Maria Guerrero began to crochet and do embroidery as a young girl in Mexico and has continued to work throughout her 70 years in Greeley. Photos by Georgia Wier (NE Colorado CCA Folklorist Collection at City of Greeley Museums.)

Photos of Maria Guerrero, crochet work.

Northeastern Colorado Cultures

This essay explores the cultures of northeastern Colorado by looking at interview techniques, topics and examples. Many different cultures and community activities provide excellent guidance in seeking out and telling the story of a place and its people. Classroom activities suggest specific ways in which to identify good interviewees, and how to apply this information to educational standards.

Contents

Look for these Icons for resources accessible on this website


Audio


Video


Lesson Plan

Standards: Information in this essay can be presented to help meet these Colorado Model Content Standards according to various age groups, abilities, and grade levels, depending on the class.

History 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Geography 5
Reading and Writing 2, 4, 5
Music 4, 5

Resources: A wide variety of resources are directly accessible on this website

- ***Audio and Video*** segments related specifically to this essay Showcase German Russian and farming and ranching cultures (also available in cassette and vhs form from CCA)
- **Lesson Plans** related specifically to this essay include the following: The Art of Interviewing, Latino Cultures, Wheat Weaving, Exploring Cowboy Life through Cowboy Poetry and Quilts Across Cultures

Please see Lesson Plans and Resource Sections to access these resources and notations throughout the essay for ideas!

About the Author

This section was prepared by Georgia Wier. Her B.A. in Fine Arts is from the University of Oregon and her M.A. in Folklore from the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill. Georgia serves as folklorist for both the City of Greeley Museums and the Colorado Council on the Arts. She travels throughout her region to document the work of professional bladesmiths, rancher quilters, Latino *Matachines* dancers, and many other creative individuals who live and work in Northeastern Colorado. Before coming to Colorado, Georgia's folklore work took her to North and South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, Oregon, and Tennessee. Prior to that, Georgia studied weaving and dressmaking in Norway and worked for several years as a professional hand weaver. She has taught weaving, fiber arts, and oral history skills to adults and children and has worked as an artist-in-residence in several states.

Northeastern Colorado Cultures

By Georgia Wier

Introduction

The term "folk arts" can be defined as those creative activities learned informally within family, regional, occupational, ethnic, or other groups. The term "folklife" includes the folk arts along with traditional activities not normally considered art forms. Professionals called "folklorists" explore both the folklore and folklife of communities. They learn about crafts, folk music, cultural dance, farming, "foodways" (all activities having to do with the producing of a meal), and more. To gather information about the folk arts and traditional activities of Northeastern Colorado, I conducted a "folklife survey" of the region. In every county I visited, I met people in museums and harvest festivals. I visited farmers, ranchers, quilters, musicians, and many others in their homes or at their places of work. Everywhere I went I discovered individuals and groups practicing the creative traditions of their communities.

"Northeastern Colorado" is defined for the purpose of this study as the area bordered by Wyoming, Nebraska, and Kansas on the north and east, by Interstate Highways 287 and 70 on the south, and by the Continental Divide on the west (but excluding the metropolitan area of Denver). While a portion of this territory might be considered part of Colorado's Front Range, most can be classified as "plains" or "prairie."

Researching Folklore and Folklife Through Interviews

When a folklorist conducts research by consulting with living people, whether they live next door or on the other side of the world, that folklorist is considered a "fieldworker." The person from whom the fieldworker gathers information can be called the "consultant." Students from the upper elementary grades through senior high can also conduct fieldwork by gathering information from their family members or other people in their community who are willing to serve as consultants. Conducting an interview is an excellent way for both professional folklorist and student fieldworker to learn about people's backgrounds, their occupations, and what gives their lives pleasure and meaning.

Interview Techniques

If a tape recorder or video camera is available, the fieldworker can record every word said during an interview. Later the fieldworker can replay the interview and write down what was said. Without using a tape recorder, a group of three to five students can also work together in making a direct written record of the interview.

While one student asks the questions, the others take notes. After the interview is complete, all students get together and combine their notes to reconstruct a good record of what was said.

