



Irish Immigrant Families in Mid-Late 19th Century America

Curriculum Unit 90.05.07

by Mary Baba

In the history classes I teach to hearing-impaired high school students, there is a section on immigration to America during the 19th century. While teaching the subject, I found that it was difficult for my students to develop a thorough understanding of this period of American history. There are so many different ethnic groups, countries and reasons for immigration to America that the students were not able to appreciate the great sacrifices and struggles of these people to achieve better lives for themselves and their children. The students had a hard time identifying with the immigrants and seeing the realities of immigrant life.

By focusing on one specific ethnic group, the Irish, I hope to narrow their focus. I want to use the Irish immigrants' experiences to illustrate the experiences of immigrants and their families in 19th century America. By doing so, I hope the students will come to see these people as individuals who were willing to endure hardships to improve their lives.

My objectives for this unit are:

1. to develop a general idea of why immigrants came to the United States
2. to know the reasons why the Irish immigrants came to America
3. to gain an understanding of the difficulties endured on the journey to America
4. to gain an understanding of the process of being admitted to the United States
5. to become aware of living conditions in the urban areas where the Irish immigrants settled
6. to learn about the types of jobs available
7. to become aware of discrimination from "native" Americans and its effects
8. to understand how ethnic groups different from their own have had to undergo experiences of suffering and discrimination
9. to gain an appreciation of Irish culture

The strategies in the unit will give the students opportunities to read, write, improve vocabulary and develop critical thinking skills. There will also be hands-on activities which will involve the students and stimulate their interest.

The strategies will include:

1. Viewing of videos and films for information and discussion
2. Use of photographs and drawings for visual images to stimulate discussions and/or writing assignments
3. Excerpts from letters and passages written by Irish immigrants
4. Readings and discussions of Irish songs, ballads, myths, and legends
5. Writing journals as Irish immigrants moving to America and establishing lives here
6. Role-playing
7. Irish cooking

I plan on teaching this unit for six weeks. However, depending on the class discussions and interests and the amount of material covered, this time frame may be extended.

I feel this curriculum would be most appropriately used with upper middle school students and high school students. The curriculum could be incorporated into an American history course or stand alone as a separate unit.

Objective 1: Immigration to the United States

Between 1824-1924, 34 million Europeans immigrated to the United States. ¹ A primary reason was the Industrial Revolution. To begin this unit, we will see how farmlands in Europe were being reduced and farmers, craftsmen and laborers were living in poverty. These European people believed that the United States was truly a land of opportunity and were willing to change their whole way of life to take advantage of the opportunities.

Another reason was political. For example, many Jews were subjected to discrimination and cruel treatment in their homelands. The 1848 revolution in Germany caused many political refugees to seek a new country. Therefore, many oppressed people felt the United States to be a sanctuary for them. Here was a country where rights were actually guaranteed to all people by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. In this country, they believed they would have opportunities for education and be free to practice their religion and own property. It is no wonder, then, that millions of Europeans came to the United States believing that they would have better lives than the ones they left behind.

To go along with this overview, I plan to show a video, "The Immigrant Experience." (This video is closed-

captioned for the hearing-impaired, which will allow my students to read the dialogue). This shows the experiences of a “typical” immigrant family coming to the United States. It depicts the family on the ship as well as arriving and settling here. The video deals with the living and working conditions of the family and shows the desire of the young son to improve his language and education and become “Americanized.” Some vocabulary words (such as “greenhorn”, “foreigner”, and “piecework”) are introduced which will help the students further in the unit. This video should pique the students’ interests and desires to learn more about immigrants’ lives.

Objective 2: Why the Irish Immigrants Left Ireland

After learning about a few major reasons why immigrants from many countries came to the United States, we will focus specifically on the Irish experience. We will talk about the land system of Ireland in the 18th and 19th centuries, where farmers were forced to rent the land they lived and worked on from wealthy landowners in England. The crop they depended on primarily for food and rent was potatoes. In 1845, a fungus hit the potato fields and a devastating famine ensued. This famine killed 2.5 million people and was quickly followed by three more crop failures in 1846, 1848 and 1851. ² Potatoes rotted in the fields, people were forced from their homes and many starved. This Potato Famine caused a mass exodus of Irish citizens. Between 1846-1851, more than one million Irish immigrants came to America, and another 873,000 arrived between 1860-1880. (W., pp. 39-40) Most of these people were poor, undernourished and feeling defeated by life.

