

**Title:** Journey to Skagway

**Objective:** Students will practice descriptive writing skills as they describe and retell a journey on a steamboat to Skagway.

**Materials:**

Student journals

Chart paper

Pencils

Markers

**Time:** 45 minutes

**Lesson Description:**

1. At this point students have added maps to their journals. We are all going to take the “poor man’s route” to the goldfields. Have students highlight the first leg of the journey – the steamboat ride to Skagway.
2. Gather as a whole group to now to learn what it was like to travel by steamboat to Skagway. Read the following excerpt from *Gold! The Klondike Adventure* to give students a clear understanding of what the journey was like on a steamboat to Skagway.

Most goldseekers could not afford the \$1,000 ticket for the all-water route. They followed a much more exhausting route to the Klondike. This is the route we will be taking. This journey began with a steamship ride north, but the sea trip ended abruptly at Alaska’s southern coast. Passengers were hurriedly unloaded at the waterfront towns of Skagway and nearby Dyea. It was this route that became the busiest highway to the Klondike.

As the summer of 1897 passes, a new ship left for the Klondike almost every day. The goldseekers boarded the most unusual

assortment of boats ever assembled. Coal ships, yachts, schooners, barges, and old fishing boats – any vessel that could float became a goldship. Many boats that had long ago been declared unsafe were quickly brought in from the shipyards. Even with the hasty repairs that were made, many Klondike boats were referred to as “floating coffins.” Stop and discuss what that means. Despite warnings, the excited stampedeers did not seem to care whether their boats were seaworthy or not. The goldcrazed people pushed up the ramps, filling every available space onboard. Passengers stood elbow-to-elbow. Over the ships’ railings, several tearful faces appeared. Many goldseekers would not see their families again for months and months. But as the crowd below cried, “Three cheers for the Klondike!” and the ship whistles blasted a farewell, most of the passengers forgot their sadness...

Every available space aboard the Klondike ships was filled. The decks were crammed with crates of food, wooden sleds, tents, pack animals, and bales of hay. Deep in the hull of the *Islander*, 600 horses were wedged tightly together in long rows-so tightly that they could not lie down or move away from the ship’s hot engines. As the shrill whistles blasted and the engines began to pound, the horses reared back on their harnesses, biting and kicking in terror.

The passengers on the “*Islander*” were not much better off than the horses. During one of its voyages to Alaska, the “*Islander*” sailed into a fierce storm with high winds. The ship began to pitch violently, and the captain changed his course, heading for the refuge of a small inlet called Safety Cove. Just as the anchor was dropped, the vessel’s water supply ran completely dry. The passengers were thrown into a state of panic. In the words of one witness, “the women wept, men cursed and prayed” as their lips grew more parched. Soda water, beer, and wine were guzzled down. Finally, in utter desperation, the men drank catsup and Worcestershire sauce from the bottle. Even the dogs on board were crazy with thirst. They began to yelp and howl uncontrollably. The passengers’ terror grew when these howls were answered by the cries of wild animals on the shores of Safety Cove.

Goldseekers on other vessels had their own hardships to bear. In August, more than 800 stampedeers crushed their way aboard the Willamette, an old coal carrier bound for Dyea. Only a few hours before the ship's departure, workmen had hastily shoved tons of coal from the lower decks. In its place carpenters built rough wooden bunks for the first-class travelers. Yet, no one had taken the time to sweep out the coal dust left behind. Now every passenger and every surface was coated with the dirty, black dust.

The situation only grew worse once the Willamette was underway. Chaos broke out in the ship's dining room. The eating area was small and cramped, with space for only sixty-five diners. Hungry passengers formed long lines for meals, but many quickly lost their appetite when they saw the revolting food being served. To make matters worse, the smell of the 300 packhorses and their dirty stalls followed the stampedeers wherever they went. Some tried to escape the sickening smell by sleeping. Second-class passengers without bunks even slept in lifeboats strapped to the ship's upper decks.

Despite these hardships, many passengers tried to make the best of the uncomfortable journey. They held boxing matches, poker tournaments, and sing-alongs with fiddle music...As their steamers sailed closer to Alaska, the stampedeers talked of nothing but "hitting the trails!" They lounged about on bales of hay in their buckskin suits and mining gear, discussing the upcoming journey. They inspected one another's camping supplies. Passengers who had been strangers when the sea voyage began now decided to become partners and face the dangers ahead together. (p.29, Rey)

3. At this point begin a discussion and ask the students to recall specific details from the journey described in the reading above. List the details on chart paper. Students will use these details in their journal entry.
4. Students are to write a descriptive journal entry telling about their journey on a steamboat to Skagway. They must use details from the reading above in their entry to make their story more historically

correct. Thus, their journal becomes a historical fiction story. I usually require students to use a minimum of 6 details in their entry. Post the list of details for students to refer to as they write. You may want to read the example entry for this lesson found in the lesson title “Journal Writing.” Encourage students to focus on VOICE and GOOD WORD CHOICE in their writing.



Mercer Island School District

