

Westward Expansion: A New History



THE CHOICES PROGRAM

Explore the Past... Shape the Future

History and Current Issues for the Classroom

WATSON INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
BROWN UNIVERSITY WWW.CHOICES.EDU

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CHOICES for the 21st Century Education Program

July 2011

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The Choices for the 21st Century Education Program is a program of the Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies and the Office of Continuing Education at Brown University.

The Choices Program develops curricula on current and historical international issues and offers workshops, institutes, and in-service programs for high school teachers. Course materials place special emphasis on the importance of educating students in their participatory role as citizens.

Acknowledgments

Westward Expansion: A New History was developed by the Choices for the 21st Century Education Program with the assistance of the research staff at the Watson Institute for International Studies, scholars at Brown University, and other experts in the field. We wish to thank the following researchers for their invaluable input:

Colin G. Calloway
John Kimball, Jr. 1943 Professor of History and Professor of Native American Studies, Dartmouth College

Karl Jacoby
Professor of History, Brown University

Naoko Shibusawa
Associate Professor of History, Brown University

We would like especially to thank Professor Jacoby for allowing us to use the research from his book *Shadows at Dawn*, which formed the basis for much of Parts II and III and the Perspectives.

We would also like to thank Josh Otlin, an assistant principal at Hudson Public Schools in Massachusetts, for the research and writing he did in the early stages of this project.

Thanks to Dana Karin and Sundeep Sood for their contributions and input.

Cover art by Douglas Miles.

Maps by Alexander Sayer Gard-Murray.

Westward Expansion: A New History is part of a continuing series on international public policy issues. New units are published each academic year and all units are updated regularly.

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Introduction: Between Atlantic and Pacific

Within a matter of decades in the nineteenth century, the United States grew from an infant nation of just eighteen states to a major world power whose borders stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The story of westward expansion is often told as the advance of civilization and the winning of a continent. But it is also a story of invasion, dispossession, and violence.

At the start of the nineteenth century, the United States' western border only just touched the Mississippi River. Spain, France, Britain, and Russia claimed large sections of the continent. These colonial powers were competing for power and influence throughout the Americas. European settlements speckled the region to the west of U.S. borders, but ultimately it was the thousands of Native American groups—and hundreds of thousands of Native American people—that controlled this region.

Less than fifty years later, the United States had expanded its boundaries clear across the continent in a quest for land and resources. U.S. settlers colonized the West. With the help of the U.S. government, they successfully pushed Native American groups off their lands and forced them onto reservations by the end of the nineteenth century. Indian groups across the country declined from a position of power to a position of dependency. But U.S. westward expansion was not inevitable, nor was it welcomed by many groups, both native and European.

How does perspective affect the story of U.S. westward expansion?

The story of the U.S. settlement of the West is not a simple story. It involved a diverse array of groups each with different perspectives on what was happening on the continent in the nineteenth century. Even the term “westward expansion” reflects a particular perspective. While it represented an expansion for white settlers, in many ways it

was a process of decline and loss for Native American groups.

The term “the West” also masks the different perspectives of people at the time. U.S. settlers on the East Coast of North America used this label. From their vantage point, the western part of the continent was “the West.” For Spanish colonists in present-day Mexico and South America, the region was *el Norte*, the North; for Russians in present-day Alaska, it was the East. And for Native groups at the time, the concept had little relevance to the way they understood the region.

Even in the United States, the concept of “the West” evolved during the course of the country's early history. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Ohio Valley and other lands east of the Mississippi River, as yet unsettled by U.S. citizens, were considered “the West.” Only in the nineteenth century, as U.S. settlements spread across the continent, did people in the United States begin to think of the region west of the Mississippi as “the West.” In this reading “the West” will describe lands to the west of the Mississippi River.

It is difficult to tell the story of U.S. westward expansion without making generalizations. The hundreds of Native American societies across North America were diverse, and their experiences with U.S. expansion were varied. Similarly, the new settlers that moved to the West were diverse, and the interactions between Native American groups and these settlers took many forms.

Nevertheless, certain themes replayed themselves over and over again as Europe, and then the United States, colonized North America. For example, cultural misunderstanding and mistrust often colored the interactions between individuals from different societies. These interactions created a new world that incorporated elements of Indian, European, and U.S. societies. But despite moments of cooperation and cultural exchange, this is ultimately a story of violence and conquest.

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Legend as an Historical Source

Objectives:

Students will: Consider the purpose of legends and myths.

Examine how one particular Indian group thought about smallpox.