To help the students see the effects of the Potato Famine, we will use the photographs and drawings in the book, *The Irish World*, which show people being evicted from their homes. By looking at the photographs, we can discuss what the feelings of the people must have been. We will also read and discuss some excerpts from *Irish Songs and Ballads* while discussing the Potato Famine. These were written by Irish people during this time period and show their sadness, despair and fear.

Also at this time, the students will begin writing a journal. They will imagine themselves as living in Ireland at the time of the Potato Famine. Each student can decide if he/she is part of a family or on his/her own. However, the students will decide how the Potato Famine affects them and discuss their feelings as they prepare to leave Ireland.

Objective 3: Journey to America

The decision to leave Ireland was only the beginning of a long and difficult journey. Once aboard the ship that would bring them to America (a 2-3 month trip), the emigrating Irish found almost intolerable conditions. The steerage compartments were about five feet high with two tiers of beds. Men, women and children (sometimes as many as 900 people) were crowded together with room only for themselves and their belongings rolled up next to them. A narrow cot was provided for each person but often it was not even wide enough to turn over. Beds and bedding were not aired out or washed until the day before arrival and inspection by government officials. The only air and light available was through a hatchway, which was closed during stormy or rough weather. The air became increasingly filthy and foul as the journey progressed. Food was often insufficient and not cooked properly. Grain, hardened and served as a lump, was common. Clean water was also insufficient for the needs of the steerage passengers. Toilets were inadequate for the number of people aboard, and stench permeated the air.

During this section of the unit, we will again examine photographs, drawings and written descriptions of the passage in steerage. *The Irish Americans*, *Ellis Island*, and *Gateway to Liberty* will provide material. After discussions and readings, the students will again write in their journals. They will tell about how it was for

them to leave Ireland. What did they bring with them? Who came with them and who did they leave behind? What are their hopes as they board the ship? What are they looking for in America? They can then describe their journeys, including the conditions on the ship and their feelings upon their first sight of America.

Objective 4: Admittance to the United States

Before 1847, immigrants arriving in the United States were faced with chaos. There was no official reception area and boarding house runners, peddlers and tavern keepers boarded the ships to make direct deals with the newly arriving immigrants. Once the immigrants got to the dock, the situation deteriorated further. They were sold tickets to the wrong destinations, cheated while changing money and talked into paying money for rundown boarding houses. Therefore, in 1855, Castle Garden Receiving Station was opened to regulate the processing of incoming passengers.

In 1887, however, charges of corruption within the administration of Castle Garden led to an investigation of abuses. The investigative committee subsequently recommended that immigration regulation be turned over to the federal government. Ellis Island was selected as the new site and was opened in January, 1892. Immigrants were now taken to Ellis Island for processing. However, since Ellis Island could handle only about 5,000 people a day, it was not uncommon for another 10,000-15,000 to wait on ships for two days just to get there. ³

Once on Ellis Island, the immigrants went through medical examinations. If the doctors saw anything indicating a possible contagious disease or something that would cause the immigrant to become a public charge (such as a mental or physical handicap) the immigrant's shoulder was marked with chalk for a further examination. Naturally, most immigrants did not understand what was happening and often had to wait days for a family member to have a further examination. If a person failed the medical examinations, he/she was subject to deportation.

After medical examinations, they had to answer a series of questions including their ability to read and write, their final destinations in the United States, how much money they had and if they were joining relatives in the United States. About 20 percent of immigrants were held over for further questioning (where they could not have a lawyer or communicate with family and friends). It took up to two weeks for these cases to be decided. During this time, the immigrants were housed in crowded buildings but were fed and given medical care. (B., p. 90)

In this section of the unit, we will look at the photographs in *Ellis Island*, which give excellent images of different steps in the admissions process. There are also several first hand accounts written by the immigrants which we will read. The students will also write their own descriptions in their journals.

