

**Teaching American History:  
Immigration**

**The Immigrant Experience:  
Neighborhoods and Homes**

**Grade 2**

**by  
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## **Introduction and Rationale**

The second grade social studies curriculum endeavors to develop a broad understanding of the meaning of community.

The students begin by developing an awareness of each classroom as a community and then apply their understanding to the school community with its specific values that direct behaviors and focus on the attainment of goals. Through this process, the students learn to define needs and wants.

The common thread of community is then woven into a study of the Wampanoag People of long ago by exploring how needs were met through various roles assigned to the elders, men and women.

Later in the year, the students begin to research their individual countries of origin and learn of their ancestors experiences as immigrants. Regardless of the period of history when their

ancestors came to America, the students learn that various needs have been the catalyst for this experience.

The purpose of these lessons is to extend the students' awareness and understanding of why communities are established and to give the students a realistic picture, beyond the depictions presented in children's literature, of the experience of the immigrants who settled in New York's Lower East Side. By comparing photographs of the past and present and artists' interpretations, the students will view the community of the Lower East Side and the homes of the immigrant families. Through this investigation, the students will develop an understanding of the importance of the community and the roles that were assumed by the immigrant families to meet their needs.

### **The Ethnic Neighborhood**

In 1903, the Tenement Commission of New York stated that the city block on which 97 Orchard Street sits has more than 2,000 residents and was the most crowded block in the city, some said the world. (Granfield 36) As the immigrants journey from their past into their future, often the mountains of their former homelands were exchanged for crowded noisy urban streets. The ethnic neighborhood though crowded provided support from people who shared a common language and customs.

As the immigrants prospered, they left the neighborhood behind only to be replaced by new arrivals. Immigrant kids who worked and played street games at the turn of the century grew up to take their places in the daily life of America. They were the first generation in their families to feel truly at home in this country. Today they are old people, those of them who are still alive. They are the great grandparents of millions of American boys and girls growing up today. (Freedman 66) Somehow these young urban immigrants survived the hardships that confronted them.

During the early 1900's working children were common. Children as young as five worked. They transplanted bundles of clothing to their homes for finishing and went back to the manufacturers with the completed work. Although youngsters under fourteen were supposed to be in school, kids eight or ten years old worked in factories, warehouses, laundries, and stores. They ran errands, delivered packages, hauled coal and firewood, sold newspapers, shined shoes. (Freedman 40)

During this time there were no department stores where woman could select new dresses off the rack. To earn money, many women worked in their homes as seamstresses. Children helped with the sewing and deliveries, and also with the household chores. (Granfield 4) Girls rarely had dolls, rather they took care of baby brothers or sisters. Dolls were also expensive and not considered something a girl needed.

Walking through the crowded immigrant neighborhood was in a small way like a visit to the old country. The streets were noisy open-air markets. Owning a pushcart was another way to earn a living. Fruits, vegetables, poultry, fish, eggs, soda water, and even old coats, hats and eyeglasses were peddled. In

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the 1930's, fifteen thousand pushcarts filled the Lower East Side streets.(Granfield 45) In addition to the pushcarts, looking down the brick tenement lined streets was the organ grinder. The wandering street musician carried a heavy hand organ, called a "hurdy-gurdy." As the organ grinder turned a crank, his hurdy-gurdy plucked out a cheerful melody of a European folk song. Some organ grinders traveled with a monkey who would collect pennies from the crowd. Around 1940 , during Mayor La Guardia's administration both the pushcart and organ grinders were banned from the city streets. Once again the neighborhood changed, stretching from the past to the present.

## Works Cited

Freedman, Russell. Immigrant Kids. New York: Puffin, 1995

*Photographs depict children who lived in crowded immigrant neighborhoods of America's big cities during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Most of the photos were taken by Jacob A. Riis and Lewis Hine and catch a glimpse of the way they lived, learned, worked, and played.*

Granfield, Linda. 97 Orchard Street, New York. New York : Tundra Books, 2001

*Linda Granfield writes an overview of the historical background of the Lower East Side and immigration in America. Through recounting the stories of several immigrant families, who resided at 97 Orchard Street, the site of the current Lower East Side Tenement Museum, the author illustrates the struggles of these newcomers to America.*



Levinson, Riki. Watch the Stars Come Out. New York: E.P.Dutton, 1985.

*In this story, a little girl hears how, long ago, another little red-haired girl - her great-grandmother - sailed across the sea wither her older brother to join their immigrant parents in a strange new land called America. The illustrations capture the immigration scene of the late 1800s with appropriate costumes and background details.*

## **Unit: Countries of Origin The Immigrant Experience**

### **Lesson : The Ethnic Neighborhood**

**Essential Question:** After arriving in America many immigrants settled in large cities, such as New York. What did these ethnic neighborhoods look like 100 years ago?

**Objective(s):** The second graders will compare and contrast an illustration and photographs of a neighborhood of long ago and the present. They will describe the multiple elements they see and begin to understand how people lived and worked together in an ethnic neighborhood of long ago.

#### **Learning Standard(s) from Frameworks:**

Grade 2 Concepts and Skills: History and Geography #3  
Economics #9

Grade 3 Concepts and Skills: History and Geography #2, #3  
Civics and Government #6

#### **Vocabulary:**

ethnic neighborhood                      tenement

#### **Procedures:**

1. After the initial reading of Watch the Stars Come Out by Riki Levinson, provide each small group of children a copy of the neighborhood illustration. (Divide the picture so that each child in the group will focus on a quarter.)
2. Give time to look carefully at the illustration, then have the group talk for several minutes about the illustration and share with each other what they see.

**3. Explain background**

After arriving in America many immigrants settled in large cities, such as New York. This illustration captures a busy street in Manhattan's Lower East Side during late 1800's/early 1900's.

**4. Ask questions about the people, setting and activity in the illustration.**

What kind of clothes are the children wearing?

Look closely at the faces. What types of expressions do you notice?

Describe the buildings. Do you see any street signs?

What type of transportation do you see?

What do you notice about the shops?

What things are familiar to you?

What are some of the activities that you notice?

What activities look like work and/or fun?

**5. Introduce the second photograph of Orchard and Hester Streets, circa 1905 to small groups using similar model. Ask the children to compare the illustration and photograph. What do they notice that is the same? What is different? Each group will share their observations, including at least one 'I wonder' question about the photograph.**

**6. Pass out present day pictures of Orchard and Hester Streets. Give each group time to talk about the photos and share ideas of how the past and present photographs are alike and different. Call attention to buildings, transportation, and clothes.**

What changes do they notice?

**7. Give students the Venn diagram to complete in small groups. Each group should have at least three entries in each category. Discuss in class what the students have written and display information in a large Venn diagram. Leave photos and Venn diagram on display to use in future lessons about then and now.**

**Materials:**

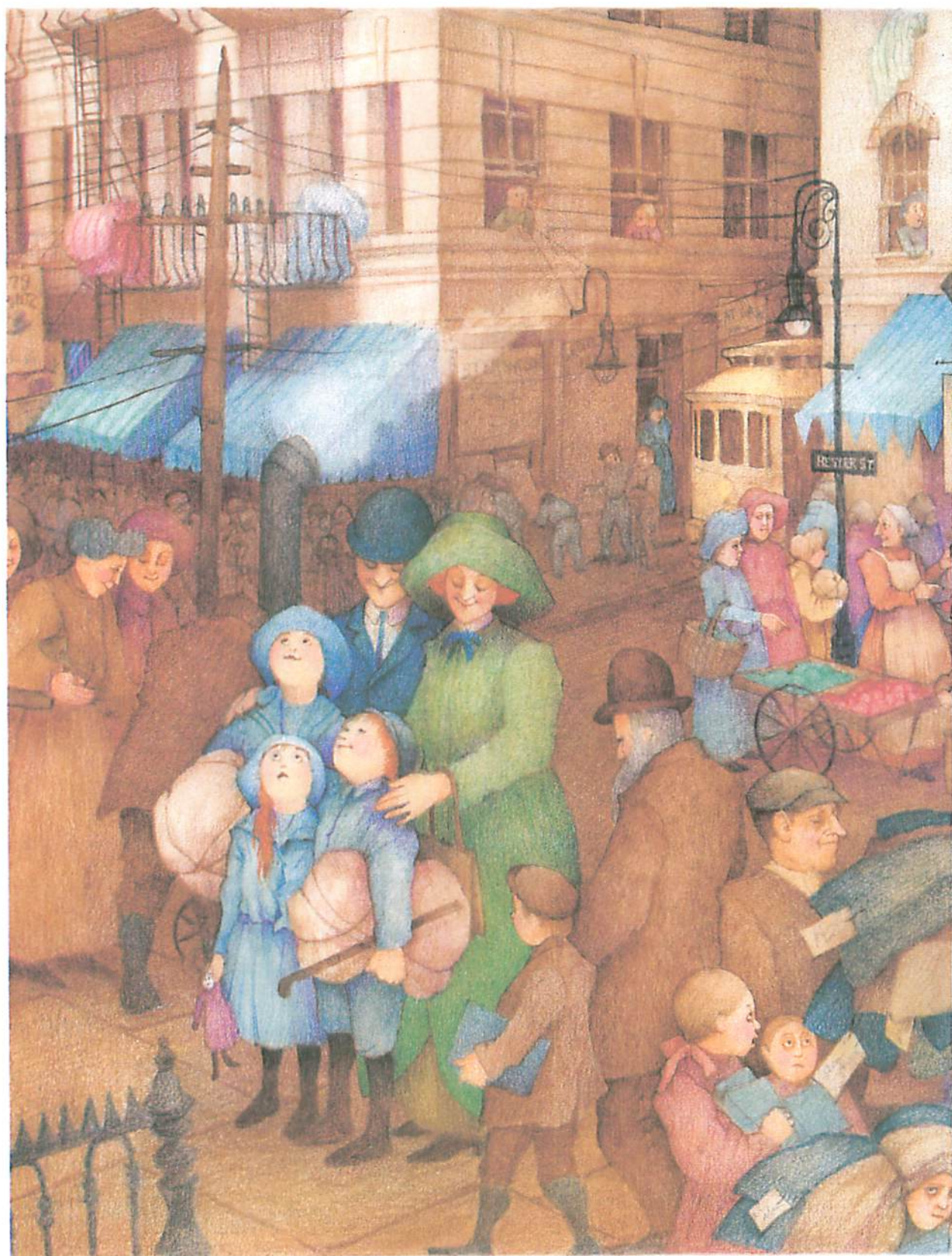
Watch the Stars Come Out by Riki Levinson

