

Pioneer Women and the American Frontier

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Overview

The study of migration and migratory patterns has always been of particular interest to me. Why people move (precipitating factors), where they move to (confirmed or chance destination), and how they relate to their new home/environment (adjustment), underscores the curriculum throughout the entire course of study in both United States History and World Cultures.

My historical perspective is largely based upon an ongoing attempt to understand and even empathize with social conditions that affected all who came before us. In an age when everything seemingly can happen almost instantaneously, it is difficult, if not impossible for our students to imagine a world without communication, ease and speed of transportation, and technology and inventions that are considered necessities of life. Rather than approach each time period and attempt to have the student identify with challenges inherent to that phase in our history, I maintain a contemporary perspective with the students in terms of their current lifestyle. Then I propose the “What If” scenario, and systematically strip away important and life sustaining amenities we enjoy today, and thrust the students into a world devoid of our creature comforts.

For the purpose of this lesson, I plan to have my students discuss voluntary migration, of one’s own volition, and forced migration, whereby wives and children were uprooted by their husbands and fathers and had no choice. The bottom line is that massive numbers of people moved across continents and oceans, despite fears of the unknown, and in many cases, fears of the known. They put themselves and their families in peril, and most importantly, for the

purpose of this study, they left their families, friends, and their roots, with what must have been a keen underlying sense that in all likelihood, they would never see, and most likely never have meaningful communication with or knowledge of them again.

From the vantage point of a 21st century American, could we or would we do the same today? The question begs to be asked. Did people migrate with full knowledge of its repercussions, because they were accepted as the norm for the times, and therefore not as blatantly a hardship as we might consider them to be? People and families who lived 15 miles away had difficulty communicating and socializing, so what difference would 3,000 miles make. Did their “conditioning” make our perception of impossible migration, possible?

These questions should pose interesting dilemmas for students, and a challenge for me as their teacher, to present this material in a way that will generate questions and foster an understanding of our families who may have left loved ones. It may also enable us to come to terms with our present state of “conditioning” when it comes to moving/migrating. Are we less capable of cutting the ties that bind than almost all peoples who have come before us? Because of our need to be in constant contact with our families, friends, business associates, and the world at large, are we somehow less brave or possess less of the pioneer spirit? If we could be transported back in time with our present level of experiences, would westward migration, both European and American, ever have been achieved? What would we have considered to be our “manifest destiny?” Were all pioneers really braver and more adventurous, or were they typical of the time they inhabited. Pioneers, excuse the cliché, were not all cut from the same cloth. One might initially think that there would be a common thread, a personality trait or characteristic that would distinguish this group from their contemporaries. The only conclusion that I can draw after reading numerous personal accounts is that they were as normal or as dysfunctional as any people at any time in history.

Student involvement in this pursuit can take many forms, and can have many applicable lessons. Some lesson plans could be designed to elicit questions about individual family experiences as well as about us, and our ability or willingness to move cross-country. Students could be asked, after reading personal writings about pioneer experiences, to determine if they could have been or would have wanted to be, a pioneer in 19th century America. Students are fascinated with the current “Survivor” rage. To migrate as our ancestors did, are ability and desire inexorably linked?

The primary focus of this unit is to allow the students to experience migration on two different levels, both from an historical and a contemporary perspective. My research responsibilities will be to find primary source material written by eastern women who migrated west during the 19th century. Journals or diaries that were kept during migration and after settlement will be paramount to this study.

Rationale

What teaching experiences prompted me to write this curriculum?

More than ever before, because of the Internet and the proliferation of on line and printed material available, students have limitless access to information. My primary goal as a teacher, particularly in the social studies field, is to create a critical and discerning attitude in my students regarding secondary knowledge. My personal experience has been that people, in general, have an almost Zen like reverence for the written word, via newspapers, magazines, internet web sites, and for anything the media gushes forth. In other words, if someone took the time to write it, someone deemed it important enough to print, or the media included it in their nightly newscast, ergo it must be true.

