

“Are We *There Yet?*” – Oregon Country, the Oregon Trail, & Manifest Destiny: 1840-1846

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I. Lesson Summary

Summary

Acquisition of the Oregon Country played an integral part in American territorial expansion in the mid-19th century. Settlers flooded the region for many varied reasons, despite the extreme danger inherent in the two-thousand mile trek across the Oregon Trail. The goal of this lesson is to get students to understand the major factors influencing the decisions made regarding what was known as the Oregon Country in the early-to-mid 1840s, with a particular emphasis on understanding Manifest Destiny and the negotiation process necessary to facilitate international diplomacy.

Objectives – Sunshine State Standards

SS.A.1.3.3
SS.B.1.3.1
SS.B.2.3.1
LA.B.1.3.1

U.S. History Event or Era

Mid-nineteenth century Westward Expansion

Grade Level

This lesson is appropriate for a middle school Social Studies classroom, regular or advanced.

Materials

- *Call To Freedom* American History textbook and handout material (Daily Quiz/Main Idea Activities 15.2)
- “History Alive!” resources (class set of middle school textbooks and a master copy of the workbook)
- Period maps detailing the territory comprising the Oregon Country (can also be found in either textbook previously mentioned)
- Computers w/ internet access

Lesson Time

90 to 120 minutes, depending on the depth of discussion and the skill level of the class

II. Lesson Procedures

Procedures

Day One - Introduction

- 1.) "How did people in the 1840s view the West?" Show the famous picture on page 200 in the "History Alive!" textbook. Without explaining what the picture references, have the students comment on every aspect of the painting, especially the people and the use of light and darkness. Ask the following questions and allow students the opportunity to briefly respond: "In what general direction are they going?" "Who is fleeing from the people coming from the east?" "What is the angel carrying with her?"
- 2.) Let the students know that we will be starting a unit attempting to explain the attitudes of every group represented in this painting (except for angels). And why would a 19th century artist place an angel at the front of this westward procession?
- 3.) Hand out part of tonight's homework – the "History Alive!" processing activity. Instruct the students that they will have to choose one or two groups of people for whom to write captions, using the terms in the word bank provided.

Part I – "Where Is Oregon?"

- 1.) Show a map from the early 1840s, when Oregon Country was claimed by four foreign powers (US, Great Britain, Spain and Russia). As a quick geography review, ask the students to identify which current states (and Canadian provinces) can be found in Oregon Country.
- 2.) In order for them to get a better idea of the nature of the region in question, have students in groups of three or four with a graphic organizer listing the states and Canadian provinces located in Oregon Country. Each student in the group will choose (or be assigned) a different state or province. Have them use the MSN Encarta website (or some other equally exhaustive web-based encyclopedia) to research and find the climate of the region, the major crops and industry, and at least one other "interesting fact" about their state or province to share with the group.
- 3.) Students will research for 8-10 minutes and share their findings with the rest of their group for 5-7 minutes.
- 4.) At the end of the exercise, return the students' attention to the countries claiming the area known as the Oregon Country in the 1840s. Reveal to the students that Spain dropped their claim to Oregon as part of the Adams-Onis Treaty in 1819 (this should be a review of previous material), and that Russia rescinded its claim to a line drawn at 54 degrees, 40 minutes north latitude (this line would become important later, of course).
- 5.) Get students to think about why what was considered one huge chunk of territory, claimed jointly by two different countries, got split up and is now part of the US and Canada. Students may suggest that there may have been a war, or that they negotiated a settlement, or that one side paid another side for exclusive rights to the territory they got. These are all viable alternatives, and the students themselves will get to decide which course of action they think the United States should have taken in this situation, and why.

Part II – "How Do You Get There?"

- 1.) "How would we get to Oregon today?" - An advanced class might actually use AAA or some other trip-planning website (Greyhound, Amtrak, or www.Expedia.com, for instance) to plan a trip from your hometown to Astoria, Oregon – which was a well-known trading post on the Pacific Coast. Otherwise, just use this question for a brief brainstorm. By car, bus, train, airplane, riding the rails, whatever. And how long would it take us to get to Oregon? A few days, maybe? Of course, we could take our extensive interstate road system (or railroads, or the air) all the way there, and we would even have the option of stopping as frequently as we desired for food, more supplies (like fuel for the car), or rest.
- 2.) We can use our modern conception of a trip to Oregon to compare and contrast the first-hand accounts of the trip out West at that time. Using the "History Alive!" textbook, show the students a map of the major trails used to travel west in this time period, paying

particular attention to the Oregon Trail (**Advanced question:** “Why didn’t the settlers just use Lewis and Clark’s trail out west?” The answer is because their trail was full of high passes and much too treacherous for a wagon to navigate successfully).

- 3.) Ask students the following questions:
 - a. “How far do you think it is from the beginning of the trail to the end?”
(*approximately 2,000 miles*)
 - b. “How long do you think it took to get to Oregon?” (*6-8 months, depending on weather*)
 - c. “How much did it cost to take the trip?” (*Around \$600, which was quite a bit of money for a family to come up with back then!*)
- 4.) Ask students, “What other kinds of concerns and/or dangers do you think would face the average wagon train on its way out west on the Oregon Trail?” Students might comment on the fact that the trail crosses over rivers (particularly the Platte and the Snake Rivers) and the Rocky Mountains. Other comments may include getting more supplies (or even paying for those supplies!), hostile Native Americans, disease, accidents, and anything else they think of.
- 5.) Record their answers on an overhead projector or a laptop, projected so that the whole class might be able to review the fruits of their brainstorm during the next assignment.
- 6.) Have the students take about 10 to 12 minutes to write 3 or 4 short journal entries, pretending they are travelers on the Oregon Trail faced with the same decisions and hardships they came up with during their brainstorm. (**see journal activity sheet**) If necessary, prompt the students to write about distinct parts of the journey. How might the attitude of a traveler change from the beginning of the journey to, for example, Fort Bridger? How do they feel having to cross through largely unorganized territory, with the possibility of running into bands of hostile Native Americans? What is it like to see the Rocky Mountains for the first time? What about the Pacific Ocean at the end of the journey? Just a few questions to get the thought process going.
- 7.) Have students share their captions from the first part of the homework. Students may complete this assignment for homework.

