you know that Wyoming'll be your new home.
Whoopie ti-yi-yo, git along little dogies,
For you know that Wyoming'll be your new home.

It's early in spring that we round up the dogies.
We mark them and brand them and bob off their tails.
We round up the horses, load up the chuckwagon,
And then throw the dogies up on the long trail.

Chorus

Your mother was raised away down in Texas,
Where the jimson weed and sandburs grow.
Now we'll fill you up on prickly pear and cholla,
Till you are all ready for the trail to Idaho.

Chorus

Oh, you'll be soup for Uncle Sam's Injuns,
"It's beef, heap beef!" I hear them cry.
Git along, git along, git along little dogies;
You'll be beef steers by and by.

Chorus

4. Encourage students to point out the elements of western dialect in "Whoopie Ti-Yi-Yo":
 - Using *a* before present participles: *a-walkin'*
 - Dropping the *g* from present participles and gerunds: *mornin'*
 - Nonstandard verb form of *throwed* for *thrown*
 - Nonstandard subject-verb agreement: *spurs was a-jinglin'*
 - *Git* instead of *get*
5. Ask students what they might deduce about cowboys from this one song. Students may suggest that the singing cowboy sounds happy-go-lucky (a reality or a Hollywood concoction?); that if the cowboy has to sing, perhaps the work is boring; that the cowboy seems disrespectful toward

Indians by calling them "Uncle Sam's Injuns," perhaps a reference to actions that implied the government owned the Native Americans.

6. Invite students to examine Web sites that publish contemporary cowboy poetry. In addition to the site mentioned previously, direct students to the following URLs:
 - Cowboy Poetry
<http://cattlepages.com/pubs/poetry/>
 - Horse Feathers (western poetry)
<http://members.aol.com/teepees1/index.html>
7. Give students time to discuss in small groups characteristics of cowboys that they uncover from cowboy poetry or songs – old or new. If necessary, have them comment on what the poems or songs suggest about the following:
 - Home
 - Independence
 - Education
 - Talent; skills
 - Attitude toward others
8. Share the following quote from "Horse Feathers" site, describing the contemporary poetry there: "Some of it is great, some of it is good, and some of it just is." Ask the students to evaluate the quality of the poetry they read on the Web sites. Is it great? Is it good? Is it mediocre? How do students reach their evaluation?

Discussion Questions

1. The video explores how popular notions of the cowboy were created by wild west shows and how these shows came to define the West. Discuss why this form of entertainment was so popular, and speculate about why people may readily accept this type of mythology. Then, consider the idea expressed in the video that city people need the sort of experiences the myth of the cowboy supplies. What are those experiences, and why might they be missing from our lives? Do you identify with those needs? How real is the cowboy myth? Can you find examples from television or the movies that show a similar type of myth-making today?
2. Who were the people involved in the production of Buffalo Bill Cody's "Wild West Show" - both behind the scenes and in front of the audience? Why does the mythology of the West show the "noble" cowboy only as a white male?
3. What are the positive aspects of the skills and functions of cowboy life? Why do families, such as J.D. Gatsen's, pass down these skills and traditions? Considering all the jobs of a cowboy, list the negative, dangerous and unappealing aspects of the life and work. Does this life seem attractive to you? Why or why not?
4. It is mentioned that cowboys needed to have a certain etiquette if they were going to spend months at a time together. Why was this necessary? How does this compare, both in form and purpose, to the etiquette you practice at school, home, and elsewhere?



Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- 3 points: Students were active in class discussions; pointed out more than one element of western dialect in the song; in small group discussions, shared several characteristics of cowboys that they uncovered from cowboy poetry or songs; clearly and respectfully evaluated the quality of the contemporary poetry they read.
- 2 points: Students participated in class discussions; pointed out one element of western dialect in the song; in small group discussions, shared a few characteristics of cowboys that they uncovered from cowboy poetry or songs; gave a satisfactory evaluation of the quality of the contemporary poetry they read.
- 1 points: Students did not participate class discussions; did not point out any elements of western dialect in the song; in small group discussions, shared one or no characteristics of cowboys that they uncovered from cowboy poetry or songs; gave an unclear or disrespectful evaluation of the quality of the contemporary poetry they read.

Vocabulary

amalgam

Definition: A mixture or combination of different things.

Context: The wild west show was an amalgam of rodeo, round-up, patriot drama, and stage melodrama.

etiquette

Definition: The conduct and procedures to follow in conducting one's social interactions; a mark of good breeding.

Context: If you go out on the trail, seven or eight people for seven months, there has to be some etiquette.

mythic

Definition: Relating to a popular belief or legend that has grown up around a person, object or idea and that exists only in the imagination.

Context: We call him forth, that mythic cowboy.

rodeo

Definition: A competitive public event in which riders test their skills in activities related to livestock, such as bronco riding, bull riding, calf roping, and steer wrestling.

Context: Modern rodeo descends from the wild west shows of the past.

ruffian

Definition: A bully or brutal person.

Context: Before Buffalo Bill, dime novels portrayed cowboys as ruffians.



Academic Standards

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/>.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- History – U.S. History: Understands how the industrial revolution, the rapid expansion of slavery, and the westward movement changed American lives and led to regional tensions.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)

NCSS has developed national guidelines for teaching social studies. To become a member of NCSS, or to view the standards online, go to <http://www.socialstudies.org>

This lesson plan addresses the following thematic standards:

- Time, Continuity, and Change
-