

Trading Spaces: Investigating People & Movement in Houston

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INTRODUCTION

Places are defined by their use. Geographers would object to that simple definition, but in most situations, people use simple definitions in their daily lives and manage to communicate and function very well. Young people define their lives by the places they are allowed to visit – home, school, work, park, mall – with little consideration of what was there before; and the natural, physical geography of Houston can be described very simply: flat gulf coast prairie land and intermittent piney woods, interrupted by shallow bayous and with a tendency to flood during heavy rains. Humidity and heat drove the wealthiest of early the settlers out of town during the summer. Today it drives people inside to the controlled atmosphere of air conditioning. Houston was planned as a commercial center, and it has achieved that designation, but every city, including those designed as seats of government, has that purpose. Trade and commerce provide goods and services for workers and education for their children: the city is defined by its use. To many, that sentence would seem too cavalier or reductionist. Yet to make our children aware of their surroundings and their effect on the future, to make the future generation an informed change agent and future planner, we need to begin with simple explanations. In addition the specific use of a specific place and how that use has changed over time can be an interesting study, and at the same time those young people with skills to understand and act in a more informed and sophisticated manner.

UNIT BACKGROUND – HOUSTON TODAY

Houston is a city of change. The one constant in its history is that nothing stays the same. Even those old buildings that have been preserved have been updated with new technologies and materials. It would be difficult to find a house without indoor plumbing or electricity, for example. Houston is also geographically large. It spreads out over the coastal plain in a series of neighborhoods designed by builders and real estate agents, railroad companies and government highway planners. It surrounded and basically swallowed outlying communities such as Bellaire and West University Place. There is no city zoning in Houston and attempts to create areas designed for specific purposes have met with limited success. Apartment buildings sit next to businesses which sit next to residential housing. Some parts of Houston have deed restrictions, but these are limited to certain neighborhoods. The changing landscape has been examined in two of my previous curriculum units. What were missing were the voices of Houston. This unit will supplement the others by providing access to some of those voices.

HOUSTON'S HISTORY OF PEOPLE AND MOVEMENT

It is relatively easy to access early voices of Houston. Houston began as a newspaper advertisement (readily available in texts and on the Internet), the Allen brothers promising fertile land and sea breezes on a property forty miles from the Gulf of Mexico. The reality was mud, mosquitoes, and humidity. With a few exceptions to be noted later, people did not stay in Houston for the weather. People came, and still come, for another reason – opportunities to make a better life for themselves and their families. Yet experiences varied widely over time. Some

were successful and stayed, some were successful and left. Some failed and left, some failed and still stayed. Their voices remain, in letters, books, documents, diaries, and living persons.

The 19th Century

The first arrivals of 1836 were land speculators, small farmers, small business entrepreneurs focusing on trade goods, and laborers, such as carpenters, who were required as the empty plain began to fill with increased immigration and the fact that the new town was made the capital of the new nation. Within a year of its founding, Houston had over 100 wooden buildings for various uses, and a fluctuating population of about 1,500. Those without lumber lived and labored in canvas tents. Accommodations for the newly arrived remained primitive, but people prospered as they traded labor for goods and places to sleep until their own houses could be established. Within ten years, the population of Houston had risen to between 4 and 5 thousand, growth slowing due to the moving of the capital to Austin. However, the local newspaper, the *Telegraph and Texas Register*, reported the establishment of two sawmills, a brick maker, a foundry, a corn mill, and a bookbinder. Entry into the United States saw a new growth spurt, including land grants to US soldiers who had fought in the Mexican War, one of whom was one of my great-great grandfathers. The railroad arrived in the 1850s, and there was constant trade with the larger Galveston port down Buffalo Bayou. Cotton and sugar plantations and smaller vegetable and dairy farms and cattle ranches prospered.

The Civil War did not affect Houston physically, but the Union blockades hurt trade. After the war, the city saw an influx of newly freed slaves who established their own communities west of downtown in Freedmen's Town, where educated ex-slaves, such as Jack Yates, established schools, churches, and small businesses to serve themselves. Yates believed that Houston held more opportunities and a less oppressive atmosphere for freedmen and women than his Virginia birthplace. Others concurred. The newcomers prospered and attracted others, so that by the turn of the century there was a well established, though small, black middle class and African Americans comprised 22% of the population.

The 1880s and 1890s brought eastern European immigrants who settled in parts of Houston that became neighborhood enclaves, such as German Town. Jews and Roman Catholics established their own schools, religious centers, and community centers. They also settled in African American neighborhoods, since rents and prices were lower and immigrants had no segregation tradition, thus making Houston one of the few southern cities with mixed race neighborhoods. A small population of Japanese and Chinese moved to the Gulf coast, drawn by the geography that was amenable to rice cultivation. The flat geography, frequent rains, and summer heat – in short, the weather – drew them here.

