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The American Family in Literature

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Introduction

The changes in the American family are startling. As a teacher in the public schools of New Haven observing the various situations from which children come, I soon realized that educators must understand the concept of family. Furthermore, teachers must be fully equipped to deal with the many manifestations of the family. Before a teacher can begin to influence a child's mind, that teacher must know with whom he is dealing. It is generally accepted that the first several years of a child's education take place in the home so the family, it follows, is the first and probably the most important molder of the child's mind. What the school gets, then, is a child who may already have his most important education in place. The school picks up the process at that point and continues. If the school continues without benefit of what family means to the child, the job may be impossible.

The first goal of my participation in the seminar on the American family is to provide a firmer understanding of what family means. When is a family a family? Why does it make a difference to teachers to know the answer to that question? The influences brought to bear in shaping a family are numerous. Cultural differences, the age at which a family begins, single-parent families, the break-up of a family, and the subsequent re-forming of a new family are some of the many influences that come to mind. In this unit I intend to take a look at a sampling of research into the formation and functioning of American families. While most of this part of the paper will be for the benefit of the teacher, I plan to discuss various configurations of the American family with my students. By doing so they will become aware that there is no one ideal type of family, and that our American culture draws much of its strength from the diversity that we all bring to it. When reading a book about a traditional family, students will be better equipped to understand their own families, many of which may not resemble the mother, father, sibling arrangement. Since so much of the literature we read in class has family as a central theme, the time spent on what makes a family will be fruitful.

The second goal of this paper is understanding literature and how family plays such an important role in so many of the novels we read. As a teacher of sixth-grade English I want my students to learn to peel away the layers of a novel or short-story and begin to see what lies beneath the plot. One novel that I plan to use, *Farmer Boy*, is the story of a pioneer family whose daily existence depends upon the family. Living on a farm, each member is a contributor to the well-being of the whole. While the family is undeniably a traditional one, students can understand why each member is such an important cog, and then relate principles of the fictional family to their own, even if their family may be far from traditional. The model of a family presented

in *Farmer Boy* is clear, and from that starting point we can develop a deeper understanding of the variations of the family.

A second book that I plan to use is *Nobody's Family Can Change*. In this novel the family is also traditional in the mother, father, sibling sense, but now we have an Afro-American family living in the present in New York City. The story revolves around the conflicts of the children in coping with the family's values, and their own desires and aspirations. Students enjoy this book because of its contemporary language and problems, but it also provides insights into the generational advancements of families, that is, parents expecting a child to progress beyond what they have. This theme is very important to immigrant as well as Afro-American families. In the novel we see goals of children that are different from what parents expect, a pertinent issue to many young adults who are pushed and pulled by peer pressure in contemporary America.

The third goal of the paper is to look at art as a chronicler of the American family and how art can open our eyes to the changes that have occurred. In particular I want to concentrate on photography as an historical marker of changes in the American family. However, I want most of the emphasis to be on the students' own pictorial documentation of family. No family, it seems, is absent of a photographic record of its important events. These snapshots may or may not be art, but they surely provide the color or vividness to one's recollections of his own personal history as a part of his family. Wedding pictures, baby pictures, picnics, trips or shots of everyone gathered together for holidays provide frozen moments that provide amazing impetus for discussion and then writing in a classroom. Students love to talk about themselves. Getting them to write it on paper is not always so easy. Photographs can provide the needed push into creative writing about a topic a student feels comfortable with.

My role as a teacher of young adults carries with it a responsibility to understand as well as possible what influences may have made them what they are. My role as an English teacher, then, makes me want to use these powerful forces in their lives to advantage. By using family, good literature and art as motivators, I want to build appreciation for all three. I want the students in my classes to understand family, and to feel comfortable enough with it to use it as a force in their writing. Through the development of this unit on the American family, I hope to accomplish all these goals.

