

Creative Activities
for teaching
American History
The Westward Movement
SS119

Introduction

These twenty puzzles, games and activities are designed to engage the students in the issues involved in the settlement of the West. The activities emphasize decision making and problem solving skills. Nine puzzles describe the culture and technology of the frontier.

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Would you make the same fatal decisions that the Donner Party did?

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Students construct covered wagons.

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Seven puzzles require students to identify items associated with the frontier. Includes: household items, clothing, cowboy equipment, the wagon train, farm equipment and weapons.

9 The Cattle Baron Game (Pages 16-19)

Four activities help students decide if they would be successful cattle barons.

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An exercise in negotiations for Indian land.



Westward Movement

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ISBN: 0-89550-116-3

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Stevens & Shea Publishers, Inc.

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www.stevensandshea.com

Westward Movement

1 Trail Boss

A decision-making activity in which the students face the same decisions that the ill-fated Donner Party had to make. There is a page which indicates what the actual decisions were and how those decisions got them into trouble.

2 Wagon Train

A hands-on activity in which students construct a covered wagon from a milk carton.

3-8 What Are They?

The first five puzzles have the students identify objects used in the Old West. The sixth puzzle has students arrange guns in the chronological order of their development. Answers are on a separate page.

9 The Cattle Baron Game

In this game students take a chance on making a fortune in raising cattle. Students must identify brands and cattle rustlers.

10-15 You Decide

Case studies of issues in the history of the West. Students are to decide what they would do in the same circumstances. The actual decisions are below.

10 Vigilance Committee

The governor called out the militia to enforce the law.

11 Foreign Miners' Tax

The foreign miners protested the tax. The legislature later changed the law.

12 Battle of Mussel Slough

The farmers fought it out using guns. Some were arrested but the jury refused to convict them.

13 Yosemite Valley

Muir's point of view prevailed in this case.

14 160 Acre Limit

The 160 acre limit was ruled unconstitutional by the California Supreme Court, but the ruling was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court. Recently, Congress raised the limit.

15 Owens Valley Water Fight

Farmers attempted to destroy the aqueduct with dynamite. They also appealed to the voters of Los Angeles and the Federal Government but failed to convince them. Many farmers had to move from the valley.

16 Language of the West

Students have to decipher the colorful language of the Old West. Answers are on a separate page.

17 Grub

Students have to figure out what they are eating from menus of a trail drive and a logging camp. Answers are on a separate page.

18 Rodeo

Activities for introducing or concluding a unit on the Old West. Contains activities that will appeal to a broad range of interests and abilities.

19 The Big Four

A short readers theatre play about the people who built the first transcontinental railroad. Students must make the decision that Theodore Judah faced in dealing with the Big Four. Judah decided to accept their offer and travelled to the East Coast in an attempt to raise money to buy them out. He died on the way.

20 Indian Treaty

Students must negotiate an agreement between the Indians and the U.S. Government.



James Wilson Marshall “discovered” gold in March of 1848. It was not the first time that gold had been discovered in California. Francisco Lopez had found some gold near Los Angeles several years before. This time it was different, however, and people became seized with “gold fever”.

Among the first to flock to the gold fields of Northern California were large numbers of Mexicans from the Mexican state of Sonora. (The town of Sonora, California, is named in honor of their origin.) In 1849, about 15,000 Mexican miners worked in the southern part of the Mother Lode, from Sonora to Mariposa.

That same year large numbers of Anglo miners from the East Coast of the United States began to arrive. Most of them were inexperienced in mining. The Mexicans, on the other hand, had been mining for many years in their home state. They taught the Anglos many of the techniques of mining. The flat bottomed pan, for example, used for washing gold from the streams, was a Mexican device called the “batea”.

The Anglo miners did not like competition from “foreigners”. Many Spanish speaking miners were native Californians and were citizens of the United States, but the newly arrived Anglos from the East still viewed them as foreigners, and they wanted them out.

In order to force them to leave legally, Senator Thomas Jefferson Green introduced a law which was passed by the California Legislature. The law required any miner who was not a citizen of the United States to pay a fee of \$20 a month. Many of the Mexican miners were not citizens and so they had no say in the government.

Contrary to popular opinion, most mining was not a “get-rich-quick” proposition. It was hard work for little reward. Most of the gold that was easy to get had been found earlier.

If you were a Mexican miner, what would you have done?

- A. Pack up and return to Mexico.
- B. Refuse to pay the tax and organize to defend yourself against the State of California.
- C. Give up mining and turn to another occupation, or steal gold from the Anglo miners.
- D. Try to persuade those who were citizens (and could influence how laws were made) to change the law.