

# Defining the West



Geographically speaking, we at the Bill Lane Center define the American West as the United States west of the 100th meridian, Canada west of Ontario, and all of Mexico, with open arms toward the broader Pacific region. But as anyone who has studied the West knows, the complexities of its history, culture, climate, institutions, politics, demography and economy amount to a regional identity that is so much more than physical place. “There are a lot of different ways to define the American West, depending on how you tee up the questions conceptually,” says historian David Kennedy, the founding faculty co-director of the Bill Lane Center. Our definition is expansive and takes into account the many dimensions of the West, from those rooted in geography to those rooted in the cultural and literary imagination.

As viewed through a historical lens, one might define the West as the last part of the North American continent to be settled by Europeans. Climatologically speaking, the region’s aridity is its most salient feature, as water shortage has influenced so much of Western history, development and public policy. The dry landscape also accounts in part for the fact that so much of the West comprises

public land, with the federal government owning more than 50 percent of the region's surface area. In addition, Western governance is complicated and distinctively shaped by its populist culture, direct democracy options, and highly fractured system of local jurisdictions.

One can just as easily view the West through the lens of demography or economics, defining the region as the fastest growing part of the country since World War II. Over the last two generations, the West has become the center of technological innovation, with Silicon Valley driving it ever forward. Today it is the most ethnically and racially diverse part of the country and home to a majority of the nation's Native Americans. All four majority minority states – California, Texas, New Mexico and Hawaii – are found in the West.

Characterized by vast distances, distinct aridity, and unique political and economic traits, the West is a dynamic region with a fluid and sometimes contested identity. When scholars teaching the Bill Lane Center's signature American West class ask, "What exactly is this region?" the answers students discover in their coursework reach across many of the disciplines described above, and go far beyond the lore of cowboys, ranchers, gold miners and "manifest destiny."

Yet even the familiar Western tropes and stereotypes – and certainly, frontier mythology – play a significant role in determining the meaning of "the West." "One might also say there is the 'West of the imagination,'" Kennedy says, "which has figured into American culture since at least the days of Henry David Thoreau, if not even further to Bishop Berkeley." Berkeley, an 18th century British philosopher, wrote the verse "Westward the course of empire takes its way," which inspired a famous mural by the same name, painted in the United States Capitol Building and depicting manifest destiny – the idea that American settlers were meant to expand westward across the country and realize their exceptionalism.

We invite you to answer the question yourself – what is the West? – as you engage with Bill Lane Center research, events, courses and programs. So multi-dimensional is this great region that no matter how you approach it – through its history and culture, its economy and public policy, or its environment and natural resources – the American West offers up a richness that encourages deep and ongoing exploration.