This section would also lend itself to role-playing. The students could take roles as immigrants, doctors and questioners. Some students could be admitted to the country while their family members are detained for further examinations. Others could be held for further questioning and not be allowed to contact their families. Still others could be told that they had failed the examinations and had to return to Ireland immediately. This role-playing situation should help the students feel the confusion, frustration and fear the immigrants faced.

Objective 5: Living Conditions

Once they arrived in the United States, the majority of Irish immigrants remained in the port cities where they landed. Often, they were sick and weak from lack of food and the rigors of the journey. Most had little money

and had no other option than to remain in the seaports. Others mistrusted farming since the land had caused so many problems in Ireland and did not want to move to less populated farm areas. With so many newly arriving immigrants crowded together, there were limited job opportunities and terrible living conditions.

People were crowded into rooms with often a whole family living in one room. In 1850, it was reported that in the Irish Fifth Ward in Providence, an average of nine people or 1.82 families lived in one or two rooms. ⁴ The Five Points slum area in Manhattan was described by a witness as having 75 people living in 12 rooms and paying about \$4 a month for rent. At this time, this was equivalent to about one week's pay. In the back of the building were wooden hovels which rented for \$3 a month. (W., pp. 65-66) Many tenements did not have indoor plumbing or running water. Sewage collected in outhouses and rats were prevalent, carrying and spreading disease, often to children. In 1857, 2/3 of New York City's deaths were children under age 5, mostly Irish. (W., p. 67) There were also epidemics of typhoid, cholera, tuberculosis and pneumonia throughout East Coast cities.

We will explore these living conditions especially through the photographs of Jacob Riis. His book, *How the Other Half Lives*, includes very moving and descriptive photographs of the slums, tenements, families and children. A video, "Immigrants and Missionaries," which examines the life and work of Jacob Riis, is also available for additional information on living conditions. This will help the students gain an understanding of the existing conditions as well as give them information about this remarkable man.

During this section, the students will add to their journals by describing their living conditions. They can tell about where they are living, including how many rooms they have and how many people share their housing with them. They can tell about what they see and hear around them and the problems they are faced with.

Objective 6: Types of Jobs Available

When the newly arriving Irish immigrants looked for work, they found only the lowest unskilled jobs available to them. Men were hired for low-paying, physically demanding and dangerous work. Wages for unskilled jobs during the 1840s were under 75 cents a day for 10-12 hours of work. (W., p. 43) The men built canals, railroads, streets, houses and sewer systems. Many others worked on the docks or canals.

Irish women, like Irish men, also had low-paying unskilled jobs. There were two main types of work available for Irish women—domestic servants or factory work. Domestic work was secure and dependable and was not seasonal. However, the work was tiring and strenuous. It was not unusual for one maid to cook, clean and care for children 16 hours a day or more.

Women who worked in factories found the work to be dirty, low-paying and dangerous. In Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore in 1833, Irish women who worked making cotton shirts were on a piecework system. They were paid between 6-10 cents a shirt and worked about 13-14 hours a day. Since they could only make nine shirts a week, the maximum pay was about 90 cents a week. ⁵

An appropriate book for students to read to understand the working conditions would be *Michael's Victory*. This is the story of an Irish boy in the 1850s working on the railroads. From the woman's point of view, the students could be assigned *Philadelphia Greenhorn*. This is written by Ann McNab, an Irish woman who came to America in the 1860s and gives a good first-hand account of her work as a domestic servant.

At this time, the students should choose a job and describe it in their journals. They should tell where they are working, how many hours a day they work and how much money they make. They can talk about how many

people the wages must support and/or how many people in the family must work to make ends meet.

The students could also be encouraged to make a budget. They could see how much money each family member earns and compare the income to the cost of housing, food, etc. If they did not have enough money, perhaps they could think of alternative ways to increase their income, such as having to take in piecework at night. This will also help them to realize how it was necessary for every family member to work in order to maintain their lives and try to improve them.

