Gateway to the Past: Primary Sources from the Frontier

A History Lesson by Log Cabin Village

Objective: Students will used primary sources to analyze historical information. They will be able to use the primary source to answer questions about life for pioneers traveling West in the mid-1800s.

Purpose: To have students gain an understanding and appreciation for 1800’s Texas Pioneer travel through the first person accounts of 19th pioneers.

Materials: Primary Source documents, Primary Source detective worksheet
  * F. G. Parks letter to his brother, Milton Parks
  * Selections from K.M. Van Zandt’s memoir, Force Without Fanfare
  * Selections from Amelia Stewart Knight’s diary to Oregon 1853; from Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey by Lillian Schlissel, pg 199-216
  * Alvin Aaron Coffey’s reminiscence of traveling to the California Gold Rush in 1849

Lesson:

Introduction- Give an overview of Westward Expansion in the United States in the 19th century. Explain to students that some of our ancestors who traveled west left written accounts of their experiences. Sometimes they wrote about their experiences in diaries or journals, other times they wrote down their experiences later for their descendants to read.

Explain to students that these types of written records are called “primary sources.” Explain that historians use primary sources to understand what life was like in the past. Give students time to come up with ways that we might use primary sources today. (Examples include writing books like the textbooks you use in class, make museum exhibits, and help with movies that take place in the past.)

Let students know that today they will have a chance to be historians by reading over primary sources from the frontier looking for clues about what it was like to be a pioneer moving west. They will investigate their sources, taking notes like a detective historian to discover more about the history of the frontier.

Investigate the Source-Do this Together
Demonstrate the process of analyzing a primary source by reading F. G. Parks’ letter to his brother, Milton Parks, about the benefits of moving to Texas. Use the primary source worksheet to guide the discussion of the letter.

Investigate the Source-Do this on your Own
Give each student the primary source documents along with a primary source detective worksheet. Have students read over the primary source documents to answer the questions about their source.

Compare and Contrast the Journey: Draw a chart like the one below on the board. Have the students use their primary sources to compare and contrast the experiences of the primary source authors. Possible discussion questions include the following:
• What were some of the dangers faced by our ancestors on the frontier?
• Where was the writer of your source traveling? Were they traveling alone or with other people?
• What are some of the reasons the writer of your source was moving west?
• What were some of the limitations of your source? Did this person represent everyone on the trails? What do we not learn about using this source?

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<th>K. M. Van Zandt</th>
<th>Amelia Stewart Knight</th>
<th>Alvin Aaron Coffey</th>
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**Bonus Activity: Ten Bears’ speech at the Medicine Lodge Treaty Conference, 1867**
To help students understand the complexities of westward expansion, have them analyze the speech by Ten Bears, the principal chief of the Yamparika Comanche during the Medicine Lodge Treaty Conference in 1867. Use discussion time to talk about how westward expansion impacted American Indian tribes. Discussion questions could include:
• What does Ten Bears say the Comanche followed for their families?
• What has happened to the Comanche Ten Bears leads?
• What do those listening to the speech want Ten Bears and the Comanche to do? Where do they want the Comanche to live?
• Do you think Ten Bears would have wanted people like K. M. Van Zandt, Amelia Steward Knight, and Alvin Aaron Coffey to move west? Why or why not?
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<th><strong>WHAT STANDS OUT TO YOU ABOUT THIS SOURCE?</strong></th>
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<th><strong>WHAT DOES THIS SOURCE MAKE YOU WONDER OR THINK ABOUT?</strong></th>
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<th><strong>SHOULD WE TRUST THIS SOURCE COMPLETELY? WHY OR WHY NOT?</strong></th>
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Jacksonville Texas May 12th, 1850
Dear Brother time & opportunity afford me the good pleasure of addressing you with afew (sic) lines which will inform you that I and my little family are still enjoying good health though I myself have had afew chills this spring but in fine health at this time Milt I have not written to you since I left New Orleans but you must excuse me as I looked for you out here for a long time I did not know where you were nor what you were doing until I received a letter from Brother william some month or six weeks ago I learned from that- that you were still staying with Mother- I have nothing good to write to you nor nothing very bad more than we have had for the last six weeks almost an incessant rain together with a very (sic) cold and backward spring which makes the farmers quake & tremble our cotton is now running on fine pasture and if the rains do not cease we will see h.Il (sic) – before we get it up of (sic) the range- our corn crop is fine though it was bit down by the frost once and covered four inches deep once in snow after being ploughed the first time a good many people about have taken blues & some not only the blues but the real mad horrors

