

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT

Lesson Title—Primary Sources Skills Activity: Three Songs and a Letter from U.S. History

From Sean Gilligan

Grade: 9-12

Length of Class Period: 48 minutes

Inquiry (what essential questions are students answering, what problem are they solving, or what decision are they making?)

- What is a primary source?
- What can songs teach us about the past?
- What can letters teach us about the past?
- What was life like in 1630s Massachusetts?
- What was life like in 1850s California?

Objectives (What content and skills do you expect students to learn from this lesson?)

- Students will interpret a song and letter about colonial life in Massachusetts. This will be accomplished through reading, discussion, and writing.
- Students will interpret two songs about life in Gold Rush California. This will be accomplished through reading, discussion, and writing.
- Students will evaluate the effectiveness of songs and letters in teaching about the past.

Materials (What primary sources or local resources are the basis for this lesson?)-(please attach)

Song Written By A Pilgrim (1630)

Letter to William Pond from his son in Massachusetts, March, 1630

The Lousy Miner (1850s California)
Chinese John's Appeal (1850s California)

Activities (What will you and your students do during the lesson to promote learning?)

This is a lesson that I teach at the beginning of a U.S. History course. A prior lesson identified different types of primary sources. First, we review the definition of a primary source as initiation. Students are told they will act as historians today as they interpret primary sources (three songs and one letter). To illustrate how a song can be used as a primary source, the teacher could play or read the lyrics of a song such as *Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?* Ask students what this song teaches them about life in 1930s America. After responses are shared, tell students that now they will use songs to find out what life was like in 1630s Massachusetts and 1850s California. Students should be split into pairs. Assign each pair one colonial source and one Gold Rush source. In pairs, students will read the sources, discuss them, and write down what each source teaches them about life in that time period. After students have examined the sources, they will be asked to share their insights. Insights from the different pairs will be placed on the board to give a complete picture of life in 1630s Massachusetts and 1850s California. Also, students can be asked to identify similarities and differences between these two decades and locations. Written interpretation insights are turned in. As a closure question, students will be asked if using songs and letters is an effective way to learn U.S. History. This can also be done through an exit card. An interesting follow up activity could be for students to bring lyrics or songs they enjoy to the next class for primary source interpretation. What will these songs teach future generations about life in early 21st century America?

Also, you could use these primary sources as part of a Colonial America unit or Westward Expansion unit.

How will you assess what students learned during this lesson?

- Verbal responses during discussion and sharing
- Active pair interpretation
- Written interpretations
- Exit card

Connecticut Framework Performance Standards—

Standard 1-Content Knowledge

- 1.1 Demonstrate an understanding of significant events and themes in United States history.
High School 1. Investigate the causes and effects of migration within the United States (e.g., westward movement)

Standard 2-History/Social Studies Literacy

2.2 Interpret information from a variety of primary and secondary sources including electronic media.

High School 1. Find relevant and accurate information from a variety of sources to answer a History/social studies question.

Songs and letter from U.S. History (Primary Sources)

Song Written By A Pilgrim (1630)

*If fresh meat be wanting to fill up our
dish,
We have carrots and pumpkins and
turnips and fish;
And is there a mind for a delicate dish?
We repair to the clam banks and there
we catch fish,
Instead of pottage and puddings and
custards and pies,
Our pumpkins and parsnips are
common supplies;
We have pumpkins at morning and
pumpkins at noon,
If it was not for pumpkins we should be
undone.*

Letter to William Pond from his son in Massachusetts, March, 1630

*Most loving and kind Father...[The reason for] my writing this unto you is
to let you understand what a country this New England is, where we live...
Spring cattle thrive well here, but they give small store of milk...Here is
Timber [in] good store, and acorns [in] good store; and here is good store
of fish, if we had boats to go for [it] and lines to serve fishing. Here are good
stores of wild fowl [birds used for food], but they are hard to come by. It is
harder to get a shot than it is in old England.So here we may live if we
have supplies every year from old England; otherwise we cannot subsist
[live]....So, father, I pray, consider of my case; for here will be but a very
Poor being—no being—without, loving father, your help with provisions
[food] from old England.*

The Lousy Miner (1850s California)

*It's four long years since I reached this land.
In search of gold among the rocks and sand;
And yet I'm poor when the truth is told.
I'm a lousy miner,
I'm a lousy miner in search of shining gold.*

*I've lived on swine till I grunt and squeal,
No one can tell how my bowels feel,
With slapjacks a-swimming in bacon grease.
I'm a lousy miner,
I'm a lousy miner; when will my troubles
cease?*

*I was covered with lice coming on the boat,
I threw away my fancy swallow-tailed coat,
And now they crawl up and down my back;
I'm a lousy miner,
I'm a lousy miner, a bite is all I have.*

*My sweetheart vowed she'd wait for me
Till I returned; but don't you see
She's married now; sure, so I'm told,
Left her lousy miner,
Left her lousy miner, in search of shining
gold.*

*Oh, land of gold, you did me deceive,
And I intend in thee my bones to leave;
So farewell home, how my friends grow
cold,
I'm a lousy miner,
I'm a lousy miner, in search of shining gold.*

Chinese John's Appeal (1850s California)

American now mind my song,
If you would but hear me sing,
And I will tell you of the wrong,
That happened until "Gee Sing",
In "fifty-two" I left my home—
I bid farewell to "Hong Kong"—
I started with Cup Gee to roam
To the land where they use the "long tom".

Chorus:

O ching hi ku tong mo ching, ching
O ching hi ku tong chi do,
Cup Gee hi ku tong mo ching, ching
Then what could Gee or I do?

In forty days, I reached the Bay (California),
And nearly starved I was sir,
I cooked and ate a dog one day,
I didn't know the laws sir.
But soon I found my dainty meal
Was 'gainst the City order,
The penalty I had to feel—
Confound the old Recorder.

By paying up my cost and fines
They freed me from the locker,
And then I started for the mines—
I got a pick and rocker.
I went to work in an untouched place,
I'm sure I meant no blame sir.
But a white man struck me in the face
And told me to leave his claim sir.

'Twas then I packed my tools away
And set up in a new place,
But there they would not let me stay—
They didn't like the cue race.
And then I knew not what to do,
I could not get employ.
The Know Nothings would bid me go—
'Twas tu nah mug ahoy.

I started then for Weaverville
Where Chinamen were thriving,
But found our China agents there
In ancient feuds were driving.
So I pitched into politics,
But with the weaker party;
The Cantons with their clubs and bricks
Did drub us out "right hearty."

I started for Yreka then;
I thought that I would stay there,
But found for even Chinamen
The "diggings" wouldn't pay there.
So I set up a washing shop,
But how extremely funny,
The miners all had dirty clothes,
But not a cent of money.

I met a big stour Indian once,
He stopped me in the trail, sir,
He drew an awful scalping knife,
And I trembled for my tail, sir.
He caught me by the hair, it's true,
In a manner quite uncivil.
But when he saw my awful cue,
He thought I was the devil.

Oh, now my friends I'm going away
From this infernal place, sir;
The balance of my days I'll stay
With the Celestial race, sir.
I'll go to raising rice and tea;
I'll be a heathen ever,
For Christians all have treated me
As men should be used never.