

Project Title: Singing West

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Subject and Grade Level: U.S. History 1 – 5th and 6th grade

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. Primary Investigative Question(s)

What cultural groups played a part in settling the American West? What can we learn about the identities, motivations, and lives of these people from songs of the period?

2. Contextual Essay

Introduction

Student knowledge of the American West is usually limited to Indians, territory acquisition, the California Gold Rush, overland trails, and a misconception of the west as a vast, unoccupied space waiting for Anglo-Americans to subdue it. What is needed to provide a framework for understanding and bring the American West alive, is familiarity with the people: the diverse cultural groups, the many nations, and the variety of indigenous peoples who played a role. "To appreciate the diversity of ideas and experiences that have shaped our history, we need to be sensitive to ... varieties of cultural documentation, to the enormous possibilities these documents afford us to get at the interior of American lives, to get at peoples long excluded from the American experience,..." (Litwack). These groups must be acknowledged and defined to understand the American West.

Through the use of songs which reflect the cultural groups, the truth of the west can be introduced: the "conquest of a vast land by competing interests..." (Luebke). Folk music provides a glimpse into these lives by communicating the hopes, sorrows, and convictions of ordinary people. Folk songs originate within a community of people, becoming "an important cultural form through which people assert and preserve their own histories..." (PBS).

Popular songs of a period provide insight because, to become popular, a song must have resonated with people - speaking for them, expressing their feelings and beliefs. "American roots music draws on the lived experience of ordinary men and women, who were and often still are defined and limited by cultural constructions of race, class and gender" (PBS).

The Mexicans and the corrido

Present in the area north of Mexico since the time of the Spanish explorations, Mexicans contributed to the settlement of the American West in many ways. As Anglo-Americans settled Mexican territory, Mexicans had more difficulty providing a secure life for their families. Some went to California to mine; others, migrated throughout the area working for Anglo ranchers. Still more became laborers on newly developing cotton plantations in Texas.

The Mexican ballad form known as the *corrido* is a native music form that developed in the mid-1800s "amidst the ongoing and often turbulent culture clash between Mexican and Anglo Americans along the lower Rio Grande Texas-Mexican border area." (Garcia). Lyrics of the *corridos* provide evidence of the resentment and "deep-seated and enduring hostility" (Greene) native Mexicans felt toward Anglo-Americans. Mexicans felt the need to express their discontent and "*corridos* decried the abuse of local officials, especially, and the *rinches* [Texas Rangers] in particular" (Greene).

Up until the mid-1800s, much of the land in Northern Mexico had been owned since the 1700s by Spanish land grantees. During the second decade of the 1800s, Anglo settlement in the area of Mexico known as Texas was encouraged by the Mexican government, partly as a means to stabilize the border area, partly as a source of income. Thousands were drawn by the combination of cheap land and fertile soil. "Mexico...was up for grabs, and expansionist America was not slow to sense its moment of destiny" (Silbur). As the Mexican government became fearful of the vast numbers of immigrants moving into the territory, conflicts grew between Mexican government and independently minded Texans. In 1834, General Santa Anna abolished the Mexican federal system, closed the

courts, and declared himself dictator of the centralized state (Tindall and Shi). Anglo-Americans rose in revolt, and by 1845, the new Republic of Texas had gained its independence from Mexico.

By 1848, most of the Spanish land grants had been transferred to Anglo-Americans. Although the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo honored and legally guaranteed old Mexican land titles, disputes arose. By 1883, only small patches of land belonged to Mexicans, and the majority of the land became large ranches owned by the Anglo-Americans. Resentment on the part of the Mexicans, and anti-Mexican discrimination by the Anglos, led to bitter cultural conflict.

Mexicans elevated to the status of hero ordinary people who responded to social injustice and mistreatment: Mexicans; and vilified those who enforced laws and reinforced discrimination: Texans (Greene). *Corridos* told stories of heroes and events, combined with commentary "colored by the ... information the corrido maker [had] at hand, his political views, his feelings about...a given incident" (Sonnichsen).

National heroes, such as Joaquin Murieta, were those who resisted the *norte-americanos* (Greene). Murieta went to California during the Gold Rush, suffered discrimination and personal tragedy at American hands, and retaliated by becoming a Mexican "Robin Hood," stealing from rich Anglos to help poor Mexicans.

