Native American Storytelling

An Oral Tradition

BACKGROUND

Storytelling is one of the most important means of instruction for Native children throughout the Americas. Indian children are told continually to “listen to your elders.” Often, when adults look back on their childhood, they remember that one of their favorite memories was sitting by their grandmother or grandfather listening to stories handed down from the ancestors. In some tribes there were, and still are, prearranged evenings when the elders sit around a campfire and tell stories ranging from tales of everyday life to complicated creation legends and the exploits of ancestral heroes. Concealed in most tales was information about the kind of conduct that was expected of young people. Through storytelling, children gained patience, listening, and memorization skills. Lessons included the value of bravery, respect for others, and the cultivation of positive relations with the spirits.

The act of telling stories creates a special bond between the child and the elder that is based on love, respect, and interest in the ancestors. For the children, the tales foster an identity with a family, band, or tribe. Elders want the children to listen closely to their stories since the children will become the storytellers of the future.

For most tribes, telling stories was a matter of survival. Native American tribes north of Mexico did not have written forms of language, thus stories and histories were not recorded. The oral tradition, music, ritual performance, and dance were key elements in keeping the traditions, language, and histories of the people alive through all seven generations. Storytelling was, and still is, an essential link to Native American’s past, present, and future.

FOCUS QUESTION

• How do Native American people pass on their traditions and history to others?

STUDENT OBJECTIVES

Students will:

• Experience the show “Stories from the Medicine Wheel” by the Milwaukee Public Theatre in the MPM Gromme Auditorium

• Explore and investigate the four Wisconsin tribes featured in the show as well as other Native groups through MPM Native American exhibits and collections

• Build greater understanding and appreciation for storytelling

• Be able to explain how MPM preserves and shares cultural history

• Explain why it is important to understand history through multiple perspectives
LESSON PLAN

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Ivory Tusk
Catalog Number: E500
This ivory tusk features Inuit pictographs which tell a story or depict events in everyday life. The ivory images carved on walrus tusks commonly have pictures of animal counts, hunting scenes, and mythological figures. This piece was given to the Museum in 1900 by the doctor on the Arctic whaling ship, the Narwhal, who got it from the captain of the ship. He most likely obtained it from an Inuit man working on their ship or one of the places they visited along the Alaskan coast in the late 19th century.

Storyteller Figure
(Cover page photo)
This impressive ceramic storyteller was made by renowned Southwest artist Mary E. Toya of Jemez Pueblo in the early 1980s. At 19 inches tall and with 115 children attached, this is one of the largest and most intricate pieces of its kind. Storyteller figures symbolize the wisdom of elders and illustrate the importance of contact between generations. The value of stories is highly prized by American Indians and oral history is still a means of educating young people in the traditional knowledge and values of their cultures. The Museum acquired this piece in 1997 through the generosity of the late Donald S. Ackerman, his son Mark Ackerman, and his daughter Francine Huxley.

MATERIALS
• Student exhibit guide for every team (2-4 students)
• Pencil

TEACHER PREPARATION
(Before your visit to MPM)
• Make a copy of the exhibit connection guide for each teacher and chaperon.
• Review additional teacher resources provided in this lesson plan.

PROCEDURE
Discuss with your students what they already know about Wisconsin Indians and what they hope to learn through viewing the performance, and their visit to the Museum. Have students write down any questions they have. Should any students not find the answer to their question during their museum visit, email questions to Gaye-Lynn Clyde at clyde@mpm.edu.

ASSESSMENT
After your museum visit, discuss the following questions with your students:
• Is storytelling important to Native Americans and other cultures? Why or why not?
• Give an example of how the Milwaukee Public Museum preserves and shares Native American cultural history.
• Name three different ways Native Americans told stories in the past. Is it the same today?
• Discuss what life lessons we can learn from these stories.

EXTENSION
Think of an event in your lifetime and tell the story to others so that a lesson can be learned. Is it a funny, sad, or serious story? What do you want the “take away” to be for those who hear your story? Tell the story to one person who in turn retells the story to another person. Then have the last person tell in front of the others. How did the story change? Were the details correct from the first telling? Was it hard to remember? Native Americans have used oral traditions to pass on their stories from the beginning with great accuracy. Why do you think they are able to do this so well?
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This ledger book was “captured” by Captain R. Miller from Red Hawk on January 8, 1891 at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota, shortly after the Wounded Knee Massacre. The Milwaukee Public Museum purchased the ledger from collector H.H. Hayssen in 1897. Ledger art was a medium of Plains Indian art from the late 19th to early 20th centuries and illustrates the changes in Plains Indian life during this time. The Red Hawk ledger consists of 105 ink and crayon drawings done by Red Hawk and other Sioux men.

VOCABULARY WORDS

Culture: The way of life for a particular group of people, especially pertaining to their habits, behavior, attitude towards themselves and others, and their moral and religious beliefs.

Indigenous: Originating in a specific place. For indigenous people in North America, this is closely tied to their relationship to the land and their histories. Indigenous people in the Americas are also referred to as First Nations (primarily in Canada), Native Americans, North American Indians and American Indians.

Heritage: Something that is transmitted or acquired from ancestors. For instance, oral histories are an important part of American Indian cultural heritage.

Oral History: Important stories and information that are passed down through generations through spoken word, without being written down.

