

Iroquois Confederacy

Oral History

Objectives:

- *Understand the Iroquois history has been passed through each generation through oral history.*

Introduction

1. Oral Review – What is the Iroquois Confederacy? Why are they important to Pennsylvania History?

Activities

2. History in Pictures – This will be a quick draw. Handout, “History in Pictures” to the students. Students will complete the 9 frames by drawing pictures of important events in their lives. You may want to do an example to share with the students. Then orally re-tell your story (about your life) to a partner. What is the advantage of telling something orally? What are disadvantages?
3. Read: Oral History to the students. Discuss.
4. Read the different Iroquois legends.

Closure

5. Exit Slip or Learning Log – What is oral history? What are some advantages of oral history? What are some disadvantages of oral history?

Name _____

Date _____

History in Pictures

Oral Tradition

Oral tradition is the practice of passing on knowledge from one generation to the next without it being written down. It is usually done through stories, songs, or poetry. Many folk tales and Legends are oral stories.

History of the Iroquois

In about 1390, today's State of New York became the stronghold of five powerful Indian tribes. They were later joined by another great tribe, the Tuscaroras from the south. Eventually the Iroquois, Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, and Cayugas joined together to form the great Iroquois Nation. In 1715, the Tuscaroras were accepted into the Iroquois Nation.

The Five Nations

Long, long ago, one of the Spirits of the Sky World came down and looked at the earth. As he travelled over it, he found it beautiful, and so he created people to live on it. Before returning to the sky, he gave them names, called the people all together, and spoke his parting words:

"To the Mohawks, I give corn," he said. "To the patient Oneidas, I give the nuts and the fruit of many trees. To the industrious Senecas, I give beans. To the friendly Cayugas, I give the roots of plants to be eaten. To the wise and eloquent Onondagas, I give grapes and squashes to eat and tobacco to smoke at the camp fires."

Many other things he told the new people. Then he wrapped himself in a bright cloud and went like a swift arrow to the Sun. There his return caused his Brother Sky Spirits to rejoice.

The Six Nations

Long, long ago, in the great past, there were no people on the earth. All of it was covered by deep water. Birds, flying, filled the air, and many huge monsters possessed the waters.

One day the birds saw a beautiful woman falling from the sky. Immediately the huge ducks held a council.

"How can we prevent her from falling into the water?" they asked.

After some discussion, they decided to spread out their wings and thus break the force of her fall. Each duck spread out its wings until it touched the wings of other ducks. So the beautiful woman reached them safely.

Then the monsters of the deep held a council, to decide how they could protect the beautiful being from the terror of the waters. One after another, the monsters decided that they were not able to protect her, that only Giant Tortoise was big enough to bear her weight. He volunteered, and she was gently placed upon his back. Giant Tortoise magically increased in size and soon became a large island.

After a time, the Celestial Woman gave birth to twin boys. One of them was the Spirit of Good. He made all the good things on the earth and caused the corn, the fruits, and the tobacco to grow.

The other twin was the Spirit of Evil. He created the weeds and also the worms and the bugs and all the other creatures that do evil to the good animals and birds.

All the time, Giant Tortoise continued to stretch himself. And so the world became larger and larger. Sometimes Giant Tortoise moved himself in such a way as to make the earth quake.

After many, many years had passed by, the Sky-Holder, whom Indians called Ta-rhu-hia-wah-ku, decided to create some people. He wanted them to surpass all others in beauty, strength, and bravery. So from the bosom of the island where they had been living on moles, the Sky-Holder brought forth six pairs of people.

The first pair were left near a great river, now called the Mohawk. So they are called the Mohawk Indians. The second pair were told to move their home beside a large stone. Their descendants have been called the Oneidas. Many of them lived on the south side of Oneida Lake and others in the valleys of Oneida Creek. A third pair were left on a high hill and have always been called the Onondagas.

The fourth pair became the parents of the Cayugas, and the fifth pair the parents of the Senecas. Both were placed in some part of what is now known as the State of New York. But the Tuscaroras were taken up the Roanoke River into what is now known as North Carolina. There the Sky-Holder made his home while he taught these people and their descendants many useful arts and crafts.

The Tuscaroras claim that his presence with them made them superior to the other Iroquois nations. But each of the other five will tell you, "Ours was the favoured tribe with whom Sky- Holder made his home while he was on the earth."

The Onondagas say, "We have the council fire. That means that we are the chosen people."

As the years passed by, the numerous Iroquois families became scattered over the state, and also in what is now Pennsylvania, the Middle West and southeastern Canada. Some lived in areas where bear was their principal game. So these people were called the Bear Clan. Others lived where beavers were plentiful. So they were called the Beaver Clan. For similar reasons, the Deer, Wolf, Snipe and Tortoise clans received their names.

An Iroquois Legend – Why There Are Mosquitoes

Many winters ago two giant mosquitoes appeared on either side of a river. These giant creatures were as tall as a good sized pine tree. As the Indian people paddled down the river in their canoes, these giant creatures would bend their heads and attack them with their beaks. The mosquitoes killed many people.

Knowing that these giant mosquitoes were waiting to attack any canoe that floated down the river, the people began to shun this particular stream. It was then that these giant creatures moved to other streams to seek their prey.

For a while, it was a reign of terror for the Iroquois who were great canoe travelers. They never knew just when these giant mosquitoes would pounce out and devour them.

Finally, one day a war party was organized to seek out these creatures and to destroy them. Twenty warriors in two great canoes floated down a river where they expected the mosquitoes to be. In their hands, ever ready, they held their bows and arrows. Fastened to their belts were their war clubs and hunting knives.

Suddenly, two shadows loomed over them and a giant beak pierced one of the canoes. Giving their war cry, the warriors filled the air with many arrows. The battle was terrific! The giant mosquitoes seemed to be everywhere at the same time. In a little while, half the warriors had been killed.

The remaining braves determined to die courageously. They hid behind trees and bushes. They surrounded the mosquitoes who were unable to get them because of the thick branches. The Iroquois buried many of their arrows in the bodies of the two mosquitoes. Finally, after most of the arrows had been shot and the supply had become low, the two mosquitoes fell to the earth. They were covered with many wounds. Immediately, the warriors fell upon them with their war clubs and, with powerful blows, they tore the bodies of the mosquitoes apart.

From the blood of the two giant mosquitoes there sprang many little mosquitoes and the air was soon filled with them. These little mosquitoes, like their grandfathers, are fond of the taste of human blood. They hate man for killing their grandfathers and are continually trying to get revenge upon man for this reason.

This is how mosquitoes came to be. The battle took place on the Seneca River in New York State.

Woman Who Fell from the Sky

In the beginning, in the Sky World, a pregnant wife asked her husband to fetch the delicacies she craved. But she wanted the bark of a root of the Great Tree in the middle of the Sky World, which none were permitted to touch. Finally, however, he gave in, and scraped away soil to bare the root of the Tree. Underneath was a hole, and as the woman peered down into it, she fell through. The birds helped transport her as she fell, and the great Sea Turtle received her on his back.

Here, on the Sea Turtle's back, she planted bits of the roots and plants she had brought from the Sky World. And she walked across the turtle's back, planting, praying and creating the Earth that we know as Turtle Island.

The woman who had fallen from the sky then had a daughter, who became impregnated by the West Wind. While in the womb, the daughter's unborn twins began to quarrel about how they should emerge, the left-handed twin refusing to be born in the usual way. Instead, he forced himself out of his mother's left armpit, killing her as a result. The newborn twins then buried their mother, who became Corn Mother, source of corn, beans and squash, the Three Sisters of the Iroquois. From her heart grew sacred tobacco, used to send messages and thanks to the Sky World.

The two brothers continued to compete with each other as they created the animals and plants, and in the process, represented different ways of living. Right-Handed Twin created the beautiful hills, lakes, blossoms, gentle creatures; Left-Handed Twin, the jagged cliffs and whirlpools, thorns and predators. Right-Handed Twin was always truthful, reasonable, goodhearted, and "straight-arrow"; Left-Handed Twin lied, fought, rebelled and made "crooked" choices.

Because Right-Handed Twin created human beings, he is known as "Our Creator," and "The Master of Life." But Left-Handed Twin helped, and invented rituals of sorcery and healing. The world they built included both cooperation and competition, lovingkindness and aggression.

After they finished their creations, they continued to compete in other ways - by gambling, by playing lacrosse, then fighting with clubs. One day, grasping a deer antler, Right-handed Twin finally prevailed, and killed his brother, throwing the body of Left-Handed Twin over the edge of the earth. As a result,

Right-Handed Twin rules day and the Sky-World and Left-Handed Twin prevails over night and the lower world.

Grandmother Skywoman was furious that Right-Handed Twin murdered his brother, and accused him of wrongdoing. Angry, and believing that grandmother had always favored the errant Left-Handed Twin, he cut off her head and threw it up toward the sky, where it became the Moon. Then he threw her body into the ocean, where it became all the fish of the sea.

The Iroquois believe that both Left-Handed Twin and Right-Handed Twin are necessary for the world to be in balance. During festivals, day activities honor Right-Handed Twin, and night activities such as feasting, singing and dancing honor Left-Handed Twin. This tension and struggle for balance between the two brothers and principles of life is incorporated into Iroquois festivals and cycles of life.