

Bay Bridge interviews.

Instructions for Teachers

This lesson is to be done in class before visiting the museum and uses interviews with Bay Bridge workers to orient students to bridge and the experiences of those who worked on it.

Before You Start With the Assignment

Begin by discussing the new bridge with the class. How many drove over the old one? Has anyone driven over the new one? Do they remember any particular experiences? What are the advantages/disadvantages of taking BART instead of driving over the bridge?

Poem

Have student read *Questions From a Worker Who Reads*. Ask students what the point of the poem is. How do they think it might connect to the Bay Bridge? Have them write one or two questions they have about people who worked on the bridge.

Interviews

Have students read interview excerpts from people who have worked on the Bridge. As they read, have students underline two or three lines that interest them for some reason. It could be because they like the language or because it reminds them of an experience they've had, or for any other reason.

Have students go around the room and reads aloud one of the sentences they underlined. It could be the same as someone else in the class. This is called a popcorn strategy and its purpose it to hear the language of the piece out loud in the class.

Class Discussion

Have a short class discussion on the interviews—what challenges did the workers face? Did anything surprise them? Where any of their questions answered?

Additional Activity

Have students interview someone who has a job and ask them a few questions—what is their day like? What challenges do they face? What gratifies them about their work? These interviews could be shared in class and become a basis for a “bottom-up” approach to looking at history.

Worksheets for Students

Questions From a Worker Who Reads by Bertolt Brecht, 1935

Who built Thebes of the 7 gates?

In the books you will read the names of kings.

Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?

And Babylon, many times demolished,

Who raised it up so many times?

In what houses of gold glittering Lima did its builders live?

Where, the evening that the Great Wall of China was finished, did the masons go?

Great Rome is full of triumphal arches.

Who erected them?

Over whom did the Caesars triumph?

Had Byzantium, much praised in song, only palaces for its inhabitants?

Even in fabled Atlantis, the night that the ocean engulfed it,

The drowning still cried out for their slaves.

The young Alexander conquered India.

Was he alone?

Caesar defeated the Gauls.

Did he not even have a cook with him?

Philip of Spain wept when his armada went down.

Was he the only one to weep?

Frederick the 2nd won the 7 Years War.

Who else won it?

Every page a victory.

Who cooked the feast for the victors?

Every 10 years a great man.

Who paid the bill?

So many reports.

So many questions.

Worker Safety:

Evelyn Rodes was the daughter of a man who worked as a laborer on building the Bay Bridge.

...A lot of people lost their lives on that bridge. It was unbelievable. There were no safety nets or nothing. When you think, I look back, people have no idea how bad things could get years ago, because there was nothing to protect you. If you were working-class, you were doomed. You figured you're either going to get killed, or you're going to die falling off of something.

Then they worked nights. They worked twenty-four hours a day. They built that bridge in three and a half years.

I think of the lives that were lost and the work that went into it, and the honor, when we built it, and how it was done so quickly, and everybody thought we were crazy.

Chuck Seim was an engineer who worked on building many bridges in the Bay Area.

On the Bay Bridge there was no safety—I've talked to guys that worked on it. There were twenty-four killed up to the opening, and there were twenty-nine total...American Bridge built the suspension span, and they required their people to wear a leather safety hat. If you look at pictures, you will see people with leather safety hats and bare-headed people, because there was no enforcement...There was this macho-ism. You know what I mean. If you showed any kind of fright, boy, they'll drum you off the bridge right then.

Women Workers:

Frances Ryan was a toll taker on the Bay Bridge during World War II.

I wanted to get out of Lodi, so my sister and I moved to Berkeley, California and we had a little old house there that we rented. We went to San Francisco, and that's when I noticed that they had girl toll collectors...I got a job on the bridge as a toll collector. That's my first job.

Before the war started, it was all men. I think a lot of them (drivers) were surprised to see women toll collectors. Because I had kind of long nails, and they used to say they wanted to drop the quarter in my hand because they were afraid I was going to scratch them.

The Bay Bridge meant a lot to me, because I liked work there very much...I look back now, I always think, I'm a part of the first Bay Bridge. I always had some nice soft feelings about it.

Working on the bridge:**Jack Giolitti**, a painter on the bridge

[They wore] coveralls and jackets because it's cold out there. And make sure you always had—if you wanted something, a bite for lunch or something to drink, you took it with you. And a hat. They didn't have hats when I went to work there. Nobody wore a hard hat. And as far as safety belts, well, you were given one and nobody wore them.

When you spill a bucket from the upper deck, up on the cantilever down, you probably hit thirty, forty cars. I think it happened once or twice in the ten years that I was there or actually my whole life that I was there. It's a long ways down there. And sometimes we'd time it... We used to take a bucket of paint and check your wristwatch and drop it to see how long it/d take to get to the water.

Richard Mooradian, a tow truck driver

I'm a people person. I really like people. I'm kind of an adrenaline junkie. I like the action of being in traffic, dodging cars. I like the excitement that might come along with—maybe it's an accident, a car fire, a suicide, perhaps, or something. I like that still, on occasion—they'll call me over and I'll drive tow trucks on overtime. I would do that for free, because I love it so much. I really do.

Bob Sorenson, who put out cones to direct traffic

I remember we always wore coveralls out there. The bridge crews wore coveralls, whereas the people out on the highways never wear coveralls, but we're always cold. Always had hooded sweatshirts. You let your hair grow long and you had beards and things, because the weather out there—today would be so miserable out there working. You're freezing.

Greg Bayol, a public relations person for the Bay Bridge

It was incredible. There was nothing that came near it. When I answered the phone at my job, and people have a question about the bridge, you could tell them, 'This is the longest bridge in the world. It has the deepest bridge piers ever built. It was built in the middle of the Depression. It is the workhorse. It carries more traffic than all the other bridges combined in the Bay Area. The money raised from the tolls go to fix all the other bridges.' It's just one thing after another about how incredible this thing was.

Feelings about the bridge:

Bob Bridwell, an engineer for the bridge

It's a living thing. It's moving all the time. If you don't believe me, walk across one of them. The temperature at the Bay Bridge would move—the bridge would move twelve, fourteen inches a day, from temperature. It's interesting. I had a unique position, because you'd go out, you could sit on the cable and as the trucks go across you could feel the truck go across the bridge. They're alive. They're always alive. They make sounds. And if you listen to the sounds the sounds will tell you whether they have problems. Because if they start screeching and yelling at you, you better start looking a little closer at things...

Richard Mooradian, a tow truck driver

I tell you what. Working on this bridge right here—they're all nice, but working on this one, because you get to see San Francisco, you get to see Oakland, there's boats, there's waves—there's nothing like it. People travel all over the world to come here, and I get to look at it and get paid for it...I love working on this bridge and just the view that you get from it. There's never a dull view for me. I don't care what time of year. It could be storming. It's beautiful. Midnight, pitch black, it's beautiful. It is. It's a beautiful place to work, it really is.

I'm going to hate when this one comes down. Because I really like it. It's something that I went across when I was a kid, even. Now I've worked here. I've got to touch it. I've got to climb on it. Inclement weather. I've been out here for everything, and it's going to go. Now we're going to have a masterpiece. It's going to be a beautiful bridge when it's all said and done, but I'm going to miss this. I'm a blue-collar kind of person, and this is a blue-collar bridge. The other one is more like for Hollywood. I hate to say that, but that's the only way I can put it.

[This one] It's rivets, it's steel. It's dirty at times. It's a means to an end, to get by. You're working and you've got to cross this thing, but it's still looking out for you. It's taking care of you. I don't know I can't describe it. I really have affections for these bridges. I really do. I know that's going to sound sappy, I really don't care.