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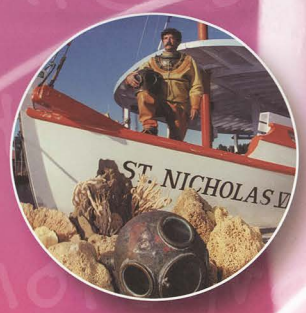
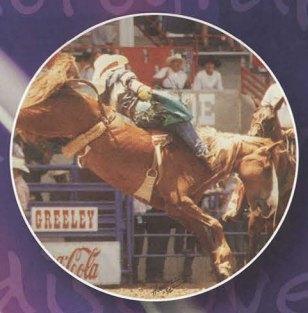
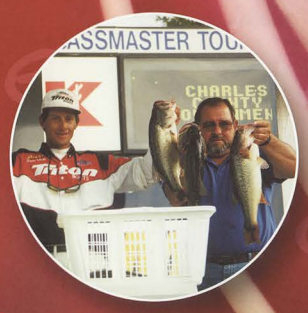
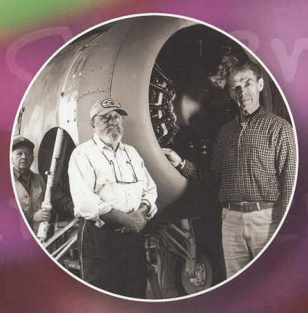




Explore your community





interview write discover

Visit the American Folklife Center's website at www.loc.gov/folklife and the Rural School and Community Trust's website at www.ruraledu.org

A collaborative project of the American Folklife Center & the Rural School and Community Trust.

THE RURAL SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY TRUST

AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER · THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Explore your Community

WHAT HERITAGE STUDIES CAN DO FOR YOU

With this poster, the American Folklife Center and the Rural School and Community Trust hope to encourage middle and high school students to explore the wide range of living cultural expression that exists in their communities. The folklife and cultural heritage activities and resources included here will guide teachers in developing original research projects with their students. They also offer young people creative ideas for engaging in cultural heritage research outside the classroom. And, finally, they demonstrate how students can learn to "read" the living traditional culture in their midst so that their community becomes, in essence, the classroom.

It is important for young people to learn that culture, history, art, and music are not just created by historical figures, famous people, or those living in other places. Culture is created in everyday life by all of us in our various communities, whether in our families, our schools, our neighborhoods, or in ethnic, occupational, or other kinds of groups. You can illuminate and expand classroom instruction with real-world experiences and connect students to their communities–in ways that capture students' attention, enrich their learning experience, and improve essential reading, research, communications, and writing skills. In addition, students will be contributing to understanding and shaping the culture and traditions of their communities.

By doing cultural heritage research in their own communities, students will discover the rich and often diverse traditions around them and make valuable connections to history, place, and environment. In working on projects such as those listed here, you will help students understand culture by connecting to their communities–and by interacting with their own relatives, people in senior centers, local craftspersons, musicians, storytellers, artisans, and experts in local history. They can visit places of historical or local significance while they document family, school, and neighborhood traditions using tape recorders, video and still photography, and basic observational skills. Likewise, you as the teacher may want to invite people with occupational expertise, storytellers, local historians, traditional musicians or dancers, and others into the classroom to enliven and illustrate the classroom experience.

Bringing Heritage Studies into the Curriculum:

- enhances performance in interdisciplinary learning, team participation, and presentation skills.
- involves students with their families, neighborhoods, and the community around them, and increases civic awareness.
- builds self-esteem and pride in self, community, and cultural heritage.
- provides an opportunity for students to contribute to their community in meaningful ways.
- fosters awareness and tolerance of cultural diversity.
- encourages the interpretation, synthesis, and evaluation of various kinds of cultural information.
- develops technological expertise and skills with documentary equipment.
- promotes school-community partnerships.
- offers learning opportunities that value each student's life and experiences.

COMMUNITY CULTURE: IT'S ALL AROUND YOU!

Whether or not you know it, COMMUNITY CULTURE is all around you. Although you probably take them for granted, you already are familiar with the traditions of your school, family, community, and the region where you live. That's what this poster is all about!

Community culture, sometimes called "folklore" or "folklife," is the living expression of culture in everyday life–anyone's culture–learned and passed on informally from person to person. It must be alive and current to be folklife, though it may have existed over long stretches of time. Everywhere people take the experiences of their lives and transform them into song, story, decoration, ritual, and celebration–examples of what folklorists call "expressive culture." When such expressions communicate the shared experiences, thoughts, and feelings of a group, and are passed on to others, they become traditions.

