

STUDENT GUIDE SHEET

How Violent Was the Old West?

Directions: Between the last years of the Civil War and 1890, cowboys, Indians, railroad builders, settlers, and soldiers played out a drama on the Great Plains. The popular belief is that this was a violent time in American history with gunfights in cattle towns, Indian attacks on wagon trains, and counterattacks by a bugle-led cavalry. This document based question asks you to examine the popular belief. In truth, how violent was the Old West?

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There are several steps for you to follow:

1. Read the Background Essay. It defines some terms, provides a little history, and gives a few tips for analysis.
2. Skim through the 10 documents to get a sense of what they are about.
3. Tentatively organize the documents into analytical categories. Can the documents be grouped in a certain way? The document list below may be helpful for this task.
4. Read the documents slowly. For each document use the margins or a Document Analysis Sheet to record:
 - a. What or who is the source? Is it a reliable source?
 - b. What is the main idea of each document? On what side of the argument would you place it?
5. Once you have grouped the documents into analytical categories, use the documents to develop your answer to the question. Specifically, how do various documents support your thesis? Be concrete.

The Documents:

- Document 1: Map of the Great Plains
- Document 2: Chart: Cattle Town Homicides
- Document 3: Chart: Annual Homicide Rates
- Document 4: Benton, Wyoming
- Document 5: Green River City Ordinances
- Document 6: The Battle of Beecher's Island
- Document 7: Casualty Figures: America's Wars
- Document 8: Reported Kills at Three-Year Intervals
- Document 9: Data from the Overland Trail
- Document 10: Robert Dykstra: A Historian Comments

How Violent Was the Old West?

In recent years, Americans have worried about the level of violence in the United States. The nation was badly shaken by the 1994 bombing in Oklahoma City and school shootings like those at Columbine High School in 1999 and Santana High School in 2001. Historians have been asked to find the root of the problem. Some Americans believe that the tradition of violence can be traced back to the American West. For more than a century, American novels, films, radio, and finally television showed the American West as a wild and woolly place – cowboy gunfights, Indian attacks, massive buffalo kills, rough and tumble mining towns. Violence and the Old West went hand in hand. This document based exercise asks you to examine the accuracy of this belief.

Definitions

The question seems clear and simple: "How violent was the Old West?" However, like most analytical questions, there are several words that need defining. First, what is meant by *West*? To keep our job manageable, when we say West we mean the **Great Plains**. (See Map next page.)

Second, what is meant by the *Old West*? We will define Old as the time between the early 1860s and 1890, when tensions in the region were highest. Third, what do we mean by *violent*? In this DBQ violence means actual physical acts carried out in order to kill or injure another person.

A Brief Background of the Old West

Before 1854, the Great Plains was known to Americans as "**The Great American Desert**," a vast prairie that would never be suited for anyone except buffalo and the Plains Indians. Ever since

President Thomas Jefferson bought the land from France in 1803, the Plains was just seen as something to get across. In fact, until 1854, the federal government had a Great Plains no-entry law which required travelers on the Plains to stay on the trail and made settlement on the Plains by non-Indians illegal.

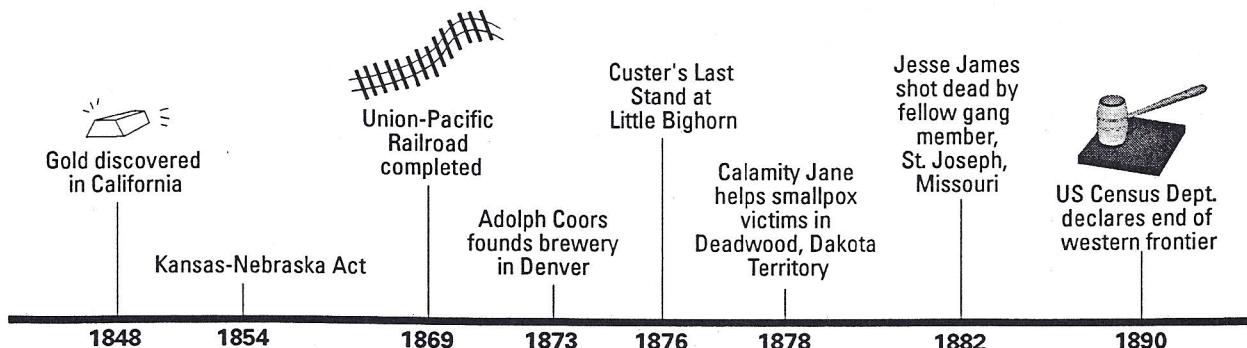
The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 changed all this. Whites from slave states like Missouri and free states like Illinois moved into Kansas to influence the slavery vote. It was clear the buffalo and the Native Americans would soon have company.

The Railroad, Cattle, and the Indian

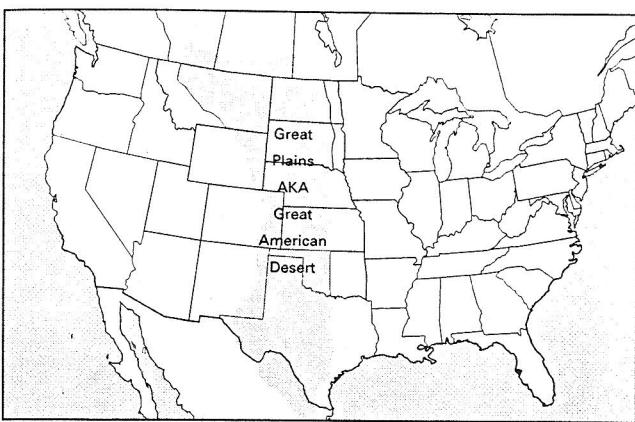
The Civil War was fought between 1861 and 1865. When it ended, two things happened. First, the Union Pacific and the Kansas-Pacific railroads were completed, and they cut directly across the Plains. Wagon trains were no longer the primary way to go west.

Second, the Old West cattle industry got started. A gentleman from Chicago named Joseph McCoy saw branded and unbranded cattle wandering around Texas. He had an idea: why not drive Texas cattle north to the railroad, put them in boxcars, and send them off to be butchered in Chicago? In 1867, McCoy bought the entire log hut village of Abilene, Kansas, for \$2400 and shipped his first 20 carloads of cattle from Abilene to Chicago. The cattle boom was on.

The arrival on the Great Plains of the railroad and the cattle industry did not take place in a vacuum. Someone was already living there. First there were the Plains Indians. An accurate census was never taken but the number of Native



Americans on the Great Plains in 1865 may have been about 100,000, which included the largest group, the Lakota, and smaller nations like the Pawnee, Cheyenne and the Arapaho. Another inhabitant that stood in the way was the buffalo. Buffalo estimates on the Great Plains after the Civil War range between 10 and 15 million.



New Players on the Old West Stage: 1865 - 1890

Railroads and cattle drives meant a new group of people were coming to the Old West. Railroad construction crews were trailed closely by camp followers – saloon keepers, gamblers, pimps, prostitutes, thieves – eager to help the workers unload their Saturday night paychecks. Next there were the Texas cowboys, mostly ex-Confederate soldiers, who drove their longhorns to the Kansas railhead towns. Newcomers also included cowtown lawmen, often northerners, who were paid to keep the cowboys in line. Finally, there were the US soldiers who were sent West to keep the Indian from causing any trouble.

It is interesting to take a closer look at these Old West newcomers. At the eastern edges of this frontier, both men and women were settling down to make farms and raise children. But further out on the plains – in railhead towns, cowtowns, and military forts – the new population tended to be male, single, and quite young. The average age of a Texas cowboy, for example, was about 24 or 25. Soldiers were about the same. Women were generally not part of their lives. Would these **demographic** (population) facts lead one to expect more violent behavior, at least until wives and children arrived on the scene?

Contrast this with the demographic profile of Native Americans living on the Great Plains. First, it is believed that Indian females outnumbered Indian males. Also, most of the young adult males were married and lived in family groups. Finally, Native American communities ran the age gamut from very young to very old. Would these demographic facts lead one to expect violent behavior?

There is another demographic note that could have a bearing on the level of violence: the inhabitants of the Old West were a mixed lot racially and ethnically. It is estimated that about one seventh of the cowboys were black, mostly ex-slaves from Texas. Another one-seventh of the cowboys were Hispanic. Most but not all of the white cowboys were southerners.

There was also racial diversity among the soldiers. One of the most famous groups in American military history was the all-black **Buffalo soldiers** who saw much action on the Great Plains.

In addition, the white settler population was very mixed. It included immigrants from places like Russia, Bohemia, and Germany who simply wanted peace and a homestead to farm or a town plot to raise a family. In fact, the population of Kansas in 1870 was more than half foreign-born.

Finally, the Plains Indian population was not a single unified people. They were many different peoples who spoke different languages and had different stories. And they were not always friendly with one another. For example, Crow scouts led General Custer in the search for Sioux warriors.

Taken all together, it would seem that the Old West had the ingredients for violence – unwelcome railroads and cattle drives intruding on the land of native peoples, an abundance of young single males, bad feelings left over from a terrible Civil War, and an ethnic soup of foreign-born, blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, ex-Confederates and Yankees. But did this violence actually occur? And if it did, was it widespread? What follows are 10 documents which will help you decide. So, saddle up and off you go: *How violent was the Old West?*

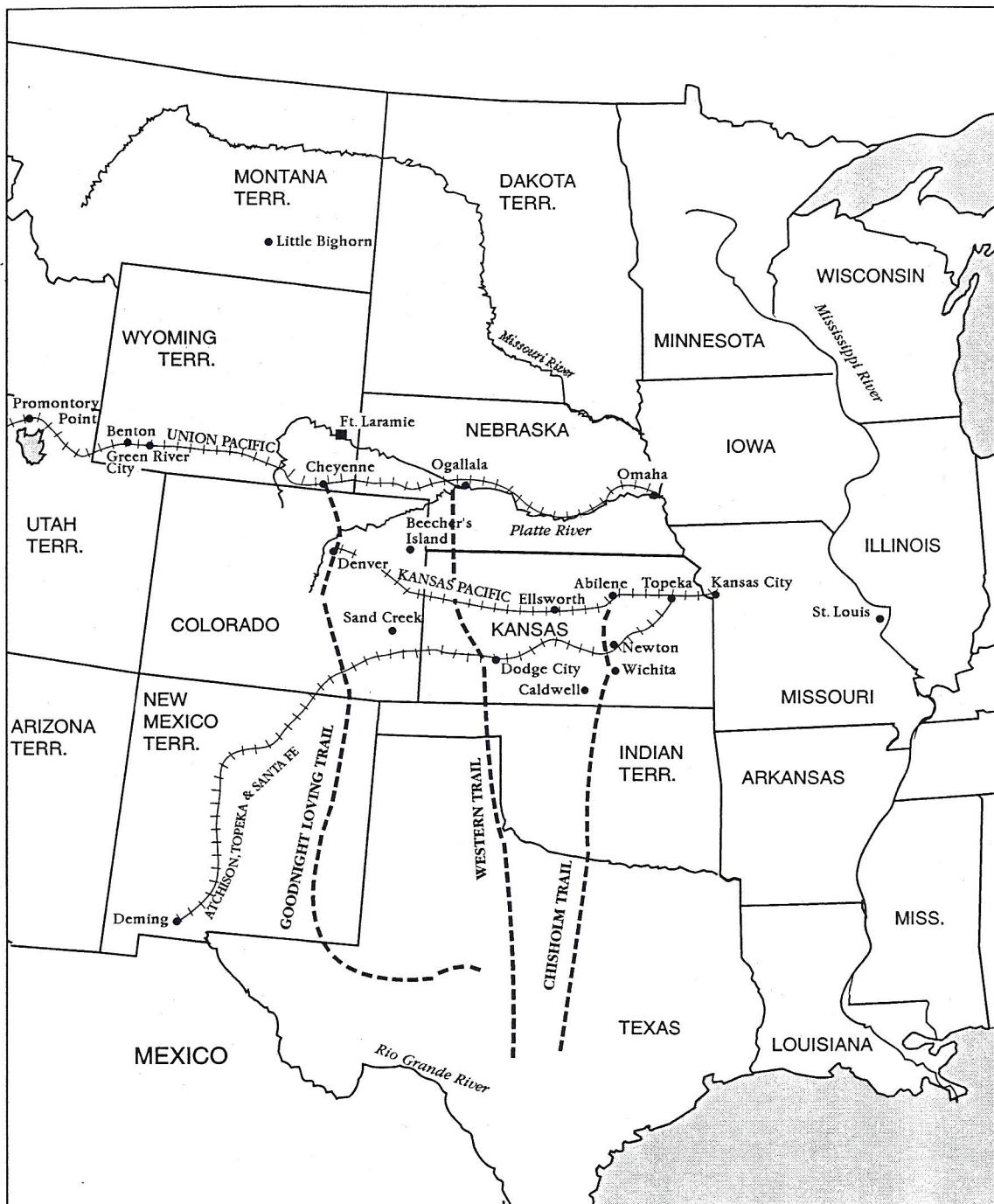
Document 1
 Notes

Source: Map created from several historical sources.

Map of the Great Plains