The 20th Century

The city continued to attract new people, thanks in part to city fathers who promoted the city in order to bring in new business. The Galveston Storm of 1900 and the discovery of oil at Spindletop near Beaumont brought new workers and a new industry to the area. These city fathers capitalized on the opportunity by creating new transportation systems for oil, such as pipelines, and dredging Buffalo Bayou to create the Ship Channel and a larger, hurricane proof, port. The city managed to solve problems of disease, water supply, electricity delivery, and transportation systems. New neighborhoods were developed by real estate developers. A university was endowed by William M. Rice, bringing university educational opportunities and a new intellectual and cultural elite began to bring other talents to Houston – public libraries, museums, opera, and theater.

Growth was steady through the 1920s, culminating in the prized Democratic Convention in 1928, which gave Houston national recognition. The Great Depression did affect Houston, but

city leaders such as Jesse H. Jones managed to avert some tragedies, such as bank failures. With the WPA, the construction of public schools and other public buildings provided jobs for the newly unemployed. World War II brought new industries and employment. After the war, money poured into Houston with the increased demand for oil and the chemical industry, and people moved to take part in the boom. An initially small Hispanic population dramatically increased with the return of veterans who decided to settle in the cities rather than return to small south Texas farms. They built new communities and brought new tastes, such as Ninfa's fajitas in her Tex-Mex restaurant. In the 1950s, air conditioning transformed the city into a place that could be tolerated in the summer months, and the population rose to 350,000.

In the 1960s politicians and city promoters managed to get the National Aeronautical and Space Administration located southeast of Houston. Traditional segregation practices were quietly abandoned through the efforts of university students and city promoters who did not want the violence experienced in other southern cities to be broadcast on national television. That would hurt the city's image as a progressive, business-friendly town. While school integration remained problematic, because it was such a personal issue, the conflict did not attract much national attention and did not become an issue as northern and eastern based businesses, such as Shell Oil, made decisions to move headquarters to the city in the 1970s. Planned neighborhoods, such as Sharpstown, sprang up on the outskirts of town. The city annexed land as it was developed by real estate moguls promoting what had become the American Dream – a home of their own, a two car garage, and a nearby shopping center. Because there was no real zoning in the city, businesses could establish themselves in any location convenient and cheap. Mini-skylines dotted the city outside of downtown: Greenway Plaza, the Galleria. The oil shortage of the 1970s brought many to Houston, as depression and stagflation plagued the rest of the United States. The oil bust of the early 1980s slowed this growth, and Houston had a difficult time, compounded by a moratorium on new building inside the city limits due to water supply issues, for the rest of the decade.

The 1970s and 80s brought new immigrants to the city: Vietnamese refugees, varying in education and job skills. Many had initially been settled in other parts of the United States, but eventually migrated to Houston because the heat and humidity were similar to that of Vietnam. Their presence transformed parts of the city into Vietnamese enclaves, where immigrants transitioned from apartment complex to home ownership in one generation. They established new businesses, religious institutions, and brought new restaurants, groceries, and opportunities to the city. The Hispanic population grew as well, some legal, some defined as illegal, growing to become the majority population of the city by 2005.

The School Setting

My students will be tasked with finding the voices of those who came to this city, to create an archive for future students to use. They will research biographies, diaries, and autobiographies to find those voices and relate them to specific periods in Houston's history. Houston is a relatively young city. Access to some of the voices can be as simple as walking down the road to a nearby retirement community. They will interview local residents to find out what drew them to the neighborhood and how the neighborhood has changed over time.

My school is located in a relatively new part of town, yet there has been much change since the school was finished in 2000. Westside High School used to be sidled by a horse stable. Just down the road were cattle. Today, the stables are smaller and the empty space is filling with new houses and an apartment complex. The cattle are still there, but a new gas station and a new fire house, as well as more houses, border their field. The cattle remain only because the property owner gets a tax break, describing the valuable real estate as "agricultural" until it is sold for housing or business use. Who made these decisions? What was the underlying motivator? The

obvious answer is always economic, but how and when the changes were made have secondary reasons that can be uncovered by talking to the people who made them. Newspaper colonist Leon Hale wrote that in 1952 the junction at Westheimer and Highway 6 – just a couple of miles from my school’s location – was the home of a hog farm. Now that junction hosts a shopping mall, three strip shopping centers, two gas stations, and several fast food restaurants. Few of my students, or even their parents, have ever seen a hog farm. If the farm had remained, it is doubtful the housing prices would be as high as they are. Using this type of information and other data the students will become more knowledgeable about spaces, time, and change. This knowledge should help them make better choices as adults, and foster a sense of the need to preserve some of the past in documents and architecture.

MORE UNIT BACKGROUND – THE TEACHER’S PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Coming to Houston

In order to inspire or guide other teachers in the history profession to teach their students how to “do History,” I will describe my journey “doing history” about people to whom I am not related in a city in which I have no ancestors, but in which I have chosen to live my life.

As to why I came to Houston? People move for many reasons – most come to Houston to make money. Many stay in Houston because their parents or grandparents came here to make money, so the family connects in Houston. Because I will be asking my students to write their own and others’ personal narratives, revealing the voices of the neighborhood and city, I should share with them at least part of my own personal narrative.

