

Belgian-American Research Collection

Lesson Title: Analyzing Oral History

Lesson Grade Level: 4-12 (depending on which file or subject you choose, the length of recording, and the difficulty level)

DPI Theme Area: Immigration and settlement and Wisconsin State History (This collection fits the Behavioral Sciences best, but can be integrated into the history curriculum)

Standards: Geography: A.4.4, A.4.5, A.4.7, A.8.3, A.8.4; History: B.4.1, B.8.1, B.12.1 (The Great Depression); C. Political Science and Citizenship: C.4.2; E. Behavioral Sciences (sociology, anthropology, psychology): E.4.2, E.4.3, E.4.4, E.4.8, E.4.9, E.4.11, E.4.13, E.4.14, E.8.2, E.8.3, E.8.4, E.8.6, E.8.7, E.8.9, E.8.10, E.8.11, E.8.13, E.12.2, E.12.3, E.12.5, E.12.6, E.12.8, E.12.10.

Introduction/Background

One of the country's largest concentrations of Walloon-speaking Belgians is found in northeastern Wisconsin, resulting in a unique cultural and social flavor. The largest wave of Belgian immigration to Wisconsin occurred in the mid-1850s. While the 1850 U.S. Census lists only 45 persons of Belgian nativity in the state, by 1860 the number had increased to 4,647. The 1890 U.S. Census also shows that 81% of Belgians in the state lived in the northeastern counties of Brown, Kewaunee, and Door. The Belgian immigration into northeastern Wisconsin came to an abrupt halt in about 1858, when word reached the homeland of the physical and economic hardships and the cholera epidemic sweeping the settlement.

The first Belgian settlers made a living making shingles and farming small plots of land. This changed in the fall of 1871 when a major fire (the same that devastated Peshtigo on the same day as the great Chicago fire) swept through Belgian settlements and virtually destroyed the shingle industry. After the fire, farming became the major industry, but because the farms were small, income was often supplemented in the winter by commercial fishing. Some men also migrated to the lumber camps in northern Wisconsin at Thanksgiving time and returned home in April; during this period, the women and children assumed responsibility for feeding and caring for the livestock.

Barriers of language and rural poverty tended to isolate and insulate the Belgians from their neighbors. While Belgians from both the Flemish and Walloon provinces have settled in Northeastern Wisconsin, the Walloons have remained a more homogeneous, readily identifiable ethnic group. The Belgians in this area generally believe, erroneously, that Walloon is only an oral (not written) language, and because it has been passed down orally in this part of the country, it may be regarded as a folk language. Walloon is a French patois. French was used in church records, correspondence, mourning cards, etc.

Today, many Belgian descendants still reside in the 35 square mile area settled by their ancestors. In many cases, farms have been in the same family for over 100 years. Fourth and fifth generation Belgians still speak together in Walloon, and continue such customs as the celebration of Kermis (a harvest festive held in early fall) and the erection of a “maypole” in the yard of a winning political candidate. The presence of small wayside religious shrines also illustrates Belgian influence.

Many of these recordings can be linked with some of the photo images by searching keywords and names. For example, many of the oral histories talk about fishing in Green Bay for food, pleasure, or commercial reasons. You can search the photos and find images about fishing. One of the photos shows some of the tools that fishermen used.

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Define social history and oral history
2. Identify customs, concerns, family life, employment, etc., specific to Belgian-Americans in northeast Wisconsin
3. Analyze oral histories for information about Belgian-Americans in Northeast Wisconsin
4. Identify and analyze different gender roles during specific seasons of the year (i.e., when men went north to work in lumber, women and children took over the farms)
5. Develop important listening skills
6. Take notes from a digital recording of oral history

Information Sources/Resources

Belgian-American Research Collection:

<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.BelqAmrCol>

You will find an excellent resource about oral history by Linda Shopes at the History Matters website: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/>

You can download the entire essay (23 pages) in a pdf format and print out parts of it for students or summarize it. This essay would work best with older students and/or honors or advanced placement level. Average students can benefit as well. This article provides links to other oral history online archives as well as a bibliography.

Materials

Instructor computer with internet access (preferably high speed), an LCD to show how to get to the Collection and speakers

Or

Individual student computers with speakers or headsets (preferable)

Handouts: Map of Wisconsin; Questions about the sources

Suggested Activities:

1. From the UW Digital Collections page, select the State of Wisconsin collection.
2. Select Belgian-American Research Collection or go directly to the collection with the following URL: <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.BelgAmrCol>
3. Choose Search the Collection from the top of the page.
4. Type in a keyword, such as Christmas or family. Some topics to consider: fishing, holidays, customs, religion, schooling, farm work, men's work, women's work, children's work, funeral rites, wedding rites, etc. Browse through the collection to get ideas.
5. Have students listen to the recordings on earphones or listen as a large group. Select parts of the file that you want to listen to. When you select a part, two icons will come up on the screen. The short version is usually the icon on the right; just click on the speaker icon. Make sure that you have downloaded Realplayer.
6. Follow these instructions adapted from American Memory: Looking into Holidays Past through Primary Resources:
 - a. Create a quiet environment. Set the scene for the students. For the first listening experience, give background information about the Belgian-American collection. Identify the voices of the interviewer and interviewee and their location. (You can get this information from the UW digital collection website and the individual bibliographic records for each item.)
 - b. Students can find some of the locations near Green Bay on an outline map of Wisconsin. Also, students can determine how far the communities are from where they live in Wisconsin.
 - c. Listen to the recording. What are the topics? Have students jot down unfamiliar words. If students have trouble understanding, play the recording again.
 - d. After students have taken notes, have a class discussion on whatever topic they listened for—customs, religion, holidays, fishing, farming, etc. Did students understand the speaker or did they have trouble with the vocabulary? What did they learn about the way of life of the speaker? Did listening to the voices help create a visual picture of the speaker and setting? Does this recording relate in any way to the students' lives?
 - e. You can search the Jeanquart or the Delwiche families and get audio and photos and allow students to write a social history about northeast Wisconsin. (There is a photo of an outdoor oven and summer kitchen, which a lot of the speakers talk about. There are also photos of ice fishing. One of the photos on fishing identifies the tools.) You can also use the Architecture Survey, for example, there are pictures of the Jeanquart's farm. There are also examples of the chapels that some of the people talk about.
 - f. After listening and discussing, do students still have questions? What resources could help them learn more? Can they locate photographs to help them visualize the farms or people? Devise more questions tailored to the topic you want to discuss.

- g. You can ask questions about using oral histories as a primary source. Are there any problems with oral histories and recordings as a primary source? How old are the people in the recordings? Does their age matter? Why or why not?
- h. Students who are not from rural/agricultural areas may not know some of the terms below.

Glossary:

Conclusion:

Assessment:

Through class participation and discussion students will demonstrate what they learned about Wisconsin culture in the northeast. Through class activities or homework or essay tests, students can demonstrate their knowledge of social history or anthropology and cultural studies and write a history or story of the Belgian-American experience in Wisconsin through work activities (i.e., fishing), schooling, family relationships, religion and traditions, etc.

Additional Information: