

Humanities Seminars Program

The American West in Myth and Reality

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Tuesdays 10:00 a.m.– 12:00 p.m.

January 15 – February 12, 2019

The Course

American history is shorter than that of many other countries. It has no Knights of the Round Table or mythic Samari. Lacking those, we used settlement of the nineteenth century West to create our own land of myth and adventure. Therefore, almost all of the ideas we have about the history of the region are wrong. Most of them come from novels, Western art, old Western films people saw in theatres or as TV reruns, or now long-gone Western series such as Gun Smoke on TV. Earlier generations got similar stereotypes from dime novels, Wild West shows, and the reminiscences of pioneers who liked to exaggerate their experiences. These sources turned American occupation of the West into a series of legendary adventures.

This course will contrast the fictional ideas with Western reality. The myths began with the self-reliant and upright pioneers, settling the wilderness while facing danger from aggressive, warlike Indians. They continued with the assumption that one did not need wealth or connections to claim and profit from the Western resources, and that the law-abiding citizens easily removed violent, dangerous criminals from their communities. As a result the myths portrayed an adventure in which most pioneers succeeded, and lived happily ever after. They also suggest that the federal government had little role in the settlement process. These fantasies do not obscure reality entirely. Many pioneers going west did combine adventure, danger and opportunity, including access to mineral wealth, free farm or range land, a chance to start new businesses, and an escape from tiresome routine and obligations. That picture comes from Hollywood and romance novels. Often reality proved to be starkly different. Yet the West offered chances for a new life, and class discussion will consider those realities with the myths that tend to obscure them.

Topics and Recommended Readings

Please note that all the readings will be uploaded to Box@UA. Registered students will receive the link by mid December.

January 15: Getting the West:

Louisiana – 1803; Texas -1846; Oregon –1846; Southwest & California – 1848; Explorers, Fur Traders

Willian Goetzmann. “From the Northwest Passage to the Great West,” pp. 110-26 in *New Lands, New Men*. Penguin Books, 1997.

Mark Nackman, “Anglo-American Migrants to the West,” *Western*

Historical Quarterly, October 1974. Pp. 441-55.

January 22: Invading the West: “Manifest Destiny”; Oregon Fever; Miners; Farmers; Ranchers

Johnny Faragher & Christine Stansell, “Women & Their Families on the Overland Trail.”

Gilbert Fite, “Failure on the Last Frontier,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, January 1989, 5-14.

January 29: Indians: Trade & Exploration; Inhabitants; & Pioneers; Government actions; Wars & settlement

Richard White, “The Winning of the West: Expansion of Western Sioux,” *Journal of American History*, May, 1978. Pp. 319-43.

Janet Le Compte, “Indians, the Army, and Settlers,” *Colorado Magazine* Spring, 1964. Pp. 315-34.

February 5: Law & Order: Outlaws, Local law enforcement, Vigilantes, Gunfighters, New communities

Robert Dykstra, Ch. 3 “Adjustment to Violence,” *The Cattle Towns*, Pp. 112-148.

Richard M. Brown, “The Pivot of American Vigilantism: San Francisco,” Ch. 9 in J. M. Carroll, *Reflections of Western Historians*, Pp. 105-19.

Richard White, “Outlaw Gangs on the Middle Border,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, October, 1981, Pp. 387-408.

February 12: Preserving the “Old West”: Popular Culture; Media & Myths; Entertainment industry; Local pride & Nostalgia; Tourism

Roger L. Nichols, “Western Attractions: Europeans and America,” *Pacific Historical Review*, February, 2005, Pp. 1-17.

Anne M. Butler, “Selling the Popular Myth,” Chapter 22 in Clyde A. Milner II, et.al. eds. *Oxford History of the American West*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.