

Historica Canada Education Portal

Halifax Explosion

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the [Heritage Minute, "Halifax Explosion,"](#) which focuses on the heroic act of Vince Coleman, who died while alerting a passenger train about the explosion in Halifax harbour on December 6, 1917.

Aims

Using the example of Vince Coleman, students will discuss the definition of a hero. Do heroes have to be famous? What role do heroes play in society? Students will also imagine how Coleman's children might have felt about his actions, and how the people he saved felt about them.

The effects of the Halifax explosion were devastating. Students will do further research into the explosion and into other disasters that may have occurred in their own communities. They will write articles or stories about the events.

Activities

1. Heroes

Vince Coleman is one of the heroes featured in the Heritage Minutes. The following activities may be useful for other films as well.

Before watching the Minute, ask the class to name heroes, real or fictional, and list them on the board.

For each character on the list, brainstorm the individual qualities that make him or her a hero. Introduce the differences between "hero" and "star" or "idol." From the brainstorm, create a chart called "What is a Hero?"

Watch "The Halifax Explosion." Discuss how Coleman qualifies as a hero, according to the definition given on the chart.

Discuss the importance heroes have in our society. Is it important to remember what they do? Why? What examples do they give us? In what ways are heroes given public recognition? Do heroes have to be famous to qualify as heroes?

In what circumstances can any of us become heroes? Does anyone really know how they will react in dangerous circumstances?

2. Vince Coleman

Vince Coleman was a real person with a real family. How might Coleman's heroic act have helped his children cope with their personal grief in losing their father?

Can students think of contemporary parallels to Vince Coleman? Write a letter from the perspective of a passenger on the train that Vince

Coleman alerted after he or she learns about the explosion in Halifax and Coleman's part in saving the lives of the train passengers. What emotions would the passenger feel? What thoughts would pass through his or her mind? To whom would the letter be addressed?

3. The explosion

The Halifax Explosion devastated the city. Research the extent of the damage. Draw a map of the destroyed area. Who suffered the most, and why?

Collect individual stories of the victims and the survivors. There are always amazing occurrences within any such disaster, as well as acts of bravery by unsung heroes.

Read Hugh McLennan's novel *Barometer Rising*, a fictionalized account of the explosion.

4. Local disasters

Every community has its share of disaster stories, and stories of individuals who "rose to the occasion." Go to local sources – community archives, museums, newspapers, libraries, etc. – to find accounts of disasters that occurred where you live.

Also find stories of individual courage or perseverance in the accounts, as well as details of how community members pulled together to help each other and to rebuild.

Use the research as material for writing, in journalistic or fictional fashion.

Resources

- [Heritage Minute: The Halifax Explosion](#)

- [The Canadian Encyclopedia: Halifax Explosion](#)

- [Radio Minute: The Halifax Explosion](#)