In America, two great events shaped the development of photography -- one was the Civil War (1861 - 65) which brought photographers out of their studios and into the fields (see Gettysburg, slide 9) and the other was the opening of the western American wilderness. The west’s untrammeled scenery was a welcomed focus during and after the Civil War, representing in its beauty and bounty promise for the nation’s spirit and economy. In the 1860s and 1870s, photographers accompanied geological survey teams, often directed by the Army, and/or were employed by railway companies to document unknown terrain in the West for future mineral exploitation and civilian settlements. These photographers of the land beyond the Mississippi River sought out vantage points that would convey for Easterners the grandeur of the region and would enshrine the ideas of Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny was the nineteenth-century belief that it was the destiny of the United States to expand across the continent of North America. As the frontier moved westward and industrialization began to change the character of the landscape, Americans increasingly turned to photographs as a means of celebrating technology as well as of expressing reverence for the landscape being threatened by technology’s advance.
In 1861 and 1866, Carleton Watkins produced two series of photographs of Yosemite Valley, the recently discovered "garden paradise" about a two-day ride on horseback from San Francisco. Watkins used a giant wet-plate camera with thick glass negatives that were often as large as the average easel painting. The negatives, coated with a sensitized emulsion called collodion, were exposed while still wet to produce the image. The technical perfection of his work is remarkable considering the difficulty of the wet-plate process for the frontier photographer. Watkins transported all of his equipment (cameras, lenses, chemicals, and up to 400 glass plates) in special vans and by pack animals. Dark tents and developing boxes were used when vehicles that doubled as "dark rooms" could not handle the terrain. In processing, he faced the challenges of a lack of pure water and the tendency of dust to adhere to the sticky collodion. Watkins’ technical achievements were matched only by the aesthetic beauty of the resulting photographs. His works combine a sense of the picturesque with a Romantic expression of nature’s timelessness, immensity, and silence. So pure and stirring were the photographs that they helped persuade the United States Congress to pass legislation in 1864 protecting the Yosemite Valley’s wilderness.

MR

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Have students research the United State’s belief in Manifest Destiny -- its origins, evolution, and impact. What role did photography play in promoting westward expansion?
2. In the 1860s, photography served to educate and entice individuals about regions of the country considered ripe for travel and/or development. Have students research an area of great beauty in the United States and collect pictures that capture its character and grandeur. Next, have students write a description of the region’s resources and attractions that would inform and intrigue a potential traveler. Note: If your school is near any of our region’s special landscapes such as Zion State Park, northern Lake County, or the Indiana Dunes, you might plan a field trip to visit one of them and have the students photograph, sketch, or write about the landscape.

3. Have students research congressional legislation to protect Yosemite Valley and other natural treasures in the United States. Investigate the impetus, scope, and impact of these federal mandates.

4. Photography, used in the nineteenth century as a means of documenting and reporting, came to be recognized in the twentieth century for its sheer artistic merit. Have students discuss what makes photography an art form, using Watkins’ Yosemite as a reference. Consider formal qualities as well as decisions that photographers make regarding subject, equipment, and process.