



Trekking into the West

60 – 90 minutes

In this lesson, students look at the history of some of the original modes of transportation in this country before the Industrial Revolution. Students “experience” the realities of traveling by covered wagon, single-rider horse, and paddle-wheel steamboats by playing a game in which they use their mode of transportation to “race” the Oregon Trail.

Objectives

- Students will examine the use of pre-industrial modes of transportation in the United States.
- Students will identify the advantages and disadvantages of early 19th century forms of transportation, including those related to environmental impact.
- Students will evaluate the sustainability of using covered wagons, single-rider horses, and paddle-wheel steamboats to move people and goods.

Materials

- *Trekking into the West Handout* (one copy)
- *Trekking into the West Classroom Presentation*

Background

In the early 19th century, Americans traveled without the modes of transportation we are familiar with today. To travel far distances took days or months, with few outposts or towns along the way for supplies or emergencies. Some trips were even dangerous. Today, many of the ways we travel can bring us to far away destinations in a matter of hours. Whether traveling by foot, bike, car, train, or plane, there are often ample amenities to make the trip more enjoyable. What are the tradeoffs of these modern conveniences, particularly of those modes of transportation that run on fossil fuels? A look back at the history of transportation in this country will help students to better understand these tradeoffs.

Advance Preparation

Prepare the trek cards for the “Into the West” game. Find three large bowls, buckets, or boxes. Label each one with one of the three modes of transportation in the game: “Covered Wagon,” “Single-Rider Horse,” and “Paddle-Wheel Steamboat.” Cut apart the cards on each page of *Trekking into the West Handout* and place the cards in their corresponding bowl.



Do Now

In their notebooks, have students respond to the following question: *How did people in this country travel from one place to another 150 years ago?* Students can respond by writing or by drawing.

Mini-Lesson

1. Place students in pairs and have them share their Do Now responses with their partners. Then, invite volunteers to share their response with the class. Then ask: *What are some of the ways that these forms of transportation are different from the ones we use today? Why do you think we no longer use some of these historical modes of transportation?*
2. Explain to students that they are going to review some of the forms of transportation that were used in this country in the early 19th century – the covered wagon, the single-rider horse, and the paddle-wheel steamboat. They will then have the opportunity to experience what it was like to travel these ways by participating in a game.
3. Project *Trekking into the West Classroom Presentation* and guide students through the each of the first nine slides. Encourage students to ask questions and share comments on the information they see in the slides.
4. Facilitate a class discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What was the most interesting thing you learned about the ways people used to travel?
 - What were the different ways people used to get around in this country?
 - What were the advantages and disadvantages of these modes of transportation?
 - How were these forms of transportation powered?
 - How significant was their impact on the environment?
 - In what ways were these modes of transportation sustainable? In what ways were they not?

Activity

1. Explain to students that they are now going to play a game in which they will “race” the first leg of the Oregon Trail using one of the forms of transportation discussed in the presentation: covered wagon, single-rider horse, and paddle-wheel steamboat.
2. Divide the class into three groups and assign one of the forms of transportation to each group. (**Note:** In larger classes, you may want to create six groups and duplicate each form of transportation.)
3. Project the final slide of the *Trekking into the West Classroom Presentation* and review the guidelines for the “Into the West” game with the students.
4. Conduct the game using the following steps:
 - Welcome each group to St. Louis and announce that they are going to see which of the groups can make it to Omaha first.



- Tell groups that they are now going to travel their first hundred miles. While they are traveling this distance, they should discuss with their group members why they think their group will be the one to reach Omaha first. Give groups a couple of minutes.
 - Announce that the groups have now traveled their first hundred miles and they should log this distance in their notebooks. Have each group send a volunteer to the bowls you prepared before class and select a “Trek Card” from their group’s bowl.
 - One at time, have each group read their card aloud. Groups should add or subtract the appropriate number from their hundred miles.
 - Repeat this procedure, announcing that groups get a hundred miles at the beginning of each round. Continue until one or all of the groups reach Omaha.
5. Debrief the experience by asking students the following questions:
- Was it easier or harder for people to get around in the early 19th century?
 - Were the journeys back then more or less adventurous? Why?
 - What were the advantages and disadvantages of these modes of transportation?
 - How significant was their impact of the environment?
 - In what ways were these modes of transportation sustainable? In what ways were they not?
 - Why do you think we replaced these forms of transportation with the ones that we have today?
 - What are some of the personal, economic, and environmental tradeoffs of using our modern forms of transportation instead of the historical ones?
 - What lessons can we take from history about sustainable transportation?

Assessment

Have students create a “human bar graph” to assess the three historical forms of transportation discussed in this lesson. Write each of the three modes of transportation in large font horizontally across the board. Ask students to identify the mode that they think was the most convenient. They should show their response by standing in front of their choice. If a student is already standing there, they should create a line or a “bar,” as if on a graph. Repeat this procedure by asking students to determine which one they think was the most eco-friendly and explain why. (**Note:** Consider adding one or more forms of modern transportation to allow students to assess a variety of historical time periods.)

Modifications

- Pre-teach unfamiliar vocabulary concepts to **English Language Learners**. Give them a list of important words from the lesson and have them work with a partner to create an illustrated glossary of terms. Each term should include a definition and a simple visual. Consider the following terms for this lesson: sustainability, tradeoff.
- Place **Students with Special Needs** in heterogeneous pairs or groups of three to complete the Do Now responses.



Extensions

- Extend this lesson by having students create a timeline of transportation showing the development of the ability to move goods and people increasingly longer distances. Students might look at rivers, roads, canals, and railroads. Have students begin gathering information by visiting: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/exhibition/>.
- Extend this lesson by having students research more about the environmental effects of historical forms of transportation, such as the impact of cutting wood to power paddle-wheel steamboats.