

Beyond the Gold Rush

The Basics

Time Required

2 periods

Subject Areas

American History, grades 4-8

Expansion and Reform, 1800-1860

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards K-5

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The Lesson

Introduction

“Seeing the Elephant” is a colloquialism spawned during the Gold Rush to describe the intense curiosity generated by the opening of the West and the discovery of gold in California. This metaphor was later modified in ironic fashion by miners in the gold fields to describe the overwhelming challenge involved in extracting enough gold to make the venture worthwhile. As a result, this song gained many new verses over the Gold Rush years.

The song was first performed in San Francisco as the title piece of a musical show by “Doc” Robinson in 1850. It later appeared in Put’s Original California Songster. See “Sweet Betsy from Pike” (VAT 3.72) to learn more about John Stone a.k.a. “Old Put.” The tune is a Daniel Emmett minstrel song, “De Boatman Dance.”

“The Old Settler’s Song,” also known as “Acres of Clams,” has enjoyed a more enduring place in the American folk repertoire, having been recorded by Pete Seeger and other modern balladeers. The words are attributed to one Frank Henry, an Oregon pioneer. The tune, according to Oscar Brand, originated as a 17th century Irish harp tune. If so, it later reappeared as the tune for the British music hall song, “Rosin the Bow.”

This song is rare in portraying the wanderlust that turned some miners into drifters once they had played out their claims in the California gold fields. It shows as well the role they played in the eventual settlement of the Pacific Northwest.

Guiding Questions

- What are the interactions and contributions of the various people and cultures that have lived in or migrated to the American West?
- Identify and study two or more points of view of an event, issue or problem.
- Identify characteristics of an event, issue, or problem, suggesting possible causes and results.

Learning Objectives

- Students will analyze and compare the lyrics of two songs that reflect the personal experiences of miners during and after the Gold Rush.
- Students will use these songs to explore possible motivations of the gold seekers beyond monetary gain.
- Students will compare the expectations of miners as they arrived in California with the realities of life in the diggings.
- Students will speculate on possible options available to miners following the California Gold Rush particularly as they relate to the later development of California and the Pacific Northwest.

Preparation Instructions

Songs used in this lesson:

- “Seeing the Elephant”
- “The Old Settler’s Song”
- “He’s the Man for Me”

Lesson Activities

Day 1

Introductory learning activities:

- Brainstorm a chart listing all the comforts of home that a prospective miner might have to leave behind on one side and the reasons they would make that choice on the other.
- Listen to and analyze “Seeing the Elephant.” Then map the progress of the song’s pioneers across the continent and down through the gold fields.

Song discussion questions and activities:

Share the Indian story of the elephant and the blind men, each of whom experience an elephant in a different way, depending on which part of the beast they touch.

- Why might different miners have “seen the elephant” of the American West in different ways?
- What did their experiences have in common?

- What would have surprised them about life in the gold fields of California?
- What would they have written in their letters home?

Follow-up learning activities:

- Write a fictional letter home from a miner to his or her family back east.
- Share demographic figures for the foreign born population in California by 1860. Research how these workers were perceived and treated by American miners.

Day 2

Introductory learning activity:

Create individual profiles for a panel of student “miners” who will discuss their life options in the years following the California Gold Rush. Others students propose options for the miners or offer them news based on historical developments that may influence their decisions.

Assessment

Song discussion, questions, and activities:

Share “The Old Settler’s Song.” Briefly explain the various mining techniques mentioned in the song. Discuss and clarify the meaning of other unfamiliar words.

- What do you think the old settler means when he says, “I have been frequently sold?”
- Why do you think he gave up mining?
- How does the environment of Puget Sound differ from other places the man had been?
- To what do you think “the end of the jumping off place” refers?
- What does it mean that he couldn’t “get down to the soil?”
- How was farming on the frontier similar to mining? How was it different?
- How did his life on Puget Sound compare to his life in the diggings?
- How would the Old Settler have described “the elephant” in his later years?
- Why did the old settler claim to be so happy on Puget Sound?
- How old do you think the narrator was when he arrived on Puget Sound? How old do you think he is now?
- What do you think might be the world’s “shams” to which the old settler refers in the last verse? How were they manifest in the gold fields?
- What conditions do you think are necessary to be happy?
- How do you think the Gold Rush affected the “character” of the West and the nation as a whole?

