

## “Trek Across America”

Jane Davin

...a journey back through time to a specific point in American history

### **Grade level: 6-8**

This lesson is an interdisciplinary project in English/American History. It is designed to coordinate with another instructor to supplement what s(he) is teaching in American History and covers the years 1700-1920. This would best be done as a revisited, familiar format throughout the school year to support what is being learned in Am. History. For English, the creative writing tasks are designed to stimulate imagination by projecting the student into a historical moment, and writing about that moment. The student gaining ownership of the historical event as well as broadening creative writing skills through pre-writing activities, writing, and revising is a major goal of this lesson.

**Time needed for unit:** Each historical fantasy assignment will take between 3-5 days to complete, from start to the revising process.

### **Objective of lesson(s):**

- \*To identify certain moments in history and be able to broaden a student’s base of historical knowledge.
- \*Getting “up close” to historical figures and their unique circumstances in an earlier America by creating your own historical fiction.
- \*Using specific writing formats such as letter writing, narratives, dialogues, descriptive essays, etc., the student completes each project alone, but benefits from group activities in brainstorming and also sharing prior knowledge on the relevant topic with a partner.
- \*I use these projects and many of our other writing activities to zero in on whatever we are working on in grammar – for instance, to practice writing verbs in a series, and including that as part of the finished piece.

### **MWP activity:**

Divide into five groups (3 or 4 in each?) and give each group a bag of supplies and project sheets for each person.

Read the sheet with your group.

Discuss how you might use each supply for the situation you are in. At least one of the supplies will be an obvious connection to your historical person or destination...*a few items may require extreme right brain fantasy functions to integrate.*

Having discussed supply possibilities, each person may be ready to write down ideas and notes about the specific task to complete.

Compare stories, dialogues, etc. with your group and compare the unique ideas created by each person.

## **How to make a “Trek Across America” lesson**

The basic format is as follows:

1. A creative paragraph or two is written by you, (or possibly a student) describing a historically correct moment in which students are projected back in time. (a fun activity might be to discuss how the time travel might occur)
2. Students may affect important people or events from the past by simply knowing what they know in 2003, an empowering advantage in the situation.
3. Two writing tasks are given relative to the paragraph. The first task considers how best to use the supplies given. The second task varies depending on the assignment in the paragraph: maybe a letter will be written, a narrative, or a short descriptive essay. The format is fluid enough so that work on grammar can also be done as an added learning exercise.
4. The point to remember with this unit is that fantasy is occurring, which means that everything can't possibly make sense. For those logical, sequential thinking students who ask questions such as, “So where will Ben Franklin get gasoline for the Pontiac Firebird in 1776?” you may want to offer something profound such as, “He just does, Okay?”

### **Other possible visits back into history: (yet to be written)**

“I’m just a reporter, Sir!” at the Boston Tea Party

Walk the Trail of Tears and weep.

Blue light special! The Louisiana Purchase!

Lewis and Clark, two guys and a pair of Adidas.

Continental Divide-“This land is *your* land, this land is *my* land.”

Transcontinental Railroad-“When it absolutely positively has to be there by October.”

Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address...the “Sounds of Silence”

Just say “Yes, Ma’am,” to Sojourner Truth.

#### **...or poetry units:**

Coffee with Edgar Allen Poe

Designing a swing set with R.L. Stevenson

Getting Emily Dickinson to go for a walk around the block with you

#### **...or art lessons**

Acting like trees with Henri Rousseau

Going around in circles with Kandinsky

### **What I have done previously with “Trek Across America”**

When I was a sixth grade classroom teacher, I taught History and English, so the format was a little different. “Trek” was a unit that was a supplemental overview of U.S. history

(and included geography). Beginning in Boston and reaching the west coast of California in about 30 class days, it included a treasure hunt using a map and also clues given daily about where students should travel to and what important event was happening at each daily destination. The English piece involved logging a historical fiction journal, with the student as the main character. More clues led to trading supplies for necessary changes, i.e., a student might have had roller blades, but traded them to an interested pioneer for a small raft to get across the Missouri River, things like that. Students wound up on the west coast of California to figure out the final clues to get to the treasure. This unit lasted about four weeks.

Now I am modifying the previous “Trek Across America” to be a series of shorter lessons that can be accomplished in 3-5 days, a supplement to our other English and grammar activities and the 6-8 American history track.

**Resources:**

Daniel, Clifton ed.	<u><a href="#">Chronicle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century</a></u>
Lasky, Jesse L. Jr.	<u><a href="#">Whatever Happened To Hollywood?</a></u>
Bower, Bert and Lobdell, Jim.	<u><a href="#">History Alive! The United States</a></u>