Bonnie Cooper, Conroe Independent School District, Caney Creek High School, Conroe, Texas
Stacy Gran, Vistation Academy of St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri

This lesson plan for a high school social studies uses a document based methodology to help students examine the role gender played in the settlement of the American frontier. Building on a previous lesson about Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, students work in groups first to create a list of how they believed gender roles were assigned on the frontier. Next, they process a number of primary source materials that illustrate contemporary views on gender roles. Following this students compare the historical evidence to their initial impressions, and finally compare/contrast the historical realities with Turner’s thesis. Participation in the activities provides the assessment for the lesson.

And Whose Job is it Anyway….. Gender and Age Roles on the American Frontier.

Objective: Have students review perceived jobs and tasks by individuals on the frontier post reconstruction through 1910. After a class consensus has been established, compare multiple primary source documents that challenge the “accepted” perceptions. This could be a 1 – 2 day assignment.

Possible over-arching questions and the enduring understanding for the Unit at large:

1. People migrate to improve their lives.
2. Two essential questions up for review:
   a. What opportunities emerged as Americans and other immigrants moved westward?
   b. What conflicts arose along the American Frontier as a result of westward expansion?

5 Document packets used for the assignment:

- Political Posters and Women’s Suffrage in the West

Review notes on Turner’s Thesis and his Concept of the American Frontier for the first few minutes of class. Introduce the concept of Gender and Age roles in the Frontier and ask the class to create a list of 5-7 traits each that they believe men, women and children participated in when they migrated west. Put this up on the board for the class to see.

Break the students up into 4 - 8 groups depending on class size by counting 1 - 4.

Have students move into their groups, designate a secretary and then have the secretary pick up the packet with the corresponding number on it.
Once they have the documents have them answer the questions attached to the source:

Written Document Analysis Worksheet

1. TYPE OF DOCUMENT (Check one):
   - Newspaper
   - Letter
   - Patent
   - Memorandum
   - Map
   - Telegram
   - Press Release
   - Report
   - Advertisement
   - Congressional Record
   - Other

2. UNIQUE PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOCUMENT (Check one or more):
   - Interesting Letterhead
   - Handwritten
   - Typed
   - Seals
   - Notations
   - "RECEIVED" stamp
   - Other

3. DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT:

4. AUTHOR (OR CREATOR) OF THE DOCUMENT:

   POSITION (TITLE):

5. FOR WHAT AUDIENCE WAS THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN?

6. DOCUMENT INFORMATION (There are many possible ways to answer A-E.)
   A. List three things the author said that you think are important:

   B. Why do you think this document was written?

   C. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.

   D. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written.

   E. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:

Give the groups 10 -15 minutes to work. The only one who has to write is the secretary, however all members of the group must have their name on the questionnaire.

Come together as a class and have ‘framing questions” that allow the students to voice their groups ideas and how they compare to the classes original 5 – 7 ideas:
1. How did the Turner Thesis influence your ideas regarding roles of gender and individuals on the western frontier?

2. Examples from their documents and how do they compare to their original ideas?

3. Do the documents you analyzed support the original idea about family members, occupations and gender roles on the frontier?

4. Did “time” on the frontier change roles for individuals regarding gender and place in the family structure?