Sets of copies of illustration and photographs for each small group

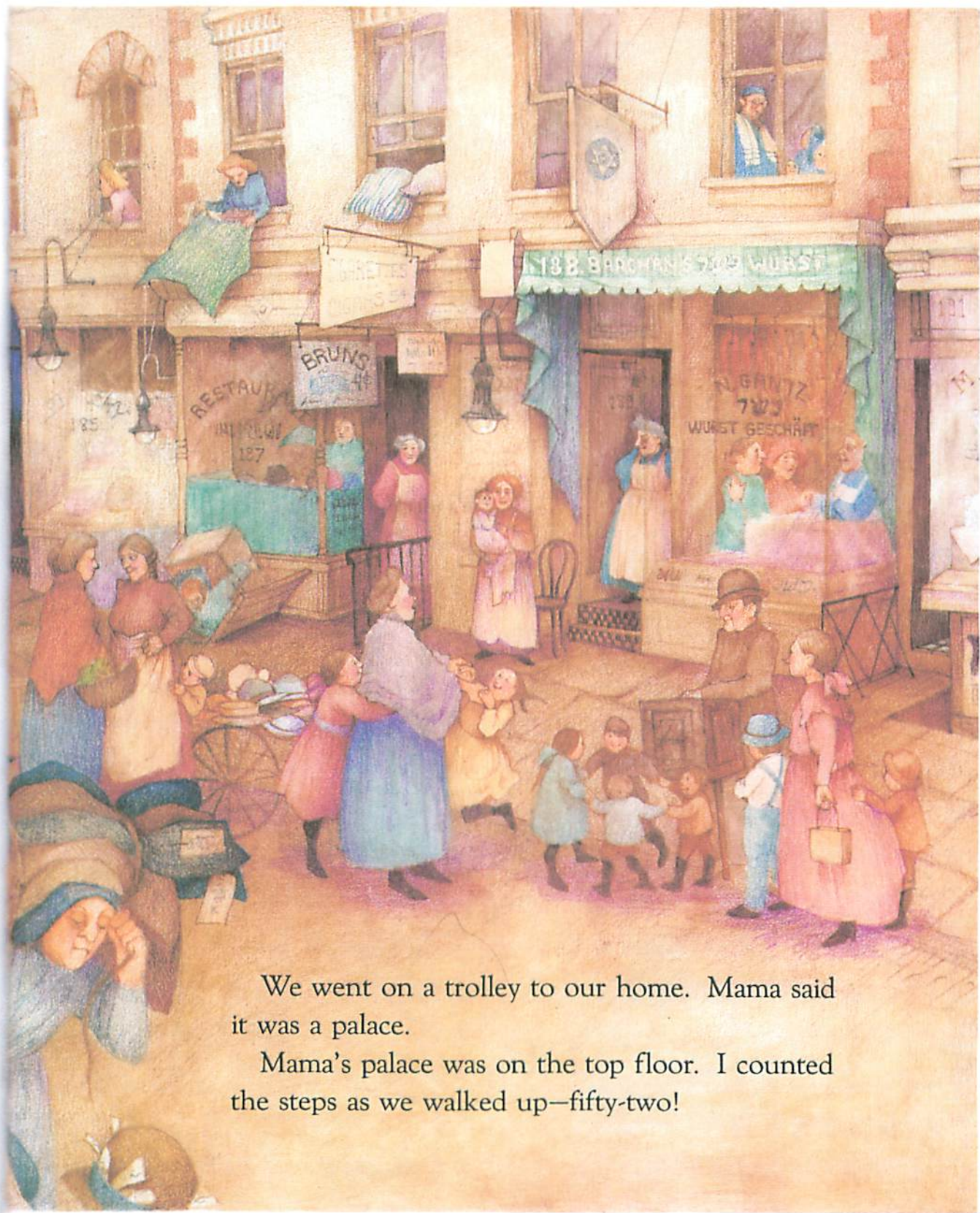
Additional photos from Immigrant Kids

Graphic organizers

Document Reader to project photos for class share

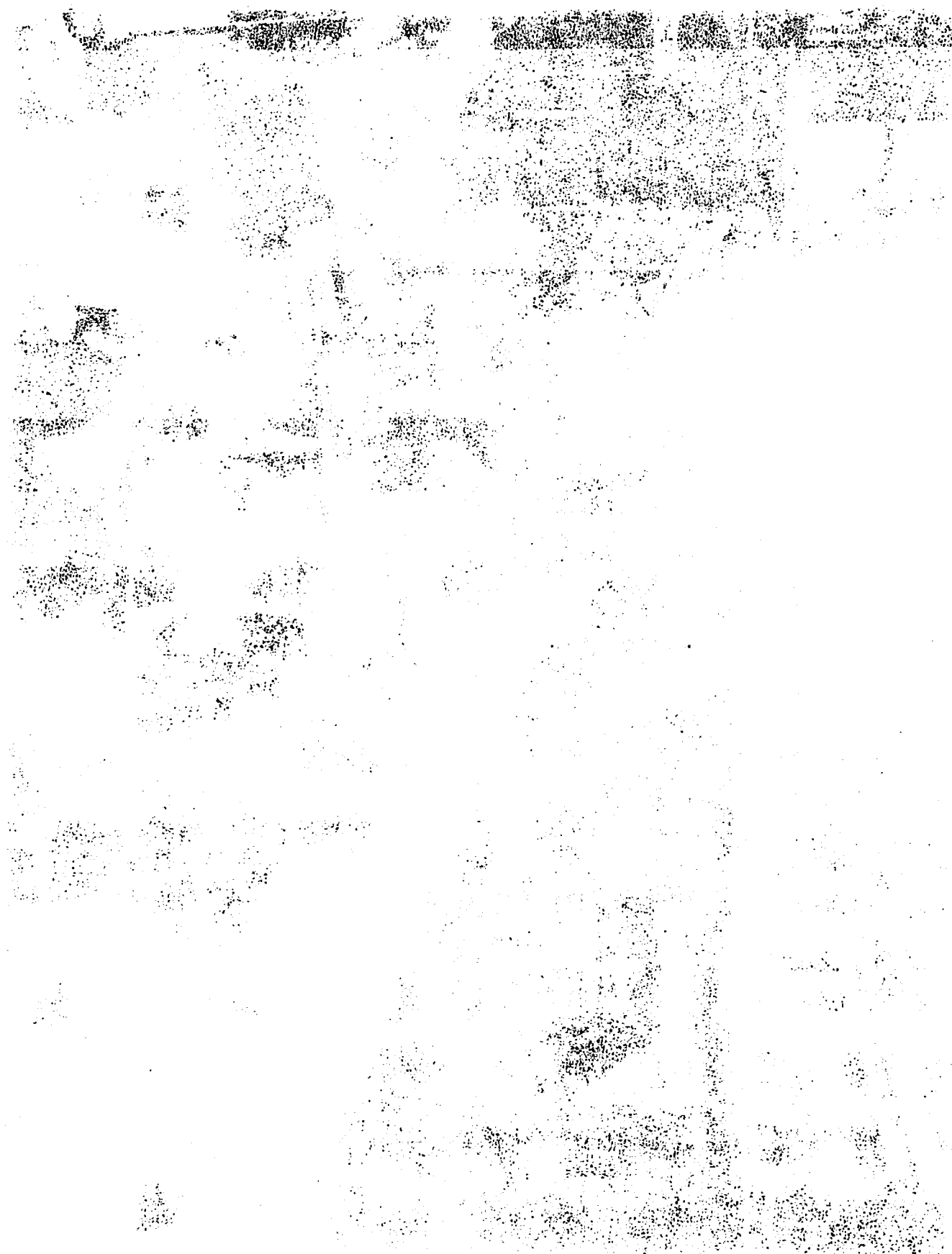








*Prokare & Western Streets, 1905*













*Carrying coats to be sewn at home (photo by Lewis Hine)*





## **The Tenement Experience**

*“We went on a trolley to our home. Mama said it was a palace. Mama’s palace was on the top floor. I counted the steps as we walked up – fifty-two! Mama and Papa’s room was in the middle. Our room was in the front. And in the back was a kitchen with a big black stove. Mama warmed a big pot of water on the stove. She poured some into the sink and helped me climb in to wash.”* (Watch the Stars Come Out by Riki Levinson)

The hardships endured by the immigrants during the late 1800’s and early 1900’s are often attributed to their prior life circumstances in the homeland, i.e. war, famine, prosecution, beyond difficult conditions while being transported to America, and the stressful experience of being processed by the inspectors at Ellis Island. However, the “homes” and neighborhoods in which the immigrants settled in the larger cities of America brought a new set of challenges to families which would lead one to question whether this experience would truly lead to “a better life”.

Employment and a growing community of people in similar circumstances with a common language brought immigrants to such areas as the Lower East Side. "The crowded conditions of the steamers, Ellis Island's Registration Room and the New York harbor ferries were replaced for many weary newcomers by the crowded conditions of the Lower East Side's streets and buildings." (Granfield 19)

The early influx of immigrants was seen as an opportunity by landowners who divided their property to accommodate the masses of people. "As business increased and the city grew with rapid strides, the necessities of the poor became the opportunity of their wealthier neighbors." (Reis 2)