1866 - 1885

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Document 2

Source: Robert R. Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns*, 1968.

Cattle Town Homicides

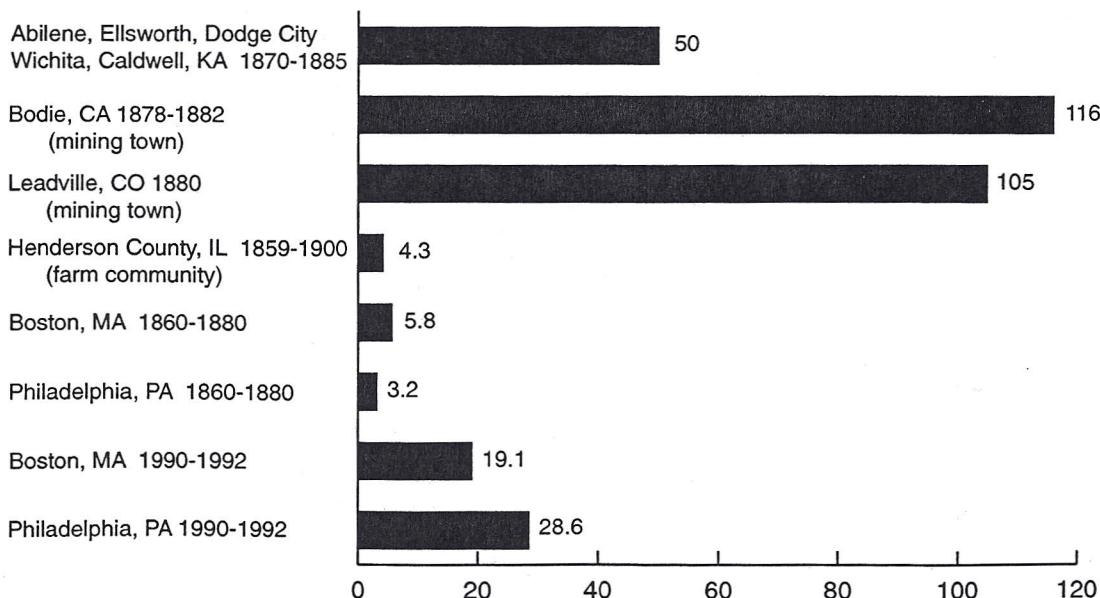
Years	1870	1871	1872	1873	1874	1875	1876	1877	1878	1879	1880	1881	1882	1883	1884	1885	Total
Abilene	2	3	2														7
Ellsworth				1	5	0	0										6
Wichita		1	1	1	1	0	0										4
Dodge City							0?	0	5	2	1	1	0	3	2	1	15
Caldwell										2	2	3	1	2	2	1	13
Total																	45

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Note: A zero in the chart means cattle were traded (and cowboys came to town) but no homicides occurred. A blank means no cattle drives arrived in this town in this year and homicides weren't recorded.

Document 3

Source: Adapted from David T. Courtwright, *Violent Land*, 1996.

Annual Homicide Rates per 100,000 People

Note: Courtwright says, "(Robert) Dykstra also found that the average incidence of homicide in the five municipalities – Abilene, Ellsworth, Wichita, Dodge City, and Caldwell – was 1.5 per town per year. This may seem a small number, but so was the average population, which did not exceed 3,000. The resulting homicide rate was quite high, 50 or more per 100,000 persons per year. According to this chart, someone living in (or more likely visiting) a Kansas cattle town was ten times as likely to be murdered as a person living in an eastern city or in a midwestern farming county."

