

HIST 162 The American West

Professor Robert St. George

TR 1:30-3:00

This course explores the social and cultural history and current views of the many Wests we think we know. In 1872, President Grant established Yellowstone National Park, only the first of many national and state nature reserves in the west. Even while the Parks were widely celebrated, in 1876 Grant allowed miners and land speculators into the Black Hills, or Paha Sapa, land long considered sacred by the Lakota peoples and 'protected' for them as recently as 1868 Treaty of Laramie. From this pairing of events in the 1870s spring the many overlapping themes this course will address: Native peoples, their beliefs and material cultures, pressured by the arrival of scattered industries (gold rushes, silver and copper mining); irregular sources of industrial and banking capital from England, New York, Chicago, and elsewhere; the arrival of the US Army in 1851, then a break removing troops for the Civil War, then their renewed and constant appearance from 1866 on and the making and breaking of other treaties; the irregular scattering of land speculators and dirt farmers, even while the US government insisted the Sioux and Cheyennes, among other peoples, not disturb the passage of planters on the Oregon Trail, even as their hunting grounds were enclosed by the Union Pacific and North Pacific railroads by 1870. Naturalists, hikers, and artists arrived by rail to the western parks: Yellowstone, Yosemite (1890), and the Grand Canyon (1919).

By 1900, American tourists went west to see Wild West Indian Shows and wonder at the new parks. They ate at restaurants serving western food, wore western ware and cowboy boots, and listened to western music that finally reached its high point when folklorist Hal Cannon founded the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, in 1984, still active today with offshoots in Durango, Montana, and Texas.



George Armstrong Custer (left center in light clothing) leads a military expedition into the Black Hills of Dakota Territory in 1874. Custer's incursion violated the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 and laid the groundwork for war between the Lakota and the United States when he announced that gold had been discovered in this most sacred of the Lakota's lands.

Photograph by William H. Illingworth.