Social Studies and the Young Learner 19 (3), pp. 15–19

Rope Circles and Giant Trees: Making History Come Alive

Robert Millward

Every year, I dine in an imaginary hollow cottonwood tree with primary and intermediate students. This is how I begin a series of lessons on the French and Indian War era. Students in fourth grade through middle school can get a real feel for what the colonial frontier was like when I incorporate physical activity, paintings, artifacts, diaries and discussions into the lessons.

Big Trees

I begin the first lesson by dividing the class into four small groups. One group is given a 45-foot length rope and told to make a rope circle on the floor and then to sit inside the circle. A second group constructs a circle with an 18-foot length of rope. The third group forms a circle with a 15-foot section of rope. The final group makes a circle on the floor with a 12-foot rope.

After they make their circles on the floor, I tell the students that 250 years ago, they could touch the objects that these rope circles represent. These objects were all of the same type. Their guesses about what the circles represent always generates an interesting discussion. Some kids suggest that the ropes represent campfires, or an Indian Village, some think the circles represent the size of a tepee or a council circle, and their ideas go on.

Students are flabbergasted when they learn that these rope circles represent the actual diameter of trees that grew in the United States 250 years ago. Cottonwoods and sycamores were often 45 feet in circumference, black walnut and oak trees were often 18 feet in circumference, maples stood 200 feet high and 15 feet in circumference and white pines were often 10 feet in circumference.

At this point I show the students "We Dined in a Hollow Cottonwood Tree," a painting by Robert Griffing, which depicts people meeting inside the hollow trunk of a giant cottonwood![1] The painting was inspired by one sentence from the diary of a French Jesuit Priest. Father Bonnecamp accompanied Celoron's expedition of more than 400 French Soldiers and Ottawa Indians into the Ohio Territory in 1749. Students are also amazed to learn that the huge canoes in the foreground of the painting could carry two tons of supplies or 40 soldiers.

Griffing does extensive research months before starting a painting about a historical incident. For example, he read the journals of Father Bonnecamp and Celoron, which gave him information on many things, such as the appearance of the Native American warriors who accompanied him, the size of the expedition and types of canoes used in the expedition, as well as the daily events of the journey. Most history texts, however, only focus on Celoron's purpose for the expedition, which was to bury lead plates at various locations on the Allegheny and Ohio River thus claiming the territory for France. Griffing's painting helps to make the expedition come alive. It was this expedition that provoked great concerns among the colonists of Virginia and Pennsylvania, since they too claimed ownership of the Ohio Valley. It was these competing claims that led to The French and Indian War.

Items of Trade

I then introduce the students to the lives of Eastern Woodland Indians and try to overcome some of the typical Hollywood stereotypes that many students have of Native Americans, such as believing that all Indians lived in tepees, wore feathered head dresses, and welcomed other people with a raised hand while saying, "How." I get students to think about life on the frontier by having them try to make a fire using a bow drill and a fire stick. A bow drill is easy to make.[2] Then, in an outdoor demonstration, I show students how a fire can be started much more quickly with a steel striker, which was a favorite trade item between frontiersmen and Native Americans in the early years. This activity is a perfect introduction into the fur trade simply because strikers, brass kettles, vermillion, glass beads, trade shirts, blankets, and jewelry were all commonly items that were exchanged for beaver pelts.

continued on page 18

This journal's center spread, pages 16 and 17, shows the painting "We Dined in a Hollow Cottonwood Tree" by Robert Griffing. After removing the pullout, you can view the entire painting at a glance. Copyright © 2003.

ROPE CIRCLES *from page 15*

The trade dramatically changed the life style of the Shawnee, Delaware, Wyandot, Seneca, Mingo, and other Eastern Woodland clans.

Paintings help to tell how the fur trade had a dramatic impact on the life of Eastern Woodland Indians. For example, I often show several paintings that depict Eastern Woodland Indians on the trail, in villages, or prior to battle. I ask students to see if they can determine whether a painting depicts an Eastern Woodland tribe prior to or after the arrival of fur traders. Students soon realize that cloth leggings, silver armbands, cloth shirts, steel knives, rifles, vermillion, and beaded neck bands represent trade items that were brought to their villages by fur traders. These traders used packhorses to carry trade goods into the woods and to transport out the valuable beaver pelts and deerskins. Questions about **VII PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION**, and **CONSUMPTION** and about **I CULTURE** arise naturally in this discussion.

Beaver Pelts and Global Trade

To help students to understand the economic impact of the fur trade on Native Americans in the 1750s, I developed a lesson to depict a pack train. I start by choosing two students to represent a fur trader and his partner. I assign them actual names such as John Frasier or Barney Currin, since both men were experienced frontier fur traders. The remaining members of the class then form a line around the perimeter of the room with John Frasier standing in front, while his partner Barney stands at the rear. The students represent a typical 20-horse pack train loaded. Once loaded with trade goods, these horses or mules begin a 200-mile journey from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, into the Ohio frontier. Students are amazed at what these horses carried: Blankets, sugar, scissors, jewelry, tobacco, vermillion, hatchets, guns, lead, awls, files, ribbons, thread, string, rope, beads, and shirts, to name just a few of the items. (I often bring samples of many of these items to class)

I then pose a question: "If only half of the horses are carrying trade goods, what are the other horses carrying?" After lots of guessing (as well as some clues that I provide), the students figure out that the remaining horses are carrying food-oats and corn, because almost no grass grows on the forest floor. The giant green canopy of the mature Pennsylvania forest, not yet exploited by loggers captures most of the sunlight before it reaches the ground. Students close their eyes to imagine the tall trees and shadowy forest floor, which is dim even at noon.

