

1.6.1.3- Sikh Farmers in the Borderlands

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Grade Levels	3-5
Lesson Overview	In the 1900s, many Sikh immigrants came from farming communities in Punjab, India. When these Sikh farmers arrived in California's Imperial Valley, they brought their farming skills and expertise with them. They contributed to the growth of the Imperial Valley as an agricultural center. In this lesson, students will learn about the geography of the "borderlands" and how Sikh farmers helped irrigate the land. Students will also learn about some of the challenges that Sikh immigrants faced.
Lesson Objectives	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Describe the geography of California's Imperial Valley• Explain why the Imperial Valley was suitable for agriculture in the 1900s• Identify contributions of Sikh immigrants to farming in the Imperial Valley
Standards	National Standards for History for Grades K-4 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities, D. Marshal needed knowledge of the time and place, and construct a story, explanation, or historical narrative. Common Core State Standards <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.• Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Sikh Farmers in the Borderlands Essay

The Imperial Valley is in California. It is near the southern border. It is between the United States and Mexico. It is mostly a dry desert. There isn't much rainfall in the area. But a **canal** was built to bring in water. The water was **diverted** from the nearby Colorado River. Water is needed to **irrigate** the land. Irrigation allows farmers to control the amount of water that crops get. This makes the soil very **fertile**. Winters in the Imperial Valley are mild and dry. Summers are very hot. This can be a good environment for many different crops to grow.

Sikh immigrants have lived in the United States since the late 1800s. At first, most of them settled in northern California. In the 1920-30s, many moved south along the West Coast. Some settled in the Imperial Valley. They helped make this area even more fertile. Most of the Sikh farmers who came to California were farmers in **Punjab**. Punjab is a valley region in northern India. It borders India and Pakistan. It is a very fertile area. It is by five rivers. (In fact, Punjab means "five rivers.")

Sikh immigrants in Imperial Valley felt at home. They knew how to farm the land. They used their farming skills and knowledge. They cleared and irrigated the land. They used new techniques. They also helped establish the growing of cotton in the Imperial Valley.

By 1910, the Imperial Valley had over 1,000 farms covering over 200,000 acres. Most of the land was owned by White landowners who **leased** their land to Sikh and Japanese farmers. However, racist laws changed the lives of Sikh farmers. Sikh farmers couldn't be citizens. They weren't allowed to own lands. They couldn't marry White people.

Many chose to move further south across the border. They settled in the Mexicali Valley. Some stayed in the Imperial Valley. They found ways to overcome racism. Some married Mexican women and had children. Children born in the United States were citizens. They could own land. So, Sikh farmers put land in their children's names. This created a new community known as the Punjabi-Mexican American community. They formed their own unique culture.

Today, the Imperial Valley is known for mid-winter vegetables like lettuce, cauliflower, broccoli, and cabbage. In the spring, farmers grow vegetables like onions, corn, bell peppers, and cantaloupes. Sikh immigrants were instrumental in the early growth of the Imperial Valley. Their contributions helped make the region successful.

Bibliography:

- Punjabi Pioneering Digital Archive: UC Davis <https://digital.ucdavis.edu/collection/pioneering-punjabis>
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- "Imperial County Agriculture." University of California Cooperative Extension Vegetable Research and Information Center. Accessed September 10, 2023. https://vric.ucdavis.edu/virtual_tour/imp.htm
- "Echoes of Freedom: South Asian Pioneers in California, 1899-1965." UC Berkeley Library. Accessed September 10, 2023. <https://guides.lib.berkeley.edu/echoes-of-freedom>

Vocabulary:¹

- **Canal:** an artificial waterway for navigation or for draining or irrigating land
- **Divert:** to draw away from something
- **Fertile:** capable of sustaining abundant plant growth
- **Immigrant:** a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence
- **Irrigate:** to supply land or crops with water by artificial means in order to promote plant growth
- **Lease:** to grant a contract in which land or property can be used for a specific period of time and for a specific amount of money
- **Punjab:** the region of the northwestern Indian subcontinent in Pakistan and northwestern India

¹ Definition adapted from Merriam Webster

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the Imperial Valley like? What conditions make it not suitable for farming? What conditions make it suitable for farming?

2. From where did Sikh farmers immigrate?
3. How are Punjab and the Imperial Valley similar?
4. How did Sikh farmers contribute to farming in the Imperial Valley?
5. How did racist laws change the lives of Sikh farmers?
6. What factors led to the establishment of the Punjabi-Mexican American community in the borderlands?

Activity 1: Introducing the Borderlands

- A. Tell students: “Today we will learn about farmers in the borderlands in the early 1900s. Many of the farmers in this area at that time were Sikh immigrants. Sikhs are a group of people from the Punjab region in India who practice a religion called Sikhism. They made important contributions to farming in this region.”
- B. Show students a map of Punjab, India.
 1. Ask students if anyone has been to India.
 2. Locate Punjab and India on a globe, or show [Google map of Punjab, India](#).
 3. Point out the distance from Punjab to California.
- C. Show students a [map of Imperial County](#):
 1. Zoom in and out to show where in California the Imperial Valley is. Point out its proximity to the United States-Mexico border and where El Centro is. Share that El Centro is the largest city in the Imperial Valley.
 2. Explain that a “border” is an agreed-upon space that separates two different places.
 3. Explain that this region surrounding the United States-Mexico border is informally known as the “borderlands.”
 4. Tell students that farming was and continues to be a major business in the Imperial Valley.
- D. Have students compare and contrast Punjab and the Imperial Valley.
 1. Ask students: “How are Punjab and the Imperial Valley similar? How are they different?”
 2. Ask students: “What are the pros and cons of living between two countries?”

Activity 2: Learning about Farming in the Imperial Valley

- A. Have students read the essay. Consider the following options:
 1. OPTION 1: Have students read the essay independently either for homework or during class time.
 2. OPTION 2: Read aloud the essay.
 3. OPTION 3: Create a slide deck with images using the essay, and then read aloud to students.
- B. Facilitate a class discussion by asking students the discussion questions.
- C. Show students this video entitled “[What is Irrigation?](#)” to help them understand what irrigation is and different irrigation methods.
- D. Have students draw a picture of a desert. Have them describe their drawing, and explain the choices they made.
 1. Tell students that Imperial Valley is a dry desert.
 2. Show them the photographs in the article entitled “[Meet the California farmers awash in Colorado River water, even in a drought](#).” Ask them if the photos matched their drawings, and if not, how they are different.

3. Read aloud this paragraph from the article: “The Imperial Valley is a place of jarring contrasts. Half is in its natural state, a bone-dry desert. The other half is mile after mile of green fields lined by irrigation canals. A few of the fields are shrouded by showers of water delivered from long lines of sprinklers.”
4. Have students add to their drawings to match this description.
5. Use Google maps to trace the Colorado River to the All-American Canal in the Imperial Valley, or show the [maps and images](#).
6. Tell students: “Two canals were instrumental in making the Imperial Valley suitable for farming: Alamo Canal (also known as Imperial Canal) and All-American Canal. The Alamo Canal is no longer in use today. The All-American canal is the sole source of water for Imperial Valley farming, and is the largest irrigation canal in the world.”
7. Show students this [astronaut photo of the All-American Canal](#) captured from the International Space Station. Read aloud the first paragraph to provide additional background on the All-American Canal.
8. Have students watch the video entitled “[The Early History of Water in the Imperial Valley](#).” Have students discuss what they learned from the video. (If pressed for time, just show clip 0.00-8:34)
9. Ask students: “Why was it important to connect the Colorado River to the Imperial Valley?”
10. Emphasize that access to the Colorado River allowed farmers in the Imperial Valley to irrigate the land and to successfully grow crops.

