

“Winter Counts”

Grade: secondary

Background:

Many Indian tribes of the Northern Plains displayed their history by drawing pictures, usually on buffalo hides. The pictures might reflect tribal, cultural, or natural phenomenon, such as a meteor shower. The Lakota called them wanayetu wawapi. Wanayetu is the word for year and wawapi is the word for anything flat that can be drawn or written on. A picture denoted a year and they were sometimes displayed in a circular fashion with the earliest year at the beginning and then moving outward, but not always.

Each band had a winter count keeper, or community historian, so remembering their story was important to them. For example, the year of a smallpox epidemic was shown by a youth with red spots and intertribal war was shown by a warrior attacking a differently attired warrior. This is analogous to us remembering a period of time as the “year Grandma died” or “the year we moved to a new house” or “the year the neighborhood flooded.” The meaning of the pictures was part of the tribal tradition and was passed on from generation to generation.

Goal:

Students will create a winter count of their “tribe’s” own history. Rather than creating a picture a year, students may pick ten years in their family’s history to display. They are encouraged to go back two to three generations. Again, the pictures can reflect personal, cultural, or natural phenomenon. For some families, 1945 might be the year Great Grandfather came home from war. A student once reported that 1977 was important because it was the year Dad met Mom at a fraternity party at college. 2001 might be the year baby sister was born, or Daddy got a new job and the family moved. For some students, 2005 was the year the relatives from New Orleans fleeing Katrina moved in with them. 2009 might be the year a brother or sister went to Afghanistan. This is a terrific opportunity for students to interact with older family members to discuss their memories and history.

Alternative activity: The above activity is designed to be a warm up activity at the beginning of the school year to impress upon the students our connection with events occurring around us and the fact that we all have a story to tell. During the closing part of the year as a review activity before semester/AP testing, students will divide into groups and each group will create a winter count of a different decade of history, for example the 1850’s, and pick the ten most significant events to exhibit. Each group will explain their winter count and they will be displayed in the classroom.

Materials:

Butcher block paper, crayons, colored pencils. Students usually enjoy trimming the paper to resemble a buffalo hide and then burning the edges.

Activity:

Teacher can construct a short powerpoint from attached references. The Smithsonian website has a terrific presentation students would enjoy. Class can identify various pictures on the winter counts and speculate as to the meaning.

Students will create their personal winter count outside of class and will explain five of their favorite events to the class (time constraints). If working in groups, classtime is allotted.

Assessment:

Students are assessed on:

Creativity/artistry. Are the figures legible? Are the figures colored appropriately?

Research. Does the winter count show thoughtful family research?

References:

<http://wintercounts.si.edu/index.html>

https://eee.uci.edu/clients/tcthorne/image_archive/samkillstwo2.jpg : excellent picture of a native American creating a winter count

<https://eee.uci.edu/02w/28010/images/Yellow-lodge.jpg>: an example of a winter count

<https://eee.uci.edu/02w/28010/kiowawc1841.jpg>: This is an explanation of a picture on a winter count

<https://eee.uci.edu/02w/28010/lonedogwcmallery93plXX.jpg>: an excellent picture of a circular winter count

<https://eee.uci.edu/02w/28010/images/Swift-dogs.jpg>: another example of a winter count