

## Lesson Five

### **Objectives:**

- Students will use the Mark Twain's Mississippi web site (and other NIU sites), as well as other web sites for images and symbols of the American West.
- Students will compare and contrast mid-nineteenth century sources promoting settlement in the Mississippi Valley with actual pioneer accounts of life there.
- Students will consider the mythic portrayal of the American West, particularly as it relates to the frontier, and explore images and symbols of the West in film, song, advertising, and culture generally.
- Teachers will briefly introduce students to new historical trends in the study of the West.
- Students will make assessments regarding the myth vs. the reality of the American West based on their research and teacher instruction.

### **Notes on the Lesson:**

This lesson is intended for history classes that have access to computers during class time so students can read the sources and search the web for the images and symbols of the West.

### **Materials Needed:**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFquzxwYoeE>

\* clip of final scene of "Shane"

Newhall, J. B. *A Glimpse of Iowa in 1846; or, the Emigrant's Guide, and State Directory; with a Description of the New Purchase; Embracing Much Practical Advice and Useful Information to Intending Emmigrants. Also, the New State Constitution.* Burlington, IA: W.D. Skillman, 1846. <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/file.php?file=newhall.html>

Hall, Edward, H. *Ho! For the West!! The Traveller and Emigrants' Hand-Book to Canada, and the North-West of the American Union: Comprising the States of Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa, and the Territories of Minnesota, and Kansas; With a Description of Their Climate, Resources, and Products; and Much Other Useful Information Compiled from the Latest Authentic Sources, and Designed Particularly for the Use of Travellers, Emigrants, and Others. To Which is Added, a List of Railway Stations, Routes, and Distances, Stage Coaches in Connection With the Railways.* London: Algar and Street, 1858. <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/file.php?file=hepplehall.html>

Baird, Robert. *View of the Valley of the Mississippi, or the Emigrant's and Traveller's Guide to the West. Containing a General Description of that Entire Country; and Also Notices of the Soil, Productions, Rivers, and Other Chanels of Intercourse and Trade: and Likewise of the Cities and Towns, Progress of Education, and c., of Each State and Territory.* Philadelphia: H.S. Tanner, 1834. <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/file.php?file=baird.html>

Caird, James. *Excerpts from 'Prairie Farming in America'* . New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1859. [at Lincoln/Net at NIU] <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/file.php?file=caird.html>

Spencer, J. W. *Reminiscences of Pioneer Life in the Mississippi Valley* . Davenport: Griggs, Watson and Day, 1872. <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/file.php?file=spencer.html>

<http://www.washington.edu/research/showcase/1990a.html>

\* article on New Western History

<http://employees.csbsju.edu/dlarson/Writings/HTML%20copies/New%20Western%20History.htm>

\* article on the New Western History

### **Time Required:**

The lesson is designed to take at least two 50-minute class periods, with opportunities for enrichment by instructors up to two further class periods.

### **Introduction:**

The West holds a mythic status in American culture, symbolizing freedom, opportunity, independence, and ruggedness. In traditional scholarship, the history of the American West has been interpreted as the struggle for civilizing unsettled lands along an ever-expanding frontier. However, recent historical study has opened new opportunities to explore the West as a place of interaction, including ethnic minorities and women, offering a more complex reality of cultural interaction. In this lesson, students will consider the mythic image of the west as read through sources promoting settlement in the Mississippi Valley and through contemporary portrayals of the West in culture and compare/contrast this with the reality of life told through the eyes of pioneers and historians.

### **Assignment:**

1. If teachers wish to create interest in the lesson by employing a popular culture “hook,” they can show the final scene of “Shane” (accessible via the YouTube link above or available for rental at most video stores). As students watch, have them list 5-6 adjectives or terms that characterize the way in which the West is portrayed in the film, particularly as it relates to values and virtues. Possible responses may include: violent, independent, courageous, simple, lawless, rural, open, sparsely settled, rugged, solitary, heroic, et al.
2. After this brief discussion, teachers should remind students that the “west” as a region or term has changed throughout American history, depending on the phase of expansion. Prior to the Civil War, the Mississippi Valley was considered the West. This point will serve as a transition to the primary part of this lesson.
3. Tell students that they will be reading through and collecting data from “Immigrant Guides,” created in the 1830s-1850s to encourage people to settle in the Mississippi Valley. The students

will then compare and contrast these “advertisements” against the reality of life in the west as it was experienced by settlers.

4. Organize students into groups of 3-4 and have them divide up the Immigrant Guides from Newhall, Hall, and Baird from the NIU sites. As they read, students should collect data on the attached sheet. When finished collecting the data, students should share the information they culled from the Immigrant Guides and answer the questions at the bottom of the collection sheet regarding how the Mississippi Valley was portrayed in these advertisements.

5. Either for homework or in class, now have students compare these advertisements with actual accounts of settlers who lived in the Mississippi Valley (the accounts by Baird and Spencer at NIU) by filling in the chart.

6. Have students reassemble in their groups, share their data, and make conclusions that compare and contrast the myth vs. the reality of life in the West. Teachers should instruct students to formulate their conclusions as brief thesis statements in response to the questions on the data collection sheet. When students have completed their worksheets, teachers can conduct a discussion based on their responses:

- How did the Immigrant Guides portray the lands of the Mississippi Valley?
- What types of opportunities were available to settlers there?
- What types of people might be attracted to settlement in the West?
- Assess how successful the guides were in promoting the settlement of the Mississippi Valley.
- In what ways and to what extent do the actual settlers’ accounts differ from the Immigrant Guides?
- What realities of life in the Mississippi Valley were ignored or downplayed in the Immigrant Guides?
- Imagine you were a settler who had written one of these accounts. What 2-3 pieces of advice would you give to a potential emigrant to the region?

7. At this point, remind students again that the concept of the West has changed depending on the extent of settlement in the United States. To extend the lesson, students can be divided into two large groups. The following projects can be assigned individually or in smaller groups of 3-4 students. One of the larger groups will use the web sites, in addition to their own research into print and web sources, to provide some background on trends in the historiography of the American West in the past thirty years or so. They can concentrate on the following four major concepts: **frontier, cultural interaction (especially with ethnic minorities), environment, role of the government**. The other large group should investigate areas of popular culture, such as advertisements, film, song, television programs, etc., to gather symbols and images of how the West is portrayed through these media. Teachers can adapt the depth and complexity of this assignment depending on time limits and student interest.

8. For the group addressing the New Western History, teachers can organize students into an open-ended forum, during which the instructor can moderate the discussion. In preparation, students can be asked to organize their observations and conclusions in a 2-3 page position paper, including references and sources. Questions to lead the discussion may include:

- What is the traditional frontier interpretation of the American West?
- How has this perspective been challenged in recent years?
- What is the New Western History?
- What are some of the benefits and drawbacks of these new approaches?
- What contributions have more recent trends in this history made to our understanding of the American West?
- On which areas would a traditional vs. revisionist historian concentrate in their research? How are these similar or different?
- How have the four assigned concepts (**frontier, cultural interaction, environment, role of the government**) affected our understanding of the American West?

9. With the forum as background, the student media presentations will provide a richer discussion of the tension between the myth and reality of the West. To assist with the presentation, teachers may wish to encourage students to use a presentation format—such as PowerPoint, a student-created web site, or video—that will allow the class to connect visually with the spoken portion of the presentation. Again, presentations can be assigned individually or in groups depending on time or student preparation/ability level.

10. To conclude the lesson, teachers may wish to reinforce the conflict between portrayals of American symbols, figures, or events in popular culture with more nuanced understandings based on systematic historical research. Teachers may also bring students back to two key considerations:

- A. Why myths and symbols hold such powerful appeal in culture and politics?
- B. How such myths and symbols can be used or misused?
- C. To what extent can such myths be challenged and how useful is it to do so?

### Lesson Five: Data Collection Sheet

Area	Immigrant Guide Portrayal	Settlers' Accounts
Climate		
Soil/Agriculture		
Resources		
Topography		
Economic Conditions		

**1. Depth of Research** (10 pts.) \_\_\_\_\_

- Do students consult a variety of sources?
- Do the paper and forum employ significant illustrative detail?
- Do students cite sources and use references appropriately?

**2. Understanding** (10 pts.) \_\_\_\_\_

- Do students concentrate on elaborating the four assigned concepts?
- Do students provide useful background and historical context?
- Do students use examples to apply their understanding of concepts?

**3. Clarity** (10 pts.) \_\_\_\_\_

- Do the paper and forum move clearly from point to point?
- Are key concepts and terms explicitly defined and explained?
- Can students answer questions effectively?

**4. Interest** (10 pts.) \_\_\_\_\_

- Do students employ anecdotes, quotes, or data for enrichment?
- Do students speak audibly, confidently, and effectively?
- Do students employ props, visuals, or other devices to maintain interest?

**5. Effort** (10 pts.) \_\_\_\_\_

- Do students demonstrate enthusiasm in the forum?
- Is the paper proofread, neat, and in a proper format?
- Do students (if in a group) work effectively as a team?

TOTAL: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Comments:

Lesson Five

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Rubric: Myth and Reality in the American West Presentation

**1. Depth of Research (10 pts.)**

- \_\_\_\_\_
- Do students consult a variety of sources?
  - Does the presentation employ significant illustrative detail?
  - Do students cite sources and use references appropriately?

**2. Understanding (10 pts.)**

- \_\_\_\_\_
- Do students successfully explain the images and symbols?
  - Do students effectively examine the issue of myth vs. reality?
  - Do students use examples to apply their understanding of concepts?

**3. Clarity (10 pts.)**

- \_\_\_\_\_
- Does the presentation move clearly from point to point?
  - Are key concepts and terms explicitly defined and explained?
  - Can students answer questions effectively?

**4. Interest (10 pts.)**

- \_\_\_\_\_
- Do students employ visuals, data, or quotes successfully?
  - Do students speak audibly, confidently, and effectively?
  - Do students employ props, visuals, or other devices to maintain interest?

**5. Effort (10 pts.)**

- \_\_\_\_\_
- Do students demonstrate enthusiasm in the presentation?
  - Are any accompanying visuals (PowerPoint, handouts, etc.) neat and proofread?
  - Do students (if in a group) work effectively as a team?

TOTAL: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Comments: