

Letters from the Past...

Writing “Primary Source Letters” to Better Understand the Lives of the Railway Mavericks

Introduction

Students need to gain an understanding of the Canadian people and the story of how Canada developed into the country it is now. The diversity of Canada’s heritage and how the ways of life have changed will be revealed through an examination of primary source historical letters and then allowing students to write their own. How did people communicate without phones or computers in the late 1800’s? What was it like building a transcontinental railway? What hardships were faced? What was life like for a Chinese railway worker?

Project Explanation

In this project, students will develop an appreciation of the way of life for people who lived in the late 1800’s, and especially for those who were part of the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Students will research and role play one of the Mavericks by writing a fictional primary source historical letter to their wife, family, the company president, or even the Prime Minister at the time, John A. MacDonald. As much knowledge and historical facts will be incorporated into the letters as possible.

Materials and Resources Needed

- [Mavericks: An Incorrigible History of Alberta](#)
- Glenbow Library and Archives
<https://glenbow.ucalgary.ca/>
- Canadian Pacific Railway
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/canadian-pacific-railway>
- Our History – Canadian Pacific Railway
<https://www.cpr.ca/en/about-cp/our-history>
- The Rail from Sea to Sea
<https://www.historymuseum.ca/history-hall/the-rail-from-sea-to-sea/>
- Primary Source Letter Examples – This Glenbow page consists of original letters written by Father Constantine Scollen, 1841- 1902.
https://ucalgary-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=01UCALG_ALMA21694074780004336&context=L&vid=UCALGARY&search_scope=UCALGARY_PRINT&tab=ucalgary_alma&lang=en_US

Procedures

Students will create a “primary source” letter to the family of one of the “Railway” Mavericks. It will be written from the perspective of the Maverick, telling about their life and accomplishments in relation to building the CPR. The students will put themselves in the shoes of William Van Horne, William Pearce, Mary Schäffer Warren or James Mah Poy, or even create their own character who would have lived at the time and been involved with the railroad in some way.

A primary source is a document, artifact, or photograph that is original and was created as a firsthand or eyewitness account of an event or life. Examples might include letters, diaries, postcards, legal records, drawings, paintings, maps, or newspapers. They are an important source of history as they tell us much about the creators, how they lived, and what they believed.

Using the *Mavericks: An Incorrigible History of Alberta* site, the students will research as much information as possible about the construction of the CPR and the life of one of the specific Mavericks presented. This will provide the factual information they will need to include in the letters they will write, as they become that a person from that time period. They should also examine some of the primary source letters on the Maverick site or those written by Father Constantine Scollen in the site above. This will help the students to gain an understanding of what an authentic letter from the time might look like, so that they might reproduce the look and feel in their own letters.

Students may choose to write the letter as the Maverick themselves, or as someone else who would have been near to them. It could be as an assistant, a fellow labourer, a friend, a relative, a Chinese railway worker, or another executive from the CPR. The letter they write will tell as much as possible about their life. Where do they live? What do they eat and drink? What do they do all day? What other people are around? What do they do for fun? How do they get around? Is their job dangerous? How do they feel about their life and their job? Yet, it must be written and sound like a letter rather than a research report.

The students must also decide upon a context for the letter. It could be a writing home, to a friend, an update to Sir William Van Horne or the Prime Minister John A. MacDonald, or even a complaint about the working conditions or the Pacific Scandal of 1872-73. They will also have to find an appropriate date, salutation, and closing for their letter.

Once they have written a rough draft, the students will have to creatively figure out how they would like to make the document look aged. They could use fancy cursive script, try to use an ink calligraphy pen, yellow the paper, tear, bend, fold or roughen up the paper to make it look as authentic as possible.

Assessment and Evaluation

- Students and their teacher should develop their own rubric by identifying evaluation criteria for the project that will match their own learner outcomes. This allows students to understand the expectations for their work and to have input into the ongoing evaluation process.
- Students may evaluate themselves and their peers using their project rubric, examining each other's project for historical accuracy, detail, and creativity.
- After completing the project, students may talk or journal about what they felt they did very positively, what they had difficulty with, and how they would change how they would approach a similar project in the future.

Ideas to Enrich this Project

- Students may use the [Glenbow Library and Archives Digital Collection](#) or [Google Images](#) to find and add photographs that the historical person might have included with the letter at the time it was sent.