Objectives 6 & 7: Discrimination

There was very deep prejudice against Irish-Americans during the 19th century, especially as more immigrants came into the United States. Many Americans considered the Irish as dirty, stupid and lazy. Newspaper cartoonists often contributed to this image by drawing Irishmen as looking like apes with a jutting jaw and sloping forehead. Newspapers also wrote about Irish people using the derogatory term of "Paddy."

Americans also blamed the Irish immigrants for causing economic problems. They felt that the great numbers of Irish workers would put Americans out of work or lower wages. Americans felt that the increased number of people would mean taxes would rise due to additional needs for police, fire, health, sanitation, schools and poorhouses.

Consequently, it became acceptable to discriminate against the Irish. Many job posters and newspaper ads ended with "No Irish Need Apply." Hotels and restaurants may have had signs stating "No Irish Permitted in this Establishment." In 1851-1852, railroad contractors in New York advertised for workers and promised good pay. When mostly Irish applied, the pay was lowered to fifty-five cents a day. When the workers protested, the militia was called in to force the men to accept. (M., p. 322)

The Irish reacted to the conditions they were faced with in different ways. Many changed their accents, names and even religion to escape discrimination. Others turned to alcohol and crime. Still others turned to the Catholic Church. Since many of the priests and nuns were Irish, it provided a connection to home. It also helped the immigrants feel safe from prejudice and helped them learn American customs.

In this section of the unit, the teacher can help the students to understand that ethnic groups other than their own were affected by prejudice and discrimination. This can be done by looking at cartoons about Irish-Americans and also looking at the posters and ads forbidding the Irish to either apply for jobs or enter an establishment. The students can then look at posters and signs of "Whites only" hotels, movies, restaurants, etc. before and during the Civil Rights movement. *A Pictorial History of the Negro In America* has several of these photographs. The students can also look at how black people were portrayed in editorial cartoons and written about in newspapers.

In addition, the students can discuss attitudes and stereotypes native Americans had toward Irish-Americans and compare these to the attitudes and stereotypes of many white people toward black people. The types of education and employment available to both groups could be examined and violence against both groups could also be explored.

Role-playing could also be utilized in this section of the unit. The students could apply for jobs and be met with discrimination. This would allow opportunities to demonstrate how different people react to discrimination (anger, violence, depression, perseverance, etc.). It would also be a good opportunity to lead to discussions about the existence and results of discrimination in the past as well as in the present.

Also at this time, the students should write their feelings about the discrimination in their journals. Then, since they are now settled in America, they should write letters to their friends and families back in Ireland. They can tell them about their journey to America, their arrival here and where they are living and working. They can also state if they were faced with discrimination and how they reacted to it and dealt with it. Finally, they can tell if life in America is what they expected it to be when they left Ireland and if they are satisfied with their decisions to come here.

Objective 8: Irish Culture

Numerous activities should be incorporated throughout this unit to help the students gain an understanding of the Irish as an ethnic group. It would be up to each teacher to choose which activities to use and when to use them. There can be discussions of what an ethnic group consists of and the students can look at ways in which the Irish have retained their identity and ways in which they have been assimilated into the mainstream of America.

The students can read folktales from *Irish Folk Tales* to give them an idea of Irish myths and legends. Also, *Irish American Almanac and Green Pages* gives information on Irish proverbs, superstitions, words, and symbols. It also provides short biographies of 100 Notable Irish-Americans from the past and present. Depending on the class make up and the time frame of the unit, the teacher may wish to assign research projects, papers, or oral reports on one or more of these people.

There are also many films available about the Irish and Irish-Americans. *The Fighting 69th*, which is about an Irish-American unit during World War I and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* about a young girl growing up in Brooklyn at the turn of the century may be useful to learn about Irish-Americans.

The teacher can also encourage the students to attend the Connecticut Irish Festival. This is held in early July at the Yale Field and has traditional folk dancing and singing as well as cultural and historical exhibits.

The students could also write to Irish-American organizations to receive information on the Irish in America. Several of these organizations exist, especially in the New York area. Addresses of many of the organizations are given in *Irish American Almanac and Green Pages*.

The students can also share a meal of Irish food, perhaps at the end of the unit. *Cooking Irish Style Today* contains many recipes for Irish dishes. The students could each decide on a recipe, prepare the food and bring it to class. Or, the class could decide on some recipes to prepare as a group during classtime.

Notes

1. Mary J. Shapiro, *Gateway to Liberty* (New York: Random House, 1986), p. 69.
2. J. F. Watts, *The Irish Americans* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), pp. 23-24. All subsequent references to this book are cited in the text and will appear with the letter "W."
3. Barbara Benton, *Ellis Island* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1985), p. 62. All subsequent references to this book are cited in the text and will appear with the letter "B."
4. Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 319. All

subsequent references to this book are cited in the text and will appear with the letter “M.”

5. Mathew Carey, “appeal to the Wealthy of the Land” in William D. Griffin, Editor, *The Irish In America—550-1972* (New York: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1973), p. 46.

Bibliography for Teachers

Benton, Barbara. *Ellis Island* . New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1985.

This book presents the history and construction of Ellis Island. It also gives accounts of the immigrants who passed through the admittance process there. It has excellent photographs and drawings of Castle Garden and Ellis Island.

Blumenthal, Shirley and Ozer, Jerome S. *Coming to America — Immigrants from the British Isles*. New York: Delacourte Press, 1980.

Describes why the Irish immigrants left Ireland and came to America. It contains photographs and drawings of Irish people in America. There is also a chapter on anti-Irish feeling and discrimination in employment and housing.

Carey, Mathew, “Appeal to the Wealthy of the Land,” in Griffin, William D., Editor, *The Irish in America 550-1972* . Dobbs Ferry, New York: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1973.

This article talks about working conditions and wages of Irish employees in the 19th century.

Cooper, Brian E., Editor. *Irish American Almanac and Green Pages* . New York: Perennial Library, 1989.

This book contains extensive information on Irish organizations, festivals, and publications. It also gives short biographies of 100 Notable Irish-Americans from the past and present.

Glassie, Henry, Editor. *Irish Folk Tales* . New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

A selection of Irish folk tales from different areas of Ireland. These were written from ancient times through the present.

Gutman, Herbert G. *Who Built America* . New York: Pantheon Books, 1989.

Gives information on immigrants who came to America. It also includes letters written by immigrants and has descriptions of working conditions.

Hughes, Langston and Meltzer, Milton. *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* . New York: Crown Publishers, 1968.

This book has many illustrations, photographs, and written material which would be useful for comparisons when talking about discrimination.

Kinney, Noreen. *Cooking Irish Style Today* . Dublin: The Mercier Press, 1977.

Includes many different recipes for Irish dishes.

Miller, Kerby A. *Emigrants and Exiles* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

This book talks about the reasons for Irish immigration. It also shows the impact immigration had on Ireland and the United States. Contains many letters, journals and diaries written by immigrants.

Nolan, Janet A. *Ourselves Alone*. Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1989.

Tells of women's emigration from Ireland between 1885-1920.

O'Tuathaigh, Gearoid O. "The Distressed Society" in DeBreffny, Brian, Editor, *The Irish World* . London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1977.

This chapter describes the Potato Famine in Ireland. It has pictures and drawings of families being evicted from their homes after the famine.

Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives* . New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971.

Excellent descriptions and photographs of slums, tenements and living conditions of immigrants in New York.

Taylor, Philip. *The Distant Magnet* . New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Discusses why immigrants chose to come to America.

Shannon, William V. "The Irish in America" in DeBreffny, Brian, Editor, *The Irish World* . London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1977.

This chapter has photographs of living and working conditions of Irish immigrants. It also discusses life in America.

Wright, Robert L., Editor. *Irish Emigrant Ballads and Songs* . Bowling Green University: Popular Press, 1975.

Irish ballads and songs written by Irish immigrants while leaving Ireland, journeying to America and living in America.

Videos:

The Immigrant Experience . Learning Company of America. This is the story of an immigrant family coming to America and settling here.

Immigration In America's History . Coronet/MTI Film and Video. This video reenacts the major waves of immigration to the United States.

Immigrants and Missionaries . Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. Discusses the work of Jacob Riis.

Bibliography for Students

Branson, Karen. *Streets of Gold* . Toronto: General Publishing Co., Limited, 1981.

