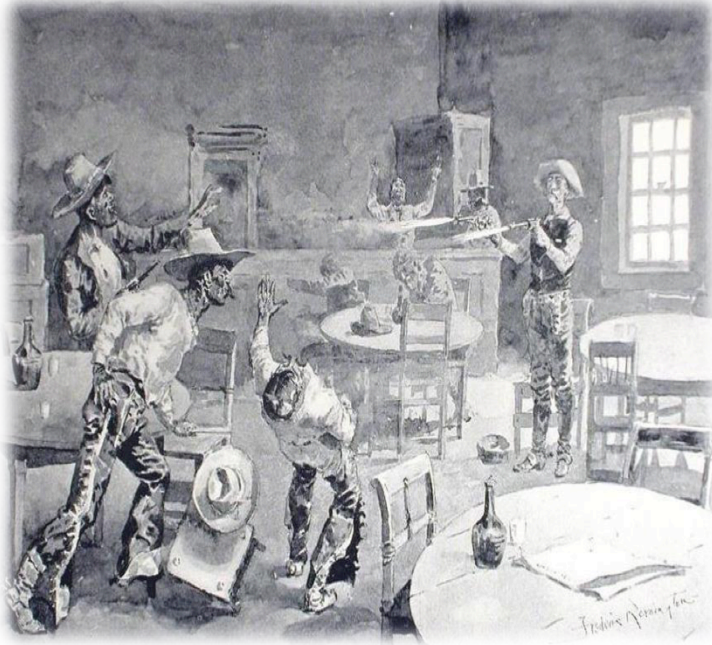
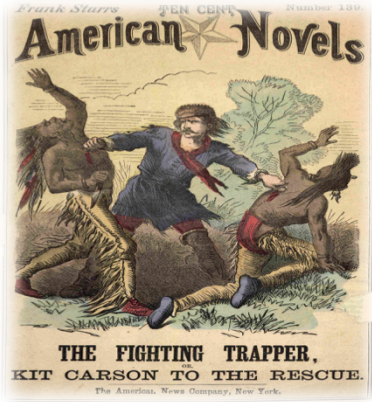


MYTHS OF THE OLD WEST



CREATING THE MYTH OF THE WILD WEST



Between the 1700s and early 1900s, the United States continued to expand westwards towards the Pacific Ocean. During the mid-1800s many people began to write and publish novels about life on the frontier, or the “wild west”. These books helped to create, and then spread, many ideas and myths about the lives of people living in the west. In many cases, the authors of these books had never actually visited the west themselves with most living in eastern states. Despite this, the images and ideas they created have had a huge impact on American history and culture over the last 150 years. The invention of movies, and then television, helped spread these ideas even further with companies producing thousands of films and series for both adults and children.

WESTERN CHARACTERS

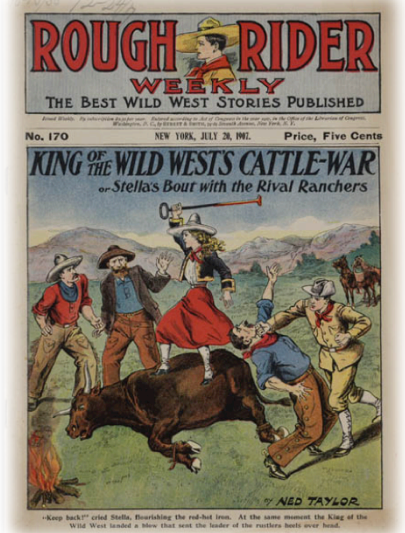
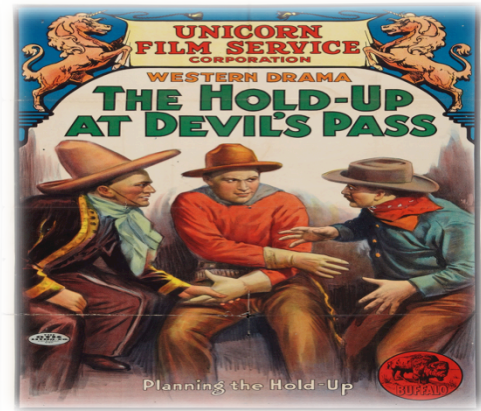
In their books and movies, artists created or used several archetypes – or stereotypical characters. These included:

- **Cowboys** : These men were often shown as being tough, independent, honest, brave, honorable, and smart in a non-academic way. They were often shown wearing large hats and carrying a large number of weapons – especially revolvers. The vast majority of cowboys were also shown as being white Americans.
- **Native Americans** : Depictions of Native Americans fell into several patterns. Some were shown as bloodthirsty savages who often attacked innocent people but who were then defeated because of their low intelligence. The opposite of this was the “noble savage” who was simple and primitive but who existed to serve his white superiors.
- **Outlaws** : These men lived in the wilderness where they robbed, attacked, and killed people – often for very little reason than a love of violence.
- **Women** : Women in the west were often shown as being much rougher, tougher, and independent than women back east. However, they were also shown as being weak and vulnerable, often needing a hero to rescue them from different dangers.

PLOTS

Western books and movies often featured stereotypical “stock” plots based around themes like:

- **Revenge** : A hero will chase the villain to gain retribution for an earlier wrong. This is often gained through a dramatic gunfight or duel.
- **Robberies** : Gangs of bandits will attack banks, stagecoaches, or trains. They will then be pursued by the law or will fall out among themselves over the money they stole.
- **Conflicts** : Native Americans will battle settlers over control of the land. Settlers would also often battle each other for land, water, or minerals like gold and silver. Conflicts could also often involve a small farmer or ordinary shop owner doing battle against a much richer or more powerful landowner or businessman.



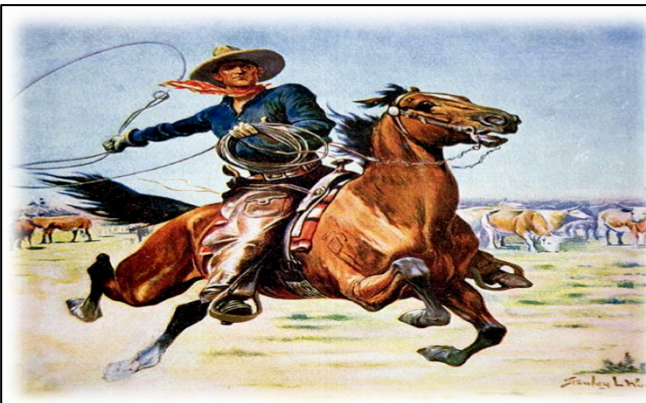
MYTH vs. REALITY IN THE WILD WEST



Native American attacks on settlers were actually very rare. Only around 400 settlers were killed as they travelled along the Oregon Trail during a 50 year period from 1810 to 1860. In contrast, more than 20,000 settlers died from disease or accidents. The wagon circles which settlers made were actually designed to stop their valuable animals from escaping rather than to defend against attacks. Many settlers would hire Native Americans as guides or would trade with them for food or other supplies. Most Native American deaths were due to disease or conflicts with the U.S. Army or other organized military forces.



In a 40 year period, between 1860 and 1900 only 14 **bank robberies** were recorded in the western states. In most western towns, banks were located on the main street, often close to the sheriff's office making it difficult to escape. Using dynamite to blast through their thick stone or brick walls would not have worked. Neither could explosives be used to try to break open a safe as this would probably destroy the money inside. Train robberies were also very rare after companies began hiring private security guards to patrol them. Stagecoach robberies were more common but often only gained robbers a few dollars rather than huge fortunes.



Around one in three **cowboys** in the west were actually Mexican Vaqueros who had been taking care of cattle in the region since the late 1600s. These vaqueros designed and developed much of the equipment and language that later cowboys would use. Between 20 and 30% of all cowboys were of African-American descent with many being former slaves who moved west after the Civil War. Many others were recent European immigrants. Cowboys were actually seen by many living in the west as being violent, ill-mannered, and unreliable. Their lives were also very hard as they herded cattle for hundreds of miles, in poor weather, with bad food and low pay.



Most people living in the west owned **firearms** both for protection and for hunting. However, many towns passed laws which strictly banned anyone from carrying a gun in the street. Visitors would have to check their guns with the local sheriff who would only return them as they left. Violence did occur in wilder places like mining and railroad camps but the murder rate in towns was much lower than today. One of the most famous shootouts, at the OK Coral in Tombstone, took place when a local gang refused to obey the town's anti-firearm rule. People living in the west also preferred to use shotguns and rifles as revolvers were not accurate enough.

WILD WEST – MYTH & REALITY PROJECT

Task : Use the information on the previous pages to create a presentation comparing the myths of the wild west with the reality.

Use short summaries and illustrations to describe the following topics:

- Contacts and relationships with Native American groups.
 - Bank robberies and other crime.
- The identities and lives of cowboys.
 - The use of firearms.

You can use images from the picture sheets provided or you can create your own. If you make your own images try to make them as simple as possible. Think of how you could use objects or symbols to help show the information rather than just trying to create figures.



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WILD WEST – MYTH & REALITY PROJECT

Task : Use the information on the previous pages to create a booklet comparing the myths of the wild west with the reality.

Use short summaries and illustrations to describe the following topics:

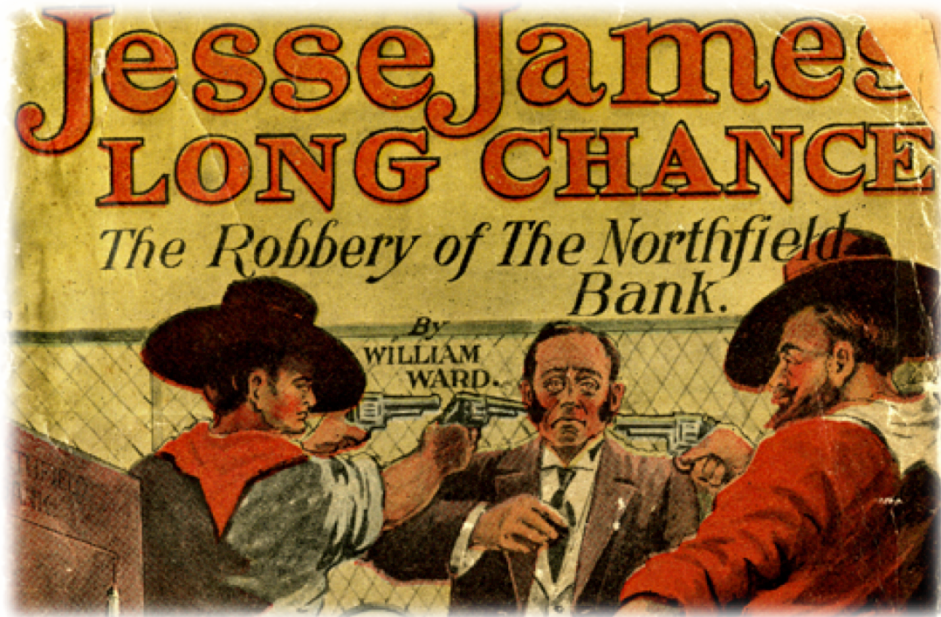
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NATIVE AMERICANS



ROBBERIES & BANDITS



COWBOYS



FIREARMS