The Cherokees, Christian hymns, and native song

Although unwilling, the people of the Cherokee nation contributed to the settlement of the American West when they were forced westward during the 1,400 mile Trail of Tears, the most famous Indian removal. They arrived in the Oklahoma territory to join other displaced eastern tribes, all of whom had experienced the determination of the whites to control prime land.

On the way from ancestral lands to new lands in the Oklahoma Territory, 4,000 Cherokee died from starvation, exposure, and disease. Despite the mistreatment they received at the hands of the whites, many of the songs they sang during the trek were Christian hymns translated into the Cherokee language. Both Christian hymns, such as 'Amazing Grace,' and native songs, like 'Ka-Ta-Yi's Tears,' reflect the experience of the Cherokee.

From the moment Europeans reached North America, conflict with Native Americans over land ownership began. Of all the Native tribes, Cherokee civilization was perhaps most culturally and socially advanced, incorporating the best of European culture. For example, in 1821, the written Cherokee language came into being with Sequoyia's invention of a Cherokee alphabet. Also, through the 19th and 20th centuries, Cherokees chose plows, spinning wheels, and looms as partial payment for ceded lands; and constructed houses, churches, schools, and roads. By the time the Nation was removed to western territories, they, along with 4 other tribes, had so thoroughly integrated "white technologies and ideas in their transformation of their traditional way of life that they became known as the 'Five Civilized Tribes'" (Anders). Cherokees embraced the Christian faith of the whites, and even adopted a constitutional form of government modeled upon the U.S. Government (Anders).

Over the years, the Cherokee agreed to numerous treaties with the whites, trying to "develop and maintain favorable relations with the United States" (Anders), and endured the consequences when treaties were broken. After years of encroachment, the U.S. Government took steps to claim native lands for white settlers. When gold was discovered in Georgia, The Indian Removal Act of 1830 was enacted, providing western lands in exchange for Indian lands in established states. It was intended as a permanent solution to the Indian problem, voiding all previous treaties.

Unable to reach agreement with the majority of the Cherokee Nation, the U.S. Government signed the Treaty of New Echota with a faction willing to cede ancestral lands. The Cherokee Nation appealed the case to the Supreme Court, which ruled in their favor. President Andrew Jackson ignored the Court's decision. As a result, the Cherokee Nation became part of the influx of emigrants to the American West. Of the estimated 16,000 Cherokees forced to move, over 4,000 died from starvation, exposure, and disease during the exodus in the fall and winter months of late 1838. More died as a result of the relocation after arriving at their new lands in January and February of 1839.

The Mormons and songs of migration

Mormon music came from the faith and experiences of the members. Songs written on the journey to Salt Lake reflect hardships of the trail, and anticipation of the wonders of Zion. "It took courage... and faith..., to stay upon the land and turn it from desert That courage and faith are reflected in these songs" (Hafen & Hafen).

The Mormons, founded in New York by Joseph Smith, believed in "Zion" - a gathering place - for the believers. Distrusted by outsiders, the group spent years searching for a safe haven. As Mormon numbers grew, so did hostility toward them forcing several relocations. The search for a refuge led from New York to Ohio to Missouri. Eventually, expelled from Missouri, the Mormons settled in Carthage, Illinois, which they renamed

Nauvoo. Nauvoo flourished until anti-Mormon hostility again grew. Realizing Nauvoo was not their refuge, Smith sent explorative teams to the far west since it offered the best possibilities for such a place. The site discovered was located around the Great Salt Lake.

By the 1830s, Mormon missionaries preaching in England, Wales, Scandinavia, and Scotland had converted over 2,000 people. In Britain alone, there were nearly 7,000 Mormon converts by 1840, 5,000 of whom emigrated to Nauvoo. Many European converts were escaping from the poverty and hardship of life in their homelands. Hardship at home prepared them for hardship on the trail. In 1844, hostilities in Nauvoo increased; Joseph Smith was murdered; Brigham Young became leader; and the migration to Salt Lake City began. The first Mormons to arrive found “a broad and barren plain hemmed in by mountains.” (Tindall and Shi 546) Settlers rapidly developed irrigation systems, began agricultural, and transformed the desert. Over a span of 40 years, more than 50,000 people moved to Utah - 16,000 were Europeans, who brought with them traditional values which became an important part of Mormonism. Some 3,000 moved across the plains using handcarts. Land was not the priority for Mormons. A place of refuge was. The Mormons were willing to face hardship to get there, and they recorded the journey in their songs.

