

Prairie Passages

Grade Level: 4-8

Lesson Overview

How do we really know what an Illinois prairie was like in the early 1800's? We depend on the written accounts of explorers and settlers who first traveled into and through Illinois. By reading their letters, journals and personal accounts, we can learn a great deal about the people and their journey and experiences related to an Illinois prairie.

Student Objectives

1. Interpret short writings by authors about life on the prairie.
2. Compare and contrast writing styles used from another era versus writing styles of today.
3. Compose informational writing that supports a topic or thesis with evidence (e.g. newspaper article, pamphlet, report, brochure, manual, business letter).
4. Write creatively for a specified purpose and audience (e.g. short story, poetry, radio scripts, play, TV commercial).

Materials

- ✓ Prairie Passages student readings

Background Information

When the first European explorers came to Illinois country in the 1600's, they were amazed at what they saw. They had seen oceans of water, but they had never seen land that looked like an ocean of grass. They did not have a word to describe this sight; so, they used the French word "prairie," which means meadow to describe this grassland ocean.

When the first white settlers started to arrive in the early 1800's, they were impressed with the prairie. Coming from the eastern United States, they were accustomed to land that was rolling and covered with forests. The promise of flat and sunny prairie land called to them. The documentation of their travels and first experiences with the Illinois prairie are a part of Illinois history.

Procedure

1. Before reading through the various Prairie Passages, ask students what words describe their idea or perception of the prairie. Is it a natural landscape, an empty terrain, an area of beauty, etc.? Write the various responses on the board.
2. Is a prairie visually appealing to students? Why or why not?

3. Are any of their other senses stimulated when thinking about a prairie? What sights, sounds and smells may be associated with a prairie?
 - a. Provide each student with information about prairies that is found in the Background Information portion of this guide. Ask the students to read through it to learn a brief history of life on an Illinois prairie in the 1800's; or the teacher may select to read the background information aloud to the class.

4. A collection of journal entries from pioneers and travelers of early Illinois is provided in Prairie Passages Student Readings. Divide students into small groups and have them read through the collection of journal entries. Assign one student from each group to record each group's responses. Questions for them to consider:
 - a. What were the most distinguishing characteristics of the prairie?
 - b. Did all pioneers and travelers have a favorable impression of the prairie? Why or why not?
 - c. What were some of the hardships encountered by pioneers and travelers on the prairie?
 - d. If caught in a winter snow storm, how might some pioneers and travelers keep warm?
 - e. What time of day did people travel on the prairie in order to keep bugs from bothering their animals?
 - f. Would you rather live in pioneer times or now? Why?

5. After all entries have been discussed in the small groups, discuss the questions as a whole group. From this discussion, ask the students if there are any other descriptive words that they wish to add to the words on the board. Add these words if needed. Students' illustrations and descriptions can be displayed in class.

Extension Activities

1. After reading and discussing the various journal writings, students will complete a writing assignment utilizing the information found in the Prairie Passages student readings. Suggested topics for the writing assignment include (individually or small group):
 - a. Write a journal entry for a day in your life as a young adult living on the prairie in the early 1800s.

- b. Pretend you are one of these early travelers. Write a letter to a friend to encourage or discourage them to settle in Illinois.
- c. Create a travel brochure designed to entice people to visit Illinois.
- d. Write a short story about what it would be like to be lost on the prairie.

Additional Resources

Writings about life on the prairie can be found in the historical writings section of your public library. Many libraries have collections of journals and other historical documents that will date back to the founding of individual counties in Illinois. Any children's books with which the classroom teacher is familiar, can be also used for this lesson.

Examples include:

- *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder; ISBN 0-06-440002-6
- *Addie Across the Prairie* by Laurie Lawlor; ISBN 0-671-70147-9
- *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan; ISBN 0-06-440205-3
- *Skylark* by Patricia MacLachlan; ISBN 0-06-440622-9
- *One Day in the Prairie* by Jean Craighead George; ISBN 0-06-442039-6

Diaries found on-line

- *Trip Across the Plains in 1864* by George Edwin Bushnell
<http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~steelquist/genealogy/GeoBushnell.html>
- *Iowa: To the "Land of Gold"* by Eliza Ann McAuley:
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/HNS/Domwest/mcauley.html>

Standards

Illinois English Language Arts Standards

CCRA.SL.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

CCRA.W.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCRA.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

Illinois Social Science Standard

SS.H.2.4. Using artifacts and primary sources, investigate how individuals contributed to and the founding and development of Illinois.

