

Publishers' Bindings Online, 1815-1930: The Art of Books
bindings.lib.ua.edu

Sample Lesson Plan:
Cowboys and Indians: Myths of the Wild West
Grades K-12

* Teachers should adjust language according to grade level.

Objectives:

- Students will learn that the Wild West has been depicted on the covers of many books, and that the depictions did not always match reality.
- The lesson will be completed with the aid of the PBO database and includes extended learning activities

Materials:

- 1) A computer with an Internet connection and a large screen or other capability to display the teacher's actions to the entire class.
 - 1) **For K-4 only:** Enough blank paper for each student; crayons, markers, or colored pencils (either for each student or to share); corkboard and tacks or other capability to display student artwork (such as spreading it out on a large table or taping it to the wall).
 - 2) **For 5-8 only:** Lined paper and pens or pencils (or computer terminals where students can work individually). *Alternatively, the activity may be completed as a homework assignment.*
 - 3) **For 9-12 only:** Copies of the book list and book report handout for each student.
- * For the 9-12 assignment, students must have access to a library or other collection of books containing novels with Western themes. They will complete an out-of-class assignment to be turned in at a later class session.

Lesson

Background

From the end of the Civil War to the start of World War I, Americans moved west of the Mississippi River by the millions, particularly invading the northern and western plains in massive numbers. At the same time, the west and frontiers became a large part of the American popular imagination, evolving into myths and legends. These myths pervaded popular culture, including books of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Depictions of Native Americans

Westward movement had devastating consequences for Native Americans of the plains and southwest. Plains Indians saw the basic foundation of their society and culture demolished by the annihilation of millions of buffalo. All Native Americans were forced into submission and onto reservations by the American military in a series of wars between the 1860s and the 1880s.

[Teacher's Note: Go to <http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/sitesearch.html>, select the "Search by Keyword" link, and click on "Guided Search" at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pba00731. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.]

The Plains Indian wars were a topic of many books of the time, and books by soldiers involved in the campaigns were particularly popular. This 1874 book by Gen. George Custer, called *My life on the plains; or, Personal experiences with Indians*, is one example. Notice the enormous bison head on the cover, which was a symbol that instantly said "western."

[Click on "Guided Search" at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pba00012. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.]

The cover art of other soldiers' stories conveyed western themes instantly as well. Col. Richard Dodge's stories of *Our Wild Indians*, for example, depicted actual Native Americans only in faceless silhouette. But with shields and tomahawks emblazoned prominently on the front and spine, one could be guaranteed that Dodge's "experiences" with the "Red Men of the Great West" would be filled with accounts of triumphs over the warriors of the plains.

[Click on "Guided Search" at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pba01111. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.]

Many fiction and non-fiction books of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries depicted Native Americans on their covers, and not just those about the far west. However, no matter where or when the story of the book in question is supposed to occur, Indians portrayed on a book's cover are practically always the stereotyped Plains Indians from the western frontier. One example is this 1930 history of the early days of white presence in and around Natchez, Mississippi. Although Native Americans of the Natchez and other tribes lived in the area during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, none wore the elaborate feathered headdress like the individual depicted on the cover.

[Click on "Guided Search" at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pba00942. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.]

Perhaps most ridiculous in its depiction of Native American life is this historical work on the Creek War. That military affair took place in 1814-1815, largely in what is now Alabama. Anyone involved in that war, however, would likely have been thoroughly confused had they seen any animal like the bison whose head is the most prominent feature of this cover, because the bison lives west of the Mississippi River, on the Great Plains. But by 1878, when this book was published, Americans saw bison and thought “Indian.” Differentiating among Indian tribes and their cultures, or the reality that most Creek Indians likely never saw a bison before their evacuation to Oklahoma was likely not a major concern for publishers, and may not have been one for most readers either.

No matter what region the book discusses and no matter what genre the book represents, Native Americans usually are depicted on the cover in one of three ways: (1) as dangerous and violent savage forces that need to be dominated by the forces of American civilization, (2) as passive witnesses to the march of the white man across the western landscape, or (3) as primitive creatures of nature.

The book on the Creek War is an example of the savage depiction. Although the Creek War actually involved the armies of Andrew Jackson against the organized forces of Red Eagle, the book cover instead shows a lone white man with a gun attempting to pick off spear-carrying Native Americans on horseback.

[\[Click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pba00550. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.\]](#)

Among the book covers that depict the Native American as a passive witness is *The Pioneer Boys of the Ohio*. A book for young readers published in 1925, it portrays a Native American, barely clothed except for the ubiquitous headdress, watching white pioneers march across the landscape from the woods.

[\[Click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pba00361. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.\]](#)

The Native American as a primitive creature of nature can be seen in *Ned in the Block House*. Also for young readers, this book depicts a young Native American boy staving off the advances of a bear with nothing but a torch and an unused bow and arrow.

[\[Click on the spine image, at the left side of the screen.\]](#)

The idea of the primitive Native American becomes even stronger when you contrast the front cover image with the picture on the spine of the same book. Here, a young white boy demonstrates with his rifle how the forces of progress deal with the creatures of the woods.

Depictions of the White Man

[Click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pba00499. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.]

Ultimately, the Native Americans depicted on the book covers of this period were less real people than they were symbols of the American landscape before the age of civilization. Judging from the book covers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the real heroes of the American West were its white men. Like the Native Americans, white men could be depicted in several ways on the cover of books. One common depiction was as the ruggedly masculine, buckskin-clad, knife- and rifle-wielding pioneer. *Jack Sutherland* provides an example of this image. The man on the cover of this 1926 book stands tall in the foreground with his rifle held triumphantly overhead, signaling his status as a conqueror of the wilderness.

[Click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pbw00015. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.]

The cowboy image was among the most popular depiction of white men in the American west. Part of this image was the rodeo-like depiction of the cowboy exerting his power over nature, busting broncos and taming wild horses. *The Border Boys with the Texas Rangers*, from 1912, provides an example of this image.

[Click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pba00674. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.]

Another facet of the cowboy image was the trail rider, driving cattle across the frontier, which can be seen in this 1903 book, *The Log of a Cowboy*.

[Click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pba00161. Click on the thumbnail of the book cover, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.]

Books made heroes not only of cowboys and wild frontiersman but also of outlaws and train robbers, such as those depicted in *Wild Bandits of the Border*, from 1888. Although these criminals used viciously brutal guerrilla activities during and after the Civil War, these barbaric actions were lost amid the more popular accounts of daring crimes and manly gunplay.

All of these heroes cleared the way for modernity and for the progress of American civilization. After the buckskin-clad pioneer and the cowboy came the stagecoach and the railroad, bringing the products, people, and industry of the East to civilize the region.

[Click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. In the first search box, type in pba00524. Click on the *endpaper image on the left side of the screen*, then enlarge the illustration by clicking on the largest of the three boxes under it.]

When Wilderness Was King encapsulates the depictions of Indians and the western frontiers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If you look at the endpapers of the book (the decorated paper glued to the inside of the leather cover), you can see all of the major themes of the story of America’s western expansion together: the cavalry officer facing off against the headdress-adorned Indian, the generic Indian tepee juxtaposed with the buckskin-wearing and rifle-bearing pioneer and his Victorian bride, all revolving around the army fort situated at the page’s center. If the book’s contents told of a time when wilderness was king, the new king of the world was the triumphant white American.

Activities

Activity 1 (Grades K-4)

For this activity, students will draw their own book covers depicting images of the American West. Encourage creativity.

After students complete their work, display the covers so students can see all of their classmates’ designs.

Activity 2 (Grades 5-8)

For this activity, students will select one of the book covers shown in class and write a story to go with it. Stories may be either hand-written or typed, depending on the materials available in class.

All students, or those who volunteer, should have an opportunity to read their stories in front of the class.

Activity 3 (Grades 9-12)

For this activity, each student will choose a Western novel to read and compare it to the mythical depictions discussed in class. Instructors may distribute “Booklist: Wild West Fiction for Young Adults” or amass a list of their own from which students may select titles.

After reading their books, students will write a book report about their selections. Distribute “Guidelines for Book Reports” for students to follow.

Students should be given at least a week to read their books and write their reports. The instructor may choose to set aside a class period for students to discuss what they reported.

For additional teaching resources on the American Frontier, see:

Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, University of Virginia

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/HNS/BuffaloBill/home.html>

Cowboys, US History Lesson Plan, Discovery School

<http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/rediscoveringamerica-therealamericancowboy/>

History of the American West, 1860-1920, Learning Page, American Memory, Library of Congress

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/collections/amwest/>

Making Myths: The West in Public and Private Writings, PBS

http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/lesson_plans/lesson06.htm

On Teaching Western History: Syllabi and Other Teaching Resources,

<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/westweb/>