

Oral History of Illinois Agriculture



Literature

Illinois State Museum



<http://www.avbarn.museum.state.il.us>

Storytelling in Fiction and Oral Histories

This activity looks at fiction and oral history as two ways of telling stories about living in rural areas during the Great Depression. Richard Peck's "A Long Way from Chicago" is the novel, and the ISM AV-Barn is the home of the oral histories of Illinois farmers.

Compare what Illinois farmers say they experienced in doing the same activities that the novel's characters did. Is the novel realistic, romanticized, or exaggerated? Are the oral history stories realistic, or might they be

enhanced, nostalgic, sentimentalized, or misremembered? Do they still reflect the real conditions of the 1930s?

Compare the characters and plot details of the novel with the details described in some oral histories from the AV-Barn and write an essay of your findings (or discuss them with others).

(Teaching standards for Grade 6 reading and writing in literature and history are on page 4, but the stories and artwork are of interest to all ages.)

A Long Way from Chicago

Peck, Richard [1998]. *A Long Way from Chicago*. Puffin Books, NY. ISBN: 0-14-24-110-2. 148p.

Synopsis:

A brother and sister from Chicago take an annual vacation at their grandmother's house in a very small town in Piatt County, Illinois. The novel is in the form of stories of the adventures the children had each year, 1929 – 1935.

Grandmother's character is hilarious, as are some of the town's inhabitants. The reader learns a good deal about aspects of life in a rural town during the Depression. Newberry Honor Award winner.

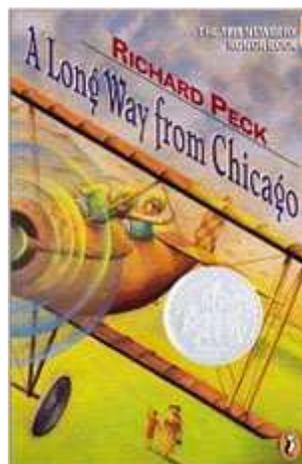
Each story tells of an adventure, a character, or a problem that Grandma confronts. They stress the importance of 'making do' during hard times, stretching resources, and always helping others.

Setting: The Great Depression, 1929—1940: Illinois rural residents experienced The Great Depression in various ways. Some farmers lost their mortgaged land to the banks. Others managed to stay on, growing their own food, bartering or trading milk or eggs for store goods, even though they had no cash.

Many farmers returned to subsistence farming so they would have enough food for their families. Livestock or produce could not be sold for a profit. Farms struggled until World War II started.

Special points of interest:

- Introduction
- Richard Peck's Novel
- The ISM AV-Barn
- Topic Search
- Harvesting the River
- WPA Art
- Teaching Standards



The Audio-Video Barn Oral Histories

Oral Histories from the ISM Audio-Video Barn and Harvesting the River: Below are listed some audio or video segments (duration 8-16 minutes) or clips (duration .5 – 3 minutes) from farmers' oral histories in the Museum's AV-Barn Web site.

The oral histories are indexed and searchable by topic, person, county, and decade.

(<http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us/clipsearch>)

Listen to them (and others you find) to compare the fictional Grandma

Dowdel's activities in the 1930s with those of real Illinois farmers. Did other farmers experience the same conditions, events, and activities that Grandma and her visiting grandchildren did? What did you learn about those activities from the oral histories and the picture galleries that you did not know before?

The **picture galleries** offer a look at the fashions, buildings, transportation, and land of 70 years ago.

(<http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us/gallery>)



Gale Williams' Milk Route Truck, 1942

Topics for an AV Search

Canning tomatoes— Grandma Dowdel and Mary Alice spend a day canning tomatoes from her garden (page 5-6). Clip search: Type "canning" then type "tomatoes" = 8 results

Making apple butter— Grandma and Mary Alice cook apples and sugar in a large pot over an open fire outside the house (page 6). clip search: Type "apple butter" (with exact phrase) = 6 results

Large breakfasts – Rural women cooked large breakfasts because workers need lost of energy (page 20). See interviewees Don, clip 475; Eva Clough, Segment 925; Mary

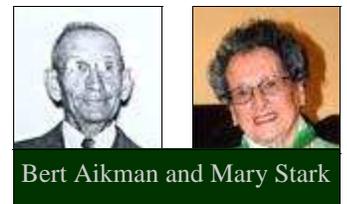
Stark, 353; Frances Culver, Segment 943 + clip 1808; Jean Sayre, Segment. 887.

Dairies and home milk delivery – Grandma got revenge on the dairyman's son with a prank of her own (page 17-35). Listen to Karl Boekenhauer, Segments 582, 585; Mary Stark, 384; Bert Aikman, segment 810, clip 1766; Wilfred Mills, 1377; Roy Nuckols, 1878; Michael Scully, 3092 as they describe dairying.

