

Unit 1: Life in a *Colonia*

Introduction

This unit is designed for grades 7–12. Before showing the video of *The Forgotten Americans*, brainstorm with students about the conditions necessary for life and what things students consider “extras.” For example, ask if owning a car a necessity or an “extra.”

Use the video and discussion questions to explore this idea further, specifically in reference to *colonias*. The first 10 minutes of the film describe *colonia* demographics, how these communities emerged and what problems residents of these communities must face. Engage your students in a discussion about *colonias*, but you do not have to limit the discussion to these specific communities. Consider expanding the discussion to talk about Appalachian communities, Native American reservations or poor communities in your area.

Consider using this video to begin a discussion about the history and economics of the *colonias*. Here are some questions to ask your students after they view the video:

- Were you aware that the *colonias* existed in the United States?
- How did *colonias* develop?
- How do economic concepts like migrant labor and free trade relate to your life?
- What does it mean “to walk in another person’s shoes”?
- How would your life be different if you lived in a home without running water or electricity?
- How would you concentrate on learning, homework and school if your parents had to worry about your next meal and making ends meet?

Use the glossary of terms and the discussion questions to further shape your discussion and your students’ understanding of *colonias*. Then once you feel familiar with the issues and history of *colonias* try the experiment listed at the end of the unit.

We encourage you to share your experiences with this discussion guide, the results of your experiments, and your essays. Please [send your feedback](mailto:kgordon@klru.org) (mailto:kgordon@klru.org) on how you used these teaching guides and what results you found.

Glossary of Terms

Grade Levels: 7-12

The following is a list of terms discussed in *The Forgotten Americans*. Most of these terms appear in the first 15 minutes of the film and are illustrated throughout. Your students can also find many of these terms defined on this Web site or on the sites listed as resources at the end of this unit.

- *colonias*
- *promotoras*
- home mortgage
- contract for deed
- rent-to-own
- migrant worker
- floodplain
- zoning ordinances
- flood insurance
- enforcement
- jurisdiction
- plats
- septic tanks
- poverty level
- prosperity
- affluence
- NAFTA
- economic boom
- fundamental human needs
- neighborhood
- community
- contaminated water
- hepatitis A
- tuberculosis

Discussion Questions

Grade Levels: 7-12

Overview: Students will discuss poverty in the United States and learn how one of the poorest communities in the country has been able to overcome what they lacked in city services such as water, sewer and electricity. All of the answers to these questions can be found in *The Forgotten Americans* video.

The first 15 minutes include a definition of *colonias* and some detailed statistics about *colonia* residents; the second 15 minutes include more specific demographic information, economic data, and information about children and schools; the third 15-minute segment includes specific information about concerns that residents have such as water and sewer system problems, and health problems; and the last 8-minute segment provides information about how *colonia* communities were organized to bring about change and the results of those efforts.

Objectives:

The students will:

- Use *The Forgotten Americans* film and the PBS Web site to find information.
- Demonstrate reading comprehension.
- Demonstrate media literacy skills.
- Demonstrate a willingness to discuss and learn about another culture.

General Questions:

- What does the word *colonia* mean in Spanish?
- When were the first *colonias* built?
- *Colonias* were initially built for whom?
- How many *colonias* are there in the United States?
- Name the three states that have *colonias*?
- What state has the highest number of farm workers?
- Approximately how many people live in *colonias* along the Mexico-United States border?
- What is one of the fastest growing areas in the United States?

- How did NAFTA cause the growth between the Mexico and Texas border?
- What state has the most *colonias*?
- How do developers start a *colonia*?
- Why have *colonias* residents had trouble proving ownership even though they had a “contract-for-deed” arrangement with developers?
- What do developers say they will provide for *colonias* residents?
- Why do people live in *colonias*?
- What caused the growth of *colonias*?
- What other areas of the United States can be compared to *colonias*?

Questions About Conditions in *Colonias*:

- What is the average yearly income of a *colonia* family?
- Where do migrant workers find work and what do they do?
- What percentage of *colonias* residents are migrant workers?
- How high is the unemployment rate in South Texas?
- With what materials are most *colonias* houses constructed?
- How many rooms does a *colonia* house start with?
- How many years does it take for *colonia* residents to build their dream home?
- What types of land are *colonias* located on and how does that affect the quality of living?
- What percentages of *colonias* are located in a floodplain?
- What are the hazards of living in a floodplain?
- What utility services are lacking in *colonias* and why?

- What utilities do *colonias*' residents share?
- Why does one *colonia* resident have to change his bathroom fixtures every two years?
- What is an outhouse?
- What are some of the dangers of having an outhouse?
- What are some of the names that developers give to *colonias*?
- What are some of the difficulties experienced by residents of Green Valley Farms, Sparks, and Sunny Skies?
- Name one of the largest *colonias* in South Texas? How many residents live there?

Project

Grade Levels: 7-12

Estimated Time: One week for gathering information and writing an essay.

