Lesson Plan 1:

**Title:** Historical Sources: Identifying Primary or Secondary

**Grade Level:** 8th grade

**Related Subject Areas:** History of the American West, Communication History, 19th Century American History

**Objectives:**
- Students will gain skills in critical thinking by identifying what historians use to understand the past through the sources available to them.
- Students will practice analytical skills by identifying and categorizing diverse source material.
- Students will gain knowledge about 19th century American communication systems.

**Social Studies Standards (District of Columbia):**
- Students define and differentiate between primary and secondary sources and know examples of each.
- Students explain the central issues and problems from the past, placing people on the matrix of time and place.
- Students detect the different historical points of view on historical events and determine the context in which the historical statements were made (the questions asked, sources used, and author’s perspective).

**Time Required:** 40 minutes (each activity requires 10 minutes each).

**Lesson Plan:**
The teacher will use the Postal Museum’s Arago Featured Collection “Postal Sources - Primary or Secondary?” to pose the introductory question to the students: Who can identify a primary or secondary source? The site can be used on an overhead or at individual student computer stations. The web page shows a collection of primary and secondary sources (stamps, letters, maps, photographs, etc.) from the 19th century American West at the Arago website, www.arago.si.edu. The Arago Featured Collection poses questions and answers via digital images to guide students in identifying the key characteristics of a primary vs. secondary source. It
will also help students learn how to use Arago on the Internet. Supporting activities will develop their individual and group skills in identifying primary and secondary sources and using Arago to learn more about their information.

**Vocabulary List:**

1. Historian (n.): A writer, student, or scholar of history; one who interprets a record of past events.
2. Primary Source (n.): A firsthand or eyewitness account of an event; an original work written by someone who witnessed or wrote close to the time of the event.
3. Secondary Source (n.): A document created using information provided by someone else, often with some distance in time or space from the recorded event.
4. Narrative (n.): A story or account of events or experiences, whether true or fictitious.

**Essential Questions:**

1. How does a historian come to understand the past?
2. What tools and skills do historians employ to draw conclusions about the past?
3. What is a primary source? What is a secondary source? What makes them different?
4. Can the same source be primary in some situations and secondary in others?

**Educational Activities:**

1. Students assess the roots of their historical knowledge
   a) Students break into groups and “brainstorm” to generate a list of different ways people communicated in the 19th century. Teacher reviews the lists generated by the students with the entire class and asks them to debate and potentially eliminate illegitimate responses.
   b) Pass out the [Sources of Information Worksheet] and ask each group to fill out the two left-hand column with up to three (3) of the class’s identified communication types. Collectively, they should then work on the middle column by referring to NPM’s website, other websites such as those listed in the “Recommended Websites” below, and remembering what they’ve seen and read in classroom books, video games, movies, museums, letters, objects, etc. Student groups report out to the class the type of communication system chosen, where they found the information, and what they found out.
   c) Pose these questions to the students while conducting their research: Did people communicate in the 19th century American West? How did they communicate? What types of communication do we have today that pioneers, American Indians, and gold miners used in the mid 1800s? What types of communication do we have today that weren't available in the 1800s? How are the types of communication today and in the 1800s similar and/or dissimilar? (The last two columns are part of Activity #2).
2. Students identify who created their understanding of the past
   a) Students use the same [Sources of Information Worksheet] as a class in the first activity. Teacher will emphasize the difference between primary and secondary sources by simply stating that a present-day textbook is a secondary source and the [Waterman Ormsby letter] from a 19th century newspaper article is a primary source. Using the [Sources of Information Worksheet], each student individually (or as a group) identifies the creator of every source listed (book=author, newspaper article=reporter, letter=name of person who wrote it, movie=director, video game=programmer, saddle=saddle maker, lecture=teacher who gave it) and exchanges it with another student after completing the worksheet.
   b) Students conduct a peer review of the selections and then work in pairs to place a “P” by the sources that were created during the time of the event and an “S” by the sources that were created after the events. Then each student reports out to the entire class.
   c) As a class, decide, are the students’ understanding of the past based on primary or secondary sources?

3. Focus on the Stagecoach
   a) The teacher will read the [Waterman Ormsby letter] aloud to the class. The letter is a newspaper reporter’s experience traveling by stagecoach during the 19th century. Stagecoaches were used to deliver the mail across the American West before railroads and telegraphs. Using this letter as method to encourage quick analysis and competitive enthusiasm, the teacher will ask three reflective questions giving the students 30 seconds or less to draw their responses.
   b) Students break into groups of 3-4. Each student will listen to the narrative and draw the scene as they imagine it based on what they hear in the letter. (Provide 5 minutes for the initial drawing scene). Following the letter reading and the initial scene drawing, students will place their individual drawings upside down on a table of a different group in the classroom. After doing so, each group should have a stack of drawings upside down at their table to evaluate. Every student in each group takes one drawing from the stack on their table to evaluate. The teacher will proceed by asking the first question:
      1) What type of transportation did Mr. Ormsby use to go West? Students will evaluate the drawing in 30 seconds or less and then exchange drawings with their neighbor. Teacher asks the second question;
      2) How do you think he felt about his travel experience? Students will evaluate and ex-
change drawings again in 30 seconds or less. Teacher asks the third question; 3) What do you think was the motivation for Mr. Ormsby and other people to go West? Students will evaluate the drawing and exchange drawings again in 30 seconds or less; Teacher asks the fourth and final question; 4) Where did Mr. Ormsby and the others travel to/from? Students will evaluate the drawing again in 30 seconds or less. The students keep this drawing in hand to discuss with their group members.

c) After the questioning has been completed, each group discusses and determines which drawing best captures the experience and period of Ormsby’s letter. Each group reports out why they chose that particular drawing. This provides students with a competition-based activity while learning to listen, observe, evaluate, and draw conclusions for further understanding.

d) One alternative to pencil and paper responses would be for the teacher to create a class blog for students to respond to one another.

Assessment/Evaluation: Review essential questions after completing the lesson plan and educational activities to reinforce the lesson. Recommend this follow-up activity for evaluation of the students understanding of the lesson plan.

- Web Activity: “My Collection of Sources”
  To assess each student’s understanding of the difference between primary and secondary sources, the teacher will ask the class to use the “My Collection” feature in Arago. Signing into Arago, each student has the option to save and group selected records in a personalized folder. Teacher will instruct each student to create a grouping titled “Sources” and select two objects from Arago; one primary source and one secondary source from 19th century American western history. Once the groupings are completed, tell the students to highlight their grouping, select “E-mail this Set”, and enter the teacher’s e-mail address. Teacher will review the two sources, looking for selections that illustrate their understanding of the sources.
Materials:

• Computer for Internet Access
• Blackboard, Whiteboard, and/or Smartboard (or, alternatively, workstations)
• Sources of Information Worksheet (Downloadable PDF)
• Copy of Waterman Ormsby Letter (Downloadable PDF)
• Paper and writing instruments (pens, pencils, and/or markers)

Recommended Websites:

www.arago.si.edu
www.postalmuseum.si.edu
http://memory.loc.gov
www.archives.com