I came because the University of Houston had an exemplary teacher education program at that time, and I could find a job with the hardware chain store for which I was currently working. My childhood had been spent living on various US Air Force Bases, which can be described as small towns with a highly transient, albeit uniform, population. I had never lived in Texas, but my career military father had been born and raised in Texas, so the early 1970s saw a non-native born half Texan enroll as a Texas resident at a Texas state university located between Ft. Worth and Dallas. I chose that university initially because it was close to Oklahoma, where my family had been stationed. I was an innocent going out on my own for the first time, and wanted to stay close to my family, which had been the only constant in my life. I had traveled the country and overseas, but still knew little of civilian life. I was a bit naive. My freshman year at college, I need new glasses, so I went to Texas State Optical. I thought that it was a government-sponsored optical service, and government services were what I knew and trusted.

At the beginning of my college sophomore year, my father was sent to Thailand and my mother took the family back to her hometown in Michigan for the duration of his tour. I no longer had any reason to stay in the Metroplex. I moved to Houston for the teacher education program on the advice of my professors at my first choice university. So far, I had moved from a small town with a transient uniform population to a small town close to two big cities into a big city, a city big in both population and distances. I had a job thirty miles from the school, and lived fifteen miles from both. The distances were too great to sustain for long since I was driving a 1964 Mercury Montclair with the back window that could be lowered (!) and was the wonderful color, “Tuddy Pink.” It was a great car that could fit eight people in the trunk, which was an advantage during the time of drive in movies. Not that I did anything untoward in that manner.

I dropped both job and school, found other jobs and another place to live, sold my wonderful but expensive to maintain car. I only once considered moving back to North Texas, never mind moving back in with my parents who had retired to Michigan by that time. My blood had thinned, adapting to the Texas climate. And I would have had to pay out of state tuition if I transferred to a Michigan university – which would have been the last straw, since I was also

half-Michiganer. As an 18-year-old college freshman, I had planned to teach in Department of Defense Schools overseas and travel the world as a teacher, but at the age of twenty-three, I married a Texan and that initial career plan was gone. I was voluntarily stuck here, in Houston, and that wasn't so bad. We had good jobs, good friends, and lots of interesting things to do and places to visit. I obtained both my BA and MA and started my teaching career. When I was assigned to teach Texas history in the early 1980s I was forced to learn more about my adopted city and state. Many of my students were in the same position I was – new arrivals from distant locations – and I worked to make the study interesting and more importantly, relevant to their lives. I later transferred to a high school named for Stephen F. Austin with ironically a majority Hispanic population and spent fifteen years there.

(For the non Texas reader – Stephen F. Austin was the empresario who brought over 300 families from the U.S. to Texas when it was part of Mexico. These settlers became the nucleus of the protests against the dictator Santa Anna and thus helped Texas gain its independence from Mexico in 1836. Many Tejanos – people of Mexican or Spanish heritage – also fought against Santa Anna, but after the war there was an Anglo/white backlash against many who were of Hispanic ancestry, and they were persecuted. Many left Texas for Mexico. Some could argue that today's “illegal” immigrants from Mexico and El Salvador and other parts of Central America are simply refusing to recognize an artificial political boundary, just as some Native Americans did and still do, since the land once belonged to their ancestors, and that one major reason the United States did not annex all of Mexico and free all Mexicans from the Dictator Santa Anna at the end of the Mexican War was that Mexico had outlawed slavery, and the annexation would upset the balance of power in the Senate between the free and slave states. But I digress.)

Over time I have taught all the middle and high school social studies subjects except 6th grade world cultures and high school football, but I managed to avoid my most hated social studies subject – US History – for that entire time, except for one semester. I focused on world history and economics and government. I enjoyed teaching those subjects, even grew to love teaching economics, but when geography became a required subject, I jumped at the chance to teach it, too. Why did I dislike US History? Because I had poor teachers, both in high school and in college. In the late 80s I had been chosen to write the US History curriculum for the district, due to a miscommunication that left me very dependent on my co-writers, but that is another story. Then in 2000 I was recruited and moved to teach at a brand new HISD school in an affluent neighborhood on the west side of town, so politicized the community could not agree on a name for the school, so a neutral, directional, name was chosen. Four weeks before school was to start, I found out I was to teach US History, something I had managed to avoid for nineteen years. And not just US – advanced placement US History. I quickly began to memorize the presidents in order and called colleagues for advice and resources.

Researching Houston

One of the thoughts I had was that I would teach my students how to “do” history. I would not repeat the mistakes of my own teachers. My students would learn to enjoy the subject because they were making history everyday. However, Houston, in terms of importance in United States history texts, ranks very low, although it has become more important in recent years. Few textbooks mention the place except for Texas independence, oil, President Bush's current residence: that is it. My students needed to know that there is more to the history of this area – to read about the experiences of settlers, real estate agents, financiers, cattle barons, slaves, Mexican settlers, and other groups who came and survived and lived and contributed to the local history of this city. Houston's history is the nation's history. I began to look for more information and more resources about the city that would be accessible to my students. I had

some of the research I had done years before, teaching Texas history. I needed to increase my resource base. Twenty-year-old newspaper clippings would not be enough.

