Strike up Student Interest through Song: Technology and Westward Expansion

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Sheet music, song lyrics, and audio recordings may not be the first primary sources that come to mind when considering ways to teach about changes brought about by technology during westward expansion, but these sources engage students in thought provoking ways.

When listing the extraordinary technological advances of this era, the railroad, the telegraph, and the telephone are first to come to mind because of their far-reaching impact on geography, economy, and communication. But consider also the device pictured in the featured photograph on page 8. After Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1877, he bragged that among its many possible uses would be the “reproduction of music.” The featured image [www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/npco/item/93503097/], from 1916, shows Edison’s dream come to life. On the right is Mountain Chief, of the Piegan Blackfeet. By the time of this photo, his tribe’s population and lands on the plains had been greatly reduced. The woman to his left is Frances Densmore, an ethnologist, who devoted her life to recording and preserving Native American music. In the middle, between them, is a phonograph playing recorded music for the two intent listeners. The photograph is a part of the National Photo Company Collection in the Prints and Photographs Division at the Library of Congress. What did the music mean to Mountain Chief? to Frances Densmore? Show students the image and invite them to make some inferences as a brief prelude to a study of the impact—both positive and negative—that technology had during the era of westward expansion.

Students will be primed to tap into the power of songs as primary sources.

To lay a foundation, lead a class discussion on the role of music in a society (consider collaborating with a music or language arts teacher). Ask students what they know and what they want to know about how music has been produced, recorded, and consumed throughout American history. Ask: What people, events, and movements in America influenced music, and in turn were influenced by music? How do we use song to transmit our national or cultural identities? How has music helped Americans work through or solve problems? Students may be able to list familiar historical or contemporary songs, composers, and musical styles, and then share, make inferences, or raise questions about their relationships to their respective times and to today.

Ask students to consider both the possibilities and the limits of using songs as primary sources. Suggest they come up with some current examples of song, or music, and reflect on how future generations may learn from these. Finally, invite students to make predictions about what a study of music may reveal about the role of technology during westward expansion.

Explain to students that they’ll be looking closely at pieces of music from the period and investigating how they both reflect and are a reflection of their time. Introduce them to the featured primary sources from the Library of Congress Celebrates the Songs of America collection: a song sheet and two pieces of sheet music. To do so, divide students into three groups and distribute one source per group. First, direct students to analyze their source for insight about the impact of westward expansion, keeping close their understandings about the power of music as a primary source, and the complexity of the topic. The Teacher’s Guide, developed by the Library of Congress education team, “Analyzing Sheet Music & Song Sheets” provides prompts to guide their study. [www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Sheet_Music_and_Song_Sheets.pdf].

Instruct students to (1) compose an essential question about technology and westward expansion and (2) propose a possible response, using their source. (Each group will later share their questions and responses with the others.) You may choose to provide students with some additional background information and questions to push their analysis of the sources or provide them the opportunity to conduct their own research. Consider distributing these information cards (on pgs. 9, 11 and 13) a few minutes after students have started to analyze their sources (on pgs. 10, 12 and 14).

Sharing Findings

When the three groups have completed...continued on page 15
Published in 1860, the song sheet “The Age of Progress,” [www.loc.gov/item/amss.sb10001b] offers an argument about “progress” with details about two technological advances—the telegraph and the railroad. At first, the lyrics may appear to praise the inventions and their impact on progress. With a close read, however, the vocabulary and images suggest a more complex point of view. When published, this nation was on the verge of the Civil War—can regional differences or tensions be inferred in the words and message?

For most of the nineteenth century, before the advent of phonograph and radio technologies, Americans learned the latest songs from mass produced printed song sheets such as this one, which were sold for as little as a penny from vendors who might sing the tune to attract customers. Since the item does not include musical notation, what clues confirm this primary source is a song and not a poem? How does the creator use elements of music to emphasize a message? How might the experience of singing, rather than simply reading the words, affect interpretation at the time and today? Look at the images around the song sheet’s border. What is the purpose of the images? How do they add to the meaning of the piece? In what ways do they remind you of the album art of your favorite musicians today? Can you set the words to a melody (perhaps using one you already know, as songs in this time period often did)? The melody should match the tone of the words. Can you defend your musical choices with evidence from the text? How does “singing” the piece add to your understanding?

Now, (1) compose an essential question about technology and westward expansion and (2) propose a possible response, using this source.
The Age of Progress.

The age of giant progress,
Americans all hail!
The land all interwoven
With telegraph and rail;
No sluggish rills shall blind us,
No tardiness delay;
The morning light is breaking (waking),
O'er our desiries.

The age of trained lightning,
"Despatching" human thought;
What wondrous revolution
The scheme of Morse hath wrought!
No time, no space can hinder
The quick, electric rise;
Intelligence is flashing, (dashing),
O'er the magic wire.

The age of grand conceptions,
The " cable of the deep!"
It "snapped," but we will mend it,
We have no time to weep.
The great Pacific Railroad!
'Twill not be long before
The railroad cars are flying (hieing),
From the golden shores.

The age of priceless knowledge,—
The scholar's jubilee!
The land all dotted over
With institutions free.
Our public schools! O, hail them!
They offer treasures cheap:
The boys and girls are scaling (hailing),
Science's rugged steep.

