

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT
Lesson Title - Women of the California Gold Rush
By Cynthia Petrie

Grade – 11

Length of class period – 50 minutes

Inquiry

1. What opportunities were there for women who migrated to California during the Gold Rush?
2. What hardships did these women who went to California face?
3. How did male miners respond to the women in the mining towns?
4. How did the life of a woman in a California mining town compare to a female industrial worker back east? Which would have been a better life?

Objectives

Content:

1. Students will learn about the women who went west to participate in the California Gold Rush.
2. Students will learn about the opportunities for women during the Gold Rush.
3. Students will learn how women's lives in California were both similar and different from the women who remained back east.

Skills:

1. Students will improve their ability to analyze and interpret personal accounts of history from letters and diaries.
2. Students will improve their ability to see cause/effect relationships.
3. Students will improve their ability to make inferences and judgments based upon their knowledge of historical events and the use of primary source documents.
4. Students will improve their ability to support a point of view through writing.

Materials - A series of first-hand accounts of the lives and experiences of women who ventured to California during the Gold Rush. The diary and letter excerpts are from the following sources and are attached at the end of the lesson.

<http://www.goldrush.com/~joann/women.htm>

<http://www.historichwy49.com/women/women.html>

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23280/23280-h/23280-h.htm>

Activities

1. Students will read the excerpts on the women of the California Gold Rush and complete a chart on the pros and cons for a woman moving to California and for living and working in eastern industrial cities around 1849. They will have already studied early industrialization and the growth of cities and women's roles at that time. *See chart attached at the end of the lesson.*
2. Once the students have completed their charts we will have a class discussion on what they included on their charts. They will also compare/contrast life for women around 1849/50 in California with women living and working in eastern cities. I will put a chart on the board and write down their responses so they may add to their own as other students give ideas.
3. For homework students will write a response to the following question:

If you were a woman living and working in a New England city 1849/50 would you have packed up and moved to California to try to make your fortune in "Gold Country"?

Explain with details from the sources you read in class on women of the California Gold Rush and your notes and resources you have on early industrial cities of the northeast.

I had my students write a five paragraph essay, but this can be less (a paragraph or a page) depending on the abilities of your students and how much time you want them to spend on it.

Assessment - Students will be assessed informally on their chart completion and participation in class discussion of the topic and formally on their written essay based upon a persuasive essay rubric.

Connecticut Framework Performance Standards

- 1.1-1: Investigate the causes and effects of migration within the United States.
- 1.6-34: Analyze human factors that cause migration (e.g., economic opportunity)
- 3.2-5: Develop criteria for judging the actions or policies of an individual or group in the past.

Women of the California Gold Rush

Miner

"We saw last April, a French woman, standing in Angel's Creek, dipping and pouring water into the washer, which her husband was rocking. She wore short boots, white duck pantaloons, a red flannel shirt, with a black leather belt and a Panama hat. Day after day she could be seen working quietly and steadily, performing her share of the gold digging labor."
-San Francisco Daily Alta

Louise Clappe tried her hand at digging gold too:

"I have become a mineress; that is, if the having washed a pan of dirt with my own hands, and procured therefrom three dollars and twenty-five cents in gold dust... will entitle me to the name. I can truly say, with the blacksmith's apprentice at the close of his first day's work at the anvil, 'I am sorry I learned the trade;' for I wet my feet, tore my dress, spoilt a pair of new gloves, nearly froze my fingers, got an awful headache, took cold and lost a valuable breastpin, in this my labor of love."

Pie Maker

"I concluded to make some pies and see if I could sell them to the miners for their lunches, as there were about one hundred men on the creek, doing their own cooking - there were plenty of dried apples and dried peeled peaches from Chili, pressed in the shape of a cheese, to be had, so I bought fat salt pork and made lard, and my venture was a success. I sold fruit pies for one dollar and a quarter a piece, and mince pies for one dollar and fifty cents. I sometimes made and sold, a hundred in a day, and not even a stove to bake them in, but had two small dutch ovens." -Mary Jane Caples

One woman boasted:

"I have made about \$18,000 worth of pies—about one third of this has been clear profit. One year I dragged my own wood off the mountain and chopped it, and I have never had so much as a child to take a step for me in this country. \$11,000 I baked in one little iron skillet, a considerable portion by a campfire, without the shelter of a tree from the broiling sun."

