

Promoting Historic Preservation in the Classroom

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Since 1998, my classroom has doubled as a training ground for students to experience archeology, research, service learning, outreach and political activism, all within the history curriculum. In 1998, I began teaching a class I called Research History. It was based on the concept of getting students involved using primary historical data to complete a single class project. This class fit the 12th grade history content standard for Ohio: Analyze primary-source material to see if a historical interpretation is supported.

I offered the Research History class as an elective for 12th grade students. It is one of multiple social studies classes I teach. I generally have a class of two to three students at different periods throughout the day, with a total of 15-25 students throughout the year. Over the years, I've realized that my students' after school time is filled with extracurricular music, athletics, and jobs. Students get whatever project we are working on completed during class. Often my students leave the building to conduct research, but on class time. We try to schedule one field trip per grading period.

Students have researched our local connections with the Underground Railroad, local United States Colored Troops (Civil War-era African American soldiers), and transcribed the minutes of a local African American G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic) post (one of the only two known sets of minutes in existence). Beginning in 2003, my class began working on the Veterans History Project.

The Veterans History Project

The Veterans History Project was created by a unanimous vote of Congress in October 27, 2000, and has since been

coordinated by the Library of Congress and its American Folklife Center. The goal is to collect and preserve the stories of all living veterans before they are lost. According to the Veterans History Project, approximately 1,500 veterans (and their stories) are lost every day. Recently, the Department of Veterans Affairs Data, listed less than six World War I veterans and approximately 3.24 million World War II veterans still living. The Department of Veterans Affairs also estimates that by September 30, 2020, only 210,000 World War II veterans will still be alive. This is a vanishing chapter in our heritage.

This Veterans History project also would cover Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm and the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. All of these veterans' stories should be preserved. The Veterans History Project comes with a detailed project kit. The kit includes instructions, explanations, information and sample questions for interviews, as well as forms for transcribing and formatting the interview.

My history class began this project in the fall of 2003. We began by interviewing several of our local World War II veterans. Because our work was limited

to our class period, roughly half of the veterans came to our high school to be interviewed. However, due to health reasons, we drove to a few of the veterans' homes. Generally, we would do one or two interviews per week. But one day, during the 2004-2005 Christmas break, a veteran invited us to interview a group of veterans from Miami Valley in Yellow Springs, Ohio, about an hour from our town of Washington Court House.

Originally, my students put together our script of questions drawn from the kit and used a cassette recorder during the interviews. We soon concluded that we needed a better way to preserve the data, so we digitized and stored the interviews on the computer. Once digitized, we could burn CDs and store the data safely. You could also use a digital recorder, and go straight to the computer. For transcribing purposes, we have found the cassette tapes to be easier than CDs. However, my fear (which has been realized more than once) is that the cassette tapes can break and sometimes are no good. The digital back up is an important step in the process of preserving and maintaining historic accounts.

The reality is that this, like every worthwhile project, takes more time than first anticipated. This is not a project that can be done quickly. The transcribing process is slow. The Library of Congress requests the tape of the interview and an exact transcription. Most of the interviews themselves last between 30 and 60 minutes. Yet completing a final transcript (depending on the ability of my students)

takes 20 to 30 hours. Students would tape an interview and transcribe over several weeks (during our one class period, one hour per day, five days a week). A legitimate goal for some students is to transcribe 1 to 2 interviews during the course of a 12-week grading period. A class could work to interview and transcribe a single veteran's story and would have accomplished a significant feat. This project takes on a life of its own. I'm proud to say we have interviewed more than 50 veterans, mostly from World War II, as well as several from Korea and Vietnam. We have sent 32 completed transcripts to the Library of Congress. Realistically, it will take several more years of work to transcribe the remaining tapes.

What My Students Have Learned

Although this project has its frustrating moments, such as transcribing difficulties, every student walks away with a feeling of appreciation of the stories that their elders have to share.

"I learned a lot about the person's life through their memories, there is more to history than what the books say," said one senior, Michaela Sanders. "You learn so much from reading an actual veteran's story, and it is easier to remember and understand. I also didn't know that African Americans had the roles they did in the Marines, Army, etc."

Almost all of the students agree that the most difficult aspect of this project is understanding the veterans on tape. "Our goal is to preserve the story to the best of our ability, and it is somewhat frustrating when you can't identify the place they are talking about, or the person's name they are referring to," said senior Laura Richards.

Two of my students have had the opportunity to interview and transcribe their own grandfathers' stories. Tobin Perrill transcribed interviews with his grandfather and two great uncles on their World War II experiences. "It was a very neat opportunity ... to be allowed to get hands-on experience with their stories, and the struggles they faced throughout the war," said Tobin. Lindsey Taylor interviewed her grandfather as well. She



George Walker, a 1st lieutenant in the U.S. Army during World War II, answered students questions, in 2004, about his wartime experiences, such as the discovery of a secret Nazi death camp.

Photo by Paul LaRue

said, "It was exciting. I have always been fascinated by his stories and wanted to be just like him. He didn't like to say too much about his combat and casualties, but I think we both enjoyed it."

What I Have Learned

Every aspect of this project requires help from the community. In our community, we have two American Legion Posts that have helped support our project, one being a historical African American Legion Post. With the help of the latter, we interviewed the six living African American World War II veterans in our county. Numerous of my students' grandfathers and great uncles volunteered to be interviewed. We also interviewed three World War II-era nurses. Since our encounters, 12 of our interviewees have died. This underscored for students the importance of our preservation work.

We received support from many people for this project. Carolyn Shoemaker, a recently retired English teacher, volunteers to read the final drafts of transcripts and helps double check the needed forms. She and the students adopted a set of rules to transform interviews into transcripts. This included mechanics, grammar, spacing, font size, and the use of bold. By standardizing the transcript format a variety of different students are able

to contribute to the project. Shoemaker also interviewed her mother, a World War II nurse who served on Iwo Jima during the invasion.

The second year we were working on this project, Jonas Bender, an African American veteran in a neighboring county, contacted us. Bender had heard about our project, and asked if we could travel to his community. He organized an event at a local A. M. E. Church, inviting African American World War II veterans from surrounding towns to be interviewed. The day was especially meaningful for my students. We were impressed by the clarity of the veterans' memories as well as their willingness to talk candidly about events that happened 50 to 60 years earlier. Other veterans' stories are harder to extract. Recently one of my students interviewed her grandfather (a World War II sailor). He gave monosyllabic replies to her questions, even though it was clear he had witnessed a lot of combat and that there had been many casualties in his unit. When the student re-interviewed her grandfather with more specific follow up questions, he provided very descriptive answers. There is a natural reluctance for some veterans to be totally candid. More than once when the tape recorder was turned off, some of the best information was shared. In many cases, veterans witnessed or participated

A group of World War II veterans from Miami Valley in Ohio wait to be interviewed by students at the A.M.E. Church in Yellow Springs, in 2004.

Photo by Paul LaRue



commitments, and prejudice faced by African American World War II veterans. Though more than one million African Americans served in World War II, their contributions, aside from the pilot group known as the Tuskegee Airmen, are rarely discussed. Two of our interviewees were Montford Point Marines. One of our local African American veterans (when the tape recorder was turned off) said, “I went into the service as a second-class citizen, I came home a second-class citizen.”

One of the veterans we interviewed in Yellow Springs was Robert Renshaw, who was from Dayton, Ohio. After World War II, Renshaw, a participant at Normandy, went to law school and later became a prominent attorney. He passed away this spring, and I was honored to be asked to give a tribute about his World War II service at the funeral. I chose to use some of his words from the interview. During his interview he was asked if he experienced any prejudice in the service. He said,

I didn't know anything about prejudice until I got in the Army, because I was raised in a mixed neighborhood in Springfield, Ohio, and when any whites died in our neighborhood my mother and grandmother would bake cakes and pies and stuff to take to that family. If a person died in one of the black families, the white families would do the same thing. We went to each other's houses. We ate at each other's houses. We played together. We went to school together.

Life in the military, however, was not one in the same. When asked about his instructors in the army, Renshaw responded,

... If you want the truth, now I'm going to give you the truth. We had four white, non-educated officers from Texas—very prejudice, couldn't read and write. Our outfit was made of boys from Ohio, Detroit, and Chicago, and they would not soldier under those officers ... they made a mistake

in things they would rather forget, and this holds them back. Several veterans have said they don't want to share their experiences. One veteran frankly stated he had spent the last 50 years trying to forget. Another veteran told my students that he had not talked about these events since 1943. More than one veteran broke down in tears. We have learned to respect how much or little a veteran chooses to share. Most of the veterans we interviewed started off humbly, saying their stories were not particularly interesting. Instead, of the 50 plus World War II veterans interviewed, my students and I were continually amazed by their stories and their heroism.

Once my students completed the transcripts, we would invite the veterans to go over the transcript, whenever possible, giving them an opportunity to correct names of people and places. Sometimes the veteran did not like the transcript format, and would attempt to re-write the interview. In that case, their final product would resemble an essay more than an interview. We learned to specifically ask veterans to look for proper names without re-writing the transcript. We did take out excessive inarticulate sounds, such as “um” and “oh,” to improve the overall flow, while being true to the interview. One veteran, when reading his transcript, asked that we take out an interesting story

he told. I encouraged him to leave it in, for the sake of the history. Given that perspective, he consented.