Subsequently, the New York State Tenement Housing Act of 1867 and the Old Law in 1879 addressed the need to bring both light and fresh air into the tenements in order to prevent the ravages of disease. Air shafts were created in new buildings for this purpose. The New Law tenement house law of 1901 further provided for fireproof shafts and windows to be installed in the walls between rooms. In addition, lit plumbing was required inside the buildings. (Granfield 29) New buildings were to meet structural requirements. Despite government regulation to improve living conditions, the tenements remained overcrowded spaces where countless families began their new life in America.

In addition to the structural inadequacies of the tenement were the physical demands placed on its occupants. As mentioned, prior to 1901, toilet facilities were located outside in a common area. Coal and water needed to be carried to each residence. A shared faucet in a hallway was viewed as a luxury by families who had carried their water from a well in their homeland. (Freedman 20)

It would seem that the limited physical space and day to day routines of maintaining a home and caring for a family would place monumental demands on the immigrant. However, each of these living conditions, along with high rent rates, brought hardships to the families.

The immigrants of the late 1800's and early 1900's represented an enormous mass of people determined to improve their lives. Yet each was required to compete with the multitudes for low paying jobs. Twelve to fourteen hours of labor per day netted the average immigrant worker an inadequate income to feed and house a family.

"Making ends meet" became the role of every family member. Contributions to the family were made by any child "old enough to follow directions." (Freedman 45) Outside employment in factories and shops was restricted to the hiring of children over the age of fourteen. However, rules and regulations were often ignored to satisfy the needs of the employer.

