

The History of Your Chicago River

Chicago River Classroom Activity

Summary

In order to understand the problems facing the Chicago River and its watershed today, students must understand how the area came to be as it is now. By hearing and reflecting on the story of the Chicago River students will also start to become interested in this river and see it as not just another body of water, but one of the main reasons they are here today.

Background

The story of the history of the Chicago River provides the background on the Chicago River.

Procedure

- ◆ This lesson can either be done outside, along the banks of the river, or in the classroom. By bringing the students to the river they will be able to better picture the river and its turbulent history.
- ◆ At the river: Have students sit along the banks of the river. Give students a couple minutes of silence to observe the river today and get used to their new surroundings. Then begin reading the story, "On the Banks- The History of Your Chicago River."
- ◆ In the classroom: Display the slide or image of the Chicago River and begin playing the CD of Chicago River sounds. Then begin reading the story, "On the Banks-The History of Your Chicago River."

Reflection and Assessment

Students should think about the history of the river and create something that expresses the way they feel about it. This reflection can be a poem, story, picture or even a song. Volunteers can share them with the class.

Grade Level: 3rd – 8th

Duration: 45 min

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to articulate some of the changes the Chicago River has seen.
2. Students will understand the importance of the Chicago River to the region.

Materials:

Option 1: Take students to the Chicago River.

- ◆ A copy of the "On the Banks" story (for the teacher)
- ◆ Pens, markers, crayons

Option 2: Stay in the classroom and use slides and sounds to recreate the feel of the River.

- ◆ Slide projector or computer and projector for power point
- ◆ Slide or image of a wooded area next to the Chicago River (available from Friends)
- ◆ CD of river sounds (available from Friends)
- ◆ A copy of the "On the Banks" story (for the teacher)
- ◆ Pens, markers, crayons

Standards:

3rd-5th: 3.B.2b, 14.C.2, 16.E.2a, 16.E.2c 6th-8th: 3.B.3a, 13.B.3d, 14.C.3, 16.E.3a, 16.E.3c,

The History of Your Chicago River: Story

This is a very fascinating story that I am about to tell you, because it involves all of you. It involves you because of the place in which we all live-the Chicago region. Central to this story is the Chicago River. (If you are at the river: The river is right before you now. If not: The river is right on the screen.)

What do you think of it? Is it beautiful or ugly? Is it scary or interesting?

What if I told you that the Chicago River saw much along its banks? The river has seen majestic bears and eagles catching food, brave Native American warriors hunting, European men dragging canoes to hunt beavers for their fur, fierce battles between Native Americans and whites for the very land you are sitting on right now. The river has witnessed the rise of industry in Chicago, the birth of the stockyards – the huge slaughterhouse where animals were killed and meat was packaged, the pollution of it's waters with poisons, oil, chemicals and trash. Finally the river sighed relief when people began to restore its health. The river has seen much, and can tell you much.

Close your eyes right now. Listen to the birds, the water and the rustling leaves. Smell the wet earth and the river. Imagine that it is 300 hundred years ago, the early 1700's, the time in which the United States was nothing more than thirteen British colonies. You are a Native American for just a moment. You are sitting next to the river and very much looking forward to the harvest festival tonight. This is one of the biggest parties of the year. You are very excited to eat all the wonderful fish, rice and berries and to dance all night with your friends. You love the smell of the fire smoke. You love the way the drumbeats echo in your chest. You have been sent to gather acorns for flour in the beautiful forest along the river. Beyond the river is the flowing prairie with millions of colorful flowers and grasses taller than you. There are elk, bears, eagles, fish and all types of birds wandering throughout the area. You must go back to the village now. Your mother is waiting for the acorns and you really don't feel like getting in trouble today. Open your eyes. The river has seen such things. This could have happened right where you are sitting.

