



PROJECT: RECORDING ORAL HISTORIES

All Grades

This lesson meets Michigan Content and Benchmark Standards for Social Studies:

I: 2-4: Comprehending the Past, Analyzing and Interpreting the Past, Judging Decisions from the Past

V: 2: Conducting Investigations

To meet additional standards, extend this activity to have students create maps (fulfilling Strand II: Geographic perspective), art work, or link specific events to American government policy (fulfilling Strand III: Civic perspective).

This project is designed to engage students in actively pursuing oral histories. While this project focuses on preserving Michigan's Fruit Belt history, students can adapt these processes to investigate other events like wartime involvement, or family histories.

Objective: Students will prepare questions about the past, conduct, and analyze interviews to help connect the national timeline to local events, people, and situations. Following, students will interpret these oral histories in order to form logical conclusions about the past.

Activity Part I: Preparing your Interview:

1. Students should reflect upon their answers in worksheet 1 (Asking Questions, p. 41), or think critically about Southwest Michigan's local past, and someone who might be able to tell them about it. Ask questions like these to help generate discussion:
 - Has anyone in your family ever been involved in the fruit industry (as a farmer, nursery worker, factory worker, market seller, etc.)?
 - If not, do you know anyone who has lived in Southwest Michigan for more than 10 years, who might know something about the fruit industry?
2. Students should think about this person's involvement or knowledge about the fruit industry, and prepare a list of 10-15 questions to ask. Questions should be specific, yet open-ended (i.e. How did World War II affect your life in the fruit industry?). Ask students to keep in mind some key issues when formulating these questions:
 - Personal involvement or experience in the fruit industry—what was the work/job like? How did it change over time?
 - Home life, daily tasks (for men and women), size of family, type of residence, material possessions (cars, TVs, radios, fancy clothes)
 - How did international or local events change life/ the fruit industry (wars, spoiled crops, migrant labor, new laws, growing California industry, Civil / Women's Rights, the movement of the Benton Harbor Market)?
 - How did technology change life / the fruit industry (better tools, cars, radios, TVs, better education, large supermarkets / malls, computers, the internet, advertising)?

Younger students may need help formulating questions. This can be best done by creating a group discussion to brainstorm for ideas, then recording some broad questions that students can use. A worksheet can be formulated using these questions for students to complete during their interview.



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Activity Part II: The Interview

3. Students should contact their possible informant about scheduling an interview. Ideally, interviews should be done in person. This project may be best done around the holidays, where students will be likely to see older relatives. Moreover, it may be helpful to have students think of 2-3 possible people to speak with, in case their first choice is unavailable.
4. Most students will record these interviews using a simple tape recorder (with microphone) or video recorder (for advanced students). Students should take notes, regardless of recording. Distribute or discuss the “Tips for Conducting Oral Histories” on page 35.

Activity Part III: Interpreting your Interview:

5. Students should think about the interview, what topics were discussed, and how the respondent addressed certain issues. The worksheet on page 46 may also help students interpret their oral histories. How did the respondent handle the issues discussed? Did he/she avoid any particular issues? Why or why not (in your opinion)? Following such discussion, students should choose a project to complete using their oral history.
- Illustrate the oral history report: choose one memorable part of the interview and illustrate using drawings or collage with magazine clippings
 - Write a Poem about what was learned from the interviewee. This project could be combined with lessons on poetry forms, asking students to complete a poem adhering to a specific number of stanzas, meter, etc.
 - Write a Newspaper Article: students should report on the information as if reporting for a newspaper. Introduce the subject and person interviewed (including name, age, occupation, relation). The article should include summary paragraphs regarding important or interesting parts of the interview, using quotes to highlight these points. The article should conclude with the student’s reflections on the interview process. Ask students to format the page as if it were a real page in a newspaper (using photos, captions, headlines, etc.).
 - Write a Report: advanced students can investigate issues brought up in the interview, research supplementary materials and sources, and write a formal report on the topic. For example, a student’s grandfather may mention a POW camp near Lawton during WWII. The student would find photographs, newspaper articles, government documents and other sources that discuss satellite POW camps during WWII, and write a report on his/her findings. Alternatively, students may present the report orally (8-10 minutes) using visual aids (posters, photographs, timelines, maps, powerpoint presentations, etc.) and audio clips from the interview.