The Environmental History of the Midwest & Great Plains
HIS/ENV 395-01; Spring 2010
Tue & Thur, 2:15-4:05pm; ARH 130

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Office Hours: Tue, 10:00am-Noon; W/F, 2:15-4:00pm

Joint Office Hours: Monday, 2:15-4:00pm (Mears 316)

Course Description

This interdisciplinary seminar explores the environmental history of the upper Midwest and Great Plains, focusing on the transformative century that began with the early stages of settlement in the 1830s and ended with the upheavals of the Dust Bowl, Great Depression, and New Deal. The first half of the course will introduce students to the wide range of questions, methodologies, and sources that environmental historians use to construct their accounts of the past. Students will learn to incorporate the perspectives of geography, ecology, and spatial analysis into their study of American history, offering new ways of thinking about how the environment has shaped the contours of society and historical change in America's "heartland." The seminar will meet during the first eight weeks to discuss the course readings and pertinent issues relating to methodology and sources, while the second half of the semester will revolve around independent research projects and smaller group meetings.

We will begin the semester by examining the work of two eminent historians, William Cronon and Donald Worster, who have explored the constellation of forces—natural, social, and economic—that made the “Middle West” such a crucible of change. Read together, these two works offer a broad overview of the topic, allowing students to develop a solid grounding in the major issues, methods, and debates that have attracted environmental historians to the study of the Midwest and Great Plains. We also hope that these larger narratives, which delve into so many different questions, topics, and sources, will help you begin the process of identifying a possible research project.

Beginning in week four, the focus shifts as we begin to explore in greater detail how scholars actually construct meaningful accounts about the relationship between the natural world and the human communities that have settled the region. Organized as a series of case studies, each week will revolve around a set of readings on Tuesday, followed by a primary source workshop on Thursday. Each week, then, you will have an opportunity to work directly with primary
sources and archival material—a chance to see how the methods and perspectives you read about actually play out when you examine the past yourself. The goal here is for students to familiarize themselves with sources they may never have encountered before; to learn what kinds of methodologies each set of sources requires; the potential insight and pitfalls of each; and the larger arguments that can be constructed from such material. Ultimately, students should become well-versed in a wide array of sources and analytical tools that will allow them to construct their own sophisticated accounts of the past.

In the second half of the course, students will pursue a research project of their own choosing which will culminate in a substantial research paper (c. 20-25 pages). This seminar paper will be the end product of a larger research process—one that will involve multiple stages and some collaborative group work (see the course requirements below for more details). While the readings of the course focus on the period between Euro-American settlement and the crises of the 1930s, students may pursue research topics outside of this chronological framework. But all projects should be focused on the Midwest or Great Plains, and they should be directly rooted in the themes and questions of the course. Needless to say, we encourage you to consult frequently with both Professor Carter and Guenther as you begin formulating possible topics.

Course Requirements

Class Attendance
Please contact both Prof. Carter and Prof. Guenther if a serious medical or personal issue will prevent you from attending the seminar, and have the relevant office (Health Services or Student Affairs) do the same.

Class Participation
Class discussion provides our main opportunity to explore the complex methods and approaches to the environmental history of the Midwest and Great Plains. It is crucial, therefore, that students come to each class fully prepared—ready to engage the issues, debates, and sources at hand. This means more than simply completing the assigned readings before class begins. Rather, each of you will be expected to have carefully analyzed the material, critically evaluating the major assumptions, methodological approaches, arguments, and evidentiary base that the authors employ. Furthermore, we recommend that you take some time to organize these thoughts (and your notes) on paper, so that you come to class with a focused and concrete set of ideas, examples, and page references to contribute to the group discussion. The seminar setting offers a great opportunity to explore issues in a detailed and sophisticated manner as well as from a variety of different perspectives. But the quality of our discussion will depend on everyone being prepared and willing to contribute in such a way.

In that spirit, we will also ask you to occasionally turn in short response papers (a page or less). These informal prompts will require you to formulate your reactions to the course material, or to address a particular issue/debate that comes up in the readings. You will have at least a weeks notice before one is due, and these assignments will be evaluated as part of your overall class participation grade.
Smaller Research Groups
Although we will rarely meet together as a full class after spring break, class participation does not end in March. During the second half of the semester, students will be divided into four research groups (based upon shared topical interests), which will meet regularly during the established course time, 2:15-4:05pm Tuesdays or Thursdays. The point of these smaller research groups is to establish a collaborative yet structured setting in which students can discuss the progress of their work, receive feedback and suggestions from their colleagues, and explore certain issues or methods with us in greater depth. Think of these sessions as smaller, more focused, versions of the seminar. We will typically meet once a week to discuss your progress, the different obstacles or challenges you encounter, and various strategies for moving forward. These meetings are also an important source of accountability—everyone needs to work steadily towards completing the draft of the paper so that you do not find yourself in week 12 without any real research or writing completed. A successful seminar paper can not be done overnight, nor should it be a solitary endeavor. Most academic work is the product of collegial feedback, interaction, and peer review. This seminar is no different.

The level and depth of your participation in these research groups will be a significant factor in your participation grade for the course, which comprises 25% of your overall grade. We will announce more of the logistical details as the semester progresses. But for now, make sure that you do not schedule any events or commitments during the allotted course period in weeks 9 through 14.