Assess the historical value of a legend.

Required Reading:

Before beginning the lesson, students should have read the Introduction and Part I of the student text (pages 1-18) and completed “Study Guide—Part I” (TRB 6-7) or “Advanced Study Guide—Part I” (TRB-8).

Note:

You may want to have students read the Kiowa legend before class in order to give them more time to concentrate on analysis.

Handouts:

“The Kiowas Meet Smallpox” (TRB 13-15)

In the Classroom:

1. Framing the Lesson—Ask students to define the word “mythology.” What is a myth? Do myths have any basis in reality? Can students think of examples of myths? Are there important myths or stories that are told in the United States? What are some characteristics of these kinds of stories? What is the purpose of these stories?

Tell students that until recently, most historians dismissed Indian oral traditions and stories as “mythology.” They believed that these sources were not reliable as records of events or experiences. But in the last few decades, scholars have begun to try to understand how people understand the history that they live through. They now see Indian stories and other oral traditions as important sources that give clues to how these groups understood (and understand) the world and the ways in which they interact with it.

2. Recalling the Reading—Tell students that they will be reading a Kiowa legend about how that group first “met” smallpox. The Kiowas were horse traders who lived in what is today southern Oklahoma. Students will read this story as historians, and attempt to sift through the story for clues about the ways in which the Kiowa lived and the ways in which they thought about their world. To refresh their memories, ask students to recall from the reading and their previous knowledge how disease affected Native American societies in the West. How did these diseases spread? How were some societies exposed to disease long before they had contact with Europeans? Why were these epidemics so deadly? What factors made groups more or less susceptible to disease?

3. Forming Small Groups—Divide the class into groups of two or three. Distribute the handout to each group. Each group should carefully read the instructions and complete the questions.

4. Sharing Conclusions—When groups have finished answering the questions, call on students to explain their answers. Why do students think the Kiowa told this story? What was its purpose? What does this story tell us about what the Kiowa thought of U.S. westward expansion?

Tell students that this legend was created in the late nineteenth century, and the landscape that it describes is from that time period. But the Kiowas were first exposed to smallpox in the late eighteenth century if not earlier, long before there were many U.S. settlements in present-day southern Oklahoma. Can students think of any reasons why this legend might describe the Kiowa’s first encounter with smallpox more than a hundred years after it actually took place?

What did students learn about the Kiowa from this legend? Make a list on the board of all the pieces of information that students could come up with. Do students think that sources like this can be useful in understand-

ing history? Why or why not? What are the problems? What are the benefits?

Homework:

Students should read Part II of the reading in the student text (pages 19-32) and complete “Study Guide—Part II” (TRB 21-22) or “Advanced Study Guide—Part II” (TRB-23).

The Kiowas Meet Smallpox

Instructions: Below is a legend of the Kiowa people of present-day Oklahoma about their first encounter with smallpox. Saynday is a trickster hero of the Kiowas. (A trickster is a figure who plays tricks or who challenges normal rules and conventions.) Read the legend and then answer the questions that follow with your group members.

From Our Hearts Fell to the Ground: Plains Indian Views of How the West was Lost

Edited by Colin Calloway, Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996, pp. 51-53.

Saynday was coming along, and as he came he saw that all his world had changed. Where the buffalo herds used to graze, he saw white-faced cattle. The Washita River [a river in Texas and Oklahoma], which once ran bankful with clear water, was soggy with red mud. There were no deer or antelope in the brush or skittering across the high plains. No white tipis rose proudly against the blue sky; settlers' soddies [houses made of sod] dented the hillsides and the creek banks.

My time has come, Saynday thought to himself. The world I lived in is dead. Soon the Kiowa people will be fenced like the white man's cattle, and they cannot break out of the fences because the barbed wire will tear their flesh. I can't help my people any longer by staying with them. My time has come, and I will have to go away from this changed world.

Off across the prairie, Saynday saw a dark spot coming toward him from the east, moving very slowly....

Almost absent-mindedly, Saynday started walking eastward. As he went the spot grew larger, and after a while Saynday saw that it was a man on a horse....

The stranger drew rein, and sat looking at Saynday. The...horse lifted one sore hoof and drooped its head as if it were too weary to carry its burden any further.

"Who are you?" the stranger asked.

"I'm Saynday. I'm the Kiowas' Old Uncle Saynday, I'm the one who's always coming along."

"I never heard of you," the stranger said, "and I never heard of the Kiowas. Who are they?"

