

Settling the Western Frontier

The Basics

Time Required

3-4 class periods

Subject Areas

11th Grade US History

Development of the Industrial U.S., 1870-1900

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

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The Lesson

Introduction

In the late 1800s, American Indian lives are forever changed by the arrival of miners, ranchers, and cowboys. The western frontier was “closed” by 1900 with government-sponsored homesteaders and the railroad. This lesson will discuss the positive contributions of these groups as they settle the west.

The songs chosen for this lesson are folksongs that were sung by many during the late 1800s. It is my wish to reintroduce these songs to students, which may have disappeared from the students’ musical history.

“Oh, California” was a popular song of the gold rush. The song was adapted from a Stephen Foster’s 1847 song, “Oh, Susanna!” While sailing for the California gold fields, John Nichols changed the words of the song and renamed it “Oh, California!”

“The Old Chisholm Trail” (author unknown) was one of the most popular songs sung by cowboys on their long cattle drives. The song’s verses describe the life of the cowboy on the trail. “The Old Chisholm Trail” is believed to have at least 143 verses. Only 13 verses will be listed in this lesson.

“Home on the Range” was created from a poem, “My Western Home,” written by Dr. Brewster Higley in 1872 and set to music by Dan Kelley. Dr. Higley was one of thousands who took advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862 and moved to Kansas to stake his claim. “Home on the Range” had spread across the west as cowboys and homesteaders passed through Kansas and then adapted the tune to fit their own home state. Some of the lines changed over time. The text “Home on the Range” never appeared in Dr. Higley’s poem. Vernon Dalhardt first commercially recorded today’s version. Kansas has taken “Home on the Range” as their state song.

“I’ve Been Working on the Railroad” also has an unknown author. Some believe the song came from an old Irish work song in the west and others believe it is an old African American song used when working on the Louisiana levees. The tune has been adapted for “The Eyes of Texas Are Upon You.” Regardless of the song’s origin, it became another popular American folksong.

Guiding Questions

What are some of the various groups which shaped the settlement of the western United States?

Learning Objectives

Contrast the cultures of Native Americans and white settlers and explain why white settlers moved west. Summarize the role of gold in luring people to the American West. Describe people's experience in their often-fruitless efforts to find gold. Trace the development of the cattle industry. Describe both the myth and the reality of the American cowboy and explain the end of the open range. Explain the rapid settlement of the Great Plains due to homesteading. Describe how early settlers survived on the Plains and transformed them into profitable farmland. Describe the role the railroad played in the settlement of the west and the closing of the frontier.

Preparation Instructions

Songs used in this lesson:

- "Oh, California!" Performed by Keith & Rusty McNeil, Moving West, WEM Records [CD505]. <http://sniff.numachi.com/~rickheit/dtrad/pages/tiOHCALIF;tOSUSANNA.html>
- "The Old Chisholm Trail" We Sing America [PSW-4932-12], Price Stern Sloan, c. 1987. <http://www.cowboydirectory.com/AA-Songs/song-004.html>
- "Home on the Range" This is My Country [KRC-109/A4], The Reader's Digest Association, Inc., 1992. <http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/homeontherange/> Also see: *Voices Across Time*, 5.70
- "I've Been Working on the Railroad" We Sing America [PSW-4932-12], Price Stern Sloan, c. 1987. <http://www.contemplator.com/america/railroad.html>

Lesson Activities

Part 1: The American Indians

Discussion questions:

- What were the characteristics of the Plains Indians culture?
- How did the culture of white settlers differ from that of the Plains Indians?
- Why did settlers continue to push westward?
- Why was the destruction of the buffalo so detrimental to the Native Americans' way of life?

Part 2: Miners

Introduce song "Oh, California!"

Song discussion questions:

- What clues do you find in the lyrics that indicate that this song is about gold mining?
- What expectations does the singer have about finding gold in California?
- How does the tune of this song make you feel?
- What precious minerals drew miners to the west during the 1800s?
- What are boomtowns and where were they located?
- Give at least four examples. What problems did prospectors face in underground mines?

- Would “Oh, California” be an accurate account of mining in the west? Why or why not?