Intergenerational Learning: Learning that occurs when an older generation passes something down to a younger generation (and vice versa).

Kinship: A web of social connections based on symbolic or blood relations with another person or group of people.

Tribe: A group of people that includes many families and relatives who have the same language, customs, and beliefs.

Anishinaabe (A-NISH-ina-beh): A collective term for the Ojibwe, Ottawa, and Algonquian people. These groups all speak similar Algonquian languages and share many cultural traditions.

Ho-Chunk: A Siouan language speaking nation with reservations today in both Wisconsin and Nebraska. Ho-Chunk means “people of the big voice”, although they are also referred to as Winnebago, a name that was given to them by Algonquian groups, meaning “people of the stinking waters”. According to a current census, there are over 12,000 Ho-Chunk tribal members today.
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Painting on muslin
Catalog Number: E31980
Accession Number: 7758

Paintings from the 19th century Plains tribes serve as narratives of important historical events. This piece was made at Standing Rock Agency (now Reservation) in North Dakota. Painted on a large sheet of muslin, nineteen male figures and fifteen horses are complemented by an additional thirty-five horse heads in the lower left hand corner. Each individual figure appears to float on the surface of the muslin, as there is no evidence of a horizon. The scene represents the heroic deeds of the members of a Sioux group known as Gall’s Band, one of the last American Indian bands to surrender to the US army, as they waged hand-to-hand combat with a group of Crow warriors.

VOCABULARY WORDS continued

**Menominee**: An Algonquian language speaking nation that occupies land northwest of Green Bay. They are the only nation in Wisconsin that do not have another reservation in a different state. Their creation story, too, is tied to a specific location in our state, only 60 miles away from their reservation today.

**Ojibwe/Chippewa**: Ojibwe and Chippewa are different pronunciations of the same word, both referring to the same Algonquian language speaking nation that today spreads from Ontario, Canada to Montana. They have six reservations in Wisconsin, more than any other indigenous nation. They are one of the Three Flames, referring to the historic connection between the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Ottawa people.

**Oneida**: An Iroquoian language speaking nation that was one of the five founders of the Iroquois Confederacy. Historically they lived in what is now New York State and came to Wisconsin in the mid-19th century. There are populations of Oneida people today in New York, Wisconsin, and Ontario. In Wisconsin, the Oneida are located just west of Green Bay.

**Potawatomi**: An Algonquian language speaking tribe who refer to themselves as “Keepers of the Fire”, in reference to their place in the Council of the Three Fires with the Chippewa and Ottawa. Although they historically occupied the Great Lakes area, many Potawatomi were forced to move out of the state during Western settlement in the 19th century. While one group remained in Wisconsin, there are other Potawatomi bands in Michigan, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Ontario, Canada.

**Minowakiing**: An Anishinaabe word meaning “good place;” this is where the word Milwaukee comes from. Ojibwe, Menominee, and Potawatomi are some of the tribes that would use this word.

**Wishkonsing**: An Anishinaabe word for the Wisconsin River. This is where the word Wisconsin comes from. Ojibwe, Menominee, and Potawatomi are some of the tribes that would use this word.

**Miigwetch** (MEEG-wetch): The word for “thank you” in Ojibwe (the language is also called Anishinaabemowin by Ojibwe people).
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Inuit Storyknife
Catalog number: E65487
Accession number: 27631

An Inuit storyknife is most often made for a young girl by her father. Historically, Alaskan storyknives were made from wood, antler, or ivory (such as this one). Story knives often have handles inspired by birds or fish. A storyknife is used by carving pictures that go along with a spoken story into an area of mud or wet sand. The stories told by a young girl are sometimes taught to her by her mother or older sisters. Other times, she makes them up herself. Stories are still told in this fashion by young Inuit girls, although they are more often told using sticks or metal butter knives today.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Publications for middle school teachers and above on Wisconsin Indians and American Indians in general. Compiled by Dawn Scher Thomae, Curator of Anthropology Collections, Milwaukee Public Museum

BOOKS

- **Native People of Wisconsin** by Patty Loew (student book and teacher guide for middle school)
- **Indian Nations of Wisconsin** by Patty Loew (easy to read detailed descriptions for a high school and above)
- **Wisconsin Indians** by Nancy Oestreich Lurie (history of Federal Indian policies and affairs in Wisconsin, for high school age)
- **The Woodland Indians of the Western Great Lakes** by Robert and Pat Ritzenthaler (subjects include food, life cycle, social organization, material culture, religion and ceremonial life, games, and music for High school audience.)
- **Digging and Discovery: Wisconsin Archaeology** by Diane Young Holliday and Bobbi Malone (student book and teacher guide for middle school)
- **Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes** by Carl Waldman (accurate bitsized descriptions of almost all tribes in the United States and Canada)
- **Atlas of the North American Indian** (Excellent history and subject coverage in brief, for middle school and above.)
- **Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History** by Helen Hornbeck Tanner (Great lakes Indian history through maps and early writings, for high school and above.)

WEBSITES

- Indian Country: www.mpm.edu/wirp/ Wisconsin Indian History, tribes and subjects produced by the Milwaukee Public Museum
- Native Tech: www.nativetech.org/ Ever evolving website on Native American technology, materials and terms.
- American Indian FAQ for Kids: www.native-languages.org/kidfaq.htm#7 Basic questions asked and answered regarding American Indians

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