Page 2
I had the pleasure of J.T. Hesters company last night you may guess that we spent the night very merrily in talking over old matters & ourtravels (sic) etc. etc. – he says he is pleased with the country & expects to move to it & also that you were coming this fall certain well now milt I shall look for you & impatiently await your arrival – now Milt for my sake & for your sake & for god sake & for every other sake wake up & shake the ashes of (sic) your feet & out of your hair and come to Texas where you can make a fortune with out work- or with it, as you please now is the time to come to Texas the country is fast settling up land is rising & trade runs high & every body animated with flattering prospects of future prosperity cotton is up the country is settling up land is rising the navigation of the sabine and trinity Rivers all tend to animate the Texian settlers- I would not move back to Tennessee under any reasonable consideration whatever because I think Texas is destined to be one of the best farming countrys (sic) now west of blue Ridge- I am very sorry that brother Allen is not coming to this country because it would just suit him and I know that he would be well pleased- but A.L. I have not much faith in his coming shortly from the way he writes tell him if he goes to open a farm in owl hollow to go first & buy a constitution from a Jackass

Page 3
Tell Brother Jess I was much disappointed to hear that he was not coming to Texas this fall I recvd (sic) his letter a few days ago which informed that M.L Parks was
still knocking around with those old claims trying to collect well now I would just say that I am in hopes you will not let him chisle out of one single cent there is honestly not more than $25.00 cts. going to him except Rights note and that you have nothing to do with, and therefore if he does not settle honestly & justly let him alone he can not take the land off and it will be Redeemable in two years if sold any how or if he sells & bids it off himself do you turn round and have it sold as his property for the claims you have against him – nothing more at present – May success attend you & love purity & fidelity ever be your motto

Yours respectfully F.G. Parks

P.S. for A.P.
Dear cousin through the medium of this epistle I take pleasure in Remitting to you that love & respect that in days gone by existed between you & I though it is not now at this time so fully developed though… (rest of page is missing)

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Of that privelidge (sic) at times makes me feel quite sad and solitary but so it is & it cant tisser (sic) - about the first of July Joel Dodson & my self expect to start to western Texas to look at the country- I hope when this comes to hand you will sit down & give us a minute (sic) detail of every thing that is werth (sic) telling all about the galls… (rest of page is missing)
After looking around for some time for a good place to locate, my father made arrangements for us to move to Elysian Fields in what was then known as the Red River district and later became part of Harrison County. Pa made a trade with a man who owned a yoke of oxen and a good wagon to transport our family and household goods to our new home. Having no money, he gave the man some of our dining-room chairs. The driver was a very profane man and cursed and swore at his oxen until Pa grew disgusted and took his place. Ma said I noticed the difference right away and asked how Pa could make the oxen go when he didn’t talk like the other man did.

On our journey we had to cross a river at floodtime. Since the boat was not available, and it was not known whether the oxen could swim the stream while hitched to the wagon, my father decided to unload and made a raft out of some logs and parts of the wagon. Several trips were required to take the family, the household goods, and some chickens we had acquired at Camp Sabine across the river. Much to the dismay and disappointment of my parents, some chickens escaped. When morning came there were the chickens roosting on the coop from which they had escaped.