People also tend to believe the first thing they hear regarding any newsworthy occurrence, and it is very difficult to ultimately dislodge them from that realm of thinking. Young people, (and adults, for that matter), are particularly guilty of taking a snippet of information, embellishing it, and then speaking ex cathedra. They are therefore very vulnerable to biased reporting.

At the beginning of the school year, I initiate discussion around news events, both past and current, to illustrate this fact. Almost everything we read or hear has been colored by the author's perspective, collective experiences, and overt or covert bias. We also discuss the fallibility of "eyewitnesses." Absolute objectivity in reporting is virtually impossible so where does one search for the truth?

History books, as we know them, are merely a statement of the obvious, indisputable facts, and an interpretation of everything else. Reading and dissecting primary sources allows the student to play reporter, and ultimately dally in the historian's craft. When five or six different renderings of the same event surface, students will be able to experience first hand, the difficulties historians and reporters encounter.

Simply for further edification, I would like to loosely quote Dolores Kearns Goodwin, the noted presidential historian, who, on the Today Show, stated that future historians would have greater difficulty gathering information about present and future presidents because of computers. Letters, journals, speech drafts, which up until now, were consigned to paper, will be largely inaccessible. Letters that other presidents may have written to their wives, children and friends, have been replaced by e-mail. Valuable insights may be lost because of technology. Can a computer printout ever replace, or provide the insight that may be gained from a handwritten note? Also, my personal reflection is that we are not creating long lasting records of our times. Oil paintings, though not infinite, have a longer “shelf life” than photographs, movie film or videotape, and our books today are printed on acid treated paper. Three hundred year old books in library stacks will be non-existent.

It has also become painfully apparent to me that the current generation of high school students does not have an “image” of western life. Allow me to digress. Right or wrong, the genre of western television and movies, and dime store novels and novellas that were the mainstay of entertainment for many years, are a thing of the past. No one will argue that the images presented were often ludicrous, and that the characters and story lines were trite, historically inaccurate, and romanticized for the 20th century audience, but one could still relate to the visual context. This is not meant to present the Hollywood version of the west as anything remotely related to history, but it did serve a purpose. I was fascinated by both the lure and the lore of western life as depicted by television and earlier movies. In that, it served a purpose. My students are interested in Vietnam. From the first day of class, questions abound. It seems to be the only period they can remotely relate to. Could this be because Vietnam War films are currently being popularized? As an historian, I usually cringe during any movie that dares to purport itself as factually based, but we cannot deny their overall motivational importance and impact on our students.

What is the purpose of this curriculum?

This is why I feel it is so important to provide our students with actual, first-hand accounts of our pioneer ancestors. Whether we are 8th generation or 3rd generation Americans, in almost all instances, our families emigrated here, and then may have subsequently migrated within the United States. The stories of pioneer women, with their seemingly unadulterated ability to cope, are inspiring, to say the least. It will be interesting to see if my students share that perspective after completing this unit of study.

How will this be accomplished?

The students will initially participate in activities focused upon differentiating between primary and secondary sources, and the relative importance of each to this curriculum. It will be incumbent upon me as their teacher, to set the stage for this unit of study. In order for this to be enjoyable for them, and not just a “learning experience,” I hope to, as mentioned previously, link the current with the past, with the prevailing overriding question, “Would you or could you have been a pioneer?” This may not be a totally fair question in light of the fact that we have the benefit of hindsight. We know, or the students will know after reading the pioneer’s accounts, how difficult, lonely, injurious to health, dangerous, death defying, frustrating, exhilarating, and rewarding western migration could be. Did the pioneers know what they were going to encounter? For the most part, I think they did. Life, for the vast majority of people at that time in an agrarian culture, was extremely difficult by our standards and even theirs. Separation from family and friends was the norm, and loss due to death was common. Though we may see the decision to leave home and hearth as a tremendous leap, it may have simply been a natural progression. Ultimately, it will be up to the students to decide if these people were really unique, with ambitions, skills, and coping mechanisms beyond our own.

What are the challenges?

