
Sample Lesson 33: Armenian Migration Stories and Oral History

Theme: History and Movement

Disciplinary Area: General Ethnic Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 1, 3, 6

Standards Alignment:

CA HSS Analysis Skills (9–12): Historical Interpretation 1

CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy: RH.9–10.1, 3, 8, 10; WHST.9–10.2, 4, 6, 7; SL.9–10.1, 4, 5, 6

CA ELD Standards: ELD.PI.9–10.1, 5, 9, 10a

LESSON PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW:

As part of a larger unit on migration and oral history, this lesson guides students to explore the role of oral histories in historiography, with a particular focus on Armenian personal stories. The goal of this lesson is to understand the history of Armenian migration to the US and delve deeply into the Armenian American experience. This lesson uses the voices of Armenian adults and children through oral histories to create an understanding of the nuances and experiences of the Armenian American community.

Students will learn about how Armenian migration stories connect to their local history.

Key Terms and Concepts: oral history, Armenian migration, interviewing, archive, memory

Lesson Objectives (Students will be able to ...):

- Evaluate perspectives on history making and historiography through the lens of oral history
- Watch, listen to, and conduct oral history interviews, transcribe narratives, develop research questions, and build upon interpersonal communication skill
- Better understand the diversity of experiences of Armenian Americans by synthesizing and analyzing oral history sources

Essential Questions:

1. What is the significance of oral history in the construction of minority histories in the US?
2. What is the history of Armenian immigration to the US?

-
3. How did the experiences of various cohorts and generations of Armenian immigrants differ from each other's and from those of their children who were born in the US?

Lesson Steps/Activities:

Part I: What is Oral History?

1. Ask students to write down a response to the question, What is history? This could be in one word, a quick response, or a paragraph response to a writing prompt. Have students share responses in a class discussion. See in which areas students have similar ideas about what defines history.
2. Ask the following follow-up questions: How do we know what happened in the past? Who writes history?
 - a. There are many ways we know about what happened in the past (through journals, objects, legal documents, photos, letters). Discuss the students' answers and how they relate to what we know about the past.
 - b. Point out that historians look at a lot of different topics when they study history. They might study politics, wars, big national events, and other important things we might see on the news. But historians also study the everyday lives and activities of "regular people."
 - c. For upper high school grades and college students, the discussion can focus on historiography and notions of what makes good, proper history.
3. All of these ways we know what happened in the past are considered primary sources. Where do you usually go if you want to learn something? (Common answers include books, internet, Wikipedia.)
4. These are considered secondary sources. Primary sources are first-hand accounts of an event or moment in time and are in their original form. Secondary sources are books or articles that use a variety of primary sources to provide commentary on an event, but these are created by people who do not have first-hand knowledge of the event.
5. Have students do basic research using key search terms such as Armenian Americans, Armenians in America, Armenians in California, Armenians in Los Angeles.
 - a. Look at the scope of various existing resources for documenting Armenian communities worldwide and in California in particular.

-
- b. Divide students into groups and assign each group one of the following categories to explore.
- c. Each group should discuss and report on what each of these resources brings to the study of Armenian Americans and what each resource may lack. Questions of sample size, representation, depth, disciplinary lens, scope, date of publication, geography, and more can be addressed in this discussion.
- i. Academic Books:
- Anny Bakalian: *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling American*, 1992
Based on the results of an extensive mail questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews, and participant observation of communal gatherings by sociologist Anny Bakalian, this book analyzes the individual and collective struggles of Armenian Americans to perpetuate their Armenian legacy while actively seeking new pathways to the American Dream.
 - Robert Mirak: *Torn Between Two Lands: Armenians in America, 1890 to World War I*, 1983
This first comprehensive study of the Armenian American community examines the rich background, patterns of migration and settlement in the New World, complex economic and social adjustments, family life, and religious and political institutions of the newcomers.
- ii. Scholarly Articles:
- “But Why Glendale? A History of Armenian Immigration to Southern California,” 2017
Despite its many contributions to Los Angeles, the internally complex community of Armenian Angelenos remains enigmatically absent from academic print. As a result, its history remains untold. While Armenians live throughout Southern California, the greatest concentration exists in Glendale, where Armenians make up a demographic majority (approximately 40 percent of the population) and have done much to reconfigure this homogenous, sleepy, sundown town of the 1950s into an ethnically diverse and economically booming urban center. This article presents a brief history of Armenian immigration to Southern California and attempts to explain why Glendale

has become the world's most demographically concentrated Armenian diasporic hub. It does so by situating the history of Glendale's Armenian community in a complex matrix of international, national, and local events.

