

## Oh, California!

Songs tell stories. They can be about many things: good times, bad times, love, community, or a changing world. Songs can also reflect a time and place in history. *Oh, California!* was a popular song in the United States during the 1840s and 1850s and tells the story of the hopes and experiences of some people coming to California to join the Gold Rush.

The musical score for "Oh, California!" is written in 2/4 time. It consists of five staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody is simple and rhythmic. The lyrics are: "I sailed from Sa - lem Ci - ty with my washbowl on my knee. I'm going to Ca - li - for - ni - a the gold dust for to see. It rained all night the day I left, the wea - ther it was dry. The sun so hot I froze to death, oh brothers don't you cry. Oh Ca - li - fornia, that's the land for me. I'm going to San Fran cis - co with my washbowl on my knee." The score includes chord markings: C, G7, C, F, G7, and C.

1. I sailed from Salem City with my washbowl on my knee.  
I'm going to California the gold dust for to see.  
It rained all night the day I left, the weather it was dry.  
The sun so hot I froze to death, oh brothers, don't you cry!
- Chorus:** Oh California, that's the land for me.  
I'm going to San Francisco with my washbowl on my knee.
2. I soon shall be in Frisco and there I'll look around,  
And when I find the gold lumps there, I'll pick them off the ground,  
I'll scrape the mountains clean, my boys, I'll drain the rivers dry.  
A pocketful of rocks bring home, oh brothers, don't you cry!

**Background information:** *Oh, California!* is probably one of the most recognized songs of the California gold rush. The song was first written by Stephen Foster in 1847 as *Oh, Susanna!*. While headed for California on a ship, John Nichols changed the words of the song and called it *Oh, California!*. The "forty-niners" of the gold rush enjoyed the rhythm and tune of the song so much that it became one of the most popular songs of America in the 1840s and 1850s.

### Additional activities:

1. **Compare:** Have students compare the lyrics of *Oh, California!* to another Gold Rush song, such as *Oh, My Darling Clementine*. What story do the songs express? What can they tell us about what life was like during the Gold Rush? How are these songs different from the music of today?
2. **Writing/Performing:** Poems are often put to music. Have students work in groups to research and write a poem that tells a story about people during the Gold Rush. Students may set their poem to music, either writing their own melodies or use a favorite tune. Have students share with the class.
3. **Performance:** Have students act out the lyrics while listening to *Oh, California!* using props such as pans, backpacks, and gold nuggets.

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## Lesson Plan

### Objectives:

1. To learn that songs document history
2. To relive the experiences and feelings of a gold miner

**Time:** 20 minutes

### Materials:

1. "Oh, California!" song sheet
2. Instrumental recording of "Oh, Susanna!"

### Directions:

1. **Distribute** the "Oh, California!" song sheet.
2. **Review** the information regarding the gold rush as well as the background information regarding the song.
3. Before playing the song, have students **read** it.
4. **Discuss** as a class the meaning of the song. What does this song tell students about the California gold rush? (Sample answers: How people traveled to California; many people thought they would find gold easily and be rich.)
5. **Play** the song.
6. **Discuss** the tone of the song. Is it happy or sad? What does the tone of the song tell about the experiences and feelings of a gold seeker? Does this change their view about a gold seeker's life?
7. Have students **sing** along with the music. You may want to divide the class into two and have each group sing a particular verse.

### Links to standards

**History/Social Studies:** 4.3.2

**Language Arts:** RI.4.2, W.4.7, SL.4.1a-d, SL.4.5

**Music:** 1.3, 2.1, 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 5.1

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The musical score is written on a single treble clef staff in 2/4 time. It consists of five lines of music. The lyrics are written below the notes. Chord symbols (C, G7, F) are placed above the staff at various points. The lyrics are: "I sailed from Sa - lem Ci - ty with my washbowl on my knee. I'm going to Ca - li - for - ni - a the gold dust for to see. It rained all night the day I left, the wea - ther it was dry. The sun so hot I froze to death, oh brothers don't you cry. Oh Ca - li - fornia, that's the land for me. I'm going to San Fran cis - co with my washbowl on my knee."

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I'm going to California the gold dust for to see.  
It rained all night the day I left, the weather it was dry.  
The sun so hot I froze to death, oh brothers, don't you cry!

*Chorus:* Oh California, that's the land for me.  
I'm going to San Francisco with my washbowl on my knee.

2. I soon shall be in Frisco and there I'll look around,  
And when I find the gold lumps there, I'll pick them off the ground,  
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