Soap making – Grandma and Mary Alice make soap from hog fat and lye (page 84-92). Jessie Saiter, clip 3498; George Cline, clip 1974; Carrie Maurer, clip 3340; Roy Nuckols, clip 1420. Cliffie Smith Patterson, clip 1313; Robert Taylor, clip 1276; Anna Williams, clip 1944.

Importance of **John Deere** works— The town has gathered property lots so that John Deere can build a depot for selling machinery (page 101-105). clip search "John Deere" + choose 1930-1940.

The coming of the automobile— Joey wants \$2.00 to buy a car-driving lesson from the mechanic (page 101-105). clip search "automobile" + choose 1930-1940. (also see Picture Gallery)



Bert Aikman and Mary Stark



Luke Bridger in his 1929 Ford Model A Touring Car



Breakfast for hired hands on the Dougan Dairy Farm, 1930s

Harvesting the River Online

Grandma Dowdel also indulged in poaching catfish from fish traps in the creek (page 37-46). Find out what fish traps are, what they look like, and how they are made and used from audio, video, and image files in the ISM Website “Harvesting the River.”

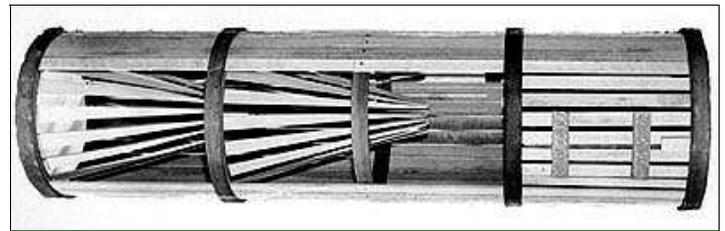
Poaching catfish traps --

<http://www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb/harvesting/archives/video/?TopicID=fishbaskets>
<http://www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb/harvesting/archives/audio/?TopicID=fishbaskets>
<http://www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb/harvesting/archives/images/index.html?TopicID=fishbaskets>

Rod and Gun Clubs— Grandma rowed past the Gun Club after she poached the fish (p. 45-49).

Take a look at some real gun club premises:

<http://www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb/harvesting/archives/audio/?TopicID=huntingcamps>
<http://www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb/harvesting/archives/images/index.html?TopicID=huntingcamps>



Catfish Trap—the fish, attracted by a bait of cheese, swim into the trap through the opening on the left. The staves flex, allowing them inside, where they are trapped. Photograph courtesy of the Illinois Natural History Survey.

Depression Era Art from the ISM Collections

Pictures—and sculpture—tell stories about the Great Depression, too. The federal government had a program called the Works Progress Administration (WPA), part of which was the Federal Artists’ Project (FAP). This program hired artists to create paintings, prints, and sculptures on special themes. These included painted murals that adorned the walls of post offices and other public buildings.

The Illinois State Museum has a collection of WPA and Depression Era artworks that are presented online at

<http://www.museum.state.il.us/ismdepts/art/WPA/index.html>

There is an introduction, an image gallery, and a link to an educational web exhibit that describes the five FAP themes. There are about 100 images of FAP artwork. Here are two. The mood expressed by both of them is somber and stoic. Both the people and the farm buildings are firmly anchored in the soil.

View the art in the online gallery and compare its content and feel to that of the Depression-era novels you read.



Rural Scene by Irean Gordon,
oil on canvas
circa 1940



Couple by Simon Gordon
painted plaster,
circa 1935 - 1940
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Louis Cheskin

Common Core Standards for Teachers

Common Core Standards in Language Arts, Grades 6

Career Readiness Standards in Reading

2. Determine central ideas of themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Reading Standards for Literature Grade 6

Key Ideas or Details 3: Describe how a story's plot unfolds (in a series of episodes or as a problem to be solved) as well as how characters adapt or change as they move toward a resolution.

Reading Standards for Informational Text Grade 6

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7:

Compare and contrast the accounts of a subject in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story told in print, video, or multimedia), analyzing which details are emphasized and how the account unfolds in each version.

Career Readiness Standards in Writing

Text types and purposes 1: Write arguments to support a substantive claim with clear reasons and sufficient evidence.

- Introduce a claim about a topic or issue and organize the reasons and evidence to support that claim.
- Support the claim with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
- Use words, phrases or clauses to convey the relationships among claims and reasons.
- Sustain an objective style and tone.
- Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from the argument.

Research to Build Knowledge

8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility of each source, and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and documenting sources.

9: Write in response to literary or informational sources, drawing evidence from the text to support analysis and reflection as well as to describe what they have learned.

- b. apply grade 6 reading standard to literary non-fiction (distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasons judgment presented in a text.