Prairie and Culture: Roots That Bind

Tallgrass Prairie Center

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PRAIRIE AND CULTURE: ROOTS THAT BIND

BACKGROUND

Primary sources provide first-hand testimony or direct evidence of events that happened in the past. Photographs, letters, newspaper reports and advertisements are examples. These sources are often created at the time the events or conditions occurred, but can also include autobiographies, memoirs and oral histories recorded later.

Culture can be defined as the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people. It includes language, religion, food, social habits, music and arts. Cultural roots are the shared behaviors, beliefs and interactions that are often passed along from one generation to the next. They form the foundation for a group's "way of life."

Prairie roots form the foundation for an ecosystem's way of life. The annual cycle of growth and decay is responsible for the development of a thick layer of healthy, productive topsoil. By creating and anchoring the rich soil, prairie roots are the cornerstone of the prairie ecosystem. Interactions between the prairie's plants, animals, water and soil all depend on these roots.

Cultural roots and prairie roots both form foundations for a way of life, and both have contributed to Iowa's rich cultural history and heritage. Primary sources provide an understanding of that heritage.

VOCABULARY

Primary source: An artifact, document, photograph, drawing, recording or other source of information that was created at the time under study.

Cultural roots: Anything relating to a particular society and its ideas, customs and knowledge.

Historical roots: The place, culture and family from which an individual or members of a society originate.

TEACHER PREPARATION

• Gather primary sources. See Resources and Appendix C.
• If you do not have a prairie root specimen to display, prepare to project a prairie roots image or poster. (www.tallgrassprairiecenter.org/curriculum_images.)
• Primary Source Analysis worksheet
• Read If You're Not from the Prairie by David Bouchard
ACTIVITY

1. Introduce students to the word “roots”. What do roots do? (Sample responses: they hold plants in place, they provide nourishment for the plant, etc.) Guide the discussion to a definition of family or cultural/historical roots. Share with students how people who settled in Iowa “pulled up their roots,” leaving family and friends, to settle here. They were determined to plant their roots in a new land. They brought their traditions and beliefs. Our Iowa culture and history has deep roots, just like prairie plants. Both need to be tended and nourished to grow and flourish.

2. Show students the video “Recording the Oral Histories of Those Who Farm.” Some or all of the video may be shown.

3. Have students select a primary source from previously gathered samples.

4. Distribute Primary Source Analysis handout (see Appendix). Students will use the handout to help think about the past, and explore how the primary source item relates to Iowa culture and history.

5. The instructor will lead a discussion in which students share their primary source and their thoughts about its place in Iowa culture and history. For example, a journal might tell about hardships and challenges met as families settled on the Iowa prairies. A photo of an early plow can tell the story of how the prairie was converted to row crops. The message students should understand: The events of Iowa’s past have shaped the course of Iowa’s future, and primary sources can help tell that story.

6. Read the book If You’re Not From the Prairie by David Bouchard. What does this book say about our prairie culture (our way of life, our habits, our way of dealing with weather extremes, etc.)? Note: If time is a factor, you may choose to watch the video rather than read the book.

7. If you have access to a Prairie Roots display, ask students to look at it carefully and think about what roots do. (You may also use projected images of prairie roots.) Sample responses:
   - Prairie roots enrich the soil.
   - Prairie roots hold the soil in place, preventing it from washing away.
While cultural/historical roots enrich the lives of people and continue to build over years, prairie roots stay in the soil and similarly enrich it over time.

ASSESSMENTS

1. Have students respond individually to the following writing prompt:
   “Over hundreds of years, prairie roots created the soil we have today. Also over hundreds of years, people of Iowa created historical and cultural roots. How are our historical and cultural roots alike and different from prairie roots?”

EXTENSIONS

1. Research the roots of cultural categories such as music (e.g., rock-and-roll or blues), prairie poetry (students may write the poems themselves), the history of farming, etc.
2. If applicable, the students may research their own family roots and stories.
RESOURCES

- Tools to help use primary sources in the classroom are at www.loc.gov/teachers.

STANDARDS

SS.3–5.H.1 Understand historical patterns, periods of time and the relationships among these elements.
SS.3–5.H.3 Understand the role of culture and cultural diffusion on the development and maintenance of societies.
SS.3–5.H.6 Understand the effects of geographic factors on historical events.
SS.3–5.G.2 Understand how geographic and human characteristics create culture and define regions.
SS.3–5.G.3 Understand how human factors and the distribution of resources affect the development of society and the movement of populations.
SS.3–5.G.4 Understand how physical processes and human actions modify the environment and how the environment affects humans.
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APPENDICES

A. Primary Source Analysis worksheet
B. Primary Source Examples

Prairie Roots lesson plans created by the Tallgrass Prairie Center with funding from the Iowa Living Roadway Trust Fund.

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PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

You do not have to answer all the questions below, but they may help you observe, reflect and question your primary source.

Describe or draw your primary source.

OBSERVE

What do you notice first? Describe a small but interesting detail. What do you notice that you didn’t expect? What do you notice that you can’t explain? What do you notice that you didn’t see earlier?
REFLECT
Where do you think this came from? Why do you think someone made/wrote/photographed this? What do you think was happening when this was created? What tool was used to create this? If somebody made this today, what would be different? What can you learn from examining this?

QUESTION
What do you wonder about? What more would you like to know and how can you find out?
Primary Source Examples

The primary sources shown below are a small sample of the many resources available online. See extensive collections at:

- the Library of Congress
- the American Memory Collection
- the National Archives
- Yale University

Diaries
- Reflections of Yesterday: Processes for Investigating Local History (see p.28)
- Bushnell, George Edwin: Trip Across the Plains in 1864 (more than 100 individual diaries)
- McAuley, Eliza Ann: Iowa to the Land of Gold Eliza McAuley (1835-1919)

Higher-resolution versions of the images below are available by clicking the image: