

Remnants from the Past: Using Scrapbooks to Make U.S. History Personal and Meaningful

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Our high school recently celebrated its 75th anniversary, and I wanted my students to remember this event for many years. As a U.S. history teacher, I also wanted to find a way for them to understand that their high school’s history has coincided with national events and trends over the past seven decades. I decided to use a scrapbook format in which students could document the history of our high school.

To cover a wide range of events and facets of our school’s history, my students researched major events, academics, athletics, arts/clubs/entertainment, and fashion and created one scrapbook page on each topic for every decade the high school has been in existence. To help them make connections between the school’s history and our nation’s past, I asked students to research major national figures and events pertaining to these same five topics during the same decades and create another page covering every topic and decade. We would eventually place the high school and national pages on the same topic during the same decade

alongside each other for an interesting comparison. The table below shows the five high school and national topics students focused on during each decade.

To make the project analytical and research oriented, all students were required to include a 200-word description on their scrapbook pages summarizing major trends or incidences evident from their examination of sources related to their topic. Furthermore, the description had to discuss a few major items or ideas that weren’t included on the scrapbook page that could offer an alternative perspective of the topics during each decade. For example, many of

the high school’s athletic pages included pictures or school newspaper articles detailing championships won by teams during each decade. However, many students noticed that yearbooks and newspaper articles mentioned that teams sometimes had losing seasons and very low fan attendance. While this was not commonly depicted on the scrapbook pages, students frequently mentioned this in their descriptions in order to add greater accuracy and balance to their pages and provide another way to view their topics during each decade.

Excerpt from Student Scrapbook

In the 1930s Whitefish Bay High School had just been built. ... During the thirties most people received “B” or “C” grades. The requirements for completing high school were six credits in English, six credits in social studies, two credits in science, and 1 credit in physical education. However, Whitefish Bay was not the norm. While the citizens of the village were paying for a new high school, some people were living in Hoovervilles just a few miles away.

Researching Local and National Past

The main resources students used to research their high school’s history were yearbooks and old school newspapers. Fortunately, our school has preserved

Table: Scrapbook Page Topics

School	National
Major occurrences at the school	Major national political, economic, and military events
Types of courses, test scores, school wide academic achievements	National educational trends and issues
Clubs, plays, and band and choir performances	Popular songs, television shows, movies, and performers
Sports offered at the school and sports teams’ performances	Popular and successful teams, players, and sports
Student clothing, hairstyles, and dress codes	Popular male and female styles of hair, dress and accessories

1930-1939 National Events



Political cartoon depicting Roosevelt holding a man's (Congress's) nose to a grindstone. During his first years in office, Roosevelt had continuously called Congress in session to pass bills related to the New Deal and some thought he was rushing it a little too much.

After growing robustly for most of the so called "Roaring Twenties," on October 29, 1929, Wall Street, and the U.S. economy, crashed. This marked the beginning of The Great Depression. As it carried through into the 30's, more people lost their jobs, their homes, and their savings. But in 1932 Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president and promptly proposed The New Deal in an attempt to boost the nation's economy to its prior height. Many parts of FDR's plan helped to institute programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps which provided jobs to young men, ages 17-28, who built national parks, roads, and planted thousands of trees to prevent the erosion of farmlands. While FDR's New Deal clearly brought needed relief, full employment would not be seen until World War II. Furthermore, some critics complained that Roosevelt's programs were too costly and encouraged major debt.

Other tragedies unrelated to the economy also occurred during the 30's. On February 2, 1937 the Ohio River rose to 60.8 feet devastating Paducah and Louisville, Kentucky and Cincinnati, Ohio. In March of 1937 Amelia Earhart started her famous flight around the world. However, on June 2, 1937 her plane mysteriously disappeared over the Pacific and was declared dead January 5, 1939.

Occupation	Annual earnings from 1932 to 1934
Airline pilot	\$4,000.00
Airline stewardess	1,500.00
Apartment house superintendent	1,500.00
Business coal miner	723.00
Bus driver	1,173.00
Chauffeur	619.00
Coal service employee	1,104.00
College teacher	3,111.00
Construction worker	907.00
Dentist	5,381.00
Department-store model	936.00
Doctor	3,358.00
Ironworker	790.00
Electrical worker	1,519.00
Engineer	4,100.00
Fire chief (city of 50,000 to 50,000)	4,075.00
Hotel farm hand	208.00
Newsreader - boys' school	780.00
Laywer	4,218.00
Lineman rail	350.00
Mayor (city of 25,000 to 50,000)	2,317.00
Pharmaceutical salesman	1,500.00
Police chief (city of 50,000 to 50,000)	2,636.00
Pilot	821.00
Public-school teacher	1,137.00
Publicly agent	1,800.00
Railroad conductor	2,729.00
Railroad conductor	1,054.00
Registered nurse	975.00
Secretary	1,000.00
Stationer	1,200.00
Stenographer	477.00
Stenographer/bookkeeper	936.00
Taxi worker	475.00
Typist	645.00
United States congressman	8,065.00
Waitress	540.00

Item	Price	Item	Price
Automobiles		Beaver Mitten (pair)	.40
Pontiac coupe	1,075.00	Alum. clock	3.00
Chrysler sedan	965.00	Briefcase	1.00
Dodge	995.00	Desk typewriter	19.75
Packard	843.00	Gasoline (per gallon)	.18
Packard	1,120.00	Tapes	
Chrysler half-ton	800.00	Dark carriage	84.00
30-hp truck	800.00	Wool	1.45
Lincoln 37	115.00	Trunks	3.90
Wardner's '30	900.00	Two-wheel bike	60.00
Ford '30	275.00	Expand	
Charging		Electric clock (per hr.)	.20
Wool suit	128.50	Beams (per lb.)	.08
Longwood coat	93.00	Log of wood (per lb.)	.08
Clark suit	6.99	Children (per lb.)	.10
Robinson	3.89	Belmont (per lb., suit)	.08
Wool dress	1.85	Milk (per qt.)	.20
Wool sweater	1.80	Beef (per lb.)	.20
Silk stockings	.80	Eggs (per doz.)	.24
Leather shoes	1.70	Cheese (per lb.)	.24
Rugby-leather shoes	1.60	Shoes (per pair, both)	.05
Overcoat	11.00	Calico (per lb.)	.08
Wool suit	10.50	Beef (per lb.)	.05
Trowsers	3.00	Pork (per lb.)	.05
Shirt	.47	Chicken (per lb.)	.05
Pull-over sweater	1.85	Bacon (per lb.)	.27
Silk necktie	.50	Custard (per lb.)	.25
Turtleneck	1.50	Real Lard	.25
Shoes	3.85	Milkmaid brand, 6 frames, 8 oz jars, Detroit	\$12,000.00
Household Items		English collars,	
Three-piece suit, 28-32, all-wool	\$4.95	8 necks, 3 bands,	\$150.00
Double-breasted	.87	1 button, Boston	
Wool rug (7' x 10')	1.80	Indian Mills,	
Apparel		30 frames, Washington, N.Y.	17,000.00
Electric iron	83.00	Special items,	
Electric coffee percolator	1.20	Expand	5,000.00
Vacuum cleaner	88.75	AP	
Electric washing machine	47.95	New York to Chicago, round trip	886.30
Car radio	125.95	Chicago to Los Angeles,	107.00
Copper lamp	1.65	round trip	
Percolator		Rail	
Strong room set, 8 shelves	248.50	Chicago to San Francisco,	80.00
Bedroom set, 2 pieces	89.95	round trip, 16 days to	
Luggage chest	99.95	San Francisco	
Double bed and spring mattress	14.95	New York City to Newark, N.Y.,	100.00
Multigrip coffee table	100.75	monthly round-trip ticket	
Chippendale mahogany sofa	124.00	Year of Europe,	
Low-back upholstered chair	124.00	See back, 12 months	495.00
Wing chair	39.00	San Francisco to Hawaii,	100.00
Grand piano	391.00	round trip	
Wicker chair		New York to California via	100.00
Wicker chair	80.00	Panama Canal	
Wicker chair	1.20		
City fan (power)	4.00		
12" x 18" picture (1/2 in.)	35.00		
Colossal Christmas cards	35.00		

A list of items and their prices from 1932 to 1943



MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT
Washington, D. C.
March 5, 1933

I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that as my attention to the Presidency I will address them with a desire and a desire which the present situation of our nation justify. This is presently the time to open the road, the wide road, freely and boldly, for and we shall have honestly being ourselves to our country's best. This great nation will survive as it has survived, will prosper and will prosper. In fact of all, let us assert by this belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself - rational, unreasoning, irrational fear which has paralyzed our efforts to correct national ills. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of President and major has not with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. I am assured that you will and I am sure that we will be victorious in these difficult days.