Can we ever truly understand another time or another culture? Is historical empathy beyond our realm of experience, possible? I think not, and it is because of this that I continue to struggle with lesson plans and teaching strategies. So much of what I love about history, beyond innate interest and appreciation, is difficult for students and non-historians to comprehend.. “Why do we have to know this stuff?” is the cry from some of my students. For my other students, relevance is the key. Nothing is accepted at face value. Because of that, I find it imperative to continually create analogous and hypothetical situations, thus the prevailing theme, “Could you or would you have been a pioneer?”

Objectives:

I want this unit of study to motivate my students to question and look at their lifestyle and their individual mettle in a 150 year-old mirror. It is my experience that many students do not care about people in history or care to study history because of it’s seeming lack of relationship to our present lives. These journal accounts should spawn reflection and discussion, and the primary goal of this lesson will have been accomplished. I am not asking the students to seek hard truths, or to arrive at any absolute conclusions. I would rather have them come

away from this with a sense of appreciation for life in another time, and the ability to compare and contrast seemingly disparate lives, theirs and ours.

Strategies

My research has relied primarily upon three sources: The Library of Congress' *American Memory*, the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and for your own edification and enjoyment, I would suggest a wonderful book, "Women of the West" by Cathy Luchetti in collaboration with Carol Olwell. In the last source the experiences of 11 women are brought to life through extensive excerpts from their diaries and journals, with commentary and reflections by the authors.

In the *American Memory, Prairie Settlements of Nebraska*, I had an opportunity to examine letters written to families and friends by pioneers, both men and women. I found them to be absolutely fascinating. Of particular interest were the writings of Mary Richardson and Miriam Davis Colt. Insights into their trip west, and their daily, if not hourly struggle to survive the experience of life on the plains, would be of interest to my students, 11th grade United States History students, but I am concerned that they would struggle with the grammatical structure, and become frustrated. I, therefore, decided to focus on two partial journals contained in "Women of the West." Both women wrote in a style that I feel would be more accessible to my students.

Mary Richardson was born on a farm in West Baldwin, Maine, in 1811. She very much wanted to become a missionary, but this was totally unheard of for unmarried women. She was pretty much resigned to the fact that she would probably never marry, as can be seen from her comment in her journal, dated August 7, 1833, "I see very few men that are perfect enough to please me." In April of 1837, fate came a knocking in the form of Elkanah Walker, who shared Mary's desire to become a missionary. They married a year later, and within a month, with Mary already pregnant, embarked on their journey to Oregon with two other couples. The account that follows I think would be of particular interest to my students, especially Mary's view of their courtship and marriage, and her observations regarding her husbands and their traveling companions' behavior.

Next, I chose a journal kept by Miriam Davis, born into a poor New York City family, in December of 1817. Miriam worked very hard to get an education, and eventually got her teaching certificate. It was while working as a teacher in Parishville, N.Y., that she met William H. Colt, also a teacher, but from a very different social background. They were married in 1845, and spent seven years teaching in Montreal. Unfortunately for Miriam, William, in 1856, decided to pursue participation in an experimental vegetarian settlement in Kansas,

consisting of 100 settlers, only eight of whom had farming experience. Needless to say, the settlement failed, but Miriam Davis Colt, in an effort to earn money to support her and her daughter, published *Went to Kansas* in 1862.

The journal entries cover their three-month journey and early settlement days. The statement at the end of her entry on July 16th struck me. She states, “Just three months to-day since we left home: mark the contrast!” She was acutely and painfully aware of how much tragedy had befallen them, and it made her seem very contemporary while reflecting on her current situation in comparison to the life that had come before.

Miriam Davis Colt was an educated woman, and her writing reflects this. I want my students to see this migratory experience through the eyes of someone who relates her experiences in a concise, educated, yet elaborative manner. Despite extraordinary determination and personal fortitude she and her husband failed. They eventually left the settlement and returned to New York, penniless. The rest of her family did not survive.