The local library is an obvious source. A local historical society is another. Old people – of which I hope to be a member one day – are an often neglected but very valuable resource. But there has to be a place of beginning. Something to spark an interest. A riddle? A mystery? Something not in the history books or on a website that can be copied and pasted and passed on as original research.

I have some old postcards of Houston that were sent during World War II, along with ration books from the same family and during the same period. These were found at a garage sale in Missouri by some friends of mine. I treasured the pictures of old Houston landmarks, but as I read the messages on the postcards another story was revealed. Most of these were sent by a W. W. Leggett, to a person named Bobbie Seale. There were reminders to attend school on Sunday, requests to call other students, references to “winning the banner” and beating the girls in attendance. From this I concluded that Leggett was a Sunday school teacher and Bobbie was a boy. Bobbie lived at 1613 Crawford with a woman named Pauline Seale. I have her ration book. There is another letter to someone with a different last name but at the same address, which led me to believe that the address was a boarding house, or that Mrs. Seale took in a boarder while her husband was overseas. She might have been a widow. There is one letter from a serviceman named Seale, but it is not clear if this was a husband or brother-in-law.

These postcards would be my “hook.” When I had used these as a short lesson in the past, the students seemed to be interested but unsatisfied since I had no answers to their questions. I needed to find some of those answers, finally, and set out to see how easily the students could find them on their own. When I saw that Stephen Fox was leading another Houston Teachers Institute Seminar entitled “Reading the City,” I decided that I would apply for the class and see what I could do with the postcards and with the city’s history. During his previous seminar he had taken us to Houston’s Public Library archives. Perhaps this time I would actually visit them. And I did. The Texas Room at the Julia Ideson Building of the Houston Public Library contains many research resources that can aid student exploration of Houston’s past. The Texas and Local History Department’s staff are very helpful. A recent tour of the facility showed the various documents, books, maps and photographs available. Many of the books are from Texas authors and publishing houses. Magazines dating from the 1800s are available. Maps, including reproductions of the earliest Houston map are easily accessed. Later maps from the Sanborn Fire Insurance Company are on microfilm, and more recent aerial photographs and Key maps are on the shelves. City directories dating back to the early 19th century and the more recent Cole’s directories are also there. Special collections of donated papers and documents are in the Archive and Manuscripts Department and are available upon request. The archives are indexed according to special collection, subject matter, and ethnicity. There are newspaper clippings of significant persons and events in vertical files.

I was interested in seeing how difficult an assignment to do research at the Texas room would be. I had the name and address from the postcards. The librarians led me to the city directory for 1943 to 45. I found the address and the names of four residents at the address – John Seale, Ralph Trussell, Walter Barrett, and Richmond Goodman. Next to John’s name was a bell symbol, which indicated he had a telephone. Perhaps he shared it with the rest of the residents, and they all contributed to paying the bill. George Hudgins lived in Apt. 1; the others had no apartment numbers. The same book allowed me to look up each individual. The individual names gave me the names of their wives, if any, number of children, and the man’s occupation. John Seale was a welder, with wife Pauline and one child. That confirmed, along with the ration book I have for Pauline Seale, that she was Bobbie Seale’s mother. Ralph was also a welder with a wife named Agnes and one child. Richmond was a rigger and had a wife, Fay, and one child.

Walter was a ship fitter with a wife, Mollie. George was a machinist and was not married, which may account for his having an apartment behind the main house structure. This detached abode was found on the microfilmed Sanborn map. The Sanborn map did not reveal any interior details of the property, but did show a large building with two-inch walls, a porch on the front and the rear of the main house, the detached apartment, and another small building next to the apartment behind the main house. The F symbol on the building seems to indicate that the building was a set of flats, or apartments. The lot behind the house was vacant, and one can imagine that a home with four wives and three children used the lot to hang clothes and as a children's playground. There were numerous other houses on the block. I can have my students research the other addresses and begin to build a picture of life during wartime in Houston. I will also assign them to research the types of jobs that ship fitters and welders would have had at the time. How did they get to work? Where did they work? Why were they here instead of fighting in the war?

I also looked for the Sunday school teacher who sent so many postcards to Bobbie. I found two W. W. Leggetts in the City Directory. Both were William W. One had a wife, Lyda, listed, but no occupation. The other had a wife, Daisy, and was a bookkeeper. Neither name had a bell symbol next to the address – which confirmed my earlier hypothesis. The reason the Sunday school teacher sent postcards was that he did not have a telephone. The confirmation of this hypothesis led to other questions, such as why would a welder have a telephone and a bookkeeper be without one? Was there a reason that involved more than the actual price of the telephone? National security? Were there welding emergencies that required the welder to be readily available?