H. De Marsan.
SongsTo, Ballads, &c., 38 & 60, Chatham St., N. Y. (C. 1860),

www.loc.gov/item/amss.sb10001b
(Courtesy of the Library of Congress)
The sheet music "Train-Éclair" ([www.loc.gov/item/ihas.100000516]) is an undated piano piece, but the composer, Charles Kinkel, lived from 1840–1923. The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869 and trains and train travel were revolutionizing every aspect of life in America, driving prosperity and opportunity for many. Popular music thrived as instruments, like upright pianos, could be easily and less expensively shipped. They were marketed and sold for the parlors of nearly all—not just the very wealthy. Publishers mass produced sheet music to keep their owners plucking piano keys and picking guitar strings. Examine the image of the train and try to date the music and place the image, linking evidence in the image to other primary or secondary sources.

Looking closely at this source, you may discover multiple layers of meaning. Note the vocabulary and consider other terminology: the song is a galop, a popular nineteenth-century social dance, closely related to the polka. If you can read music, can you look at the musical notation and hum the tune? If so, perhaps others in your group could dance to it. How does the tune, combined with physical movement and the score’s cover image, convey a message about the impact of westward expansion? What feelings might the song have conveyed about the railroad, about the relationship between technology and progress? Perhaps compose some dialogue or lyrics to go with the song. What characters and points of view would you include? How is the song a reflection or expression of views on westward expansion?

Now, (1) compose an essential question about technology and westward expansion and (2) propose a possible response, using this source.
Train-Éclair, op. 40 [n.d.], www.loc.gov/item/ihas.100000516, Charles Kinkel, composer

(Courtesy of the Library of Congress)
**Tips for Analyzing Sound Recordings:**

To prepare your students to listen to music, note that in many older recordings, the sound quality does not always match today’s standards. Rather than letting that be a hindrance, help your students see that as evidence of the item’s authenticity, and an invitation to investigate how technology has changed. For more ideas when using this format, refer to the “Teacher’s Guide: Analyzing Sound Recordings” [www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Sound_Recordings.pdf]

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**Information for Group 3**

The third source, the sheet music for “The Buffalo Rag” [www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200033228] composed by Tom Turpin, was published in 1904 and bears a prominent image of a buffalo in profile. As the name suggests, the song belongs to the ragtime tradition, which flourished at the turn of the twentieth century. The song was written for string instruments at a time when banjos and guitars could easily be procured through mail order. Ragtime was uniquely American with roots in unwritten music played in the Caribbean and southern states. Connections can also be made to rhythms performed by enslaved blacks in America. Two audio recordings of the song are available for you to listen to alongside your study of the sheet music. One from 1906 [www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/935/] and one from 1909 [www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/1603/]. The song is syncopated, where the emphasis is on a beat that is not usually emphasized—you may recognize this feature most easily in reggae music today. Listen to the audio and consider how the style and tone of the music impact interpretation of the song and its subject.

Turn your attention to the image on the cover, and consider the following about the buffalo: from a population in the tens of millions in the mid-nineteenth century, there were less than 1,000 buffalo in the wild by around the time this song was composed. Many Native American tribes depended on the buffalo for food and clothing, yet the animal was practically made extinct during westward expansion. How does the illustrator portray the buffalo? The composer, Tom Turpin was an African American and lived in St. Louis. The growth of western cities like Chicago and St. Louis were incubators for creativity—cultures mingled, time and money for leisure pursuits increased and American musical styles like ragtime and blues emerged. But Tom Turpin lived in a time when his opportunities as a composer were likely affected by racial prejudice and discrimination. Do you think his personal biography is relevant to an interpretation of this source?

Now, (1) compose an essential question about technology and westward expansion and (2) propose a possible response, using this source.
The Buffalo Rag

The Buffalo Rag (1904), www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200033228 (Tom Turpin, composer)
(Courtesy of the Library of Congress)
their analysis and discussion of their sources, ask a representative from each to post their essential question about technology and westward expansion. Some possible questions might include: What was the effect of technology on different groups of people during the era of westward expansion? How did American culture change as a result of technological advances during westward expansion? How did westward expansion and related technological changes transform the way Americans interacted with their environment? What technological advancements influenced westward expansion and in what ways? Next, jigsaw the students, so students who studied each source are represented in the new groups. Students can share their findings, combining their ideas and evidence, using all three sources to address their questions.

Finally, finish where the study began, with the image of Edison’s phonograph and the listeners. Play an audio recording of Native American music, “Buffalo Dance” (it includes a short explanation about the importance of the buffalo to Native Americans) [www.loc.gov/item/omhbib000356]. Invite students to make observations and connections. Ask students to use the image along with their song source to address their questions about westward expansion. What do the picture and other sources suggest about the impact of technology during westward expansion? What do students now know about the potential for using music as a lens for investigating topics in social studies?

From yours and your students’ vantage point, the featured image may now provoke a more layered interpretation, even one that suggests harmony—Mountain Chief, Thomas Edison, and Frances Densmore, composing, performing, recording, and listening to music to support powerful learning today.