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The American Experience

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“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!’ cries she With silent lips. Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send
these, the homeless, tempesttossed to me I lift my lamp beside the golden door!
Emma Lazarus

In 1986 we celebrated the centennial of the Statue of Liberty and these words were brought to our attention once again. Maybe the words that Emma Lazarus uses to describe the meaning of this great monument seem exaggerated or melodramatic, but if we look at them carefully we see the reality of what 300 years of immigration have brought to this country. From the 1607 founding of Virginia by English colonists “to—fetch treasure-and enjoy-religious and happy government” (7.p.88), to the present “boat people” and illegal immigrants hoping for a new start in life, it seems that “the special destiny of America was to be a country of immigrants”(10.p.2)

These immigrants came from many lands, they came for many reasons, and are still coming. If we stop for a moment, we can envision how difficult this journey must have been, not only physically, but also emotionally.

“Little is more extraordinary than the decision to migrate, little more extraordinary than the accumulation of emotions and thoughts which finally leads a family to say farewell to a community where it has lived for centuries, to abandon old ties and familiar landmarks, and to sail across dark seas to a strange land.”(7.p.4)

But in spite of this emotional pain and great fear, many millions chose to leave their country and emigrate to the New World. They came for many reasons, but we know that predominantly they came for religious freedom, to escape political persecution and to overcome economic hardship. These conditions had made life in their countries harder to endure, and therefore the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” attracted them even more.

However what they found here was far from the “promised land.” They found the freedom of expression denied to them by many of their dictators; they found the opportunity to advance their lot in life; they found

the liberty to express their religion openly, but not without many hardships and losses. The freedom was here, but so were the prejudices. The economic opportunities were available, but only very few were able to accumulate the fortunes dreamed. Religion was not imposed on anyone, but certain religions were cause of downgrading and even ridicule. Therefore, although, this land promised much, the deliverance of these promises was slow to come. But the immigrants still came, and they are still coming today.

The first waves of immigrants were, of course, the English, with the Jamestown settlement in 1607 and the Plymouth colony in 1620. These early settlements were followed by many other Englishmen anxious to find religious freedom and economic opportunities. These early English settlers contributed to imprint an undeniable English flavor to this new country. The language was English, the religion a form or another of Protestantism, the color white and the political and social tradition copied from English government. These early English settlers were followed by the Dutch, who settled “Niewn Amsterdam and explored the Hudson River”, (7.p.11) and the French, both Protestant Huguenots and Catholic Acadians.

Many Germans migrated also during this early period, so many that “by the eve of the Revolution there were over 100,000 German immigrants and descendants of German immigrants living in the United States”. (7.p.14)

The Irish

However the great waves of immigration did not begin until the 1840-1850 period, with the Irish leaving their country after the great potato famine, and resettling along the East coast of the United States. They came in great numbers and were the first large group to experience the ridicule and discrimination that many other immigrants would later endure. Although they spoke English, a great advantage to their assimilation, their way of dressing, of speaking was “foreign”; they were poor, unskilled, often uneducated, and many doors were closed to them. They were willing to work, but many “No Irish need apply” signs kept them from better jobs. But they were ready to take on the most menial jobs, any manual work that was available. And the great expanding railroads and canals needed much labor, and the Irish immigrants were able to furnish this source of labor. Gradually they were able to improve their condition in life, and began to expand their influence and power. They were very instrumental in the growth of the Catholic Church in America, and together with the Catholic religion they emphasized the importance of a Catholic education, so giving the impetus to the founding of Parochial schools, and large Catholic Institutions like Fordham, Georgetown and Notre Dame University.

The immense growth and assimilation of this group can be judged simply by saying that in 100 years the Irish Catholic went from the tenements of lower Manhattan to the splendor of the White House.

The Germans

During the same period of the migration of the Irish, large numbers of Germans also came to this country. In fact “between 1830 and 1930, the period of the greatest migration from Europe to the United States, Germany sent six million people to the United States—more than any other country”.(7.p.51)

Differently from other immigrant groups, the Germans usually came with some resources, and with many employable skills. Therefore they were not forced to concentrate in the urban centers of the East, where most of the unskilled labor was required, but they were able to relocate themselves over a wider geographical area. In fact many of them brought with them their agricultural skills, which were very vital in changing millions of acres of wild territory into profitable farm land.

Their influence, however, was not limited only to farming, but many aspects of everyday life were changed by them. To the Germans we owe the idea of kindergarten, the concept of state-endowed university, the program of physical education in the schools, and of course our ever-present hamburgers and frankfurters.