Extending the Lesson

- Create a realistic timeline of the Old Settler’s life using the lyrics as a guide for your imagination.
- Research the history and resources of the Puget Sound area. What role did it play in the economy of the West in latter half of the 19th century.
- Create a fictional genealogy for the old settler that includes his ancestors and descendants based on what you know about the background of the miners and the later development of the West. Assign different students to create profiles of each character.

Resources

Lyrics

“Seeing the Elephant” from *Days of Gold*

1.
When I left the States for gold, ev’rything I had I sold:
A stove, a bed, a fat old sow, sixteen chickens and a cow.

Chorus:
So leave, you miners, leave;
oh, leave, you miners leave.
Take my advice, kill off your lice,
or else go up in the mountains.
Oh, no, lots of dust,
I’m goin’ to the city to go on a bust!

2.
Off I started, Yankee-like, and soon fell in with a lot from Pike;
The next group was some durned “Whoa-ha’s,” a right smart bunch from Arkansas.

3.
The poor coyotes stole my meat, then I had nought but bread to eat
It was not long till that gave out, then how I cursed that Truckee route!

4.
On I traveled through the pines, till at last I found the Northern Mines;
Stole some food and ate my fill, then away I went to Marysville.

5.
Because I would not pay my bill, they kicked me out of Downieville;
I stole a mule and lost the trail and then fetched up in Hangtown Jail.

6.
When the elephant I’d seen, I’m durned if I thought I was green.
And others say, both night and morn, they saw him comin’ round the Horn.

"The Old Settler's Song" from *Songs of the Great American West*

1.
I’ve wandered all over this country,
prospecting and digging for gold;
I’ve tunneled, hydraulicked and cradles,
and I have been frequently sold.

Chorus:
(*The first line of each chorus is the second half of the last line of the previous verse. The second line of each chorus is the entire second line of the previous verse.*)

And I have been frequently sold;
yes I have been frequently sold;
I've tunneled, hydraulicked and cradles,
and I have been frequently sold

2.

For one who gets riches by mining,
perceiving that hundreds grow poor,
I made up my mind to try farming,
the only pursuit that is sure.

3.

So rolling my grub in my blanket,
I left all my tools on the ground;
And started one morning to shank it
for a country they call Puget Sound

4.

Arriving flat broke in mid-winter,
I found it enveloped in fog,
And covered all over with timber,
thick as hair on the back of a dog.

5.

As I looked on the prospect so gloomy,
the tears trickled over my face,
For I felt that my trouble had brought me
to the edge of the jumping-off place.

6.

I took up a claim in the forest
and set myself down to hard toil;
For two years I chopped and I logged,
but I never got down to the soil.

7.

I tried to get out of the country,
but poverty forced me to stay
Until I became an old settler,
then you couldn't drive me away.

8.

But now that I'm used to the climate,
I think that if man ever found
A spot to live easy and happy,
that Eden is on Puget Sound.

9.

No longer the slave of ambition,
I laugh at the world and its shams;

And I think of my happy condition,
surrounded by acres of clams.

“He's the Man for Me” from *Put's Golden Songster*

1.
I've traveled the mountains all over,
and now to the valleys I'll go;
And live like a pig in the clover,
in sight of huge mountains of snow.

Chorus:
Same pattern as “The Old Settler’s Song”

2.
I'll marry a rich senorita
and live on a ranch in the west;
Have forty young greasers to greet her,
and fifty if put to the test.

3.
I'll wear a right pert standing collar
and smoke cigaritos, of course;
And when I run short of a dollar,
I'll try and obtain a divorce.

4.
I'm greatly in favor of mining,
with me, though, it does not agree;
I'd rather be gently reclining
with Beauty upon a settee.

5.
I'm not much in favor of thieving,
at all events, just as I feel;
But never will work for a living,
so long as I'm able to steal.

Other resources:

Seeger, Pete. *Singalong*, (Sanders Theatre, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1980), Smithsonian Folkways CD SF 40027/8, Washington, DC, 1991.

Put's Golden Songster; music from Minstrel Songs Old and New. Oliver Ditson & Co., 1882.

Brands, H.W., *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream.* New York: Doubleday, 2002.

Marks, Paula M., *Precious Dust: The Saga of the Western Gold Rushes*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1994.

Arlen, Karen, et al, ed., *Days of Gold: Songs of the California Gold Rush*. Oakland, CA: Calicanto Associates, 1999. Includes sheet music and two CD's.

Silber, Irwin, ed., *Songs of the Great American West*. New York: Dover, 1967.