In such a spirit of my part and my part to face our common difficulties. Their success, their aid, will national wills, nations have advanced to further goals; need be many our ability to help the people government of all kinds.

Excerpt from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's first inaugural address. His famous quote "we have nothing to fear but fear itself" comes from this speech (line 8).



copies of every yearbook dating back to the school's opening in 1932 and every edition of the school newspaper, which was started in 1938. Students photocopied items from these sources and transformed them into scrapbook items. For the national pages, students used a wide variety of sources. Books from our media center highlighting trends during each decade included photographs and documents that students used for their scrapbook pages. Our school also

subscribes to a database called SIRS Decades, which included pictures, primary sources, and information for students to research and display their topics. Students also searched images through Google to find color pictures and photographs of particular events or individuals they had researched from their textbook and other sources.

When researching their high school, yearbook photos were very helpful for students examining fashion to see the way

students have dressed over the decades. At times, students noticed some correlations between national and school trends during some decades, like the feathered hairstyle of the 1980s or baggy clothing during the 2000s. However, they also found inconsistencies between national styles and school fashion. As longer hair and tie-dye became popular during the 1960s, students at Whitefish Bay were rarely seen in yearbooks displaying these fashions since the school



dress code restricted students' attire and hairstyles.

Yearbooks were also very useful for students researching athletics, clubs, or arts and entertainment, since they showcased photographs of sports teams and extracurricular organizations to help students identify some of the major activities at our school. Many students observed that while baseball was a very prominent sport on the national level for many decades, it was not necessarily the most popular sport at their school. It was also evident that student clubs were transformed by national events and trends. During the 1940s, school organizations were established to contribute to the war effort; and as computers became increasingly common in the 1980s, our high school formed a computer team.

Finally, yearbooks occasionally offered photographs and descriptions of major speakers who addressed the student body, new facilities that were available to students, and some of the

unique academic trends. In some cases, national events impacted major events at the high school. For instance, students were fascinated to learn that an alumnus of their high school was one of the 52 Americans held hostage in Iran from 1979 to 1981 and that this individual came back to the school a year after he was released to speak about his experiences at an all-school assembly. Students were also surprised to see that their high school was being built in the midst of the Great Depression—a time when some communities were forced to shut down schools—which showed that this national event affected local communities in different ways.

While the yearbooks offered students a wealth of information about their school to compare to events and trends across the United States, school newspapers provided more specific details and additional insight, allowing for greater comparisons to national events. The school newspapers included many rich details

about academic achievement and main events during each decade at the high school. Some articles noted that a few different New Deal agencies helped to fund projects at the school; others described the campaigns to ration everything from books to old clothes or the World War II bond drives organized through the high school. Students were also astonished to discover a school newspaper article stating that Duke Ellington had performed at the opening of the high school's auditorium. Students also learned about a local legacy of the civil rights movement while reading about the origins of a transfer program—which started in 1976—that has enabled minority students from the city to enroll in their suburban school district.

Students were also intrigued to find that some events or trends were not heavily discussed in the school newspaper. While the Vietnam War is a major topic in textbooks and in our own U.S. history course, very few articles mentioned it or the protests at home. Furthermore, the Elvis and Beatles craze that swept the nation during the 1950s and 1960s was not significantly mentioned in the school newspapers. When we discussed this, students hypothesized that either these issues did not significantly occupy the attention of Whitefish Bay High School students, or simply that the school newspaper was not the forum where students discussed these topics.

