

Historica Canada Education Portal

Margaret "Ma" Murray

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Ma Murray biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Murray became a legend in Canadian journalism despite her terrible grammar and spelling. Although her stories did occasionally generate public criticism, Murray had a loyal audience of readers.

Aims

Ma Murray was a strong, independent woman who spoke her mind no matter what the consequences. She even made things up for a good story. The following activities question what we can learn from Murray's brand of journalism, as well as exploring the broader issues about the reliability of the media for the study of history.

Background

Ma Murray's grammar was terrible and her spelling was atrocious. She used words like "damshur," "craparoni," and "snafoo," but she became a legend in Canadian journalism. Her readers were just like her – strong, pioneering, and taking no nonsense. One female reader threatened her

with a horsewhip, while others broke into her office to destroy her editorials before they could be published. She was publicly insulted and shunned, but it didn't matter to her a "gaddamm bit." Ma Murray went right on lambasting everyone and everything she saw as wrong.

Most of the time she simply made things up. When covering a town council meeting where the citizens of a Vancouver suburb were irate, she wrote that the Reeve had been thrown out the window. It was pure fiction and she was sued. "Boy," she wrote to her sisters back in Kansas City, "these Canadians sure take themselves serious!!"

She had come from the Shipley Saddlery Company in Kansas where she worked as a clerk. She had started tucking notes in with the invoices for the hundreds of saddles they shipped to Alberta and started a lively correspondence with the cowboys who got the notes.

So, Margaret Theresa Lally set out for Canada in 1912 to catch herself a good looking cowboy. Instead she caught herself a newspaper editor called George Murray and for the next sixty-five years she carved out her legend in the small town presses of northern B.C.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1- 4 hours

Procedures:

1. Provide a sample of articles covering a range of topics, writing styles, and editorial stances from contrasting newspapers. Encourage students to read newspapers to distinguish between fact, fiction, and opinion.

Based on reading the articles and viewing the video, facilitate a discussion about the historical and contemporary field of journalism and the perceived reality of the stories found in newspapers.

2. Create a balance sheet to illustrate the positive and negative aspects of Ma Murray's brand of journalism. Organize a formal debate on the question, "Be it resolved that although Ma Murray had an unconventional style of journalism, she should be remembered as a great Canadian journalist." Remind students that a balance sheet should be used as a preparation tool for the debate.

3. Create a timeline to illustrate the key events in Ma Murray's life from her birth in 1888 to her death in 1982. Include 10 key events or developments with corresponding visuals (e.g., pictures, drawings, or cartoons). Compare the events the students have selected and discuss why the different events were chosen. Emphasize that there is more than one correct answer and that all answers need to be supported with facts and well-constructed arguments.

4. Write an obituary column for Ma Murray. (For examples of obituaries, refer to your local newspaper or go to [The Globe and Mail](#).) Try to mimic the style and tone that Ma Murray used for her stories. You are even permitted to include a few "deliberate" spelling and grammatical errors.

5. Trace the life and travels of Ma Murray on a map of North America.

6. Direct students to research an aspect of frontier life in British Columbia during the 1900s. Students should use the research to write stories resembling articles that appealed to newspaper readers at the time. The class should collaborate to publish the articles as a version of the *Lillooet News*.

7. Research, storyboard, and videotape your own Minute about Ma Murray. There are a number of examples of *The Canadians* series and Heritage Minutes on the same famous person; for example, [Joseph Tyrrell](#), [Jacques Plante](#), [Sam Steele](#), [Emily Carr](#), [Emily Murphy](#), [La Bolduc](#) and [Agnes McPhail](#). Any of these would be excellent to illustrate how a 47 minute story can be told or at least highlighted in a one-minute video. If you have the technical knowledge and video equipment in your school you could actually produce your own Heritage Minutes.

8. Familiarize students with the history of Japanese Canadian internment and relocation during the Second World War. Direct students to write a letter to the editor in response to Ma Murray's comments about Japanese-Canadians. For examples of letters to the editor, refer to your local newspaper.

Resources

[Margaret Murray Worksheet](#)

[The Canadiens: Margaret "Ma" Murray](#)

MacEwan, Grant. *Mighty Women: Stories of Western Canadian Pioneers*.
Vancouver: Greystone Books, 1995.

[Margaret Teresa Murray - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)