



Native Rumors: Rumor vs. Reality of Indigenous Attacks on the Trails West

GRADE 8

Native Rumors: Rumor vs. Reality of Indigenous Attacks on the Trails West

By Aaron L. Crawford

Summary

Students will read primary documents by Gen. James F. Rusling, a man who traveled the West in 1866. They will read rumors of violent attacks by Indigenous Americans on the trail west, and then see how these rumors had little basis in fact. They will reflect on the impact of these rumors on both the Natives and the settlers. Finally, the teacher will lead a discussion on what we can learn from a primary document when the “facts” in it aren’t actually facts.

Main Curriculum Tie

U.S. I Standard 6.2: Students will use primary sources representing multiple perspectives to interpret conflicts that arose during American expansion, especially as American Indians were forced from their traditional lands and as tensions grew over free and slave holding territory.

Additional Curriculum Ties

U.S. I Standard 6.4: Students will make a case for the most significant cultural, political, and economic impacts of territorial and/or industrial expansion.

Time Frame

1 time period that runs 60 minutes; or 2 time periods that run 30 minutes each

Group Size

This lesson is intended for whole-group instruction. Students reflect as individuals.

Life Skills

Aesthetics Character Communication Employability
 Social & Civic Responsibility Systems Thinking Thinking & Reasoning

Bibliography

- Czajka, Christopher W. "Hardship without Glory": Life on the Trail. n.d. 15 August 2018. <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/frontierhouse/frontierlife/essay3_3.html>.
- Dickinson College Archives. James Fowler Rusling (1834-1918). 2017. 15 August 2018. <<http://archives.dickinson.edu/people/james-fowler-rusling-1834-1918>>.
- Rusling, James Fowler. Across America: or, The Great West and the Pacific Coast. New York: Sheldon & Company, 1874. 7 August 2018. <<https://archive.org/details/acrossamericaorg00rusl>>.
- The National Oregon/California Trail Center. Trail Basics: Indians. n.d. 15 August 2018. <<https://www.oregontrailcenter.org/HistoricalTrails/Indians.htm>>.

Materials

You will need a copy of the reflection paper and each of the primary documents for each student. In the interest of saving paper, I have put several documents on each page. I recommend cutting these apart at the lines before distributing them to students.

Background for Teachers

The primary documents in this lesson are excerpts from a book by General James F. Rusling called *Across America: or, The Great West and the Pacific Coast* (1874). General Rusling had served in the Civil War as a regimental and division quartermaster. Quartermasters in the military are responsible for their organization's supplies.

By 1866 (the year Rusling went on his journey through the West), settlers had moved into many places in the American West. But things between these settlers and the Native inhabitants were often tense, especially because permanent settlements tended to disrupt the Natives' food supply. Some tribes attempted to fight the encroachment; others tried to find a more peaceful route.

In spite of the problems that the presence of settlers created, violent conflict was actually quite rare. Between 1840-1860, Native Americans killed 362 immigrants, who killed 426 Natives in turn. The vast majority (nearly 90%) of the settlers' deaths at Native hands occurred west of South Pass. While there were a few major altercations between settlers and indigenous people, the rumors of that sprang up in relation to violent "Indians" loomed large in the wagon trains. Many settlers carried weapons, prepared for all-out wars against Natives that very rarely materialized. In fact, most encounters with Natives were focused on trade.

The Indigenous Peoples of the West were not a monolithic culture. They did not all believe the same things, practice the same religious ceremonies, or view the settlers in the same way. While people historically tended to talk about "Indians" as though they were all the same, in actuality their tribes were very different from one another.

Be sure students understand that Gen. Rusling exhibited the anti-Native biases that were common in his day, including racist assumptions regarding their work ethics and what is now inappropriate terminology (e.g. "Injun" or "red skin").

You may want to share a map to help students track Rusling's journey. This map (<https://www.choices.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/native-languages-map.jpg>) shows the location of the tribes.

Student Prior Knowledge

Students need to understand that rumor can be a powerful historical force. Sometimes, in the sense of impacting history, what people believe is more important than what actually happened. For example, the peasants of France became incensed by Marie Antoinette's famous statement, "let them eat cake." While she almost certainly never uttered that phrase, the rumor that she had said this about starving peasants was widely believed, and provided part of the impetus for sacking Versailles.

Students should also be aware that Indigenous Americans were not a monolithic culture, but a diverse group with different cultures – and therefore different approaches to the encroachment of non-Native settlers.

Be sure that they also understand that the people who wrote primary documents exhibit the feelings and opinions common in their day. The documents from Gen. Rusling call Natives "Injuns" and assume the worst regarding their work ethic. Help the students understand that this is more a reflection of Gen. Rusling's opinions than objective reality. It is also important that they understand that these opinions were common in his day – most white Americans believed in these stereotypes. This widespread stereotype is a large reason that the rumors were so powerful!

Another pervasive belief among white Americans was the myth of the "noble savage." This is the belief that civilization is a corrupting influence, an influence that Indigenous peoples have avoided. The American Indian, being free from civilization, therefore represents humanity's inborn goodness. This idea is still common today, and leads to an inaccurate perception of Native life.

Intended Learning Outcomes

Students will understand that history was full of rumors. They will see how rumors affected people in the past. Students will also understand that primary documents reveal opinions and feelings – even when they are light on facts.

Instructional Procedures

You will need to hand out the primary documents in order, one at a time, pausing between each to allow students to answer the questions on their reflection paper. I recommend cutting the documents apart at the lines before handing them out. After each student has had a chance to reflect on their own, you may want to consider having students discuss their answers with each other in a think-pair-share format.

Hand out the student reflection paper and the primary document with Rumor A at the top. Students will read the document and then answer question 1 on the reflection paper.

After students have answered question 1, hand out the primary document titled Reality A. Students will answer question 2 after reading this document.

Conduct a discussion with your students. Gen. Rusling discovered that most of the rumors were untrue. But the authors of many primary documents never learned that they were mistaken. What can we learn from a document that isn't accurate? [You may need to guide them a little in this discussion. Hint that we can still learn about the author him/herself from what they said.]

Strategies for Diverse Learners

The primary documents contain a few complicated words and complex, dated sentence structure. You may want to read it with your struggling students, either in a small group or as a class, and talk about these words. I also recommend pausing to discuss and visualize what the journey would have been like.

The document "Reality D" may be unclear to them – you may need to point out that the "Indian attack" turned out to be a stampede of mules.

Extensions

Students could conduct more research into General James F. Rusling. They could look into his background and make a deduction regarding why he was not convinced by rumors regarding Native Americans. They could also analyze why he was able to see past rumors of war, and yet made snap judgments regarding the Indigenous peoples' lifestyles (he incidentally did the same regarding the Mormons. You could use the same book to explore the military side of the Utah War, as long as you made it clear that most of Rusling's assumptions, and many of his "facts," were false).

If you have them research the General, be sure that they are searching for "General James F. Rusling" or "James Fowler Rusling." The modern James F. Rusling is a professor of chemistry at the University of Connecticut.

Assessment Plan

The student reflection paper will serve as the primary assessment tool.

Rumor A

Background:

Brigadier-General James F. Rusling received orders to inspect the military outposts in the Western United States in 1866. The goal was to reduce the costs of outfitting military units in the West. General Rusling wrote a detailed account of his journey, in which he "cross[ed] the continent to San Francisco, among the Mountains, along the Pacific Coast, and thence home by the Isthmus, I travelled in all over 15,000 miles, as per accompanying Map; of which about 2,000 were by rail-road, 2,000 by stage-coach, 3,000 by ambulance or on horseback, and the remainder by steamer." Several years later, he used his journals and recollections to write a book. These are some excerpts from that book.

Note that General Rusling used language and made judgments that were common in his day. You'll see that he used racist terms like calling a Native person a "red skin." He also sometimes assumed the worst of the Native people he encountered, calling them things like "savages." This reflects Gen. Rusling's opinions and feelings. Consider how these ideas would have impacted what Gen. Rusling saw and how he would have interpreted what he saw.

Document:

p. 37-38 Of Indians we heard a great deal, but saw none. Rumors of them increased as we moved north and west; but, if about, they gave us a wide berth. At Virginia Station, about half way, the station-keeper reported the Pawnees in force on the Little Blue [River]; and at Big Sandy the last stage-driver through from Fort Kearny reported Fort Reno taken [over by Indians], Fort Laramie besieged and [Fort] Kearny itself in danger. He said, one settler had already been lanced and killed on the Little Blue ; that the Pawnees there — six hundred lodges strong — were moody and hostile ; and, as our party as too small for effective resistance advised our return. Further on we found ranches here and there abandoned, with the crops left growing; and one day we descried a solitary horseman in the distance galloping rapidly towards us, that we were sure must be a red skin. " But as he came nearer he proved to be a settler's half-grown boy, who had been up the road several miles helping a neighbor move. He, too, had heard " Big Injun" stories, but said his people did not mind them much. These reports, at first, I confess, were rather startling, as we had no idea of losing our scalps; but as our safe advance day by day exploded one after another of [the rumors], we soon became quite skeptical on the Indian question. The chief effect was to increase our prudence and vigilance. We looked well to our arms morning and evening, and seldom halted, even briefly, without posting a guard.

Reality A

Document:

p. 38 In due time we reached and passed the valley of the Little Blue without seeing a Pawnee — they had all gone off a fortnight before to the Republican and Smoky Hill to hunt buffalo — and finally arrived at Fort Kearny in safety. There they laughed at the idea of Indians south or east of them, but confessed to ugly reports about Reno and Laramie. Ultimately, as we got farther west, these also proved false; and our conclusion as to Big Injun stories in general, was not very favorable.

Excerpts from *Across America: or, The Great West and the Pacific Coast* by Gen. James F. Rusling

Rumor B

Document:

p. 55 Rumors of impending troubles with the Indians thickened as we advanced. The settlers and stage-people said the Indians appeared but little on the road, which was a sure sign that a storm was brewing. Further they said the tribes had had a grand pow-wow recently on the Smoky Hill and the Republican, in which they had agreed to bury the hatchet [stop fighting with each other] and make common cause against the pale-faces.

Reality B

Document:

p. 55-56 Subsequently, later in the autumn, they did attack some stations on the Smoky Hill route, and a stage or two on the Platte route; but we reached Denver unmolested. East of Julesburg, at Baker's ranch, we passed an encampment of Sioux, perhaps two or three hundred, papooses [children] and all, in cone-shaped wigwams, evidently the original of our army "Sibley." [A Sibley is a round army tent, named after its inventor.] While changing horses, we strolled into several of their wigwams, and found them full of braves, squat upon their hams, intently engaged in playing cards. In Indian pantomime, they warmly invited us to participate, but we were obliged to decline the distinguished honor. The squaws were mostly at work on moccasins or blankets and their tawny little papooses (stark naked, except a breech-cloth) were either practicing with bows and arrows, or "lying around loose." The entire party seemed utterly poverty-stricken, even to their ponies and dogs, and, generally, about as wretched as human beings could well be. Their main provisions seemed to be rusty army-rations, which had recently been issued to them at one of our neighboring posts, and without these they would have been practically destitute. Dirty, squalid, indecent, and half-starving, they seemed but little removed above the brute creation, and gave a terrible shock to all preconceived ideas about the "Noble Red Man," if we had any. They were the first real savages — pure and simple — we had met, and our poetry and romance, born of Cooper and Longfellow, shivered at the spectacle. Some miles farther on, we encountered two young "bucks," gaily attired in blankets, beads, feathers, etc., jogging along on their ponies to the camp at Baker's. They had given a big scare to a poor German we overtook — a blacksmith, travelling alone from station to station, in a light two-mule buggy, to shoe the Company's horses. The appearance of our coach, however, made him feel his scalp more secure, and falling in behind he followed us up for miles, singing at the top of his voice "Annie, dear Annie of the vale! "

Excerpts from *Across America: or, The Great West and the Pacific Coast* by Gen. James F. Rusling

Rumor C

Document:

p. 76-77 In the matter of arms, what with our repeating-rifles and revolvers for Indians, and a brace of fowling-pieces for game, our ambulances were travelling arsenals. And from reports on leaving Denver, (Sept. 13th) we did not know but we should want all, and more. With the usual exaggeration of the border, the story current there was, that a Mexican belonging to one of the settlements down below had quarrelled with a Ute about a squaw, and wound up by killing him; that the Utes were consequently up in arms, stealing stock and murdering the inhabitants ; that Fort Garland was already practically besieged ; and that the United States was of " no account, no how," because we did not send more troops to Colorado.

Reality C

Document:

However, we started for Garland, well-armed as above ; we did not meet a hostile Indian on the way ; and when we arrived there, we found there hadn't been a settler molested, or mule stolen ; and the whole yarn had come from a Ute found dead, supposed killed by lightning. When first discovered, near one of the settlements, the Utes were considerably ruffled; but when the post-surgeon at Garland and their medicine-man had examined him and found no marks of violence, the chiefs laid their heads together and sagely concluded the Great Spirit had called him.

Excerpts from *Across America: or, The Great West and the Pacific Coast* by Gen. James F. Rusling

Rumor D

Note:

This document is a little different. Instead of hearing rumors from other people, Gen. Rusling's companions hear a noise and invent the rumors themselves!

Gen. Rusling's original document nearly always substitutes "yer" for "your," "sher" for "sure," etc. when reporting conversations. The spelling in the following has been corrected to make it easier to read. Shortening profanity and referring to his traveling companions only by the first letter of their names were both done by Gen. Rusling.

Document:

p. 145-146 Weary with the stage ride of two days and nights continuously, I remained half-dozing in the coach, wrapped in my buffalo-robe, when suddenly I was aroused by a distant noise, that grew rapidly louder and nearer, and presently came thundering down the road directly toward the station. While pondering what it could be, half-sleepy still, all at once the station-keeper, who was helping with the horses, broke out with:

"I say, Tom (our driver), hark! Do you hear that?"

"Yes, Billy! What the deuce is it?"

"Why, good heavens, it must be the infernal Injuns, sure as you live! The d — d Red Skins, I reckon, have just stampeded that Government-train down the road there; and they'll all be here, lickety split, quicker than lightnin', you bet!"

I was wide awake in a second, now. They pushed the horses quickly back into the stable, and shouted to me to seize all the arms and hurry to the station-house. I was not certain, that it was not better to stand by the coach, and "fight it out on that line," come what might; but concluded the stage-men knew more about such encounters than I did, and so followed their directions. Out I tumbled, gathered up all the rifles and revolvers I could lay my hands on, and rushed to the station-house, shouting "Indians! Indians!" Soon the driver and stock-tenders came running in from the stable, as fast as their legs could carry them; and for a few minutes we thought we had the Indians upon us at last, sure enough. The pluck of the party, I must say, was admirable. L. and M. stood to their guns. Nobody thought of flight or surrender.

Reality D

Document:

p. 146-147 But all quickly resolved, as we grasped our rifles and revolvers, to make the best stand we could, and to fight it out in that shanty, if it took all summer. But presently, as the mules thundered up the road and past us, just as we were about to fire on one of their pursuers, we saw him tumble from his horse all sprawling, as it stumbled across a chuck-hole, and as he gathered himself up heard him break out swearing in good vigorous English, that stamped him as a Pale Face [white man] beyond a question. The swearing probably saved his life, however objectionable otherwise, and we were soon at his side. We found him more stunned, than hurt, and presently his comrades succeeded in stopping the herd. They were unable to say what had caused the stampede; but as no Indians appeared, we were soon off on the road again.

These "stampedes" of animals are not uncommon on the Plains, and sometimes prove very embarrassing.

Excerpts from *Across America: or, The Great West and the Pacific Coast* by Gen. James F. Rusling

Name:

Native Rumors: Student Reflection Paper

1. Rumor A – Describe the rumors that Gen. Rusling heard.
2. Reality A – What was actually happening? What was the truth with regard to the rumor?
3. Rumor B – Describe the rumors that Gen. Rusling heard.
4. Reality B – How did Gen. Rusling describe the Native people he encountered? What stereotypes is he relying on? What assumptions is he making?
5. Reality B – What was actually happening? What was the truth with regard to the rumor?
6. Rumor C – Describe the rumors that Gen. Rusling heard.
7. Reality C – What was actually happening? What was the truth with regard to the rumor?

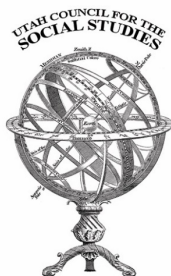
8. Rumor D – Describe the rumors that the stagecoach travelers invented.

9. Reality D – What was actually happening? What was the truth with regard to the rumor?

10. General Rusling's experience with rumors was not unique. Most settlers who came west discovered that the Native people wanted to trade with them instead of attack them. Nevertheless, there were a few violent confrontations between pioneers and Native people. Why do you think that rumors like those you read were common?

11. What impact do you think the rumors had on the Native Americans?

12. What impact do you think the rumors had on the settlers?



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