The Germans were attracted to this New World by the great opportunities that its vastness could offer, but they were also eager to leave the chaotic conditions of Central Europe after the defeat of Napoleon. These immigrants became quite involved in the American political process, and after the Civil War they were instrumental in the formation of the Republican Party.

During both World Wars, the descendants of these early German immigrants, served with distinction in the American army, fighting the Germans of Europe.

The Jews

After many centuries of persecution and exile, large numbers of Jews had settled in Germany and Russia. But in either country they did not enjoy the freedom that they would have liked to have; they were still poor and lived in ghettos, either by necessity or by tradition. Their living conditions were still controlled by prejudices and their opportunities were very limited.

“It was a time when many Germans were sailing for America; the letters they wrote home stirred the imagination of their countrymen of the Jewish religion. Between 1820 and 1880, some 250,000 German-speaking Jews came to this country. They crossed the oceans, just as the new republic began its westward expansion, and they followed close behind the pioneers. (22. pg. 141)

Many of them became small merchants, continuing a tradition that had sustained them in Europe for many centuries. But as their opportunities improved, they made sure that their children received the education that they did not have and by these means advance their lot in life.

But soon another large immigration of Jews was to take place. These new immigrants came from Russia and the Polish provinces that were under her control. The Tsars of Russia kept their subjects under an iron rule, and the Jews felt this repression the most. The great majority of them were forced to reside in a particular section of the country, and within this region they were restricted to Jewish-only villages. Their living conditions became even more unbearable after the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, and soon great waves of Russian Jews began to cross the Atlantic. They left Russia knowing that they were never to return to such an inhospitable place, and their determination to succeed in the new world was very important in their early adjustment to the new country. Many other immigrants, as we will see later on, came and are coming today, only for a little while, save some money and return to their homeland.

“By the 1880s the United States had completed the major phase of its expansion. Pioneers were no longer needed; it was a time of industrial growth in the cities.” (22. p.148) In fact although in 1880 there were about 80,000 Jews in the city, “by 1910 there were a million a quarter Jews in New York City. They then formed more than a quarter of the population, a proportion they have maintained ever since.” (94. p.139).

Most of the Jewish people living in America today are second or third generation Americans, and their integration in the mainstream of life here is complete, while at the same time the commitment to their religion and their culture has remained strong.

The Italians

During the 1860s and 1870s Italy went through a period called “Risorgimento”, which culminated in the unification of Italy under one ruler. Up to that time, since the Fall of the Roman Empire in 476 A.D., Italy existed only in name, being forever divided in many small states. But the unification of the country did little to change the life of the poor peasants, who gained very little from the liberation of the country. The division that had existed for many centuries, continued to live through conflicting loyalties, strong local patriotism and dozens of different dialects to which the people held on tenaciously.

The main resource of the country was agriculture, which had sustained the many feudal states for many centuries. Each town or village had a few individuals who owned most of the land, and the peasants either rented the land for a high price or were paid a very meager daily wage. The land was dry, the tools were old, and the way of cultivating the land not modernized in any way. The “contadini” or farmers saw little relief from their plight and began to look to emigration as their solution. And emigrate they did indeed!

First most of the emigration was focused toward South America: Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Venezuela. Later on the Italian migration shifted from South America to North America.

“After 1900 emigration from Southern Italy and Sicily increased, and became almost as numerous as that from the Northern and Central parts of the country. And whereas emigrants from Northern and Central Italy continued for the most part to go to countries where their relatives had become established, to Latin America, the new streams of immigrants from the South headed for the United States.” (4. p.183)

The tendency of the Italians to follow their friends and relatives and establish themselves nearby, springs from the long attachment to one’s own “paese” or town. (From the word paese we get the word “paesano”, meaning “from the same town”). These poor, illiterate and unskilled emigrants, tried to soften the hardship of relocation by moving close to people whom they knew, people who understood their dialect, people who shared their life history and those of their ancestors. Italians always had a certain reluctance to accept foreigners or strangers among their group, and for this reason clinged to their “paesani” with tenacity.

For example here in New Haven we have a large contingency of people that have emigrated from Amalfi, a small town on the Tyrrhenian coast. Amalfi is our “Sister City”; the feast of St. Andrew, the patron Saint of Amalfi, is celebrated here in New Haven; the beauty and charms of Amalfi are frequently praised in the local press. Therefore, although Italy has hundreds of other small, beautiful, picturesque little towns, Amalfi is the one more frequently mentioned because so many Amalfitani or their descendants reside here.

This desire to be near their townsmen gave rise to so many “Little Italies” in so many American cities. These transplanted “paesi” were a source of strength and encouragement for the immigrants, but at the same time it delayed the process of assimilation that was so important in this “melting pot.” In fact only with the second and third generation of ItalianAmerican, the integration and acceptance begins to take place. In today’s America, ItalianAmericans occupy places of importance in all fields, from the Supreme Court to the Senate, from the Statehouse to the Board of Directors. Many of them have found success in the arts and in the world of entertainment, following a long tradition in these fields.

The Negroes

In 1619, one year before the arrival of the Mayflower, the first shipload of twenty Negro slaves arrives at Jamestown. (7.p.88). They were the first immigrants, after the English, to come and settle in this new country, although their arrival had been against their will. In the next 200 years over 350,000 Africans were brought

into the country under the most inhuman conditions. Many times they were captured in Africa by enemy tribes and sold to slave traders in exchange for beads, cloth, guns, rum and other goods. The plantations of the South needed large numbers of cheap laborers to work in their sugar, tobacco and cotton fields and the African slaves fulfilled this demand.

Their emigration was a forced one, and in the process much of their African culture and identity was lost. Due to this difference “it is difficult for Negroes to view themselves as other ethnic groups viewed themselves—because the Negro is only an American” (4.p.53), and most of their African culture was lost during the long years of slavery. Today the descendants of these early forced immigrants form 11.7 percent of our population.

After the Civil War many Negroes left the South, and migrated North in search of work and better living conditions. Some of them settled in the new states, and territories of the West, but the majority headed for the new industrial centers of the North.

In the North the Negroes found the freedom that they had dreamed, but just as all the other immigrant groups, they found prejudice, mistrust and poor living conditions. And just as the other immigrant groups found the answer to these problems in education, hard work and mutual support, so do the Negroes have found these to be the avenues of success.

The Chinese

Although relocation to a new world was difficult for all groups, the immigrants from Europe had the common roots of Western Civilization to bind them together. The immigrants from China and Japan, as the slaves from Africa, came from totally different cultures and therefore their adjustment was much more difficult.

“It was the cry of ‘Gold in California’ in 1848 that brought the first wave of Chinese immigrants to Gum Son, the land they called ‘Mountain of Gold’.” (22. p.165)

At first only few Chinese merchants made this journey, but soon their encouraging words brought many others, and by 1851 there were about 25,000 Chinese on the West Coast of the United States, mostly working in the mines. But the difference of language, customs clothing and religion made the Chinese miners stand out, and objects of ridicule and mistrust by the other miners. In fact, in time, many of them were forced to leave this work, and find occupations in other fields.

Being California a new territory, there was a critical need for services of an everyday nature such as laundries, restaurants and household helpers. The Chinese displaced from the mines found occupations in these areas. Soon another source of labor was to appear the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific Railroads. The need was so great that the Chinese Six Companies began importing thousands of men directly from China. Their passage was prepaid and then deducted from their monthly pay. The work was hard, but the poor Chinese peasants were willing to work. In 1869 the railroads were completed and thousands of Chinese were left without work. Some of them returned to China, but the majority of them remained and were joined by 123,000 more Chinese that landed in California between 1870 and 1880.

The economic boom of California was coming to a close, and the newly unionized white workers resented the cheap labor offered by the Chinese laborers and feared for their jobs. This labor insecurity turned into riots, assaults and arsons against the Chinese, and eventually into local and federal legislature aimed at keeping Chinese out of jobs and out of the country. “The Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited the entry of Chinese workers

for ten years." (22. p.174). This law brought on a break in relations with China, and it remained in vigor for 60 years. Due to these undesirable conditions many Chinese returned to their homeland and the few that remained made their way East, establishing little Chinatowns in many American cities.

In these tiny cities within cities the Chinese clung to their customs, language, religion and traditional clothes. They found the answers to all their needs within Chinatown and mistrusted and avoided the Americans. The children were encouraged to learn English, but Chinese always came first, and any dispute or difference between Chinese people were resolved by the elders of the community.

As the years went by fewer and fewer Chinese were left in the United States, and only with the advent of World War II and the partnership of the United States and China were the Exclusion Laws repealed.

After World War II and the Communist takeover of China in 1949, many Chinese have immigrated to America. This new wave of immigrants together with younger Chinese-Americans, have left "Chinatown", and joined the mainstream of America becoming very successful in all their endeavors.

The Puerto Ricans

During the 1930s, after 35 years of American administration, the island of Puerto Rico was in very poor conditions, largely overpopulated, with few resources, almost no industries and depending only on the unstable cash crop of sugar.

The Puerto Ricans, being American citizens, began to look to America as the solution to their problems. They began to come, first by few thousands, then soon in greater and greater numbers. In New York City alone the 45,000 Puerto Rican residents of 1930 had increased to more than a quarter of a million in 1950, and to 720,000 in 1961 (4.p.94).