Answering questions led to others. Most of the streets near downtown were named for famous Texans or Americans. Who was Crawford named for? A quick search of the Handbook of Texas Online found a likely candidate. Crawford Street appears to be named for William Carrol Crawford, the last surviving signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence and a relative of Charles Carroll, who was the last surviving signer of the United States Declaration of Independence. Prominent enough. Easy for students to find.

Using the Sanborn map on microfilm was an interesting revisit to using old technology. The maps are also available on line. Through the Houston Public Library anyone with a library card can access the digitized copies of the Sanborn maps, and the copies are much clearer to read. This is something the students can do in class. A quick look through past maps show the area was not included before 1907. One dwelling and two out buildings were on the site at that time. Each volume of maps has an index and a key to symbols, and the D stands for Dwelling. Crawford Street was paved with bricks. On the 1924 to 1950 map, the building had a different shape and an F, for flats. That confirms the idea that this was a boarding house instead of an apartment building. It indicated that the families shared some common room or rooms.

One of my concerns was having enough material for students to research, to “do history.” I have enough postcards and addresses and ideas to have small groups of students focus on different aspects of the journey. But one does not need to have postcards to begin this type of research. Starting with any simple address, a student can create a history of a place using maps and city directories and archived materials. Students can research the Seale neighbors, the block where they lived, find the church they most likely attended. The search is relatively easy in the city of Houston. Smaller towns also have their Sanborn maps, so research could extend to other parts of the United States. Students could see how San Francisco changed before and after the earthquake, Galveston before and after the 1900 storm, Detroit before and after the automobile, are available. The Seale postcards were found in Missouri. Access to St. Louis City Directories is problematic at this time, but the Sanborn maps are available. City Directories may not be online. Using them may require a field trip to the Texas Room – or a visit to my brother's family in St. Louis.

IMPLEMENTATION

Lesson One

Every historian starts with the self as a reference point. What is my interest? Where does my story fit into the story I am telling? Is my interpretation correct? What are my biases, and how can I minimize them? This lesson is designed to help students realize that their own experiences can be used to write an historical narrative that has value and interest.

Objectives

The primary objective is to provide students with a starting point as they learn how to do history by letting them tell their own stories. Secondary objectives include helping students realize that experience is not enough to write a true historical narrative, that secondary resources and experts are also necessary.

Activity One

Share with the students your own story of place that you experienced when you were their age. Find or create a map to illustrate the places you frequented. For myself, I found a map of the military base on which I lived when I was a high school junior and identified the places where I spent the most time – school, home, library, park, etc. I also spoke of trips I took as a high school junior outside the base. Then have students do the same thing. Provide them with maps of the area and have them write their own narratives about the places they frequent and explain why there are drawn to those places. Allow them to share their narratives with a partner or a small group. Have students evaluate each others narratives by asking questions and adding more information to their narratives.

Activity Two

Share a brief history of the local area. One should be available at a local library or on the internet. Houston students can use an excerpt from the 2002 HTI curriculum unit “If You Build It, They Will Come” background section entitled “The Early Years.” My students will then read an excerpt from diaries of early settlers to the Houston area: Mary Austin Holley’s *Texas Diary, 1835-1838*, and Frederick Law Olmsted’s *A Journey through Texas*. These two narratives speak in very different voices with very different perspectives, so I can use these as examples of the types of writings they are looking for and that they will produce as a final product. They will then examine a map of early Houston and locate the places mentioned in the narratives. Using GoogleEarth, students will locate those places and download pictures of those locations in present time. They will then write a compare and contrast narrative about how the use of one location has changed.

Activity Three

Students will select a reading about a certain time period in Houston’s past, research the time period using historical maps and current maps, and create a presentation for the class about how and why that area has changed. Students in other parts of the United States can do the same for their location, as many journals and diaries are available at local archival depositories and on the Internet.

Lesson Two

Students now begin to do historical research using authentic historical documents and identifying and using research tools and methods to create an historical narrative.

Objectives

Students will research the story of local artifacts and/or documents to create a narrative about that object. Students will identify and evaluate resources available to do that research. Students will identify questions that their research does not answer.

Activity One

Students will be given some historical documents to examine and Handout A: How to Construct an Historical Narrative. After completing the steps on the handout, the students should write a historical narrative based on the documents and their research. This is not designed to be an all inclusive handout listing all possible resources to explore or even the exact number of steps to take. Students will discover that each step includes a number of other steps to fully complete the assignment. The teacher and students should create a rubric based on resources available to serve as a final evaluation tool.

Handout A: How to Construct an Historical Narrative

1. Examine the documents. Summarize the information contained on each. Write a list of questions that will form the basis of your next research. Basic questions: Who? What? Where? When? How? Why?
2. Identify secondary resources that could contain information about the time period and location. Keep a record of the information and full bibliographic information about the resource
3. Visit local archives for information. Record sources and include bibliographic information. Note successes and failures. Recording failures will prevent others from wasting time looking at or for incorrect or missing information.
4. Visit websites that contain historical information about the time period in the local area.
5. Identify and contact any local historians or long time residents who might be able to provide information about the topic. Record and transcribe the interview.
6. Construct a narrative about the artifacts and/or documents, including questions that still need to be answered. Cite resources.

