

The American Dream

Overview:

Students read a first hand account of one person's image of America, then compare that with their own impressions of America.

Preparation:

Paper, pen or pencil

Time:

½ class period

Procedure:

1. Read the following first-hand account of how one Italian boy's imagined America.
2. Discuss the important elements of his "America."
3. Have students write either a response to the account, or their own description of how they imagined America before they came, and if they still think of it in the same ways.

Questions:

1. What is the image of America to this boy?
2. How is the boy's account different from the reality he may have faced in America?
3. How does this image fit the reality that students know?
4. How do people around the world today think of America?
5. Are their perceptions correct? Incorrect? How?
6. How did you view America before you arrived?
7. How did it change, it at all, after you arrived?

Standards:

Source:

Story from From Rhoda Hoff, America's Immigrants: Adventures in Eyewitness History, pp. 121-122. Lesson by Amnesty International, USA

1. As a boy, this Italian knew what he wanted to do:

I played with the idea of going to America when I was but eight or nine.

My notion of the United States then was that it was a grand, amazing, somewhat fantastic place--the Golden Country--a sort of Paradise--the Land of Promise in more ways than one--huge beyond conception, thousands of miles across the ocean, untellably exciting, explosive, quite incomparable to the tiny, quite, lovely Carniola; a place full of movement and turmoil, wherein things that were unimaginable and impossible in Blato happened daily as a matter of course.

In America one could make pots of money in a short time, acquire immense holdings, wear a shirt collar, and have polish on one's boots like a gospod--one of the gentry--and eat white bread, soup, and meat on week-days as well as on Sundays, even if one were but an ordinary workman to begin with. In Blato no one ate white bread or soup and meat, except on Sundays and holidays and very few then.

In America one did not have to remain an ordinary workman. There, it seemed, one man was as good as the next. There were dozens, perhaps scores, or even hundreds of immigrants in the United States, one-time peasants and workers from the Balkans and from Poland, Slovakia, Bohemia and elsewhere, who, in two or three years, had earned and saved enough money working in the Pennsylvania, Ohio, or Illinois coal-mines or steel-mills to go to regions called Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Nebraska, and there buy sections of land each of which was larger than the whole area owned by peasants in Blato.... Oh, America was immense--immense!

I heard a returned Amerikanec tell of regions known as Texas and Oklahoma where single farms-- renche (ranches), he called them--were larger than the entire province of Carniola! It took a man days to ride on horseback from one end of such a ranch to the other. At that time I accepted as truth nearly everything I heard about America. I believed that a single cattleman in Texas owned more cattle than there were in the entire Balkans. And my credulity was not strained when I heard that there were gold-mines in California, and trees more than a thousand years old with trunks so enormous that it required a dozen men, clasping each other's hands to encircle them with their arms.

In America everything was possible. There even the common people were 'citizens,' not 'subjects,' as they were in Austria and in most other European countries. A citizen, or even a non-citizen foreigner, could walk up to the President of the United States and pump his hand.