

**Coming to America: Putting Your Life in a Box Follow Up Activity**  
**Updated: August 2007**

Lesson Title: Coming to America  
Name: Erin Anderson  
Grade Level: 1  
Length of Lesson: 20 minutes

**Rationale:**

This program is meant to be a follow up activity for “Seeds, Shirts, and Silver: Putting Your Life in a Box” immigrant box program. It is designed to be an easy tool for the teacher to use in the classroom to extend the program. It can also be used at CCHS as part of the “Putting Your Life in a Box” exhibit in the *Choosing Carver County* gallery.

**Goals:**

- 112: Compare the history of long ago and yesterday with today
- 111: Family life today and in the past’ many peoples and cultures meet in the making of North America
- 110: The student will understand different types of family units in our community and how wants and needs are responsibly met in the home

**Lesson Objectives/Overview:**

1. Students will consider what life was like for a young German man in the 1860s during the height of immigration to the United States.
2. Students will experience what it was like to make decisions
3. Students will view images of the era in order to illustrate and better understand the story of German immigrants.

**Supplies:**

Numbered photos or overheads

**Preparation:**

Make sure the photos are in order so that they are easier to use when trying to read the story.

**Activities:**

1. Seat the students and begin the story. At the end of each page, have students consider the two options, using what they have already learned from the immigrant trunk activity, and then take a vote for which option to pursue.
2. If there is time, try the story a second time using different options. Did it turn out differently? How so? Why did you make the different decisions?
3. Wrap-Up: Do you think you will ever have to make decisions like this in your life? What would it be like to leave all your friends and family for a new life in America? How is coming to America different today than in this story?

It is 1892. You live on a small farm in Germany with your parent, three brothers, and two sisters. *(If possible, show a world map. Ask a student to identify Germany on the map.)*

You are 17 years old and it is time for you to head out on your own. You are the second son. Your older brother Peter will inherit the farm. He will have to give you some money for your share but you will never have enough money to buy a farm in Germany.

Your family has never been rich but there was always enough to eat. There was always porridge, potatoes, and milk. There was often even meat on your family's table. Unfortunately, the last few years have been very dry so the crops did not grow well.

One day your cousin John comes to visit. John is two years older than you. He tells you that he is planning on going to America. He claims that you will both be able to buy farms there. He is not sure if the money your family will give you for your share of the family farm will be enough to buy a farm in America, but wages are so high there that he is sure you will both be able to earn the rest very quickly. He asks you to go with him. **Do you go with him or do you stay in Europe? If you go with him turn to page 9. If you stay in Europe turn to page 3.**

You choose to stay in Europe. Your cousin John also often exaggerates things. America is a long way away. Better to stay near your family and near to the things you know.

Your father tells you that a farmer with only daughters has asked if you would come and work for him. In exchange for working on his farm he will give you food, a place to sleep, one new set of clothes each year, and a little money.

Your father also tells you that his friend the bricklayer in town needs a helper. He would not pay you for the first few years but you would learn to be a bricklayer.

Bricklayers make a good living. However, if you go to work from the farmer you might be able to buy his farm someday or perhaps marry one of his daughters and get his farm that way. **Do you become a bricklayer or a farmer? If you become a bricklayer, turn to page 4. If you go work for the farmer, turn to page 7.**

You decide that you will be a bricklayer not a farmer. A farmer's life is always uncertain. If the weather is bad the crops fail and there is nothing you can do about it. So you go to town and learn to be a bricklayer.

The bricklayer is a fair man but he expects you to work hard. You sleep in the attic with three other boys learning to be bricklayers. You have to get up at dawn and go to work. You are not sure you like being a bricklayer. It is much harder work than you thought it would be and it will take you years to learn how to do it well enough for you to work on your own.

One of the other boys has decided to quit and become a dock worker. Dock workers in town make a decent wage and you could do that work right now without having to spend years learning how to do a job for no pay, just your food and housing. **Do you decide to stick it out and learn to be a bricklayer or do you go hire on as a dock worker? If you decide to be a bricklayer, turn to page 5. If you decide to be a dock worker, turn to page 6.**

You decide to stay and be a bricklayer. Sure you would be paid more right now if you were a dock worker but your pay would never go up much. Also, you know the work would be much harder than the other boy is telling you and your pay would not go as far as he says.

After three years you have learned all you can from the bricklayer and you go out on your own. You are good at your job and you slowly build a steady business. When you get married you are able to buy a small house. You will never be rich but your family will always have a roof over their head and enough food to eat. Sometimes you think about what it would have been like if you had gone to America. Your cousin John who went now has a farm in a place called Minnesota. You would have like to own your own farm but you have a good life anyway.

