

## The Myth of the American Cowboy

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Westward Expansion and the idea of Manifest Destiny inform the image of the cowboy in American culture?

#### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students will analyze select songs from John Lomax's collection Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads with other primary sources to explore the period of westward expansion in the United States.*



Painting: James Walker

In popular culture, the American cowboy is regularly portrayed as a singular white male, traveling through desolate and dusty towns of the Southwest region of the United States. But in truth, such a depiction contrasts greatly with the historical realities of the cowboy.

The origins of the cowboy begin with *vaqueros* who herded cattle on horseback in Mexico and in what today is the Southwestern United States. *Vaqueros* emerged from an earlier Spanish herding tradition which arrived in Mexico with Spanish colonization in the 16th century.

The *vaquero* tradition and culture began to change as white settlers in the United States began migrating to the West in the 19th century. Seeing the West as an opportunity to expand the United States from “sea to shining sea” and motivated by the idea of manifest destiny, white settlers conceptualized westward expansion as a divine right.

The infiltration of the West under the guise of manifest destiny had dire consequences for Native Americans for much of the 1800s. Westward expansion led to the forced removal and massacre of Native Americans. The tense relationship between the U.S. government, settlers, and Native Americans inspired dramatic “Western” tales that gave rise to the caricature of the heroic American cowboy, sans its *vaquero* origins.

The image of the American Cowboy also contributed to the erasure of Black cowboys. After the Civil War, many Black people traveled West in search of opportunity and in hopes of escaping the racism of the South. They took on jobs as cowboys throughout the Southwest, herding cattle. The job was not an easy one and racism still persisted in the West. One of the most prominent Black cowboys was Nat Love, who published his memoir in 1907 that detailed his life as a cowboy. While Love himself often turned to the trope of the American cowboy as a hero, his memoir reflects the prominence of Black cowboys in the West which still exists

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The history and origins of the cowboy
- The philosophy behind the idea of manifest destiny and westward expansion
- Legislation, treaties, and Supreme Court decisions related to westward expansion, including the Indian Removal Act, *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, The Indian Appropriations Act, The Homestead Act, and the Dawes Act
- The genocide and forced relocation of Native Americans during the period of westward expansion
- John Lomax's collection *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to describe the philosophy of manifest destiny and explain the effects westward expansion had upon Native Americans and wildlife in the United States by examining traditional cowboy songs and primary source documents.

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

- What comes to mind when you think of the word “cowboy”?
- What does a cowboy look like? What is the job of a cowboy?
- Where have you seen cowboys?

### PROCEDURE

1. Display **Image 1, James Walker, *California Vaqueros***. Give students some time to examine the painting, then ask:

- What do you see in the painting?
- What are the figures doing? What does it say about their role?
- Does the painting differ from depictions of cowboys you may have seen? In what way?

2. Display **Image 2, Kendall Nelson on Cowboys**. Ask students:

- Have you ever heard the term “*vaquero*?” If so, where?
- Does the James Walker painting you observed earlier give any indication of what *vaqueros* did for a living?

3. Tell students that well before European Americans moved into the West, Mexican *vaqueros* were herding cattle.
4. Explain that prior to the start of the Mexican American War in 1846, a newspaper editor named John O'Sullivan coined the term manifest destiny in an article for *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. Pass out **Handout - John O'Sullivan, "Annexation" (1845)** and read the article by O'Sullivan as a class or independently. Then ask students:
  - What is O'Sullivan advocating in the article?
  - In what context is O'Sullivan using manifest destiny? What events lead to his justification of manifest destiny?
  - How is Mexico portrayed by O'Sullivan? Why do you think he holds such views?
5. Tell students that the idea of manifest destiny led to a period of westward expansion in the United States, as white settlers began to increasingly go west, some taking up the cowboy profession practiced for decades prior by the *vaqueros*.
6. Tell students they will be now looking at the effects of westward expansion. They will be looking at historical documents, as well as cowboy songs collected by folklorist John Lomax. Split students into groups, and have each group rotate between three stations. Within each station, have student groups read the documents and consider what life might have been like in the West.
  - **Station 1: The Extermination of Buffalo**
  - **Station 2: Wounded Knee/Native Americans**
  - **Station 3: Westward Expansion**
7. Ask student groups to share with the class the discussions they had for each station.
8. Pass out to students **Handout - Times of U.S. Legislation and Other Events Related to Native Americans, 1830-1890**. Read the timeline together as a class, or independently. Ask students:
  - How might the primary sources you read relate to the events outlined in the handout?
  - Who was most affected by the westward expansion?
  - How did white settlers co-opting cowboy culture and stealing land hurt Native Americans?
9. Remind students that while legislation like the Homestead Act mostly benefited white settlers, African Americans who were recently freed from slavery also moved west. Show **Image 3, Photograph of Cowboy and Horse**, and pass out to students **Handout - Excerpt from Life and Adventures of Nat Love**. After reading the handout aloud as a class or individually, ask students:
  - What are some of the challenges to being a cowboy, based upon Love's experience? How would you describe Love's written voice?
  - Based on what you read, what were some challenges that came from being a Black cowboy?
  - How does the Love's depiction stray away from the caricature of the American cowboy? How might it play into the trope?

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Show **Image 4, Writing Prompt**. Ask students to write a response to the prompt, citing evidence from the historical documents they investigated during class.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Examine how the idea of the cowboy continued to influence American culture into the 20th and 21st centuries in the lesson **The Reclamation of the American Cowboy** (<https://teachrock.org/lesson/the-reclamation-of-the-american-cowboy/>)
2. The Handout - **Times of U.S. Legislation and Other Events Related to Native Americans, 1830-1890** mentions the violation of the Treaty of Fort Laramie. Do more research on the Treaty of Fort Laramie, and how it relates to the American Indian Movement's (AIM) occupation of the Black Hills in the 1970s.
3. Read this overview of American Imperialism in [americanyawp.com](http://www.americanyawp.com/text/19-american-empire): <http://www.americanyawp.com/text/19-american-empire>. Then write an essay discussing the ways manifest destiny and westward expansion might be considered a part of American imperialism.

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)*

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Reading 3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Reading 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Reading 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Reading 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)*

Writing 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Text Types and Purposes 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Production and Distribution of Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)*

Comprehension & Collaboration 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)*

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

## **SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)**

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

## NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

### Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

### *Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.



## RESOURCES

### HANDOUTS

- Handout - John O'Sullivan, "Annexation" (1845)
- Handout - Times of U.S. Legislation and Other Events Related to Native Americans, 1830-1890
- Handout - Excerpt from Life and Adventures of Nat Love
- Station 1: The Extermination of Buffalo
- Station 2: Wounded Knee/Native Americans
- Station 3: Westward Expansion