265

Document 4

Source: Emmett D. Chisum, "Boom Towns on the Union Pacific," *Annals of Wyoming*, 1981.
Reprinted by permission of Union Pacific Railroad.

Benton, Wyoming: Photo by A.C. Hull, 1868

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Commentary about Benton, Wyoming

Source: Alfred J. Mokler, editor, *Wyoming Pioneer*, date unavailable.

Benton is not but a name – all but faded from memory. In 1868 it was the temporary terminal of the Union Pacific Railroad; it earned wide notoriety as the most incandescent (hottest) of red hot towns in the West; a cemetery was started there the same day that the town was established and before the next terminus (railhead town) west was set up, more than 100 graves disgraced the plot that was set aside in which the dead were buried.

Source: Samuel Bowles, reporter, *Springfield Republican*, 1868.

When we were on the (railroad) line, this congregation of scum and wickedness was within a desert section called Benton. One or two thousand men and a few women were encamped on the alkali plains in tents and board shanties, not a tree, not a shrub, not a blade of grass was visible. A village of a few variety stores and shops, by day disgusting, by night dangerous, almost everybody dirty, many filthy with the marks of lowest vice, averaging a murder a day, gambling and drinking, hurdy dancing and the vilest of sexual commerce.... It fairly festered in corruption, disorder and death, and would have rotted in this dry air, had it outlasted a brief sixty-day life.

Document 5

Notes

Source: *The Townsmen*, Time-Life Books, 1975.

Green River City Ordinances, 1868

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CHAPTER I

Be it ordained by the President and Board of Trustees of Green River City,
Dakota Territory.

1st. That it shall be unlawful for any person to carry concealed weapons of any kind within the corporate limits of said city.

2nd. That it shall be unlawful for any person to shoot or discharge any fire-arm, air gun or other deadly weapons within said corporate limits.

3rd. That it shall be unlawful for any person to be on the streets or in any public place in said city under the influence of intoxicating liquors.

4th. That it shall be unlawful for any person to make loud and unusual noises or in any way disturb the peace of citizens of said city as to fight or threaten to fight....

CHAPTER IV

1st. That it shall be unlawful to be guilty of gambling by betting on any games of chance, whether at cards, dice, faro, monte, kono, or any other game of chance whatever....

CHAPTER V

1st. That it shall be unlawful to keep a house of prostitution, every person keeping such house, and every inmate thereof, shall upon conviction be fined in the sum of ten dollars....

CHAPTER VII

1st. That it shall be unlawful to drive or ride a horse or mule or horses or mules, at a faster gait than six miles per hour within the city limits....

Approved this 12th of August, 1868.
Joseph Binns, President of the Board of Trustees

Document 6

Source: Mike Flanagan, *The Old West, Day by Day*, 1995.

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The Battle of Beecher's Island

– September 17- 25, 1868 –

This conflict is also known as the Battle of the Arikaree or “the fight when Broken Nose was killed.” During the campaign against the Southern Plains Indians, 50 soldiers under Major George A. Forsyth and Lieutenant Frederick Beecher were attacked in eastern Colorado by some 500 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors.

The summer of 1868 had been long and hot. Western Indians, in a rage over the advancing railroads, had wiped out teams of railway workers. Raids on 40 homesteads had resulted in the deaths of 99 white settlers. Wives and children had been dragged away screaming.

Civil War General Philip H. Sheridan, commander of the Department of the Missouri, boomed, “I am here to clean up the savages!” Major George A. “Sandy” Forsyth, 30, was ordered to recruit “50 first-class hardy frontiersmen” to go lesson-teaching in Indian country. Lieutenant Fred Beecher, a nephew of the abolitionist clergyman Henry Ward Beecher, was named second in command. Thirty volunteers, many of them in their teens, signed up at Fort Harker, the rest at Fort Hayes.

...Late in the afternoon of September 16, Forsyth came to the Arikaree River in eastern Colorado.... Rations were low and the men and horses were tired. At the bottom of the grassy valley, a sandbar 40 yards wide and 150 yards long rose from a nearly dry riverbed.

That night while his men slept near the river, Forsyth was unable to rest. His worst fears had come true; his presence was well known to the Indians....

