

## **From Russia and Vietnam to the Sooner State: Immigration from Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia**

About this lesson

Grade Level: Middle  
School/High School

Author: Mary Opegard,  
Field Representative, OCEE

Time: One class period

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**Rationale** Oklahoma has always been a land of immigrants, whether the Native American tribes moved here by the federal government, or the eager Boomers and Sooners ready to stake out a claim or participate in a lottery for land. But over the years other groups relocated to Oklahoma and found their homes here. All of these new Oklahomans made important decisions about moving. Geographers call these push-pull factors, and economists called the process cost/benefit analysis of alternatives. For each of these groups the costs and benefits were different. The basic question for us, however is what incentives made people from the far reaches of the globe decide to move to Oklahoma?

### **Oklahoma History Standards**

PASS 7: The student will examine major cultural and ethnic groups represented in Oklahoma.

7.1 Identify cultural and ethnic groups in Oklahoma (Eastern Europeans, Germans, and Vietnamese) and explore the causes and effect of their immigration and settlement patterns.

7.2 Trace the economic contributions of these groups.

### **Student Objectives**

As a result of this lesson students will be able to:

- Define costs and benefits and identify the costs and benefits that influence people's decisions to migrate.
- Define push and pull factors for migration, and identify examples.

### **Vocabulary**

Migration

Immigration

Benefits and Costs

Incentives

Push factors and Pull factors

### **Materials**

Activities 1 through 5

## Procedure

1. Ask students if any of them have ever moved. Ask how many times they have moved. Ask how many have moved within Oklahoma, from outside Oklahoma. Have students speculate about why people move. Tell them that according to US Census statistics, most Americans (59%) move in the same county, 19% move to another county in the same state, and another 19% move to another state. Ask why they think that is true.
2. Tell students the Census also reports the group that moves most often is ages 20-24 and the group that moves the least is over age 85. Discuss why these data are true. (*20-24 year olds are undergoing such events as graduation, new job, marriage, etc., while those over 85 are probably retired, facing more health issues, with strong ties to friends and family*)
3. Define and discuss costs and benefits. (*Costs are the disadvantages of a particular course of action measured by feelings, dollars, or number of items. Benefits are the advantages of a particular course of action as measured by feelings, dollars or number of items. Point out that costs and benefits may be different for different people.*) Have students give examples of costs and benefits from their own experiences.
4. Brainstorm the costs and benefits of moving. (*Benefits might be a new or better job, nicer weather, friends and/or family living there, lower taxes, beautiful environment, sports and recreational opportunities. Costs might be the expense of moving, climate, lack of jobs, crowded conditions, traffic, high cost of living.*)
5. Discuss push factors that influence people to move away, and pull factors that draw people to another location. Remind students that not all migration is voluntary.
6. Discuss how Oklahoma is a land of immigrants, from the first Native Americans, through explorers, fur traders, Sooners and Boomers, homesteaders from other states, Austrian and Italian coal miners, German and Russian farmers, to Vietnamese and Central Americans. Let students volunteer some of their immigrant background.
7. Ask students to read the migration stories of two major Oklahoma immigrant groups: German/Russians in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, and Vietnamese in the 1970's. First, hand out and read Activity 1: "New Oklahomans from Germany by Way Russia." Debrief student understanding of the reading. Then, hand out and complete Activity 2: "Why German/Russian Families Migrated to Oklahoma". Discuss the cost and benefits, push and pull factors, and the contributions this group made to Oklahoma.
8. Repeat # 7 with Vietnamese Oklahomans.

## Closure/Assessment

See Activity 5

## Extension

- Research the places where these two immigrant groups came from, and the routes they took to get to Oklahoma; locate them on maps.
- Have students research the archives of *The Oklahoman* for more information on immigrants in Oklahoma.

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**Activity 1**

**New Oklahomans from Germany by Way of Russia**

The story of the Russians who came to Oklahoma began 166 years before in Germany when Russian Czarina Catherine the Great, a German herself, and worried about the frontier along the Volga River, decided German farmers would be better farmers and a better buffer against Mongols, Kirghiz, and Turks who raided the steppe territory. So in 1763, she welcomed the poor farmers of war-ravaged southern Germany and promised them home stead land, tax breaks, cultural and religious autonomy, and no military conscription.

