

Lesson Title: The US Cavalry

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Teaching Traditional American History Program
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Lesson Overview: The primary objective is to depict the U.S. Cavalry from the Revolutionary War to 1950. From 1865 to 1890, the Plains Cavalry protected American settlers, railroaders, wagon trains, businesses, and others from Indian attacks. The protection of the Cavalry was accentual to the building of the American Frontier.

Objectives: After completing this lesson the students will be able to:

- Be familiar with the Military vocabulary in the cavalry
- Evaluate how technology evolved in horsemanship and changed the tactics of the military
- Describe the life of the military personnel, and realize the hardships that choosing this type of life brought.
- Evaluate how purchasing of land made the cavalry a major part of the expansion to the west.

Material: The following material will be needed for this lesson:

- Background information (see attached)
- Detailing the events from the standpoint of the soldiers and commanders.
- A dictionary to be used to look up any words the students do not understand.
- Maps of the Louisiana Purchase and the Trails west are plentiful and they will help the students better understand the large area the cavalry had to protect.

Class time: Approximately 51 minutes if the hand outs are used as an outside reading. If the class reads in class allow for 2 periods.

Teaching Input: The following steps are suggested for this lesson.

1. Maps of the American frontier and also the forts to be mentioned in the attached readings.
2. Reading assignments with background of events. (see attached)
3. Many of the battles were with Native Americans, have the class review the reasons for these battles and discuss the rights of the American Government in taking the land of the Indians.
4. Explain the overall objectives and ideas of the cavalry.

Activity: Upon completion of this lesson each student should write a letter back to someone in their family. This letter should describe his duties, his way of life, what the officers are like, the quarters he lives in and his view about the Native American. The letter should be at least 3 paragraphs and be graded on content and structure.

Attached: Objects and Ideas

Transportation:

Horses and Mules to transport the equipment and other resources of the military needs.

Military:

The military assigned ranks to each of their soldiers. This rank helped them follow the chain of command. Every rank was indicated by the number of stripes or bars they had on their uniform. Colors of uniforms also indicated the obligations of the soldiers. Rank was earned through deeds or number of years in the service. A regiment consisted of 12 Troops.

A Troop was approximately 95 men

1 Captain

1 First Lieutenant

1 Second Lieutenant

1 First Sergeant

5 Line Sergeants

4 Corporals

2 Trumpeters

2 Farriers (horse shoers and veterinarians)

78 Privates

Protection:

The cavalry had strict standards to become members. A soldier could not be over six foot tall or weigh more than 160 pounds. They had to be excellent horsemen and skilled with a weapon.

The weapons changed with rank and units.

Themes include:

1. Forging a New Nation

2. Reuniting a Nation torn apart by Civil War

3. Protecting Overland Trails

4. Protecting the Railroads and New Frontier

5. Reconnaissance and Communication Activities

Minorities

1. The 'Buffalo Soldiers' the African American Soldiers

2. The Indian Scouts- Native Americans

Attached (The US Cavalry)

From 1865 to 1890, the Plains Cavalry protected American settlers, railroaders, wagon trains, businesses, gold seekers and others from Indian attacks.

For more than 50 years movie fans worldwide have enjoyed a romance with the American Western film in general and with the US Cavalry in particular. This romance probably started around 1939 with the release of the film Stagecoach, which tells the story a group of stagecoach passengers who are saved from marauding Indians by the last-minute arrival of US Cavalry. With bugle flourishes, banners waving and snapping in the wind and stirring background music, the horse soldiers drive off the Indians and save the day.

Some later films-- such as Fort Apache, She Wore A Yellow Ribbon, and Rio Grande-- had told a little about cavalry life in those days. However, these films dealt primarily with excitement, battle and heroism rather than the day to day life of the average enlisted man, jokingly referred to as the 'dog faced soldier' but officially referred to as a trooper. Who were these men and where did they come from? Before telling you about the men, it is necessary to give you some historic background regarding the US Cavalry itself.

The Plains Cavalry

The US Cavalry existed in various forms from 1775 to 1942. For all practical purposes this service ended during World War II when General Jonathan Wainwright surrendered his saber to the commander of Japanese forces at Corregidor. The sword was returned in 1947, by the way, the US Cavalry did not exist at that time.

The cavalry I am about to describe is the one that existed from 1865 to 1890 and was informally known as the Plains Cavalry. Formed at the end of the civil war in 1865. The Plains Cavalry was meant to operate primarily on the western frontier of the expanding nation. Most Americans living east of the Mississippi had no idea of the danger, deprivation or hardship encountered by those who lived on the other side of the river.

After the Civil War, the Plains Cavalry was overrun with commissioned officers. Many had held high brevet (temporary) ranks during the late war. One such man was George Armstrong Custer, who had graduated from West Point in the class of 1861. At the end of the war he held the brevet rank of Major General. This temporary promotion was an award for performance of meritorious service. After the war he went back to Captain. Then he was appointed Lieutenant Colonel because the military needed more individuals with this rank. Soldiers were entitled to wear the highest rank they had in the Civil War. Many soldiers were in this situation.

Filling the enlisted ranks was another story. Most of the men who had served during the war were finished with fighting and returned to their homes. Non-commissioned officers who had served as officers in the Confederate Army filled the void the military needed. Ex-confederate officers were allowed to serve in the cavalry as commissioned officers.

Where They Came From

I was extremely difficult to recruit men for this difficult, hazardous and sometimes fatal duty. In some ways the Plains Cavalry was America's version of the French Foreign Legion. The cavalry became a place to simply disappear. Many of the men who enlisted had arrest warrants outstanding for them. Some joined the service to stay out of jail. Some judges believed that a hitch in the service would make a man out of a boy. This custom existed into the late 1930's. The ranks of enlisted were filled with criminals, adventurers and many ex-confederate officers now serving as corporals and sergeants.

Immigrants, especially those from Ireland and Germany, filled the ranks. Others came from England, France and Italy. While most of the American recruits did not read or write, the immigrants who did not speak English compounded this problem. A trooper started off at the pay of \$13 per month. By the time he finished his first hitch and re-enlisted this was raised to \$15.

Various forts, both large and small were set up from the cold northern Dakota, Nebraska and Montana Territories to the hot desert areas of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. As the western borders of the US expanded, so did the areas covered by the cavalry. In some ways garrison life was a picnic compared to patrol or being on a campaign. It was mundane, boring and unrewarding let alone dangerous. The days started at 5:30 with Reveille and ended at 10:00 with taps. The officers job was to keep the enlisted men busy and this brought many discipline problems.

Care of the Horses

A lot of time in garrison was spent grooming horses and training recruits to fight on horseback. Officers were well aware that the ultimate success of mounted troops demanded that horses be in top condition. Everyone knew that if the horse was not ready then you walked.

Question for review:

The teacher should allow students to ask question in areas of confusion. Any questions the teacher asks should be used to assess students understanding prior to the assessment.

Scoring: The students will be assessed by participation with the group. They should also write a letter to one of their family members as if they were in the cavalry in 1876 to describe what their life is like. The letter needs to be at least 3 paragraphs. Also at the end mention how movies effected the image of the cavalry.

The answers will be graded on logic and accuracy. The teacher point system should be based on previous assignments of this nature.;

References:

U.S. Cavalry Museum at Fort Riley Kansas

<http://www.history-magazine.com/cavalry.html>

http://www.Nebraskahistory.org/fort_rob/history.htm