Portail de l'éducation de Historica Canada

Alfred C. Fuller

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Alfred C. Fuller biography from *The Canadians* series. Alfred Fuller (1885-1973) was a turn of the century entrepreneur. He was the eleventh of twelve children on a Nova Scotia farm and later became the founder of the internationally successful, multi-million dollar Fuller Brush Empire.

Aims

An examination of Fuller's life provides students with the opportunity to discuss what they think accounted for his success. Students can also be introduced to media studies, advertising, and marketing strategies.

Background

He called himself a "country bumpkin" and made his first thirty cents working a 12 hour day picking cranberries near the family farm in Nova Scotia. He started his career as a door to door salesman, but even his first wife outsold him 2 to 1. Later he'd champion one of America's leading companies, by "tuning" himself, as he described it, to the metaphysics of

the universe. Hollywood made movies about him, and Editorial cartoonists poked fun at him. He was Alfred C. Fuller: The Fuller Brush Man and he founded the world famous Fuller Brush Company.

Alfred was born in 1885, the eleventh of twelve children born to Nova Scotia farmers. He grew up to be a lanky boy, quiet and unschooled. His parents sent him to Boston when he was eighteen to live with a sister and "find" a career.

But Alfred couldn't hold a job because he was too awkward, unsophisticated, and shy. The solution was self-employment, and he started selling brushes from a shop in the basement of his sister's home. Alfred had no way of knowing that his basement shop would later become a 100 million dollar per year business.

His mother was a devout believer in The Divine Guidance. Bible teachings were the foundation of her children's upbringing. In later years, when floundering over a decision, Fuller would find his answers in the Bible. He learned the value of hard work early too. As a boy, he'd picked strawberries for a cent per quart. Later, he'd give his salesmen no salary, just commissions that were "the fruit of their labour." As a boy, he'd learned to put his money to work by hiring a younger brother to help him with his chores. In the same way, he'd later encourage his salespeople with company stock and other incentives.

When he first began to sell his brushes door to door, his future looked grim. After the first few doors were slammed in his face, he made an important discovery. When the door opened he'd step back, which put the housewife at ease. His farm boy honesty and full money-back guarantees made the buyer comfortable. These were the basic tenets of his future success. By the end of his first day he'd sold six dollars worth of brushes.

His share was three dollars, and with that, the Fuller Brush Man was on his way.

When he'd saved a bit of money he decided to marry. Her name was Evelyn Ells, another Nova Scotian in Boston. There never seemed to be much of a romance, but Evelyn caught the business bug and in no time was outselling Alfred 2 to 1. She also helped him as personal secretary and accountant. On one of their selling trips, they both became Christian Scientists. They had two sons, but their love never grew and it eventually ended in divorce.

Two years after the divorce Alfred married Primrose Pelton, who was eighteen years his junior. This time, Alfred was in love, and the relationship - though childless - was his greatest comfort.

Meanwhile, the Fuller Brush Company was a thriving success. It had gone from a one-man show to 260 dealers selling door-to-door across America. Eventually, his eldest son Howard took over the business, a move Alfred had intended, but never quite got used to.

The Company's success continued, and in true American fashion, Hollywood came calling. First Red Skelton starred as Alfred in "The Fuller Brushman" and later Lucille Ball played "The Fuller Brush Woman." All this hype did wonders for sales, but a retired Alfred now resented his back-seat position. He turned his attention to philanthropy, and the unschooled farm boy earned an honorary degree - but his relations with his oldest son remained strained. In 1959, when Howard and his wife were killed in a car accident, Alfred was devastated by guilt and loss. His younger son took over the business and Alfred and Primrose retired to Nova Scotia.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

1. When Alfred left home, his mother gave him three objects: a spool of white thread, a needle, and a Bible. Discuss why his mother gave him these objects and ask each student to choose three things that they would take with them if they were leaving home. They could explain their choices in either written form or better still they could bring in the objects for a presentation and explain their choice to the class.

2. Alfred and his future successes were heavily influenced by the women in his life. Have the class individually, or in groups, discuss the impact that his mother and his wives, Evelyn Ellsand Primrose Pelton, had on his life and on the Full Brush Company. Can the women be ranked in terms of importance? If so, how would you justify their ranking? If one of these women had not influenced Alfred, how would the Company have been different?

3. Have the students produce three excerpts from the life of Alfred C. Fuller. This could be done through diary entries written from his life, by drawing three pictures that represent moments of his life, or by role-playing Alfred Fuller in a three part monologue on his life, feelings, and beliefs.

4. There seemed to be a conflict between education and experience at various points of Alfred's life. (For example, the insurrection among his managers who Alfred later fired and the tug-of-war between himself and his son Howard.) Does this debate continue today? Have students argue

the merits of education vs. experience. Which is most important? Which is most likely to contribute to future success? This could be set-up as a class debate, and lead into a modern-day context; for example, looking for summer jobs (experience vs education) or planning post-secondary education and careers.

5. Create a timeline of Alfred Fuller's life (include all the important people who affected his life and Company). Groups of students could be responsible for different sections of the timeline. It could be constructed in pictorial or mobile and 3-D form.

6. Pretend that you are a salesperson. Divide the students into groups. Have each group write an advertisement for the Fuller brush. Your objective is to convince the householder to buy your product. Presentations or commercials could be videotaped, or jingles could be sung and recorded. To make it a class effort, all presentations could be presented to the class who would then vote on whether they would purchase the object. The best presentation or advertisement could be chosen. This assignment could serve as a way of introducing a unit on advertising, commercialism, and the media.

7. Alfred Fuller, though he was born in and returned to die in Canada, built his empire and his fortune in the United States. Divide the class into small groups and discuss in what ways Fuller contributed to the Canadian identity despite his absence from Canada for most of his life. Can Canada claim Fuller as her own? Chart arguments for and against this point of view.

8. What types of information did the producers use to make the video? Make a list of these sources and rank them according to those you found interesting, most relevant, and most historically accurate. Why did you

rank them as you did?

9. Select one of Alfred Fuller's contemporaries who lived during his reign as the Fuller Brush Man and who encountered a level of success in business comparable to Fuller's own. Compare and contrast their education, their qualities as leaders, how they achieved success, and their philosophies of business?

Resources

The Canadians: Alfred C. Fuller

Inventors and Innovations - The Canadian Encyclopedia

Fuller Brush Company