Coming To America, Coming To Oregon:
Exploring Immigration Trends from the Past to Present Day

**Grades:** 6-12  
**Subjects:** American History, Oregon History, Civics, Geography, Social Studies  
**Suggested Time Allotment:** 3 Class Periods

**Overview:**

This lesson begins with a role-playing simulation that will help to personalize the immigration experience for students. They will then research and analyze an historic West Coast immigration controversy using the [Historic Oregon Newspapers](http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/sn83045782/1905-12-24/ed-1/seq-33/) Website. Finally, present-day immigration trends in the State of Oregon and America at large will be explored through further, contemporary news resources.

A) **Researching the Chinese Exclusion Acts of the 1880s**

The Instructor should begin this lesson by explaining that, whereas most American immigrants of European descent entered our country through Ellis Island and other ports on the Atlantic seaboard, the majority of Chinese, Japanese, and Pacific Islanders who immigrated to this country arrived at the West Coast. Utilizing a World Map, a class discussion can be initiated centering on the details of geography, nineteenth century transportation technologies, and socioeconomic factors that led to this unbalanced pattern of immigration.

Chinese laborers had begun immigrating to the U.S. in 1848. At first, they mostly came to work on construction of the transcontinental railroads. The immigrants also found work mining gold, harvesting fruit and vegetables, and processing salmon in the early canning factories. ‘Chinatown’ districts sprung up in most cities and larger towns in Oregon and throughout the West. By 1882, however, the U.S. Congress passed the first in a series of Chinese Exclusion Acts, laws designed to severely limit the entry of Asian people into America.

There is a wealth of related material available on [Historic Oregon Newspapers](http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/sn83045782/1905-12-24/ed-1/seq-33/). **Instructors should be forewarned:** this area of study will expose a great deal of racial stereotyping and outright prejudice from Oregon’s past. It is a good deal idea to address this at the beginning, and provide the class with some context on racial attitudes of earlier times.

An excellent starting point is to view and discuss as a class the following piece from the *Portland Sunday Oregonian,* December 24, 1905:

Entitled “Chinese Flock To Portland in Winter,” this is a photographic essay on ‘the most populous Chinatown in the Northwest.’ We must be thankful for these photos, because they offer us a rare glimpse at turn-of-the-century Chinatown, but we also should consider the culturally and racially biased manner in which they were originally presented to readers of the Oregonian.

*Lead the class discussion with questions such as:* What sort of attitudes towards the Chinese are revealed in the photographs and the accompanying article? What do you think of the way the pictures are captioned? Are the newspaper’s criticisms of the Chinese immigrants fair or unfair? What are some things the Chinese people pictured here might have said, if they had been asked to tell their side of the story?

Delving further into Historic Oregon Newspapers, students may be assigned a research project with the aim of learning more about the enforcement and reception of the Exclusion Acts here in Oregon. Direct them to locate relevant news items from the 1880’s through the early decades of the 20th Century.

*Key questions to focus on:* Why did Chinese workers first start coming to America? Why did the Chinese sometimes have problems getting along in the dominant Euro-American society? Why did some Americans begin to object to the presence of the Chinese in this country? What are some measures they tried to take to keep out Chinese immigrants? Were other groups of people affected? How and why did some Asian immigrants try to get around the laws against immigration? How was the public debate circa 1848-1910 different and/or similar to the types of debates we are still having about immigration issues in the present day?

**B) Below are links to some of the most relevant of the many available stories on East Asian immigration and Asian Exclusion:**

- “Value of Our Salmon Fisheries,” --Willamette Farmer, September 27, 1873:
  [Link](http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/sn85042522/1873-09-27/ed-1/seq-1)*article contains an early reference to Chinese living and working in Oregon (Astoria)

- “A Chinese Protest”—Willamette Farmer, July 19, 1873:
  [Link](http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/sn85042522/1873-07-19/ed-1/seq-2)*Offers Chinese perspective on immigration issues and U.S.-China relations