Examples of Folklife:

- the stories that you tell at family holiday gatherings
- the nicknames you call your friends
- the jokes or chain letters that you forward to friends
- the ghost stories or legends you tell of strange happenings in your neighborhood
- the way your grandmother prepares special holiday dishes
- the notes and rhymes you inscribe in each other's school yearbooks
- the songs your parents learned from your grandparents and sang to you, and which you may sing to your own children someday
- the rhymes you use for jump-rope or other playground games

Cultural Traditions are Almost Always:

- passed on informally, by word of mouth, observation, or imitation.
- anonymous–no one really knows where they came from.
- enjoyed and performed by members of groups (and used to convey a sense of the group's identity).
- found in several different versions and variations. (They change dynamically according to who is creating and sharing them.)

Poster photographs, clockwise from top:

Young Okinawan Taiko performer, Waikiki, Hawaii,1998. Local Legacies Project. Photo by David M. Shimabukuro

Bob Holt gives private lesson at Hammond Mill Camp, Missouri, June 1999. Local Legacies Project. Photo by Liz Amos and Kathy Casper

Travis Carlson riding bareback bronc at 1996 Greeley Independence Stampede, Colorado. Local Legacies Project. Photo by Dan Hubbell / Greeley Independence Stampede Permanent Collection

Fourth graders at Blue Ridge Elementary School perform a hand-clapping routine, Ararat, Virginia, 1978. Blue Ridge Folklife Project. Photo by Patrick Mullen

Native dancer performs at annual Kee-Boon Mein-Kaa festival, Indiana, marking the end of the huckleberry harvest. Local Legacies Project. Photo by courtesy South Bend Tribune

Volunteers restore planes at the Cradle of Aviation Museum at Mitchell Field, Long Island, New York. Local Legacies Project. Photo by Robert Axel

ESPN X-Trials, Louisville, Kentucky, including this bicycle stunt event, became part of the Kentucky Derby Festival in 1999. Local Legacies Project. Photo by Marvin Young

Bass pro Kevin Worth (center) displays winning catch, Charles County, Maryland. Local Legacies Project. Photo by Joanne Roland

Graciela Santiago performs in Stevens Park, Finney County, Kansas,1999. Local Legacies Project. Photo courtesy of Finney County Convention and Tourism Bureau

Blues musician Vasti Jackson sings Robert Johnson tunes, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 1999. Local Legacies Project. Photo by Patrick Snook

Sponges piled on dock in Tarpon Springs, Florida. Local Legacies Project. Photo by Nick Caloyianis

Sarah Perzent demonstrates quilting, Clark County, Alabama, November 13, 1999. Local Legacies Project. Photo by Monica Vinston Simpson

EXAMS, TROPHIES, DIRTY SOCKS: COMMUNITY TRADITIONS IN YOUR SCHOOL

Communities are made up of different kinds of groups–people in the same business, family, social club, religion, or ethnic group. These groups are usually proud of their own identity and their members have a strong feeling of "belonging"–sharing common knowledge and traditions. A school is also a community–with distinctive ways that students express themselves through stories and jokes, nicknames, clothing and hair styles, mascots, and good luck charms. Here are a few activities that will help you discover community culture in your school.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

The Trophy Case

Investigate the trophies in your school's trophy case. Interview parents and others who were on the teams in the past. Talk with retired teachers and coaches. How did they celebrate victory in the past, and how have these celebrations changed? What memories of school sports do they have? Research pictures in old school newsletters and yearbooks. Create an archive of these materials for the school library or a time-capsule from this year's teams and their activities. Invite past champions to the school for recognition. Add research you have collected to the school's Web page or write an article for your school newspaper.

Are You Ready for the Game, the Test, the Show?

Interview classmates about the good luck charms, customs, or rituals that are used in your school before a big game, exams, or a school play. How are these charms or rituals the same or different from those your parents or teachers used when they were students? Write articles about your findings for the school newspaper and place them into your school library.