Overview: Students will better understand fundamental needs and how important modern conveniences are in their lives. They will also examine what it is like to live in a *colonia* and some of the positive aspects of a more simple life.

Enlist support from parents for this project. Send a letter home with your students explaining the project and its goals to parents. If necessary, develop a separate essay question that can be answered for those students who choose not to participate.

Objectives:

The students will:

- Learn about fundamental needs.
- Gain a better understanding about how others live.
- Record the experience.

Related National Standards:

This lesson addresses the following national content standards established by MCREL at <http://www.mcrel.org/>:

Social Studies

- Knows examples of conflicts stemming from diversity, and understands how some conflicts have been managed and why some of them have not yet been successfully resolved.
- Knows beliefs that are common to American political culture (e.g., belief in equality of opportunity; mistrust of power, as well as high expectations of what elected officials and government should do; the need to admit to faults or shortcomings in the society; the belief that social, economic, or political problems can be alleviated through collective effort).
- Knows some of the discrepancies that have arisen between American ideals and the realities of political and social life in the United States (e.g., the ideal of equal justice for all and the reality that the poor may not have equal access to the judicial system).
- Knows how various individual actions, social actions, and political actions can help to reduce discrepancies between reality and the ideals of American constitutional democracy.
- Understands issues regarding personal, political, and economic rights
- Understands how certain character traits enhance citizens' ability to fulfill personal and civic responsibilities.
- Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals.

Economics

- Understands unemployment, income, and income distribution in a market economy.
- Understands that wages and salary are influenced by forces of supply and demand for labor, as well as an individual's productivity, education, training and skills.

- Understands that personal income is influenced by changes in the structure of the economy, the level of gross domestic product, technology, government policies, production costs and demand for specific goods and services, and discrimination.

Health Education

- Knows environmental and external factors that affect individual and community health.

Technology

- Knows ways in which technology has influenced the course of history (e.g., revolutions in agriculture, manufacturing, sanitation, medicine, warfare, transportation, information processing, communication).
- Knows ways in which technology and society influence one another (e.g., new products and processes for society are developed through technology; technological changes are often accompanied by social, political, and economic changes; technology is influenced by social needs, attitudes, values, and limitations, and cultural backgrounds and beliefs).

This lesson also addresses the following national content standards established by the National Council of Teachers of English at <http://www.ncte.org/standards/thelist.html> :

English/Language Arts

- Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
- Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
- Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
- Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

Procedure:

- Prepare a letter explaining this assignment and your goals to parents.
- Have your students attempt to recreate *colonia* conditions.
- Ask them to give up television, computers and video games for a week.
- Ask them to bathe only with cold water for a week. If they want hot water, they must boil it.
- Ask them not to wash their hair for a couple of days.
- Ask them to wear the same clothes twice a week.
- Ask them to have their family sleep in one room for a few nights.
- Have them only eat beans, rice and potatoes for a week.

Assignment:

- Have the students write a report on their experiences.
- Include a paragraph on whether they were able to concentrate on their homework.
- Include a section on any of the positive things they learned, such as feeling closer to a family member or being able to spend more time with a friend.
- Ask your students what strengths *colonias* children might have despite the conditions in which they live.

Assessment Recommendations:

- Teachers should set standards for the project before it is assigned based on the amount of time spent on the lesson as well as the amount of research. For example, seek student input on what will make a successful report and how much research is expected. Ask your students to set a criteria for what level of necessities must be given up for the week and what level of detail is expected from the report. For older students emphasize self-reflection and conclusions about other communities and cultures.

Extension and/or Adaptation Ideas:

- Ask your students to keep a journal of their experiences and answer specific questions that the class develops.
- Ask your students to develop a photo essay of the experience.

Recommended Online Resources:

- *Las Colonias* (<http://www.lascalonias.org>)
- **Llano Grande Center** (<http://www.esconett.org/llanogrande/llanotx.html>) -- A research center designed to revitalize the community and create systematic school reform.
- **Colonia Housing and Infrastructure** (<http://www.utexas.edu/lbj/pubs/books/colonias.html>)
- **National Colonia Clearinghouse** (<http://www.utexas.edu/lbj/pubs/books/colonias.html>)
- **Texas A&M University Colonias Program** (<http://chud.tamu.edu/colonias/colonias2.html>)
- **Border Health Commission** (<http://www.nmsu.edu/~bhcom/bhcomm.html>)
- **Colonias Information, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)** (<http://www.hud.gov/cpd/colonias.html>)
- **Texas Colonias Report** by the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (<http://www.dallasfed.org/htm/pubs/ca/colonias.html>)
- **Texas Colonia Project, Texas Water Development Board** (<http://www.twdb.state.tx.us/>)
- **Texas Low-Income Housing Information Service** (<http://www.texashousing.org/txlihis/index.html>)
- **Housing in Texas a Living Crisis** (<http://www.texashousing.org/txlihis/livingcrisis%20%C4/livingcrisis/html/cover.html>)