Another woman wrote, from San Francisco:

"A smart woman can do very well in this country—true, there are not many comforts and one must work all the time and work hard, but there is plenty to do and good pay. If I was in Boston now and know what I now know of California I would come out here – if I had to hire the money to bring me out. It is the only country I ever was in where a woman received anything like a just compensation for work."

Hotel Keeper

Running a boardinghouse was the commonest money-maker for women. One woman earned \$189 a week after only three weeks of keeping boarders in the mines. She shared with her boarders accommodations decidedly minimal, as she wrote her children back East:

"We have one small room about 14 feet square, and a little back room we use for a storeroom about as large as a piece of chalk. Then we have an open chamber... divided off by a cloth. The gentlemen occupy one end, Mrs. H and daughter, your father and myself, the other. We have a curtain hung between our beds but we do not take pains to draw it, as it is of no use to be particular here."

Luzena Wilson set herself up in the boardinghouse business, too. Despite its rustic beginnings, she had grand plans for her Nevada City enterprise, which she elevated with the title 'hotel':

"I determined to set up a rival hotel. So I bought two boards from a precious pile belonging to a man who was building the second wooden house in town. With my own hands I chopped stakes, drove them into the ground, and set up my table. I bought provisions at a neighboring store, and when my husband came back at night he found, mid the weird light of the pine torches, twenty miners eating at my table. Each man as he rose put a dollar in my hand and said I might count him as a permanent customer. I called my hotel 'El Dorado.'"

From the first day it was well patronized, and I shortly after took my husband into partnership."..... -Luzena Stanley Wilson

But running a boardinghouse was hard work, as Mary Jane Megquier attested from San Francisco:

"I should like to give you an account of my work if I could do it justice. I get up and make the coffee, then I make the biscuit, then I fry the potatoes and broil 3 pounds of steak, and as much liver, while the hired woman is sweeping and setting the table. At 8 the bell rings and they are eating until nine. I do not sit until they are nearly all done...after breakfast I bake 6 loaves of bread (not very big) then 4 pies or a pudding, then we have lamb, for which we have paid \$9 a quarter, beef, pork, baked turnips, beets, potatoes, radishes, salad, and that everlasting soup, every day, dine at 2, for tea we have hash, cold meat, bread and butter, sauce and some kind of cake and I have cooked every mouthful that has been eaten excepting one day when we were on a steamboat excursion. I make 6 beds every day and do the washing and ironing and you must think I am very busy and when I dance all night I am obliged to trot all day and if I had not the constitution of 6 horses I should have been dead long ago but I am going to give up in the fall, as I am sick and tired of work."

In full agreement was Mary Ballou, who kept a boardinghouse in the mines. Her complaints included the additional inconvenience of unwelcome animals.

"Anything can walk into the kitchen and then from the kitchen into the dining room so you see the hogs and mules can walk in any time, day or night, if they choose to do so. Sometimes I am up all times a night scaring the hogs and mules out of the house. I made a blueberry pudding today for dinner. Sometimes I am making soups and cranberry tarts and baking chicken that cost \$4 a head and cooking eggs at \$3 a dozen. Sometimes boiling cabbage and turnips and frying fritters and broiling steak and cooking codfish and potatoes. Sometimes I am taking care of babies and nursing at the rate of \$50 a week but I would not advise any Lady to come out here and suffer the toil and fatigue that I have suffered for the sake of a little gold."

Gamblers

"In one corner, a coarse-looking female might preside over a roulette-table, and, perhaps, in the central and crowded part of the room a Spanish or Mexican woman would be sitting at monte, with a cigarita in her lips, which she replaced every few moments by a fresh one. In a very few fortunate houses, neat, delicate, and sometimes beautiful French women were every evening to be seen in the orchestra. These houses, to the honor of the coarse crowd be it said, were always filled."..... -Eliza W. Farnham

Muleteer

"She is genuine Castilian, owns a train of mules and buys and loads them. We bought the flour she sent to Weaverville. I had a strong idea of offering myself...but Angelita told me she had a husband somewhere in the mines and she has a boy about five years old. So I didn't ask her." -Franklin Buck

Speculator

"I have before spoken of her....Her husband would give her no money to speculate with, so she sold some pieces of jewelry, which she didn't value particularly, & which cost her about twenty dollars at home, with this jewelry she purchased onions which she sold on arriving here for eighteen hundred dollars, quite a handsome sum, was it not?...She also brought some quinces & made quite a nice little profit on them." -John McCrackan

