Physics—and history—teaches us that for every action there is a reaction and, upon occasion, a single seemingly small event can dramatically change the future. The popularity of Robert Cowley’s book *What Ifs? Of American History*, for example, takes advantage of our innate interest in alternative historical outcomes. Students often consider similar alternative histories, though perhaps with less conscious effort, while watching movies like the recent Hollywood hit, *Looper*, and television series like the popular British teen drama, *Misfits*. Building on that interest to motivate historical inquiry can be as integral a teaching tool as establishing relevance by offering connections between the past and the present. This article’s case in point is the San Juan Island Pig War (1859-1872), its impact on land and sea borders between what is now Canada and the United States, and the ongoing consequences of a pig crossing boundaries on the lives of Americans and Canadians today.

The U.S. and Canada did not always have the peaceful border we share today. In fact, in the Pacific Northwest, when Canada was still a colonial possession of Britain, there was no border at all. The *Treaty of Joint Occupation of Oregon of 1818* established joint control of Oregon Territory between the U.S. and Britain as if it was a shared country. Until then, the Pacific Northwest remained open for settlement by people from the U.S., Britain, Russia, and Spain. (See Map 1 or, better still, have students access an interactive version via the link to the Library of Congress’ website: [http://www.loc.gov/item/98687152](http://www.loc.gov/item/98687152).)

By 1846, however, another agreement between the U.S. and Britain called the *Treaty of Oregon* established a border between American-controlled and British-controlled Oregon Territory westward along the 49th Parallel, south through the Strait of Georgia, and west through the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Of course, the U.S. preferred a
border set at the 54°40' Parallel (or fight!) while Britain preferred a border at the 42nd Parallel. (See Map 1 for extreme U.S. claim and Map 2 for extreme British claim.) However, their shared history led them to compromise on the 49th Parallel as the international boundary between the U.S. and Canada west of the Great Lakes. And so it remains today. In fact, such negotiation between the U.S. and Britain, and the U.S. and Canada, have settled a number of border disputes peacefully in the past, including the Aroostook War, the Great Lakes Border, and the Alaska Boundary Dispute. See also “Recommended Extensions for Learning” at the end of this article.

Authority over the San Juan Islands was left in dispute by the 1846 treaty, however. (See Map 2). Both the U.S. and Britain interpreted the boundary as giving them oversight and Americans, fueled with the notion of “Manifest Destiny”—a providential call to move west and settle the continent (see Picture 1)—were particularly keen to lay full claim to the island. On the other hand, Britain’s Hudson’s Bay Company felt their three year-old claim on the main island, San Juan, remained valid. After the treaty was signed, both nations peacefully continued to claim authority and neither “moved camp”. [Note: to this day the U.S. National Parks Service maintains the historical “American Camp” and “English Camp” (not established until March 1860) on San Juan Island – both worth visiting online and in-person – See Map 3.]
By 1851, the Hudson’s Bay Company established a salmon-curing station along San Juan Island’s western shore to strengthen its presence on the island. In 1853, the U.S. reestablished its Manifest Destiny claim on all of the islands between Vancouver and the U.S. mainland when the Washington Territory was established. In retaliation, the Hudson’s Bay Company established a strategically placed sheep farm by the American Camp on San Juan Island’s south end. The HBC placed Charles Griffin in charge of Belle Vu Farm, but by 1858, several American miners who failed to make it big in the Fraser Canyon Gold Rush also settled near the American Camp, bolstering the American population of the island.

The incident that began the infamous “Pig War” took place on June 15, 1859 when Lyman Cutlar (American), found an English pig (belonging to Belle Vu Farm) rooting around in his garden. He shot and killed the pig in order to protect his crops. Although Cutlar went to the farm to offer compensatory payment, arguments arose over the price, and Cutlar refused to pay Griffin’s outrageous demand of $100 (claiming true value was not more than $10). British officials, who happened to be visiting the farm, threatened to arrest Cutlar if he did not pay Griffin’s price. Although no arrest was made, tensions rose between the Americans and the British, with a threat of eviction raised against Americans as trespassers.

Military support, led by Captain George E. Pickett, was established on July 27, 1859, just north of the Belle Vu Sheep Farm. This was the first of several military orders and troop movements that would occur for the next few years. On the British side, James Douglas, Governor of Vancouver Island (See Picture 3) sent 3 gunned ships, 46 Royal Marines, and 15 Royal Engineers to remove Pickett without raising arms. Pickett refused to surrender and instead asked for reinforcements which, in turn, prompted Douglas to send more Royal Marines. By August 10, 1859, Pickett’s reinforcements arrived in the form of Lieutenant Colonel Silas Casey and several companies of soldiers. Casey moved the soldiers’ camp, known as “American Camp”, near the Sheep Farm and, although no shots had been fired on anyone except the pig, the increased military presence on both sides escalated tension.

In September 1859, U.S. President James Buchanan learned of the standoff and sent General Winfield Scott (Picture 4) to settle the matter. Negotiating with Douglas, Scott managed to de-escalate the situation by proposing that Americans get a new commander to oversee a single company of troops and that the British reduce their fleet to only one warship. Eventually, the British deemed it preferable to build a camp of their own on land, so by March 1860 an “English Camp” was officially established on the north
end of the island. Surprisingly enough, the joint military occupation of the island reduced tensions and reestablished order for the next ten years. In the meantime, the 1861 outbreak of the American Civil War and its aftermath kept attention focused elsewhere until 1870. Indeed, Canada had become a nation herself in the interim with her Confederation in 1867.

During this off-period, both sides relaxed and both camps were visited freely by the opposing sides' troops. A dialogue began on March 5, 1871, to discuss the boundaries established by the Treaty of Washington; both nations agreed that the dispute over San Juan Island would be settled by a third party, Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany. He, in turn, appointed a three-man arbitration team to resolve the issue and, after a year of discussion in Geneva, the team determined on October 21, 1872, that the official boundary would be the Haro Strait and that the San Juan Islands belonged to the U.S. (See Map 2).

The Royal Marines of English Camp withdrew peacefully on November 25, 1872 and the last of the troops at American Camp left on July 17, 1874. Both sides were relieved to see the dispute laid to rest so that in the U.S., focus could turn to Civil War Reconstruction and in Canada, to increased settlement of their new and rather vast nation.

It is interesting to note that neither side had any resentment for the other after the issue was resolved and Britain publically lost the “war”. In fact, many drank and feasted together. British settlers, including the Hudson’s Bay Company workers, were able to keep their land and became American citizens. Since then, no border disputes have arisen in the area even though an “anomaly” exists in Point Roberts, Washington that cuts it off from the rest of the state and requires its high school students to cross borders in and out of Canada twice daily in order to attend school in Blaine, Washington….but that’s another story.

Today’s San Juan Islanders and tourists can visibly connect to the Pig War past by visiting the two camps preserved by the National Parks Service. It is interesting to realize that the islands’ roads were paved atop paths originally carved by the sheep and shepherds of Belle Vu Farm. It is also interesting to consider what might have happened if additional shots had been fired. What if casualties had been human rather than merely porcine? Would today's boundaries between the province of British Columbia and the state of Washington be the same? How might North America be different? Such conjecture could, of course, be mined via a creative writing assignment.

The reality is that, since the end of the Pig War, the U.S. and Canada have shared the longest peaceful border in the world and have grown to be partners in the world’s largest trade relationship. Learning how the border was established historically helps students appreciate their existence on our northern border today and the binational cooperation involved in the smooth and efficient movement of people and goods across it. Who would have guessed you can trace much of it back to a pig!
Recommended Extensions for Learning:

- **San Juan Island’s Pig War:**
  - National Park Service
    
    [http://www.nps.gov/sajh/historyculture/the-pig-war.htm](http://www.nps.gov/sajh/historyculture/the-pig-war.htm)
  - The Pig War – Conflict and Resolution in the Pacific Northwest: A Resource Guide for Washington State Teachers and Travelling Trunk:
    
    [http://www.nps.gov/sajh/forteachers/upload/Trunk-1.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/sajh/forteachers/upload/Trunk-1.pdf) [highly recommended!]
  - History Link
    

- **Manifest Destiny and curricula related to westward expansion in the US:**
  - [http://americanhistory.mrdonn.org/manifestdestiny.html](http://americanhistory.mrdonn.org/manifestdestiny.html)
    
    (especially the “Establishing Borders” lesson plan)

- **Canada’s westward expansion and responses to US westward expansion:**
  - [http://www.canadiana.ca/citm/themes/constitution/constitution14_e.html](http://www.canadiana.ca/citm/themes/constitution/constitution14_e.html)
  - [http://www.hbcheritage.ca/hbcheritage/home](http://www.hbcheritage.ca/hbcheritage/home)

- **Curricula and information about other boundary disputes**
  - Summary of the Aroostook War and Winfield Scott’s role:
    
    [http://millercenter.org/president/events/03_25](http://millercenter.org/president/events/03_25)
  - Great Lakes region, history, and much more:
    
    [http://glin.net](http://glin.net)
  - Alaska Boundary Dispute:
    
  - Setting Boundaries: Learning About Political Maps and How Boundaries Are Determined in the Social Studies Classroom:
    
  - Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History – *Who Killed William Robinson? Race, Justice and Settling the Land* (on nearby Salt Spring Island in 1868:)
    
    [http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/robinson/home/indexen.html](http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/robinson/home/indexen.html)
  - [Although the connection here is only a peripheral one, this site is great for motivating students into doing history!](http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/robinson/home/indexen.html)