Clothes, Fads, and Hair Braiding:

What are you and your friends wearing? How is your hair done? What is in your pocketbook, book bag, or locker? What kinds of hats or caps, jewelry or make-up do you and your friends wear? What words do you use to describe something or someone that is "in" or "out" of fashion? What do clothes, hair styles, and personal decoration communicate about us as individuals and as members of a group? Pick a theme for your research, interview your classmates, take photographs, and create an exhibit that displays clothes, hair styles, and accompanying paraphernalia over the years.

WORK AND PLAY, RITUAL AND CELEBRATION: CULTURAL HERITAGE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Most people share with others at least some of the experiences of family life, ethnic origin, occupation, religious beliefs, age, recreation, and region of the country. We all belong to one or more "cultural" groups. Folklife and cultural heritage flourish in all of these groups and affiliations, where members gather to work, play, and celebrate together. Here are some activities you can do to explore the common beliefs, customs, and traditions of groups in your community.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Family Folklore

All families have stories they tell about each other when they are together, and special customs, recipes, and other traditions that only they know. Interview one or more of your family members about a family tradition. Write about your findings and ask family members to comment on what you've written. Use family photos to prompt memories.

Celebrations and Rites of Passage

We all have participated in rituals and celebrations–birthdays, baptisms, high school or college graduations, weddings, religious festivals, community fairs, New Year's Eve parties, and Thanksgiving and Fourth of July gatherings and events. Document a specific holiday celebration that you know something about. Interview members of your community at local events or family gatherings, take photos and videos, or make sound recordings. Develop a school- or community-based archive based on your research material. Do a comparative study of the same event or holiday as celebrated by several different families.

Occupational Folklife and Work Traditions

Many occupations have their own special language, stories, tools, and customs. Interview a baker, teacher, computer programmer, car mechanic, farmer, salesman, nurse, or factory worker in your community about his or her work. Collect work-related stories, or special terms, pranks, sayings, jokes, legends, and songs. Document the skills associated with the job on video or in photographs. Investigate how the job serves the community. Research how the job was different in the past. An entire class might study members of different occupations and work places and combine their research to create an occupational portrait of the community.

MAPPING YOUR WORLD

Popular culture (TV, the movies, shopping malls, and fast food restaurants) sometimes makes it seem that one place in America is just like every other place. But all communities–whether urban, suburban, or rural–have their own cultural heritage. Who you are is often closely linked to where you live. Individuals may assume regional identities such as Southerner, Westerner, Hoosier (a person from Indiana), or Piney (a resident of New Jersey's Pine Barrens). Distinctive ways of speaking, dressing, dancing, making chili, or decorating a car can also become ways for expressing regional or local identity.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Create a Tour

Create an auto tour map, audiotape, "virtual" Web site tour, or walking plan of significant or curious places in your city or county that outsiders would be interested to know about. Historic buildings, local cemeteries, places with local legends, and places that have significance within your community play an important role in your world. Plot sites on your map with descriptive material about each place. Research their history or geology and interview people who may know something about their origin or know stories about them. Can you find old photos of these places? Do any places on your tour have names that don't exist on printed maps? Interview local people to find out more about place-names and local history.

Study Old Buildings or a Business District

Study and document a historically significant building in your community. Measure it, do rough sketches of its dimensions, photograph it. Is the architecture characteristic of your community or region? Is the building made from a particular kind of stone, clay, or other material native to your area? How has it been used over time? What role did it play in the economic or social life of the community? What was happening in history when it was built? Can you find information about the builders, masons, or inhabitants of the building? Do library research in old newspapers and local histories about it; interview older members of the community about it.

CHOOSE A TOPIC, ANY TOPIC – CHANCES ARE, IT HAS LINKS TO FOLKLIFE OR CULTURAL HERITAGE

Follow an interest of yours or something you are curious about–skateboarding, gardening, your school's track team, pets, biking, fishing, cars, getting old or being young, e-mail hoaxes, hair styles, pizza. People like to talk about themselves and their life experiences. They enjoy telling stories about people they have known and activities, adventures, and experiences they have had. Pick a topic and explore its connections with folklife and cultural heritage in your community.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

The Good Old Days

Research and write about an event in the history of your community or some special quality of your neighborhood, something that it is known for. Interview parents, neighbors, and seniors. Check old newspapers, memoirs, and historic records, maps, and photographs. Create a time line using what you have gathered to show how the community has changed since the "Good Old Days." Were the "old days" really so "good"? Prepare an exhibit in your school or local library or develop a multi-media presentation or Web site using materials you have gathered.

