The California Gold Rush: 1849 - An Oral History Class Activity
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"California as I Saw It"
First-Person Narratives of California's Early Years, 1849-1900

Action Plan
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Teaching with Primary Sources

Instructors: Nik Roberts, M.S., David Lonich, Ph.D.
I. Pennsylvania State Standards:

**HISTORY 8.1.4.B:**
Distinguish between fact and **opinion** from multiple points of view, and **primary sources** as related to historical events.

**GEOGRAPHY 7.2.4.A:**
Identify the physical characteristics of **places** and **regions**.

**READING, WRITING, SPEAKING, AND LISTENING R4.A.1.3.1:**
Make inferences and/or draw conclusions based on information from text.

II. Inquiry based Learning Model

**Defining:** Students will be introduced to United States History in relationship to the 1849 California Gold Rush.

**Locating:** Students will locate geographic regions on a United States map and locate the distance from their hometown.

**Selecting/Analyzing:** Students will be able to analyze primary and secondary sources: (a letter from a traveler).

**Organizing/ Synthesising:** Students will work in groups and plan an imaginary 1849 trip to California.

**Creating/ Presenting:** Students will present their plans to the class, and they will defend their choices of plans and activities.

**Evaluating:** Students will be assessed by completing a 10 point quiz.
III. Descriptive Walk-Through of My Activity

This Action Plan for Learning describes one specific activity that I would use when teaching learners about The California Gold Rush of 1849. Since this will be a theme unit which I will be using across the curriculum with my students, I will be describing only a brief section of the lesson. They will be prepared to view a primary source which is a letter from a traveler in 1850. The traveler is writing to his cousin and seems to be weary and disappointed in his endeavors to find gold in the golden land of promise. In his letter, the traveler reveals the appearance of the bays and the “boom town” cities which offer little promise. The traveler finds his way to Sacramento, California.

Initially, I will briefly review the previous history lessons which lead to this activity. Through the defining stage, as an anticipatory set, I will ask the students to explain what reasons might they consider packing everything they own and leave for California this week? I will write responses on the board. I will then ask students to think of this as the year 1849. What kinds of technologies existed? What means of travel would have been available in 1849? While in the locating stage, I will ask students to study their maps and locate areas on the map in California where they might be most likely to find gold. I will ask students to describe what kinds of problems they might expect to encounter on their trip to California. Who would they consider worthy to travel with them? What would they pack? How would they get there? How might you be able to communicate with friends and family back home?

As we begin the selecting/analyzing stage, I will distribute copies of a letter (http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/calbk.155) that was written from a gold miner in 1849 (this letter appears below). I will tell students, “Let’s take a look at a letter from a gold miner.” This letter was written and mailed from Placerville, California, October, 1850. This man is recounting his
voyage and offering details of the everyday life of a gold prospector. I will ask learners to analyze the letter and record their findings. Where did he travel from? Was he married? Does he have children? How does he sound? Has he been successful? Do you believe he may have been regretting the trip? How does he describe the buildings? Does he sound weary? Hopeless? Do you expect that he may return to his home? As we conclude the organizing/synthesising stage, students will be given time to think and respond to their groups. Then, in the creating/presenting stage, students will present their opinions to the groups, and they will determine the success of the traveler. Finally, students will be evaluated on the lesson by taking a 5 point quiz.

This is an excerpt of the letter (mentioned above) that we will use:

“The city is built on the side Hill south of the bay & commands a fine view of the harbor & shipping and the distant hills that surround it on all sides. The buildings were mostly of cloth, some small frames were covered with it, others covered with shingles & boards, & some few good buildings were up & many more in the course of erection. The hills in all directions were covered with tents & the streets crowded with people from all parts of the world anxious to make their fortunes in a few days in this golden land of promise. Here our company disbanded, owing to several causes which I will not now stop to mention & a division was made of all property funds on hand & each man took his share & went his own way. I was much opposed to this & used my best endeavors to keep them together, but was overruled by the casting vote of our President H. Taylor of Prattsville. Mr. J. S. Cornwall & S. L. Hayes of Cairo were sick at the time & we took the money that belonged to the shares of those that died in Panama & took Cornwall to a good hospital & Hayes went with him to take care of him & for company, not being able to work. We paid 10 Dollars pr day for Cornwall & $2 for Hayes. We left $300 with them & most of the company gave a joint note for the payment of this to those that it belongs to. We staid here about one week, then eight of us left for Sacramento City” – p. 14
IV. My Assessment Tool:

The California Gold Rush

1. What year did The California Gold Rush Begin? 1849
2. How were the buildings described in the letter? Mostly of cloth
3. How did the traveler reach California? By ship
4. Why was meant by “this golden land of promise”? People expected to find gold on this new land and get rich.
5. Did all people who traveled to California find gold and get rich? No, most were not successful.

Grading criteria: Students who score four correct out of five will pass the assessment.