Victim

"As she began to make considerable money the bigger, if not better, half of this couple began to feel quite rich and went off on a drunk, and when his own money was spent he went to his wife for more, but she refused him, and he, in his drunken rage, picked up a gun near by and shot her dead." -William Manley

Washerwoman

"Magnificent woman that, sir," he said, addressing my husband; "a wife of the right sort, she is. Why," he added, absolutely rising into eloquence as he spoke, "she earnt her old man," (said individual twenty-one years of age, perhaps) "nine hundred dollars in nine weeks, clear of all expenses, by washing! Such women ain't common, I tell you; if they were, a man might marry and make money by the operation." -Louisa Clapp

One woman determined to get her gold the old-fashioned way, by marrying it. She placed what must have been the first personals ad in a California newspaper, under the heading:

A Husband Wanted... By a lady who can wash, cook, scour, sew, milk, spin, weave, hoe (can't plow), cut wood, make fires, feed the pigs, raise chickens, rock the cradle, (gold rocker, I thank you, Sir!), saw a plank, drive nails, etc. These are a few of the solid branches; now for the ornamental. "long time ago" she went as far as syntax, read Murray's Geography and through two rules in Pike's Grammar. Could find 6 states on the atlas. Could read, and you can see that she can write. Can—no, could—paint roses, butterflies, ships, etc. Could once dance; can ride a horse, donkey or oxen...Oh, I hear you ask, could she scold? No, she can't you _____good-for-nothing _____!

Now for her terms. Her age is none of your business. She is neither handsome nor a fright, yet an old man need not apply, nor any who have not a little more education than she has, and a great deal more gold, for there must be \$20,000 settled on her before she will bind herself to perform all the above. Address to Dorothy Scraggs, with real name. P.O. Marysville."

Dame Shirley (MRS. LOUISE AMELIA KNAPP SMITH CLAPPE) describes one of her first experiences in the mining town of Rich Bar, CA and with the men who inhabited it:

Through the middle of Rich Bar runs the street, thickly planted with about forty tenements, among which figure round tents, square tents, plank hovels, log cabins, etc., the residences varying in elegance and convenience from the palatial splendor of "The Empire" down to a "local habitation" formed of pine boughs and covered with old calico shirts.

To-day I visited the "office," the only one on the river. I had heard so much about it from others, as well as from F., that I really *did* expect something extra. When I entered this imposing place the shock to my optic nerves was so great that I sank helplessly upon one of the benches, which ran, divan-like, the whole length (ten feet!) of the building, and laughed till I cried. There was, of course, no floor. A rude nondescript, in one corner, on which was ranged the medical library, consisting of half a dozen volumes, did duty as a table. The shelves, which looked like sticks snatched hastily from the woodpile, and nailed up without the least alteration, contained quite a respectable array of medicines. The white-canvas window stared everybody in the face, with the interesting information painted on it, in perfect grenadiers of capitals, that this was Dr. ——'s office.

At my loud laugh (which, it must be confessed, was noisy enough to give the whole street assurance of the presence of a woman) F. looked shocked, and his partner looked prussic acid. To him (the partner, I mean; he hadn't been out of the mines for years) the "office" was a thing sacred, and set apart for an almost admiring worship. It was a beautiful architectural ideal embodied in pine shingles and cotton cloth. Here he literally "lived, and moved, and had his being," his bed and his board. With an admiration of the fine arts truly praiseworthy, he had fondly decorated the walls thereof with sundry pictures from Godey's, Graham's, and Sartain's magazines, among which, fashion-plates with imaginary monsters sporting miraculous waists, impossible wrists, and fabulous feet, largely predominated.

During my call at the office I was introduced to one of the *finders* of Rich Bar,—a young Georgian,—who afterwards gave me a full description of all the facts connected with its discovery. This unfortunate had not spoken to a woman for two years, and, in the elation of his heart at the joyful event, he rushed out and invested capital in some excellent champagne, which I, on Willie's principle of "doing in Turkey as the Turkeys do," assisted the company in drinking, to the honor of my own arrival. I mention this as an instance that nothing can be done in California without the sanctifying influence of the *spirit*, and it generally appears in a much more "questionable shape" than that of sparkling wine

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United States History
The Gold Rush

Name _____
Date _____

Women of the California Gold Rush - 1849/50

| Pros for Moving to California | Cons for Moving to California |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
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Women of Eastern Industrial Cities - 1849/50

| Pros for Living & Working in Cities | Cons for Living & Working in Cities |
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