

## **Exploring, Analyzing and Evaluating the Heroes and Legends of the American West**

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### **Introduction**

In the summer of 2009, I went on an eighteen day road trip out West to camp in Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Tetons. To this day, the images I saw with my eyes will never leave my mind. Driving down country roads in “Big Sky” Montana where the endless blue created a horizon that stretched forever and made you feel as if you are looking into heaven with its breathtaking beauty. Driving through the mountains, I never imagined encountering a random snow storm in the middle of July; in a matter of minutes and traveling a couple miles down the mountain side you encounter a valley of endless green. Yellowstone National Park itself contains numerous unique geographic features such as “Morning Glory”, a hot spring representing the colors of the flower it was named after, Old Faithful, a water geyser that was just as magnificent to see as it was to hear the stories behind. The Yellowstone Grand Canyon made of bright red, orange and sand color rocks that painters come from all over to capture on their canvases. Then there are vast green valleys where the wild buffalo roam. Traveling south to Pike’s Peak, Colorado you walk through a garden of orange and burnt red rocky terrain. I was fascinated to see terrain and landscapes so very different than the one I am used to here in Delaware. These wonders are what creates this grandeur and appeal of the West.

Not only were these far –off places of the west alluring but the stories of the people were just as fascinating. I remember growing up as a child hearing the gun slinging stories of Wild Bill, Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Annie Oakley and Calamity Jane; I became hooked on these tales of the people of the west. My friends and I would play for endless hours “cowboys and Indians” out in the woods. I enjoyed watching old black and white films featuring the hero John Wayne save the day in the little town out west. I begged my parents and was willing to use all of my life’s savings to buy my ticket to see the play “Annie Get Your Gun” at the Three Little Bakers dinner theater. Travelling through the Black Hills of South Dakota I stopped in Deadwood, the famous cowboy town where the resting places of Wild Bill and Calamity Jane lie. Visiting the grave site of two of these heroes of the west proved that they are more than a cool bedtime story I heard growing up but are actually real people.

However, going to the museum and seeing an actual photo of Calamity Jane I was shocked. The image of her in my head as a child believed her beauty to be comparable to Helen of Troy and this beautiful woman that caught Wild Bill’s heart. Boy was I wrong! Jane was buried right next to Wild Bill once she passed away (four years after him).

Rather being buried by the man she loved so that death can no longer separate the two lovers, it was a joke played by four men on Wild Bill. Even in death, Wild Bill wouldn't be rid of the annoying Jane. On my road trip and taking this seminar, I came to realize that what I considered to be the truthful Wild West might not be as accurate as I thought it was. I fell in love with the romanticized version. Now that I am older I can differentiate between what is real and what was fabricated or embellished to ultimately create a good story. Presently, I am finding that is where the gray area lies with my students. In my sixth grade English/Language Arts class we had a discussion about the upcoming presidential election after reading an article that feature the background information about Obama and Romney. Numerous students were confused by the article because it did not include the information stated in the various political campaigns we saw on television. "Why doesn't it say why Obama Care is a bad idea like it did it the one commercial?" or "How come it doesn't say anything about how Romney wants to take women's rights away?" Hearing these comments, I realized that my students readily accepted the message they saw in the political campaign advertisements. Since this information was presented to them on television they assume that all the information presented to them about each candidate has to be true. None of my students knew why or who made the advertisement; they chose not to further research the claim to see if the information was valid. The difference between my students and I is that I realize that the creator had a way with words or visuals that are meant to manipulate my train of thought. My students have a harder time taking a step back, refocusing and using their own logic to question what they see. They just assume that everything placed in front of them is factual unless it is stated otherwise in the text or media.

In conclusion, my students struggle when analyzing a resource for its validity and only accept the face value. They have a difficulty taking a step back, refocusing and using their own logic to question what they see. They just assume that everything placed in front of them is factual unless it is stated otherwise in the text or media.

## **Rationale**

Young children love the question "why". They have an innocence that makes them inquisitive and curious about how the world operates and have this unquenchable need to seek out the answers. Unfortunately as we grow older, this sense of curiosity has been lost. I'm starting to see this curiosity disappear within my students in that they don't question their surroundings and what they see. They are satisfied with the results that are face-value, remain only on the surface, and don't tread deeper to formulate higher-order conclusions. Everything remains on a very simplistic level. This is why I believe they accept the reality presented to them on television with the show mentioned above and have difficulty differentiating between what is reality and what is fiction. I understand now this is why they struggle when making inferences about content because an

inference requires them to look beyond the page and use what evidence is presented to draw a conclusion.

Much of the creation and appeal of the West is based on and generated through people's interaction with the environment and the various cultures of people we find living there. I think much of the appeal of the West is based around the stories formed around iconic cowboys, the great American hero. These legends, folktales or tall tales have survived generations because they are stories that remain popular stamp on American history. The vivid details, humor, action and use of figurative language—specifically hyperbole—I believe are reasons why the West is still alluring and a mystery to many of us today. But by visiting these fascinating places, not only seeing them but hearing or reading of the stories, I am able to see how my ideals of the Wild West were fabricated in my own mind based on what I think is a good story. The majority of my students (not just my special-education students) struggle in identifying the details that are exaggerated, especially the different kinds of figurative language, used in the text and explaining the deeper meaning of that description and why it was used. It would be beneficial for to gain more background knowledge about where our American hero—the cowboy—originated and determine which stories of cowboys are truth, tall tales or classified as a legend of the American West. More importantly, this would be extremely beneficial for my special-education students because we are able to analyze and discover where these extreme tales have developed from and make a better connection to the real-world.