Thoughts on the Family

A general definition of family is impossible because of the various cultural colorations of the concept. There are some basic similarities among various peoples that might prove useful in trying to understand the importance of family in our own particular society. People everywhere seem to live in groups that can be called families. While different cultures have different specific values that determine family structure, there are basic social functions that need to be met by families in general, such as child bearing, child rearing and control of sexual behavior. As our own society changes, we can see different methods of achieving basic goals of a family. In Colonial America, families were quite large, a practice that seems to have continued for quite some time. Many ethnic immigrants came to America with their own cultural mores concerning marriage. As society modernized, for example, family size seems to diminish, until we have family size in modern America down to one, two or three children. The basic function of family remains constant. It still is the primary imparter of values, but, in America, at least, the family has had to make many changes, and has had to make them extremely rapidly at times.

Teachers deal with families. The student is the teacher's primary concern, but the student comes with a set of values taught to him by his family. As family structure changes, these values tend to change as well. In the article, "The Family As a Changed Institution", Pepper Schwartz (1988) notes that the American family is

composed of voluntary associations. Spouses can leave, children have outside resources to rely on if they perceive the family crumbling. The divorce rate, women's rights, psychiatry emphasizing self over community may all have a hand in creating this flexible concept of family. Schwartz hypothesizes that the traditional family was undermined with the founding of our country on the principle of enlightened self interest. When that concept is extended to all people, as it is happening more today, the family would have to change drastically. A family is a group in which some members must compromise their own self-interest for the good of the whole. When individuals truly realize a sense of self, then the family unit cannot exist as it once did. Schwartz envisions the creation of three major family types, an idea that teachers can consider and benefit from. The single-head household will be prevalent among the poor as long as society picks up the economic burden of supporting families that are centered around women and children. The middle class family will be composed of two wage earners either of whom cannot provide enough for the desired lifestyle. The strong incentive to marry and remarry is present so that this arrangement can continue. Divorce is undesirable due to the high cost, but will occur. The executive family will have one income, (usually the male's), high enough to allow the other partner the choice not to work. If both decide to work, economic independence will be further enhanced. All three situations have parents doing the best they can for themselves first, and their children second. The individual is concerned with being successful and society is providing a structure that allows this to happen. In our society it is becoming difficult if not impossible to retain the notion of family as a group giving up self for the whole. The idea of Dad going out to work while Mom stayed home is no longer feasible in today's society which is acutely aware of every individual's right to self-fulfillment. It is important to understand and accept the changing concept of family, and extremely important not to judge the concept. In particular teachers must not judge the family, but understand its workings and how it affects teaching.

Before disposing of the traditional family, shouldn't we look a little more closely at it? Traditional extended families as brought to America by immigrants stressed obedience to parents, respect for elders, loyalty to the family and similar values that can be found in literature. However, could the children of these families succeed in America? In an article by Martin King Whyte titled "Is America Well Served by Its Family System?" (1988), the author states that immigrant children could not succeed unless their families adapted to the founding principles of American society. Assimilation necessitated family change. As Mr. Whyte points out, the assimilation argument has its objectors who feel that American children do not interact enough with adults. Young people spend more time in peer groups that reject adult values and this leads to antisocial behavior. Traditional immigrant families, strong family bonds and loyalties exert powerful inducements to study hard, to excel in sports and music, deferring pleasure, so as to repay the family for its sacrifices. Japan's family system is frequently cited as an example of the benefits of traditional family structure. The fact that Japanese women withdraw from outside social contacts allows them to concentrate totally on encouraging and assuring that their children will do well. When Japanese children are compared to American children academically, the case for traditional family values seems to take on added weight.

Should the traditionalists' view lead America to return to the traditional family values? Whyte correctly states that America never had such a tradition, even if some immigrant groups brought one with them. What is more important is the nature of the relations among generations and what values are stressed during child rearing. How do we raise children who possess the values that Americans deem important to society? Those values are autonomy, self-development, a desire to overcome obstacles, a curiosity about how things work and a desire to seek perfection, even if it can never really be achieved. Perhaps these values, too, need to be questioned. Have we produced too many artistic, creative individuals, and not enough disciplined workers? When teachers ponder such questions, it is not so much an effort to answer them, but to be aware of what it is we do each day. The responsibility for developing the American value system does fall on teachers' shoulders, even though that responsibility may be unwanted. Teachers must know what our country's goals are before they

can address the questions.