Deadlines & Late Assignments
Meeting deadlines is critical to the seminar—both in terms of individual student’s ability to stay on track and the ability of your colleagues/professors to provide the necessary feedback to your work. Accordingly, we will deduct one whole letter grade per day for late assignments (weekends will be counted as one day). Exceptions may be made for extraordinary medical or personal issues. Please be aware as well that the college requires ALL coursework be submitted by the end of exam week, so no seminar papers will be excepted after 5:00pm on Friday, May 21st.

Disabilities
If you have specific physical, psychiatric or learning disabilities and require accommodations, please let me know early in the semester so that your learning needs may be appropriately met. You will need to provide documentation of your disability to the Associate Dean and Director of Academic Advising, Joyce Stern, whose office is located in Rosenfield Center (x3702).

Required Texts

The following required texts are available for purchase at the campus bookstore. A copy of each is also available on reserve at Burling Library. Other required readings will be distributed through pioneer web or as handouts.

Course Reserves
A variety of recommended books have been placed on one-day reserve at Burling Library to provide you with greater detail and context regarding the key issues of the course. Students who do not have a familiarity with American History, in general, or the Midwest and Great Plains, in particular, may want to consult some of these surveys early on during the semester. Yet all students will be expected to use this reserve material (where appropriate) to help in defining their research projects. Let us know if a particular work is central to your topic, and you would like to check it out permanently.

Grading
Grades will be assigned according to the following formula:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Topic Statement</td>
<td>Feb 25</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper Proposal</td>
<td>Mar 12</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annotated Bibliography</td>
<td>Apr 9</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Source Analysis</td>
<td>Apr 19</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Presentation</td>
<td>Apr 20-22</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<td>Polished Draft</td>
<td>May 7</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Review</td>
<td>May 11-13</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resource Guide</td>
<td>May 20</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Paper</td>
<td>May 20</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<td>Participation</td>
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Course Schedule & Reading Assignments

Note: Please read the assignments in the order in which they are listed each day. Recommended texts are included for those students who want to explore a particular topic in greater depth—especially those considering a research project in that area.

Week 1: Nature Transformed: City and Hinterlands

Tuesday, Jan 26:
- Cronon, Nature's Metropolis, pp. xv-93

Recommended:

Thursday, Jan 28:
- Cronon, Nature's Metropolis, pp. 97-259

Recommended:

Week 2: The Geography of Capitalism

Tuesday, Feb 2:
- Antipode (vol. 26, 1994) symposium on Nature's Metropolis (P-web)
- Primary Source Exercise: Exploring the World of Goods

Recommended:
Thursday, Feb 4:
In Class Film: "The Plow That Broke the Plains" (Pare Lorentz).

**Recommended:**

**Week 3: Ecology, Economy, and Culture**

Tuesday, Feb 9:

**Recommended Texts:**

Thursday, Feb 11:

**Week 4: Midwestern Land and Life**

Tuesday, Feb 16:

Recommended:

Thursday, Feb 18:
Primary Source Workshop: Principles of Cartography & GIS

Week 5: Place, Space & the Frontier Narrative

Tuesday, Feb 23:
• "Among the wheat-fields of Minnesota." Harper’s Magazine, 1868. (P-web)

Recommended:
Thursday, Feb 25:

**Primary Source Workshop:** Historical Maps, Land Survey Records, and Settlement documents  
**Meeting Location:** Iowa Reading Room (Lower Level of Burling Library).

**RESEARCH TOPIC STATEMENT DUE TODAY**

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**Week 6: Agriculture and Land Use Change**

Tuesday, Mar 2:


**Recommended:**

Thursday, Mar 4:

**Primary Source Workshop:** Census Returns, Agricultural Manuals, and Property Records.

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**Week 7: Ecology and Environmental Conservation**

Tuesday, Mar 9:

Recommended:

Thursday, Mar 11:
Primary Source Workshop: Assessing Historical Scientific Studies and Data.

RESEARCH PROPOSAL DUE FRIDAY, MARCH 12

Week 8: The Granite Garden: Urban Environments in the Midwest

Tuesday, Mar 16 (tentative readings):


Recommended:

Thursday, Mar 18:

SPRING BREAK (Mar. 22-Apr. 2)

Week 9 (Apr. 5-9)

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE FRIDAY, APR. 9
FIELD TRIP (OPTIONAL), SATURDAY, APR. 10

Week 10 (Apr. 12-16)

Prof. Carter out of town this week: AAG Meeting

Week 11 (Apr. 19-23)

SOURCE ANALYSIS PAPER DUE MONDAY, APR. 19
ORAL PRESENTATIONS, TUES., APR. 20 AND THURS., APR. 22

Week 12 (Apr. 26-30)

Week 13 (May 3-7)

POLISHED DRAFT DUE FRI., MAY 7

Week 14 (May 10-14)

PEER REVIEW PROCESS, TUES., MAY 11 AND THURS., MAY 13

Final Exam week

FINAL DRAFT DUE THURS., MAY 20 at 5:00 pm

RESOURCE GUIDE CONTRIBUTION DUE THURS., MAY 20 at 5:00 pm