One aspect of the state test is that students are given information text and are asked to generate conclusions and inferences based on what the content states. Students are asked to perform these skills using informational text. Unfortunately, our curriculum lacks informational text. This is an issue because the Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System (DCAS) test consists of 55% informational texts and readings in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. My students struggled with these concepts because they only rely on what is right in front of them and what information is given in the text. They do not consider the facts or information that is being left unsaid. I clearly saw this in our presidential election discussion. They treat reading text just like they do with television: rely only on what they see or are given and assume the information is valid. They do not question the information due to the fact that they only rely on what is right in front of them. As a result, the class as a whole received a weak score in being able to draw conclusions about content. In particular, my special-education students struggled with this concept. These multiple skills seem difficult for both groups of students I teach. This type of thinking requires them to perform a deeper level of questioning and making inferences. As a result of those struggles they have a hard time comprehending and applying these grade-level expectations (GLEs).

There will be two parts within this curriculum unit. First, students will learn about tall tales and how they are purposely embellished to create a story using the narrative Uncle

Septimus's Beard, an American tall tale written by Herbert Shippey featured in the sixth grade unit entitled *Timeless Tales: Myths, Legends, and Tales*. Students will then compare the American cowboy, both the historically accurate cowboy and the pop culture version, to the famous tall tale about “cowboy” Pecos Bill. Secondly, we will extend the use of our analytic and evaluation skills to generate conclusions about two American Legends—Wyatt Earp and Jesse James—to determine if they rightfully earned the title American legend and do those titles still apply to the standards today. Using this, the essential questions I want my students to address is: What details in the narrative were over-exaggerated and why did the author choose to embellish upon reality? Why is the embellished or exaggerated “reality” more appealing to the audience?

The State of Delaware and Red Clay Consolidated School District have mandated that all secondary schools in our district implement the Common Core Standards for the 2012-2013 school year. These unit essential questions are aligned with and allow for a smoother transition of incorporation and implementation the new Common Core Standards. The previous school year, I was still required to implement the state grade-level expectations (GLEs). I feel as if this unit will be the first of many I create to better address the needs of my students according to what the Common Core Standards are requiring.

## **Demographics**

I currently teach sixth grade English/Language Arts at Conrad Schools of Science (CSS) in Red Clay School District located in Wilmington, Delaware; the school hosts sixth through twelfth grades. CSS is considered a magnet school in which our high school programs focus on mathematics and Science pathways. The various pathways offered are in Allied Health, Biotechnology, and the newest pathway of Engineering. The middle school program follows the norms and requirements of a typical middle school setting in the Red Clay School District. We operate on a block schedule; I see my sixth grade students on a daily basis for 84 minutes. The students I have in my class range from high to low academic ability level based on the previous year's test results and classroom created assessments. For example, in the fall of 2012 70% of our students were proficient in reading according to the state standards. By the end of the school year we needed 86% of our students to be proficient and passing the state test.

I also teach special-education students. Red Clay follows the inclusion model. At CSS, students classified with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) are placed in an ‘A setting’ which is considered to be the least-restrictive educational setting. This means special-education students are mainstreamed and attending classes with students that are considered regular education students. This past year was the first year we followed the team-teaching model. Following this model, I was required to push-in as the special-education teacher into an eighth grade English/Language Arts class and would co-teach a ninth grade English Literature class. However, for my sixth grade English/Language Arts

classes I would have both special-education students and regular education students in the same class; I am the only active teacher in that classroom. This setup I feel creates challenges for the special-education population. They are required to keep pace and perform with the regular-education population; they are to use the grade-level curriculum when certain students cannot read and comprehend at that reading level. Modifications need to be made to make everything fair and with technology the special-education students are able to excel. Due to this I had to differentiate instruction based on the various ranges of academic needs of my students.

The unit was designed to fit into the block schedule and targets all ability levels and various multiple intelligence spectrums so that instruction can be differentiated based on the ranges of student ability level in the classroom.

### **Essential Understandings and Questions**

Essential Understandings:

- Understand what specific characteristics or traits define a hero or legend and how the characteristics can change over time
- Understand why the author exaggerates certain details in narratives and why this version is more appealing to the audience.
- Analyze the language the author uses to create a tall tale

Essential Questions:

- What characteristics create a hero or a legend? Can they change over time?
- Why does the author exaggerate the certain details of certain stories? And why is it more appealing to the audience?
- How does the use of the words help create more effective story to the audience?

### **Narrative**

In the article “How Do Students Understand the History of the American West” David Reichard concludes that historians are asking new questions about the region itself and are summarizing new interpretations of previously considered concepts of the American West. However, the same changes are not reflected in teaching these new ideas. “While historians have focused on how writing of western history has changed in recent years, there has been comparatively little attention to how the teaching of western history has changed as a result.”<sup>1</sup> Looking at my own personal experience, I originally thought I had a decent understanding of the stories, people and events that derive from western expansion. I had a basic understanding of what life was like on the Oregon Trail and the other settlers moving west to claim land for their families (some thanks to Oregon Trail computer game). I knew the famous names of Jesse James, Wild Bill, Annie Oakley but

as I discovered from my road trip west and actually seeing where these events historically took place and reading a more accurate account of these people's lives for myself, I realized I never fully understood why I know those names. I feel as if this is the same mentality for most people when it comes to our understanding of "the West". For most classroom teachers, at least for English/Language Arts teachers, there is a heavy reliance on teaching folk tales and traditions such as Davy Crocket or the tall tale of Paul Bunyan to teach students of the west; we then use this information to teach student how to differentiate between a folktale and tall tale and host a guided discussion. This represents a basic understanding of the west and what most teachers comfortable teaching (since this is only what is required of them according to the English/Language Arts standards). However, I did not account that what I interpreted to be the west as being inaccurate or not fully developed. With this unit, I want my students to analyze and critic the cowboy and see how popular culture has played in creating the image of the cowboy to maintain the grandeur or the west. Further, I want them to analyze and evaluate what creates a legend of the past and if that still applies to ideals of the present.