An article entitled, "Social Structure and Black Family Life, An Analysis of Current Trends", by Robert Staples (1987) provided many useful insights into minority families. Historically, the Black family structure was thought to have been destroyed under slavery. This idea has been challenged, Staples tells us, through the use of slave journals, that Black families were functioning institutions and strong family ties persisted in the face of frequent breakups as a result of slave trading. Black culture flourished, the matriarchy was in reality a healthy equality of the sexes and the majority of Blacks were lodged in nuclear families in cities between 1880 and 1925. Slave narratives can be tainted since they were frequently edited by northern abolitionists, but historians conclude that the Black family was stable during and immediately after slavery. The rise in out-of-wedlock children and female-headed households are more the result of twentieth century urban ghettos, northern segregation in obtaining industrial jobs, vulnerability to disruptions due to urbanization, reduction of family functions, and the loss of extended family supports.

Staples says that education, employment and income are the principal supports for families. He contends that little change has occurred in all three areas when comparing Black to white families. Blacks are more likely to drop out of high school, Black women tend to be slightly better educated than Black men, and Blacks do not get the same rewards financially for their education. One third of America's Black population is living at poverty levels, and one fourth are receiving public assistance. Unemployment among Blacks is extremely high. These figures point to reasons why the Black family is struggling to maintain its integrity.

The sexual revolution has affected Blacks more than whites. Black women are twice as likely to engage in sexual intercourse by age 19 as white women. A result is the large number of Black children born out-of-wedlock. The increasing divorce rate in America has affected Black couples more than whites. Female headed households have increased, and the number of Black children living in two parent families has declined. The total birthrate among Black women is decreasing, particularly among college educated Black women, which points to the need for low cost abortions and education about the prevention of pregnancy. Staples' conclusion is that public policy must not attempt to force idealized middle-class family models on Black families, (or on white families, for that matter), but should educate the population according to the needs the statistics demonstrate. Clearly, according to Staples, America must move away from middle-class Puritanism, the Protestant ethics and out-dated ideas about male-headed families.

Staples relates some thought-provoking ideas about why the nuclear family has declined among Black Americans. He says the basis of a stable family depends on the desire to bear and raise children and fulfill certain roles. The traditional role of men, economic provider, is difficult to fulfill due to the unemployment problems among young Black men. Staples provides the all too familiar statistics regarding the incredible unemployment rate among young Black men, the very same pool of marriage aged men. Those that are employed have a high rate of underemployment. They are overeducated for their jobs and have difficulty translating their education into a meaningful job. Marriage in the traditional sense, based on the above societal factors, becomes extremely difficult. There are further complications. Black males are more likely to be committed to mental institutions than Black females. Black males are much more likely to have drug and alcohol abuse problems. These and other problems affect the non-college educated women when seeking a traditional-role husband. Black college-educated women, if they desire to marry a Black male of similar educational background, find that about 43% of Black college students are men, and that these men have a much higher attrition rate than their female counterparts.

In conclusion, Staples feels that the decline in Black family structure is in tune with changes in American

families. He concludes that the forces that are redefining American family structure in general are much more pronounced among Blacks because of the “institutional decimation of Black males.” (pg. 283) The social forces that account for dropping out of society in general, also account for Black men eschewing traditional family roles. The origin of these forces is in the school systems that better educate Black women for reasons that are open to speculation. Staples cites studies that show female-headed households declining when the supply of Black males increases. Finally, the crisis of the Black family is caused by the inability of the Black male to fulfill the traditional role of husband and father.

