Myths of Time: The Wild West
Lesson Five

Home on the Range!

Many of our modern conceptions about the stereotypical historic western town layout are based upon movie sets. Movie sets, however, are designed around considerations such as providing adequate camera and crew accessibility to areas or visual lanes for shot setups, which may have little bearing on the realities of how 19th century western towns were actually built.

Every western ever made features a saloon complete with swinging doors in the center of town, and nearby is inevitably a two-story hotel (complete with second story railing through which a gunman must inevitably break as he is shot and falls). A bank, a dry goods store, jail, post office, feed store, land office, and rail depot are other typical fixtures found on screen. And we almost never see houses 'downtown'! Hmm, would everyone (including those store owners) really live so far away? Western studio towns usually depict a single strip, with facades of the aforementioned buildings having zero-foot side setbacks on either side of a dirt road. And the central dirt road right-of-way often appears in westerns to be quite wide by modern day standards - perhaps 120 feet from façade to façade. Wooden structures dominate, however, the town bank and the jail are usually depicted as brick buildings.

For reasons of economy, movie makers make their towns sparser and smaller than actual western communities, but it's not too too far from the truth. Towns in the West in the 19th century

These Wild West buildings templates (available in PDF) can be printed with or without the signage provided. Students glue the printed-out plans to cardboard (e.g. a used cereal box), or you could glue them to corflute or foam (you decide). Use a sharp Xacto craft knife or scissors to cut the plans out ready for sticking together with adhesive. The whole process is surprisingly simple and these Wild West scale models are super strong and realistic when built. Option: Use the templates from the Western Boomtown and/or Lucky Luke's Town too! Choose based on your students' abilities.

were smoky, smelly, cramped, dirty in the summer and muddy in the spring and winter. In mining camps the buildings were typically flimsy - miners did not want to spend much time building when they could be digging for gold.

The towns were built much the same way as movie sets - very fast, using wood, without much attention to detail. The substantial buildings came along after the town had burned a few times and there seemed to be a feeling that the town had permanence. After the town burned down once or twice, somebody often set up a brickwork, and they started building the more substantial buildings like the town hall, banks and post offices out of brick.

Actual towns had buildings pretty close together. Town lots were often 25 feet wide (measure it out). A lot of times the main streets were incredibly wide so that wagons could circle around without leaving town. For example, in Taylor TX the older streets near downtown were built at 100' wide to accommodate the distance it took a horse to turn around, probably while pulling a wagon or carriage.

After the business district was laid out the residential streets were laid out - further from downtown, but still within walking distance, because nobody wanted to live too close to all the noise and commotion. The streets there were much narrower because nobody wanted to angle park a team and wagon in front of their house. The lots were still 25 feet wide because that was about the minimum size you could build a house on.