Activity 3: Examining Sikh Farmers’ Contributions to the Imperial Valley

A. Distribute and have students complete the graphic organizer entitled, “[Sikh Farmers’ Success and Contributions in the Imperial Valley](#).”

1. Have students work in pairs or small groups to complete the graphic organizer.
2. Remind students to refer to the text and to content learned in previous activities as a source of information.
3. Have students identify the factors that led to Sikh farmers’ success in the Imperial Valley.
4. Have students identify the Sikh farmers’ contributions to the Imperial Valley.

B. Facilitate a discussion by asking students: “In what ways were Sikh farmers essential to the growth and development of the Imperial Valley?”

Activity 4: Analyzing Stories from the Imperial Valley

A. Show videos entitled “[Water-wise vegetables in California’s Imperial Valley](#)“ and “[Agriculture under pressure: The Imperial Valley braces for a future with less water](#).”

1. Point out that both of the videos feature brief stories of farmers in the early 1900s.
2. Have students look at who posted each of the videos and ask students: “Who is the intended audience? What is the purpose of the video?”
3. Facilitate a discussion by asking students: “What did you learn from the videos? Why do you think these stories were included in the videos? What is the impact of these stories on the viewer? How do these stories help us understand the experiences and challenges of the Sikh immigrants in the Imperial Valley?”

B. Point out that the history of Sikh farmers in the early 1900s Imperial Valley is absent from both of these videos. Facilitate a discussion by asking students: “Why do you think the history of Sikh farmers is missing? How would the inclusion of the history of Sikh farmers fit into this story? How would Sikh farmers’ histories enrich these videos?”

- C. Have students work in small groups to write and film a short video about Sikh contributions to Imperial Valley farming.
1. Have students decide on their intended audience and purpose for the video.
 2. Have students include at least three facts about Sikh history in the Imperial Valley in the video and explain why these facts are important.

Extension Activities

- A. Inform students that today, farmers in the Imperial Valley are dealing with a water shortage and that because the Imperial Valley is a desert with little rainfall, the Colorado River is the primary source of water. Explain how climate change is causing the river to lose much of its water. Show students the videos entitled, “[Water-wise vegetables in California’s Imperial Valley](#)“ and “[Agriculture under pressure: The Imperial Valley braces for a future with less water.](#)” After watching the videos, have students discuss the problems farmers in the Imperial Valley are facing today. Then, have them create posters to persuade people to address the water shortage and/or climate change in the Imperial Valley.
- B. Inform students of the following: “Sikh American immigrants have a long history of farming in the United States. Imperial Valley was one area they settled, but they formed farming communities and contributed to agriculture in other areas including San Joaquin Valley and Sacramento in California, as well as in Washington, Oregon, Utah, and Arizona.” Show students these areas on a map. Have students read more about the history of Punjabi farmers in the United States on the webpage entitled “[Farming](#)” from the Pioneering Punjabis Digital Archive. Then have students do a See, Think, Wonder routine with the photographs in the article entitled, “[Young Sikh Farmers in California Keep Up a Long Tradition](#),” and read the article. Have students discuss the importance of sharing stories of individual farmers and families like the ones featured in the article.
- C. Have students share out loud their favorite fruit or vegetable. Challenge students to trace the history of that product and find out where it was farmed and by whom. Have students create a flow map, marking the different people involved in getting their food to them (i.e., farmers, pickers, grocers, etc). Have them write thank you notes to the farmers.

Further Information

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “Racial Identity and American Citizenship in the Court”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/racial-identity-citizenship-in-the-court.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “South Asian Pioneers”:
<https://asianamericanedu.org/early-south-asian-pioneers.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, “South Asian Pioneers in California”:
<https://asianamericanedu.org/early-south-asian-pioneers-in-california.html#overview>

“El Centro Sikh Temple.” 1951. Pioneering Punjabis Digital Archive. UC Davis Library, Archives and Special Collections. 1951. <https://digital.ucdavis.edu/collection/pioneering-punjabis/D-643/d3z305>.