

Lesson Plan for James's trip across Western Canada in 1937

Intended Grades: 9 and 10

Subjects: Social Studies, Canadian Studies, Canadian History

Background on the Project

This site has been developed by a team at the Canada Science and Technology Museum, with the aid of a Canadian Culture Online grant provided by the Department of Canadian Heritage. It was created for use as part of the grade 9 and 10 history/social studies curriculum, dealing with modern Canadian history. The time period is the Depression, and the locations are primarily Saskatchewan and Alberta, with references to Ontario and Manitoba.

There are three goals of the site: first, to honour Alberta and Saskatchewan's Centennial year (2005) by focussing on the little-known development of tourism and travel in those provinces, which signify their transformation from Wild West colonies to provinces in the Dominion of Canada; second, to make use of and give context to the extensive photo archive donated to the Museum by the Canadian National Railways; and third, to provide educators with a site that takes a new and interactive approach to teaching history.

Key Themes Found in the Letters on the Site

Canada during the Depression

The impact of radio and media in the 1930s

Canadian youth culture during the 1930s

The Great Depression and life on the Prairies during the 1930s

Women's rights and Nellie McClung

Rail travel in Canada

The railway as a national symbol

Alberta/Saskatchewan Centennial

Tourism as an escape from ordinary life

The Rockies

Summary

Students will read a series of fictional letters detailing a trip across Canada during the summer of 1937. Although the main characters do not actually exist, the events, famous characters, and experiences are based on extensive historical research, using old newspapers, books, photographs, interviews, brochures and first-hand accounts. These letters are a composite of experiences, facts and imagination. The main character of this story is James Russell, a 22-year-old law student from the University of Toronto. His letters are addressed to his fiancée Eleanor (Ellie), and were written during a train trip he took across western Canada during the summer of 1937.

In addition to the letters, the site allows students to view old video recordings, see photographs (from the CN collection, the Library and Archives Canada, the Glenbow Museum, the Saskatoon Public Library's Local History Room and the Edmonton City Archives) and learn more about the Canada Museum of Science and Technology's collection.

Using information in the letters, along with video and photographic materials and links to informative sites, students will answer questions, have discussions and/or write essays on various aspects of the Depression in Canada, western development, train travel, technological developments and Canadian culture.

Purpose

The character of James allows students to experience the Canadian West through the eyes of someone they can engage with and relate to. Teachers can use this site to introduce students to primary-source materials and to help improve students' research and analytical skills. Students will learn about western Canada near the end of the Depression, but they will also gain skills such as document analysis, which will aide them in further studies.

Resource Requirements

Computers with access to the internet and the ability to play sound and video are required, preferably one for every pair of students.

Preparation

Before students engage in the site, it is important to have a discussion about what a primary source is, what historians do with primary sources, and what they can learn from them. A good web site containing this information, which can be printed and handed out to students, is www.dohistory.org.

The students should be introduced to the main character, James, and his granddaughter Ellie, who are the narrators of the site. The fact that the letters are fictional should be explained, but teachers should also explain that the information contained within the letters is based on historical facts.

Organization

Students should be broken into groups of between two and four (depending on the number of computer terminals available). The site introduction and first letter should be read individually. After reading the letter, students can take time to explore the additional information (links) included. After students have had a chance, in their groups, to read and explore these documents, teachers should assign the first discussion question and instruct the students to appoint a recorder and a speaker for their group. Once the groups have answered the

question, the students will rejoin as a class, and the speaker will read the group's answers. The teacher can then engage the class in further discussion about what they have seen and read.

The remaining letters can be read one at a time or in chunks, depending on the teacher's preference. Each letter has accompanying questions and suggested discussion activities. Teachers can choose as many from these lists as time allows.

The following pages are designed to be printed out for the class.

Introduction and Letter 1

Discussion Question

James has read stories, looked at pictures and read brochures about the Canadian West, which have influenced his ideas about what he will see and find there.

Look at the brochures the travel agent gave to James, which appear on the side bars of letters 1, 4 and 9, as well as the promotional video clips throughout the letters: How did advertisers “sell” images of places, people and products to James? How have advertisements today changed? How are they similar?

Write notes about each *Primary Source* (videos, pictures and brochures) you find in the chart below.

What types of words and slogans are used?

Do you see any reoccurring themes or images?

Videos	Pictures	Brochures

Essay Question

The people who rode the rails by sneaking onto freight trains during the Depression of the 1930s were often young single men who were not eligible for the same benefits as people with families. Families were given relief payments, which provided some food and basic clothing. They were allowed to live in accommodations of their choosing as long as the rent was less than \$13 per month, which usually meant whole families shared one room in a boarding house. However, the single men were expected to live in barracks, with rules inspired by the military, to receive relief. They were not given food vouchers, but instead fed in communal kitchens. These young men were forced to work in relief camps for 20 cents a day, performing tasks that had little value, such as splitting wood with an axe (even though chain saws were invented, the government wanted to make sure they could keep as many men busy as possible by forcing them to use hand tools), building elaborate bridges over small rivers or building roads to places no one travelled. In 1935, the frustration these men felt resulted in the "On to Ottawa" trek.

Question: What was the "On to Ottawa" trek? What were the men's goals? How did it end? Why do you think the government worked so hard to suppress it?

Additional Resources

Read about the "On to Ottawa" Trek

<http://www.ontoottawa.ca/trek/trek.html>

Hear the trek anthem "Hold the Fort," which was recorded in 1986 to raise money for strike support.

<http://www.ontoottawa.ca/holdthefort.mov>

Letter 2

James writes to Ellie about his first day of travelling on the Prairie, dust storms, young boys working and black blizzards.

Short-Answer Questions

For extra room, use the back of this sheet.

A. What is a "black blizzard" and why did they occur on the Prairies during the Depression?

B. What did families do to deal with the Depression, poverty and drought on the Prairies?

C. What was the "Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Project"?

Letter 3

James writes of his visit to Regina, dancing, the diner incident, drought and radio.

Discussion or Essay Questions

A. Recreation was very important in the 1930s. People attended movies, went to weekly dances, developed theatre groups, borrowed books on adventure, philosophy, economics and fiction from the local library and listened to radio programs called "soap operas" (because the first ones were sponsored by soap companies). Many families worked extra hard to find the money needed to enjoy these activities. Why do you think recreation was so important to poor families during the Depression of the 1930s?

B. Regina is situated within the region known as the Palliser Triangle -- a section of southern Saskatchewan and Alberta that, in 1863, was surveyed by John Palliser and declared unsuitable for farming because it was an extension of the sandy American Desert region. Palliser claimed in his report to the Dominion government that the land was more suitable for growing grass and raising cattle than farming. The government ignored his advice and advertised the area to settlers for farming. They claimed it was ready-made for farms because of the lack of trees. Unfortunately, Palliser correctly anticipated that the area would be problematic for farmers. Wheat farming broke the topsoil into small particles, and when, during the Depression, the entire area was struck by drought, the top soil turned to sand and blew away in clouds of black dust. Hundreds of farms had to be abandoned.

Question: Why do you think the Dominion government ignored Palliser's advice and advertised the area for farming to immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century?

Additional Resources

University of Calgary, "Applied History: Calgary and Southern Alberta"

http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/calgary/intro.html

http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/calgary/triangle.html

National Resources Canada, "Palliser Triangle Global Change Project"

http://gsc.nrcan.gc.ca/climate/palliser/index_e.php

The Canadian Encyclopaedia, "Drought in Palliser's Triangle"

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=ArchivedFeatures&Params=A220>

Immigrant Voices, "Laurier Boom"

http://www.canadianhistory.ca/iv/1867-1914/laurier_boom/

Letter 4

James writes about the barren prairie, locusts, train radio and Grey Owl.

Discussion Question

A. Did you know that many (including the first) radio stations in Canada were started by the railways? Listen to the radio and song clips in the link provided (<http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-109-1257/1930s/1938/>). Discuss the differences between radio during the 1930s and today's radio. What kinds of music would have been popular to listen to? Why would radio be so important to have on a train?

Essay Questions

B. Who was Grey Owl, and why did people believe he was from a First Nations background? What messages did he try to promote? Why was he so popular during the 1930s in both Canada and Britain?

C. How did the people of Saskatchewan and Alberta deal with the problem of locusts between the late 1920s and the 1940s? Listen to the CBC radio clip from an interview with depression survivor James Gray, and read the document on the locust problem (provided in links below). Try to find two additional sources.

Additional Resources

CBC Radio, "Dustbowl Horrors," Interview with James Gray, 1 July 1982.
http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-70-1407-9038/disasters_tragedies/drought/clip3

Joan Champ. "Grasshopper Campaigns in Saskatchewan during the 1930s" A Report for Saskatchewan Western Development Museum's "Winning the Prairie Gamble" 2005 Exhibit, February 21, 2002.
<http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/DE/saskatchewan100/researchpapers/WDM/Grasshopper%20Campaigns.pdf>

Letter 5

James writes of farming exhibitions, Bennet buggies and Indian camps.

Discussion Questions

A. Exhibitions on farming, industry, technology, sewing, baking and preserving were part of the summer for many western (and also many eastern) towns and cities, starting in the 1800s. Some, such as the Saskatoon Exhibition, continue today! Why were these exhibitions so important that the Canadian National Railways would offer reduced fares, towns would observe a civic holiday and children would save their pennies all year so that they could enjoy the rides? Why do you think the Exhibition in Saskatoon, being especially focussed on agricultural, continued during the Depression when many farmers had nothing to show because of drought, locusts and debt?

