Historica Canada Education Portal

Bill Miner

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Bill Miner biography from *The Canadians* series. It explores the life and legend of this American train robber. Among his many heists, Miner robbed a CPR train and was sentenced to life in prison, although he managed to escape and eventually died in a Georgia jail at the age of 69.

Aims

Bill Miner's life spanned the late 1800s and the turn of the century. Students will use Miner's life as a way to explore the significant social, environmental, economical, and political themes that relate to this time period in Canada and the United States.

Background

When Bill Miner was sentenced to life in prison for robbing the CPR train in British Columbia, there was only one little hitch.

Somewhere, Bill had buried $300,000 worth of government bonds and the CPR was on the hook for the money. The CPR detectives and the

Pinkerton men visited Bill and offered to have him set free if he would just tell them where the bonds were buried. Bill asked for the agreement in writing. That, said the CPR, was not possible. Yet within three months Bill Miner would manage to escape from the maximum security prison, the CPR would deliver the bonds and there would be an uproar in the Canadian House of Commons.

In the meantime Bill Miner, The Grey Fox, was making his way to Georgia to rob another train.

He was a career criminal who had spent more than forty years behind bars, thirty-three of them in San Quentin. He died in a Georgia jail when he was sixty-nine.

Bill Miner was a train robber and the last of the old western bandits.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

1. Since Bill Miner travelled between the United States and Canada, a map can help students visualize where the events of Miner's escapades and imprisonments occurred, as well as help them review or become familiar with Canadian and American geography. Trace Bill Miner's movements during his life; significant events could be labelled on the map.

2. Bill Miner adapted to the changes in technology from his first stage

coach robbery in 1866 to the CPR train robbery in 1904. Through individual or group projects students could examine different changes in technology between the late 1800s to the early 1900s during the time span of Bill Miner's life. Various technologies such as the telephone and automobile and other new technological inventions could be explored and presented together. Call on the students to present their projects.

3. Students could create a mindmap to explore the social and environmental impact of the CPR railway. Be sure they consider both positive and negative impacts of the railroad.

4. In order to assist students with a broader understanding of Bill Miner and the times in which he lived, introduce them to the culture of the time through music, plays, literature, and silent films such as *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Have students make comparisons between the culture of the time and today's culture.

5. Discuss the meaning of the term or concept "legend." Is Bill Miner a legend? Students can examine the history of other Canadians and how they became legends. Have students create their own legends of real or imagined people.

6. The popular Canadian folk artist, Bob Bossin, wrote a song about Bill Miner's train robbery of the CPR which is in his CD*Gabriola* VOR1X0 (1994). This folk song is an excellent way of retelling Bill Miner's experience in Canada. Music can liven up the class and benefit different types of learning styles. Play the song a couple of times and have students compare the section of the video that discusses Bill Miner's time in Canada to Bob Bossin's presentation in song.

7. Another way to use the song to complement the video is to have

students, in groups of four, write new lyrics to add to Bossin's song. These new lyrics could deal with different issues such as why the CPR was not favoured by many Canadians.

Resources

The Canadians: Bill Miner

William Miner - The Canadian Encyclopedia

The Grey Fox - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Anderson, Frank W. *Bill Miner Stage Coach Train Robber.* (1982). Surrey, BC: Frontier Books, 1982.

Anderson, Frank W. Bill Miner, Train Robber. (1963). Calgary: Frontiers Unlimited, 1963.

Bower, Bert, Lobdell, Jim & Swenson, Lee. *History Alive! Six Powerful Teaching Strategies.* Teacher's Curriculum Institute, 1994.

Kagan, Spencer. *Cooperative Learning.* (1992).

Bossin, Bob. *Gabriola* VOR1X0. - "Bill Miner" song.(1994) Nick Records: Canada.