Railroad towns were often laid out in a T-shape, with the top portion being the street paralleling the railroad and the straight part being the town's main street. As far as the location of businesses, Old West towns often had a primitive form of zoning. Cow towns often had a "deadline." - A demarcation separating the rowdy element from the good people of the town. A cowboy misbehaving on the wrong
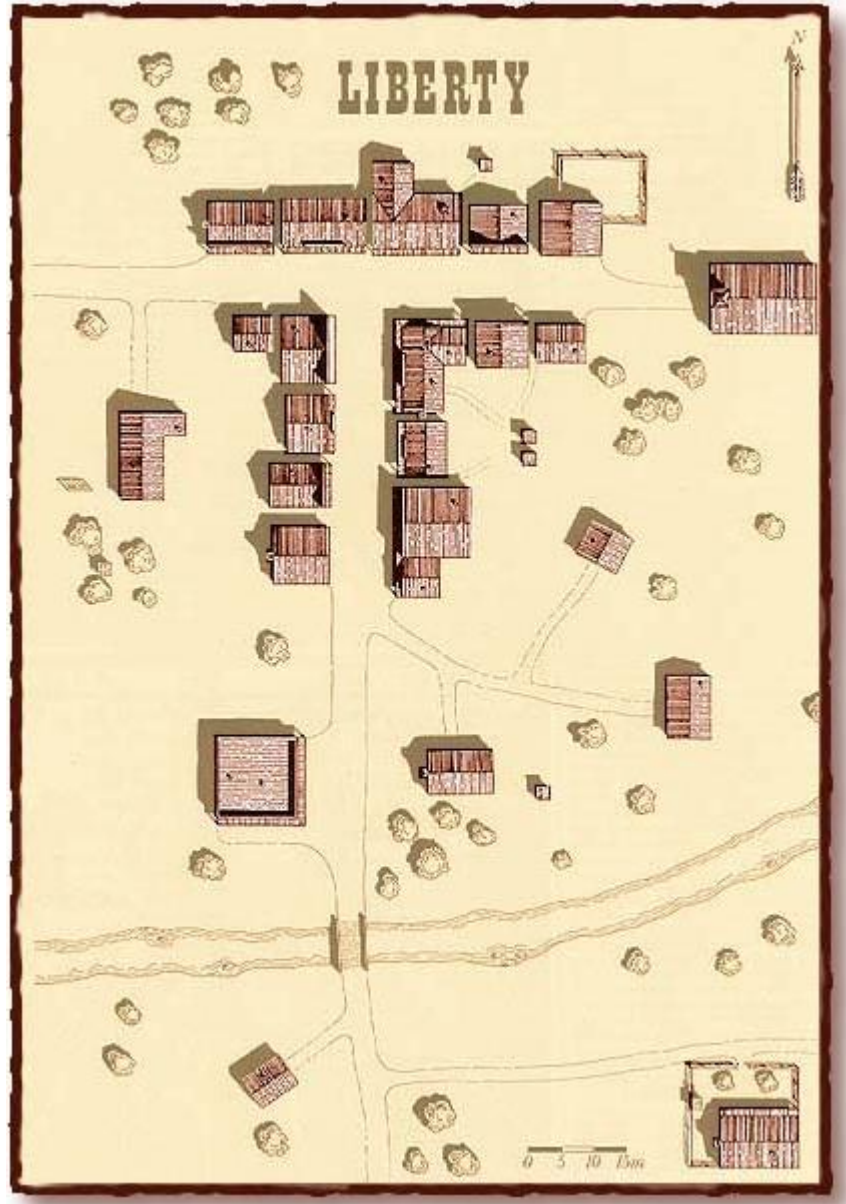
side of the deadline was likely to get hit on the head with the barrel of a lawman's gun and dragged to jail. Or if he gave the lawman any guff, he might end up shot dead. There was often a sign or signs posted warning the cowboys where they should not go.

Mormon communities had their own distinct development pattern, as did Southwestern Spanish towns, which were designed by edicts created by the King of Spain.

Most Oklahoma towns that were settled in the land runs were pre-surveyed into blocks based on sections of Township and Range. Many went from 0 to upwards of 5,000 population literally in one day, and then remained tent cities until the local branch of the General Land Office could file all claims and the locals could explore their local resources for solid building materials. Still, a lot of people lived in tents for years afterward, even in Oklahoma City, which was settled by over 10,000 people in the first 48 hours of The Land Run (capital letters = April 22, 1889 land run for unassigned central Indian Territory lands).

Now that we know a bit more about Old Western towns it's time to build our destination!

TOWNSCAPING!

Materials:

- Models Printouts (Boomtown, Wild West, Lucky Luke)
- Tape
- Glue
- Paper (for mapmaking and writing)
- Pencils
- Art supplies (for mapmaking), ex. watercolors, colored pencils, crayons
- Rulers
- Sample maps images
- Books for reference

As a group determine the name of your town. Naming a fake town is one of the coolest parts of coming up with your own setting. Who wouldn't want to live in a place like Arkham, Idaho; Tombstone, Arizona; Cemetery Junction, California; or Bloodlust, Indiana? A fun name will keep you excited, it will (hopefully) intrigue your readers, and it can really say something about the strange goings on in this sleepy small place. Your town's name says a lot about it. Now you can go with a realistic route and take a name that would fit the region of the country you're talking about , ex. Spanish sounding words if you're in the Southwest, in certain parts of the country names are inspired by old Native American words; other places are named for foreign cities (Paris, Texas),

geographic elements (Lakewood, Chloride Flats), presidents (Garfield, Washington), or even the name of the lucky guy or gal who got their name on that first deed. And sometimes, these names get complicated.). Or you can get mysterious and hint at a backstory, like Belle Falls. Of course we're going to expect a bunch of crazy stories behind it if you name your city Vengeance! You want a name that's going to have atmosphere, but you don't want to hit your audience over the head with it. Lots of towns are named for famous residents, Presidents, foreign cities or regions.

The history: So now your town has a name. Fantastic! But who named it? Why? Why'd they choose that spot to settle in, and when? Most settlements start near a source of water because of how important it was way back when.

Who (in your group) was the founder? (ex. the teacher as…Lady Grey the Bounty Hunter?) Are there any legendary tales of your town (what is it famous for?) or legendary characters? Who in your group is the Sheriff? Are there any outlaws nearby? *These are minor details that you can always play with down the road. Little details that make the town come alive. Is that mean old guy hanging around the General Store really the last descendant of the guy the town was named after?*

Work together to create the illusion that we're standing on the main drag of a hardscrabble town in the barely settled American West, sometime between the 1860s and the 1890s.

