

THE GREAT FIRE OF SAINT JOHN: PRODUCING HISTORIC PLAYS

Susan Bate, New Brunswick

INTENDED GRADE LEVEL/SUBJECT AREA

Grades 8 and 9 History, Language, Theatre Arts

CONCEPTS

Local history, geography, research, drama

INSTRUCTIONAL OUTCOMES

Students will:

- appreciate their own city by taking an in-depth look at one period of its history;
- understand the process, method and approach which is unique to the study of history;
- demonstrate an understanding of how geographic forces shape culture and history;
- create a cooperative book while learning research skills and the steps of the writing process;
- use writing and other ways of representing to explore, clarify, and reflect on their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and learning;
- use their imagination.

RECOMMENDED TIME FRAME

This project was carried out during most of the English classes of 9F, using approximately five 40-minute periods a week for the full school year.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

“Project 1877” was a partnership project linking the class of 9F of Quispamsis Junior High to the community theatre company, New City Theatre Company, Ltd. In the fall of 1996, the company announced that it would be producing an historic drama, *From These Ashes*, on June 20 and 21, 1997. The play describes the golden days of Saint John in 1877 and shows the effects of the Great Fire on the city. The students were offered an opportunity to learn about an exciting era in the history of their city through their research and promotional work for this production.

The success of this project was due to the highly motivating factor that the students were participating in a community project. The research and writing the students did was actually for a real purpose and for real people—the actors needed to know about the era so they could understand and develop their characters. The students were helping them accomplish this by providing a book or relevant topics on the era.

It also helped that their English teacher was also the writer and producer of *From These Ashes*.

ACTIVITY

Part One — The Book

The first part of the project was to create a background document for the actors of New City Theatre Company's production, *From These Ashes*. The twenty students of 9F chose a topic from Saint John in 1877 about which to write a chapter. Some examples were food, law, women's issues, schools, politics, music, transportation, and the Great Fire itself. During November and December, we visited the Saint John Regional Library and the Saint John Archives. Each student was also set up with an expert in their field to interview about their topic. The students took notes from original documents, kept track of their references and then began writing their chapters through a series of rough drafts.

The Process Writing steps were introduced, and the students wrote outlines using their notes and spent their class time in January, February, and March writing and editing their drafts. The book, *Project Saint John 1877*, was printed and bound on Friday, March 21. On Monday, March 24, ten copies of the book were delivered to the actors of *From These Ashes*.

Part Two — The Press Release

An important part of promoting an event is writing a clear and concise press release. Douglas Hughes, the Entertainment Editor of the *Times Globe* newspaper, came to speak to the class. This proved to be valuable in three ways: Mr. Hughes clearly taught us how a press release should be written; we made a permanent connection with him as the Entertainment Editor; and he wrote up a commentary in the paper about our first press release sent in by one of the students, Corey James Asher. Mr. Hughes brought a photographer with him and we got our publicity!

Each student took one aspect of the production and created a press release. Each interviewed a Production Coordinator or participant and found a hook for their story. We sent out two press releases to the local paper and one more was used in an article.

Part Three — The Skit

The students of 9F performed, for Heritage Saint John's annual dinner at the Imperial Theatre, a series of skits portraying a day-in-the-life of 1877 in Saint John. Taking the research notes, eight students worked with me to write the script collectively. We brought in the rest of the class to rehearse the skits after school and in the evenings. The end result was very successful! The audience enjoyed the fine, clear voices of the students during the imaginative historic dialogues.

Near the end of May, the students had two full days on the road with their skit. We performed for two high school theatre arts classes in the city, a small rural school in Gagetown, NB, and a junior high in Grand Bay. As well, we performed for a Listen and Lunch series at the local cultural centre, ABEC, and at a Heritage Fair for schools in Saint John.

Part Four — Creating A Historic Keepsake

The students daily plan for May and June was helping put together the program for the main show, *From These Ashes*. The program itself was to be a special keepsake document. Each ad contained

an anecdote, story, or fact from 1877 about the fire or as a commentary about the lively social and business community in Saint John at the time. The sponsor committee at New City Theatre targeted several businesses that existed in 1877 and were burned out in the fire but still existed today.

The students were, once again, on the research trail. They contacted the committed businesses and talked to them about ideas for their ad. Working in pairs, the students found out what historic information was needed for the ads. The New City Sponsor Committee took over at this point because exams were upon us and the end of the year was in sight. The students had their own page in the program acknowledging the people and institutions that helped make Project 1877 possible and describing the part they played in bringing about this historic production, *From These Ashes*.

MATERIALS/RESOURCES

- A local theatre group willing to work with the students.
- Historical texts with information about the era.
- Photos, documents, maps and plans from the local archives.

About the Educator

Susan Bate believes that historical fiction is a powerful tool for connecting students to their past. Using a play she co-authored about life in Saint John at the time of the Great Fire of 1877, Susan began involving her students in local, historical research. To mark the 120th anniversary of the Great Fire, the play was to be produced on June 20, 1997. The grade nine students researched primary sources and interviewed local historians in order to provide actors with the historical background they needed. Their research was then written and published as *Project Saint John 1877*, a collection of short essays on urban life in Saint John. Students also promoted the play by creating advertising and through a skit they wrote and performed. Through the use of historical fiction, Susan has managed to teach a piece of Canadian history in a creative and meaningful way.