In the interest of accessibility and ease of presentation, I am going to suggest that for this lesson you use the PBS website to locate the writings of Narcissa Whitman. The PBS (Public Broadcasting System) was a surprising source for this particular topic. You may choose to use any portion of Narcissa Whitman’s journal or letters. If you cannot download or project an excerpt, I have included a representative portion suitable for copying and inclusion in the student’s primary source packet. (Appendix A)

<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/resources/archives/two/whitman1.htm>

Classroom Activities

In the interest of time, the lesson may include any or all of the following:

- **Readings** – Primary Source Material from the Library of Congress American Memory and/or the Public Broadcasting System websites. (Appendix A)

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/calbk:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(calbk020div8\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/calbk:@field(DOCID+@lit(calbk020div8)))

<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/resources/archives/two/whitman1.htm>

- **Photographs** – Library of Congress American Memory
- **Group and Individual Activities** – Identifying primary and secondary sources, brainstorming session on defining the pioneer spirit. (Appendices B & C.)
- **Essay** – Would you want to live the experience of a pioneer? (Appendix D)

ACTIVITY SECTION AND LESSON PLANS FOR 11TH GRADE UNITED STATES HISTORY

The Teaching Plan

Time allotment:

The entire unit will take three days to complete.

Materials:

Teachers will need the following materials:

- access to the internet
- smart board or overhead projector
- copies of the journal entries on transparencies or projected images
- activity forms

Students will need the following materials:

- primary source packet
- notebook

Day One

Students will be asked to read Section 1. *The Expanding Nation*, pages 196 – 199 in their textbook *American Odyssey*, or a similar section in your textbook on westward migration, post Civil War. Pose the following questions for discussion: What is meant by the “frontier”? Why did pioneer families or individuals travel west? Write answers on the board. Next, ask students to consider if the frontier, as defined in this section, still exists, and if not, does any kind of frontier exist today? Where could they or would they go if they wanted to change their way of life, or just get away from it all? Write answers on the board. Along with students, determine which answers are valid and credible, and have them record them in their notebooks.

Next, explain to the students that they will be reading actual personal accounts (primary sources) of pioneer women’s experiences as they traveled west across the United States and territories, and that the focus of this lesson will be to attempt to define the “Pioneer Spirit,” and determine if we could or would have chosen this life path.

Now students will be asked as a preliminary step to this lesson to distinguish primary sources from other sources of information. Distribute the worksheet, A SOURCE BY ANY OTHER NAME, a dictionary, and assign the chapter in your textbook that you think contains at least ten (10) examples of primary and secondary source material. The students should record a minimum of eight (8).

Using Primary Sources: General Information

Topic: How do I identify a primary source?

Objective: Students will be able to differentiate between primary and secondary source material.

Materials: Worksheet, “A Source By Any Other Name,” plus their Textbook. (Appendix B)

Procedure: Distribute copies of the worksheet, and assure that each student has their textbook.

The teacher should select a chapter in the book that best serves the purpose of this activity. The chapter should have at least ten examples of a primary source, including documents, speeches, commentary, letters, and newspaper articles.

Have students locate what they think are examples of a primary source. Discuss their findings with them in detail.

Go over the worksheet with the students, and answer any questions they have about the assignment.

Have students individually review the assigned chapter. Check their worksheets periodically to make sure they understand the assignment. Begin the chapter review. Use correct as well as incorrect responses as learning examples.

Day Two

It would be ideal if selected excerpts from the PBS website on Narcissa Whitman could be projected. If this technology is not available, copy the portion included herein for each student (Appendix A). Divide the students into groups, and distribute the worksheet, “Defining the Pioneer Spirit.” (Appendix C). It is

paramount to this entire lesson that students develop a conceptual grasp of what these pioneer men and women experienced, and be able to compare and contrast those experiences to those of any emigrating or migrating peoples. Again, this lesson will raise questions that have no single definable answers.

Day Three

Distribute the Essay worksheet (Appendix D). Juniors in high school will be expected to write a clear and concise essay on the proposed topic without a scoring rubric. Standard expectations regarding form, grammar and spelling should be known and understood.