Day Two – Part III (Why Oregon?)

* The purpose of this portion of the lesson is to examine the reasons why settlers chose to settle in Oregon, as well as examining the reasons why the US wanted to add this large expanse of land to the western territory (which, at this time, only included the as-yet unorganized portion of the Louisiana Purchase, called Nebraska). We will use the term “Manifest Destiny” extremely sparingly at this point, but the goal is to get the students to link the attitudes conveyed in the portrait they filled in and for which they provided captions for last night’s homework and this unfamiliar phrase.

- 1.) At the beginning of class on **Day Two**, have students share their captions from the first part of the homework.
- 2.) After sampling a few and providing comment, pick a few students to share their journal entries, then hand out excerpts from first-hand accounts of life on the Oregon Trail. Students will read the journal entries aloud and analyze what sense each one is conveying.
- 3.) Compare the students’ entries with the real ones, noting the important similarities and differences. Having seen the real accounts, what do the students think about the journey west?
- 4.) Watch a short video presentation from United Streaming (anywhere from 3 to 16 minutes, depending on grade level, how much time you have, and the parts of the video you choose to download) about the Oregon Trail.
- 5.) Have students reflect for a short time (3-4 minutes) on the reasons why settlers would undertake such a dangerous journey in such large numbers. Students answers will vary, but they should at least hint around the major reasons: they wanted to get rich (through the fur trade), they wanted to spread Christianity (through missions to Native Americans), and they wanted to start a new life in the untamed West.

- 6.) Ask students, "Why, then, would the United States want to gain sole possession of the territory after sharing it with Great Britain peacefully for years?" Now would be a good time to explain the notion of Manifest Destiny further, and possibly show the painting from yesterday once again. The angel, when viewed through the lens of Manifest Destiny, becomes a direct emissary of the Lord, doing His work on earth through the American settlers. In addition, very few British settlers had come to the territory, while tens of thousands of American settlers were flocking to Oregon by the 1840s, for all of the reasons mentioned above, despite the danger. Geographically speaking, Great Britain was too far away from Oregon to control the administration of the territory, even with Canada (at the time a British possession) just north. Students may or may not get this one, but it's good at least to mention geographical concerns as a driver of historical events.
- 7.) "Why would it be in the best interests of Great Britain to maintain joint control of the area?" This is not explained in our American history textbook very much (if at all), but here is a great chance to try to get students to see all sides of a sticky historical wicket. Answers will vary, but the most important part of the exercise is that they begin to see things from all perspectives, not just a pro-American perspective.
- 8.) Muddying the waters is the presidential hopeful James K. Polk, whose supporters begin to stoke the flames of Oregon Fever by using such slogans as, "Fifty-Four Forty Or Fight!" and "All of Oregon or None of it!" Ask the students what these slogans meant potentially to U.S. relations with Great Britain. Would the United States go to war with Great Britain, AGAIN, over territorial rights?
- 9.) Now would be a good time to mention the events surrounding another previously-mentioned historical event (the Missouri Compromise) to illustrate the value of diplomacy in potentially dangerous times like this: when two sides won't budge, it's time to compromise! This becomes a major theme of sectional relations in the 1840s and 1850s, but it comes up here as well.
- 10.) Present students with the "History Alive!" - Reading Notes 15: Situation 4. Divide the class into thirds by randomly placing the letters "A," "B," and "C" at the top of each handout sheet. The students that receive sheets marked with "A" have to defend Scenario A as listed, and so forth. This activity could be reserved strictly for advanced classes as well – otherwise, just get students to pick which option seems best to them, and why. Give them 4-5 minutes at the end of class to get started, and have them finish this activity and the "Read To Discover" questions #1 and #2 on page 427 for homework.

Part IV – Wrap-Up

- 1.) Discuss each scenario with the class and end the lesson by revealing to the students that the U.S. decided not to go to war with Great Britain, instead making a treaty in 1846 which divided Oregon fairly evenly between the two countries at the 49th parallel, which is the northern border of the United States today.
- 2.) Even though the U.S. chose not to go to war to gain Oregon from the British, they did use war to wrest most of northern Mexico away from the Mexican government a short time later. In fact, a great reason why President Polk was willing to compromise with Great Britain in 1846 was that he was preparing to send his armies south to deal with General Santa Anna and his troops. This ending provides a perfect transition into a discussion about the Mexican War.

III. Resources

**Call to Freedom* middle school American History textbooks

**History Alive!* middle school American History textbooks and resources

*<http://msn.encarta.com> (to conduct research on the states and Canadian provinces that make up Oregon Country)

*<http://www.unitedstreaming.com> (for short video presentations about this time period);

*<http://www.loc.gov> (Library of Congress website – for primary source material from people who traveled on the Oregon Trail);

*<http://www.si.edu> (Smithsonian website – for primary source material)

3. A moment of great tragedy or fear on the journey

4. The day you reach the Pacific Ocean