Short-Answer Questions

B. Why did people hitch their horses to cars during the Depression? Why did they call them "Bennet buggies"?

C. Do you see any similarities between exhibitions today and exhibitions in the 1930s? Do they still serve the same purpose?

Essay Question

D. During the first half of the twentieth century, First Nations people were seen as mysterious by the rest of the world. Native people lost much of their land and hunting grounds to White settlers, and the Canadian government forced them onto reserves. They were unable to move freely around the country because many reserves required residents to obtain passes issued by an "Indian Agent" before they were able to leave. First Nations people were usually very poor because they had no access to good land, water, food, employment or good medical care. In his letter, James writes that a band of "Indians" had come to camp at the fair. They were seen as an exhibit by most of the townspeople. Write an essay on the living conditions of Native people during the 1930s on the Prairies.

Letter 6

James writes about The Continental train and relief projects.

Short-Answer Questions

A. Why was it not appropriate for Ellie to accompany James on his trip west before they were married?

B. Why was the Broadway Bridge built? What other relief projects were there on the Prairies during the 1930s? Describe life in a relief camp.

Letter 7

James writes about the Women's Christian Temperance League, Nellie McClung, women's rights, William "Wop" May and aviation.

Short-Answer Questions

A. Who was Nellie McClung and what did she do?

B. What was the Women's Christian Temperance League?

Discussion Question

How did the women's rights movement change Canada? Who, besides Nellie McClung, was involved in fighting for women's rights? Can you think of ways women's rights have changed the lives of *all* Canadians?

Essay Question

Who was Captain William "Wop" May and why was/is he considered a Canadian hero and aviation pioneer? What was western Canada's role in the development of aviation? (<http://www.bestcdn.com/primary/pride/may.htm>)

Letter 8

James writes about Jasper National Park and tourism.

Discussion Question

A. When the head of the Canadian Pacific Railroad, Cornelius Van Horne, saw the final expense report for passage through the Rockies, he realized that he would have to find ways to increase passenger traffic to make back some of the money. The CPR became one of the first companies to advertise Canada as a vacation destination, claiming "if we can't export the scenery, we'll import the tourists!"

Look at the photos from the CN collection used to advertise Jasper Resort and the Rocky Mountains (the CN collection was mainly used for advertising). How did the CPR and CNR make the mountains appealing to tourists like James? Which words did they choose and what do you think they left out? How do you think this kind of advertising has affected the image of Canada at home and around the world?

Essay Question

B. Before Jasper and Banff became national parks, the railway had to be extended between Alberta and British Columbia, through canyons, mountains and dangerous territory. Write an essay on the building of the railroad through the West. How did workers overcome obstacles? What dangers were there to workers? Who built the railroad? Why was it so important to extend the track through the Rockies?

Letter 9

James writes about his first impressions of Jasper Park Lodge, meeting new friends and golfing.

Discussion Questions

A. At the start of his trip, James was very excited to travel by train. Why then would he decide to travel home by plane? What were some of the discomforts of the train? What were the good things about train travel? How was rail travel affected by the Depression?

B. Why would CN decide to build their hotel in Jasper in such a different style than their main competitor, the Banff Springs Hotel, which was built like a castle in the mountains? What attracted visitors to Jasper?

Letters 10a and 10b

James writes about his Maligne Lake trip, fishing and eating.

Short-Answer Questions

A. What type of clientele do you think the lodge catered to, and why? What would be the appeal of a mountain vacation during the Depression?

B. Do you think it would have been viewed as “proper” behaviour for girls to go fishing with men in 1937? What types of activities would men and women be engaged in that are different than today?

Letter 11

James writes about the Maligne Canyon motor tour and Banff Indian Days.

Discussion Question

A. Early guide and park pioneer Tom Wilson created "Banff Indian Days" when he was called upon to find a way to entertain a group of bored guests. It became a tradition at the Park. What image did this kind of exhibition give tourists of Native people? Do you think contact increased awareness of Native issues or made the First Nations culture seem more mysterious and foreign? Why?

Group Activity

B. Choose a picture from the photo album that comes from the CN collection and describe what you think it would have been used for? Advertising? Inventory? Surveying? Tourist photographs? Are there people in the photos? Animals? Do they appear posed/staged or natural?

Final Discussion Question

Before reading James's letters to Ellie, what did you know about life in the 1930s in Canada? What have you learned? What did you find most shocking? Interesting? Upsetting? What is similar to present-day life? What is different?