The Chinese and songs of Gold Mountain

Chinese immigrants to California traveled a great distance both culturally and physically, and faced “more virulent social and political discrimination,” than immigrants of European ancestry (Greene). The greater majority of Chinese immigrants were driven from their homes, in the southern China province of Canton, by natural disasters and political instability created by the Taipang Revolution (1850-1871). They came to California with dreams of financial success, lured by promises of western capitalists and the possibility of attaining a better life (Hom). “Some Chinese [were] lucky, and return[ed] home with money,...but these cases [were] rare” (Greene).

Chinese immigrants to California sang of Gamsaan (Gold Mountain). Personal accounts from the Chinese attracted to America by the Gold Rush are rare, but their songs demonstrate “heartfelt feelings about life,” (Greene) dealing with emigration anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, and loneliness.

Although the first Chinese immigrants were welcomed, by the 1850s, it had changed to abuse. Language barriers, skin color, and drastically foreign culture set the stage for their mistreatment. “Conflicts had developed in the mines, and Chinese miners became the victims” (Hom). They were able to work only the poorest diggings at the mines, and frequently had their claims jumped by white miners. Many Chinese ended up as servants, laundrymen, or laborers. Discriminatory laws, combined with cultural differences, made Chinese life in America particularly hard.

The Chinese work ethic was recognized as exceptional. The Chinese made contributions through agriculture, service industries, and hard work on the Transcontinental Railroad, where they “hand[led] the most dangerous assignments, often at the cost of thousands of lives” (Hom). Chinese songs shared their disillusionment with Gold Mountain, their loneliness, and their humiliation.

The Irish and the ballad

Irish immigrants were reluctant immigrants, driven from their homeland by famine, high taxes, and lack of work, and torn by mixed emotions. “The Famine was a decisive event in modern Irish history. It claimed an estimated 1.5 million lives and established emigration as Ireland’s safety valve, relieving the demographic pressures on a primitive agrarian economy” (McCaffrey). “Whether lyrics describe the traumatic departure from home, family and loved ones simultaneously with the need for leaving; the physical and psychological ordeal of crossing the Atlantic; or the hardships of settling in the United States...the Irish vocalized it in song.” (Greene). Drawn to America by the lure of better economic prospects, Irish laborers faced severe discrimination. Irish ballads paint a picture of ethnic discrimination, frustration, exploitation, and economic injustice, yet still portray an America of freedom and opportunity.

Many jobs in the cities were closed to Irish immigrants. “Lacking marketable skills, Irish men during the mid-19th century had no choice but to take work as menial laborers” (McCaffrey). Irish workers also faced exploitation when they were hired (Greene). Songs such as “Give an Honest Irish Lad a Chance” and “Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill” reflect the Irish work experience in America.

Many Irish immigrants found work on the transcontinental railroad, performing hard labor on the lines for the Union Pacific Railroad Company. With the completion of the railroad, Irish immigrants, who often had mining experience gained from the closed copper mines of County Cork, Ireland, found work in the silver and copper mines of the American West. Irish miners moved from place to place around the United States and the territories

of the west as mines became depleted and new ones opened, helping extract countless tons of ore from the mines.

African Americans and songs of enslavement and freedom

Life in the post Civil War south presented limited economic possibilities for former slaves. Most worked as tenant farmers, unable to earn enough to purchase land. Southern blacks faced racial repression that barred them from certain occupations, prevented them voting, and left them victims of violence. Promoters, such as former slave Benjamin Singleton saw a future for freed blacks in Kansas: "the most promising place for the settlement of home-seeking blacks. There were several reasons for this choice. In the first place, the history of Kansas appealed powerfully to the negroes" (Fleming). The history of Kansas reflected the debate and turmoil over the issue of slavery, with Kansas ultimately becoming slave free.

