

America's Old West

America's Old West was a fascinating time and place. Yet many of its essential facts, compelling stories, and intriguing people are widely ignored. Consider these examples.

Most Native American tribes had migrated from elsewhere to the lands they occupied in the 19th century and forced from those lands the prior inhabitants. Thus most had done to others what 19th century whites did to them. Many Native American tribal cultures combined a spiritual harmony with nature and a remarkable disregard for human life. For years America's richest man, J. J. Astor, monopolized the Western fur trading business. When Texans gained independence from Mexico they immediately restored slavery, which Mexico had abolished. In the 1840s more than a quarter million people crossed the Great Plains on the Oregon Trail, during which less than 50 were killed by Native Americans. Tabitha Brown, age 66, arrived in Oregon in 1846 with six cents. Within 2 years she created an academy which soon became Pacific University. The first western school for the higher education of women was created in 1851, by the Cherokees. At the height of the California Gold Rush one could walk across San Francisco harbor on the decks of ships abandoned by their crews. By mid-century two-thirds of Christian missionaries in the West were women. In the 1850s California, Utah and New Mexico adopted laws enabling whites to force Native Americans into "indentured service" akin to slavery. In 1857-58 70% of the entire U.S. Army was assigned to control the Mormons. The transcontinental railroad was the greatest industrial feat of the century and a monstrous fraud on the U.S. government. Arduous deadly work by Chinese immigrants was necessary to build the railroad from California over the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Thereafter Californians voted overwhelmingly to expel all Chinese. The first prairie homes for many pioneer families were man-made caves. Americans simultaneously perpetrated the largest mass killing of a species (bison) and the largest forced migration of a species (cattle) in history. Most cowboys did not carry handguns. In all of the Kansas cattle towns over a 30 year period there were only 6 homicides from handguns. The Old West's most successful lawman was not named Earp, Masterson, Hickok, or Garrett. He was Nathaniel K. Boswell. By the mid-1880s investment in the American cattle industry exceeded the entire capitalization of the American banking system, and Cheyenne, WY had the highest median per capita income of any city in the world. It also had an opera house, polo park, electric street lights, and a vigilante committee with hired assassins. By 1896 Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho had granted women the right to vote.

America's Old West has had a profound impact and influence on our nation. Its history is worth knowing. Through lecture and discussion this course shall bring that history to life. To gain perspective on what living in the Old West was really like, from time to time the class will take on the role of a Western gathering, such as Native American tribal council considering what to do regarding the coming of innumerable white men, and a town council in a mining or cattle town considering what to do regarding prostitution, law enforcement, and saloon operations. In class each participant may choose the level of active or passive engagement with which he or she is comfortable. No advance preparation is required. At the outset a bibliography of recommended books will be provided to support further study by any participant who has an interest in doing so.

LEADER: Robert Nolan is an attorney and retired executive who has a history degree from the University of Scranton, where he is on the adjunct faculty, and a law degree from Harvard University.

THURSDAYS: 10:00 a.m. to noon, 8 weeks: February 27 through April 16

LOCATION: The Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville, Maximum 45 seats