The house at Elysian Fields to which we moved was an unfinished, one-room log cabin covered with hand-hewn boards fastened on with weight poles. The door was hung with wooden hinges and had a latch inside. Glass windows were scarce then, but the builder of this house had by some means obtained a small window sash with panes of glass about six-by-eight inches in size, which he had placed by the side of the front door. The beds were built in the corners of the room by placing a post about six and one-half feet from one wall and five feet from the other and adding a side rail and footboard. The walls of the house made the headboard and one side of the bed. Rope and strips of rawhide laced across the frame of the bed served as springs.

This source is a **diary**. A person writes in a diary to keep a record of what happened during their day. Amelia Stewart Knight wrote these diary entries when she and her family traveled West to the Oregon Territory in 1853. She probably wrote many of these entries when their wagon train stopped for the day.

**Saturday, April 9, 1853** Started from home about 11 o’clock and traveled 8 miles and camped in an old house; night cold and frosty.

**Sunday, April 10th** Cool and pleasant, road hard and dusty. Evening—Came 8 ½ miles and camped close to the Fulkersons house.

**Monday, April 11th** Morn. Cloudy and sign of rain, about 10 o’clock it began to rain. At noon it rains so hard we turn out and camp in a school house after traveling 11 ½ miles; rains all the afternoon and all night, very unpleasant. Jefferson and Lucy have the mumps. Poor cattle bawled all night. ...

**Saturday, April 16th** Camped last night three miles east of Chariton Point in the prairie. Made our beds down in the tent in the wet and mud. Bed clothes nearly spoiled. Cold and cloudy this morning and every body out of humour. Seneca is half sick. Plutarch has broke his saddle girth. Husband is scolding and hurrying all hands (and the cook) and Almira says she wished she was home, and I say ditto. “Home Sweet Home.”

... **Wednesday, April 20th** Cloudy. We are creeping along slowly, one wagon after another, the same old gait; and the same thing over, out of one mud hole into another all day. Crossed a branch where the water run into the wagons. No corn to be had within 75 miles. Came 18 miles and camp. ...

**Monday, May 2** Pleasant evening; have been cooking, and packing things away for an early start in the morning. Threw away several jars, some wooden buckets, and all our pickles. Too unhandy to carry. Indians came to our camp every day, begging money and something to eat. Children are getting used to them.

... **Sunday, May 8th** Still in camp. Waiting to cross [the Elkhorn River]. There are three hundred or more wagons in sight and as far as the eye can reach, the bottom is covered, on each side of the river, with cattle and horses. There is no ferry here and the men will have to make one out of the tightest wagon-bed (every company should have a waterproof wagon-bed for this purpose.) Everything must now be hauled out of the wagons head over heels (and he who knows where to find anything will be a smart fellow.) then the wagons must be all taken to pieces, and then by means of a strong rope stretched across the river with a tight wagon-bed attached to the middle of it, the rope must be long enough to pull from one side to the other, with men on each side of the river to pull it. In this way we have to cross everything a little at a time. Women and children last, and then swim the cattle and horses. There were three horses and some cattle drowned while crossing this place yesterday. It is quite lively and merry here this morning and the weather fine. We are camped on a large bottom, with the broad, deep river on one side of us and a high bluff on the other. ...
Wednesday, June 1st It has been raining all day long and we have been traveling in it so as to be able to keep ahead of the large drovers. The men and boys are all soaking wet and look sad and comfortless. (The little ones and myself are shut up in the wagons from the rain. Still it will find its way in and many things are wet; and take us all together we are a poor looking set, and all this for Oregon. I am thinking while I write, “Oh Oregon, you must be a wonderful country.” Came 18 miles today.)

...  

Tuesday, June 7th Rained some last night; quite warm today. Just passed Fort Laramie, situated on the opposite side of the river. This afternoon we passed a large village of Sioux Indians. Numbers of them came around our wagons. Some of the women had moccasins and beads, which they wanted to trade for bread. I gave the women and children all the cakes I had baked. Husband traded a big Indian a lot of hard crackers for a pair of moccasins and after we had started he came up with us again making a great fuss, and wanted them back (they had eaten part of the crackers). He did not seem to be satisfied, or else he wished to cause us some trouble, or perhaps get into a fight. However, we handed the moccasins to him in a hurry and drove away from them as soon as possible.