The **M**ultidisciplinary **A**gricultural **I**ntegrated **C**urriculum (mAGic) was created in 2004 under the leadership of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and the Facilitating Coordination in Agricultural Education Project (FCAE). Funding was made available through the FCAE grant budget from the agricultural education line item of the ISBE budget. This revision, as printed, was developed in January 2021.



These mAGic lessons are designed to bring agriculture to life in your classroom. They address the Illinois Learning Standards in math, science, English language arts and social studies.

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Prairie Passages Student Readings

The following excerpts are taken from several fiction and non-fiction books that offer representations of life on the prairie in the early 1800's.

“So when the morning’s work was done, Laura took Mary walking over the prairie. Spring flowers were blossoming and cloud shadows were trailing over the grassy slopes.”

(From “*Little Town on the Prairie*” by Laura Ingalls Wilder)

“...When Addie became tired of staring at the emptiness, of trying to find something – anything – on the horizon, she dropped to her knees and let the tall grass with its sweet, dry smell swallow her up.”

(From “*Addie Across the Prairie*” by Laurie Lawlor)

“There seemed to be no edge to the land. The very weight of the sky made Addie duck her head a little. She felt so frightened and small! She turned around and around, but every way she looked the view was the same rolling prairie stretching for miles and miles.”

(From “*Addie Across the Prairie*” by Laurie Lawlor)

“Papa needs five horses for the big gang plow,” Caleb told Sarah. “Prairie grass is hard.”

(From “*Sarah Plain and Tall*” by Patricia MacLachlan)

“There are prairies three, six, ten, and twenty leagues (one league is three miles) in length, and three in width, surrounded by forests of the same extent; beyond these the prairies begin again, so that there is as much of one sort of land as of the other.”

(From “*Prairie State*” by Paul M. Angle)

“Day after day the sun beat down, baking our little house, shriveling up the plants in the garden. It was so hot that nothing moved, not even the wind.”

(From “*Going West*” by Jean Van Leeuwen)

“Most of the land was prairie. It rolled on forever, like the back of some huge animal that might get up and run.”

(From “*Grandma Essie’s Covered Wagon*” by David Williams)

“Our house on the prairie was like a little white ship at sea. Not a tree, not a bush to be seen; just an endless tall grass that billowed in the wind like the waves of an ocean.”

(From “*My Prairie Year: Based on the Diary of Elenore Plaisted*” by Brett Harvey)

“At first, when we were told of these treeless lands, I imagined that it was a country ravaged by fire, where the soil was so poor that it could produce nothing. But we have certainly observed the contrary; and no better soil can be found, either for corn, for vines, or for any fruit whatever.”

(From “*Prairie State*” by Paul M. Angle)

“The deep ruts in the road were frozen and glazed with ice; the wind had a clean sweep across the prairies, a sweep that sometimes seemed about to carry Jethro before it. Tears froze on his cheeks, and the cold pounded against his forehead as he trudged along, weighted by the heavy, over-sized shoes and the many layers of clothing. It was bitter, but not beyond the ordinary; suffering at the mercy of the elements was accepted by Jethro as being quite as natural as the hunger for green vegetables and fresh fruit that was always with him during the winter.”

(From “*Across Five Aprils*” by Irene Hunt)

“In the summer the sun was so hot it burnt everything yellow dry. Some days the heat was so intense that we were not allowed outside the shade of the house. One day I saw the horizon swimming in ripples like water and, as I watched, shapes began to appear.”

(From “*My Prairie Year: Based on the Diary of Elenore Plaisted*” by Brett Harvey)

The following excerpts are from letters, journals and personal accounts from the materials in the collections of the Chicago Historical Society.

“The prairies here were delightful, they are from 12 to 20 miles wide, and 150 long, instead of the timber surrounding them, they surround the timber, at this season they are most beautiful. The green grass has sprung up and covered the whole bosom of these wastes; with that grass there springs up a multitude of flowers of every hue, form and scent. It is delightful to ride over this level land and every step, tramping those gems of nature underfoot. Their beautiful heads can be seen as far as the eye can reach waving in the summer wind.”

