At the Western Frontier: Teacher’s Guide

Grade Level: 9-12  Curriculum Focus: U.S. History  Lesson Duration: Three class periods

Program Description
Ride the transcontinental railroad for a look at how this new mode of transportation changed the makeup of America’s western lands. See what happened to boomtowns after the gold and silver were mined. And explore the realities of frontier life and the myths about the Wild West.

- Changes in the West (4 min.)
- From Boomtown to Ghost Town (3 min.)
- Living the Frontier Life (14 min.)
- Fact vs. Fiction: Movies of the Old West (26 min.)

Onscreen Questions
- What attracted settlers to the West?
- Why did mining towns become ghost towns?
- Why did the American frontier attract so many people?
- How do movies give inaccurate portrayals of the Old West?

Lesson Plan

Student Objectives
- Discuss the differences between myths and facts.
- Examine myths and facts found in movies about “the old west.”
- Write an essay that explains how facts differ from myths and discusses the challenges of determining the truth about historical events.

Materials
- At the Western Frontier program
- Computer with Internet access
- U.S. history textbooks (optional)
Procedures

1. Ask students: What is a myth? (Myths are fictional beliefs or tales that have grown up around a historical event or person; they are often conveyed through oral histories, movies, and television shows.) Point out that some periods of American history have been portrayed in many Hollywood films, which often perpetuate myths. This is especially true about the settling of the American West.

2. Discuss the challenges of determining the facts about events that happened long ago, including the following factors:
   - The existence of conflicting firsthand accounts by people now deceased
   - Long-told myths which have become accepted as truths
   - Societal prejudices, such as racism, that were prevalent among the individuals who wrote contemporary accounts (articles, essays, opinion pieces)

3. Have students view the “Fact vs. Fiction: Movies of the Old West” segment of the At the Western Frontier program.

4. Divide the class into small groups and explain that they will examine Web sites that tell conflicting stories related to the settling of the American West—the Battle of the Alamo, violence on the Western frontier, Davy Crockett’s role in history, and Wyatt Earp’s role in history. Their challenge is to then write an essay that explains what they believe to be the truth in each case and the challenges they faced in trying to separate fact from fiction. Here are the Web sites they should review:
   - The Battle of the Alamo
     http://thealamo.org/battle.html
     http://www.dreamscape.com/morgana/alamex.htm
     http://www.lone-star.net/mall/texasinfo/alamo-battle.htm
   - Violence on the Western Frontier
     http://www.texasbeyondhistory.net/forts/frontier.html
     http://www.iusb.edu/~journal/2000/mcendarfer.html
     http://www.bbhc.org/pointsWest/PWArticle.cfm?ArticleID=83
   - Davy Crockett’s Role in History
     http://www.thealamo.org/Crockett%20Letter.htm
     http://www.americanwest.com/pages/davycroc.htm
     http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/projects/price/acrocket.htm
     http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/CC/fcr24.html
   - Wyatt Earp’s Role in History
     http://members.aol.com/Gibson0817/wearp.htm

5. Give students class time for conducting the research and writing the essays. If needed, have them finish the essays as homework.
6. During the next class period, have the groups share their essays and discuss students’ ideas. How accurate do they think the program’s interpretation of these people and events is? What conclusions did they reach about the best way to determine the “truth” about historical events? Why are myths about history kept alive? If textbooks on U.S. history are available, students may find it interesting to see how the books describe the people and events they researched.

Assessment

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

- 3 points: Students were highly engaged in class and small-group discussions; produced a persuasive essay, with all the requested components; were able to frame clear arguments about the implications of their findings.
- 2 points: Students participated in class and small-group discussions; produced an adequate essay, with most of the requested components; were able to frame some arguments about the implications of their findings.
- 1 point: Students participated minimally in class and small-group discussions; produced an incomplete essay, with few or none of the requested components; were not able to frame arguments about the implications of their findings.

Vocabulary

Alamo
Definition: A structure in San Antonio, Texas, at which a famous battle was fought in 1836 for Texas' independence from Mexico
Context: Historians are still debating exactly what happened at the Alamo and whether all the people in the Alamo died in the structure or were executed later, after the battle was over.

Davy Crockett
Definition: An American frontiersman who was born in Tennessee and lived from 1786 to 1836
Context: Davy Crockett served in the American Congress between 1827 and 1835 and then moved out West, where he died during the siege of the Alamo.

Wyatt Earp
Definition: A marshal in Dodge City, Kansas, who spent his life (1848-1929) traveling through the deserts of the Southwest
Context: A feud between the Clanton brothers and Wyatt Earp and his brothers led to the shootout at the O.K. Corral in Tombstone, Arizona; the Clanton brothers were killed, but the Earp brothers survived.

Myth
Definition: A fictional belief or tale that has grown up around an historical event or person; myths are often conveyed and kept alive through oral histories, movies, and televisions shows.
Context: Many myths about the Western frontier arose because of the way life in the West was portrayed in the movies.

Western frontier
Definition: Originally, the land west of the Mississippi River that had not yet been settled; the frontier line moved as people traveled farther west, into the mountains and to the Pacific coast.
Context: People moved to the Western frontier in search of gold, as well as for excitement and the chance for a new beginning.