Let us close our eyes again. It is about 100 years later. It is the early 1800's. Imagine that you are a fur trapper from France and you are sitting on the riverbank. You hunt animals for fur and then send the fur back to Europe to make your money. It is getting harder and harder to make a living because there are fewer and fewer animals around. So many people have gotten into the hunting business that the animals are disappearing. You hear some women crying in the distance. In the log cabin not far from here a white settler family has just found out that their father and brother were killed in a battle with the Native Americans. Yesterday, you sat around the fire with your Native American friends while they cried because five of their best warriors were killed in the same battle. You feel sick to your stomach. There is so much fighting! You remember when this area had many Native American villages. You would visit them often. Now, more and more people from Europe are coming, especially after the land was declared to be a country called The United States of America. You are going to visit some of your friends, a Native American family from the Potawatomi tribe, again tonight. You know that they will talk about how powerful people in the government have been tricking the Native Americans to sign papers and give the whites their land. They will talk about how a huge group of Indians from many tribes are assembling to try and stop

the whites from swallowing up so much land. You get confused yourself when you are trapping. You never know if you are in Native American territory or American territory because the borders keep changing. All you do know is that the Native Americans keep getting pushed further west. The conversation at your friends' house will be sad. You wonder how the American government can keep lying to the Native Americans by telling them that they are not trying to take over and want to be friends. People in the American government call the government "The Great White Father" and call all of the Native American "red children". You think this is insulting and ridiculous because the Native Americans are not all children, but men and women. You jump in your canoe and begin to paddle down the river. The sounds of birds and the lovely smell of the rich prairie beyond the forest along the river relaxes you. The river has seen this. Blood could have been spilled right where you are sitting. Let us open our eyes again.

Close our eyes once more. We have moved forward 80 years from when we were the fur trapper. It is now the late 1800's, about 15 years before the Titanic sank. You are a person about your own age. You are sitting next to the river but feeling as if you might get sick because the river smells so terrible. Your family has come from Poland to Chicago on a big boat. They were looking for a better life here. They had heard about many jobs here in Chicago, especially in the stockyards. The Chicago stockyards are big factories where animals are slaughtered for meat. Your father and mother both work in the stockyards. They leave early in the morning and come home late at night. Your father's clothes are always smelly and bloody from butchering the cows. Your mother looks very tired from her work packing the meat. Her fingers are usually so sore that she can hardly move them. You yourself must take care of the younger children. There is often little food at your table because your parents just don't have a lot of money. You don't understand this, because they work very hard. You feel so hungry right now, that your stomach hurts but you can't even think about food because you feel sick from the smell of the river. The river is polluted with sewage all of the time. The sewers in Chicago just pour right into the river. Even worse, all of the blood, fat and guts from the stockyards are also dumped into the river. You've seen the river catch on fire sometimes because of all of the waste floating on top! In addition, factories have been dumping chemicals into the river. You look at the river and see many dead fish floating by. One of your neighbor's sons has just died from a terrible illness. Many people think that it's from the smell of the river itself. You aren't sure if a smell can make someone sick enough to die. You feel very sad for the family. You also feel angry, because you know that there are a lot of very rich people in Chicago that make a lot of money from owning the factories and the stockyards. You know that they eat more than the once a day that you do! Even if it is smelly, Chicago still is becoming a rich and large town. You've heard people talking in the streets about cleaning up the river and the city's drinking water by turning the river around. It seems almost unbelievable that a river could be made to flow backwards, but they say that by building a canal from the southern tip of the river all the way to the Des Plaines river that the river water will be pulled away from the Lake, keeping the filthy river water out of Lake Michigan (the city's drinking water source). At the same time, clean Lake Michigan water will flood into the river flushing the pollution away, far away - all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. You've never seen where the river goes after it leaves Chicago, but you imagine that it's quite far. People are also talking about preserving some of the forests that are left along the river before they are all gone. The city is growing very quickly! You hope they do this soon! You would like to see a forest someday. The river has seen this happen.

Open your eyes. Look at the river now. How does it smell? How does it look? It is a whole lot cleaner now than it was. They were able to flush sewage out of it by digging the canal. Now there are also sewage treatment plants. Many people have worked for years to improve the river, but there still are problems.

This area is so full of history! Did you know that Archer Avenue was once an Indian trail that was turned into a road? Did you know that a military fort called Fort Dearborn stood on Michigan Avenue when Chicago was nothing more than some cabins and a trading post? There are little bricks in the street that marks the spot and you can see it!

You are now part of the river's history because you live here and you affect the river every day, believe it or not!