Teacher Guide

Myths and Misconceptions: Progressive Era & Immigration

1. **Immigrants all came to the United States for the same reason: financial gain and prosperity.**
   It is widely believed that people immigrated to the United States primarily in order to improve their economic situation, fueled by the vision that American "streets were paved with gold." However, financial gain was not the predominant motive for all immigrants. At the turn of the twentieth century in Eastern Europe, Jewish residents were being persecuted, ranging from restrictions on where they could live, work and go to school to harassment and increasing violence. From 1881 to 1884 and again from 1903 to 1906, Russian mobs and soldiers attacked Jewish communities, destroyed homes, and massacred hundreds of Jews. Over 2 million Russian Jews fled for the United States joined by many more from other countries in Eastern Europe facing similar discrimination.

2. **All immigrants wanted to permanently stay in the United States.**
   While data on the total number of immigrants are relatively easy to find, the number of immigrants who returned to Europe is less definitive and varies according to nationality. For example, some Italians immigrated with the goal of earning enough money to secure land ownership back in Italy. In some years, repatriation rates – or the act of returning back to one's country of origin - were as high as 73 percent. In many cases, male immigrants traveled back and forth on a regular basis, working for a year or two at a stretch in order to return back to their families and home countries with their wages. While more Jewish immigrants came as families without plans to return to their homelands, historians now estimate at least 15 percent did return, especially in the years prior to 1900.

3. **Immigrants had to comply with many regulations to be admitted to the United States.**
   In comparison with present day restrictions on immigration, arrivals prior to 1924 faced few obstacles to entering the United States - with the major exception of the legal exclusion of Chinese immigrants in 1882. The vast majority of Eastern and Southern European immigrants from 1880 to 1924 were admitted with only the basic and minimal information they provided to the steamship companies upon departure. Once in the United States, new immigrants were screened for disease, disabilities, and, after 1901, for anarchism or political extremism—they could be denied entry for any of these reasons. Even with these barriers, very few immigrants were turned away. At Ellis Island, only two percent were excluded prior to World War I. More federal regulations were introduced starting in 1917 to limit immigration by adding more barriers to entry, starting with a literacy requirement and later through quota systems. These quota systems limited the number of immigrants from each country allowed entry into the United States. The quotas remained in place until 1965.

4. **Ethnic names were often changed at Ellis Island.**
   Family lore often claims that immigrant names were "Americanized" as ancestors entered through Ellis Island, but there is no evidence to support these claims and significant evidence to refute it. Immigration officers at Ellis Island did not record the names of new arrivals; they simply checked the names of immigrants against the ship's manifest list. Immigrants provided their names to the steamship companies upon departure, usually with no form of identification required. Ticket agents in the immigrant's country of origin may have misspelt names, especially as names were translated from one language or alphabet to another. Once in the United States, Ellis Island immigration inspectors would only correct those misspellings if requested by the immigrant.

5. **Immigrants at the turn-of-century all wanted to Americanize.**
   Present day opponents of immigration often claim that current immigrants want to retain their language and customs to resist Americanizing, while citing earlier immigrant groups as wanting to "Americanize." This comparison, however, does not show the whole picture. At the turn of the twentieth century, immigrants from southern and eastern Europe often lived in ethnic enclaves allowing them to retain their native languages and customs for decades. Ethnic newspapers, radio stations, theatres and other cultural venues thrived well into the 1920s and 1930s. "Americanization" came largely with the children of immigrants or with immigrants who arrived as children.

6. **All ethnic neighborhoods (or ghettos) were bad for immigrants.**
   The Lower East Side, New York's main immigrant neighborhood, became known for its extreme overcrowding and poverty. Middle-class reformers at the turn of the century viewed the neighborhood as a negative influence on the residents and a problem that needed to be solved by encouraging immigrants to settle elsewhere. However, there were also some benefits to the ethnic neighborhoods. The density of these ethnic enclaves benefitted immigrants through formal and informal networks of support that could assist newcomers in finding an apartment and a job, help locate relatives or friends, and establish cultural, social, and religious institutions that could serve the needs of recent immigrants.