#### Creating the Mythic West and It's Appeal

Many people have their own interpretation or ideas of what they considered to be the Wild West. Even today, many regard the west as a place of fascination, wonder, and intrigue. Others see the west as an opportunity of new beginnings; a pull on invisible heartstrings and a strong desire to change and create a better life. People have based their interpretations off of stories and tales they have heard, pictures, movies they have watched or video games they have played. However, Walt Disney was able to use our sense of wanderlust and intrigue to capitalize and create his theme park. He successfully used western icons, stories and memorabilia that we are familiar with through popular culture to teach us about the expansion west.

Walt Disney had his own vision of what "west" was. In this theme park Disney Land, Frontier land "allows us to explore the vision of the West held by Walt Disney."<sup>2</sup> Walt Disney was said to have created mental map of the West that many people from around the world have claimed to match their own. "So powerful is the name "Frontierland" that its mere mention evokes images of "the West" to most people. Those images are derived from television and novels rather than serious historical research. They are, nevertheless, valid representations of the frontier in popular culture."<sup>3</sup> "He used media and technology to tell and retell the engaging story of the frontier."<sup>4</sup> People debate the significance of the "Disney version" as historically accurate. Disney is "an immensely important—perhaps the most important—representative and shaper of the twentieth century American

Culture.”<sup>5</sup> To the public, Frontierland represented living history of the West on actually historical events as well as the Disney films in which they were depicted. The public assumed Disney was historically accurate in his interpretations. However, I see this as a similar conclusion I made in my classroom. People are seeing Disney’s creation of the west and accept its accuracy at face value. People do not question if Disney is truly accurate in his interpretations based on this influence on the generation or if he was just able to successfully use America’s mythical fascination with the westward experience to make us believe this is the truth.

### America’s Heroes: The Cowboy

From this mythic west developed America’s hero: the cowboy. I’m sure many of us remember playing cowboys and Indians as children. Everyone always wanted to be the cowboy or the good guy that has come to symbolize America as a nation and as a people. The classic image of the American cowboy was caught in C.M. Russell’s painting: a man astride a horse lassoing and herding cattle. This man is lean and strong, wearing a rugged button-down shirt, chaps, bandana and most importantly cowboy boots and hat. This rugged individual is seen as brave, courageous, stoic and loyal- the true American idol. “We have romanticized the cowboy’s life as one of high action and adventure.”<sup>6</sup> Charlie Daniels, a singer/songwriter interviewed for the documentary for his knowledge of living the “cowboy” lifestyle, claims that trail rides only lasted for fifteen years but due to the romanticism of the role of the cowboy through films we have come to believe that this way of life has been around for hundreds of years and don’t regard the difficulties a man in this role often had to endure. “Trail ride is hard work-I’ve only done it for fifteen miles and it is rough, tough work, end up in places with no water and it is hostile environment with Indians and outlaws that there really is not anything romantic about it.”<sup>7</sup> Many cowboys do not see themselves as a hero; their only concern on the trail was to survive to the next day.

A cowboy is a man who herds and tends to cattle on a ranch. The historic American cowboy appeared in the late nineteenth century beginning in 1865 acting as leaders on the cattle drives. Cattle drives no longer take place but the stories of the cowboy have come even further to the present time. The life of a cowboy was difficult. You were expected to stay with the night and day, endure weather from rain and snow to excruciating heat. In order to develop the necessary skills and develop the physical ability required of the job, a person pursuing the job of cowboy often started at the age of twelve and committed to this for the rest of their life unless crippled by an injury. As a cowboy, you were meant to follow the unwritten code of honorable conduct; there is a high regard for truthfulness

and keeping one's word, intense dislike for hypocrisy and any man that does not pull their weight. Today, the working cowboy is normally an adult; herding sheep and cattle is now seen as too dangerous of a role for children.

Our present collective image and how we have come to romanticize the role of the cowboy's life as an action hero was due greatly to the movies. As stated above, Walt Disney used media and technology to formulate his vision for Frontierland. Using this fascination of "the West" many films were made telling the story of the west and have personified our great American hero but created a certain image which romanticized the life of a cowboy to keep the audiences engaged. The first movie that had a well developed plot was a Western film called *The Great Train Robbery* made in 1903; it contains the many images of the West that we have come to visualize as "West" as well as our rugged cowboy as the hero who saves the day. Many actors became famous due to Western films. America's most beloved hero was John "the Duke" Wayne. Wayne created a great and vast career starring in many Western films; when many people generate a mental image of "cowboy" John Wayne often comes to our minds. As western film star Harry Carrey Jr. states in the documentary *True Stories of the American West*, "As great as those films were, they did not give an accurate depiction of the way the real West was. Those films were made to entertain not educate. Oh sure there as romance, action and heroes and bad guys. The west was hard and very, very wild place to life."<sup>8</sup> Many men who had to try to tame the Wild West paid for it with their lives. Most Westerns focused on action and romance but very little focus was placed historical accuracy. Many Western films did not include the hardships, heartbreak, tragedies and injustice the people frequently encountered on the frontier.