Activity Two

Students will select class leaders who will assign students to certain tasks to complete – who will search for the authors of the documents, who will research the general time period and location of the documents origins, who will seek out persons who might today have recollections about the documents or their origins. All this information will be collected into a narrative which will include facts, assumptions, speculations, and areas for more research.

Activity Three

Students will write a self evaluation and an evaluation of the final product.

Lesson Three

This lesson is designed to allow students to practice their newly honed historical research skills to create an historical narrative about their city, town, or neighborhood. Again, the teacher and students should create a rubric based on resources available to serve as a final evaluation tool.

Objectives

Students will create a narrative history about their neighborhood, using various resources. Students will practice their researching, interviewing, and writing skills.

Activity One

Students will view a video of Houston's history of the 20th century, KPRC's *Once Upon a Time in Houston*. Students will use this background to identify major changes that have occurred in the Houston area to create questions that can be used as a basis for their research in their neighborhood. For example: When was this business established here? What was here before? What company developed the neighborhood? Why did you move to the neighborhood? Where did you come from? In places without such a video resource, students should view one from another area and identify eras that should be included in a local video. Local newspapers can provide important events and significant local personalities to investigate. This can also be the activity in which teacher uses his or her own narrative as an example of why people came to the area being researched. This is where I shared the rest of my narrative with my students. They need an example to follow as they interviewed adults for this part of the unit. Some teachers who do not want to reveal their own narratives may be able to find locals who will volunteer to be examples for the students. For example, when teaching the Depression, I have used my parents and grandparents narratives to make the history more personal and to illustrate that one does not have to be famous to be important to understanding history. I know many teachers draw on their personal familial histories to impart a sense of immediacy to their students.

Optional Activity

Invite a local historian to speak to the class, and have the class interview him or her in order to develop their interviewing technique before approaching anyone outside of class. If there is no alternative, the teacher can stand in for an historical figure or allow the students to ask questions about his or her personal narrative.

Activity Two

Students will share their findings in a presentation to the class. Students will archive their written, audio, and visual presentations in the school library for future classes.

Activity Three

Students will write an evaluation of the finished product and a self evaluation about their contribution to it.

ACTUAL IMPLEMENTATION – AN HISTORIOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE

The lesson plans are deceptively simple, but the actual implementation was excitingly complex. Due to time constraints, I decided to try some of the lessons on my students and have them create the process, and include this narrative as a guide for teachers who attempt similar activities. I split the work between two classes, because I had originally designed this as a long term project, but I only had two weeks of school left after the last round of standardized testing. One class would do the local history of the neighborhood, lessons one and three, and the other class would investigate the postcards, the documents I intended to use for lesson two.

My own research had uncovered a hog farm nearby, but not its exact location. The students in the local history class would do research and interviews, and as they strove to answer that question, they would create a local history narrative. The neighborhood was new enough, and my students were connected enough, to find people who could describe the settlement and growth of the area. We first brainstormed people who should be interviewed, and several had relatives or family friends who were real estate agents, developers, or homeowners who had lived in the area since its development. We went on the internet and found the usual research tools – the public library, the Houston history sites, the local newspaper. Fortunately, that paper had recently run an article about local neighborhoods and real estate prices, including a listing of all the developments surrounding the school – the students then decided to visit the websites of the

developments for information. One student found a website that lists population figures for every city, including the amazing statistic that in our zip code there were still 51 residents considered rural, and shared that with the class. One found a website of quotes –remembrances about local changes – the day the cows escaped from a nearby farm, now gone; the building of retail establishments and how some of those had also been replaced by other retail establishments. Some had their own memories of change; for example, how the local Kmart had been left empty for four years before a new tenant took its place. Then another found a website listing child molesters and the lesson that day quickly turned to finding lurid scandals that had occurred nearby. I decided to have the students write a narrative about the processes they went through to help them become more aware of their research processes – metacognition: thinking about thinking. I decided to have the other class do the same.

The class investigating the postcards was more problematic. I had done some research so I could point the students in the right direction, but I was very aware of the fact that I could be too controlling. I decided to ask the students for leaders who would direct the research, and I had three volunteers. They called themselves the JAM, using the initials of their first names. Already they were putting together a team. They divided the postcards according to date and had the other students transcribe the messages on the postcards, then type them, email them to the leader who compiled them and sent them to me to copy for the class to examine. The JAM leaders assigned students to various internet research destinations: searching for names on the postcards, addresses, and the one very detailed return address on an empty envelope. I had investigated that return address, and waited in anticipation for my students to discover the Task Force’s mission – monitoring the bomb testing on the Bikini Atoll. The *USS Wharton* was the ship John T. Seale was on. I wanted my students to think about where that envelope had been. The envelope was addressed to John R. Seale, at 306 West 20th Street. Pauline’s ration book had three addresses on it. The first address was 1613 Crawford, the second was illegible, but the third, not crossed out, was the West 20th Street address.

