

# Unit 1: Introduction

## Featured Families

The history we study in school is generally a history of public life. But great or small, all of us create history. Every family adds to the story, enriching the narrative and expanding what it means to be an American.

In U.S. History: 1877–present, we explore the histories of eight American families—from the wealthiest and most privileged, to the poorest and most humble. Although they come from widely divergent backgrounds, these families all have one thing in common—somewhere along the way some family member made the decision to dig into the past and uncover the stories that bring the family's legacy to life. In the video programs you will find their trials and triumphs woven into the broader narrative, highlighting the sometimes very personal ways in which the course of history impacted their lives—or their lives impacted the course of history.

The very down-to-earth **Bill Cecil Jr.** (formally known as William A. Vanderbilt Cecil Jr.) shares the stories of one of the great industrialist families of the late nineteenth century. A direct descendant of Cornelius Vanderbilt, "The Commodore," Bill describes how his notorious ancestor built the world's greatest fortune; and how Cornelius' grandson, George Vanderbilt, used his share to build the Biltmore, a stunning chateau and working farm in western North Carolina. Today, Bill Cecil and his family still live on the Biltmore Estate, which they operate as a tourist attraction, vineyard, and vacation getaway. Also contributing to the story is **Arthur Vanderbilt**, a descendant of the Commodore's uncle. He is the author of *Fortune's Children*, a book detailing the history of the Vanderbilt family. (Lessons 1, 4, 8, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26)

**Charlene McAden**, has spent decades researching and recording the history of the Lafferty clan, a family of farmers who moved west to claim a homestead in the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889. Charlene's great-grandfather, Enoch Lafferty, a Civil War veteran, struggled to make a living on the windswept prairie with his wife, four sons, and a daughter. Eventually, during the Great Depression, Charlene's grandfather was forced to sell the family farm and move into town to raise his eleven children. Charlene herself raised three children during the 1960s, an era that offered them a much wider range of opportunities than she had experienced in her own youth. Her oldest daughter, **Sherrie Tarpley**, weighs in on the significance of coming of age during the women's movement and how that affected her life and that of her daughter. (Lessons 2, 6, 11,

13, 16, 18, 20, 23, 25, 26)

In his book *Singing for a Spirit*, **Vine Deloria Jr.**, traces his family's history back to a French fur trader, Francois Deloria, who married into a band of Yanktonais Sioux in the late eighteenth century. A hundred years later Vine's great-grandfather Saswe, a Sioux medicine man, encouraged his son to embrace Christianity. The young Tipi Sapa was eventually ordained as the celebrated Episcopal priest Philip Deloria. Philip's son, Vine Deloria Sr., followed in his father's footsteps to the priesthood. Vine Jr., however, broke the tradition and went on to become a leading figure in American Indian activism and scholarship. Together with his son, **Philip Deloria**, Vine shares the story of this family's fascinating journey through the twentieth century. (Lessons 2, 11, 12, 13, 18, 20, 22, 23, 26)

As **Edward Archuleta** puts it, most immigrant families wanted to come to America. In his family's case, America came to them. Ed is a thirteenth generation New Mexican. His ancestors were among the original Spanish families that settled in Santa Fe in 1598. After the war with Mexico in 1848, the United States annexed the Southwest and the Archuletas became American citizens. Much of their land was taken by Anglo-Americans moving into the new territory, but the family managed to hang on and adapt to the new reality. Eventually they came to love their new country, even as they clung strongly to their Hispanic roots. Ed's stories of his family history reflect a changing cultural identity in a changing world. (Lessons 2, 7, 11, 12, 15, 18, 24, 25, 26)

**Harry Dingenthal's** parents came to America in the great flow of European immigration during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Harry's father came over in steerage from Polish Austria. Once in New York, he moved into the Jewish neighborhood where the people of his region had settled and found a bride through the services of a matchmaker. The Dingenthal family lived in the tenements where, as Harry remembers, there was never a scrap of food left on anyone's plate. Harry joined the army in the 1930s and served in Europe in World War II, where he was among the first troops to liberate the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau. Harry's stories of growing up as a first generation American are sometimes funny, sometimes poignant, and always memorable. (Lessons 3, 11, 14, 21, 26)

Until he was fifteen years old, **Bill Neebe** never knew that his grandfather was a celebrated labor leader whose activism was honored throughout the world. Oscar Neebe was a German immigrant who settled in Chicago in the 1880s, where he tried to organize labor unions in order

to better the lives of the miserable workers. Falsely arrested, tried and convicted as part of a bombing conspiracy, Oscar and his codefendants were made examples to put the scare into the organized labor movement. His life sentence was later commuted after a pardon from the governor of Illinois, but the effects of his ordeal continued to reverberate through the family for generations. Bill's stories of his family's life on the political left culminate in the reflections of his son, **Mark Neebe**, who honors his great-grandfather's radical legacy, even as he dons a uniform every day to work in law enforcement in the city of Boston. (Lessons 3, 5, 11, 15, 19, 22, 25, 26)

In her fascinating history of Chinese American women, *Unbound Feet*, **Judy Yung** includes the story of her own great-grandmother, who was sent to the United States in an arranged marriage in the late nineteenth century. She settled in San Francisco and bore five children, but Leong Shee was never happy in America. In 1904 she returned to China, reversing the usual immigrant trend. But Judy's grandmother, who was born in San Francisco before their return to China, made her way back to America while a young woman in her twenties. Judy's family stories have a way of bucking the trend, whether it's her husband **Eddie Fung**'s adventures as a teenage POW or her own journey from a sheltered life in Chinatown to political awakening as a modern Asian American woman. (Lessons 3, 11, 14, 15, 17, 18, 20, 22, 23, 26)

**Dianne Swann-Wright** traces her family's history back to the plantation on which her ancestors were enslaved. Her book, *A Way Out of No Way*, follows their journey up and out of the economic and psychological slavery that still lingered long after emancipation. Her father, who could neither read nor write, worked for forty years in a back-breaking industrial job to provide for his children the education that was denied him. Today, Dianne holds a PhD and is the curator of African American history at Monticello, the historic home of Thomas Jefferson. Perhaps her daughter, high school biology teacher **Ellen Wright**, put it best when she said that her family story is a true American triumph. (Lessons 4, 6, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25, 26)