Some students were also able to contact alumni and former Whitefish Bay teachers and interview them to gain deeper insight into our school's history. In one interview, a student learned about a student sit-in to protest the dress code in 1969 that eventually led to looser restrictions on student attire. Since this event was not discussed in yearbooks or the school newspaper, it helped provide a more complete understanding of students' fashion at the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s. It also helped to explain why styles at our high school during the 1970s began to more closely resemble some of the national fashion trends. Another student's interview with

an alumnus added insight into the school newspaper's silence on the Beatles and Vietnam. The interviewee noted that the community was socially conservative and that many adults looked down upon youth rebellion, including some of the trends promoted by groups like the Beatles. In addition, he pointed out that many students from our high school in the late 60s and early 70s went on to college and, consequently, were deferred from being drafted to serve in Vietnam.

Finally, other records, mostly preserved by our school and school district, became valuable components of the scrapbook. A collection of local newspapers in our public library provided additional articles, particularly related to the construction of school buildings, which illustrated the financial costs involved in creating the school facilities. The schedule of course offerings throughout the decades allowed students to track changes in the school's curriculum. School board minutes provided insight into policies like the dress code that students observed over time.

Perhaps the most unique item was a document from 1934 that provided a distribution of letter grades given to seniors in English courses that year. Students quickly noticed that an average English grade was much lower, with most students receiving between a B and a C in 1934. This provided an interesting opportunity to discuss the way grades have risen at our school due to a combination of the pressure on students to get good grades for applying to college, and the pressure on teachers to give better grades for the same reason.

Turning Primary Sources into Scrapbook Items

While my experience in historical research helped students find significant items to display on their pages, I had never created a scrapbook prior to this project. Therefore, I relied on the expertise of a few people in our community. I learned that one student's parent designed very creative family

scrapbooks. This parent was willing to show students some of her scrapbooks and give them tips on matting items and using stickers and embellishments to make a page come to life.

A woman from a local scrapbook store was willing to instruct my classes, for a small fee, about advanced techniques to display older and historical items. She showed students ways to rub ink on items and even tear them to make white photocopied sheets of paper look older and more worn. This person also showed students how to use photo corners and double and triple matting of items to make them look neat and distinct. Finally, she shared advice on using tags and folding techniques to make items stand out and add greater variety to each page.

I purchased a wide variety of supplies from a local store to make sure students were able to create impressive pages. Since our project was funded through a teaching award, my students had the luxury of using a wide variety of resources. Students mainly used construction paper, mounting squares, and double sided tape to mat items; photo corners to enhance pictures; scrapbook paper cutters, stamps and special scissors to create straight and unique designs on the edges of the paper; and stickers and embellishments like athletic numerals, letters, and graduation tassels to add further ornamentation. Since each scrapbook page was 18 inches by 18 inches, students had plenty of space to display at least 5 items (after they minimized some of the photocopied items).

Once all of the pages, which were coordinated to match our school colors, were placed into plastic protective jackets and arranged chronologically by decade with each high school and national topic alongside each other, it was clear that my students had created an item that would become a part of their school's history for generations. The added incentive that their work would be displayed for the entire community and for other students for many years seemed to motivate them to do a spectacular job of researching and designing their work.

My students were clearly operating under a best-case scenario. I had received \$1,000 from the Herb Kohl Educational Foundation, a teaching award I won several years ago, and spent about \$700 on this project. Our high school has also maintained a great collection of primary sources including old yearbooks and school newspapers along with historic course schedules and school board minutes. Additionally, a flexible U.S. history curriculum gave my students needed time to work in class to create superb pages.

However, if I purchased smaller scrapbook pages, fewer stickers and embellishments, and a smaller album, my costs could have easily been cut in half. I could have also asked students to purchase some of their own materials like construction paper, stickers, or mounting squares—a nominal financial expense. Even if I did not have close to three weeks built into my curriculum to spend on a project like this, I could have seen similar results by assigning the project at the beginning of the school year or semester, providing a few class days to get started and asking students to complete the project over a few months.

I rarely observe students thanking me for assigning them a project, but many expressed their gratitude for being part of this activity and for having the opportunity to display their interest and talent for historical research in such a creative manner. As our scrapbook was unveiled at a community event to commemorate the school's anniversary, a number of administrators, alumni, colleagues, and community members also showed deep interest and amazement in my students' work. This was truly a project that students will remember for years to come and one that allowed them to see their local and national history through a different lens. 📖

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