Historica Canada Education Portal

Step into History

Overview

This exercise presents an historic photograph for your students to recreate, or step into. The photo of The Last Spike shows many of the key people involved with building the Canadian Pacific Railroad (CPR), some unidentified people, and a young boy who is poking his head through the crowd. This photograph was taken on the dreary morning of 7 November 1885 at Craigellachie, British Columbia at the western entrance to Eagle Pass.

In this lesson, students will become actors in the historical event and, based on the amount of background information derived by research, will attempt to bring a character to life, and will reflect the attitudes, thoughts and feelings of the people of that time. By studying a picture, students will look for evidence to gain an understanding of the historical context of people's behaviour. By role-playing the different perspectives of individuals involved, students should gain a more thorough understanding of the event.

This lesson can be applied to other historical photos as well.

Aims

Prescribed Learning Outcomes

Students will:

• apply critical thinking skills, including questioning, comparing, inferring, imagining, verifying, identifying relationships and drawing conclusions, to a range of problems and issues (all inclusive)

• gather and organize a body of information from primary and secondary print and non-print sources, including electronic sources

• defend a position on a selected topic

• demonstrate skills and attitudes of active citizenship, including ethical behaviour, open-mindedness, respect for diversity and collaboration

• identify factors that influenced growth and development of industry

Benchmarks of Historical Thinking: Historical Perspective; Evidence; Continuity and Change

Background

On 7 November 1885 the Last Spike was driven at Craigellachie, Eagle Pass, British Columbia. The driving of the Last Spike marked the realization of the dream of a national railway that had been promised to British Columbia in 1871.

Prior to Confederation the only people who had seen vast parts of Canada were the native people who lived there and the fur trappers who traded with them. With Confederation came the need for a more efficient way to cross the country than by foot and canoe. The obvious choice was a railway. The people of British Columbia wanted the railway so that they could feel like they were really part of Canada. Sir John A. Macdonald wanted the railway because he knew it would help unite the country by making the transportation of goods and settlers into the West easier.

While everybody wanted a railway, nobody was really sure that it could be built. So a team of surveyors was sent out to see if the railway was a physical possibility. It took ten years but the surveyors did find a route through the swamps and rock of northern Ontario, across the prairies, and through the mountains of British Columbia.

Finding the route was one problem, finding the money to pay for the railroad was another. Competition to build the railway was severe and would lead to a scandal that affected the plans for the railway. In 1873 a story emerged that one of the contractors, Sir Hugh Allan, had donated money to the Conservative Party in return for a promise of CPR contracts. Because of this scandal Sir John A. Macdonald was forced to resign. He was replaced by Alexander Mackenzie and the Liberals.

The new Liberal government supported the CPR. In 1875, it ordered for the construction of the railroad to begin at Fort William in northwestern Ontario.

While construction had finally begun, it was proving to be both slow and costly. When the Conservatives were re-elected in 1878 they promised to complete the railway. In 1880 Macdonald decided to turn the railroad over to a private syndicate headed by Sir Donald Smith and George Stephen. In 1882, the now privately owned company hired a new manager, William Cornelius Van Horne. Van Horne promised that the railroad would be completed quickly and efficiently. At the same time the CPR hired another experienced railway man, Andrew Onderdonk, to lead the BC part of the project.

Van Horne quickly took control. He knew a major problem was that his men had to cut down hills, fill

in swamps, blast tunnels through the granite of the Canadian Shield, and build bridges across steep gorges and mighty rivers. As part of his plan, Van Horne divided the railway into three sections and sent teams of workers to start construction in each region. The first section was from northern Ontario to Winnipeg. The next section was from Winnipeg to the Rocky Mountains. The final section was from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean.

With Van Horne's vision and determination to guide them, 30,000 workers began building the CPR in 1882. In three short years and many backbreaking hours of labour they completed construction of the railway.

All in all the CPR took 14 years to survey and build. When it was completed it was over 3,200 kilometres long and had cost $150 million.

Activities

Procedures:

- View the photograph of the Last Spike.
- Divide your class into pairs to represent each character in the photo.
- Each person should have a speaking or directing role. Everybody needs to do some research about their person. Your students will find most of the information they need by clicking on the highlighted people in the photo. In many cases we have discovered the identity of the person and provide actual information that we believe to be true according to our sources. There are lots of other good sources in the Bibliography.
- When the students complete their research, have them write a script for a conversation their character might have had with other people in the photograph. They need to be conscious of who is standing near to their character in the actual photograph and think about how they would respond to their points of view. They should incorporate as much of the factual information as possible into their conversation without making it sound like they are giving a prepared speech.
- When your students are ready with their scripts to recreate the photo, you may need to conscript a few extra actors to create a crowd effect. These students do not need to speak in their roles as extras. They are just filling in the crowd scene. They should remain absolutely frozen and listen as the others conduct their conversations.
- Now have the students re-enact the scene. When they are set in position, tableau or frozen-picture style, ask them to bring the scene alive by recreating the conversations that might have taken place using their prepared scripts but not reading them.
- When they have exhausted themselves of conversation, probably 5 to 10 minutes, tell them to freeze and snap a photograph.
- Immediately after they have recreated the scene ask them to write a one page reflection paper on what they have learned about the building of the CPR. Encourage them to include factual

information and some opinion. When this is completed and collected for assessment have a full class discussion about the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. On the board create with your students a mind map or board note showing all that they have learned.
- To assess the students make observations during the preparation, collect their research notes and their script, and finally make observations during the final presentation.

