THE AMERICAN WEST

M, W 2:00-3:20 PM
Curry Hall 103
University of North Texas

Professor Michael Wise
Office: Wooten Hall 259
Hours: M 3:30-5:30 or by appt.
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Stay in one place long enough, or return to the same place often enough, and some interesting ironies are likely to accumulate.

-Larry McMurtry, Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen

Course Description:
What is the “American West?” The phrase refers both to a region and to a set of historical processes. Both conjure a broad array of ideas about the United States that have long guided popular interpretations of the nation’s history and political life.

Our class begins with a discussion of how two ideas, the “wilderness” and the “frontier,” have structured past and present understandings of western history. The course then moves chronologically through western history, starting with the encounters of Indigenous and European empires from the 1500s through the 1800s, and tracing how movement and conquest constitute recurring processes in the region’s ongoing colonial history. Next we will study the region’s twentieth-century economic and environmental histories, paying close attention to how the West’s human and non-human forces have affected modern developments across the rest of the country and the globe. Beyond the American West itself, this course also explores the everyday relationships between historical narratives and experiences of place.

Course Texts:


Grading Criteria:

- Take-Home Exam #1 25%
- Take-Home Exam #2 25%
- Discussion Facilitation 15%
- Take-Home Final Exam 35%

100%

Blackboard:
Electronic course materials will be available as PDF files on the Blackboard Learn website.

Course Policies:

Attendance and Behavior
Students are expected to attend all sessions and to complete reading assignments before class. Electronic devices may be used for note-taking purposes only. Cell phones must be powered off or silenced. I will start class promptly at 2:00 PM. Late students are permitted to enter the classroom provided they do so with minimal disruption to their peers.

Discussion Facilitation
There are three class sessions set aside for the formal discussion of course readings and lectures. During the first half of the class, students will separate into small groups and work on answering a set of pre-circulated questions. The class will then reunite during the second half, and each group will take a few minutes to present their answers. It might be helpful to think of these like informal quizzes. Students will be graded on their preparation, professionalism, and participation in these discussions. If you miss class on the day of a discussion, you may receive partial credit by writing an excellent two-page response essay to that day’s reading assignment.

Take-Home Exams
The main evaluation method for this course is a series of three take-home exams. For the first two exams, students will be expected to answer one essay question, writing a double-spaced, 4-6 page response. The final exam will require two essay responses. In total, each student will write between 16 and 24 pages for this course. The best exam essays will be well written and will offer clear answers grounded with textual evidence from course readings. Late exams will only be accepted in the case of an emergency that conforms to official university policy.

Extra Credit Map Test
The only extra credit opportunity is a map test during the last week of class. A perfect score will increase your grade one level (i.e., B to an A). This map test will take one hour and will require you to hand-draw a map of western North America that correctly identifies a list of geographic features. Students must turn in all assignments on time in order to qualify for this extra credit option. The test is tentatively scheduled for 5 PM on Tuesday, December 4 in Wooten Hall 230.

University Policy Statements:

Disability Statement
Any student with special circumstances covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act should register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA), Suite 322, University Union Building (phone 940-565-4323). Students who have registered with ODA should also make an appointment to discuss disabilities accommodation requests with the instructor of this course during the first week of class. Reasonable adjustments will be made to accommodate the special needs of students with disabilities where such adjustments are necessary to provide equality of educational access.

Academic Integrity
Academic integrity is defined in the UNT Policy on Student Standards for Academic Integrity. Any suspected case of Academic dishonesty will be handled in accordance with the University Policy and procedures. Possible academic penalties range from a verbal or written admonition to a grade of “F” in the course. Further sanctions may apply to incidents involving major
violations. The official policy and procedure are located online at: http://vpaa.unt.edu/academic-integrity.htm.
Part One:
WILDERNESS AND THE AMERICAN WEST

Week 1:
M, Aug 25  
Course Introduction: Place and Process

W, Aug 27  
Where is the American West?
READ:

Week 2:
M, Sep 1  
NO CLASS

W, Sep 3  
The Frontier Thesis
READ:

Week 3:
M, Sep 8  
The Wilderness Idea
READ:

W, Sep 10  
Discussion Day #1
READ:

Begin Take-Home Exam #1

Week 4:
M, Sep 15  
The Spanish North
READ:
Andrés Reséndez, A Land So Strange: The Epic Voyage of Cabeza de Vaca, 1-68.

W, Sep 17  
Ancient Native America
READ:
Week 5:

M, Sep 22 The Horse and Indigenous Empires
READ:
Reséndez, 157-226.

W, Sep 24 France, Spain, and Upper Louisiana
READ:

Reservation Slaughterhouse. James Sherburne, 1905.
Part Two:
REMAKING THE WESTERN ENVIRONMENT

Week 6:
M, Sep 29  The Lewis & Clark (and other) Expeditions
   NO READING
   Take-Home Exam #1 Due
W, Oct 1  California and the Gold Rush
   READ:

Week 7:
M, Oct 6  Grain and the Railroad
   READ:
W, Oct 8  Cowboys and Indians and Meat
   READ:

Week 8:
M, Oct 13  The Western War of Incorporation
   READ:
   *Richard Maxwell Brown
W, Oct 15  Discussion Day #2
   READ:
   Mark Fiege, “The Weedy West,”
   Begin Take-Home Exam #2

Week 9:
M, Oct 20  The Power of the River
   READ:

**W, Oct 22**  
**The Power of the River (Part Two)**

READ:
White, 89-114.  
FILM (in-class): Bonneville Power Administration, *The Columbia*, 1949  
(music by Woody Guthrie).

**Week 10:**

**M, Oct 27**  
*NO CLASS* (work on your exams!)

**W, Oct 31**  
**The Dust Bowl**

READ:

FILM (in-class): Pare Lorentz, *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, 1936.

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Bonneville Dam Construction, Columbia River, 1936.
Part Three:
THE METROPOLITAN WEST

Week 11:

M, Nov 3  The Allotment Acts
            Take-home Exam #2 Due

W, Nov 5  Privatizing the Wild
            READ:
                *Karl Jacoby, “Class and Environmental History: Lessons from the War in
                the Adirondacks,” Environmental History, Vol. 2, No. 3 (July 1997):
                324-342.

Week 12:

M, Nov 10  The Western Homefront During World War II
            READ:
                *Carl Abbott, The Metropolitan Frontier: Cities in the Modern American
                West (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993), TBD.

W, Nov 12  The Nuclear West
            READ:
                Findlay and Hevly (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 179-
                199.

Week 13:

M, Nov 17  Termination and AIM
            READ:
                Woody Kipp, Vietcong at Wounded Knee, excerpts.


Week 14:

M, Nov 24  NO CLASS
            READ:
                Jon Krakauer, Into the Wild, 1-69.

W, Nov 26  THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY
Week 15:

M, Dec 1  Tourism and the New West
           READ:
           Krakauer, 70-171.

W, Dec 3  Discussion Day #3
           READ:
           Krakauer, 172-203.
           Begin Final Take-Home Exam (DUE ON FRIDAY 12/13 by 1 PM)