



DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MODERN, WEEK 8: The Transcontinental Railroad, Moving Out West

- Review the Companion section about the Pony Express. Make sure your students know the Pony Express's two endpoints: St. Joseph, Missouri in the east and Sacramento, California in the west. Also point out that the Pony Express operated for just two years, 1860 and 1861; and that it closed as soon as the U.S. completed its first transcontinental telegraph. Remind your students that 1861 was the year of the Battle of Fort Sumter, the secession of the Upper South and the First Battle of Bull Run/Manassas.
- Explain the arduous route that most travelers followed to reach California before the Transcontinental Railroad was complete— down the east coast to Central America; across Central America by horse and wagon or by train; and then up the west coast to California.
- Ask your students to imagine how very much the development of railroads changed people's daily lives. Point out that railroads were critically important during the Civil War— dozens of battles were fought over important rail stations; and during his March to the Sea, General Sherman ruined many Southern railroads by bending their rails around trees to create "Sherman's neckties."
- Retell the story of the building of the Transcontinental Railroad. Impress upon your students how very difficult the Central Pacific Railroad's job was— how it carved 15 tunnels through the solid granite of the Sierra Nevadas and the Rockies; how it build sheds to cover 37 miles of its route so that it could work through heavy winter snows; and so on.
- Review the Companion section on the buffalo. Explain how tribes like the Cheyenne and the Kiowa used buffalo, exploiting every resource that the buffalo provided; then explain how the American settlers used buffalo, leaving everything but the hide wasted on the plain. Ask your students to imagine what it might have been like for tribesmen who depended upon the buffalo for survival to watch wasteful American settlers eliminate the buffalo from the plains in just 20 years' time.
- Explain the American settlers' reasons for ridding the plains of buffalo herds— because the buffalo supported the tribes, whom the settlers wanted to remove; because the buffalo interfered with trains; and because the buffalo ate grass that cattlemen wanted for their cattle. Ask your students: Might it have been possible to preserve some buffalo herds? Or was the buffalo's removal from the plains as inevitable as the removal of the tribes?
- Point out that "Go West, young man" was a phrase coined by Horace Greeley, a newspaperman from the New York *Tribune*. Explain some of the motivations that drove the American settlers west— especially the Homestead Act, which gave poor Americans who were willing to move west opportunities to own land.
- Review the Homestead Act's terms— any settler who could pay a \$10 fee was entitled to 160 acres of western land, so long as he or she lived on that land for five years and improved it with a house or a barn.
- Describe the scene before the beginning of an Oklahoma Land Run— 50,000 or more people waiting at the Oklahoma border, mounted and ready for the starter's gun that would send them racing into unsettled territory to stake their claims. Ask your students to imagine what it would be like to be one of those people waiting on horseback for the starter's gun.
- Make sure your students know who the Sooners were— settlers who cheated on the land runs by arriving sooner than anyone else. Explain that some Sooners were U.S. marshals who took their jobs because these jobs allowed them to spy out all of Oklahoma's best land before the land runs began, in territory that was

closed to everyone else. Discuss the Sooners' opportunism and dubious morality.

- Describe a long cattle drive along the Chisholm Trail from Texas to Abilene, Kansas. Explain that these cattle drives were only possible because no one owned the land along the way; there were no fences, so the cattle were free to graze wherever they could find grass. Ask your students to list the types of cowboys who went along on cattle drives— trail bosses, cooks, drovers and wranglers— and describe each type.
- Make sure your students know that the era of long cattle drives in the American West lasted only about 30 years, from the 1850s through the 1880s— because by the end of that time, the railroads had arrived in Texas, and ranchers had begun to take over the open range.
- Make sure your students know what the Fence Cutting War was— a short conflict between open range cattlemen and settled ranchers that took place at the end of the cattle drive era, in 1883 – 1884. Explain that when settled ranchers began to fence off the open range, open range cattlemen fought back by cutting fences; but that as the settlers fenced off more and more land, long cattle drives became impossible. Ask your students to imagine the open range cattlemen's anger at seeing their way of life disappear. Compare their anger to the anger of the tribesmen who had watched their buffalo disappear just a few years before.
- Explain why the earth's rotation made it necessary to divide the widening United States into time zones— because when it was high noon in New York, it was only 9 AM in Sacramento. Explain that before the era of railroads and telegraphs, the difference in times wasn't a problem; but that as railroad travel grew common, it became too confusing to keep track of each town's local time. Make sure your students know that there are four time zones in the continental United States: Eastern, Central, Mountain and Pacific.
- Review some of Thomas Edison's inventions and accomplishments, including the phonograph and the Edison bulb.
- Ask your students to review these Thomas Edison quotes and explain what they say about Edison's character and drive:

"I never did anything by accident, nor did any of my inventions come by accident; they came by work."

"I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

"Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration."

- Make sure your students understand what a reaper was— a machine for cutting and gathering wheat. Also make sure your students understand what a threshing machine was— a device for separating the edible part of wheat, the kernel, from inedible straw and chaff. Explain that before the threshing machine arrived, workers threshed wheat by hand by beating it with flails on a threshing floor. Explain that in modern times, large machines called combines reap and thresh wheat at the same time. Discuss how inventions like reapers and threshing machines changed farming— how they allowed farmers to cultivate more land and raise more food without hiring more workers.
- Review James Garfield's life and presidency. Explain that Garfield was assassinated by Charles Guiteau, an attorney who had helped Garfield win election, and who was disappointed when Garfield didn't reward him for his help by appointing him as a U.S. ambassador.
- Review Chester Arthur's life and presidency. Explain that the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act, which Arthur signed, was designed to prevent grateful election winners from handing out good government jobs to people whose only qualification was that they had helped their candidates win elections. Explain that this act was partly a response to Garfield's assassination.