

Centennial: Mystery History: The Old Utah State Prison

Summary

by Sheri Sohm. People, places and things have a history that is not always apparent.

Materials

(Teacher or student provided) Picture of a local park or vacant lot
Pictures of Sugar House park as it exists today
Deseret News article describing 4th of July activities in the park
Picture of the Penitentiary
Article relating to the Old Penitentiary in Sugar House Park
Drawn map of the Sugar House area

Background for Teachers

Sugar House Park in Salt Lake City is used for sledding, Christmas displays, 4th of July fireworks and picnics. Few visual clues remind citizens that this parcel of land used to house the State Prison! The old prison had an interesting history and famous inmates, Students can learn about the previous use of this site and be detectives to finding the 'mystery history' of places in their own neighborhood.

NOTE TO TEACHER: This lesson will be most effective if the teacher locates several local areas that have a 'mystery history' before presenting the lesson. A vacant lot may have scattered bricks from an old home. Old planks might be what is left of a barn. A partial foundation might mark the spot where a commercial building stood. Consider resources to help students discover information about local sites.

Intended Learning Outcomes

In their study of the Old Utah State Prison, students will compare the use of the site as a prison and today as a park and high school. Students will relate the mystery history of today's Sugar House Park to a local vacant lot or openspace. Students will identify a local property and research its history. Students will make a record of their discoveries.

Instructional Procedures

See preface material for the Utah Centennial Lesson Plans book.

Introductory Activity: Display a picture or describe a local area that has a mystery history. (Teacher provided) Ask students what they know about the place.

Ask students: 'What do you think the area is used for today? Do you think that the site has always been used in this way?

Explain that some places have 'mystery histories.' Sugar House park in Salt Lake City has a mysterious past. Show a picture of Sugar House Park.

Brainstorm ways in which parks are used. Describe how Sugar House Park is used for sledding, picnicking, jogging, fireworks, Christmas displays, etc. Read the article describing 4th of July activities.

Explain that Sugar House Park was not always a place for having fun. It had an exciting 'mystery history' 100 years ago. Play 20 questions to find what had been there before. The teacher may give clues such as:

People lived there.

A building on the site looked like a fort or castle.

Once you got in, it was hard to get out.

Famous Utahans lived there.

An execution took place there.

Reveal the mystery: Show the picture of the prison. The first prison stood where Sugar House Park and Highland High school are today.

Read: 'Almost a Century of Service Ends.' (article written in 1951) Discuss the information. When was the prison site selected? What materials were used in its construction? List other facts.

Discuss the irony of turning a prison into a park. Compare and contrast the users of the park then and now.

Look at the map. Find the Penitentiary, the library, the fire station and Westminster University are the only buildings that remain today. The rest of the area is filled with businesses and houses.

Connecting the Past to the Present: Explain that there are many places in the local community that have 'mystery histories' like Sugar House Park. Ask students to generate a list of mystery places that might have had other uses in the past.

Help students think of ways to discover the history of local sites. Brainstorm steps and resources.

Record student answers.

Prepare to interview older residents in the community. Ask students to collect stories that might give information about a mystery site. As a class, brainstorm WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, HOW and WHY questions in order to prepare the interview. Record memories and stories.

Extensions

The first extension can be used as a student product if it is too difficult for students to research a mystery site.

Assign students to: Identify a 'mystery history' site to investigate. This might be a site predetermined by the teacher, or one of interest to the student. Screen student choices to insure the possibility of research. Interview at least one resident who has information on the past and present use of the area.

Take pictures or draw sketches of the mystery site.

Students will select several other ways to explore the history of a local site. Examine the placement of plants, any stones or bricks, locate pictures of then and now, find or draw overhead maps, take pictures, research the history of the area by using plat maps or records found in the local recorder's office.

Students will present their 'mystery history' report through a display or poster or booklet. Students will compile the information, interviews, stories and pictures to share with other students and interested community leaders.

Discuss why it is important to record histories and stories. Ask students to share stories from their own past. They may wish to take pictures of favorite places that might become mystery history sites in the future. Students may take pictures of favorite trees, play areas, open spaces, or old barns or houses, and write paragraphs about the pictures. Collect these pictures and writings in a book. This will be a mystery history book for the future.

Compare the 'mystery history' of a place with that of a person. Do people change their looks, job, interests, friends, etc. over time? Ask students if they feel that even friends are mysterious sometimes. Is it easier to appreciate people and places when the history is understood? Discuss situations where understanding the past helps in understanding the present.

Sponsor an 'Older Neighbor Day' where senior residents can meet together at school and share their stories with each other and interested students. Prepare simple refreshments for the guests.

Authors

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