Every one of the buildings in the town, flanking a muddy central boulevard, was raised and built by members of your town/class. Using the templates, have each student build at least one building, name it (ex. Bob's General Store) and describe their character(s) who owns it.

The color: This is the fun stuff. What makes this town unique? If there are ghost stories or town legends that are passed from parents to children, how did they start? How does the story get embellished over the years?

What about people? Who are the notables around town? Is there a town crazy person? Every town has its colorful characters – whether they're politicians, owners of small businesses, or even relatives of yours.
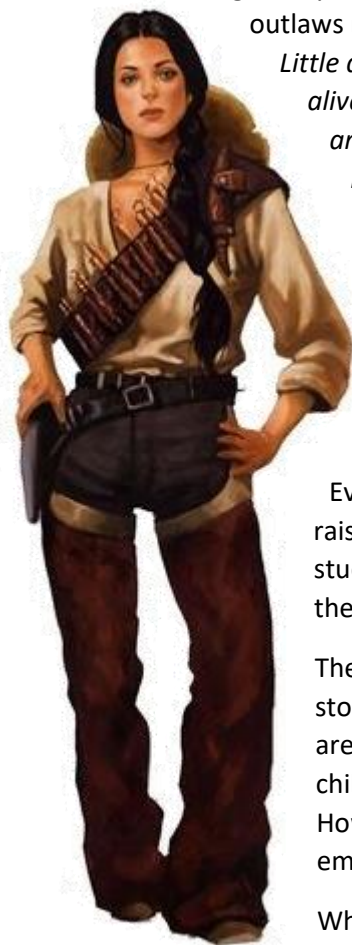
Write a dull character description on the board, something like: "The girl is pretty. She looks sad. She's wearing a green dress." Also, write the same four headings as we had in the prior session: Adjectives, Descriptive Phrases, Similes, and Metaphors.

Read the dull description to the class and ask students how they think this description could be improved. Have them take a few minutes to rewrite the description using adjectives, descriptive phrases, similes, and metaphors. Remind them to refer to the vocabulary list for interesting adjectives. Then have several volunteers read their improved versions aloud as you jot down their creative additions on the board under the four headings.

Option: Pass out a variety of old magazines and newspapers and tell students to choose and cut out any picture of a person (set a time limit of 10-15 minutes). If you are using online resources, have students access the photo sites you have bookmarked and demonstrate how to navigate around the site. Have them select one of the photo portraits. **Ex:** From the list of subjects on the New York Public Library Digital Gallery, have students choose images related to content area study (such as *inventors*, *cowboy*, or *immigrants*)

Have students write their individual stories about their character (perhaps it's their character from the Oregon Trail?) and business. Tell students to write for a specified time limit (ex. 10 minutes) a description of the person in the picture they selected. They can imagine and describe any aspects of the person's life, character, and background. *Option: Use their descriptions in a class game in which students will try to match each picture with its description. Thus, they should make their descriptions neither too obvious nor too difficult.*

Then create a group story about an exciting event that happened in your town with all of the characters you've created involved.
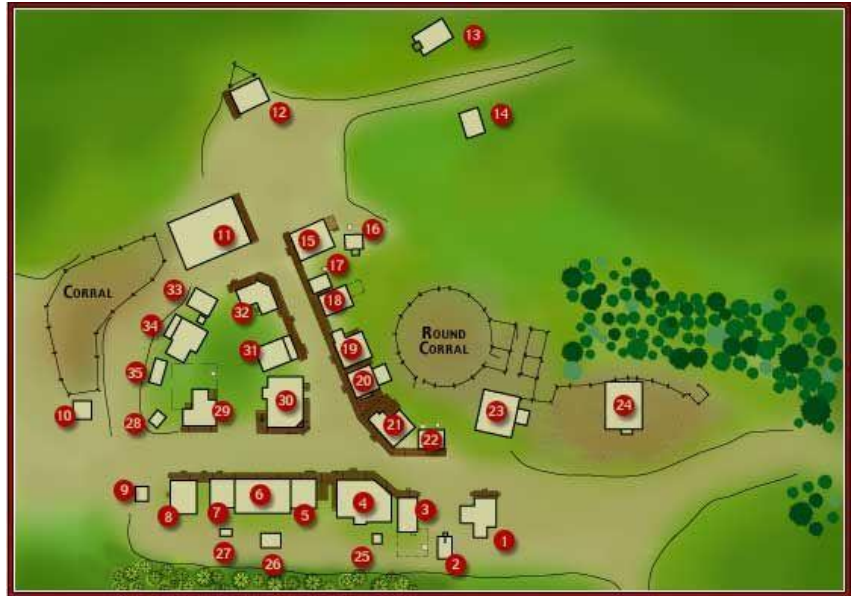
Tip: **Story Dice/Story Cubes are a great resource to help students have ideas for both their individual stories and to keep your group tale exciting.**