The next question relates directly to economics: How much would such a pack train be worth in today's currency? After they have a chance to speculate on the answer they are amazed to learn that a typical pack train could be worth $100,000.00 (in current dollars) and they find this amount unbelievable.[4] The trip from the warehouse in Carlisle to the Ohio Valley often took 20 days or longer. Fur traders spent another 30 days traveling from village to village, trading their merchandise for beaver pelts and other animal skins. When they finally traded all their merchandise, they would begin their return back to Carlisle. Now the horses would be loaded with beaver pelts and deerskins. The value of the pack train on the return trip could be $200,000.00 or more (in current dollars). The approximate profit from the venture equals this total income minus the value of materials on the original outbound pack train.

Competition and Hostilities

Sometimes I will start this lesson with the question: "How could a beaver start a war?" Kids love to try to solve this question. After they learn about the economics behind a single pack train and then learn that often there

ACTIVITY

It's April 1753, John Frazier and Barney Currin, along with 18 packhorses, are following a very narrow Indian path in the backwoods of Pennsylvania. Luck has been with them on this trip, so far. Their mules are healthy and none have gotten lost during the 50-day trek through the dark and dreary Pennsylvania forest.

The pack train is homeward bound. Fourteen mules are heavily loaded with beaver pelts and deerskins that they traded with the Shawnee, and three carry the remaining food supplies for the men and mules. One mule with a lame hoof carries nothing.

The Shawnee were glad to exchange their furs for Frazier's trade goods that included knives, tomahawks, beads, trade shirts, vermilion, powder, lead, tobacco, pins, needles, fishhooks, and small mirrors.

Just after supper, a chill shoots up Frazier's back as he spots small puffs of smoke, coming from a campfire, in the far off mountain valley.

"Who's out there," whispers Barney. Frazier could tell by Barney's anxious gaze that he feared the worst.

"Easy does it now, let's sneak over yonder," Frazier murmured, "We're going to creep along this ridge and see who's making that smoke." With rifles in hand, they slowly inch their way around boulders and giant trees and steadily approach the distant campfire.

…(Work with a partner to develop an exciting finish to this story).

were 400 fur traders traveling into the Ohio and Pennsylvania frontier, they begin to understand the fact that economic forces were a major cause of the French and Indian War.

I usually follow this lesson with a creative writing assignment related to the adventures of fur traders and their pack train. Since creative writing is a tough skill for beginning writers, I try to help spark their creativity by providing several short "starter" paragraphs such as those in the sidebar:

"The Prize" by John Buxton. Copyright © 2001.

Kidnappings

The French and Indian War also resulted in the capture and kidnapping of children along the Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio frontier, which was a new kind of terror for frontier parents. It was not uncommon for families to have several children kidnapped during a frontier raid, which might also result in burned cabins, dead livestock, and loss of life. The kidnapped children were often adopted by Native American families (Shawnee, Seneca, Wyandot, or Delaware tribes participated in such forced adoptions).

After living with their adopted parents for several years, many of these children pleaded to remain with their adopted parents when the war ended. Many of the captives could no longer speak English, or remember where they were born or the names of their original parents. Kidnapping was common on the frontier because the Native American population had been severely decimated by a combination of white man's diseases and constant warfare. Kidnapping children and adopting them into their tribes was a way of replenishing their populations.

There are several autobiographies written in the 1700s by adults who were kidnapped. Students enjoy reading captivity stories such as that of Mary Jemison, who was captured and lived with her adopted tribe for seventy years.[5] John Tanner, author of *The Falcon*,[6] was captured at the age of eight and lived with his adopted family the rest of his life.

John Buxton's painting, "The Prize" is clearly a story waiting to be told.[7] I encourage students to create a story describing how this baby's life will change. I model how to incorporate historically accurate details about Native culture, food, and Native games, into their stories by referring to autobiographical accounts. A great teacher in Virginia has her students try to describe what is happening from the perspective of the baby, the Shawnee warrior, and the baby's parents, at the moment shown in the picture. Students can learn a lot by examining this incident from several perspectives.

A Passion for History

Finally, a teacher who has an in-depth knowledge of content along with a repertoire of teaching strategies may still not have enough to inspire his or her students. A teacher must, above all, have a passion for teaching the subject. Without this passion, the paintings and artifacts can become lost in another series of names, dates, and events committed to memory for a few days in order to pass a multiple choice test. Students in American classrooms today are too often ending up with an "A" in American history without retaining meaningful knowledge or positive feelings about history. They go through life believing that history is unexciting and unimportant. Using paintings, artifacts, and hands-on activities to teach history is one way of restoring the joy and excitement of learning to the social studies classroom.

Notes

1. Robert Griffing's work can be seen at www.paramountpress.com/opedprin.html and in George Irving, *The Art of Robert Griffing* (New York, Paramount Press, 2000).
2. One can see a diagram of a fire starter and explanation at www.primitiveways.com/pt-bowfire.html.
3. Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).
4. Walter S. Dunn, *Frontier Profit and Loss: The British Army and the Fur Traders, 1760-1764* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press (1998).
5. James E. Seaver, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison Who was Taken by the Indians in the Year 1775* (New York: Kessinger, 1990; orig. 1820s).
6. John Tanner, *The Falcon: A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner* (New York: Penguin, 1994; orig. 1840).
7. Artist John Buxton's home page is www.buxtonart.com. The painting "The Prize," shown above, can be seen in color at www.buxtonart.com/the_prize.html.
8. Robert Millward's webpage is www.coe.iup.edu/teachingpahistory.

Robert Millward *is a professor of education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Over the past decade, he has developed DVDs, CDs, booklets, and various simulations to bring history alive in elementary and middle school classrooms.*