A Changing Nation: America's Reaction to its Immigrants

Purpose: To learn about the reaction to increases in immigration between 1850 and 1924.

Directions: Examine the cartoon below and answer the questions that accompany it.

THE IMMIGRANT: THE STRANGER AT OUR GATE.
EMIGRANT: --Can I come in?  UNCLE SAM: --I 'spose you can; there's no law to keep you out.

1. What actions do you notice in the cartoon?
2. What words do you notice in the cartoon?
3. What people do you notice in the cartoon?
4. What is the message of the cartoon? Is it for or against laws about immigration?
Between 1890 and 1914, over 15 million immigrants entered the United States. In some large cities, one out of every three residents was foreign-born. Many Americans felt threatened by the newcomers. In the early 1900s, economist Simon Patten described the way those fears were shaping American life:

Each class or section of the nation is becoming conscious of an opposition between its standards and the activities and tendencies of some less-developed class. The South has its Negro, the city has its slums... The friends of American institutions fear the ignorant immigrant, and the workingman dislikes the Chinese. Every one is beginning to differentiate those with proper qualifications for citizenship from some other class or classes which he wishes to restrain or exclude from society.

In 1876, the United States celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. In honor of the event, the French gave the nation a huge copper statue that depicts liberty as a woman holding high a giant torch. Emma Lazarus, a Jew whose family had lived in the nation for generations, later wrote a poem describing the statue.

In 1903, the year that Lazarus’s poem was carved into the base of the Statue of Liberty, 10 percent of the nation was foreign-born. As immigration increased so did the fears of many native-born Americans. Native-born workers often viewed the newcomers as competitors for jobs, housing, and public services. More prosperous Americans felt threatened by the way the immigrants crowded into the nation’s largest cities. Their legitimate concerns about the ability of local governments to deal with overcrowding turned into fears about the character of the newcomers. It was as if the new arrivals were the carriers of social problems rather than individuals who experienced those problems. Like Emma Lazarus, Thomas Bailey Aldrich came from a family that had lived in the United States for generations. He modeled his poem after the one she wrote, but the sentiment was very different. “The Unguarded Gate” was published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the magazine he edited, in 1892.

While we are reading the two poems, do the following:

1. Underline any words you don’t know.
2. Highlight any words that illustrate the author’s feelings towards immigrants and immigration.

Modern historians and economists note that immigrants in the early 1900s were as skilled and well educated as most Americans of their day. Although many were unable to read or write, so were many Americans. Those who opposed immigration often compared immigrants as a group to Americans as a nation. But nearly 80 percent of the immigrants were between the ages of 16 and 44 and about 70 percent were men. If opponents of immigration had compared the newcomers to a group of Americans in the same age range and with a similar gender balance, they would have found the two groups more alike than different.

While debate existed throughout the period between 1865 and 1924 about whether or not it was right to restrict immigration, the following laws were passed between 1882 and 1924:

- 1882 – Chinese Exclusion Act restricts Chinese immigration, allowing only Chinese whose parents were already in the United States to immigrate
- 1907 – Gentlemen’s Agreement between the United States and Japan determines that Japan will prevent its citizens from leaving for the United States in return for the desegregation (between Japanese and whites) of public schools in San Francisco
- 1917 – Literacy test mandates that all immigrants 16 and over must be able to read in their native language
- 1921 – Emergency Quota Act restricts the number of immigrants to 350,000
- 1924 – National Origins Act restricts the levels of immigrants based on their presence in the United States based on the 1890 census (aimed at restricting immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe)
The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Gloves world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"
Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,
Named of the four winds, North, South, East and West;
Portals that lead to an enchanted land
Of cities, forests, fields of living gold,
Vast prairies, lordly summits touched with snow,
Majestic rivers sweeping proudly past
The Arab's date-palm and the Norsemen's pine—
A realm wherein are fruits of every zone,
Airs of all climes, for lo! throughout the year
The red rose blossoms somewhere—a rich land,
A later Eden planted in the wilds,
With not an inch of earth within its bound
But if a slave's foot press it sets him free!
Here, it is written, Toil shall have its wage,
And Honor honor, and the humblest man
Stand level with the highest in the law.
Of such a land have men in dungeons dreamed,
And with the vision brightening in their eyes
Gone smiling to the fagot and the sword.

These bringing with them unknown gods and rites,
Those, tiger passions, here to stretch their claws.
In street and alley what strange tongues are these,
Accents of menace alien to our air,
Voices that once the tower of Babel knew!
O Liberty, white Goddess! is it well
To leave the gates unguarded? On thy breast
Fold Sorrow's children, soothe the hurts of fate,
Lift the down-trodden, but with hand of steel
Stay those who to thy sacred portals come
To waste the gifts of freedom. Have a care
Lest from thy brow the clustered stars be torn
And trampled in the dust. For so of old
The thronging Goth and Vandal trampled Rome,
And where the temples of the Caesars stood
The lean wolf unmolested made her lair.

Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,
And through them presses a wild motley throng—
Men from the Volga and the Tartar steppes,
Featureless figures of the Hoang-Ho,
Malayan, Scythian, Teuton, Kelt, and Slav,
Fleeing the Old World's poverty and scorn;

This cartoons protests the anti-Chinese sentiment that led to the Chinese Exclusion Act (from the UC Davis collection)