

Learning Early Twentieth-Century History through First-Person Interviews

Lisa A. Lark

My third-hour American history class in Dearborn, Michigan, is comprised of 21 eleventh-grade students of multiple ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds. Nearly two-thirds of the students are of Middle Eastern descent, with some from families that have been in the United States for as little as five years. Although some of the students were born in the United States, the majority has maintained strong cultural ties and continues to speak Arabic dialects at home.

Dearborn is a city of nearly 98,000 people that borders Detroit on the west side. Most famous for its association with Henry Ford, Dearborn is home to a large and vibrant Middle Eastern community. Coming from Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Palestine, Dearborn's Middle Eastern residents encompass a significant portion of the city's population. As such, the cultural makeup of my American history classroom is typical of classes within the Dearborn Public Schools.

For many of the students in this class, early twentieth-century American history seems far removed from their daily lives. Being first and second-generation American citizens, many of the students do not have the luxury of hearing grandparents and great-grandparents telling stories about FDR and Henry Ford. More specifically, many of these students do not have family members with firsthand knowledge of what life was like in the United States prior to the 1960s and 1970s. Since the focus of the American History II course is 1910-1945, this lack of firsthand knowledge puts some students at a disadvantage. I decided to bridge this gap by inviting older adults to come to our classroom and share their stories.

As part of a unit on the Great Depression and World War II years, I assigned the students an oral history

project. Working in groups of 3-5, the students began by making a timeline of the years from 1910-1945 and identifying critical events in American history during those years. Once the groups had created the timelines, their task was to develop questions that they would like to have answered by someone that was alive during the years 1910-1945. Ideally, the goal of this project was to familiarize the students with the time period by introducing them to firsthand accounts via interviews. The student created questions focused on living arrangements, schooling, and leisure activities during this time period (See Box on page 311). The students seemed to be far more concerned with how this generation lived, worked, and played during this time period rather than learning opinions about larger, more critical events in American history.

Seniors and Students Meet

I contacted a local senior living facility and arranged to match my class with a group of residents ranging in age from 76 to 96. These residents volunteered to complete a pre-interview survey, and then come to the school to participate in a face-to-face interview with the students shortly thereafter. The students and the seniors met for more than an hour in our media center. The pre-interview survey

included questions about the senior's childhood experiences, hometown, and schooling. The students were very excited about having guests in the classroom, and were actually quite excited to hear firsthand accounts of the events they had been learning about in class.

The students met with their senior partners in pairs or groups of three. Despite a difference in age and backgrounds, there were very few lulls in the conversations, with both the students and the seniors warming to one another very quickly. The conversations were primarily focused on the experiences of the Great Depression, and whether the experiences were "as bad as they sounded." While the senior citizens that were interviewed did not suffer extremely hard times during the Great Depression, they still shared stories of difficulty.

There were several senior citizens who grew up in rural areas, and the students were fascinated by their stories of chores and day-to-day activities. The concept of growing one's own food and raising animals for meat was foreign to some of the students, and they were fascinated by the responsibilities that some of the seniors had as children. One woman, Mourine, was born in 1916 in rural Michigan. She described her daily responsibilities as bringing in the wood, pumping the water from her family's well, carrying in water for clothes and then washing them on the washboard. She said she used to help pick up coal along the railroad lines for fuel, and that her family grew as much of their own food as they could and did their own canning.

“We didn’t really think beyond one day at a time during the Depression; everyone was in the same boat, and we all helped each other,” she said. “Sometimes my dad would stand in line to get a job, and sometimes he would be out there all night.” Her first job was working on planes for the war. “Women usually didn’t work unless they had to, but a lot of us had to during the war,” Mourine said.

One man, who was born in 1921, described his childhood in Detroit. The family had a garden and raised chickens and rabbits. They got their milk and butter from nearby farms. During World War II, he was caught up in the patriotic fervor and joined the Air Force when he was 21. He became a pilot but was shot down over Germany. “I had to jump out of the plane,” he said. “It took six weeks for my family to know I was a P.O.W. We marched 87 days with no clothes to change, and only water to drink, and very little food. We didn’t bathe and only slept in the fields.”

Another man, Philip, born in 1927 in Rockwood, Michigan, recounted his most vivid memory of World War II. “I still remember hearing that France had surrendered to Germany,” he said. “I think I was playing catch in the empty lot near my house, and it hit me so hard that I cried. I was 12.” Philip talked about his first job soon after, when he was in the ninth grade. He cleaned the presses at the *Detroit News* for thirty-five cents an hour. Eventually he was lucky enough to get a job greasing engines at the railroad station for eighty-five cents an hour.

My students noted that while they shared some experiences with the senior citizens, a great deal of their childhoods were different. Most of the seniors did not have family cars until they were in their teens and twenties, and only two of the seniors came from homes with a radio or phonograph. Several young women in the class launched into a discussion about clothing with two senior citizens. The girls listened in amazement as the women described long cotton skirts, flowing dresses, and ankle high boots that were fastened with button



Two women are seen working the production line at Grumman Aircraft Engine Corp., at an unknown location in 1943. As men left to fight in the war and labor demands increased, many women went to work outside the home for the first time.

(AP Photo)

hooks. The seniors described the knee socks and short pants that boys wore; and they recalled summer days running barefoot through both the city and the countryside.

