This course will survey centuries of North America’s past but will concentrate on the 1700s and 1800s and the lands west of the 100th meridian—a place that has variously been called “the Far West,” “the west of the West” or the “west of everything.” Yet we will see not only those who traveled west and the natives they encountered, but also peoples moving northward, southward, and even eastward. We will develop two themes: first, the role of the physical environment in shaping western life and, second, the struggles of divergent peoples for control of the region.

Historians have long visualized American’s frontier as the settling of “unknown lands.” Even today popular culture reflects this vision, but in this course we will see wilderness as a cultural artifact. If Lewis and Clark did not know in 1802 the Rockies existed, others did: Indians, Spaniards, Mexicans, Russians, French, Asians, and Africans. The frontier was not filling an emptiness but processes of depopulating and repopulating. It was constant, violent, often racialized conflict.

Face-to-face gun battles were rare even in Nevada mining towns but remain telling. Duals to the death were metaphors for contests of survival, selfhood, and place. We will look at violence between native peoples and newcomers but also ask who among the latter won the American Dream. The cry “Gold,”--greeted with frenzied rushes from China to Ireland--represented one of many stampedes for coal, minerals, land, timber, and water. Most were desperate people fighting over arid lands, but there was wealth. Today much of it is held by international corporations

America’s frontier was an ecodrama. Conquest damaged lands, even creating desserts from fertile valleys. But the environment itself was an actor, shaping human history, doling out wealth and misery. The most striking faces of western landscapes remain their treeless aridity and vastness. Fights for water ruled the region. Big skies are keynote in everyday life and old movies. The need to conquer space impelled people to ride, walk, import camels, drive mules, and lay rail. Television commercials for SUV’s still evoke heroic intrusions into expansive vistas.

We will begin with the Spanish and French frontiers. Other European peoples, mainly Anglos and Asians will enter our story about the fifth week, bringing with them stock figures, from cowboys to outlaws, vigilantes, prostitutes, miners, Victorian ladies and sodbusters. Myth and reality converge and diverge in these stories. We will consider western movies, targeting masculinity, the horse, dry landscapes, and the west’s particular brand of anti-hero. We will explore public understandings of the Wild West but will also look for discrepancies between public memory and critical history. The frontier—in myth and reality—still shapes the cultural identity and the national politics of the United States.
Grading and Attendance:

One quarter of your grade in this course will be based on the midterm, one quarter on your term paper, and one half on the final examination. The examinations are written and will require detailed information drawn from readings, lectures, discussions, and your own thoughts. The term paper will focus on Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*. In addition to a close reading of the novel you might well spend time on research in the Rutgers Libraries and the Internet. A sheet outlining the requirements for the paper will be provided.

In addition to the midterm, term paper, and final examination, class attendance is required. Complete reading assignments prior to class meetings so as to participate in discussions. Attendance and participation will be evaluated at the end of the semester as excellent, satisfactory, or unsatisfactory. An excellent will raise your final score by half a grade (for example, from a B to a B+), a satisfactory will not change your grade, and an unsatisfactory will lower your course grade. You cannot pass the course if you have five or more unexcused absences.

Please do not plagiarize. If you are uncertain what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate use of sources bring your work and ideas to me so that we can discuss how you can use and cite materials to strengthen your paper.

Required readings: These books are available for purchase through the Rutgers Barnes and Nobel Bookstore, Albany Street, New Brunswick (732 246-8448) and New Jersey Books on Easton Avenue (732 828 7401). Both bookstores purchase as many used copies as possible.


Additional, required readings of primary sources (under 512:320.01) on Sakai:

1 Six maps of New Spain, Mexico, and the topography & rainfall of the United States.

2 Treaty of Guadalupe Hildalgo (Feb. 1849)

3 Land Ordinances of 1785 & 1787


6 President Lincoln’s First Inaugural, 1861

7 The Homestead Act (May 1862)


14 Jane Tompkins, West of Everything, chapters 2, 5 (pp. 47 – 67, 89 – 110).


The Hispanic Frontier, 1600s – 1848

Weekly Readings

Jan. 23 Defining the West, Frontiers, & this Course.

Jan. 28, 30 Early Encounters Weber, 1 – 129

Feb. 4, 6 The Borderlands: Conquest and Accommodation Weber, 130 – 198

Feb. 11, 13 Spanish California and Texas "The Last Don": Governor Pió Pico Treaty of Guadalupe Hildalgo Weber 199 - 264

Treaty of Guadalupe Hildalgo
Anglo Asiana and Africana on the Frontiers, 1848 - 1890

Feb. 18, 20  Federal Land Policies, 1780s-1860s  Land Ordinances of 1785, 1787  
Gold Fever  Homestead Act of 1862  "Reports on the Gold Rush"

Feb. 25, 27  Gender & Race in the Far West  Anna Maria’s Diary  
Chinese Exclusion Act, 1892

March 4, 6  Indian Policies  Weeks, 1 – 72  
From Trail of Tears to Wounded Knee

March 11, 13  The Reservation System  Weeks, 73 - 120  
The West As a Cause of Civil War  Lincoln’s Inaugural, 1861

March 13 Midterm Examination  March 16 – 24 Spring Recess

Contested Control of the Arid West

March 25, 27  Ecological & Demographic Reinvention  Weeks, 122 - 257  
Transformation of the Great Plains:  Homesteaders, Beef, & Genetic Engineering

April 1, 3  Personal Violence: Vigilantism, Outlawry, &  Norris, 1 - 202  
Prostitution  Tompkins, chapters. 2, 5

        Cowboys and their Horses

April 8, 10  Industrial Violence: Farmers, & Miners  Norris, 203-460

April 15, 17  1880s-1940s A Permanent Public Domain  Muir, The Mountains  
National Forests, Parks, & the BLM:  Pinchot, The Fight  
The Many Dispossessed Peoples

April 22  Feel free to submit a draft of your paper for feedback but please do so no later than April 15. Come to class April 22 even if your paper is not complete.

April 22, 24  Dependency & Denial: Aridity  Steinbeck & Sonora Babb  
The Hydraulic Society; Dust Bowl to CCC  Boulder Dam  
Colorado River Dams & Lake Powell  The Monkey Wrench Gang

May 6  The Great American Wall: Exclusion or the Reconquest?  
May 15  Final Examinations  Wednesday 12 – 3:00 pm