This set of five lessons for a high school social studies class leads students through a study of women’s frontier experiences and the contemporary attitudes that way behind them. Students read and analyze primary and secondary sources, using a guided matrix of questions, participate in both small and large group discussions, and demonstrate their mastery through a before/after acronym exercise.

**Women on the Frontier: enlarging the scope of true American womanhood, 1870-1915**

**Why explore the experience of women on the American frontier?**

On the very first day of the “westward expansion” unit I currently teach, I ask my students to make a list of everything they think of when imaging the west. Regardless of the learning environment, the list is remarkably generic: tumbleweed, cowboys with big belts and even bigger hats, Indians in teepees, lawlessness, railroads, and gold. Women are noticeably absent. Over the years, I have grown increasingly concerned about the inability of the young women I teach to see their own likeness in the quintessentially American narrative of life in the west. My eleventh grade students affirm the observation made by Sandra Myres in her 1982 book, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1905*: “westering was supposed to be a male enterprise”. But Myres continues by saying, “women, too were part of the westward migration, and their experiences, recorded in diaries, letters, and reminiscences are an important part of the trail literature.” (98) The primary objective of this lesson is to expose students to this documentation.

It turns out frontierswomen left behind a plethora, not a dearth, of primary source documents, most appropriate and highly readable for high schoolers. In this lesson plan, created for the NEH teacher institute *American Frontiers in Global Perspective*, the selected readings and images are one representation of the female experience on the frontier. I encourage you to consult the evaluation matrix, as well as the sources listed in the “Learn More” section on page 6, to select the documents most fitting for your academic environment. I hope these primary and secondary sources affirm but also complicate turn-of-the-century notions of womanhood, specifically those of President Theodore Roosevelt. Ultimately, I hope students see the grey area of history and their place within this great American story through this seminar style approach.

**Driving Questions:**

1. How did Anglo and non-Anglo women on the frontier fit into Theodore Roosevelt’s narrative about womanhood?

2. What was the female experience on the American frontier? Was there a universally female, frontier experience?
Learning Objectives:
After completing the lessons in this unit, students will be able to

- Discuss Theodore Roosevelt’s opinions about the primary duty of women and their qualities.
- Describe the characteristics of daily life for women living on the frontier.
- Compare and contrast the experience of frontierswomen from a variety of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and occupations.
- Determine if there was a universality to the experience of women on the frontier.
- Assess whether or not women on the frontier met the Roosevelt expectation of womanhood.

Estimated Time:
Five, 45-minute periods of discussion, plus time to complete the final assessment.

Materials
- flip chart paper
- markers
- “snowballs”
- iPad
- Internet access to sign into Focus

Documents
Day One:

Day Two:
- Becker sisters branding cattle, photograph, courtesy of History Colorado (Scan #10025494)

Day Three:
• Elinore Pruitt Stewart. Letters of a Woman Homesteader. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1961). 3-14; 184-192; 213-217
• Mrs. A.M. Green, “I resolved to try and be cheerful”, in So Much to Be Done: women settlers on the mining and ranching frontier, ed. Ruth Moynihan, Susan Armitage, and Christine Fischer Dichamp, 2nd ed. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 148-170
• Augusta Pierce Tabor, “$80,000 worth of gold dust”, in So Much to Be Done: women settlers on the mining and ranching frontier, ed. Ruth Moynihan, Susan Armitage, and Christine Fischer Dichamp, 2nd ed. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 263-292
• Sister Blandina Segale, “If you are not afraid, neither am I”, in So Much to Be Done: women settlers on the mining and ranching frontier, ed. Ruth Moynihan, Susan Armitage, and Christine Fischer Dichamp, 2nd ed. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 263-292

Day Four:

Day Five:

Instructional Process

Day One: Anticipatory Set

1. Break the class into small groups and ask learners to complete an acronym for Women/Woman that reflects their ideas about life for women on the frontier and/or their reasons for heading west. If necessary, provide one or two suggestions and
differentiate by allowing letters appear anywhere in the new word. They must write their acronym on a piece of flip chart paper before time is called. (10 minutes)

2. Complete a silent walk, taking mental note of who/what is and is not represented in the different acronyms. Share observations. (5 minute silent walk; 5 minutes sharing)

3. “Snowball discussion” about how/why/who shaped our ideas about the experience of women on the frontier. (10-15 minutes)

4. Homework: Read the two articles and take notes using the Cornell Method
   - Theodore Roosevelt, “The Backwoodsmen of the Alleghanies”
   - Charles M. Harger, “The Prairie Women: Yesterday and To-Day”

Day Two: Cult of Womanhood?