As our first day of internet research closed, my students were following leads and hopeful that they would find more information about the family. I knew that part of that research must include a visit to the archives of the public library. But there was a snag – the only day anyone could go to the library was Saturday, and Prom, with a capital P, was that evening. I agreed to tell one of the students what pages to investigate in the City Directories, and she arranged to send her father to copy the necessary pages. I crossed my fingers. Her father is a lawyer, so research of this type might even be interesting to him? Next time I would make sure they had several Saturdays to do the work.

The second day in the computer lab, we listened to each person report on their efforts. Several had found Bobby Seale, one of the founders of the Black Panthers – was he our Bobbie Seale? Others had found a photographer – was he our Bobbie Seale? These were the same questions I had had when I had done the research. But the second day revealed a flaw in my own research. I had put everything in protective plastic bags years before and had forbidden the students from taking anything out. One student had been given the task of investigating Pauline, and had found nothing. We looked at the addresses visible on the ration book. I allowed her to take the ration book out of the bag, and look through it. She found what I had forgotten – that the child’s ration books were also inside. We discovered ration books for John R. Seale, signed by his mother. We also discovered his age at different times.

Was Bobbie Seale really John R. Seale, who used Bobbie to differentiate himself from his father, John T. Seale? It seemed likely. So John T. Seale was the father and John R. Seale was not the father-in-law Pauline went to live with when John went into the military, but his son. When the father wrote from the *USS Wharton* he put Mr. in the address. Of course he was writing to his son, not his father! Who puts an honorific on a letter to his father? But to a young

child, perhaps with a letter to comfort him, or reassure him about his future, or to tell him about what he had experienced – that would necessitate the use of the more respectful title, one that would make the child feel more like a man than a boy. Perhaps that was the message of the letter – “Now you are the man of the house,” that was often included in letters from men at war to their sons left behind. But the actual letter is missing. What is extraordinary is that the empty envelope survived.

We spent six days in the computer lab, doing research and writing the pieces of the historical narrative that each student had been assigned. The class doing the local history was also the one that included a lunch period, and many of the students had off campus lunch privileges. I allowed some to take the two hours to go off campus and gather information. One student was assigned to put the pieces together, and she kept in constant contact with me as we emailed the text back and forth during the editing process. A few students, new to the area, felt they had no resources and could make no real contribution, so I reminded them of one of our essential questions “why did people come here?” This became “why did my parents move here?” One student, making his presentation of his findings to the class, stated that he had not known how important education was in the decision making process. His parents had moved to the west side of town when it was announced that the new high school was being built. They wanted more for their children than the local neighborhood school could provide. He was very proud and inspiring – and his presentation helped two other students interview their parents and write very poignant and inspiring narratives about their move to the neighborhood. These local, oral histories, combined with the narratives about the area from secondary resources, created an interesting, if incomplete, historical narrative that my future classes can use as a model and a reference.

My students were very enthusiastic, coming up with their own suggestions about whom to research and why. One interviewed an elderly neighbor; two interviewed a local businessman who gave them coupons for one of his restaurants; another interviewed her grandparents. One day two my students decided we needed to hear from our former principal, recently promoted to West District Superintendent. I said it would be fine to contact him, and Mr. VanBeck showed up one day, with original documents from the first year the school had opened, and spoke with the students for an hour about the schools history – which had actually begun thirty years before, when a high school had first been promised to the community. The students wrote him a thank you note and included a wonderful paragraph about the school’s origins.

The final section of the project was a self evaluation and an evaluation of the final product. One student wrote an evaluation which most of the class echoed:

As a whole the project was a success in recognizing the community the students of Westside High School live in. Not only did we research on the internet, students went to talk to real estate agents, business owners, and of course, their family members. Some of my classmates gave a personal history of their family and reasons for moving over here. This brings realism to the project because these are their accounts and experiences. After looking at the product of the project, I noticed that some students did more than just one article in our history. They worked extra hard to make sure there were no loose ends at the end of the project.

One of the interesting aspects of the project was the diversity my students discovered in their neighborhood. One student, who was of Vietnamese ancestry, interviewed a neighbor who had escaped from Iran in 1979. Another, of Korean descent, interviewed a refugee from Lebanon. One student, a child of immigrants from El Salvador, interviewed her father and recorded his efforts to come to the United States and start a better life for his family. I point out the diversity of the interviewers as well as the interviewees to demonstrate two aspects of this history compilation process. One, some students did not want to share or did not think to share their own

personal histories as part of the project. The students must be given permission to ignore their own backgrounds for their own privacy. I would advise against requiring students to reveal too much of their own backgrounds if they choose not to share that background. Secondly, Houston's diversity has been called one of its major strengths. The fact that so many people from such diverse backgrounds can come from all parts of the world and learn to live together, work with each other, and appreciate similarities and differences is Houston's lesson for the world. Given that Houston has few qualities that people admire in urban areas, this one should be emphasized.