Appendix A

The Letters and Journals of Narcissa Whitman 1836 – 1847

Saturday, 4th. Good morning, H. and E. I wrote last night till supper; after that it was dark I could not see. I told you how many bipeds there was in our company last night; now for the quadrupeds: Fourteen horses, six mules and fifteen head of cattle. We milk four cows. We started with seventeen, but we have killed one calf, and the Fur Company, being out of provision, have taken one of our cows for beef. It is usually pinching times with the Company before they reach the buffalo. We have had plenty because we made ample provision at Liberty. We purchased a barrel of flour and baked enough to last us, with killing a calf or two, until we reached the buffalo.

The Fur Company is large this year; we are really a moving village - nearly 400 animals, with ours, mostly mules, and 70 men. The Fur Company have seven wagons drawn by six mules each, heavily loaded, and one cart drawn by two mules, which carries a lame man, one of the proprietors of the Company. We have two wagons in our company. Mr. and Mrs. S., husband and myself ride in one, Mr. Gray and the baggage in the other. Our Indian boys drive the cows and Dulin the horses. Young Miles leads our forward horses, four in each team. Now E., if you want to see the camp in motion, look away ahead and see first the pilot and the captain, Fitzpatrick, just before him, next the pack animals, all mules, loaded with great packs; soon after you will see the wagons, and in the rear, our company. We all cover quite a space. The pack mules always string one after the other just like Indians.

There are several gentlemen in the company who are going over the mountains for pleasure. Capt. Steward (Mr. Lee speaks of him in his journal - he went over when he did and returned) he is an Englishman and Mr. Celam. We had a few of them to tea with us last Monday evening, Capt. Fitzpatrick, Stewart, Major Harris and Celam.

I wish I could describe to you how we live so that you can realize it. Our manner of living is far preferable to any in the States. I never was so contented and happy before neither have I enjoyed such health for years. In the morning as soon as the day breaks the first that we hear is the words, "Arise! Arise!" - then the mules set up such a noise as you never heard, which puts the whole camp in motion. We encamp in a large ring, baggage and men, tents and wagons on the outside, and all the animals except the cows, which are fastened to pickets, within the circle. This arrangement is to accommodate the guard, who stand regularly every night and day, also when we are in motion, to protect our animals from the approach of Indians, who would steal them. As I said, the mules' noise brings every man on his feet to loose them and turn them out to feed.

Dearest mother, let me tell you how I am sustained of the Lord in all this journey. For two or three days past I have felt weak, restless and scarcely able to sit on my horse - yesterday in particular. But see how I have been diverted by the scenery, and carried out of myself in conversation about home and friends. Mother will recollect what my feelings were and had been for a year previous to our leaving home. The last revival enjoyed, my visit to Onondaga and the scenes there - these I call my last impressions of home, and they are of such a character that when we converse about home these same feelings are revived and I forget that I am weary and want rest. This morning my feelings were a little peculiar; felt remarkably strong and well - so much so as to mention it - but could not see any reason why I should feel any more rested than on the morning previous. Then I began to see what a day's ride was before me, and I understood it. If I had had no better health to-day than yesterday I should have fainted under it. Then the promise appeared in full view: "As thy day, so shall thy strength be," and my soul rejoiced in God, and testifies to the truth of another evidently manifest, "Lo, I am with you always."

Appendix B

**A SOURCE BY ANY OTHER NAME...
OR
EVERYTHING I WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT PRIMARY AND
SECONDARY SOURCES**

Name _____
Subject _____
Class Period _____
Date _____

Objective: At the end of this assignment, I will be able to differentiate between primary and secondary sources in my classroom textbook.

Define a Primary
Source _____

Define a Secondary
Source _____

Based upon these definitions, do you think your textbook is essentially a primary source or a secondary source? _____.
Explain your answer _____

Review Chapter _____.

There are at least _____ examples of primary source, and _____ examples of secondary source material contained in this chapter, above and beyond the general text. Please indicate below the page number, the first five words of the example, and whether it is a primary or secondary source.

Page	Example	Prim/Sec
1. _____		
2. _____		
3. _____		
4. _____		
5. _____		
6. _____		
7. _____		
8. _____		

Politicians and celebrities are always pleading that their comments were taken out of context. What do you think they mean?