Through letters, pamphlets, and meetings, word was spread to newly freed blacks of hopes of creating black utopias in the west. Rising from such promotion were western settlements like Nicodemus and Dunlop, Kansas. "At the meetings held to stimulate interest in the "exodus," as Singleton called it, it was the custom to sing songs composed for such occasions. The "exodus" songs possess considerable interest and afford an insight into the feelings of the black people" (Fleming). Exodusters, freed African Americans who left the South, emphasized the similarities between their journey from the "Egypt of the southern states to the Kansas Canaan" (Fleming).

Conclusion

Songs were "closer in spirit to the feelings and expression of ordinary people who endured the experience than any other kind of historical document." (Greene). People of the West came from many countries, and many conditions. They came with many motivations and goals. As they entered American culture, the folk songs they brought with them began to reflect American culture as well as the culture of their homeland. The folk songs that began in Europe or Mexico began to infiltrate American culture, and came to be known by people of other nations as well.

Whether the singers came from Wales or England to join the Mormons; Mexico; China to mine gold; or Ireland to escape economic deprivation; they all reflect common themes: the pain of leaving loved ones, the challenges of immigrant life, the fear of losing their homeland, and hopes for their new land.

Annotated Bibliography:

Secondary sources

Anders, G.C. (1981). *The Reduction of a Self-Sufficient People to Poverty and Welfare Dependence: An Analysis of the Causes of Cherokee Indian Underdevelopment*. American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Jul.,1981), pp. 225-237. Published by 'American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Inc. Retrieved 5/8/2011 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3486514>.

Anders presents a case for how U.S. governmental policy took a group of people who were self-sufficient and innovative, and degraded them until they became welfare dependent. He discusses Cherokee culture and advancements in the 19th and 20th centuries giving perspective to the current condition of the Cherokee nation.

Fife, A.E. and Fife, A.S. (1947). *Folk Songs of Mormon Inspiration*, Western Folklore, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Jan. 1947), pp. 42-52. Western States Folklore Society. Retrieved May 7, 2011 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1497451>.

Fleming, W.L. (1909). "Pap" Singleton, the Moses of the Colored Exodus. The American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 61-82. The University of Chicago Press. Retrieved 5/8/2011 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2762620>.

Pap Singleton was very influential in the movement of freed colored peoples to the west during the 19th century. He was instrumental in the establishment of several black communities in the west. This article provides a history of Pap Singleton and his involvement in the exoduster movement.

Garcia, P.J. (1996). *"The New Mexican Early Ballad Tradition: Reconsidering the New Mexican Folklorists' Contribution to Songs of Intercultural Conflict"*. Latin American Music Review, Volume 17, Number 2, Fall/Winter 1996. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Garcia provides evidence that corridos were a native form of expression growing out of cultural conflicts. He makes the point that this particular Mexican folklore form was greatly influenced by the interaction of traditional Mexican culture with Anglo culture, and that folklore of Mexican-Tejano areas north of the border is distinctly different from Mexican folklore from south of the border. He refers to the work of historians/folklorists Aurelio Espinosa and Americo Paredes in his article.

Greene, V.R. (2004). *A Singing Ambivalence: American Immigrants between Old World and New. 1830-1930*, Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press

Chapters focus on different European immigrant groups to the United States. Each chapter takes examples of folk music peculiar to that cultural group, and analyzes the songs for clues to the immigrants' motivations, hopes, disappointments, and emotions regarding both their homeland and their adopted land. Historical background is included to explain the origin of the songs.

Hafen, L. and Hafen A. (1960). *Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique A Western Migration, 1856-1860*, Glendale, CA: A.H. Clarke, Co.

This book focuses on a particular part of the Mormon migration to Salt Lake, Utah – the companies of immigrants who traveled across the plains on foot, pushing and pulling their limited goods in handcarts. Included is a brief history of the Mormon religion, including their many attempts to find a safe refuge. In several appendices, the authors provide many Mormon songs of Zion and the journey, as well as journals from the participants, and lists of the company members.

Hom, M.K. (1987). *Songs of Gold Mountain*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.