Then there were the narratives from those who had been in the neighborhood since it began to change from farms to housing developments. They went to brand new elementary schools in the 1960s which are currently being torn down and replaced with up to date, brand new elementary schools. On the east side of town, historic preservations are trying to save elementary schools that date back to the early 1900s. On the west side of town, the older schools are being torn down and replaced with little protest. The 1960s institutional architecture is not as relevant, or old enough, or important enough, to deserve preservation.

One student began her journey by asking her own questions. She lived in a different part of town but came to Westside due to a special transfer program. She did not know how she could fit her narrative into the Westside narrative. Then she discovered that there was a new elementary school being dedicated and decided to investigate the person for whom the school was named. (Westside was called Westside because the community could not agree on one person for whom to name the school, but different areas of the school are named for those politicians and administrators who had helped discover a way to finance the school so it could finally be built. So we have the Leonard Strum Theater, the Laurie Bricker Commons, the Rod Paige Athletic Building, etc.) My student looked into the background of Ray K. Daily, for whom the new elementary school was named, and tried to find out who this Daily person was. She called the school and did not receive any help. She googled the name on the Internet and discovered that Ray Daily was a woman born in 1891 in Lithuania, immigrated to Texas with her parents when she was fourteen, and became a famous ophthalmologist. But what was her tie to Houston Independent School District that a school would be named for her? It took my student another few days to find the answer by calling the central administration building and finally talking to the right person. Ray Daily was the first female president of the Houston ISD school board, was the first woman elected to the school board, and contributed a great deal to education in Houston.

The one weakness in the final product is the bibliography – there is none. I did not teach the students to document their resources. That is an error that I will rectify the next time I teach this unit. Most of the oral histories can be traced back to those speakers, but I cannot trace the secondary sources students used to write the narratives about the local reservoirs and the history that goes back to 1836.

The class that investigated the documents and created a narrative about people with whom they had no personal contact had different issues and different strategies to create their historical narrative. The students in charge, the JAM, were constantly receiving information from the different investigations assigned to the rest of the class, then evaluating the information and identifying other areas to research. One gathered a list of people with the Seale name and was brave enough to call and ask if they were related to the family. Although that did not find any family members, that was not surprising, given that the postcards were discovered in Missouri. Our resources did not extend, at this time, to a field trip to the archives there. Another student discovered that the Army records for the elder Seale were not available to non-family members unless proof of death could be shown – but that many of those records might not be available, anyway, because there had been a fire in the St. Louis records' center. One student thinks she found the birth and death dates of the elder Seales, but could not find out what happened to Bobbie. One investigated the stamps on the postcards, and the fact that soldiers did not have to

put stamps on their postcards. Another did a detailed report on the mission of Joint Task Force One and the *USS Wharton* – surprising because all we had to work with initially was an empty envelope.

Several students were assigned to discover what life was like in Houston for people of certain occupations, and wrote background information about the shipbuilding business in Houston during World War II. One group tried to contact local churches to obtain information about the family and the Sunday school teacher, but was told those records were confidential. With each discovery, with each triumph, and each disappointment, the students were beginning to understand how interesting and how difficult investigating and writing history actually is. Their detailed evaluations of their own and their classmates work praises some efforts and criticizes others. They cared about the outcome. One student wrote:

The coming of age story of a few months in the 1940s...the *Seale Family Narrative* is a work important not only for the story it pieces together, but as for the work done by the students in Doc Savage's 6th period in order to assemble as pseudo-coherent narrative from a group of half-century old postcards found in a garage sale. The making of this narrative showed great organization by all the students and the "JAM," who split up the specifics of the story and the background "Big Picture."... It felt validating to find the information we were looking for...

The students found more than I had, which was very gratifying. Their final narrative was tantalizingly incomplete, of course, but so much of the history is correct, their speculations became facts as they confirmed or debunked certain assumptions. Their own lament, and mine, was that they did not have enough time. This will be rectified in future classes. The unit will be taught over a semester instead of two weeks, and every class will do every activity.

CONCLUSION

Writing this curriculum unit has been an intellectual and emotional journey for me. I have been able to impart part of my passion for history to my students and many others, since this unit will be published, and at times the unit essay reads more like a blog than an intellectual journey or narrative of the historical process. But the personal and the political and the historical have always been intermingled, despite efforts to maintain objectivity. And I am sure that the writing and the methodology will be criticized for many reasons I cannot foresee, since I would have made corrections or avoid mistakes for which I may be criticized. Ah well. I began sentences with *But* and *And*. Perhaps critics will focus more on grammatical errors than procedural ones. And the pedantic nature of my personal voice may be enough to put the most ardent off, so they will not finish the essay. For those who made it this far, I hope you "do history" with your students and continue to explore the past with your mind on the future.

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