**THE END**

You go with the other boy and hire on as a dock worker. (*Show Picture: The Docks*) The work is much harder than you thought it would be. You spend all day lifting boxes off ships or onto ships. By the end of the day you are so tired you can barely walk back to your room and eat dinner. Also, your room and your food are much more expensive than you thought they would be. You can only afford a small attic room and cheap food like porridge and potatoes. You can hardly ever afford to have meat. At the end of each week you have no money left to save. You also do not have a real skill so your pay never goes up much.

Eventually you meet a girl and get married. She takes in sewing to bring in more money but you still have to live in a dark attic room and skimp on food. From time to time when you are loading boxes onto a ship going to America you think about how different your life might have been if you had gone there with your cousin John. John has a farm in a place called Minnesota. You wonder if you could have had one too if you had not missed your chance.

**THE END**

You go to work for the farmer. (*Show picture 2: Farm Family in Field*) He works you very hard. You have to get up at dawn and work all day long with only a short break for lunch. You are so tired every night that you just fall into bed. The bad weather has hurt this farm just like it has hurt your family's so most days you only have porridge and potatoes to eat.

There is another boy working on the farm with you. He has decided to leave and go work as a dock worker in the town. He tells you that dock workers make good money and that the work cannot be as hard as it is on the farm. He asks you to go with him. **Do you stay on the farm and hope that one day you will be able to buy it or marry one of the farmer's daughters and inherit it or do you go be a dock worker? If you decide to stay on the farm turn to page 8. If you decide to be a dock worker turn to page 6.**

You decide to stay and work on the farm. It may be hard work but you always wanted to be a farmer. The next year you finally get enough rain. The crops do better. Slowly the farmer becomes nicer to you. You realize the reason he was so mean at first was because his farm was doing so badly.

You get to know his oldest daughter. (*Show Picture 3: Girl with Basket*) Her name is Sarah. Eventually you marry Sarah and the farmer promises to leave you the farm when he dies so long as you stay and work it with him. You agree. Sometimes the weather is good and your crops do well. However, more often it is too dry or too cold or too hot or too wet and your crops do not do well. You worry about how to feed your family in the bad years and how you will provide for your children.

You learn that your cousin John did go to America and now owns a farm someplace called Minnesota. It is much bigger than your farm in Germany. He has enough land to give farms to each of his sons. You often wonder if you would have done better to go with him to America when he asked you.

**THE END**



You decide to go to America with John. He buys you both tickets on a ship going to America. The two of you say good-bye to your family and set out. You find the boat in the harbor and get on. (*Show Picture 4: Steerage Bunks*) Your bunks are at the bottom of the ship where there are no portholes. It is very dark and smells. You and John do not have your own rooms. You are in a big room with lots of other men. (*Show Picture 5: People on the Deck of the Ship*)

The ship sails. You hit a storm and everybody is seasick. It feels like the trip will last forever but finally you arrive. As your ship pulls into New York harbor you see the Statue of Liberty and know you have arrived in America. (*Show Picture 6: The Statue of Liberty and Picture 7: The Great Hall and Ellis Island*) However, you cannot just get off the boat and walk into New York City; you have to go through a place called Ellis Island.

At Ellis Island you stand in line for hours and people ask you all sorts of questions. You want to answer all of the questions right or else they might send you back to Europe! (*Show Picture 8: The Physical Inspection*). You finally finish answering all the questions and a man in a uniform tells you that you have answered everything correctly. You take the ferry off Ellis Island. **Turn to page 10.**

Now you and John have to decide what to do. Neither of you speak English but John has written to a friend of his from Germany who moved to America three years ago. His friend, Henry, meets you at the dock. He tells you that there is plenty of work in New York at the docks if you want it. Henry says the pay is good and there will be lots of people around who speak German. You and John discuss whether you should stay in New York for now or go to the place where you heard you can buy farms: Minnesota. Minnesota is very far away. You would have to take a train for days to get there. **Do you decide to stay in New York or go to Minnesota? If you want to stay in New York, turn to page 11. If you want to go to Minnesota, turn to page 15.**

You and John decide to stay in New York. After all, neither of you can speak English yet nor are there are lots of people who speak German in New York. You and John agree that after you have saved some money and learned English, you will go out to Minnesota together and buy farms.