...  

Monday, August 8th We have to make a drive of 22 miles, without water today. Have our cans filled to drink. Here we left unknowingly our Lucy behind, not a soul had missed her until we had gone some miles, when we stopped a while to rest the cattle; just then another train drove up behind us with Lucy. She was terribly frightened and so were some more of us when we found out what a narrow escape she had run. She said she was sitting under the bank of the river, when we started, busy watching some wagons cross, and did not know we were ready. And I supposed she was in Mr. Carl’s wagon, as he always took care of Francis and Lucy, and I took care of Myra and Chat, when starting he asked for Lucy, and Francis said “She is in Mother’s wagon,” as she often went there to have her hair combed. It was a lesson to all of us. Evening—It is near dark and we are still toiling on till we find a camping place. The little ones have curled down and gone to sleep without supper. Wind high, and it is cold enough for a great coat and mittens.

...  

Friday, Sept. 17th In camp yet. Still raining. Noon—It has cleared off and we are all ready for a start again, for some place we don’t know where...  

A few days later my eighth child was born. After this we picked up and ferried across the Columbia River, utilizing skiff, canoes and flatboat to get across, taking three days to complete. Here husband traded two yoke of oxen for a half section of land with one-half acre planted to potatoes and a small log cabin and lean-to with no windows. This is the journey’s end.
This source is a reminiscence. That means someone shared this personal story about their past after it happened. The writer of this reminiscence is Alvin Aaron Coffey. Coffey, an enslaved man, traveled to California with slave owner, Dr. Bassett. While in California, Coffey saved $616 to buy his freedom. Dr. Bassett took the money and re-sold Coffey into slavery in New Orleans. Coffey returned to California in 1854. He saved enough money to buy his freedom and the freedom of his family in 1857.

I started from St. Louis Missouri, on the 2nd day of April in 1849. There was quite a crowd of the neighbors who drove through the mud and rain to St. Joe to see us off. About the 1st of May we organized the train. There were twenty wagons in the number and from three to five men to each wagon.

We crossed the Missouri River at Savanna Landing on about the 6th, no, the 1st week in May. There were several trains ahead of us. I was one of the three who were on the first night guard. At 12 o’clock three more men took our place and we went to camp. At 6 in the morning there were three more went to relieve those on guard. One of that three that came in had Cholera so bad that he was in lots of misery. Doctor Basset, the Captain of the train, did all he could for him, but he died at 10 o’clock, and we buried him. We got ready and started at 11 the same day and the moon was new just then.

We got news every day that people were dying by the hundreds in St. Joe and St. Louis. It was alarming. When we hitched up and got ready to move the Dr. said, “Boys we’ll have to drive day and night.”

There were only three saddle-horses in the train Dr. Basset, Mr. Hale Sr, and John Triplet owning them. They rode with the Dr. to hunt camping places. We drove night and day and got out of reach of the Cholera. There was none ahead of us that we knew of.

Dave and Ben Headspeth’s train was ahead of us. They had 14 or 15 wagons in the train and three to five men to a wagon. Captain Camel had another such train. When we caught up with them, we never heard of one case of Cholera on their trains.

We got across the plains to Fort Larimie [sic] the 16th of June and the ignorant ox driver broke down a good many oxen on the trains. There were a good many ahead of us, who had doubled up their trains and left tons upon tons of bacon and other provisions.

When we got pretty well down the Humboldt to a place called Lawsons Meadow, which was quite away from the sink of the Humbold, the emigrants agreed to
divide there. There was good grass at Lawsons Meadow. We camped there a day and two nights, resting the oxen, for we had a desert to cross to get to where there was grass and water.

Starting to cross the desert to Black Rock at 4 o’clock in the evening we traveled all night. The next day it was hot and sandy. When within 20 miles of Black Rock, we saw it very plainly.

A great number of cattle perished before we got to Black Rock. When about 15 miles from Black Rock, a team of four oxen was left on the road just where the oxen had died. Everything was left in the wagon.

I drove our oxen all the time and I knew how much an ox could stand. Between 9 and 10 o’clock a breeze came up and the oxen threw up their heads and seemed to have new life. At noon we drove into Black Rock...
This source is a speech. It was given by Parry-wah-say-men, or Ten Bears, principal chief of the Yamparika Comanche at the Medicine Lodge Treaty Conference on October 20, 1867. During the Medicine Lodge Treat Conference representatives from from the Kiowa, Comanche, Arapaho and Kiowa-Apache, and Southern Cheyenne nations met with US government representatives to make peace between the American Indian nations and the United States.

The representatives signed two treaties during this conference. The treaties guaranteed hunting rights and set aside land for the five American Indian nations called reservations. Many of our ancestors on both sides off the treaties found them controversial before they were broken in 1868.

My heart is filled with joy when I see you here, as the brooks fill with water when the snow melts in the spring; and I feel glad, as the ponies do when the fresh grass starts in the beginning of the year. I heard of your coming when I was many sleeps away, and I made but a few camps when I met you. I know that you had come to do good to me and my people. I looked for benefits which would last forever, and so my face shines with joy as I look upon you. My people have never first drawn a bow or fired a gun against the whites. There has been trouble on the line between us and my young men have danced the war dance. But it was not begun by us. It was you to send the first soldier and we who sent out the second. Two years ago I came upon this road, following the buffalo, that my wives and children might have their cheeks plump and their bodies warm. But the soldiers fired on us, and since that time there has been a noise like that of a thunderstorm and we have not known which way to go. So it was upon the Canadian. Nor have we been made to cry alone. The blue dressed soldiers and the Utes came from out of the night when it was dark and still, and for camp fires they lit our lodges. Instead of hunting game they killed my braves, and the warriors of the tribe cut short their hair for the dead. So it was in Texas. They made sorrow come in our camps, and we went out like the buffalo bulls when the cows are attacked. When we found them, we killed them, and their scalps hang in our lodges. The Comanches are not weak and blind, like the pups of a dog when seven sleeps old. They are strong and farsighted, like grown horses. We took their road and we went on it. The white women cried and our women laughed.

But there are things which you have said which I do not like. They were not sweet like sugar but bitter like gourds. You said that you wanted to put us upon reservation, to build our houses and make us medicine lodges. I do not want them. I was born on the prairie where the wind blew free and there was nothing to break the light of the sun. I was born where there were no inclosures [sic] and where everything drew a free breath. I want to die there and not within walls. I know every stream and every wood between the Rio Grande and the Arkansas. I

National Archives, Records of the Indian Division, Office of the Secretary of the Interior, Record Group 48.
have hunted and lived over the country. I lived like my fathers before me, and like them, I lived happily.

When I was at Washington the Great Father told me that all the Comanche land was ours and that no one should hinder us in living upon it. So, why do you ask us to leave the rivers and the sun and the wind and live in houses? Do not ask us to give up the buffalo for the sheep. The young men have heard talk of this, and it has made them sad and angry. Do not speak of it more. I love to carry out the talk I got from the Great Father. When I get goods and presents I and my people feel glad, since it shows that he holds us in his eye.

If the Texans had kept out of my country there might have been peace. But that which you now say we must live on is too small. The Texans have taken away the places where the grass grew the thickest and the timber was the best. Had we kept that we might have done the things you ask. But it is too late. The white man has the country which we loved, and we only wish to wander on the prairie until we die. Any good thing you say to me shall not be forgotten. I shall carry it as near to my heart as my children, and it shall be as often on my tongue as the name of the Great Father. I want no blood upon my land to stain the grass. I want it all clear and pure and I wish it so that all who go through among my people may find peace when they come in and leave it when they go out.