Hom provides historical and cultural background on the Chinese who emigrated to America in search of wealth, explaining their motivations, their culture, and the hardships they faced due to discrimination. Songs are divided into chapters based on the content of the lyrics, with commentary and explication of the message. Hom also explains how Chinese culture affects their songs, and distinguishes them for European or American songs.

Litwack, Leon. *American Roots Music* (Adviser/Pulitzer Prize winning historian). Retrieved March 28, 2011 from http://www.pbs.org/americanrootsmusic/pbs_arm_itc_historical_background.html#1.

This quote from Litwack, used in the historical background for the PBS series on American Roots Music, discusses the need to consider many different types of cultural documentation when attempting to build a broad and deep understanding of the events and beliefs that made America and Americans what they are, and how culture affected the events.

Lomax, J.A. and Lomax, A. (1994). *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. New York: Dover Publications.

A collection of American ballads and folk songs collected and recorded in the early 1930s by John Lomax and his son, noted American Folklorists. This book has transcriptions of the songs, lyrics and music. There is also background information provided to give a context for the songs. Songs are grouped by the context in which they would have been created or sung.

Luebke, F.C. (1998). *European Immigrants in the American West*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press.

Luebke has pulled together a series of articles by historians that provide a broad view of marginalized immigrant groups in the West. In his introduction to the essays, he provides documentation of the diversity of western immigrants through analysis of census data. The essays that follow focus on several different immigrant groups, their cultural and historical backgrounds, and their experiences as Western immigrants.

McCaffrey, L.J. (1985). *Irish America*. The Wilson Quarterly, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring 1985), pp. 78-93. Retrieved May 8, 2011 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40468527>.

This article provides a history of Irish immigrants in America. It discusses their opportunities in America, and the issues in their background that helped make them targets for discrimination.

Silber, I. (1995). *Songs of the Great American West*. New York: Dover Publications.

This is a collection of songs from the West, collected and compiled from multiple sources. Background information on the songs is provided to give context to the lyrics.

Sonnichsen, P. (1994). *Corridos y Tragedias de la Frontera: The First Historic Recordings of Mexican-American Ballads*, Arhoolie Productions retrieved March 13, 2011 from <http://amso.alexanderstreet.com/view/388817>

Sonnichsen has provided historical context and explanation of the stories behind many corridos. His article was provided for publishing on the liner notes of the album of historical recordings: 'Corridos y Tragedias de la Frontera'.

Tindall, G.B. and Shi, D.E. (1999). *America: A Narrative History*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

The authors have presented a thorough history of America in a narrative format. The text offers multiple perspectives on important events in American history, building in-depth background to allow for understanding of events.

Thornton, R. (1984). *Cherokee Population Losses during the Trail of Tears: A New perspective and a New Estimate*. *Ethnohistory*, Volume 31, No. 4, pp. 289-300. Duke University Press. Retrieved 5/8/2011 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/482714>

Thornton looks at the losses sustained by the Cherokee on the Trail of Tears, coming to the conclusion that the numbers traditionally viewed as total losses may be understated. He considers not only losses incurred on the trail, but losses brought on by the stress of relocation.

<http://www.cherokee.org/Default.aspx>

The official website of the Cherokee Nation provides historical background, cultural information, primary source documents, and current information about the Cherokee Nation. Information on the site pertaining to the history of the Cherokee, particularly the time period of the Trail of Tears is complete, and offers the history of this event from the Cherokee point of view.

http://www.loc.gov/folklife/LP/SongsofLDSandWest_opt.pdf

Part of the Library of Congress archives, this particular section deals with American folklore of all types. Available for download are historic recordings of folksongs and Native American songs, liner notes written by authorities and songcatchers, and many other forms of folklore.

<http://www.nps.gov/home/historyculture/exodusters.htm>

A publication of the National Park Service written to inform about the Exodusters, and the settlements built by freed blacks during Westward expansion. The site describes the history of the exodusters, the conditions in the South post Civil War, and the exodus of freed blacks to the West. A small list of reference sources is included.

http://www.pbs.org/americanrootsmusic/pbs_arm_itc_historical_background.html#1

This is the companion site to the PBS series on American Roots Music. It traces the development of American folk music from its origins in Europe and Africa, to its development through the history of the United States. It is particularly valuable for its "Into the Classroom" section which provides historical background, resources, and lesson plans.