Using Elder Stories to Understand the Continuity of History

Meagan C. McGowan
Lamberton Elementary School

Abstract:

A perennial challenge that we face as history teachers is how to make history relevant to our students. This unit seeks to enrich the task of connecting local resources to broader historical narratives while helping students to recognize ways in which local historical narratives are embedded in ordinary language and how they can be “read” out of ordinary materials, especially through the stories of neighborhood elders. The collection, transcription, and reading of the stories of elders will be a way to introduce students to concepts that are used by historians and folklorists to piece together and understand how historical narratives frame our lives.

By reading and collecting stories from elders in a community, students should be able to use these primary sources to gain an understanding of their present day lives and make a prediction of how the future will be influenced by such knowledge. Teachers at almost every grade level can adapt this unit to fit their needs. It is imperative that students in the social studies understand the connection between past, present, and future time; the unit stresses this connection and allows teachers a way to explore it easily in their classrooms.