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link407>

iii. Food Journalism:

- Liana Aghajanian: "In L.A., Armenians' Disparate Food Traditions Live Side by Side"

A food journalist looks at the various components that make up part of the modern Armenian food lexicon in Los Angeles. In fact, in order to understand the ancient, diverse, and often tragic history of Armenians, one can start by looking at the food they eat. But this story isn't an easy one. It's complex, reflecting the frequency with which Armenians have had to remake their lives as refugees or immigrants in foreign lands.

Armenians have been conquered over millennia by the Byzantines, Romans, Turks, Persians, and Russians. They have also been displaced across the world because of war, revolution, and genocide. Because of this, Armenians are not made up of one place, but of many. Nowhere is this more apparent than in their cuisine, and in no American city is this better reflected than Los Angeles. It is here where these fragmented histories merge and blend, where Armenians have managed not only to find some permanence but to use food as a way to showcase and unify their diverse and scattered nation.

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link408>

iv. Demographic Studies:

- James P. Allen and Eugene Turner: *The Ethnic Quilt: Population Diversity in Southern California*, 1997

The Ethnic Quilt is a demographic study of the various ethnic groups in Southern California, including Armenians, using maps, census data, and economic patterns.

v. Literary Works and Nonfiction Memoirs:

- Peter Balakian: *Black Dog of Fate: A Memoir*, 2009

This nonfiction memoir is about an Armenian American family and a young man's transformation into adulthood.

- William Saroyan: *My Name Is Aram*

This collection of tales chronicles the various ventures of Aram Garoghlanian, a boy of Armenian descent growing up in Fresno, California.

vi. Archives:

- Project Save – Armenian Photograph Archives “Preserving Armenian History Through Photographs” includes over 45,000 historical photos from 1860 to the present. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link409>
- Houshamadyan Digital Archives were created to reconstruct and preserve the memory of Armenian life in the Ottoman Empire through research. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link410>

vii. Museums:

- William Saroyan House Museum is a museum built in the house of Pulitzer Prize and Oscar-winning Armenian American writer William Saroyan. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link411>

viii. Podcasts:

- “Armenian Enough” is about life and identity in the Armenian diaspora. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link412>

6. One way we know about the past is by doing oral history. What is oral history?

Oral history is the systematic collection of living people’s testimony about their own experiences. Oral history is not folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumor. Oral historians attempt to verify their findings, analyze them, and place them in an accurate historical context. Oral historians are also concerned with storage of their findings for use by later scholars.

As an example, the teacher leads students to look at the USC Institute of Armenian Studies **Displaced Persons Documentation Project**, which documents the community of Armenians Americans that formed during and after WWII, through oral histories. Students can take a look at the photos, historical overview, and sample oral history testimonies.

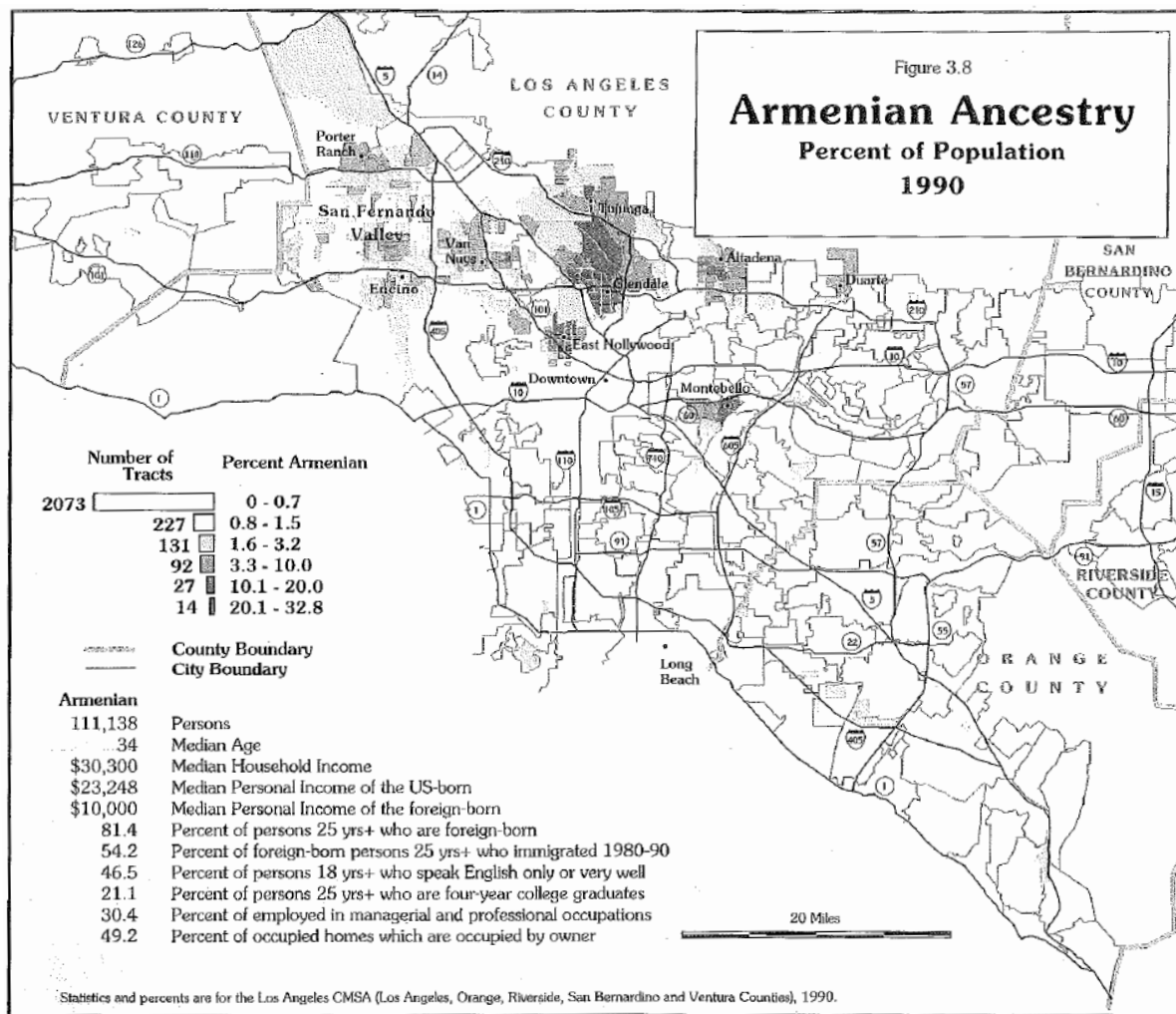
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link413>

Part II: Why is oral history important? How does it add to history?

7. Discuss as a class why oral history is important. Emphasize that it is important to understand **people's stories and their experiences** related to an event. We all have stories to tell, stories we have lived from the inside out. We give our experiences an order. We organize the memories of our lives into stories. Oral history listens to these stories. Historians currently recognize that everyday memories of everyday people, not just the rich and famous, have historical importance. If we do not collect and preserve those memories, then one day they will disappear forever.
8. **Oral history accounts add the life to the facts.** And they give voice to people, regular people, who often aren't involved in writing history.
9. Review publicly available segments from the #MyArmenianStory archive and follow up with the following questions: **After reviewing the example, why do you think oral history is important? How does it add to historical accounts? Do you understand the facts differently after listening to the oral history account?** Sometimes statistics and numbers are difficult to relate to. But we might be able to relate to an account of someone's life as told in their own words.
 - a. Compilation of #MyArmenianStory oral history submissions
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link414>

*More segments of individual oral histories will be available on the USC Institute of Armenian Studies page by January 2021 at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link415>
 - b. USC Displaced Persons Documentation Project oral history segment
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link416>

Students can use this map from *The Ethnic Quilt* demographic study to look at Armenian settlement patterns in Southern California. They can compare the visual data from the map to the details from the oral history accounts.



