Lesson Overview
In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the U.S. experienced a second industrial revolution – and immigrant labor fueled factories, construction, mining and other economic growth. Over the first two decades of the 20th century, over 3 million Southern Italian migrant laborers passed through Ellis Island. Like many others before and after them, this group included migrant laborers who hoped to make money in the U.S. and return home, and others who envisioned a new life in America. What rings true for all, is a challenging experience of transatlantic travel, rough work, often-deplorable living conditions – and an undeniable contribution to the United States.

By viewing the video “Birds of Passage” and through discussion and independent writing of historical fiction, students will connect the personal experiences of immigrant families to broader historical events. Additional reflection questions and an extension offer the option to connect learning about Italian Americans to other immigrant groups and times. This lesson invites students to look deeply at the central role of immigration in the American story – to examine the reasons people leave their families and homes to take on risky work. And, to understand the pivotal work of migrant labor in literally building the systems of water, transportation, industry and buildings that we use to this day.

Grade: 5 – 12 (A variety of discussion questions below, along with flexible writing prompts, allow for a wide grade range)

Multimedia Resources
- Birds of Passage
Also see:
- Who Killa Da Chief?
- Fruits of Thy Labor

Materials:
- Chart paper or chalk/whiteboard for main ideas in group discussion
- Writing materials for historical fiction writing prompts
Time: Video & Discussion: 30 minutes (Add time for independent writing (in or out of class), if completing the writing prompt.

Lesson Objectives
- Observe and describe Italian American experiences from the late 19th and early 20th centuries
- Contextualize individual stories with broader historical events and ideas, including the modernization and urbanization of the U.S.; immigration and migration to the U.S., and working class living/labor conditions at the turn of the 20th century
- Research specific historical events and characters, and then synthesize detailed information in a creative writing project
- Examine the role of immigration in the growth of the U.S. economy
- Make connections between Italian migrant laborers and other immigrant groups past and present

Lesson Procedure
1. Before viewing the video, ask students to consider the role of immigration in our society – and to consider the costs and benefits of immigration to the immigrants themselves as well as to society overall.
2. View “Birds of Passage” (additional viewing options include Who Killa Da Chief? Fruits of Thy Labor)
3. Select from Analysis Questions for post-video discussion
4. If students will do the writing prompt, move to that step next. Students will take on the persona of an Italian migrant laborer or a “white widow” in Southern Italy. Depending on the grade level and depth of writing expected, additional research is optional.
5. If desired, use the Reflection Questions to make connections between Italian immigrant labor experiences and the experiences of other groups and times of immigration.

Analysis Questions
- What was happening in U.S. industry that required high numbers of workers?
- What distinguished the “Birds of Passage” among the millions who travelled from Italy to the U.S. at the turn of the 20th century?
- What is a White Widow?
- Describe the transatlantic journey like for laborers that travelled from Italy.
- Explain the living and working conditions experienced by Italian migrant laborers.
- Drawing from the stories of Gay Talese’s grandfather, Gaetano, and Laurie Fabiano’s great grandparents, Nunzio and Giovanna, explain the benefits and the costs by immigrants and their families.
- Considering the many industries immigrants worked in, how did the U.S. and its economy benefit from immigration?
• Gay Talese suggests that one 11-day journey by sea can change a thousand years. What does he mean by this?

**Writing Prompt for “Una Lettera”**

Drawing from the video and other research, take on the role of an Italian migrant laborer or a white widow at the turn of the 20th century and write a letter to your loved one across the sea. Be sure to address where and what conditions you are living in, how you got there and what work you are doing. Draw from the personal histories in the video to describe your experiences or those of your neighbors or fellow workers.

**Reflection Questions**

• How does the Italian American story compare to that of other immigrant groups of yesterday or today?
• What are some of the industries where Italian immigrants made a big impact in the past? What are some of the industries where immigrants make a big impact today?
• The faces and the national origins of large-scale immigration to the U.S. have changed from the early 20th century to the early 21st century. But, have the personal challenges of immigration, or the economic role of immigrants changed or stayed the same?
• Too often in our nation’s history, one ethnic group has trouble relating to another, yet the U.S. is almost entirely a nation of immigrants. What lessons can be taken from one experience to help understand another?
• Is immigration part of the experience of your immediate family? If so, what connections can you make with the stories of Italian immigrants? If not, imagine how many generations ago your family immigrated and what challenges they might have encountered.

**EXTENSION I: A Letter to My Immigrant Ancestors**

Virtually every family in the U.S. is descended from immigrants. Some migrated by choice, others endured a forced migration (such as the Middle Passage). Write a letter to your immigrant forbears. Try to imagine why they made the change and how. Were their sacrifices worth it? Is there anything you want them to know about you, your family, your accomplishments or your aspirations? If you have American Indian or Chicano ancestors, they may not have immigrated, rather the U.S. came to them. Write to that generation which encountered the change.

**EXTENSION II: Immigration Yesterday and Today**

Research immigration experiences today and write a second letter from the point of view of an immigrant today. What is the national origin of the contemporary immigrant character? What has brought them to the U.S. and what are they experiencing? Compare and contrast the two letters.