#### *Tall Tales Embodiment the American Hero*

Tall Tales are said to be the natural decedents of contemporary legends. Both genres resonate with real-life details and mix exaggeration with touches of fear, suspense and fulfillment. Tall tales begin in a world of ordinary people having ordinary adventures but the potential hazards and events are embellished to create suspense. It uses the local setting to add familiarity and create a better personal connection with the audience. Tall tales are based on the humor or lies and exaggerations; they are meant to help deal with the fears surrounding the mysterious new environment that they settlers of the West had to endure and conquer on a daily basis. This history of the West itself often considered a tall tale. Many prefer to remember the gaudy version of its history because it relays a better story of violence, adventure and romance because it sounded better being told from that perspective. It's a reflection of the American culture at that time period



Many people who travelled out west had various reasons such as gaining land and freedom to move out to a place that at first many thought was inhabitable. The west transitioned from this place of being impossible to live to one where someone can seek adventure, violence or thrills and romance. This ideal led to one particular reason for people to migrate west: a means for starting over and having a fresh beginning. By going to this new, vast place, you are given an opportunity to change and have a fresh start; you can become someone else entirely as a part of your new beginning. Tall tales are stories that symbolized and follow suit of that new beginning and image. According to David Leeming, author of *Myths, Legends and Folklore of America* is that these stories are a reflection of America and the reality of the American experience. He also claims that these tales were a way of creating a new identity. He compared creating the tall tales to looking at our reflection in a mirror: “We apply makeup or even disguises, designing images of who we think we are, how we believe we should appear to the world, and how we think we should perform in it.”<sup>9</sup> These tall tales are very American in that they are a harmless exaggeration of self; they were created based on the ideals of the American society at the time in that people want to read these gripping tales of people overcoming obstacles because that’s what the time period embodied. Davy Crockett is an example of a man who exaggerated his existence and the events that happened in his life because he wanted to create a specific image for himself for the viewing public.

Many tall tales were written to help Americans come to terms with the vast and inhospitable lands that we are now daring to move to. Living in the 1850s and heading west was a terrifying and difficult notion that many did not survive to tell the tale. In the introduction of her book *American Tall Tales*, Mary Pope Osborne discussed the purpose for tall tales.

“Tall talk or exaggerated story telling began in the 1800s as a way for Americans to come to terms with the vast and inhospitable lands they’d come to live upon...The heroes and heroines of the tales were like the land itself—gigantic, extravagant, restless and flamboyant. Their exaggerated feats of courage and endurance helped the backwoodsman face overwhelming task of developing such a land.”<sup>10</sup>

In hearing of the stories of people such as Davy Crockett or Buffalo Bill Cody demonstrate to the American society that these struggles can be faced and won. Mary Pope Osborne quoted Kenneth Lynn, the author of *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* stating that “Every time Davy Crockett triumphed over ‘man varmint and cogwheels of the universe’ the ordinary backwoodsman felt identification with his own efforts to tame his part of the American Woods.”<sup>11</sup> It gave the people settling in the west

encouragement that times may be difficult but you have to continue working towards that dream of a new beginning. Tall tales were meant to quench our hunger for a juicy, terrifying tale that reflects our lives as Americans. We want violence, adventure, thrills and romance; our tall tales of these beings need to be a reflection of who we are now becoming: a society of thrill seekers.

Pecos Bill is often described in stories as being the best cowboy that ever was and a great American Hero. He was said to be a cowboy hero with superhuman abilities where he was able to rid the West of all its criminals, ride any stead including a tornado, and kill the huge Bear Lake monster. Dr. James Clody Bowman wrote a narrative novel that tells the story of this true American hero. The book breaks Pecos Bill's life into stages and first discusses how Pecos Bill was raised by a pack of coyotes, how he met the love of his life in Slue-foot Sue and makes a connection to Pecos Bill being a demigod as mentioned in Greek and Roman mythology. However, the author states in the introduction that this is folklore how can this figure be the "best cowboy that there ever was" <sup>12</sup> if he was a fictional character? I want my students to first read the tall tale "Uncle Septimus's Beard" looking for the over exaggerated and larger than life details present in this tale and use that as an example to find the exaggerations mentioned about the life of Pecos Bill. Pecos Bill was often a story used to explain how great the American cowboy was.

### The Legends of the Old West

The word "legend" implies an exaggerated and colorful account of an event or person. Legends deal with people, places and events; they have some historical and factual background and must be associated with a community that has a known individual, geographic landmark or particular episode or event that has happened. Opposing that tall tales are stories of heroes and legends, he claims that what Americans did was take real historical figures and personalities and make them into fairy tale characters. Both Wyatt Earp and Jesse James, each in their own right have become legends of the Old American West. But looking at each man's life, are they deserving of the title?

#### *The Legend of Wyatt Earp: Lawman or Murderer?*

There has always been a lot of controversy about how violent the West really was. These "gunslingers" were known as the best guns men in the West. Many of them are the hero hired to save the town for having this remarkable talent of killing without regret. Wyatt Earp is seen as one of these controversial gunslingers but nonetheless still categorized as an honorable cowboy and legend.