One common theme through all of the conversations was what children “back then” did with their spare time. The senior citizens went into great detail about the games that they played and the places they went. While one woman grew up in a relatively wealthy home and told stories about the novelty of having a radio and phonograph, most of the senior citizens told stories of baseball and hopscotch, of hide and seek and jumping rope. “The games that they played seemed much simpler than the things we do in our spare time. Without TV and video games, they had to find other things to do to entertain them. It seems like they did a lot with other children rather than indoors.”¹

A 93-year old woman (at the time of the interview) who grew up in Kit Carson County, captivated the students with what life was like in, what the students called, “the middle of nowhere.” The woman was

born in 1912, lived in a sod house, and attended a one-room schoolhouse that she had to ride 2 1/2 miles on horseback to attend. Her meals were cooked on a wood stove that used cow chips for fuel. She had no neighbors within a mile of her home, and told the students that as a girl she entertained herself by braiding her horse’s tail and playing make believe.

“I appreciated the senior coming in because I was able to learn about what life was like during the Depression,” one student wrote later. “The man I spoke to told me how hard it was, and how even the young teenagers had to work. I was also surprised that the government would give them coupons and limit what they could buy.”² The students also considered that their lives were much easier than those of the senior citizens, with one student commenting, “I don’t know if I could have lived like they did. It seems so much harder.”³

Students spoke of this experience for a longtime afterwards, and during the remaining class discussions of the semester they would often bring up their senior partners’ stories. I asked the students to

A family listens to the radio (a novelty at the time) in this 1933 photo. (AP Photo)



analyze the conversations they had had with their senior partners and to write a description of how the stories they heard compared with what we had read about in class. Most of the students spoke about how the meetings had brought history to life for them, and taught them more about what it meant to be an American in the years before World War II.

Cross-Cultural Communication

The meeting between my students and the older adults was not simply an exercise in American history, but also an experiment in cross-cultural communications. While the majority of my students were of Middle Eastern descent, all of the senior citizens were Caucasian, with many of them having grown up in segregated areas. Just as many of the students were unfamiliar with American life during the early twentieth century, nearly all of the senior citizens had no experience with Middle Eastern cultures. Ernest, a 96-year-old man who had resided in Dearborn since the early 1950s had a great deal of interest in the students' stories. "When I was younger, places like Egypt and Saudi

Arabia were things that we read about in books. I was really interested in hearing if the places they lived were like the places I read about in books."

For the Middle Eastern students, their grandparents were not from the United States so these interviews were the first time that they had heard a first-hand account of American history. They really seemed to relish the opportunity to ask what it was like to live the events rather than simply read a narrative account. Several Middle Eastern students commented on how much easier it was to understand American history from the senior's point of view rather than from a book. "It was nice to be able to ask them questions about it rather than just see a list of dates. The lady I talked to really told me how it felt to grow up when she did, and that helped me understand what that era was like," said a 17-year-old from Lebanon.

As such, there was not just a sharing of stories, but an introduction to another culture. The Middle Eastern students were obviously aware of the differences between their cultures and

that of the seniors, but none specifically addressed those differences in the interviews. However, in post-interview discussions many mentioned the fact that their grandparents had grown up quite differently. Nearly all of the students said that they were surprised how different their respective childhoods had been. While the students were quite aware of the differences between themselves and their senior partners, the vast majority of the students defined the differences as being generational rather than cultural.

In a post-activity analysis, the students were asked to consider how these senior citizens were different or similar to their older relatives. Many students responded to this query with answers like "They're both old," "They all like to tell the stories of their lives," or "They couldn't hear (well) and repeated many things." The major difference, as was noted by more than one Middle Eastern student, was that these senior citizens lived by themselves in a retirement home. The Middle Eastern students noted that they had significantly larger families than their senior partners did, and that their grandpar-

ents or great-grandparents lived with a member of their family. A student also noted, "The most obvious and agreed upon ethics and forms of respect are in both cultures." All of the students appreciated the senior citizens for being willing to share their experiences and stories in order to help them better understand American history.

It seems as though the students saw both themselves and their senior partners as being American, though simply from different eras and environments. This is particularly impressive considering the strong ties that the majority of these

students maintain to their cultural homelands. During the average school day conversations, it is not unusual to hear students define or identify themselves or others as Yemeni, Iraqi, Lebanese, or Palestinian. These students also bring their heritage into the classroom in the form of their dialogue, dress, and opinions. This creates an enriched classroom that facilitates constant lessons on diversity and multiculturalism. The students and I have become so accustomed to sharing space with myriad other cultures that we have come to expect to be relating to someone that comes from a different

country or religion than we do. Perhaps that is the true benefit of learning in a multicultural environment: we see people for the experiences they have had and the people that they are, not for their country of origin or religious preference. 🌐

Notes

1. Student post-interview with instructor.
2. Student post-activity analysis forms.
3. Ibid.

LISA A. LARK is an American history and world history teacher at the Michael Berry Career Center in the Dearborn Public Schools, in Michigan.

Personal History Interview

Name: _____ **Birthdate:** _____ **Hometown:** _____

1. What was your earliest memory and when did it take place? _____
2. What city were you born in? _____
3. How long did you live in this city? _____
4. Did you grow up in the city or the country? _____
5. How many siblings did you have? _____
6. What kind of house/apartment did you live in? _____
7. Did any relatives live with you? _____
8. What did your parents' do for a living? _____
9. If she didn't work outside the home, what did your mother do during the day? _____
10. Did you have any pets? _____
11. Did your family have a car when you were a child? If so, do you remember what kind it was? _____
12. When did your family first get a telephone? _____
13. When did your family come to the United States? _____
14. What country(ies) did your family immigrate from? _____
15. What sort of ethnicities lived in your neighborhood? _____
16. What sort of chores did you have to do around the house? _____
17. What sort of hobbies did you and your friends have? _____
18. What were your favorite meals when you were a child? _____
19. What was your school like? _____
20. What did you wear to school? _____
21. Was religion important in your life? _____
22. Was your family affected by the Great Depression? _____
23. What did you think the future was going to be like? _____
24. Would you be interested in sharing any mementos from this time period with the class? _____
25. Would you be interested in answering questions in person? _____