What conclusions can a teacher in an urban school draw from such insightful, thought-provoking studies? Primarily, what comes through clearest is that changing family structure is certainly nothing new. Our country has such diverse influences that arriving at a model family structure is absurd. As a teacher one must be prepared to adapt to as many different cultural make-ups as there are children in the classroom. Awareness of the diversity is an important step in providing the best educational environment possible. More importantly, teachers must control expectations in regard to family structure, and teachers must never judge family structures. What enters the door is what must be worked with. It makes for a very exciting day, and yet new problems still arise. In the Friday, May 25, 1990 edition of “The New York Times,” a headline reads, “Crack Babies Turn 5, and Schools Brace.” The first line of the article says, “The nation’s inner-city schools, already strained by the collapse of families and the wounds of poverty, will face another onslaught this fall—the first big wave of children prenatally exposed to crack.” The uncertainty of the consequences of drug abuse in our society, and in our schools, will be the next huge problem getting addressed. The problems that already exist will not go away, and will continue to need society’s dedication. Public education is going to play a major role in dealing with all of them.

Students’ Reading

Farmer Boy

The book *Farmer Boy*, by Laura Ingalls Wilder, is an excellent portrayal of American family life in the late 19th century. While great changes were beginning to take place in the cities of America, the agrarian organization on small farms was still in effect. Family life as represented in the book centered on the necessity of each individual contributing to the success of the farm. The four children, two boys and two girls, are an integral part of the farm even as they grow up. Mother and Father need the assistance of the children in a very real way. As today’s students read this novel, they begin to get a vivid historical perspective of the American family, and also a sense of the importance of the younger members of a family contributing to the total well-being of the family unit. Each chapter of the book becomes a vignette depicting an aspect of farm life in detail. Indeed, a chapter can be lifted from the whole book and read as a short story. By the end of the book students have a vivid mosaic of family life in the 1860’s.

In reading through the table of contents of *Farmer Boy*, one can sense that many aspects of farm life will be recounted throughout. What could this book possibly hold for today’s young people? A book about farm life in 1866 America would surely bore these modern, sophisticated pre-teens. Chapter titles such as, “Filling the Ice House”, or “Breaking the Calves”, or “Spring Harvest” surely cannot interest today’s students. Surprisingly, these pages do indeed interest students today, but not so much because they can relate to the chores described. Throughout this book, students recognize what it takes to make a happy successful family life.

Today's readers see a group of people working together toward a common goal, and this they can certainly understand, even though the actual make-up of their own family does not resemble the book's family.

In *Farmer Boy*, the reader observes a family that firmly has Father in charge, with Mother in a supportive role. The children, while enjoying childhood activities, must be contributors every day. This concept of family exists rarely in modern America. Today's family is more likely to have a mother and father who contribute equally to the financial security of the household, and children whose primary contribution would be the household duties that a mother would have traditionally done. Many of today's families are single-parent families, where children are called upon even more to run households. By reading *Farmer Boy*, children from a modern family gain an historical perspective of American families and can begin to make judgments about why what is the family as it is today became necessary.

People today don't live on farms the way the family in *Farmer Boy* did. If an American family does live on a farm today, it is probably a large mechanized business that does not need the kind of day to day chores that were previously necessary. Since the students in New Haven are urban, they can see the evolution of American life away from the farm as precipitating the need for a change in family structure. Quite simply, today's young person still has a chore to do, but it's running to the store to buy some milk, rather than milking the cow. The concept of being a contributor to a successful family remains, even if the structure today is extremely different from the structure in *Farmer Boy*. The book is a valuable resource for reinforcing values that make individuals important to the family. Students in an urban setting can understand that the success of the whole depends on the contributions of each individual. When reading *Farmer Boy* many discussions revolve around changing the circumstances of the book to more modern ones, and then reaching conclusions about family values. Today's families in urban settings don't labor in the fields harvesting the wheat to make the flour that results in bread. Rather the labor of the family today results in money with which to buy the bread; but the concept of a family's working together to achieve the ultimate goal remains constant.