Part III: Doing Oral History

10. Explain to the class that they will be conducting some of **their own oral histories** to learn about the **Armenian experience**.
11. Advise students to think of the person they wish to interview. The teacher can provide a list of Armenian organizations, institutions, and community centers students can utilize. This will serve the dual purpose of familiarizing students with the Armenian presence in California and helping them find an interview subject.
 - a. USC Institute of Armenian Studies
3518 Trousdale Parkway
CPA 351, MC 0043, Los Angeles, CA 90089
213-821-3943

-
- b. Armenian Society of Los Angeles
117 S. Louise St., Glendale, CA, 91205
818-241-1073
 - c. Tekeyan Cultural Association
1901 N. Allen Ave., Altadena, CA 91001
626-296-1806
 - d. Armenian General Benevolent Union
1720 Fulton St., Fresno, CA 93721
 - e. Ararat Home
15105 Mission Hills Road, Mission Hills, CA 91345
818-365-3000
 - f. Unified Young Armenians
1110 Sonora Ave. Unit 106, Glendale, CA 91205
818-857-5892
 - g. Homenetmen Western USA
2324 Colorado, Los Angeles, CA 90041
323-344-4300
- 12. Have students determine what they hope to discover about the person's life. In **preparation for the interview**, students should research the following:
 - a. Historical and significant events
 - b. Social and economic conditions
 - c. Culture and other interesting information about the time
 - d. Appropriate linguistic skills based on in which language(s) they'll be conducting the interview
 - 13. Have students review the **#MyArmenianStory Guidelines, Interview Guides, and FAQs** from the USC Institute of Armenian Studies #MyArmenianStory project in detail. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link417>.
 - 14. Review **best practices in interviewing**, watch/listen to several sample oral history recordings, and conduct mock interviews in class.
 - 15. Students should set up an appointment with the interviewee. They should be prepared with recording equipment and the question guides.
 - 16. Students can ask the interviewee whether they have any letters, photographs, or objects that they would like to share. If so, they can use them for their final product in class.

-
17. Students may be asked to transcribe the interview. The process of transcription offers new insights on the content in a written medium.

Part IV: Analysis and Reflection

18. Students are given a choice in the **creative medium** (interpretive paper, PowerPoint presentation, newspaper article, digital history videos, podcast, portfolio, etc.) with which they would like to present their findings and analysis of their interview. The **analysis** may focus on:
 - a. A summary of their findings
 - b. Some of the most interesting things they learned
 - c. What they found out that was surprising
 - d. What the stories of the interviewee tell us about a certain time period or event
 - i. Perhaps discuss how what they learned from the interview conflicts with what they know or what they have learned about in school
 - e. Further questions they would ask if they could go back to learn more and clarify some points
 - f. After all students present their findings, you may want to **discuss and reflect** on some themes, such as:
 - i. The constant movement and migration
 - ii. The process of adaptation and integration
 - iii. The common threads and unique elements of the various interviews
 - iv. Intersectionality of identities
 - v. The value of oral histories as primary resources
19. Students should carry out a series of **reflections** throughout the process at various stages. The reflections can cover sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and historical observations. For example, students can journal about their expectations before the interview, the experience during the interview, and how their oral history interview reflected or changed their thinking about central themes. Encourage students to compare and contrast themes, perspectives, and experiences based on the oral history projects.
20. **Share** students' oral history projects with the larger school community by organizing an oral history viewing and listening event.

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection:

See steps 18 to 20 above.

Materials and Resources:

- Oral History Association “How Do I Engage Students in Oral History Projects?”
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link418>
- USC Institute of Armenian Studies #MyArmenianStory Oral History Project
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link419>