Small towns are the perfect breeding grounds for paranormal stories and mythologies. Creating your own town means starting your own town myths and legends. Perhaps some of the biggest names of the era lived in, or passed through [Your Town] over the years: Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson or a gone-to-seed dentist named John Henry ['Doc'] Holliday, just to name a few.
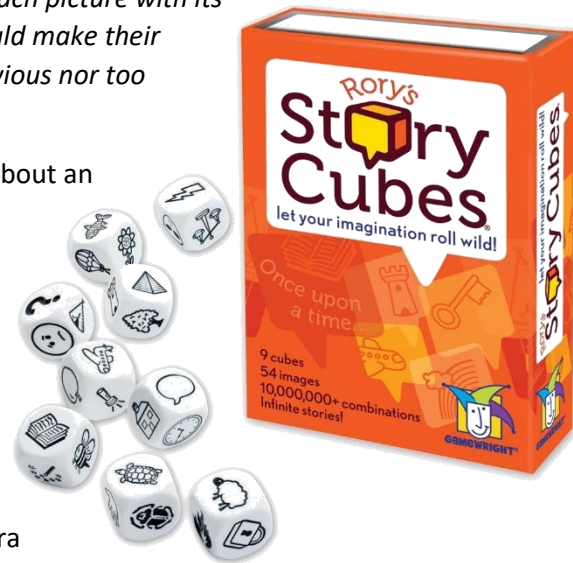
"It started with a cabin. A small, wood cabin with a pot-bellied stove and enough room for a few friends to gather after a day's riding. Then another wood building, grafted it on to it like a tree branch. One by one, other buildings, weather-beaten clapboard painted sober colors, joined it—the bank, the apothecary, the Lonesome Dove Mining Co., the blacksmith's, a printer's shop called Epitaph, the dry goods store, the jail, the two-story saloon and hotel."

Work together to create a town layout and map describing your town and its residents. Don't forget to have some fun with street names too. You may find that just one or two streets with names like "Longman's Leap," "Ghost Miner Road" "Sores and Boils Alley" or "Dead Horse Way" add so much. Have students use map symbols and legends (including cardinal and intermediate directions and geographical/topographical symbols) to identify locations and directions and mark on the map the locations of the shops and buildings, train stations, lost mines, old trails, awesome geographical features (canyons, plateaus, caves, waterfalls, etc.), nearby communities, and exciting events you described in your group story. Include a 'map legend' and compass rose.

Spark
Innovations

When a prospector was lucky enough to come across some signs of gold, he'd run his ore over to the Assay Office to determine just how much gold he was looking at. The Land office is like a modern realty.

Blacksmith's Shop

Gold Mine

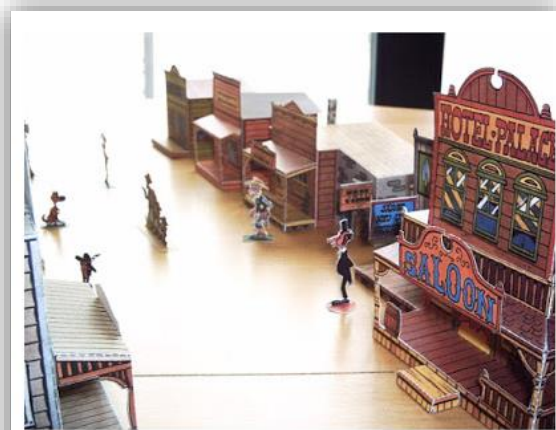
HOTEL

Stagecoach

Covered Wagon

Train Station

Native American Village TeePees

Spark
Innovations

(Like TinTin) Lucky Luke is a Belgian comics series created by Belgian cartoonist Maurice De Bevere, better known as Morris, and for one period written by René Goscinny. Set in the American Old West, it stars the title character Lucky Luke, the cowboy known as the "man who shoots faster than his shadow". He can also lasso a whirlwind, he can outride (he once raced the Mississippi River and won), outdraw, and outshoot anyone. His faithful horse Jolly Jumper is also pretty unique…being able to play Luke at chess, arm-wrestle him, and run while asleep. Paper models are from YPS Fan Page website.

Outshooting his own
shadow!!