The Immigrant Experience

From the beginning, our nation has been a meeting ground for different cultures. Today, American culture is made up of many cultural groups. Stories of immigration, or migrant experiences, contribute to a sense of belonging for a group. Collect family stories about moving to a new home or interview a recent immigrant in your community and learn about his or her culture and experiences. Read about historic events at the time of migration and write a history of this culture and its role in your community. Describe and document a local ethnic community festival or celebration using still and video photography and audio recording.

Publish a Cookbook

Folklorists call the cooking traditions of a group or family "foodways." Collect traditional recipes from people in your community or from your family, perhaps focusing on one kind of food or the food of a specific cultural group. Interview people about how they learned recipes and the role that these traditional foods play in their lives and heritage. Study the production of a food or crop that is special to your community or celebrated at a local festival. Publish a cookbook, using quotes from people you have interviewed, historical details about the importance of the dishes, and photographs and sketches.

This poster was made possible by an initial grant from the U.S. Department of Education and generous support from the Rural School and Community Trust.

ABOUT THE AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress was created by Congress in 1976 "to preserve and present American Folklife." Its enabling legislation includes the following definition of American folklife: "the traditional, expressive culture shared within the various groups in the United States: familial, ethnic, occupational, religious, and regional; expressive culture includes a wide range of creative and symbolic forms, such as custom, belief, technical skill, language, literature, art, architecture, music, play, dance, drama, ritual, pageantry, and handicraft; these expressions are mainly learned orally, by imitation, or in performance, and are generally maintained without benefit of formal instruction or institutional direction." (Public Law 94-201)

The American Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established at the Library in 1928 as a repository for American Folk Music and has grown to become one of the most significant collections of American and international cultural research materials in the world.

The Center has a staff of folklorists and reference librarians who conduct programs under the general guidance of the Librarian of Congress and a board of trustees. It serves the U.S. Congress; federal and state agencies; national, international, regional, and local organizations; scholars, researchers, and students; and the general public. The Center's programs and services include field projects, conferences, exhibitions, workshops, concerts, both print and online publications, online digital collections, archival processing and preservation, reference service, and advisory assistance.

TO LEARN MORE:

- For an overview of the Center's activities and information about the Archive of Folk Culture's collections of American and international folk music and culture, go to the American Folklife Center's Web site at http://www.loc.gov/folklife/
- For information on how your class can participate in a Veterans oral history project, go to http://www.loc.gov/folklife/vets/
- For information about Publications and Recordings available through the American Folklife Center, go to http://www.loc.gov/folklife/pub.html
- For an online sampling of historical collections from the Library of Congress (American Memory), browse http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html
- For The Learning Page, a Web site designed to help teachers and students (6-12) use the American Memory digital collections from the Library of Congress, see: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/index.html. This site provides guidance to finding and using items within these primary source collections. At: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lesson99/ritual/intro.html, you can find classroom lesson plans (grades 6-12) for American Memory materials based on topics relating to "Exploring Cultural Rituals."
- Folklife-related reference questions can be answered by sending an electronic query to the American Folklife Center at: folklife@loc.gov. Or, write us at: The Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, Washington, D.C. 20540-4610

ABOUT THE RURAL SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY TRUST

The Rural School and Community Trust (Rural Trust) is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to enlarging student learning and improving community life by strengthening relationships between rural schools and communities and engaging students in community based public work.

Through advocacy, research, and outreach, the Rural Trust strives to create a more favorable environment for rural schooling, for student work with a public audience and use, and for more active community participation in schooling.

Founded as the Annenberg Rural Challenge in 1995, the Rural Trust today works with more than 700 rural elementary and secondary schools in 35 states.

The theory that has guided the work of the Rural Trust is that when rural public schools base their teaching on the culture, history, ecology, and economy of the communities they serve, and fully engage members of the community in the work of the school, schools and communities improve together. Students who participate in this kind of "place-based" learning routinely meet or exceed the most rigorous educational standards. Communities that sponsor place-based learning are at the vanguard of a nationwide rural schools movement.

TO LEARN MORE:

- For an overview of the Rural School and Community Trust's activities, and descriptions of school-based projects, go to the Rural Trust's Web site at http://www.ruraledu.org
- Questions can be directed to the Rural School and Community Trust, 1825 K Street, NW, Suite 703, Washington, DC 20006. Phone: (202) 955-7177. FAX: (202) 955-7179. E-mail inquiries: info@ruraledu.org.

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