

## **Conflicting Images of Migrant Labor**

### **The Basics**

#### **Time Required**

Several class meetings

#### **Subject Areas**

Middle and High School History, Language Arts, Social Studies

The Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945

#### **Common Core Standards Addressed:**

Writing Standards K-5

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

Writing Standards for English Language Arts 6-12

#### **Author**

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### **The Lesson**

#### **Introduction**

"Big Rock Candy Mountain" is about a hobo's idea of paradise. It was first recorded in 1928 by Harry McClintock, also known as "Haywire Mac."

Probably best remembered for its recording by Burl Ives in the 1940s, it has been recorded by many throughout the world, the most popular version being recorded by Dorsey Burnette in 1960, reaching the Billboard Top Ten.

Generally, the song is recognized as a turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century hobo ballad based on "An Invitation to Lubberland" (1685). However, authorship is attributed to McClintock because earlier written evidence of the song is not known. There was some attempt by McClintock to enforce the copyright but he lost the case. As such it remains in the public domain.

Before recording the song, he cleaned it up considerably from the version he sang as a street busker in the late 1890s. Originally the song described a child being recruited into the hobo life by tales of the "big, rock candy mountain." Such recruitment actually occurred, with hobos enchanting children with tales of adventure called "ghost stories" by other hobos, but there is no evidence to substantiate that recruitment was the purpose of this song. In later incarnations, changes occur in order to clean up the song: "cigarette trees" become "peppermint trees," and the "streams of alkyhol trickling down the rocks" become "lemonade." The "lake of gin" is not mentioned and the "lake of whiskey" becomes a "lake of soda."

#### **Guiding Questions**

Who (what) are/were hoboes? (offer supplemental information, including hobo signs and their purpose. They can be found here: <http://www.worldpath.net/~minstrel/hobosign.htm>)

Who are migrant laborers?

What might be the economic realities of migrant laborers and hoboes?

Which image – hobo or migrant laborer - has the more favorable view in American sensibilities?

Why might there be differences in the perceptions held of the two groups?

Consider the following paradigm: A man who travels from one place to another and works is a hobo; a man who travels from one place to another and doesn't work is a tramp; a man who doesn't travel from one place to another and doesn't work is a bum. Is the paradigm a valid evaluation of hoboes? If so, are hoboes and migrant laborers in the same category? If not, how are hoboes and migrant workers different?

### **Learning Objectives**

To understand why migrant laborers are considered an underclass in American society.

### **Preparation Instructions**

Songs used in this lesson:

“Big Rock Candy Mountain”

"Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)"

“Hobo’s Lullaby”

### **Lesson Activities**

#### **First listening:**

- While listening to and reading the lyrics of the song "Big Rock Candy Mountain" (the lyrics can be found here <http://www.angelfire.com/folk/famoustramp/song.html>), students mark vocabulary and phrasing that they do not understand. As a group, define and explain these situations after the song is over.

#### **Second listening/reading:**

- Mark places where the song indicates that things are not all pork rinds and bug zappers. (Follow-up: ask the students to explain what the passage indicates.)

Introduce and discuss "Hobo’s Lullaby" (the lyrics are here: <http://www.arlo.net/lyrics/hobos-lullaby.shtml>) following the same procedure as for “Big Rock Candy Mountain.”

### Discussion Questions (using history text for assistance):

- If there is a split view of the hobo life, why has it been mythologized? Is the hobo life a good life?
- What impact might the following have on the hobo (as an abstract concept):

Pastoral nomadism  
Jeffersonian Agrarianism  
Industrialization (post 1865)  
Poetry of Walt Whitman  
The rise of the Railroad  
Rugged Individualism  
Increasing attempts to unionize workers  
The Great Depression  
Vagrancy laws

Introduce the song "Deportee" using the same procedure as "Big Rock Candy Mountain" and "Hobo's Lullaby."

### Discussion questions:

- How is this song different from the previous songs? What might account for this difference?
- What impact might the following have had on the American view of migrant labor that is imbedded in the song:

Immigration laws  
The Great Depression  
Wobblies  
Attempts at unionization  
*The Grapes of Wrath*  
Cultural and language differences  
Zoot Suit Riots  
Xenophobia  
Japanese internment camps

### Question for assessment:

- Why are migrant laborers considered an underclass in American culture? (*AP classes: Either a change over time essay or a comparative essay or even a DBQ.*)

### Assessable product or performance:

Present a product that reflects an understanding of the material and integrates at least three of the areas read and discussed.

Possible products (by no means exhaustive or written in stone): Letter, Diorama, book report, Puppet show, Food product, Video, Game, Portrait, Comic Strip, Song, Musical composition, Poem, Model, Skit, Play, Radio Play, Mime performance, Teach a lesson, Photo essay, Children's book, Travel Brochure, Toy, Slogans, Mottoes, Ad campaign, Slide show, Dot-to-dot, Paint by numbers, Jigsaw puzzle, Political Campaign, Organize Community Action, Venn Diagram, Finger puppets, Comparative song(s), Magazine, Newspaper, Lesson plan, Dance, Sermon, Movie, Editorial, Talk show, Letter to the Editor,

Diary, Landscape, Powerpoint, Essay, Database, Graphs, Charts, Maps, Cartoon, Sculpture, Speech, Rebus, Jokes, Costume design, Clothing design, Comedy routine, Silkscreen, Print, Tabloid front page.

Product selection will be mutually agreed upon and the standards determined by both the teacher and student.

## **Assessment**

### **For AP U.S. History and Literature:**

- The essay will be evaluated according to the standards presented in the ACORN booklet. Or I might go easy and let them create a product of their own choosing. We will arrive at a mutual agreement as to what the product must entail.

### **Literature and History classes other than AP:**

- Students will develop a product that addresses the question and responds in a manner that reflects an understanding of the material and an integration of at least two views of migrant labor.

### **Assessment criteria and performance descriptors:**

All this will be determined according to the needs and abilities and goals of each student as mutually agreed upon in the IEP for the student in question. Any work that falls short of those mutually determined goals will be redone (reworking of the assignment will be done as many times as needed).

## **Extending the Lesson**

- Discussion of contemporary issues regarding migrant laborers.
- Discussion of wage slavery in countries other than the United States.
- Discussion of the issue of unionization of migrant laborers.

## **Resources**

### **Lyrics**

“Big Rock Mountain” available at

<http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/b/bigrockcandymountain.shtml>

"Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)" available at

[http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Plane\\_Wreck\\_At\\_Los\\_Gatos.htm](http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Plane_Wreck_At_Los_Gatos.htm)

“Hobo’s Lullaby” available at

[http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Hobos\\_Lullaby.htm](http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Hobos_Lullaby.htm)

***Other resources:***

- American history textbook (chapters beginning with the late 1870s through WWII)

***Optional Films:***

- *Sullivan's Travels*
- *The Journey of Natty Gann*
- *My Man Godfrey*
- *El Norte*(R)
- *Born in East L.A.*(R)
- *West Side Story*
- *Bread and Roses* (r)
- the rock throwing scene at the end of *City Lights*.

(The movies rated "R" are so rated for language.)

***Optional Literature:***

- "Zoo Island" by Tomas Rivera ("Zoo Island" is outstanding and can be read from 5th through 12th)
- *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros
- *The Journey of Natty Gann* by Ann Matthews
- *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman
- *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck.