

## ALBUM "UGLY LAWS" AND EARLY 1900S BEGGARS (PRIMARY SOURCE LEARNING ACTIVITY)

### Album Description

This learning activity explores “the ugly laws,” a nickname given to a type of local law that many cities and towns implemented in the late 1800s and early 1900s. These ordinances targeted disabled and disfigured people who asked for money on public streets (either through begging or selling small items) for arrest. The first such law was passed in San Francisco in 1867. New York City drafted their own “ugly law” in 1895 but did not enact it. You can find more background information on “the ugly laws” on [eugenicsarchive.ca](http://eugenicsarchive.ca).

\*Note: Before starting this exercise, discuss respectful language and historical terms (like crippled) which are considered offensive today.

Consider starting with the Observe, Reflect, Question approach to [analyze the newspaper articles and photographs](#).

Vocabulary: mendicants is another term for beggars

The core source for this set is the “Glaring Eyesores on Our Streets” article. If you want to cut down this long article, the first column alone contains plenty to analyze. You could also pick out a single paragraph. FYI, the third column of this article contains a reprint of the 1867 San Francisco ordinance; however, I included a reprint of the ordinance from a different article that’s visually clearer.

### Potential Discussion Questions

1. What commonalities do you see between these photos?
  1. *(not all of them are visually disabled, but all of them belong to groups associated with dependency – elderly, women, disabled)*
2. What did these ordinances (“the ugly laws”) criminalize?
3. If New York City had passed an “ugly law,” do you think any of these photographed people would have been arrested?
4. What can we learn about public space and belonging from these sources? In other words, who is welcome in public? Do you think public spaces influence who can think of themselves as American?
5. How did these photographs and news article influence perceptions of who is “deserving” versus “undeserving” of aid?
6. How did appearance influence perceptions of disabled people and their treatment?

### “Glaring Eyesores on Our Streets” article

1. What are some of the words/terms the article uses to describe disabled beggars? What images/ideas does the author want readers to associate with disabled beggars?
2. What reasons does the article give for why this law is necessary? Provide some of the specific examples from the article.
3. According to the article, what should be done with poor disabled people to prevent them from begging on the street? *(this could provide an opportunity to talk about institutionalization more broadly)*
4. What is the purpose of the article? (What does the author hope to achieve?)
5. It can be difficult to find the voices of disabled people in historical sources. So, historians try to read the sources we do have, like newspaper articles, “against the grain.” This means that historians look for clues into what the people being written about might have thought or felt based on their actions. Can you make any educated guesses about the thoughts or feelings of the disabled beggars featured in this article?

1. *If students are struggling with this question, these quotes might be helpful to get the conversation started:*

1. "Those vagrants of this class do not wish to be placed in a home because they could secure no liquor there"
2. "The better class among the blind, crippled, and infirm prefer the precarious existence afforded by an 'independent' mode of life to living upon a regular charity. Under the thin disguise of selling pencils they contend that they are not as much the objects of charity as if they were in the poorhouse."
3. "It is the desire to do as they please which makes them all want to beg for a living"

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These sources can be put into conversation with lessons/sources about:

- the institutionalization of disabled people during the same era
- immigration restrictions (notice how the article refers to Southern Europe and importing beggars)
- temperance movement (alcohol is frequently cited in the article)
- a language arts/English lesson about how disabilities were represented in literature at this time (associations between disabled characters and amorality and/or pity) and how those depictions might have influenced the treatment of real disabled/disfigured people
- the Americans with Disabilities Act, includes in its definition the phrase "being regarded as having such an impairment"; discuss why that phrase was included and possible connections to the "ugly laws"

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Alt text for the photographs is available on the LOC website. Alt text for the newspaper articles is available in the reference note section for each source.

**SAN FRANCISCO 1867 ORDINANCE REPRINTED (SAN FRANCISCO CALL. MARCH 9**

***THE LAW IS STRONG AND CLEAR.***

***Mayor Sutro and Chief Crowley Know That It Is Their Duty to Suppress Mendicancy.***

*Section 29 of the general orders of the Board of Supervisors, entitled "To prohibit street-begging and to restrain certain persons from appearing in streets and public places, reads" as follows ;*

*No person shall, either directly or indirectly, whether by look, word, sign or deed practice begging or mendicancy in or on any of the streets, highways or thoroughfares of the city and county of San Francisco, nor in any public place.*

*On the conviction of any person for practicing mendicancy or begging, if it shall appear that such person is without means of support and infirm and physically unable to earn a support and livelihood, or is, for any cause, a proper person to be maintained at the Almshouse, such person may be committed to the Almshouse.*

*Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares or public places in this city and county, shall not therein or thereon expose himself or herself to public view.*

*On the conviction of any person for a violation of any of the provisions of the next preceding clause of this section, if it shall seem proper and just, the fine and imprisonment provided for may be omitted and such person sent to the Almshouse.*

*It is hereby made the duty of the police officers to arrest any person who shall violate any of the provisions of this section.*

**Teaching Notes:**

This is a newspaper reprint of the 1867 San Francisco Ordinance.

**Reference Link:** <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1895-03-09/ed-1/seq-14/>

*San Francisco Call*, March 9, 1895, p.14

Alt Text

Mayor Sutro and Chief Crowley Know That It Is Their Duty to Suppress Mendicancy.

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It is hereby made the duty of the police officers to arrest any person who shall violate any of the provisions of this section.



## GLARING EYESORES ON OUR STREETS (SAN FRANCISCO CALL, MARCH 8 1895).PDF

### Teaching Notes:

Additional discussion questions:

- Why do you think the author profiles so many individual beggars? How does it serve the purpose of the article?
- What is the purpose of the sketches of individual beggars?
- What can we learn about living as a disabled person in the late 1800s from these profiles? (For instance, what were some of the ways people became disabled? What role did migration play in their lives?)

Potential Activity:

- Assign each student/pair a different profile to analyze (after reading the beginning of the article as a group)
- Additional profiles can be found in this article from the next day (San Francisco Call, March 9 1895): <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1895-03-09/ed-1/seq-14/>

BEGG



CITY

**Reference Link:** <http://www.loc.gov/item/2014680095/>

Contributor Names: Bain News Service, publisher

Created / Published: [no date recorded on caption card]

Subject Headings: - New York City

Genre: Glass negatives

Notes: - Forms part of: George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress).

- Title from unverified data provided by the Bain News Service on the negatives or caption cards.

- General information about the George Grantham Bain Collection is available at

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.ggbain>

Repository: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>

Digital Id: ggbain 00096 //hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ggbain.00096



**Reference Link:** <http://www.loc.gov/item/2014680096/>

Contributor Names: Bain News Service, publisher

Created / Published: [no date recorded on caption card]

Subject Headings: - New York City

Genre: Glass negatives

Notes: - Forms part of: George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress).

- Title from unverified data provided by the Bain News Service on the negatives or caption cards.

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Repository: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>

Digital Id: ggbain 00097 //hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ggbain.00097





**Reference Link:** <http://www.loc.gov/item/2014683231/>

Contributor Names: Bain News Service, publisher

Created / Published: 9/1/22 (date created or published later by Bain)

Subject Headings: - New York

Genre: Glass negatives

Notes: - Forms part of: George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress).

- Title from unverified data provided by the Bain News Service on the negatives or caption cards.

- General information about the George Grantham Bain Collection is available at

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.ggbain>

Repository: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>

Digital Id: ggbain 03237 //hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ggbain.03237





**Reference Link:** <http://www.loc.gov/item/97519049/>

**Summary:** Woman holding a small child and a box of Wrigley's Spearmint gum, in front of a building on Broadway in New York City; pedestrians on sidewalk in background.

**Created / Published:** [ca. 1909]

**Subject Headings:** - Mothers & children--New York (State)--New York--1900-1920

- Beggars--New York (State)--New York--1900-1920

- Peddlers--New York (State)--New York--1900-1920

- City & town life--New York (State)--New York--1900-1920

**Notes:** - George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress).

**Repository:** Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

**Digital Id:** ppmssc 00147 //hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmssc.00147



**Reference Link:** <http://www.loc.gov/item/2014689735/>

Contributor Names: Bain News Service, publisher

Created / Published: [between ca. 1910 and ca. 1915]

Subject Headings: - Hoboken

Genre: Glass negatives

Notes: - Forms part of: George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress).

- Title from unverified data provided by the Bain News Service on the negatives or caption cards.

- Corresponding print in LOT 10827 is cropped version of negative.

- General information about the George Grantham Bain Collection is available at

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.ggbain>

- Additional information about this photograph might be available through the Flickr Commons project at

[http://www.flickr.com/photos/library\\_of\\_congress/2162933167](http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/2162933167) External

Repository: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>

Digital Id: ggbain 09750 //hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ggbain.09750