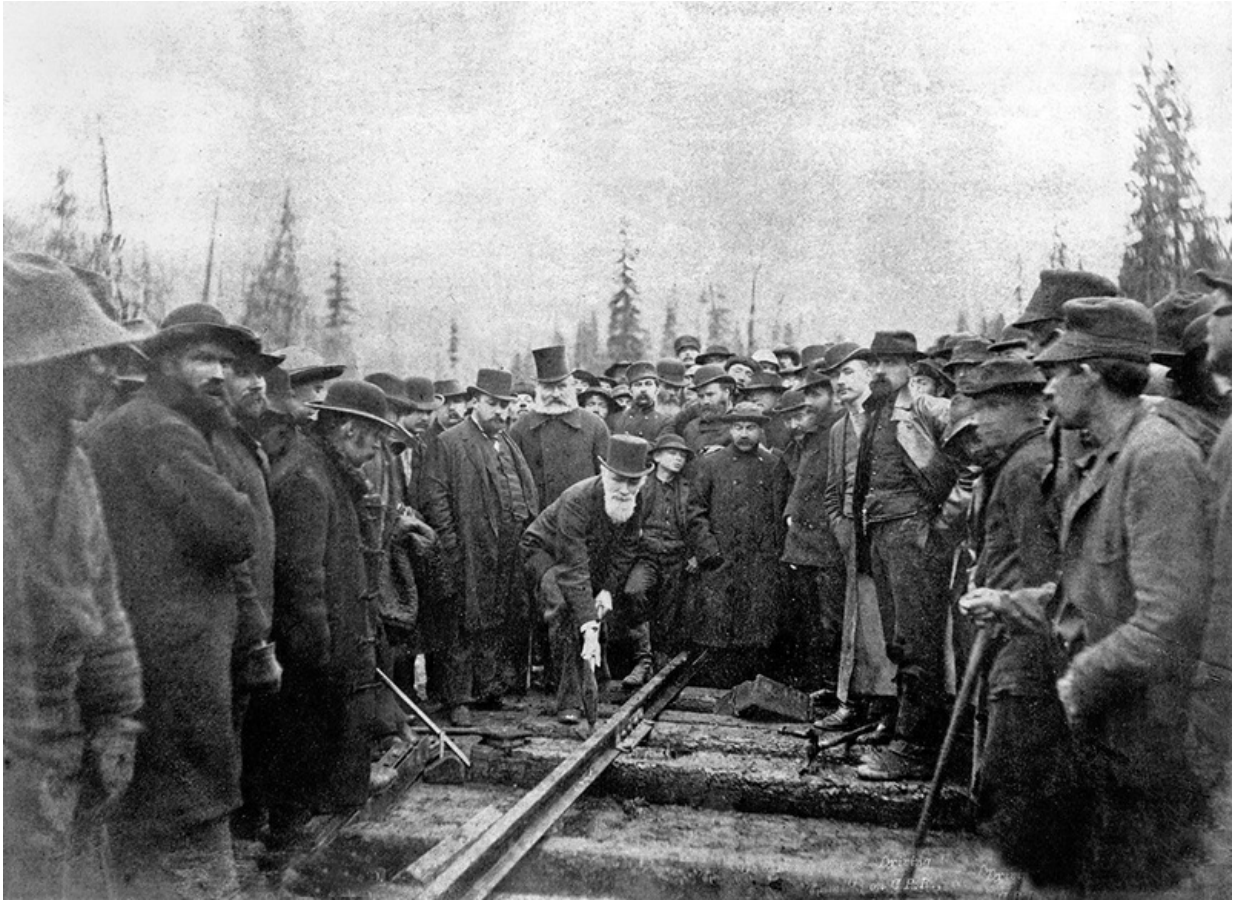
Basic Steps for conducting a "Step Into History" Lesson:

1. Study the photograph selected (photos with multiple people against a busy background work best as they provide more details for discussion).
2. Ask students what eveidence about the past this photo tells us. Brainstorm and list ideas on chart paper for future reference. Draw attention to the buildings, the hillside, the street, the businesses, the residents, the mode of dress, etc.
3. If possible, share some primary documents relating to the photo with your students. Conduct a class discussion to establish the attitudes of the time. You can also explore similar images.
4. Bring the focus back to the original photo. Discuss who the people in the photo may be.
5. Assign students to work in pairs. Each pair will represent a character in the scene. Roles/Characters can be chosen or assigned. Pairs will research their person by using the resources listed, their school library, and any other resources available to them.
6. After students research, have them write a script for a conversation their character may have with other people in the photograph. They should incorporate as much factual information as they've been able to find.
7. When the scripts are ready, students will practice their roles. When the class recreates the scene, one of the students will play their role (you can recreate twice to give both students an opportunity).
8. Students will be set up as a tableaux. When each student is pointed to, they will bring the scene to life by presenting the prepared scripts. They will stop when they are finished or when the teacher points at them again.

Resources

The image of The Last Spike can be found by searching "the last spike" on The Canadian Encyclopedia or the Library and Archives Canada Image Search. Both of these resources are invaluable should you choose to select an alternate photo for your students to step into.

"The Last Spike"



The last spike of the CPR in Craigellachie, British Columiba. Nov 7, 1885

Craigellachie - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Railway History - The Canadian Encyclopedia

The "Other" Last Spike - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Canadian Pacific Railway - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Pacific Scandal - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Eagle Pass - The Canadian Encyclopedia