1. Break class into two groups: one group makes a list of the characteristics, experiences, and responsibilities Roosevelt assigned women on the frontier while the other group does the same for Harger. They must write their list on a piece of flip chart paper before time is called. (10 minutes)

2. Swap lists and make additions or edits before returning them. (5 minutes)

3. When groups one and two get their lists back, give learners time to review changes and star similarities between Roosevelt and Harger. Follow up with whole class discussion. (5 minutes to review changes; 10 minute class discussion)

4. Reorganize learners into five groups and have students sign into Focus. While the class page loads, distribute photo analysis sheet and assign one photograph to each group. Complete the document analysis as a group and elect one spokesperson to explain how the image:
   - defines the female frontier experience, supported by two or three specifics
   - affirms Roosevelt and/or Harger
   - complicates/challenges Roosevelt and/or Harger

5. Homework: Choose one other photograph from the set and complete the document analysis sheet. Read both articles and take notes for Stansell using Cornell Method.
   - “Pioneer Photographer: the story of the cow chip lady”
   - Christine Stansell, “Women on the Great Plains, 1865-1900”

Day Three: Homesteaders, Miners, and Missionaries

1. Organize class into two groups, giving each a piece of flip chart paper. One group should explore the ways Stansell’s thesis is consistent with Roosevelt’s, while the other group identifies the ways she challenges his prevailing ideas. (10 minutes)

2. Swap lists, asking groups to read through silently. (5 minutes)
3. Lead a class discussion comparing the similarities and differences between Stansell and Roosevelt. Push students to support their statements with specific examples from the documents. (10 minutes)

4. Finish class by examining the photograph set. Students should now apply Stansell to their interpretation as well as Roosevelt and Harger. (20 minutes)

5. Homework: Read TWO documents and complete the “frontierswoman matrix”.
   - Elinore Pruitt Stewart, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader*
   - Mrs. A.M. Green, “I resolved to try and be cheerful”
   - Augusta Pierce Tabor, “$80,000 worth of gold dust”
   - Sister Blandina Segale, “If you are not afraid neither am I”

Day Four: Homesteaders, Miners, and Missionaries continued

1. Before class begins, instructors should take 6 pieces of flip chart paper and create a “set” of questions for each document. Teachers should also write a generic version of each question on the board to help students complete their first activity.
   - What is the most important thing [insert author’s name] said?
   - What does [insert document’s name] tell you about life on the frontier?

2. Instruct learners to partner up with a classmate who read a different account than they. Learners should apply the two questions written on the board to each of the documents. When they have finished their discussion, learners should write their answers on the appropriate piece of flip chart paper posted throughout the room, before time expires. (15 minutes)
   - What was the most important thing the author said?
   - What did the document tell you about life on the frontier?

3. Give learners stickies and have them complete a silent walk. They may use the stickies to write questions and post them to the sheets. (10 minutes)

4. Regroup and spend the rest of class reviewing the “frontierswoman matrix”. Make a conscious effort to answer questions posted by learners during the silent walk. (20 minutes)

5. Homework: Read the McCunn document and add to “frontierswoman matrix”.
   - Ruthanne Lum McCunn, “Reclaiming Polly Bemis: China’s daughter, Idaho’s legendary pioneer”

Day Five: Alternative views: non-Anglos on the frontier

- Handout Sarah Winnemucca’s letter. Learners should read “Letter from Sarah Winnemucca, an educated Pah-Ute Woman” and add her information to the “frontierswoman matrix”. (10 min.)
• Break learners into four groups to answer one following questions. (10 min.)
  • How was the experience of non-Anglo women, specifically Bemis and Winnemucca, similar to the other narratives we’ve discussed in class?
  • How was the experience of non-Anglo women, specifically Bemis and Winnemucca, different to the other narratives we’ve discussed in class?
  • How do Bemis and Winnemucca affirm the Roosevelt narrative?
  • How do the non-Anglo women complicate/challenge the Roosevelt narrative?

• Regroup to share/wrap-up ideas discussed in small groups. Conclude the discussion by determining whether or not there was a universally female experience on the frontier. (10 min.)

• Repeat acronym exercise from day one. Hang new acronyms next to learner’s first attempt; conduct a quick silent walk followed by a discussion centered on the questions below. (6 min. to repeat exercise; 2 min. silent walk; 5 min. discussion)
  • What is different about your new acronyms?
  • How have your ideas about women on the frontier changed?

• Handout final assessment. Learners will write a 5-paragraph essay: In his writings about the west, Theodore Roosevelt presented a very specific picture of womanhood. To what extent did the frontierswomen of the late 19th-early 20th century meet his expectations?

Learn More:

The “frontierswoman matrix” criteria is based on the writings of Sandra Myres and Shelia McManus. For a more complete understanding of their ideas as well as valuable background information, I recommend consulting the following sources:


• Ruth Moynihan et alt. So Much to Be Done: women settlers on the mining and ranching frontier. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. 2nd ed.


For an extensive, and easily accessible, collection of photographs visit the Denver Public Library Digital Collections website: http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/