

Pushing the Boundaries: The Pioneer Spirit

Summary

What motivated various pioneer groups to go out west? Each group (settlers to Oregon, persecuted Mormons, and gold-rush adventurers to California) had different reasons, but at huge cost in life and lifestyle. Was it worth it?

Time Frame

3 class periods of 45 minutes each

Group Size

Large Groups

Life Skills

Thinking & Reasoning, Communication

Background for Teachers

An historian, William Stegner, says that if you cut open a vein of any Mormon, you will find the Mormon trail in their bloodstream. Similarly, the pioneer spirit defines the American experience. Hardships, discoveries, and adapted lifestyles on the frontier shown through diary entries and pioneer accounts determine the pioneer spirit. Students can infer qualities of a pioneer and apply these to other events and time periods of American history.

Intended Learning Outcomes

Through a debate, students will determine the advantages and drawbacks of traveling west using original sources and descriptions of the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of the pioneers.

Instructional Procedures

Almost a third of a million Americans traveled the pioneer trails out west during the mid-1800's. In 1843, almost 900 people made the first trek to Oregon. In April 1849 alone, more than 20,000 people left for Oregon and California. The Mormon Trail saw over 70,000 people during a 20-year period. Taking the 2,000 mile trek could prove fatal, as one in ten pioneers died along the way. Yet they kept coming. Why?

Refer to the Heritage Gateways list of Essential Questions and Themes.

Have students find examples of motivations for going west, drawbacks for going, and advantages for settling out west using various sources of trail stories, pioneer journals, and published accounts of the time.

Set up a debate: The cost of life and changes in lifestyle were too high to offset the advantages of moving out west. Have sides take turns supporting the pro or con side of westward migration with specific facts, statistics, incidents.

Debrief the debate. Have students vote on who was the most persuasive, giving reasons why. Show demographics of the 1800's that demonstrate how extensive the westward movement was. Ask students what impact the westward movement may have had on the rest of the Americans.

Extensions

Get more specific with related activities: Have students research particular people whose lifestyles contrast sharply -- a pioneer in the mid 1800's with a city dweller during the same time period.

Assessment Plan

Make the rules for the debate clear-cut, so students can self-assess and determine winners by the type and amount of support.

Bibliography

Stegner, Wallace The Gathering of Zion, The Story of the Mormon Trail (University of Nebraska Press,)

Powell, Allan Kent Utah History Encyclopedia (University of Utah Press,)
Pioneer General Reference Sources (,)

Authors

[JEAN MCPHERRON](#)