One hundred ten years later there were a quarter million Germans living on either side of the Volga River. These Germans were thriving, and Russians were becoming increasingly resentful of the German/Russian's special privileges. So in 1872, Czar Alexander II revoked Catherine's promises, taxing them and taking their young men off to the army. Slowly as the German/Russians began to hear of more promising lands clear across the globe, their eyes began to turn to the plains of the United States, where there was no conscription, land was free, and they could keep their religion and way of life.

American railroad agents began to court the German/Russians. First the German-Russians came to Kansas. But when the Cherokee Strip was opened, they came down the plain into the Panhandle of Oklahoma. The major lure was land, free land. And on this land the German/Russians would try to recreate what they had in Russia, and more.

The Russian-Germans brought beer, sauerkraut, wurst, and more importantly seeds of turkey red, a hard winter wheat, and incidental thistle sewn into the pockets of their vests. It meant survival, something worth more than currency. The turkey wheat, short-stemmed and resistant to cold and drought, took so well to the land beyond the ninety-eighth meridian that agricultural experts were forced to rethink the predominant view that the Great American Desert was unsuited for agriculture. The thistle came by accident, but it grew so fast that it soon was all over the West. In German, it was called "roll-across-the-field." In Oklahoma and elsewhere in the West it is now known as tumbleweed.

For more information, read Timothy Egan's book - **The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl**, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2006.



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**Activity 3**

**Vietnamese Oklahomans**

Right in the middle of Oklahoma City sits Little Saigon, the hub of the largest Asian group in Oklahoma, Vietnamese Americans. Numbering 9,600, according to a 2002 census, it is double the population of the next largest Asian group, Chinese Americans. The overall population throughout Oklahoma is over 13,000, double what it was 10 years ago. What incentives brought these new Oklahomans here; what choices did they make to come from such a far, away place to establish their homes here, and what were their costs and benefits to get here?

Their story begins in 1975 as North Vietnam took over South Vietnam, the city of Saigon fell, and the whole country came under the Communist rule. While many people decided to stay, others decided they must leave. Some took to the sea hoping to survive storms, pirates, and leaky boats; they became known as “boat people.” Thousands eventually ended up in refugee camps in countries such as Thailand and the Philippines. From there, many of them were sponsored to come to America by Oklahoma church groups, and others were sent to Camp Chaffee, Arkansas which is just across the state line near Forth Smith. They also needed sponsors before they could leave the Arkansas barracks and find permanent homes.

It wasn't long before a few Vietnamese made the short trek west on Route 40 to Oklahoma City. They liked what they found, a reasonably warm climate and a relatively low cost of living; and they felt welcomed by caring sponsors. As stories of the success of the first refugees spread, relatives and friends soon joined them in Oklahoma.

The first refugees, many of whom did not speak English, left professional and military careers in Vietnam to become laborers – brick makers, builders and warehouse workers in Oklahoma City. In time, they became lawyers, doctors and engineers, opened dental and chiropractor offices, nail salons, restaurants, travel agencies, and insurance agencies. They sent their children to American colleges and became entrepreneurs in the Little Saigon portion of the Asia District in Oklahoma City. Today Little Saigon is an important, vibrant, exciting part of Oklahoma City's economy.



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**Activity 5**

**Extending the Lesson\***

Your parents call a family meeting. Your mother has been offered a new job with higher pay in a larger city 1,000 miles away. The new city has many theaters, parks, museums, and shopping areas – along with two major league sports teams. The city is also near the ocean, and you’ve always wanted to live near the ocean. It has excellent schools and is only half an hour away from you favorite grandparents. You and your brother have lived in this neighborhood all your lives, and you have many friends here. You just made the soccer team at school. Your father is a skilled craftsman, and says he should have no trouble finding jobs in the new city, but it may take him awhile to build up a solid list of clients. Even though your mother will make more money, you will have to buy a smaller house because the cost of living is higher. She says she won’t take the job if the family doesn’t want to move. She asks you how you feel.

Use the table below to make your decision:

<u>Alternatives</u>	<u>Costs</u>	<u>Benefits</u>
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Move

Stay

For you, which is greater the costs or the benefits? Explain.

\*An excerpt from Middle School World Geography, National Council on Economic Education, NY, NY.