"The Kiowas are my people," Saynday said, and even in that hard time he stood up proudly, like a man. "Who are you?"

"I'm Smallpox," the man answered.

"And I never heard of you," said Saynday. "Where do you come from and what do you do and why are you here?"

"I come from far away, across the Eastern Ocean," Smallpox answered. "I am one with the white men—they are my people as the Kiowas are yours. Sometimes I travel ahead of them, and sometimes I lurk behind. But I am always their companion and you will find me in their camps and in their houses."

"What do you do?" Saynday repeated.

"I bring death," Smallpox replied. "My breath causes children to wither like young plants in spring snow. I bring destruction. No matter how beautiful a woman is, once she has looked at me she becomes as ugly as death. And to men I bring not death alone, but the destruction of their children and the blighting of their wives. The strongest warriors go down before me. No people who have looked on me will ever be the same." And he chuckled low and hideously. With his raised forearm, Smallpox pushed the dust off his face, and Saynday saw the scars that disfigured it.

For a moment Saynday shut his eyes against the sight, and then he opened them again. "Does that happen to all the people you visit?" he inquired.

"Every one of them," said Smallpox. "It will happen to your Kiowa people, too. Where do they live? Take me to them, and then I will spare you, although you have seen my face."

If you do not lead me to your people, I will breathe on you and you will die....” And although he did not breath on Saynday, Saynday smelled the reek of death that surrounded him.

“My Kiowa people are few and poor already,” Saynday said, thinking fast as he talked. “They aren’t worth your time and trouble.”

“...Man, woman, or child—humanity is all alike to me. I was brought here to kill.... I count those I destroy. White men always count: cattle, sheep, chickens, children, the living and the dead. You say the Kiowas do the same thing?”

“Only the enemies they touch,” Saynday insisted. “They never count living people—men are not cattle, any more than women and children are.”

“Then how do you know the Kiowas are so few and poor?” Smallpox demanded.

“...You can look at a Kiowa camp and tell how small it is. We’re not like the Pawnees. They have great houses, half underground, in big villages by the rivers, and every house is full of people.”

“I like that,” Smallpox observed. “I can do my best work when people are crowded together.”

“Then you’d like the Pawnees,” Saynday assured him. “They’re the ones that almost wiped out the Kiowas; that’s why we’re so few and so poor. Now we run away whenever we see a stranger coming, because he might be a Pawnee.”

“I suppose the Pawnees never run away,” Smallpox sneered.

“They couldn’t if they wanted to,” Saynday replied. “The Pawnees are rich. They have piles of robes, they have lots of cooking pots and plenty of bedding—they keep all kinds of things in those underground houses of theirs. The Pawnees can’t run away and leave all their wealth.”

“And they are rich, and live in houses, with piles of robes to creep into and hide?”

“That’s the Pawnees,” Saynday said jauntily. He began to feel better. The deathly smell was not so strong now. “I think I’ll go and visit the Pawnees first,” Smallpox remarked. “Later on, perhaps, I can get back to the Kiowas.”

...He picked up his reins and jerked his weary horse awake. “Tell your people when I come to be ready for me. Tell them to put out all their fires. Fire is the only thing in the whole world that I’m afraid of. It’s the only thing in God’s world that can destroy me.”

Saynday watched Smallpox and his death horse traveling north, away from the Kiowas. Then he took out his flint and steel, and set fire to the spindly prairie grass at his feet. The winds came and picked up the fire, and carried it to make a ring of safety around the Kiowas’ camps.

“Perhaps I can still be some good to my people after all,” Saynday said to himself, feeling better.

And that’s the way it was, and that’s the way it is, to this good day.

Questions

1. Summarize this legend in 2-3 sentences.
2. What changes does Saynday notice when he looks at the landscape?
3. What do you think Saynday means when he thinks, “Soon the Kiowa people will be fenced like the white man’s cattle”?
4. What is the relationship between Smallpox and white men?
5. According to this legend, in what ways do the Kiowas see themselves as different from white people?
6. What do you think was the relationship between the Kiowas and the Pawnees?
7. According to this legend, what factors made a group more appealing to Smallpox?
8. According to Smallpox, what were some of the effects of the disease? How was it spread?
9. From the description of the landscape in the legend and your knowledge of U.S. westward expansion, around when do you think the meeting between Saynday and Smallpox took place?
10. Imagine that you are an historian reading this source. What have you learned about the Kiowas? List as many pieces of information as you can, including details about their lives, their relations with other groups, and what they knew about smallpox.