Finally, the book *Farmer Boy* gives today's young readers incidents that talk about natural progressions in families. One example occurs when Father drinks tea from his saucer, which mortifies twelve-year-old Eliza Jane. Mother immediately defends the practice asking how else he would cool it, and that Eliza's education in the more delicate practices does not change the more ordinary ones. Clearly, as the young family members become more worldly, they begin to move away from their parents. Another example occurs when 13 year-old Royal expresses his consternation with being a farmer, and tells of his desire to be a store keeper. This occupation represents a move up in status to him that his younger brother, Almanzo, rejects. Almanzo wants to be a farmer. The conflict represents the kind of give and take that makes for healthy family growth and ultimately family stability. Regardless of differing attitudes and goals, the family remains a unit. Once more, the lessons to be learned about family are important to today's students, even though they may be grappling with extremely different circumstances.

Nobody's Family is Going to Change

Louise Fitzhugh's *Nobody's Family is Going to Change* presents a modern, sophisticated Black family living in New York City. The Sheridans consist of Mother, Father, Emma and Willie. Mr. Sheridan is a lawyer who desires his children to be successful in a very middle-class fashion. As his foil we have Dipsy Bates, Mrs. Sheridan's brother, who is a professional dancer. Mr. Sheridan holds Dipsy in low esteem, since he views dancing as an undesirable occupation for a grown man. The conflict arises because Willie wants to do nothing but dance, and is indeed quite talented. Mrs. Sheridan is caught between these opposing forces, and Emma is left to develop on her own. It is Emma that becomes the main focus of the book. She is the studious one who wants to follow

in her father's footsteps and become a lawyer. This reversal of expected roles disturbs Mr. Sheridan who holds to more traditional "female" occupations for his daughter. That his son is the budding artist and his daughter the intellectual causes him consternation. Mother assumes the role of arbiter in attempting to maintain family harmony. In addition to the main theme of the book, other issues are dealt with. Obesity, female rights, Black rights and family relationships are some that are beautifully handled.

When students read this wonderful novel, they fall with it within the first dozen pages. It has an instant appeal because it comes through as real to them, albeit in a somewhat idealized situation. The Sheridans don't have money problems, housing problems or the fear of daily life in cities. In a sense they are a very Cosby-like family, and the parallels can be readily drawn between the television show and this book. This similarity is an advantage rather than a detriment because the entertainment factor keeps young readers avidly interested and keenly eager to discuss situations in the book in relation to their daily lives. In short, the book is self-motivating and so getting at the deeper issues is easier.

What can students learn from this book if their own families are far from the likes of the Sheridans? As with discussions of *Farmer Boy*, the young reader must be shown how to peel away the layers of the story. If in *Nobody's Family is Going to Change* Willie wants to be a dancer, and his father strenuously objects, the young reader can readily move from that to a situation in his own life where he seriously wanted something that his father/mother/grandmother/aunt denied. Because it is not a "father" does not change what Mr. Sheridan represents. Families have an authority figure regardless of the sex or relation of the person who is the authority figure. Mother is the conciliator in the book, but it is the role, not the person who is important. Dipsy represents that person in the family who tells you to follow dreams and you will be successful because you will be happy. Every family has conflict, and what is important is how it gets resolved and what happens to the family because of it. In this book the mechanisms for the resolution of problems chug along at times, but points of view get heard, discussions sometimes become arguments complete with shouting matches and subsequent tears, but opposing ideas are aired and finally the firmness of the integrity of the family is the primary lesson. Young readers easily recognize that conflict does not necessarily tear apart strong families. This becomes a key to their own understanding of family at an age when conflict occurs frequently and needs some method of resolution.