Children often became peddlers of household items or sold newspapers at ages far younger than fourteen. Home industries such as garment stitching or cigar making supplemented the family's income. The children of the family would contribute their labor, and, often other immigrants would be hired. Thus the crowded tenement became the home and the sweatshop.

The hardships of the immigrant experience reach far beyond the initial voyage to America and the processing at Ellis Island. The efforts to establish oneself, one's family, one's home in America required immeasurable fortitude and commitment to attain "a better life".



## Works Cited

Freedman, Russell. Immigrant Kids. New York: Puffin, 1995.

*Russell Freedman uses the photographs of Jacob A. Riis, Lewis Hine and others to chronicle the experiences of immigrant children entering the country through Ellis Island and living in the Lower East Side.*

Granfield, Linda. 97 Orchard Street, New York. New York: Tundra Books, 2001.

*Linda Granfield writes an overview of the historical background of the Lower East Side and immigration in America. Through recounting the Stories of several immigrant families, who resided at 97 Orchard Street, the site of the current Lower East Side Tenement Museum, Linda Granfield illustrates the struggles of these newcomers to America.*

Levinson, Riki. Watch the Stars Come Out. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1985.

*In a children's picture book, Riki Levinson tells the story of two young children who make the voyage from their homeland to meet their parents and sister in America. The story follows them across the Atlantic,*

*to Ellis Island, and finally to their new home on Hester Street.*

Riis, Jacob A. How the Other Half Lives. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004.

*This is a reprinting of the original book published in 1890, in which Jacob A. Riis, a New York reporter and photographer, as well as a Danish immigrant, documents the plight of the immigrant in New York, reports on the living conditions at that time, editorializes about various nationalities and makes recommendations for social change.*

## **Unit: Countries of Origin The Immigrant Experience**

### **Lesson : The Tenement Experience**

**Essential Question:** Many immigrants stated that they came to America for a better life. What was life like for the immigrants who passed through Ellis Island and lived in the cities of America?

**Objective(s):** The second graders will compare and contrast photographs of tenement living in the Lower East Side of New York. They will describe the homes of the immigrant children and how the children in the photographs play, learn and work.

#### **Learning Standard(s) from Frameworks:**

Grade 2 Concepts and Skills: History and Geography #3  
Economics #9

Grade 3 Concepts and Skills: History and Geography #2, #3  
Civics and Government #6

#### **Vocabulary:**

Tenement

#### **Procedures:**

1. The book Watch the Stars Come Out by Riki Levinson, first read at the beginning of the unit, will be shared again with the students either in its entirety or particularly the section regarding what happens after the children leave Ellis Island.
2. The passage beginning with “We went on a trolley to our home. Mama said it was a palace...” will be read for discussion and questions, i.e. What do you visualize when I read the word palace?

What do you think the girl's mama meant when she used this word? What are the things that the little girl mentions about her home that are different than your picture of a palace?

3. Share the illustration of the little girl bathing in the sink. Ask the children what they notice about this picture and the characters.
4. Share the photograph of the child bathing in the sink on page 22 of Immigrant Kids by Russell Freedman. How is this photo different from the artist's drawing?
5. After explaining that the photo is a real picture of the apartment in the tenement, pass out sets of copies of photos depicting tenement life, immigrant children playing, learning and working to groups of students. The children will write one "Why" question for each picture and find two or three details in the photo that might answer their question.
6. Each group will share one picture with the class, their question, and the details that they noticed in the photos.
7. Sections of the text Immigrant Kids will be shared with the class to answer remaining questions.

### **Materials:**

Watch the Stars Come Out by Riki Levinson

Immigrant Kids by Russell Freedman

Sets of copies of photos for each group

Photos from Immigrant Kids

Recording sheet for questions and notes about photo details

Document Reader to project photos for class share

**Lesson: The Tenement Experience**

Names: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Photo: The tenements**

Question: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Photo details:

**Photo: Immigrant children playing**

Question: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Photo details:

