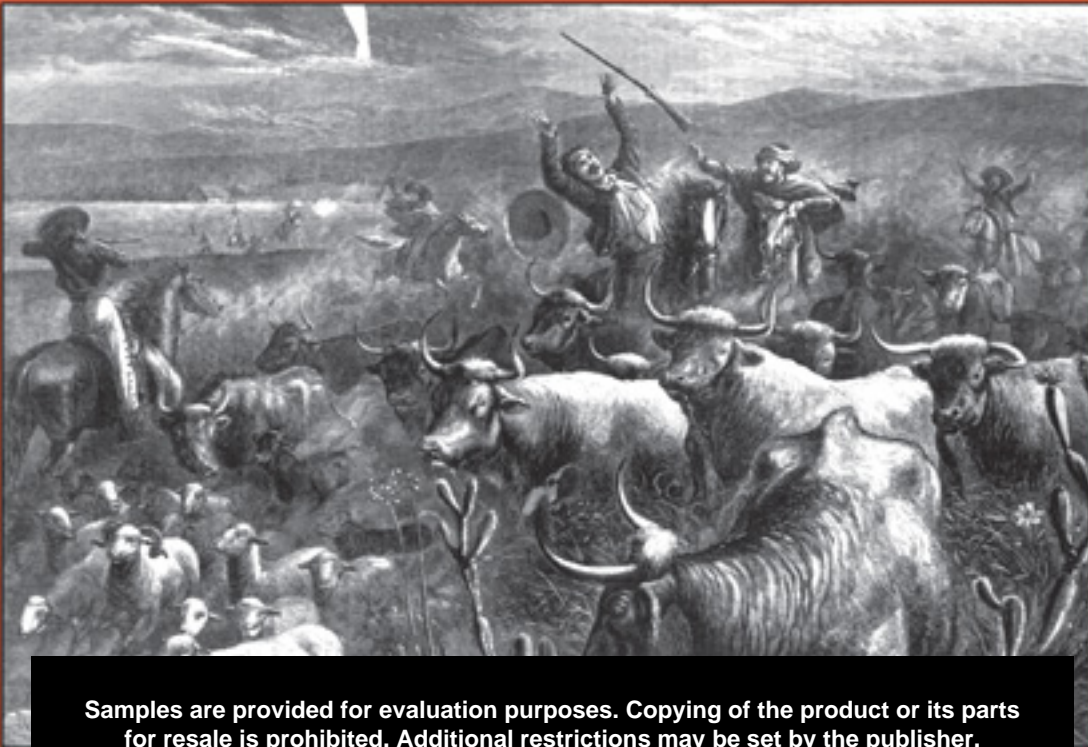


History
UNFOLDING

THE WEST OF OUR IMAGINATION



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The West of Our Imagination

Introduction

The West as We Have Imagined It

For much of our history, the American West has been a source of fabulous stories, mythic characters, dreams and ideals. This booklet is intended to help you explore these aspects of its history. In other words, the focus here is not on the reality of the West, it is on how Americans at various times have imagined the West to be.

Obviously, in exploring this dimension, comparisons between ideal and reality must be made. From the start, Americans tended to think of the West as a vast, empty wilderness. As a result, they found it easy to fill up that empty space with their own notions, hopes and ideals. The natural landscape, the original inhabitants, the earliest settlers, and the process of establishing new ways of life—all these aspects were at times seen in mythic ways. By exploring and discussing these myths and ideals about the American West, students will be better able to assess both the reality and the meaning of the West in American life.

The twelve illustrations in this booklet focus on the a number of central themes in the history of American West. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three of the illustrations to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

The Challenge of the Frontier

The illustrations for this lesson focus on the process of settlement in general and on the character of the settlers who moved west into each new frontier region.

The Original Inhabitants

Americans have had many ideas about the first inhabitants on this continent. The illustrations in this lesson explore various aspects of stereotypes, both negative and positive, about Native Americans. They should make it clear just how hard it actually is to see and understand all of the different American Indian cultures clearly.

Outlaws and Other Characters

Miners, mountain men, cowboys, and others helped to settle the West. Romantic notions about all of these rugged individuals are still with us. The illustrations in this lesson focus on some of these mythic figures of the American West.

Dreams of Development

Americans have often looked to the West as a place to start over, a place to create new and better ways of life. Therefore, while some of our ideas about the West focus on its pristine and primitive purity, others focus on its potential for development and progress. The illustrations in this lesson explore several different aspects of this theme.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

The West of Our Imagination

OBJECTIVE

1. Students will become more critical in assessing the accuracy of certain idealized views about the settlement of the West and about the settlers themselves.
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The Challenge of the Frontier

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Illustration 1

This 1872 painting by John Gast is a good place to begin to study the way Americans have thought about and imagined the American West. That's because it dramatically illustrates a central theme about the West running throughout our history—the theme of progress. The mythic female figure at the center of the painting leads the march of progress across the plains, with a schoolbook in one hand and a telegraph wire in the other. Other symbols of progress such as wagon trains and railroads follow her, banishing darkness and bringing the light of a new and better life. This is a visual representation of the key nineteenth century idea of Manifest Destiny. In it, the American West is assumed to be an untamed wilderness bound to be civilized and improved through settlement.

Illustration 2

The settlers who settled the frontier throughout the 1700s and 1800s were a hardy group. No doubt it took a great deal of courage and hard work to establish the first farms and communities in each new area as it was opened up. One of the strongest ideas about the frontier is that it fostered a powerful spirit of independence and self-reliance. This illustration captures that aspect of our ideas about the West. Not many settlers were ever quite as independent and on their own as this one seems to be. For example, many had to borrow funds from banks or others to buy their farms—and those lenders often had a good deal of control over the farmer. Also, farmers depended on railroads and many other “middlemen” to get their crops to market. And yet the idea that the West fostered an independent spirit was not just a myth. It was also a reality for tens of thousands of adventurous Americans.

Illustration 3

Another, almost opposite idea about the settlers had to do with the strong and close community spirit they fostered. This illustration shows some neighbors helping a newly arrived family build its first log home. A strong community spirit did in fact exist among many of the settlers who moved west. At times, entire communities moved together. The illustration here presents a very positive and idealized view of this spirit of cooperation. Sometimes it existed. But just as often, it did not.

Lesson 1—The Challenge of the Frontier

Illustration 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Discussing the Illustration

1. This painting is about America's westward movement in the 1800s. While its details are realistic, it is not meant to be a real scene. What features show that this scene is not a real one?
2. The painting is titled *American Progress*. In it, a huge female figure is shown floating westward. She is the key symbol of American progress. What is a symbol?
3. On this ghostly female figure is a Star of Empire. She holds a schoolbook in one hand and strings a telegraph wire the other. How do these features add to the idea that this figure is a symbol of "American Progress"?
4. What else in the painting adds to its overall message that westward settlement was also an expansion of American progress? How do the movements and gestures of the many smaller figures add to this idea? How does the use of dark and light add to the idea? Do you agree or disagree with this painting's point of view about America's settlement of the west? Why?

Follow-up Activities

1. Artist John Gast painted this picture in 1872. By then, Americans had been talking for some time about what they called the nation's "Manifest Destiny." What does your history textbook have to say about this notion of Manifest Destiny? Do you think this painting could have been titled "America's Manifest Destiny"? Why do you think the idea of Manifest Destiny was so popular in the 1800s. What is your opinion of this idea? Answer these questions in a brief essay on this John Gast painting.
2. Pretend that John Gast is alive today. And imagine that someone has asked him to paint a picture titled "America Progress" to get across the way Americans feel about this idea today. What kind of picture would Gast paint? What objects, symbols or figures would he put in it? What style of painting would he use? Try to sketch your own idea of how he might portray American progress today. As a class, share your sketches and discuss your views about the idea of American progress now.

Dreams of Development

Illustration 2



Courtesy of Dover Publications