Wyatt Earp was a hard man who lived in hard times. Wyatt Earp was a town marshal: one of the most difficult and controversial jobs a man could have out in the west. A town marshal was required to be ruthless, cold-blooded and as deadly as the outlaws he faced. He lived by the code of honor and never doubted or strayed from that code. “His world was one in which “survival of the fittest” was more than a social philosophy. Although not a complex man, he lived his life according to a code that seemed right to him, if not to those that would judge him later.”<sup>13</sup> Wyatt Earp did what he thought was right and he was right more often than not based on the times in which he lived. He was the one lawman that became a legend in his own time; if he hadn’t worn the badge he would have been known as one of the West’s most infamous gunslingers. “In truth, Wyatt Earp was a violent man who would not hesitate to pistol whip or kill a man while trying to uphold the law.”<sup>14</sup> By 1876, Earp made a reputation for himself since outlaw barons offered a one-thousand dollar reward for anyone who could kill Earp. He was a deadly killer.

Earp became famous for the West’s most famous gun fight at the O.K.Coral in Tombstone, Arizona in 1879. Earp moved with his brothers to Tombstone due to the town’s reputation of being wild and untamed. Some of the most famous outlaws, the Clanton Boys, roamed its streets causing daily riots. There resulted in the most famous showdown amongst the outlaws and the Earp brothers. According to historical records, the gunfight lasted a little more than thirty seconds and the only man left standing was Wyatt Earp. In the end, Earp was a mass of contradictions that ultimately yielded positive changes to the justice system that allowed it to make the move forward and not once was he ever ashamed of his life. I remember briefly learning about Earp in school; I envisioned him as this great hero who wasn’t afraid to confront danger when someone else needed help. However, in researching more about his background, I did not realize that he be a marshal and a lawman at this time how ruthless –and heartless at times—you had to be to seek justice in the west. I want my students to examine Wyatt Earp and reconsidered the roll of one who defends the law. Was there any concept of justice in this west? Or did the lawmen consider themselves above the law and abuse their rights to maintain justice?

### *The Legend of Jesse James: Outlaw or Hero?*

Jesse James’ name and reputation is still known amongst students. He is seen as a cool, dangerous cowboy that was famed for avoiding and outsmarting the law. He stole from the rich to give to the poor. However, in his lifetime James was seen as a criminal and a murderer according to the justice system. Can Jesse James live up to our standards of a “cowboys” and behold qualities we use to define a legend?

Jesse James was born September 9, 1847 and died April 3, 1882 in Missouri. Historically Jesse James is known as one of the most famous and greatest American outlaws of the Wild West; even though he is an outlaw, many people related the legend of Robin Hood to his quest. Jesse James came from a highly respected family: his father was highly educated with a master's degree and was a minister that established three different churches. Originally, it was said that Jesse was striving to follow his father's footsteps. His mother was also a well-educated, determined, and strong woman that was well-respected by the community. Jesse James had a nice personality where he was open and pleasant, smiled and laughed a lot; he liked people and people liked him. Unfortunately, many historians like author Milton Perry, claim that "they grew up at the worst possible time."<sup>15</sup> Rather than living a peaceful childhood playing in the country side, the James' brothers witnessed the hostile and cruel realities of the time. The Territory of Kansas held many settlements that were anti-slavery while Missouri was a slave state. As a result, there was a vicious and violent conflict between the two areas even before the Civil War started. James H. Lane was one of the men that would kidnap slaves and cause havoc, chaos and murder. The James' home became a warzone. Due to these circumstances and growing up during this devastating time in our country's history, many historians claim that this is the reason James turned to violence. Jesse's older brother, Frank James, joined the Missouri front and fought in the Civil War for the Confederacy. At the end of the war, Frank was forced to sign a loyalty oath and an agreement that he would never hold arms against the Union. In 1862, Frank joined a guerilla band led by William Clark Quantrill. Quantrill used the Civil War as an excuse to murder and steal along the border states. In 1863, Quantrill led a raid that was considered the most unforgivable event of the war. Quantrill and "Bloody Bill" Anderson arranged for 100 Kansas civilians to be lined up and shot in front of their wives and children; Frank James was there to bear witness. Militia men came to the James home in Missouri looking to arrest Frank. When the family refused to state his whereabouts, they hung Jesse James' step-father for the family's disobedience. Sixteen-year-old Jesse James was tired of witnessing the violence and his family being harassed. He joined a guerilla band led by Bloody Bill Anderson. By 1864, Jesse and his brother Frank were wanted in thirty-nine states. In April of 1865 when General Lee surrendered to General Grant the Union army, it was said that Jesse James was surrendering to a group of Union soldiers when the rest of his guerilla band came riding into town. Federal soldiers opened fire on the incoming riders, injuring Jesse James in the chest even though he was trying to surrender.

After the war and confederate soldiers were returning home to Missouri, James and Frank James continued to live a life as outlaws. With the help of newspaper editor John Neumann Edwards- diehard confederate veteran and a romantic- he created the image of Jesse James as the glorified Robin Hood of the West. Like many literary people, Edwards found the truth painful and had a difficult time to face it. He rather portrays the positive image of the underdog winning against a controlling population that many people saw as unjust and cruel. Historian Milton Perry states that :

“John Neumann really created the Jesse James that we know today: the American Robin Hood who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. The public read this and it was entertaining and charming and daring. Bankers were not popular...so by attacking banks and institutions they were attacking the forces that people disliked the most and became American heroes.”<sup>16</sup>

Whatever bank or train robbery that occurred, the James brothers were held responsible even though this was physically impossible for the brothers to commit all of these crimes. With many of the crimes, there was little evidence to prove the brothers' guilt. The one instance that came to idolize Jesse James as a folk hero and legends is when Pinkerton Detective agency raided the family farm where his mother, step-father and half brother were living. As a result of the raid, James' brother Archie died and his mother's arm had to be amputated due to a horrific explosion. Their house was bombed because the Pinkerton agency believed they were harboring Jesse and Frank. Public opinion grew even more supported of the James' brothers due to this incident. Long after his death, Even today Jesse James is still regarded as a hero to many; those disagree with the term outlaw as to describe his image. For the documentary *True Stories of the American West*, Jesse James' great grandson Judge James Ross was interviewed:

“I am no way saying that everything he did was okay. What I'm saying is that you should judge for yourself. He had a lot of reasons but on the other hand I think it would be a little hard to say that 'I was robbing a bank and shot somebody' and that was self-defense. So you can look at Jesse one way or another depending upon your point of view. I'm not trying to make him look like a Robin Hood; he was made out to be a Robin Hood by John Neumann Edwards and he probably thought of himself that way when you read about

yourself from that aspect.”<sup>17</sup>

By 1882, Jesse James was already being made into an American Robin Hood and “Jesse was credited with the same virtues as the legendary English outlaw.”<sup>18</sup> James was regarded as a close friend by the poor; many saw his slayer as a coward for killing a true hero that was one with the common folk. People saw Jesse James as someone they can rely on the help them when no one else would. There were a lot of reasons James made the choices and committed the acts he did. I want my students to examine his life as a whole and determine if James was a cold-hearted killer or were his intentions justifiable by the circumstances he faced growing up and by what other men created.

### Rise of Heroes or Lies?

Author Walter Blair claims in his book *Tall Tale America* that since the beginning America has had its fair share of hardships, some more than any other country. Due to America undergoing these various hardships (mainly while going through the process of being discovered and identified as a new country) Blair thinks that this is the reason why America’s history is filled with so many heroes such as Paul Bunyan, Davy Crocket and Old Stormalong. In order to be considered a hero you have to overcome all the odds you face. “When it comes to raising up heroes, there’s nothing under the sun that’s as helpful as hardships. This is because the way a man gets to be a hero is by overcoming hardships.”<sup>19</sup> The formative years of the frontier placed emphasis on qualities of physical strength and stamina that was required to endure those difficult living conditions. Clearing forests and creating homesteads required for a man to have strength and endurance and power. Word would spread of these men that could move 800 pounds of lumber, lifting boulders and stone and they would create a reputation for themselves and essentially create a character or hero or legend of their own. These traits that were created by their reputation are what equate the qualities that we have come to define in a hero.

As addressed prior, my students are unable to differentiate between what details are embellished and what is considered to be valid information based on their statements about political campaign advertisements. I want my students to see the exaggerations in the tall tale of Pecos Bill and start to realize that we as a society may have romanticized this image of the American cowboy to be larger than life—just like Pecos Bill—through the means of popular culture and hearsay. I also want them to be able to differentiate between what we see as a society define a legend to be in comparison to what was seen as a legend and hero of the past by examining Wyatt Earp and Jesse James.

## **Strategies**

### **Collaborative Learning/Group Work**

Working together with peers is a life skill that students need to practice and accomplish. With collaborative learning, it allows students to learn to work together towards a common goal. Each member of the group is accountable to each other and required to participate in order to achieve the final outcome. Students need to learn how to work respectfully with others and learn how to consider each other's points of views and opinions. Collaboration also benefits students in that by listening to their peers they can develop better understanding of the task or content; it also extends their thinking by hearing other perspectives that they may not have considered or thought of. Individual and group evaluations are essential to monitor the group's work and their progress working as a team.

### **Response to Questions**

I feel as if in this unit, student discussion is vital and beneficial. With class or group discussions, responding to questions is a good strategy to engage students in helping them identify what specifically defines an American cowboy, legend and hero. This way you can create a discussion and allow students to explain their thinking. In examining text, images and media, the students will work to determine what traits create a the great American hero: the cowboy but also determine how the image is embellished in media.

### **Think-Pair-Share**

Think-Pair-Share is a specific type of responding to questions strategy. It allows for collaborative learning in that students think and generate their own conclusions about a prompt or question. They then have to paired up with their assigned partner (or a peer of their choice) and share the conclusions they each came up with. The Think-Pair- Share strategy will be implemented into the unit in allowing the students to collaborate and share their ideas on the author's intentions and persuasive techniques used.

### **Proficient Reading Strategies**

The proficient reading strategies are techniques student use to break-down and analyze a story or text to gain better comprehension of what was written. I teach my students these strategies at the beginning of the school year to teach them how to break-down and analyze text. I like linking the proficient reading strategies with analyzing the author's

intentions because going through the steps as a proficient reader, they are able to further analyze the text, determine the point the author is making and the strategy they use to influence the reader. Students are asked to generate predictions before they read, make connections to the text as they read, write down questions the author leaves them with, make inferences, visualize, determine the main idea, particular what they author is trying to tell their audience, and summarize what the author is saying and how they are accomplishing their goal.

### Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers are a visual tool that helps display the relationship amongst facts and ideas. It allows the content to become easier to break down because you are able to categorize related information and it becomes more visually organized and comprehensible. For the unit, we will use graphic organizers to perform character analysis of both Wyatt Earp and Jesse James. This will help students organize their thoughts for their writing piece where they have to defend their opinion on who they think is deserving of the title American hero.

### Classroom Activities

*Lesson One: Real or Tall Tale?(one to two days in length)*

Objectives:

1. Define a tall tale
2. Identify traits of a tall tale within a text stating evidence from the text to support conclusions and answers
3. Determine if phrases are a hyperbole and explain what they mean in references to the narrative

Vocabulary:

Tall Tale- a humorous story in which the characters and events are exaggerated. This means that the characters are events seem bigger, louder or greater in some way than they really are.

Hyperbole- a type of figurative language; phrase or statement that is wildly exaggerated. Often involves comparison.

Introduction: Journal Write: Have you ever told a story to someone and over exaggerated a detail to make it funnier or more interesting?



Notes: define a tall tale and hyperbole in their notebooks.

Activity A: As a class we will listen to the tall tale “Uncle Septimus’s Beard.” As they listen to the story on tape, they need to write down the details of the story that are over exaggerated. (Appendix B)

Summative Assessment: Have students discuss question: Why do you think certain details of a story are exaggerated?

Activity B: Using the popcorn method, have students take turns reading aloud the narrative of Pecos Bill. While reading, students are to highlight with a highlighter any details about Pecos Bill’s life that doesn’t seem realistic or exaggerated. Once we have concluded the read aloud, briefly discuss what details were exaggerated in the text. On the SMART Board, watch 15 minute clip of the 1948 cartoon of Pecos Bill by Walt Disney downloaded from YouTube.

Final Discussions: Ask students: “Based on what we read and saw, is Pecos Bill real? Why or why not?” “ Why is he regarded as the most famous cowboy that ever lived?”

Formative Assessment: Students have to address the following on their exit ticket: what is a tall tale and why does the narrative of Pecos Bill qualify as a tall tale? Cite examples or evidence from the narrative or film clip.

*Lesson Two: What Makes a Cowboy (Two to three days in length )*

Objectives:

1. Provide a summary of text or media without their judgments or opinions
2. Students will compare draw conclusions about what traits and qualities define a cowboy using discussion, visuals and media.
3. Cite textual or evidence shown in the media resource to support conclusions

Activity A:Think Pair Share: State “Since we determined that Pecos Bill is not really a cowboy, we need to determine then what qualifies or truly defines this American hero. On the word splash, write down characteristics or traits that you think a cowboy must have.” On the back of the word splash worksheet, I would like you to sketch what you visualize a cowboy to look like. If you don’t want to draw, write a list of all the things that a cowboy has or what they are wearing. After 20 minutes or so, let students share with their clock partner what they believe are traits that define a cowboy. After 3 to 5 minutes of discussion, we will share out as a class. I will write down the traits on a separate poster board on the wall with the heading “A Cowboy is...”

Activity B: Watch 10-15 minute clip from film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Vance* featuring John Wayne as the idealistic cowboy. As students watch the film, they have to

list the qualities that Wayne demonstrates as the ideal cowboy. Once slip is concluded, we will share our observations as a class. Share their results with their clock partner. Once students have had time to discuss, you will write new observations on the poster state “A cowboy is...”

**Summative Assessment:** Students write a one paragraph summary of the film clip what traits make up American hero: the cowboy.

**Activity C: Picture Sort:** Give students copies of six to eight images of cowboys. Half of the images are of John Wayne and other film stars that portrayed cowboys in the old Western films. The other half are real, accurate images of a cowboy living in the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With a partner, students will organize the photos into one of three columns: cowboys, villain, not sure. You will have a similar display on a poster or SMART board if available.

Once you have completed the sort, the class will watch the 20 minute segment of documentary *True Stories of the American West* that depicts the lifestyle of the American Cowboy and how the image was fabricated and exaggerated by Hollywood. Students will have to write down the truth of what cowboys had to endure on a worksheet while they watched the film. Once the film has concluded, students will reevaluate the images and decide if the category they originally placed them was accurate. They will have to complete a separate picture sort placing the picture in one of the two categories: Accurate Image of a Cowboy or an Exaggeration of the Truth.

**Formative Assessment (Exit Ticket):** Before students are allowed to leave, they have to summarize their results or explain why they placed each photo either as an accurate image or an exaggeration. (See Appendix C)

*Lesson Three: Cowboy or Outlaw (one to two days to complete)*

**Objectives**

1. Summarize the text
2. Write a short essay stating their side of the argument with valid reasons and support from the text and media format
3. State textual evidence to support reasons and conclusions

**Vocabulary:**

**Hero-**a main character or protagonist in a story; they are typically courageous, strong, honorable, and intelligent. They are protectors of a society who hold back forces of evil.

**Legend-** a story handed down from the past about a specific person, usually someone of heroic accomplishments.

Introduction: Have a discussion review what traits qualify or define the heroic American cowboy. Take notes and define terms hero and legend.

Activity A: define the terms and discuss the definition of legend and hero. Read the excerpt from the legend Robin Hood of Sherwood Forest of textbook pg. 679.

Summative Assessment: In their notebook students need to address the following questions: What details suggest that the people who first told this legend were fed up with the unfair laws of the rich? What qualities do you think were valued in medieval times? Are the similar or different to those we stated of the American cowboy?

Activity B: Comparison of biographies: Students will read biographies of lawman Wyatt Earp and famous outlaw compare the life of Jesse James and Wyatt Earp. State” Both of these men have been claimed as legends by historians. We need to determine if the historians are accurate or correct by calling these two men American heroes.” They will read individually a biography of each man and watch excerpts of the documentary *True Stories of the American West* that features summarizes of both Earp’s and James’s biographies.

Formative Assessment: Written Essay. After watching the documentary and reading their biographies, each student will have to determine which man rightfully deserves the title of American legend and hero. (Appendix D)

## **Bibliography**

Blair, Walter, and Glen Rounds. *Tall Tale America: A Legendary History of our Humorous Heroes*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1944.

Walter Blair and Glen Rounds wrote this book as a way to understand America’s history through a different set of leaders; we see history not through presidents but through folk heroes and popular tall tales. It is meant to be a humorous book that can be shared with families.

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Dr. James Cloyd Bowen is the former Head of the English Department at Northern State Teachers College in Marquette Michigan. He is a specialist in native American folklore. He writes this children’s novel of the life of Pecos Bill.

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Mary Pope Osborne is credited and praised for writing children's books retelling various myths and legends including *Favorite Greek Myths* and *Beauty and the Beast*. In this children's book, she writes of the American Tall Tales and Legends here in the United States.

Reichard, David. "How Do Students Understand the History of the American West? An Argument for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2006): 207-214.

David Reichard, who teaches law, history and politics at CSU Monterey Bay, wrote this article featured in *The Western Historical Quarterly* discussing how students are currently learning the history of the West in their classrooms and use this as a way to improve our teaching.

Steckmesser, Kent Ladd. *Western Outlaws: the "Good Badman" in Fact, Film, and Folklore*. Claremont, Calif.: Regina Books, 1983.

Kent Steckmesser wrote this book to inform students about the lives of various American West outlaws that were prevalent figures in our history. The book is written with a focus on students using the information to gain comprehension about the timeperiod.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Common Core Standards Addressed in Unit

#### Reading Standards for Literary Text 6-8:

RL1: Cite textual evidence to support analysis of text and any inferences or conclusions made.

RL2: Provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments

RL4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language

#### Reading Standards for Informational Text 6-8:

I3: Analyze in detail how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced, illustrated and elaborated in a text

I7: Integrate information presented in different media or formats

I9: Compare and contrast one author's presentation of events with that of another on the same person

#### Writing Standards 6-8:

W1: Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence

W1b: support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using credible sources and demonstrating understanding of the topic or text

### Appendix B:

Uncle Septimus/ Pecos Bill	Items that are Exaggerated
Character Description/looks	
Setting	
Events	

### Appendix C: Picture Sort

Accurate Image of Cowboy	Exaggeration of a Cowboy
Summary Results:	Summary of Results:

### Appendix D: Format of Written Essay

Paragraph I: Define a legend and what traits or qualities create the American hero or cowboy in a paragraph.

Paragraph II: Summarize either Wyatt Earp's and Jesse James' life in a paragraph (the person who they think deserves the title of legend and American hero)

Paragraph III: Three reasons and evidence as to why they think this person deserves the title of American hero.

**Curriculum Unit Title**

Exploring, Analyzing and Evaluating the Heroes and Legends of the American West

**Author**

Michelle Hilbeck

**KEY LEARNING, ENDURING UNDERSTANDING, ETC.**

- Understand what specific characteristics or traits define a hero or legend and how the characteristics can change over time.
- Understand why the author exaggerates certain details in narratives and why this version is more appealing to the audience.
- Analyze the language the author uses to create a tall tale

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) for the UNIT**

- What characteristics create a hero or a legend? Can they change over time?
- Why does the author exaggerate the certain details of certain stories? And why is it more appealing to the audience?
- How does the use of the words help create more effective story to the audience?

**CONCEPT A**

**CONCEPT B**

**CONCEPT C**

Examining Tall Tales

Defining the qualities that create a hero and a legend; determining if they remain the same throughout time

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS A**

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS B**

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS C**

How does the use of words help create a more effective story to the audience?

What traits create a hero and a legend?

**VOCABULARY A**

**VOCABULARY A**

**VOCABULARY A**

Tall Tale  
Hyperbole

Legend  
Hero

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/MATERIAL/TEXT/FILM/RESOURCES**

Documentary *True Stories of the American West* hosted by Western film starring Harry Carey Jr.

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- <sup>1</sup> David Reichard, *How Do Students Understand the History of American West*, pg.209.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Francaviglia, *Walt Disney's Frontierland as an Allegorical Map of the American West*, p157.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid pg. 157
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid pg. 160.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid. pg.161.
- <sup>6</sup> Harry Carrey Jr, *True Stories of the American West* documentary
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid
- <sup>9</sup> David Leeming, *Myths, Legends and Folktales in America*, pg. 3
- <sup>10</sup> Mary Pope Osborne, *American Tall Tales*, pg. x
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid, pg. xi
- <sup>12</sup> Dr. James Cloyd Bowman, *Pecos Bill: The Greatest Cowboy of All Time*, introduction
- <sup>13</sup> Richard W. Etulain, *With Badges and Bullets: Law Men and Outlaws in the Old West*, 2
- <sup>14</sup> Harry Carrey Jr. *True Stories of the American West* documentary
- <sup>15</sup> ibid
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid
- <sup>18</sup> Kent Steckmesser, *Western outlaws: the "good badman" in fact, film, and folklore*, 59
- <sup>19</sup> Walter Blair, *Tale Tall America*, 1