We are a small, rural, midwestern, town of 13,500. From our community, we've interviewed a prisoner of war; a Counter Intelligence Corp officer (who was also interviewed by the Shoah foundation) for discovering a previously unknown [Nazi] death camp; and a paratrooper who took part in the re-capture of Corregidor against the Japanese in the Philippines. We also interviewed one Marine who earned two purple hearts in the first wave at Peleliu in Micronesia and the first wave at Okinawa; a purple heart recipient at Attu of the Aleutian Islands of Alaska;¹ a sergeant in the Allied supply convoy system known as the Red Ball Express; and a local silver star recipient from the first wave at Bougainville in the Soloman islands.

We asked Fred DiDomenico, the silver star recipient, who recalled the brutality of the battle in Bougainville, where he had witnessed the fiercest combat, there or at Guam.

“Bougainville ... for the first eight hours,” said Fred. “Yes, hand-to-hand combat is not often, but it was there ... but I'd say [measuring by] intensity, Guam. It was constant for a three-day period....”

My students and I have come to better understand the contributions,

by taking Northern blacks and putting uneducated, white Texans over us. We had education, they didn't....

Rev. Howard Gray is a respected minister from our town who served as a sergeant in the Red Ball Express. My students have been both surprised and saddened when faced with stories like Gray's, which demonstrated both the pride that the veterans felt in serving their country and the racism and prejudice they experienced during their military service. In 1999, the senior class at Washington Senior High selected Gray as their commencement speaker. In describing his experience in Europe, Gray recalled that racism in Ohio even affected issues like a haircut; it was easier to get a haircut in France, he recalled:

...The French people cut my hair. You think I could get a haircut in Ohio, in Washington Court House? Never, no way. The only way I could get a haircut was in a black person's kitchen. That's where I got my hair cut. No white barbers would cut our hair....

Caroline Shaper, a local retired nurse and teacher who served as a nurse stateside during World War II (in San Francisco), treated many injured soldiers returning from the South Pacific. She talked about how her experience influenced her views on war:

... After you take care of those people that come back from the battlefield injured, it influences your thinking. You see emotional problems between husbands and wives, because when husbands come back injured, the wives come and sometimes it's a difficult adjustment ... I cringe when I hear war news ... and you've taken care of fellows, you know it doesn't make any difference how much we have rehabilitation.... It's not going to be any better physically or mentally. And you see broken families and they're just too much....

All of these poignant recollections were found in our small community. What other stories might be left unpreserved across our nation? Many teachers are working on this initiative around the country, and I encourage many more to participate. Not every history classroom can be as deeply involved as we were, but each teacher can make students aware of one story before it is lost. The classroom as a preservation tool is a viable model for teaching and learning. If it is utilized correctly it can serve as a resource center, library and archive run by a group of eager preservationists. 📖

Note

1. I took data from our interview with local veteran Bill Anderson, a purple heart recipient from Attu, and developed a lesson plan, "Half-Hour History," for The History Channel's Save Our History teacher's website. I created a mini-unit on the one World War II battle fought in North America combining aspects of our veteran's interview; The History Channel's documentary, "Save Our History: Alaska's Bloodiest Battle" and the National Park Service's Teaching with Historic Places Lesson called *Attu and the Brain Garfield Book: The Thousand-Mile War*.

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Interview Questions for World War II Veterans

1. Why did you join the service? What branch?
2. Where were you living at the time?
3. Why did you pick the branch that you were in?
4. Do you recall your first days in the service?
5. What did it feel like to be in the service?
6. What was your boot camp like?
7. Do you remember your instructors?
8. Did you do anything special to get through the training?
9. Where did you go for your training?
10. Where did you go after boot camp?
11. What were your job assignments?
12. Did you see any combat?
13. Were there many casualties in your unit?
14. What are some of your memorable experiences?
15. Were you a POW?
16. Were you awarded any medals or citations, and if so, how did you get these?
17. How did you stay in touch with your family?
18. What was the food like?
19. Did your unit have enough supplies?
20. Did you feel much pressure or stress?
21. Did you do anything special for good luck?
22. What did you do for entertainment?
23. What did you do on leave?
24. Where did you travel during the service?
25. Do you remember any humorous or unusual events?
26. Were there many pranks on you or other officers?
27. What did you think of the other officers and soldiers?
28. Did you see or experience any discrimination in the service?
29. Did you keep a personal diary?
30. Do you recall the day your service ended?
31. What did you do in the days and weeks after you returned?
32. Did you go back to school or straight to work?
33. Was your education supported by the G.I. Bill?
34. Did you form any close friendships, and do you still stay in touch?
35. Did you join a veterans' organization?
36. What kind of activities does your post have?
37. Do you attend reunions?
38. Did your military experience influence views on today's military and war?
39. How did the service affect your life?