Historica Canada Education Portal

Grey Owl

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Heritage Minute, "Grey Owl," which explores the life and career of this controversial conservationist. Grey Owl, whose real name was Archibald Stansfeld Belaney, was born in England. He immigrated to Canada, adopted the name Grey Owl, and purported to be the son of a Scot and an Apache. He was a trapper and a park ranger whose writings on conservation were very influential.

Aims

Students will briefly describe the history and importance of Grey Owl and will identify and debate the issue of conservation from the perspectives of land developers and First Nations.

By preparing a formal debate and creating a fictional newspaper, students will learn about Grey Owl's life and assess whether he should be remembered as a hero or a fraud.

Activities

1. After viewing the Grey Owl Heritage Minute, ask students questions

about it. The questions can be about the time period, people's reactions to Grey Owl (reactions from both Aboriginal Canadians and European Canadians), and certain facts about Grey Owl's past life.

- Where did Grey Owl come from?
- When did he immigrate to Canada?
- What kind of lifestyle did he want?
- How did he teach others about conservation?

You might want to direct students to other sources of information about Grey Owl to enhance the discussion.

2. Lead a class discussion on the need for development due to the wave of immigration after the First World War and the resulting problems of over-development. Discuss how it affected the physical environment and the people living on the land.

3. Divide students into three groups to represent the roles of land developers (e.g., lumber companies), Aboriginal Peoples, and the "voice of the forests." Each group will prepare three statements about their rights and why they should be listened to. Have them present these statements to the class. Then, each group will be able to ask one question of the other groups to challenge their statements. Allow each group the opportunity to reply to these challenges.

Assist the whole class with drawing three clear conclusions about the issue of development and protecting the environment.

4. An alternate debate idea is to consider the issue of a non-Aboriginal person bringing wide attention to wilderness conservation. Divide

students into three groups. One group will discuss the reasons why a non-Aboriginal man was needed at the time to raise awareness about the wilderness. Another group will discuss the reasons why an Aboriginal person could or could not achieve the same recognition, and the last group can decide if an Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal man or woman can achieve that sort of recognition today. Each group will prepare three statements about their points and the reasons fortaking that position. Have them present these statements to the class. Then, each group will be able to ask one question of the other groups to challenge their statements. Allow each group the opportunity to reply to these challenges.

Assist the whole class with drawing three clear conclusions about the issue of development and protecting the environment.

5. Students will watch the Heritage Minute “Grey Owl,” and record significant information in their notebooks/logs (Where, When, Who is involved, What is happening).

After this initial viewing, ask what the students’ initial impressions were, and what they thought was the most important message from the Minute.

The students will watch the Minute a second time to look for details they may have missed the first time. Then discuss with the students what they have seen. Have the students work in pairs to combine the information they have gathered for their notes/logs.

6. Students should be divided into debate teams of 3 or 4. In each group one person will be responsible for the introduction, one for the rebuttal, one for the conclusion, and one for the compilation of research (this does not mean that this student does all the research; they are merely

responsible for combining the group's materials/resources and handing them in). Outline for students the proper format for a debate (introduction, rebuttal, conclusion).

After placing students in groups, provide one library period for them to research the question: Should Grey Owl be remembered as a hero or a fraud in Canadian history? (or: should Grey Owl be remembered as Grey Owl or Archie Belaney?) Remind them to use the Heritage Minute as a starting point.

7. Have students work on a 'Newspaper Report' about Grey Owl. Review what information should be found in a newspaper report (The 5W's). Have students work in pairs or individually researching Grey Owl.

After gaining significant knowledge about Grey Owl and the events that occurred in Canada during his life (i.e. economic boom/recession, political problems), have students make a newspaper that would have been read the day after people realized Grey Owl was really Archie Belaney. Their headlines should include the shock felt by the people of the time, and their main article should include what they imagine may have been people's reactions at the time.

Depending on the length of time allotted for the assignment, students could have a sports page representing sports at the time, and complete a full newspaper with events from the era.

(Instead of writing a newspaper about the event, students could write and perform a skit based on the reaction of the townspeople to the revelation about Archie Belaney.)

Resources

- Parks Canada: Prince Albert National Park of Canada
- Heritage Minute: Grey Owl

- The Canadian Encyclopedia: Grey Owl
- Aboriginal Arts & Stories