Part 3: Cattle Industry

Introduce song “The Old Chisholm Trail”

Song discussion questions:

- What strikes you most about this song?
- What musical phrase is especially memorable?
- What makes it so memorable: melody, rhythm, lyrics?
- How often does it or a similar phrase occur?
- Describe the life of a cowboy based on the verses of this song.

Part 4: Homesteaders

- Have students sing the song “Home on the Range”
- Play song (instrumental)

Song discussion questions:

- How was the mood of the song you sang different from the recording?
- What instruments did you hear?
- What emotions does the song express?
- How might the song’s message or meaning change with different people or in different environments?

Give students a copy of the song’s lyrics.

Have students sing all verses of “Home of the Range”

Song discussion questions, continued

- Which verse seems not to fit the rest of the song?
- What did the writer try to convey in this song?
- How did the transcontinental railroad open up the west for settlers?
- How did the federal government encourage western settlement?
- What new technology helped the homesteaders farm the prairie?
- Do you think the song, “Home on the Range” encouraged settlers to stay in their new homestead? Why or why not?

Part 5: Railroads

Introduce song “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad”

Song questions and activities:

- What do you think the song is about?
- How does the song illustrate the life of a railroad man?
- Have students relate other “school yard” versions of this song that they have heard.
- Why was this song easy to parody?
- Have students break into groups and create a new version and then share with the class.

More discussion questions:

- How did the US government encourage the railroad companies to build rails across the country?
- What two railroad companies built the transcontinental railroad and where did they meet?
- What were the working conditions of the railroad builders?
- What role did the railroad serve in settling the west? Immigration? Migration?

- Why did the railroad also play a role in ending the long cattle drive?
- Would “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad” be an accurate account of working on the railroad? Why or why not?

Summary

The American Indians on the Western Frontier were pushed off their land by the demise of the buffalo, and the arrival of the homesteaders, ranchers, miners, the railroad, and US Army. Boomtowns, cow towns, and railroad stations grew as a great number of people moved west. In 1900, the Census Bureau claimed the United States no longer had a continuous frontier.

Assessment

Settling the Western Frontier Cube Project

Follow the directions for completing each side of the cube.

Side 1: Indians use of the Buffalo

- Illustrate 4 or more uses of the buffalo by the Indians

Side 2: Cattle trails

- Create a map illustrating and labeling the four cattle trails.
 - a) Chisholm Trail
 - b) Western Trail
 - c) Goodnight-Loving Trail
 - d) Sedalia and Baxter Springs Trail

Side 3: Railroads

- Create a map illustrating the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads.
- Mark and label the meeting point of these two railroads.

Side 4: Mining

- Create a bar graph that shows the percentage of people who set out for the Klondike who did not get there, got there, staked claims, found gold, and became rich.

Side 5: Farming

- Illustrate a sod house and at least three new technologies that helped the settlers to farm the prairie.

Side 6: Vaqueros

- Illustrate at least three contributions of the vaqueros to the American cowboy.

Supplies needed:

Colored pencils, poster board, pattern, scissors, and scotch tape.

Extending the Lesson

Settling the Frontier Quiz

1. Which of the following was not a use of the buffalo by the American Indians?
 - a. food
 - b. clothing
 - c. riding
 - d. tools
2. Why did the policy of treating the Great Plains as a huge reservation change?
 - a. White settlers began wanting the land on the Plains
 - b. Native Americans refused to remain on the Plains
 - c. Native American populations decreased and needed less land
 - d. The Plains failed to meet the needs of Native American peoples
3. Demand for beef in the East contributed to
 - a. the invention of the cowboys’ way of life

- b. the end of the long drives
 - c. the development of the Chisholm Trail
 - d. the decline of the railroads
4. The Mexican vaquero influenced the American cowboy in all of the following areas EXCEPT
- a. politics
 - b. language
 - c. clothing
 - d. food
5. What led to the growth of boomtowns in the Rocky Mountains and to the west?
- a. cattle trails
 - b. silver and gold mines
 - c. Indian trading posts
 - d. All of the above
6. Which of the following new inventions enabled settlers to farm the often dry and harsh terrain of the prairie?
- a. steel windmills
 - b. reaper
 - c. steel plow
 - d. all of the above
7. Which group of people worked on building the transcontinental railroad?
- a. Irish
 - b. Chinese
 - c. African Americans
 - d. All of the above
8. In what town did the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific meet that linked the east coast with the west coast?
- a. Sacramento
 - b. Promontory
 - c. Abilene
 - d. Denver
9. The intent of the Homestead Act was to
- a. prevent African Americans from settling the west.
 - b. settle Native Americans in farming communities.
 - c. make money for the government.
 - d. encourage white families to develop the west.
10. Which of the following was MOST responsible for bringing an end to the era of the wide-open western frontier?
- a. the railroad
 - b. barbed wire
 - c. sheep ranching
 - d. bonanza farming

Resources

Lyrics

“Oh, California”

I come from Salem City with my washbowl on my knee,
I'm going to California, the gold dust for to see.

It rained all day the day I left, the weather it was dry
The sun so hot I froze to death Oh brothers, don't you cry.

cho: Oh, California, that's the land for me
I'm bound for San Francisco with my washbowl on my knee.

I jumped aboard the Liza ship and traveled on the sea,
And every time I thought of home I wished it wasn't me;
The vessel reared like any horse, that had of oats and wealth
I found it wouldn't throw me so I thought I'd throw myself.

I thought of all the pleasant times we've had together here
I thought I ought to cry a bit but couldn't find a tear;
The pilot's bread was in my mouth, the gold dust in my eye
And though I'm going far away dear brothers don't you cry.

I soon shall be in Frisco, and there I'll look around,
And when I see the gold lumps I'll pick them off the ground-
I'll scrape the mountains clean, my boys, I'll drain the rivers dry
A pocket full of rocks bring home so brothers, don't you cry.

“The Old Chisholm Trail”

Well come along boys and listen to my tale,
I'll tell you of my troubles on the old Chisholm Trail.

CHORUS:

Com-a ti-yi-yip-pee, yip-pee yea,
Com-a ti-yi-yip-pee, yip-pee yea!

2. On a ten dollar horse and a forty dollar saddle
I started out to punchin' them longhorn cattle.

3. I started up the trail October twenty-third,
I started up the trail with the 2U herd.

4. I'm up in the morning before daylight
And before I sleep the moon shines bright.

5. It's bacon and beans most every day;
We'll soon be a-eatin' prairie hay.

6. With my seat in the saddle and my hand on the horn,
I'm the best damned cowboy that ever was born.

7. It's cloudy in the west and a-lookin' like rain,
[D] And my damned old slicker's in the wagon again.

8. We hit Caldwell and we hit 'er on the fly;
We bedded down the cattle on a hill close by.

9. I went to the boss to draw my roll
And he had me figured out nine dollars in the hole.

10. Me and my boss we had a little spat
So I hit him in the face with my ten-gallon hat.

11. The boss says to me, "Why, I'll fire you!
Not only you---but the whole damned crew!"

12. I'll sell my horse and I'll sell my saddle'
You can go to hell with your longhorn cattle!
But....on second thought.....

13. With my rump in the saddle and my head in the sky,
I won't quit punchin' cows un-til the sweet by-and-by.

"Home on the Range"

1. Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam
Where the deer and the antelope play
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day.

Cho: Home, home on the range
Where the deer and the antelope play
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day.

2. How often at night when the heavens are bright
With the light from the glittering stars
Have I stood there amazed and asked as I gazed
If their glory exceeds that of ours.

3. Where the air is so pure, the zephyrs so free
The breezes so balmy and light
That I would not exchange my home on the range
For all the cities so bright

4. Oh I love those wild flowers in this dear land of ours
The curlew I love to hear scream
And I love the white rocks and the antelope flocks
That gaze on the mountain tops green.

"I've Been Working on the Railroad"

I've been working on the railroad
All the livelong day
I've been working on the railroad
Just to pass the time away

Can't you hear the whistle blowing
Rise up so early in the morn

Can't you hear the captain shouting
Dinah, blow your horn

Dinah, won't you blow
Dinah, won't you blow
Dinah, won't you blow your horn
Dinah, won't you blow
Dinah, won't you blow
Dinah, won't you blow your horn

Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah
Someone's in the kitchen I know
Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah
Strumming on the old banjo, and singing

Fie, fi, fiddly i o
Fie, fi, fiddly i o
Fie, fi, fiddly i o
Strumming on the old banjo