Lesson Plans

I Farmer Boy

Reading the novel *Farmer Boy* seems to be the logical starting point of this unit. The book presents a traditional family, a self-sufficient unit, with very little influence from the outside. The picture of life in 19th century America is clearly drawn. Students who read the book get an historical perspective of the period and also recognize that basic family values remain constant. The book is wonderfully introduced by using a pamphlet titled *The Wilder Family Story*, by Dorothy Smith. It is available from the Franklin County Historical and Museum Society. In the pamphlet there is a brief history of the Wilder family of *Farmer Boy*. The part of the pamphlet most exciting to young readers is the photographs of the family. Indeed, for this unit, I would stress these more than the text, since one of the goals of the unit is to incorporate art into literature. Before reading the novel students can discuss their impressions of family and individual portraits, landscapes, architectural photos and photos of town scenes. An initial writing assignment could be to write about the people in a portrait. Students would be free to express whatever emotional reaction they have. Later in the unit, after reading about the characters in the novel, the students can review their initial impressions, comparing and contrasting those impressions to what has been learned from reading.

While reading *Farmer Boy*, traditional family values, as outlined earlier in this unit, should be discussed. Students should establish the family hierarchy, the level of responsibility for each member and what criteria determine that responsibility, the goals and aims of the family and the success the family has in meeting those goals. An interesting writing assignment would have students reacting to roles described in the book as contrasted to roles in today's urban family. For example, Almanzo and his brother, Royal, are continually trained by Father to become farmers, while the sisters, Eliza Jane and Alice are trained by Mother to be nurturers and care-givers. Students today have remarkably strong opinions about changing roles, and they enjoy writing about those opinions.

II Nobody's Family is Going to Change

Introducing *Nobody's Family is Going to Change* should draw from the discussions of *Farmer Boy*. Initial discussions should include identification of similarities and differences between the families in each novel. Many of the same values can be found in both books. Father still wants his son to be trained to become what he is, and Mother is still the nurturer and care-giver who is in charge of raising her daughter. However, the level of rebellion in *Nobody's Family is Going to Change* is much higher than in *Farmer Boy*. This rebellion of the family's children is the conflict that engenders lively discussions and writing.

Journals are a regular part of the writing program, and as the reading of *Nobody's Family is Going to Change* begins, journals are an ideal place for students to write about reactions to the novel. Generally, students have an opportunity to write in journals daily. A number of days can be devoted specifically to writing about the novel, or a group journal can be instituted. The group journal is only for the novel and could be a special notebook located in an easily accessible location in the room. Students write their reactions to a particular day's reading assignment on the left hand page, reserving the right hand page for any of their classmates' responses. Once certain ground rules are established, the danger of insulting or risqué writing greatly diminishes.

In addition to journal writing, another interesting, thought-provoking assignment would be to compare and contrast Father to Father, Mother to Mother, children to children in both books. In this assignment family values, roles, duties and responsibilities can be examined to establish their existence, and then to establish changes and differences between the books. Writing assignments such as this, in conjunction with previous journal writing, reaction papers, and character analyses and descriptions will establish and clarify the values that define a family for young readers. When the term family is used in class, students and teacher will be working with a collective understanding of the word that was gained through the reading and writing assignments. At that point the class can begin to talk about their own families with clearer understanding and meaning.

III

Throughout both the novels discussed previously are illustrations of individuals, groups and scenes depicting family life as described in each book. Louise Fitzhugh's novel has, even before the text, illustrations of each character. Willie Sheridan is dancing, his sister Emma is sitting in an easy chair, book in lap, holding a pair of glasses and looking a little dumpy. Mrs. Sheridan is seen in a pensive pose, legs crossed, chin on her fist as her arm rests on her knee, while light-hearted Dipsy Bates is dancing and smiling. Finally, Mr. Sheridan is dressed in his three-piece business suit, one arm akimbo, leaning against an unseen wall with his other arm. He is a picture of a serious, stern and steadfast character, but yet his bodily pose lets us know that he is not at all convinced he's going to win his battles with his children. Discussing these drawings, and the drawings scattered throughout *Farmer Boy* will lead the class into a discussion of their own family photographs, an

activity that will surely excite the young students in a sixth-grade class.