- “Free Versus Slave”—Daily Morning Astorian, February 23, 1886:
  [Link](http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/sn96061150/1886-02-23/ed-1/seq-2)*equates Chinese “coolie” labor with slave labor

- “Hard To Enforce” —Daily Morning Astorian, October 27, 1888:
  [Link](http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/sn96061150/1888-10-27/ed-1/seq-3)*issues of illegal immigration at the US-Mexico border in 1888

- “Japanese Immigration” –Portland Oregonian, May 9, 1900:
  [Link](http://oregonnews.uoregon.edu/lccn/sn83025138/1900-05-09/ed-1/seq-2)*Labor Unionists argue to have exclusion acts extended to Japanese, as well
In-class discussion time should be set aside for students to share the results of their research and their feelings about it. Subsequently, students will be asked to apply their research by writing a newspaper editorial of their own, from the point of view of an Oregon journalist in the 1880’s, persuasively arguing against the Chinese Exclusion Acts.

C) Interpreting Immigration Trends in Our Own Time

Begin the lesson with a brief overview of the earliest chapter of U.S. history in Oregon:

The first permanent American settlement in Oregon was Fort Astoria, founded in 1811 by representatives of John Jacob Astor’s Pacific Fur Company. This pioneering group of sailors and trappers consisted mostly of immigrant Scots, Canadian citizens of mixed French and Native American ancestry, and Native Hawaiian Islanders. Nonetheless, this was officially an American venture and the fort flew the American Flag.

Initiate an open class discussion by asking questions such as:

Is it surprising to learn that our State’s first settlers were such a culturally and racially diverse group? In light of this fact, what should we make of the attempts of later generations of Oregonians to keep out the Chinese, African Americans and other non-European immigrants? Are there any groups of immigrants who might be made to feel similarly unwelcome today? Why do you think this is so?

Lesson Activity:

As a class, read the article “Who’s Coming To America?” from the NY Times Online Teacher Connections Network, and study the accompanying Graphs of Immigration Data (Note: if your students are working online, there is a link to the graph page at the bottom of the article; otherwise, materials can be printed out ahead of time; graphs may be projected.) Organize students into groups of 3-4 and have them work together to provide written answers to the following questions using the article and graphs:

1. What percentage of current Oregon residents were born in another country?

2. How does this compare with the number of immigrants living in the other Pacific Northwest states of Washington, Idaho and Montana?
3. Which U.S. States have the highest percentage of foreign-born residents as of 2007?

4. What are some of the factors that might lead more immigrants to settle in states such as New York or California, and fewer to move to states such as North Dakota or Mississippi?

5. Between 1900 and 2007, which two ethnic groups have experienced the greatest increase in immigration to the U.S.A.? Which group has experienced the greatest decrease in immigration?

6. Why were there few legal restrictions on immigration to America prior to 1875?

7. As far back as the 1800’s, some native-born Americans were against allowing foreigners to move to our country. What were some of the reasons these people gave to explain their opposition to immigration? To what extent are these reasons similar to arguments we sometimes hear against immigration today? How are they different?

8. What are some reasons that might help to explain why immigrant families from some parts of the world have presently achieved higher levels of income than immigrants from other countries?

9. What are some of the major differences between second-generation Americans (i.e. the children of immigrant parents) and their parents who first immigrated here? What does this say about American culture?

10. Given the current trends in immigration to America, what are some of the ways that our country might be expected to change in the future? In what ways will it probably remain unchanged?

After students have completed the questionnaire, regroup the class and lead an open discussion of the questions posed and the answers they came up with.

Examples of follow-up homework that can be assigned:

--Interview an immigrant person in your own community to learn about their personal experiences and impressions of moving to America.

--Using current newspapers and online news sources, find editorial / opinion articles both for and against current immigration policies. Write a paper or presentation summarizing the two sides of this issue.

--Have students research their own family histories and cultural backgrounds. Ask them to bring in to class an object (article of ethnic clothing, foreign flag, book or magazine in a non-English language, craft object, dish of food, etc.) that reflects their heritage. Use this “show and tell” to lead a discussion on American diversity.

OTHER ONLINE RESOURCES: