

Lure of the West

Reflecting on Railroads

Overview: After completing this activity, students will better understand the effects of the railroads on American society and our relationship with the land, in the past and today.

Subject Area: Social Studies, Language Arts

Age Group/Grade Level: 13-17 years, grades 8-12

Duration: 30 min.

Background

The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869; four more followed before 1900, including the Northern Pacific Railroad, completed in 1883. As the railroads spread across the West, they brought economic growth, increased populations, and a new awareness of the landscape and available natural resources. Railroad companies saw the potential of the West's scenic wonders to draw tourists and promoted creation of national parks and private resorts, even lobbying to create Yellowstone National Park. The steel train tracks brought with them the displacement of Native peoples and the mass slaughter of buffalo, as well.

Photographer F. Jay Haynes spent most of his career documenting the development of the western territories. He was commissioned in 1876 to take photos along the route of the Northern Pacific Railroad, which snaked from Minnesota to Seattle, WA. Besides photographing views of natural scenery, Haynes produced an extensive record of how railroads and industry modified the landscape.

Discussion

Share two of Haynes's photographs with students. Begin your conversation by having students compare the two photographs of western landscapes. Follow up with the questions below:

- How did the presence of the railroad make this photograph possible?
- How does the presence of the railroad change the character of the land?
- What might be outside of each photograph's frame?
- Haynes was hired by the railroad company to take *East Entrance, Jefferson Canyon*. How might his employment have influenced the photos he took?

For full-size images of F. Jay Haynes's photographs, visit:
https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1994.91.69_1 and
https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1993.77.3_1



F. Jay Haynes, [*East Entrance, Jefferson Canyon, for the Northern Pacific Railroad*](#), 1890, albumen silver print, sheet: 17 1/8 x 21 5/8 in., Museum purchase from the Charles Isaacs Collection made possible in part by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 1994.91.69.



F. Jay Haynes, [*Gardner Canyon, Electric Peak*](#), ca. 1885, albumen silver print, image: 17 3/8 x 21 1/2 in., Museum purchase, 1993.77.3.

Activity

Share with students the excerpt on the reverse from Walt Whitman's poem "Passage to India." Encourage student discussions with the following questions:

- In Whitman's poem, how has the presence of the railroad affected the landscape through which it passes?
- How does Whitman's description compare to Haynes's photographs?
- How do the poem and photographs reflect the reality of railroads' effects on the West? What details might they omit?

Have students imagine they are traveling west on the railroad today. Have them write a postcard home describing what they've seen on their journey and what the railroad might mean for the communities it passes through.

Passage to India (excerpt from section 3)

Walt Whitman

. . . I see over my own continent the Pacific railroad surmounting
every barrier,
I see continual trains of cars winding along the Platte carrying
freight and passengers,
I hear the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-
whistle,
I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the
world,
I cross the Laramie plains, I note the rocks in grotesque shapes,
the buttes,
I see the plentiful larkspur and wild onions, the barren, colorless,
sage-deserts,
I see in glimpses afar or towering immediately above me the
great mountains, I see the Wind river and the Wahsatch
mountains,
I see the Monument mountain and the Eagle's Nest, I pass the
Promontory, I ascend the Nevadas,
I scan the noble Elk mountain and wind around its base,
I see the Humboldt range, I thread the valley and cross the river,
I see the clear waters of lake Tahoe, I see forests of majestic
pines,
Or crossing the great desert, the alkaline plains, I behold enchant-
ing mirages of waters and meadows,
Marking through these, and after all, in duplicate slender lines,
Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel,
Tying the Eastern to the Western sea,
The road between Europe and Asia. . . .

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. 7th ed. Boston: James R. Osgood and Co., 1891.
<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/239>.