One aspect of Puerto Rican migration is however quite singular, and that is the easy accessibility to the island. Only three hours away from New York, and maybe one hour from Miami, it presents an escape that other immigrants never had. The early European immigrants knew that they had to make a success of their staying, because they could not return to their countries easily. It was too far, too costly, and in some cases as the Russian Jews, politically impossible. But the Puerto Rican could always go back. This tendency to return frequently has caused many problems in housing, education and labor.

The language difference has again divided the other immigrants from the Puerto Ricans. European and Asian immigrants knew that in order to obtain their citizenship they had to learn English. Therefore the emphasis was on learning the language as quickly as possible. But this requirement is not imposed on the Puerto Rican. He is an American citizen, regardless of what language he speaks. Many Americans are not aware of this particular difference and say that as their grandfathers had to learn and speak only English to succeed, so should the Puerto Ricans. The problem of bilingualism therefore is a complex one, with no easy answers. There are movements in the country defending each side of this issue. Time will be the judge.

Finally let us say that we have always dreamed of America as a land like no other, where immigrants of all nations could find success by almost magic. In fact, immigration has always been a very difficult process. This assimilation process has exacted a high price from the immigrants, and our current recognition of this difficulty is a positive step forward. We love to hear the funny stories of misunderstandings due to language barriers, but let us look more deeply in these stories, and let us recognize the pain. And if we recognize the pain, let us make the adjustment, if we can, a little easier for the new immigrants.

Purpose

This unit is designed to supplement the curriculum of the 7th and 8th grade Social Studies Program. In 7th grade the Social Studies program covers the Eastern Hemisphere, in 8th grade the Western Hemisphere.

The American immigrant experience has influenced our image as a nation (8th grade curriculum), and also our relationship with other nations around the world (7th grade curriculum).

It is very important that the students understand that “we” as a nation, do not stand by ourselves, but are involved with the world around us. One way to bring that world closer to us is to understand that we have ethnical ties with almost every nation in the world. The cultural heritages of many countries have influenced the formation of our culture, the dreams and desires of many nations have been fulfilled and completed in our nation. The dream of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” that has lived in the hearts of many immigrants has found its completion here.

By understanding these dreams, we can comprehend more fully our destiny and our reality. I also hope that by understanding the immigrants better, we understand what being an American means.

Lesson Plan 1

Introduction:

Theme Many different people have immigrated to the United States of America over the last 300 years. All have come with a desire to resettle and begin a new and better life in this new country.

Objectives After completing the lesson, the students should understand:

1. The large number and the reasons why so many people chose to come to America.
2. The hardship involved in relocating to another country.
3. The contribution that each group has made to the overall tapestry of this country.

Vocabulary study The teacher will facilitate the study of the lesson by identify and define any word that might be unfamiliar to the student.

Activities

1. Have each student ask their relatives the country of origin of their ancestors.
2. If available, have the students talk to a relative or friend who immigrated to the United States, and remembers the experience.
3. Have these students share their reports with the other students and discuss the contents.

Lesson Plan 2

Theme *As our ancestors have struggled to become part of this country, so the present day immigrant is struggling. Relate the continuing influx of immigrants to this country to our everyday life , and our awareness of this or lack of it.*

Objectives *To observe and identify with a new immigrant. his or her problems and rewards.*

Vocabulary study As in lesson 1.

Activities

1. Identify, where possible, a new immigrant student in the class or in the school. Ask this student to relate some of his or her personal experiences.
2. Ask the immigrant parent of a student to speak to the class and talk about their feelings about this adoptive country.
3. Have students write an assignment paper describing:
 - a. How does it feel to go and live in a foreign country, not knowing the language, the way of life, etc. . . .
 - b. How would it feel to go to school in this foreign country.
 - c. What things would you find different in this country.
 - d. Write a letter back home and describe the similarities and differences of this country.

Lesson Plan 3

Theme *In spite of our cultural pluralism, we are one nation with common bonds and shared dreams and ideals.*

Objectives

1. The student will identify and evaluate some of the similarities and differences among Americans.
2. The student will answer the question "Is America like a 'melting pot' or more like a 'tossed salad'"?

Vocabulary study As in Lesson 1.

Activities *Have students answer similar questions about immigration in America.*

1. Name several different ethnic groups living in America today.
2. Give some reasons why people have emigrated to the United States.
3. What are some of the skills brought by these people.

4. Identify different celebrations or traditions that other groups observe.
5. How are Americans alike and how are they different.

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A very informative and well illustrated series of the various aspects of immigration.

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