

RIVERS TO THE WEST

By: Nancy McDade

QUESTION – Why did western explorers choose certain U.S. rivers as their chief mode of transportation to the west?

OVERVIEW – Throughout history, rivers have played an important role in the settling of our country. During westward exploration, rivers were vitally important for water, irrigation and transportation. This activity asks students to find the rivers that flow to the west and understand how and why these rivers were used as a main source of transportation. Students will explore a variety of U.S. maps to study the river's flow. Students will name rivers, trace their routes and follow them along the trails.

CONNECTION WITH THE CURRICULUM - This lesson has connections to the following standards and benchmarks:

O.D.E. – Grade 8 benchmark – read, interpret and prepare maps, charts and other visual representations to understand geographic information.

LINKS TO CONTENT AREAS - This lesson has connections to language arts and art.

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC STANDARDS - #1 - How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools and technologies to acquire, process, and report information about people, places, and environments in a spatial context.

#12 – The process, patterns and functions of human settlement.

GRADE LEVELS – 6-8

OBJECTIVES – The students will:

- Identify and map major west flowing rivers.
- Trace river routes.
- Map these routes.
- Map trails to the west.
- Use pioneer journals to demonstrate how rivers played a part in their journeys.

PROCEDURES – Step #1 – Ask students the following questions:

- How would rivers be helpful in exploration?
- Could direction of flow and existence of the river play a role?
- Why do you think Lewis and Clark chose to follow rivers in their expedition?
- Name some rivers you think they followed.
- Do other western trails follow rivers also? Name some.
- What kinds of boats do you think Lewis and Clark might have used on their journey?

Step #2 – Divide the class into groups. Ask each group to:

- List the rivers starting from St. Louis, Mo. following the route of Lewis and Clark.

Step #3 – Ask the students to do the following:

- Name the western trails.
- Identify the rivers that each trail followed.

Step #4 – Using laminated U.S. desk maps, the students will:

- Trace and label each of these rivers and label each of the trails as they follow these various rivers.
- Ask the students in which direction these rivers flow.
- Does the direction of river flow help in westward exploration?
- Is it the existence of rivers rather than direction of the flow that was key?

Step #5 – Ask the student to:

- Transfer information from the laminated desk map to their individual U.S. map.
- They should use colored markers to denote different trails.

Step #6 – Ask the students:

- To look at these completed maps to see if there is a correlation between these rivers and the trails.
- What they think and why?

Step #7 – Using a narrative piece of writing, the student will:

- Include in his/her story a river, terrain, and events they might encounter along their journey.
- Choose to illustrate and color a picture to accompany this work.

VOCABULARY - Lewis and Clark, expedition, flow, Mormon Trail, Oregon Trail, California Trail, Santa Fe Trail, Old Spanish Trail.

ASSESSMENT - Accurate river and trail placement on the individual U.S. maps would be a good measure of understanding.

The state writing scoring guide for the 8th grade would be used as the final assessment in the writing piece.

EXTENSIONS – This exercise can be extended by assigning groups one western trail. Each group would focus on how their trail contributed to western expansion. They might also mention the terrain, distance and difficulty of each one in their presentations. Group presentations would allow everyone an opportunity to learn more about each of these trails and their historical significance.