The fictional story of a 14-year-old Irish girl who came to America with her family in 1847. Tells her family's experiences in finding a place to live, getting a job and prejudice. Also has positive aspects the family found in America such as educational opportunities and freedom.

Crane, Stephen. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* . New York: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1960.

The story of a young Irish girl who lived in the urban slums at the turn of the century. Shows poverty and loneliness she experienced.

Judson, Clara Ingram. *Michael's Victory*. New York: Houghton, 1946.

The story of an Irish boy in the 1850s, whose family came to Ohio. It tells about his adventures while he was working on the railroads.

McNab, Ann. "Philadelphia Greenhorn" in Cavanah, Frances, Editor. *We Came to America* . Philadelphia: Macrae Smith Company, 1954.

The first-hand account of a young Irish woman who came to America in the 1860s. She tells of the Potato Famine, her journey to the United States and her work as a cook in a literary woman's home.

Shapiro, Mary J. *Gateway to Liberty* . New York: Random House, 1986.

Tells about construction of the Statue of Liberty. Also describes immigrants' crossing to New York and conditions on ships. Many good photographs.

Watts, J. F. *Irish Americans* . New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988.

Discusses Irish immigration and describes living conditions. Also section on famous Irish-Americans. Many photographs and drawings.

Lesson Plan I

Objective To use photographs of Irish-American families to develop thinking and writing skills.

Materials Ellis Island, Coming to America, The Irish World, How the Other Half Lives

Procedure The students will each choose a photograph of an Irish-American family from one of the above books. After examining the photographs, the students will write about the people in the pictures.

Possible questions to answer while writing could include:

1. Who is in the photograph?
2. What are they doing?
3. Do they work? If so, where?

4. Where do they live?
5. What are their living conditions?
6. Who took the photograph?
7. Why was it taken?
8. What happened just before and after the photograph was taken?
9. What do the people in the photograph think and feel about their lives in America?
10. What do they think and feel about each other?

11. What do you think happened to these people in the future?

Lesson Plan II

Objective *The students will role-play to experience and understand the feelings of Irish immigrants going through the admittance process at Castle Garden or Ellis Island.*

Materials Readings of first-hand accounts of admittance process in *Ellis Island* and examination of photographs from the book.

Procedure *After discussion of the above, the students and teacher will decide on situations to role-play.*

Some possible situations may be:

A husband, wife, and daughter are admitted to the country but their two-year-old son's admittance is delayed for a further medical examination.

A mother and her three children are detained for further questioning and are not allowed to contact the father who is waiting to meet them.

An extended family of mother, father, children, and grandparents go through the admittance process. All are admitted to the United States except the father, who is soon to be deported back to Ireland.

After the role-playing, the teacher will lead the students in a discussion of how they felt during these situations. Since students sometimes have difficulty using a variety of vocabulary words to label feelings accurately, this could also be an opportunity for the teacher to assist them with vocabulary development.

Lesson Plan III

Objective To compare attitudes and stereotypes of many native Americans toward 19th century Irish immigrants with those of many white Americans toward black Americans and how both groups deal with discrimination.

Materials Photographs and readings from *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* , *Coming to America* , “*Appeal to the Wealthy of the Land,*” “*The Irish in America,*” and *How the Other Half Lives* .

Procedure Teacher and students discuss meaning of:

prejudice

discrimination

minority

ethnic group

stereotype

attitudes

After reading selections from the above books and looking at photographs, the teacher will ask the students to make two comparative lists using a few words or short phrases:

How native Americans discriminated against Irish-Americans

How white Americans discriminated against black Americans

After giving the students sufficient time to make lists, the teacher and students will look at the similarities and differences in both lists. They can discuss possible reasons for the existence of prejudice and discrimination against both groups. If they wish, the students can share personal feelings or experiences of discrimination.

Next, the teacher could again ask the students to make two lists;

How Irish-Americans dealt with discrimination

How black Americans dealt with discrimination

Again, the teacher and students will discuss the similarities and differences. The students can also state which ways they feel to be positive and which ways are negative. If students wish, they can share with the class if they have ever used any of these strategies and if the strategies helped or hurt them.

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