How does context affect the validity of a source?

Appendix C

Defining the Pioneer Spirit

Name _____
Subject _____
Class Period _____
Date _____

Objective: After reading the following primary sources as a class, students will be asked to list personal qualities and characteristics that they think defined these women as pioneers.

Excerpts from the journal and letters of Narcissa Whitman.
Excerpts from another journal or letters of your choosing.

Each group of four to five students will brainstorm about what they have just read and list their impressions of these two women using the following guidelines:

Strengths

Abilities

Weaknesses

Get a dictionary and look up *spirit* and *pioneer*. Write down those sections of the definition that pertain to this activity on the board.

Which of these attributes would define *pioneer spirit*, and why?

How do these women describe their day-to-day life?

Do they reflect upon their previous lives? If yes, give examples.

Do they consider their present life a hardship? Why or why not? Give examples.

Can you tell from the readings if they would go back to their previous homes and lives? Give examples.

Each group will share their findings with the class. The teacher will record the findings on the board. As a class, the students will be asked to choose the best interpretations and impressions from the readings. The information will be consolidated, and the class will state what they think defines these women as pioneers.

Section Two

The second part of this exercise involves you, the students of today, attempting to determine if you have what it takes to have been a pioneer. Return to your group, review the readings and answer the following questions:

How did their life change? Give examples.

What were the physical demands? List them.

What were the social hardships? List them.

Appendix D

Essay

This section is to be completed by each student individually.

The Pennsylvania Historical Society is looking for volunteers to participate in a re-creation of a Conestoga wagon trip, from Pittsburgh to the foot of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. The trip will last approximately 3 months, June through August, and the participants will have to adhere to all guidelines and rules as established by the Society. You will not lose your job, and you may either travel alone or with your family. Since the participants cannot be rewarded with land the way the original pioneers were, you will participate solely for the experience. Except for the threat of attack, your trip will resemble the journey taken by Narcissa Whitman.

Would you or would you not want to participate and why?

Annotated Bibliography/Resources

The following texts and web sites will be helpful to educators implementing this lesson.

Texts

Luchetti, Cathy and Carol Olwell (Contributor). Women of the West. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2001. If you have any interest in the role of women in the American West, this book is a must. The photos are stunning, and the letters and journals included in this publication are inspiring. This book is available for purchase at Amazon.com

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/039332155X/qid=1120871213/sr=2-1/ref=pd_bbs_b_2_1/103-4329535-6876648#cited

Murphy, Claire Rudolf, Jane G. Haigh. Gold Rush Women. Alaska Northwest Books, Portland, Oregon, 1997. This book is in its' fifth printing. Also available through Amazon.com, it provides insight into the other "west." Fabulous pictures and stories about women settling in the Yukon.

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0882404849/ref=sid_av_dp/103-4329535-6876648?%5Fencoding=UTF8&v=glance

Web Sites

Library of Congress

American Memory- The Learning Page

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>

[Women: Struggle and Triumph](#)

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/00/triumph/overview.html>

This is the best site for primary source material. The lesson plan contained in this unit, Women: Struggle and Triumph, would be a valuable adjunct lesson plan to this curriculum unit.

National Archives

<http://www.archives.gov/>

Digital Classroom

http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/index.html

Excellent source for documents related to United States History with related classroom activities.

Public Broadcasting System

<http://www.pbs.org/>

The Letters and Journals of Narcissa Whitman 1836 - 1847

<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/resources/archives/two/whitman1.htm>

THE WEST is an eight-part documentary series which premiered on PBS stations in September 1996. This multimedia guided tour proceeds chapter-by-chapter through each episode in the series, offering selected documentary materials, archival images and commentary, as well as links to background information and other resources of the web site.

<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/program/>

Standards

Pittsburgh Public Schools has adopted a series of Standards that support the curriculum in each subject area. The following Standards will be met as part of this lesson:

Citizenship Standards – 1, 4, 5, 7 and 8.

Communication Standards – 1 through 8.