Each student will be asked to bring to class a photograph that is his or her favorite family snapshot. Limiting the choice to one will necessitate some thought on the student's part before he/she brings it into class, thereby making the student focused and better prepared to discuss the reasons why the photo was chosen. Through experience, a teacher learns that not setting a limit results in getting photo albums. While numbers of photos might be interesting for some activities, for this activity the student should be encouraged to concentrate on why he/she likes this particular photo, or class discussion and subsequent writing activities will also tend to be too diverse and unfocused.

Initially, students will meet in small groups to ensure each person an adequate amount of time to discuss his/her photo. When the class reforms as a whole, which could be the next meeting if small group discussion takes up an entire class period, the writing assignment topic is to tell the reasons for the photo's selection. Review with students some of the ideas about family that were discussed during the reading of the novels. In their papers students should identify family members present and try to answer some questions. What is each individual's role in the family? What was happening at the time the photo was taken? Who took the photo—is he/she the person who always snapped the pictures and therefore never appears in any photo—and what does that tell us about that individual? What happened right after the photo was taken? Perhaps this last question will encourage a student to discuss the photo with other members of his/her family to acquire more knowledge and information about the photo and the family. The provocation may encourage students to become a family historian which could prove to be a wealth of positive reinforcement for the student about his family.

IV

The writing project based on a family photograph leads the class discussion of family into a deeper understanding and appreciation of one's own family and identity within the family group. In the next project the emphasis shifts to the student and his place within his family group. By this point in the unit students will feel more comfortable discussing themselves within the framework of their families. Classroom discussion can be expected to be livelier and less inhibited due to the groundwork laid out by the reading and writing done previously. Students now will research and plan an oral history of themselves and their position in their families. To begin the project students will ponder some general questions such as Who am I? Where did I come from? What forces made me what I am today? Where will I be tomorrow? In an article entitled, "Utilizing Immigrant Family History in the High School Curriculum", the author, Mark Hutter, discusses the positive effect such questions and discussions have in a high school history class. While many of the techniques, goals, and specific suggestions Hutter makes for high school students are a touch advanced for sixth-graders, the basic idea is a good one that can be adapted to suit the purposes of this unit.

An oral history of one's own family allows students to focus on and talk about that which they know best. It allows students to examine themselves and talk about what is most important to them. Furthermore, it leaves a margin within which students can *not* talk about people or events that might be embarrassing because no one else knows their history. This may be valuable because sixth-graders can be shy about standing up and talking in front of their peers. However, after all the work done previously, and with the safety valve of the student's power of censorship, the shyness can be overcome.

The project will give students an opportunity to do research into their families. The research may range from interviewing older relatives, to reading written family histories, which many times takes the form of journals that parents keep of important dates, events, even medical histories of first inoculations, first words, first steps or when an individual has achieved various levels in religious education. The student can look at

historical events that may have caused particular changes or moves in his family. A lost job in one area of the country may have caused a family to relocate, and thereby caused a chain of events that gave the family an entirely new direction leading to where a student finds himself today. The students have an opportunity to learn and develop many skills while doing an oral family history. The students must do research, learn and practice interviewing techniques, develop note-taking skills, practice good, clear, concise writing skills when shaping their report, and then overcome trepidation about standing up and giving their family history to their peers. A student may have family members living a distance away and may write a letter to obtain information he/she wants to use in the final report.

After all the preparatory work on families, the discussion and writing about family photographs and the initial discussion of oral histories, the teacher must be prepared for the student who still balks about talking in front of his/her peers about his/her family. This student who remains adamantly against an oral report after positive encouragement should have the option of a written family history that will be read only by the teacher and not discussed in class. While the student might lose some of the benefit of an oral history, he/she still has the opportunity to do the research and practice the skills as the other students have done. It might happen that a reluctant student, after writing a history, will have a change of heart and make an oral report, or agree to someone in the class reading the report. In any case, every student must participate in the project, if all are to feel part of the classroom family.

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