Voices From Ellis Island

Student Study Guide
berth: a shelf-like sleeping place. The character Luigi speaks of sleeping in a berth on a ship.

contagious: carrying or spreading an infectious disease. Immigrants underwent a medical inspection at Ellis Island to try to prevent the spread of contagious diseases to people already living in the United States.

detain: to keep from proceeding or moving forward. Immigrants who were not allowed to enter the United States were detained at Ellis Island.

ferry boat: a boat used to transport passengers across a small span of water.
Vocabulary, continued...

**immigrant**: a person who migrates to another country, usually to take up permanent residence.

**inspection**: a formal examination. Immigrants at Ellis Island went through a medical and legal inspection to determine whether they could enter the country.

**louse** (lice, plural): a small, flatbodied, biting or sucking insect that lives as a parasite on many types of animals, including humans. Immigrants detained at Ellis Island were often treated for lice.

**measles**: an infectious disease that occurs mostly in children. Symptoms include small red spots.
ringworm: a skin disease. The character of Rifka is afraid the inspectors will not let her enter America because of ringworm. Shalom: a Hebrew word meaning peace. It is often used as a word of greeting or farewell. The character Rifka signs all of her letters with the word Shalom.

steerage: accommodations given to passengers who travel at the cheapest rate on a ship. SOS: a signal sent by telegraph used by ships in distress to call for help.

steward: an employee on a ship who is responsible for the comfort of passengers.
The Characters, In order of appearance


Fannie: A 13-year old girl from Russia. Fannie crossed the Atlantic in 1903.

Luigi: A young boy from Italy, crossed the Atlantic with his mother in 1909.

Vera: A pregnant woman from Czechoslovakia. Vera was 25 years old when she crossed the Atlantic in 1928.

Hans: A 19-year old young man from Germany. Hans crossed the Atlantic in 1924.

Nora: A teenage girl from Ireland. Nora crossed the Atlantic in 1913.

Rifka: A 12-year old girl from Russia. Rifka crossed the Atlantic in 1919.
Ellis Island is located in the upper bay just off the New Jersey coast, in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. The island itself has had a varied history. Once a sandy island that barely rose above the high tide mark, it served as a lynching site for pirates, a harbor fort, and ammunition and ordinance depot. Finally in 1890 President Benjamin Harrison designated Ellis Island as the first official Federal immigration station.
Prior to 1890, individual states—rather than the Federal government—regulated immigration into the United States. Castle Garden in lower Manhattan served as the New York State immigration station from 1855 to 1890. These early immigrants came from nations such as England, Ireland, Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Throughout the 1800's political instability, restrictive religious laws, and deteriorating economic conditions in Europe began to fuel the largest mass human migration in the history of the world. It soon became apparent that Castle Garden was ill-equipped and unprepared to handle the growing numbers of immigrants arriving each year.
The Federal government intervened with the state-controlled immigration system and constructed a new Federally-operated immigration station on Ellis Island in 1892. The new structure on Ellis Island opened on January 1, 1892; Annie Moore, a 15 year-old Irish girl accompanied by her two brothers entered history and a new country when she became the very first immigrant to be processed at Ellis Island on January 2. Over the next 62 years, more than 12 million followed through this port of entry.
First and second class passengers who arrived in New York Harbor were not required to undergo the inspection process at Ellis Island. These passengers underwent a brief inspection aboard ship and were free to pass through customs and enter America at the pier. The theory was that if a person could afford to purchase a first or second class ticket, they were less likely to become a financial drain with health or legal issues in America.
Despite the island's reputation as an "Island of Tears", the vast majority of immigrants were treated courteously and respectfully, and were free to begin their new lives in America after only a few short hours on Ellis Island. Only two percent of the arriving immigrants were excluded from entry.
Ellis Island remained open for many years and served a multitude of purposes. During World War II enemy merchant seamen were detained in the baggage and dormitory building. The United States Coast Guard also trained about 60,000 servicemen there. In November of 1954, the last detainee — a Norwegian merchant seaman named Arne Peterssen — was released, and Ellis Island officially closed.
Despite the island's reputation as an "Island of Tears", the vast majority of immigrants were treated courteously and respectfully, and were free to begin their new lives in America after only a few short hours on Ellis Island. Only two percent of the arriving immigrants were excluded from entry.
HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF ELLIS ISLAND

April 11, 1890 Designated as an immigration station by the US Federal Government

January 1, 1892 Opened as an immigration station. Processed first immigrants on January 2.

June 14, 1897 Buildings destroyed by fire. All persons safely evacuated but records of early immigrants lost.

December 17, 1900 Reopened as an immigration station, on a larger and more majestic scale. New buildings were built to be “fireproof.”

1917-1919 Served as a detention center for enemy aliens during WWI, a way-station for Navy personnel, and a hospital for the Army.

1919-1954 Served as a deportation center as well as an immigration station.
HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF ELLIS ISLAND

1924 Mass immigration ended. Most immigrants were inspected in countries of origin with the development of US Embassies abroad.

1936-1946 Part of Ellis Island was used as a Coast Guard Station.

1941-1954 Part of Ellis Island served as a detention center for enemy aliens during WWII.

November 29, 1965 Ellis Island is officially closed.

May 11, 1965 Ellis Island was added to the Statue of Liberty National Monument.

1976 Opened to the public for limited seasonal visitation.

1984 Closed for $160,000,000 renovation.

September 10, 1990 Reopened with extensive new museum exhibits and facilities.
Additional resources available at Scholastic.com