

DOING LAUNDRY BY HAND: KEEPING THE PAST ALIVE

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OVERVIEW

Students will use primary and secondary sources to learn how clothes were cleaned in Colorado mining camps.

STANDARDS

- History Standard 2: Students know how to use the processes and resources of historical inquiry.
- History Standard 3: Students understand that societies are diverse and have changed over time.

OBJECTIVES

After completing this activity, students will be able to:

- Describe how clothes were washed in the Colorado mining camps.
- Explain how keeping clothes clean was associated with gender and ethnic work roles.
- Describe the occupations open to Chinese laborers in Colorado mining camps.

INQUIRY QUESTIONS:

- Who washed clothes in Colorado mining camps?
- What tools were used in clothes washing?
- Why was washing clothes traditionally considered women's work?
- Why was washing clothes an occupation open to Chinese laborers?

PROCEDURE

1. You will need to obtain hand laundry tools; clothing.
2. Assemble the materials needed for a demonstration of the hand-cleaning of clothes: wash tubs, rinse tubs, scrub boards, bars of laundry soap, a clothes line, and old, badly-soiled clothing. If possible, gather enough equipment for two or three laundry stations.
3. Prior to class, fill tubs 1/2 full with warm water
4. Begin a class discussion about how clothes were cleaned by hand in the past. Introduce the basic tools and briefly describe the process.
5. Divide the students into teams and give each team its share of the dirty laundry. Its task is to clean the clothing by scrubbing each item on the soapy board, rinse the items in a separate tub, wring out each piece, and hang the clothing on the clothes line. Some members of the class can be photographing or video taping the procedure while waiting for their turn.
6. After the laundry has been washed, continue the discussion by introducing the idea of work and gender roles. Why were women and girls traditionally assigned the task of laundering clothes? (It's an in-the-home activity; its associated with sewing and making clothes; its very hard work.)
7. Then pose this question: in mining camps in which women were scarce, to whom was the occupational role of clothes laundering assigned? To focus the discussion, introduce the following primary source, a letter from Westcliffe, Colorado dated 1887:

"The backyard of a house, has now a tenant in person of Mr. San Lee, a 'heathen Chinee' who keeps a laundry and lives in the said house. He makes no objection to my getting water at his well, so I still continue, but I suppose it is rather impudent on my part, so I must take it up by giving him some collars to wash, for I cannot starch these myself."

Source: Theodore A. Cockerell, *Letters from Westcliffe*, p; 39.
Originals in the Norlin Library Archives, Boulder, Cockerell papers.

8. Continue the discussion by explaining that Chinese immigrants had difficulty finding jobs in Colorado. In California, they had been excluded from mining, even. Ask the students what the opening of the laundry occupation to the Chinese says about how white miners regarded Chinese immigrants.