You follow Henry, John's friend from Germany, through the streets of New York City. (*Show Picture 9: Children Playing in the Street*). You have never seen so many buildings and so many people all together in one place.

Finally, Henry leads you into the building where he lives. He takes you to an apartment on the second floor. A woman greets you and tells you and John that for \$3 a week you can live with her and her family. She will give you a bed, breakfast, and dinner. She already has four men living with her family and has room for just two more. The apartment has only three rooms. It is dark and crowded but Henry tells you this is all you can afford if you want to try and save money for a farm. You and John talk it over and agree that it is not a great place but you will stay there until you can find something better. **Turn to page 12.**

The next day you and John go to the docks with Henry. *(Show Picture 1: The Docks)* You start working as a dock worker. The work is much harder than you thought it would be and the pay does not go as far as you thought it would. You have to go to work every day at dawn. You spend all day lifting boxes off ships or onto ships. By the end of the day you are so tired you can barely walk back to your building and eat dinner. However, you are saving \$1 a week for your farm. **Do you decide to find an easier job or stay with the dock work? If you decide to stay with the dock work, turn to page 13. If you decide to find an easier job, turn to page 14.**

Being a dock worker slowly gets easier as you get used to the work. You get married. All the money you saved goes to buying furniture and things for the home but you figure you can start saving again to buy a farm. However, you never do manage to save much. You get a small raise but you also have your first child so you still cannot save much money. Then you are promoted to foreman but by then you have three children and need a house. So you buy a house. You never do manage to buy a farm in Minnesota but being a dock foreman is not a bad life.

**THE END**

You quit working as a dock worker. It is just too hard! Instead you take work in a factory canning vegetables. The work is easier but you make less. At the end of each week you have almost nothing left to save. You also do not have a real skill so your pay never goes up much. Eventually you meet a girl and get married. Your wife takes in sewing to bring in more money but you still have only enough to buy food, clothing, and to pay rent on a small apartment.

From time to time you think about how different your life might have been if you had gone right to Minnesota or stayed a dock worker. John stayed a dock worker and became a foreman. He has managed to buy a small house for his family. He had to work very hard but he has made a nice life. You wonder if your life could have been different.

**THE END**

You and John decide to go to Minnesota anyway. You want to be farmers, not dock workers. So, you and John get on the train for Minnesota. (*Show Picture 10: Train*) It takes days to get there but you finally get off in a place called Chaska. A cousin of yours lives just outside Chaska. Her name is Anna and she meets you at the train. She takes you back to her and her husband's small farm. (*Show Picture 11: the Woman and the Child in Front of the House*)

She tells you that you do not have enough money to buy a farm but you could rent one. If you are lucky you could someday save enough money to buy the farm you rent. However, it would cost all of the money you brought with you to set yourself up on a farm as a renter. If you do not make money as a renter you will never be able to buy a farm. She also tells you that you could work on someone else's farm for \$.75 per day plus food and a place to sleep. If you saved your money you would be able to buy a small farm in 7 to 8 years. **Do you rent a farm or do you work on someone else's farm? If you rent a farm, turn to page 16. If you work on someone else's farm, turn to page 17.**

You decide to take a chance and rent a farm. At first it is hard. You are all by yourself on the farm and there is so much work to do. John had to rent a farm far away so you only see him every couple of months. The first winter it snows so much that you can barely get to the barn and the well. You do not see another person for over a month.

During your first year your crops do not do well but your second year is better and your third year is even better still. You get married and your wife is a big help on the farm. You start to save money. Over the next 20 years you have 11 children. (*Show Picture 12: the Family*) As your sons grow up you are able to farm more land so you rent more. Finally, you save enough money to buy the land you are farming. It took a long time but you finally own your own farm!

**THE END**



You and John decide it would be safer to work on someone else's farm for awhile. You get a job on the farm of a neighbor of Anna's. You get to see Anna every week and the farmer and his family are very nice.

After 7 years of working on someone else's farm you finally have saved enough money to buy a small farm. It is far away from Anna's farm but it is all your own.

At first it is hard. You are all by yourself on the farm and there is so much work to do. John bought a farm far away so you only see him every couple of months. During your first winter it snows so much that you can barely get to the barn and the well. You do not see another person for over a month.

You get married and your wife is a big help on the farm. Over the next 20 years you have 11 children. (*Show picture 12: the Family*) As your sons grow up you are able to farm more land so you buy more. By the time your sons have grown up you have enough land so that the two of them can have their own farms near you. This would never have happened if you had stayed in Europe. Things have turned out even better than you hoped they would.

**THE END**