At dawn a group of young braves, trying to impress their elders, unintentionally saved the volunteers from being wiped out in their sleep. Whooping and shooting, the youths tried to stampede the

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troops’ horses but only succeeded in doing so with half a dozen. Forsyth’s men awoke to the battle cries of 600 attackers. “My God,” gasped Chief Scout Sharp Grover, “look at the Indians!” Forsyth thought, “The ground seemed to grow them.”

The men were ordered to the island, where they dug trenches in the sandy earth. Bullets and arrows came from three directions. By 9 A.M. every army horse and mule was dead; their bodies would provide a certain amount of cover, but now there was no means of escape.

At 9:30, an estimated 300 mounted warriors, riding 60 abreast in five ranks, tried to ride the volunteers down. At the last instant, Forsyth commanded his men to fire their Spencer seven-shot rifles. The repeating weapons broke the charge, as the Indians galloped around but not over the island. Indian women and children watched in horror from a nearby hill....

That night, Jack Stillwell and Pierre Trudeau volunteered to try to make it to Fort Wallace, 85 miles to the southeast. After a series of dramatic close calls, Stillwell and Trudeau made it back to Fort Wallace. A hundred black soldiers, Troop H of the 10th U.S. Cavalry, were sent to rescue Forsyth’s command. By then most of the Indians had moved on, leaving behind a small force to try to starve out the defenders. The Indians quickly dispersed at the sound of the approaching bugle.

Ten men had died on the island and another 20 had been seriously wounded. Forsyth refused to have his infected leg amputated, but he eventually made a full recovery. (Beecher had been killed.) Indian casualties were difficult to determine: Forsyth said 35 were killed, whereas another soldier counted at least 50; perhaps as many as 200 were wounded.

Document 7

Source: America's Wars, Department of Veteran Affairs, Washington D.C.

US Military Battle Related Deaths

PARTICIPANTS		DEATHS
290,000	American Revolution (1775 - 1784)	4,000
287,000	War of 1812 (1812 - 1815)	2,000
79,000	Mexican War (1846 - 1848)	13,000
	Civil War (1861-65)	
3,213,000	Union	364,000
1,000,000	Confederate	133,821
106,000	Indian Wars (Approx. 1817 - 1898)	1,000

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Document 8

Source: Adapted from Mike Flanagan, *The Old West: Day by Day*, Facts on File, 1995.

**Reported Kills in the Old West from Scattered Sources
(Six Selected Years)**

	Indians Killed by Military	Indians Killed by Civilians	Military Killed by Indians	Settlers Killed by Indians
1867	219	0	40	4
1870	64	0	7	49
1873	17	0	0	2
1876	72	0	265	16
1879	37	0	5	0
1882	2	0	0	0

DOCUMENT 9

Source: Glenda Riley, "The Specter of a Savage: Rumor and Alarmism on the Overland Trail," *Western Historical Quarterly*, October, 1984.

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(For many settlers moving west),...rumors were far worse than reality.... Most were actually more harassed...by (worry) than they were by the Indians. To support this point, a sample of 150 diaries, journals, memoirs, and letters was assembled from all major trails between 1830 and 1900. Of those,...only 15 reported major difficulties (but still not extensive loss of life or anything even approaching a "massacre"). Yet, almost every document contained some mention of tension, agitation, and dread regarding the possibility of altercations with natives.

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DOCUMENT 10

Source: Robert R. Dykstra, "Field Notes: Overdosing on Dodge City." *Western Historical Quarterly*, Winter, 1996.

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The Indian wars of the late nineteenth century are a special case. What gave them their...murderous quality were the massacres of...women, children, the elderly – by...young males from both sides (i.e. settler and Native American). In contrast, the number of combat deaths among soldiers and warriors was not particularly large. Between 1865 and 1898, regular troops killed while encountering Indians totaled 919. But well over a third of these – 37 percent – died in two very exceptional engagements. One was the Fetterman ambush in 1866, which cost the lives of 79 officers and men. The other was the Little Big Horn Battle ten years later, in which 258 soldiers died. Absent those two blood-lettings, combat deaths averaged about 17 per year. As for Indian fatalities, they were probably even fewer over the long run. No more than 32 warriors, for instance, are known to have died at Little Big Horn.