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:

- U.S. History: Era 6—Understands federal Indian policy and United States foreign policy after the Civil War
- Historical Understanding—Understands the historical perspective
- Language Arts: Viewing—Uses a range of strategies to interpret visual media

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
- Power, Authority, and Governance

Support Materials
Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the Discoveryschool.com Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html
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DVD Content

This program is available in an interactive DVD format. The following information and activities are specific to the DVD version.

How to Use the DVD

The DVD starting screen has the following options:

Play Video — This plays the video from start to finish. There are no programmed stops, except by using a remote control. With a computer, depending on the particular software player, a pause button is included with the other video controls.

Video Index—Here the video is divided into four segments (see below), indicated by video thumbnail icons. Watching all parts in sequence is similar to watching the video from start to finish. Brief descriptions and total running times are noted for each part. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the remote for TV playback; on a computer, click once to highlight a thumbnail and read the accompanying text description and click again to start the video.

Curriculum Units — These are specially edited video segments pulled from different sections of the video (see below). These nonlinear segments align with key ideas in the unit of instruction. They include onscreen pre- and post-viewing questions, reproduced below in this Teacher’s Guide. Total running times for these segments are noted. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the TV remote or click once on the Curriculum Unit title on a computer.

Standards Link — Selecting this option displays a single screen that lists the national academic standards the video addresses.

Teacher Resources — This screen gives the technical support number and Web site address.

Video Index

I. Changes in the West (4 min.)
The promise of gold and land enticed many Americans to migrate westward, creating the need for a transcontinental railroad. See how U.S. expansion affected the West and its native populations.

II. From Boomtown to Ghost Town (3 min.)
Mining camps became towns as prospectors ventured west in search of gold. Learn about the mining towns of the Old West, which were only as prosperous as their mines.

III. Living the Frontier Life (14 min.)
In the 1800s, the Western frontier provided a possibility for riches, land, and opportunity that many European settlers could not pass up.
IV. Fact vs. Fiction: Movies of the Old West  (26 min.)
Our familiar notion of the Wild West was actually created in Hollywood studios. Compare the fictionalized version of how the West was won with historic facts.

Curriculum Units

1. Settling the West

Pre-viewing question
Q: What might it have been like to live in the Old West?
A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question
Q: How should the U.S. government have treated the Plains Indians?
A: Answers will vary.

2. Old West Mining Towns

Pre-viewing question
Q: What does a town need to grow and thrive?
A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question
Q: Why do you think abandoned mining towns appeal to people today?
A: Answers will vary.

3. Lewis and Clark Meet Native Americans

Pre-viewing question
Q: What do you know about Native American cultures?
A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question
Q: Why were Lewis and Clark told to cultivate friendly relations with Native Americans?
A: Thomas Jefferson envisioned the United States stretching from the East Coast to the Pacific Ocean, including the land inhabited by Native Americans. He instructed Lewis and Clark to cultivate friendly relations so the Native Americans would more readily accept European settlers.

4. With Settlers Comes Disease

Pre-viewing question
Q: How are native peoples affected by new populations?
A: Answers will vary.
5. The Concept of Frontier

Pre-viewing question
Q: How would you define the concept of frontier?
A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question
Q: How was the concept of frontier defined in the 1800s?
A: The U.S. Census Bureau defined frontier based on the number of people who lived in an area. Fewer than two people per square mile was considered frontier, and more than two was considered civilized.

6. Trapping and Prospecting

Pre-viewing question
Q: How do you think people survived on the frontier?
A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question
Q: How would you have lived on the frontier in the 1800s?
A: Answers will vary.

7. Hollywood’s Racist Portrayals

Pre-viewing question
Q: What role has racism played in U.S. history?
A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question
Q: Do you think the movie portrayal of Native Americans contributed to the popularity of Westerns?
A: Answers will vary.

8. Wagon Trains and Indians

Pre-viewing question
Q: What were the greatest dangers wagon trains faced in the Old West?
A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question
Q: How did Buffalo Bill’s shows contribute to myths about Native Americans?
A: Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show was usually staged in a circus ring. His wagons rode in a circle, and the Native Americans rode around the wagons. People believed this was what really happened on the frontier. Then movies picked it up, influencing people for generations to come.
9. General Custer and Native Americans

Pre-viewing question
Q: What do you know about General George Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn?
A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question
Q: What do you think was the worst European injustice to Native Americans?
A: Answers will vary.

10. The Truth About the Alamo

Pre-viewing question
Q: What do you know about the Alamo?
A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question
Q: How is the movie The Alamo inaccurate?
A: The Alamo with John Wayne portrays defending the Alamo as a wise decision and the time the Texan patriots bought for Sam Houston to organize an army as invaluable. In reality, Houston ordered the Alamo abandoned and destroyed, and he wanted the patriots to take the arms from the fort and join him fighting in the East.

11. The Myth of the Western Shootout

Pre-viewing question
Q: How does violence today compare to that of the 1800s?
A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question
Q: How could Western movies be made without shootouts and gunfights?
A: Answers will vary.

12. Wyatt Earp

Pre-viewing question
Q: Who are some heroes of the Wild West?
A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question
Q: What would Wyatt Earp think today about his portrayal in the movies?
A: Answers will vary.