(This letter was written by Lucinda Rutherford, shortly after she settled in eastern Illinois. She wrote the letter to her mother in Pennsylvania to tell her about the Illinois country.)

“The prairies in this state are charming – great stretches of flat land, covered with wild meadows which are hemmed by thin forests. The prairies are covered all summer long with flowers that change color every month – yellow, blue, then red. By wandering from one meadow to another, one encounters a series of surprises. Huge green surfaces of unbelievable high grass which waves in the wind like the sea against a wooded background more beautiful than the English parks. These prairies are from ten to one hundred miles across, because of their size one can travel over them by horse only. In the winter, when the trails are covered with snow, people get lost and cannot find shelter. I have heard of instances when travelers, lost in the snow on the prairies, have slit the bellies of their

horses for warmth of their bodies. In summer the prairie insects are so numerous that the horses often are stung to death by them. Therefore, one must travel during the night or the early morning hours. Flies settle by the thousands on the horses, and after a ride of several hours the blood can be seen trickling down their sides. To get relief from these pests, a horse will break into a fast gallop.”

(Written by Fred Gustorf, who visited Illinois in 1835)

I am highly pleased with Michigan, but I am delighted with Illinois...The first view of a Michigan Prairie is delightful after passing the oak opening and thick forest, but the first view of an Illinois prairie is sublime...A person needs a compass to keep their course, but the more I travel over them the more I like them. There is a great variety of flowers now on the prairies, but they tell me in a month from this time they will be prettier. I have sent you a few of them with Mr. Douglas which will be all faded by the time you get them, but they will be interesting to you as you will be sure they were picked from prairies of Illinois. There is a number of other kinds on the dry prairies, some resemble sweet William, some pinks, sunflowers and almost every variety that grow in our gardens...This is the best country I have ever seen for a poor man or a rich one, an industrious man or a lazy one...It has the advantage of grist mills and saw mills, within half a mile, also a store and tavern and a thick settled neighborhood. As people build in the groves you cannot see many of your neighbors. I will not say houses yet, but cabins. In a few years, I think I can say mansions.

(Thousands of settlers entered the region after the 1832 Black Hawk War. Many came from eastern states in search of good farmland and other business opportunities. Morris Sleight came to Chicago from Hyde Park, New York, in the summer of 1834, on a journey to Michigan and Illinois in search of land on which to settle. Sleight wrote to his wife to recount his travels and to convince her that a westward trip was worthwhile. On July 9, 1834, Sleight wrote to his wife from Chicago about a trip west to Naperville)

“The appearance of the prairies disappointed me very much; the tall brown grass, coarse and scattered, gave to the whole a ragged appearance; the ground was low and marshy, and at short intervals we passed through what they here call slews. I thought, at first, that these slews were rivulets, whose streams were dried up by the long drought; but I believe their true character is long narrow ponds, or rather mud holes. There is little or no water visible; here and there a small dark pool dots the surface of the soft black mud. Clumps of grass, the size of my hat, are also sprinkled around. ‘Twas by the help of these clumps that we crossed these mud holes, as the carriage sank so deep we were all obliged to get out to enable the horses to drag it through.

(Chandler R. Gilman in 1835 as he was traveling in Illinois by stagecoach.)

“Our first experiences in prairie life were not very comfortable. Camping for the night near a pool of stagnant water, we lay down to rest, turning our horses loose to graze. In the morning our horses

were missing. We wandered all day in vain search. I had separated myself from my companions in my roving. The second night found me in a small prairie, about three miles west of the one we first entered. I lay down in the open prairie without fire or supper; my umbrella, a walking stick by day, at night a house for my head. In the morning, somewhat stiff and cold, I again began my search, and soon became as wet as if I had walked through a river, from the dew on the tall grass. For once, I felt glad of the hot sun, to warm and dry me. As a resource in an emergency, I carried a small bag of ground parched cornmeal mixed with some sugar and a little ground ginger. A tablespoon of this, with water, in some shell or the hollow of your hand, is very grateful, prevents extreme hunger, and gives reasonable nutrition. On this I subsisted for a couple of days.”

(Written by Morris Birkbeck, a wealthy English farmer, emigrated to the United States in 1817 to establish a colony. This is one of his accounts of his travel experiences in Illinois.)