

The American West

The Real West?

The trans-Mississippi West held a special place in the American imagination for much of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Professor Patricia Limerick muses in *The Western Myth*, at first it may seem strange that "a cultural myth involving single white guys on horses and open spaces" develops as the nation is experiencing industrialization and urbanization. But imagination sometimes helps us escape reality, including the realities of life in the American West in the late nineteenth century.

Video: The Western Myth

Historians Patricia Limerick and Richard White present a thought-provoking analysis of the development and uses of the "western myth." How and why did Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" and a western myth emerge out of the developments of the Gilded Age? How and why was that thesis and myth passed on to later generations?

Video script:

Music introduction, Western movie

Patricia Limerick, University of Colorado: I used to puzzle over why it is that the western myth really came into full being and got glued into the American mind in a period where it seems so irrelevant to what was going on in most of America. This is the era, late 19th century, of industrialization and urbanization. So, first you think – well, why in heaven's name, would you then have a cultural myth involving single white guys on horses and open spaces? The explanation and the answer – that the imagination wants to go someplace quite different from the factory and the city street.

Gunslinger, from High Noon: Alright Kane, c'mon out!

Patricia Limerick: What a great thing to do, to have a place where you can put your imagination, where life would be completely different and you would not be in a factory and you would not

have a boss and when someone made you angry, you would shoot them.

Richard White, Stanford University: The hard part was, of course there were other people there before and those are Indian peoples. And one of the things that Americans have had a hard time with is seeing themselves as an imperial nation, as a conquering nation. If you ask most Americans to list a battle or a conflict, they'll tell you – the Little Big Horn or they'll tell you The Alamo. These are astonishing things to remember because they are defeats. But for the myth they work wonderfully, because they allow you to say we did nothing. It looks like conquest but we were just defending ourselves. And so you have this inversion of actual history where it makes it appear that Americans somehow were attacked the first moment they set foot on the Atlantic Coast and when they got finished defending themselves, they somehow spread all the way across into the Pacific. But it serves its purpose because it can show to Americans – we're not conquerors. We're not imperialists. We're just people who defend ourselves against aggression.

End of video.

Hang the Myth

The reality of the American West during the Gilded Age contrasts sharply with the myth that has grown up around this period of time. This activity tests your knowledge of terms that were part of the real story of the American West.

Interactive Activity: Hang the Myth

The reality of the American West during the Gilded Age contrasts sharply with the myth that has grown up around this period of time. This activity tests knowledge of terms that were part of the real story of the American West. Hydraulic mining was a process that mechanized mining, but was detrimental to the environment and flooded many farms. The spoils system was an arrangement practiced in most western territorial governments in which party leaders rewarded party loyalists with government jobs. Barbed wire was a technological advancement that ended the free range and forced many former ranchers to become wageworkers on large ranches owned by Anglos or European syndicates. Sodbusters were poor farmers who worked without machinery and often lived in dugouts carved in hillsides. The railroad largely replaced the covered wagon in moving white settlers to the West. A land grant was a gift of land from a

government, usually intended to encourage settlement or development. Assimilation was the process Native Americans underwent when they were absorbed into white culture. Ghost dancing was a generally nonviolent Indian response to white encroachment that frightened white settlers. Little Big Horn was one of the last military victories for Plains Indians over the white man. The Wounded Knee Massacre was an event that represents the failure of government Indian policies and the end of armed conflict between U.S. troops and Indians.

Lesson Study Questions

To evaluate your understanding of the lesson topics and prepare for tests, consider how you would answer these questions:

1. Why did Ghost Dancing become popular among American Indians in 1889–1890? Why did it frighten non-Indians?
 - Consider the plight of American Indians in 1889–1890.
 - What do people tend to do in times of stress? What life did Indians desire?
 - What did non-Indians have at stake?
2. What conditions did Mexican Americans face in the West in the late nineteenth century? How did they cope? What were the consequences of this era of Mexican American history?
 - What was happening with land ownership in that region?
 - What forms of discrimination existed? What were the opportunities?
 - What types of assistance and/or resistance were available?
 - How did conditions affect status and identity?
3. Briefly describe the western myth. Why was this myth created? What purposes did it serve?
 - Who were the heroes in this myth? How was the story told?
 - How did the myth allow for escaping reality?
 - What did the myth justify?
4. How and why was the West transformed in the late nineteenth century? How did these changes affect the people living in the West? How did the changes in the West transform America?
 - Consider the economic, social, and political forces at work.
 - Why were the railroads and the federal government critical?

- How did mining, ranching, and farming change in the West?
- How were American Indians, Mexican Americans, and settlers affected?
- How was the West connected to the rest of the country?
- What role did the western myth play in American history?

Additional Resources

Websites

[The Frontier in American History](#)

This hypertext edition of Turner's "The Frontier In American History" is taken from the 1921 edition published by Henry Holt and Company of New York.

[The Frontier Thesis Debate](#)

http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/s_z/turner.htm

Frederick Jackson Turner laid the foundation for modern historical study of the American West and presented a "frontier thesis" that continues to influence historical thinking even today. This article discusses the ongoing debate among historians over Turner's thesis.

[Closing the Frontier](#)

<http://www.pbs.org/fmc/interviews.htm>

Three noted historians discuss the background and analyze the importance of Frederick Turner's frontier thesis.