Photo: **Immigrant children learning**

Question: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

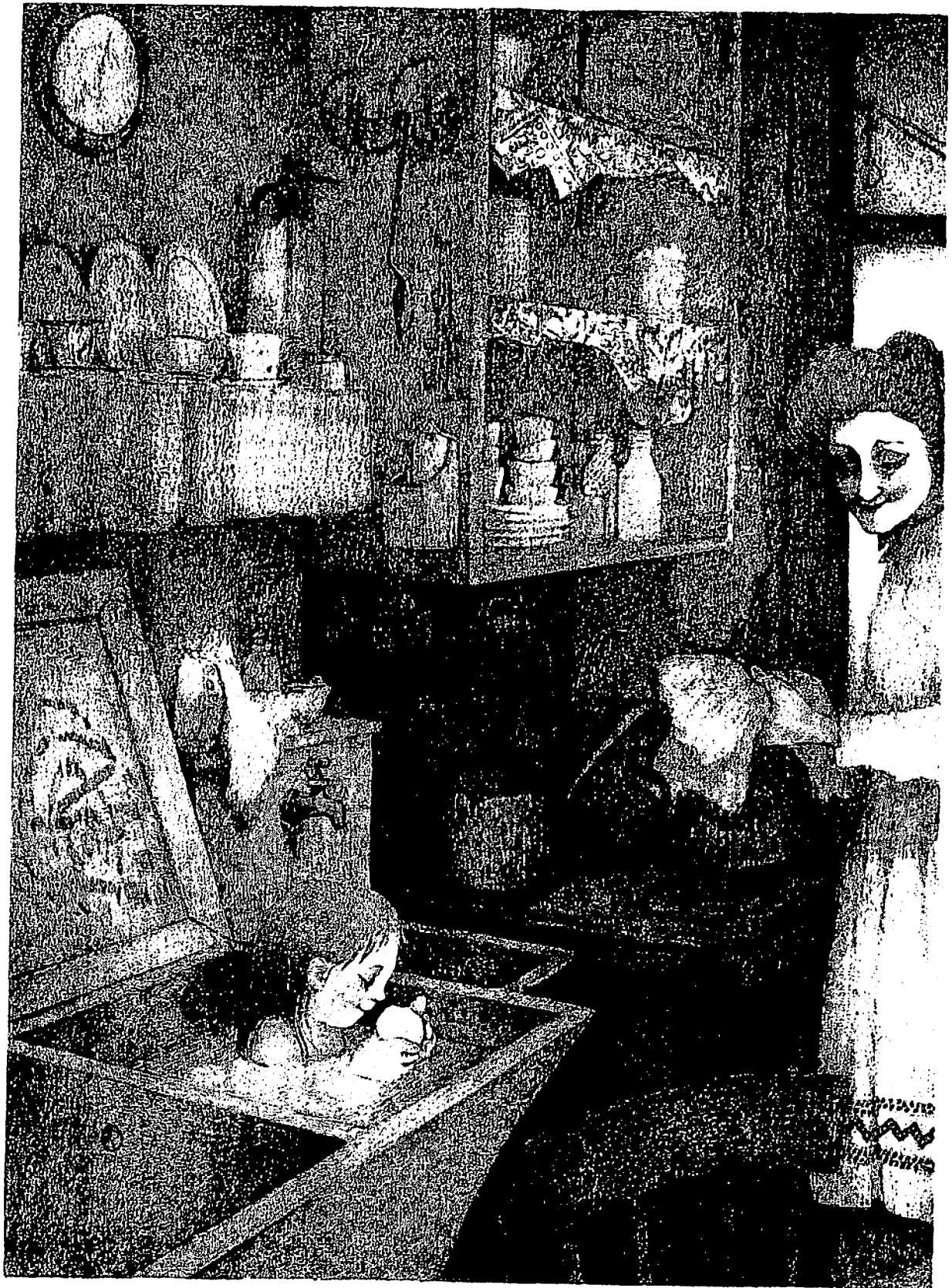
Photo details:

Photo: **Immigrant children working**

Question: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Photo details:





was over and that here was America. It was Mrs. Accurso who put her arm comfortingly about my mother's shoulder and led her away from the party and into the hall and showed her the water faucet. "Courage! You will get used to it here. See! Isn't it wonderful how the water comes out?" Through her tears my mother managed a smile.

*Combined bath and laundry in tenement sinks  
(photo by Lewis Hine)*













## **Conclusion**

The purpose and function of the community was as vital to the survival of the immigrant as it was to the first inhabitants of the Americas or the “founding fathers” of this country. It is important to impart to our young students that, although the nature of community can change from one generation to the next and that it may be affected by major trends and events in history, individual contributions to a community are necessary to meet needs and attain “a better life” for all.