

AMERICANA UNLIMITED

Gold Rush - Lotta Crabtree

Art Form: Storytelling/Historical Character

Style: Contemporary

Culture: North American

MEET THE ARTIST:

Actress **Judith Helton** literally steps into the past when she goes to work. Since 1976, she has brought history to life with her intriguing portrayals of women of accomplishment and artistic talent. Her versatile repertoire of one-woman shows consists of three from American history -- First Lady *Abigail Adams*, Gold Rush entertainer *Lotta Crabtree*, pioneer author *Laura Ingalls Wilder* -- and England's author/illustrator, *Beatrix Potter*. Each portrayal is meticulously researched from an historical perspective. Ms. Helton's professional theatre credits include work in resident acting companies in Baltimore, Milwaukee, Houston and San Diego. Internationally she has performed at the Edinburgh, Scotland "World Theatre Festival," and in Dublin and Cork, Ireland. Ms. Helton's commitment to authenticity in her performances has led her to master such specialized skills as spinning, weaving, banjo playing and antique costume construction. She so truly 'becomes' the women she plays, that it is little wonder when leaving her home she is asked by neighbors, "Who are you today?"

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

In *Lotta Crabtree: A Diamond in the Gold Rush*, Judith Helton portrays one of the outstanding entertainers of the 19th century. Using banjo, song and dance, this performance traces the beginnings of Lotta Crabtree's career as a Fairy Star (as child performers were called) traveling to towns and camps during the Gold Rush in California. Students have an opportunity to learn about the excitement, hardships and pursuit of dreams that was life in the early days of the Golden State as they experience the adventurous life of Lotta. An entertainer who was so beloved her fans called her "The California Diamond" or "San Francisco's Favorite," Ms. Crabtree as presented by Judith Helton shares social, political and historical information with students as part of the performance. Students should be encouraged to prepare for the discussion period that follows the presentation by studying the information provided in these pages.



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PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

An event took place on January 24, 1848 on John Sutter's land that forever altered life in California and began a movement that affected the entire United States of America. On that day James W. (John) Marshall discovered gold at Sutter's Mill in the Sacramento Valley. Sutter tried to keep this information secret, but word spread that gold had been found on the American River, and nothing could keep thousands of people from flowing into California to seek their fortunes.

During this reckless time, fortunes were made and lost; dreams were fulfilled and shattered. Life was often harsh in the gold camps. Prices for goods were high (eggs cost \$6.00 per dozen) and life was uncertain. Even when people got lucky and found gold, there was no guarantee of safety; there was always someone ready to take advantage of anyone else's good fortune in hitting "paydirt." A hunger for entertainment grew out of this uncertain atmosphere, and performers began traveling to the settlements, presenting shows in tents, general stores and saloons. When a 7 year old girl named Lotta Crabtree joined in the trek to the camps, she began a career that would span over 37 years.

Born on November 7, 1847 in New York City, Lotta Crabtree came to California with her mother in 1853. Her father had journeyed west two years before but had no luck in finding gold. Lotta and her family settled in Grass Valley, California, where her father ran a boarding house while continuing his fruitless attempt to strike it rich in the gold fields.

Forced to earn their own living, Lotta and her mother turned to the theatre. Years of touring with shows in California and throughout the United States brought Lotta national fame and earned her the nickname "The California Diamond." At the height of her career (the 1870s and 1880s) she was the highest paid actress in America. She viewed her fortune as an instrument of good. "Lotta's Fountain," which still stands in San Francisco, was her gift to the city in her youth. She retired in 1891, but never retired from helping others. At her death she left her entire fortune of four million dollars to charity. She never forgot where her fortune had begun - when hopeful, dream-filled miners threw gold nuggets at her feet as a child during the California Gold Rush.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Think about the stories you heard in the performance. Which was your favorite? Why?
- Did you know any of the songs that were sung by Lotta Crabtree? Which ones? What were the lyrics of the songs about? Did they give you an idea of what life was like during the Gold Rush?
- Discuss what conditions were like for many of the miners who lived in camps during the Gold Rush. What major problems did they have to overcome in their search for gold? (separation from family, lack of a secure income, high prices for goods, untrustworthy companions)
- Has anyone in your class ever panned for gold? If so, what was it like? Was it fun or difficult? Do you think that panning gold would be a good way to earn a living?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - GEOGRAPHY:

While many of the 49ers (travelers who rushed to California during the Gold Rush were called 49ers because 1849 is the year that they headed for the Golden State) were from the eastern United States, many more came from around the world. Miners came from Mexico, China, Germany, France and even far off countries like Turkey. Each journey had its own set of difficulties to overcome, and its own story.

Select a country in the world from which you, a 49er, will be leaving to travel to California. Make a list of what you will need to take, making sure to think about how and what time of year you will be traveling. Plan your modes of transportation (horse, on foot, by train, ship or wagon) and draw a map of your planned route. What countries (or states) will you be crossing? Will you be traveling through snow, desert or over mountains? Will you be crossing oceans, rivers or streams? How many months will you be traveling?

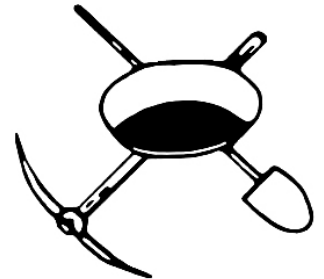
Make a timeline of your journey, noting how many miles between stops, where you can purchase needed supplies, and where you will go when you get to California. Use a classroom map and colored strings to mark the different journeys planned by the class.

- Legend:
- ☉ Artistic perception
 - ❖ Creative expression
 - ▶ Historical & cultural context
 - ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
 - * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ☉ Discuss how the performance of Lotta Crabtree's life and adventures reflected the time and place in which she lived. Select one aspect of a story or song you remember and note what events, lyrics or melodies seemed to transport you to that time period.
- ❖ With a partner, imagine what it would be like to tell someone else that you are leaving (perhaps forever) for the gold fields in California. What would you say? What reasons would you give for going? What reasons might convince you to stay? Rehearse and then act out a scene with your partner, alternating roles so each of you gets the chance to use every reason possible to convince your partner that you should go - or stay. Share with the class.
- ▶ Try panning for "gold" in your classroom. Take a plastic or metal tub and fill it 1/3 to 1/2 full of water, sediment and sand. Drop in a few small rocks or pebbles that have been painted gold. One or two at a time take pie plates and dig out a bit of the sediment, swirling it until the water and smaller bits of sand are gone. Continue taking turns until the "gold" is found.

- ⇒ Discuss how inventions have changed the ways that Americans are entertained since Lotta Crabtree's days as a performer. Make a list of challenges and benefits that performers from both eras would face.



- * In discussion or in a written assignment, compare the Lotta Crabtree's California to the California of today, noting the differences of the following:

- Travel, in towns and between towns
- Population (size, ethnicity, lifestyle)
- Prices and availability of goods
- Clothing and dress styles
- Law and order
- Employment opportunities

BIBLIOGRAPHY/WEBLINKS:

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Rau, Margaret. *The Wells Fargo Book of the Gold Rush*. Atheneum, New York: 2001.

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