Basic Information

When fieldworkers in folklore conduct interviews, we need first to gather basic biographical information about our consultants (like parents' names and dates of birth and marriage). We also need to learn about major events in nature (like dust storms) and national events (like the Great Depression) that have affected the course of our consultants' lives. In addition to gathering this historical information, as folklorists we also need to find about the individuals' creative activities—like music, crafts, cooking, dance, and home building. While conducting interviews, fieldworkers often learn that these folk arts add pleasure and satisfaction to those who practice them.

Georgia Wier works with Lone Star School students in Washington County to prepare their upcoming interviews. Photos by Tory Read, 1999]

Example

Interview of "Bud" Bartram. After talking informally for a while with a Stoneham resident, I began an interview by asking, "What is your full name?" Having passed his ninetieth birthday, this man was accustomed to telling his life story (and that of other former Stoneham residents) because he has done public "readings" since he was six or seven years old. His answer reflected this ease with the interview process: "My full name is Ralph Edward Bartram, but I go by the name of Bud Bartram, and I always have ever since I was four years old. I was born in Illinois and my dad homesteaded out here (took up 160 acres). And I was the cowboy because I took care of the cattle and Dad did the farming."

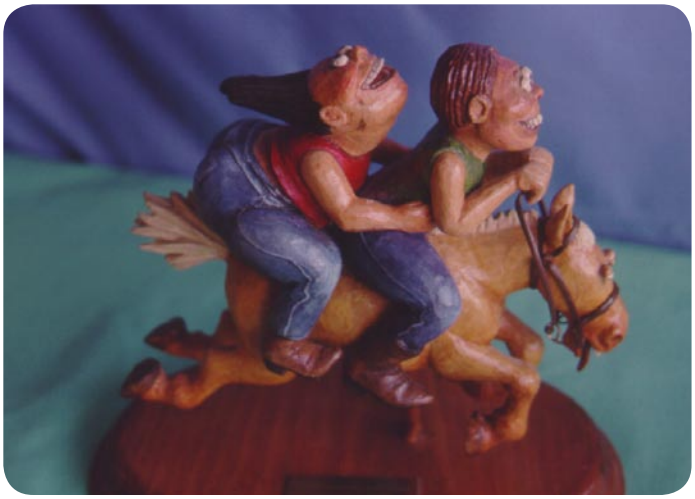
Most consultants are not as accustomed to tape recorders and microphones as Bud Bartram, and they need to have us ask them specific questions like, "Where were you born?" and "When did you come to Colorado? and "What did you do when you got here?"

Listen to Bud Bartram recount his own stories on ***Do Not Pass Me By***, a recording produced by David Brose and the Colorado Council on the Arts, with Harry Tuft narrating [Volume I, Side A, #2] You may also hear Bartram on the recording ***A Calling Card for Friendship*** produced by Brose using his field recordings as State Folklorist. [CCF 1A-5, 2A-7.8] DNP 1A2; CCF 1A5 2A7,8

Interviews With Farmers and Ranchers

Frequently the fieldworker in northeast Colorado meets people who still work on the land their parents or grandparents homesteaded, bought, or worked as employees. When the fieldworker asks, "How did the ranch (or farm) get started?" sometimes we hear a more complicated history than we expect.

When I visited a dairy in Yuma County, I learned that the owners' family had long ago sold their farm and that family members had taken jobs in town. Due to the hard times of the Great Depression, the family was forced to take back the farm. In order to earn a little income, they began bottling all excess milk provided by their two cows and taking it to the homes of friends in town. Whenever they earned enough money, they bought another cow. The farm to which they returned "out of necessity" became the Harper Dairy, which came to be run with computer-assisted precision. See Exploring Cowboy Life through Cowboy Poetry **Lesson Plan**.



Whimsical woodcarving of two riders enjoying a gallop, by Audrey Lechuga of Yuma, Colorado, Photo by Bea Roeder (Colorado Historical Society: MSS2450).

Allow Opportunities For Storytelling

An important skill for any fieldworker to learn is when to stop asking questions and let consultants talk on their own. When allowed to speak at his or her own pace, a consultant may prove himself or herself to be a master at the art of storytelling. An Akron resident, while discussing her experiences in raising many children on a drylands ranch, told a story recounted to her by an 87-year-old Denver woman who got lost while driving on county roads.

The story began with an account of how another woman aired her family's bedding by laying it on top of the slanted cellar door. Each evening she bundled up the bedding and returned it to the beds. One night one of her daughters complained that the sister sharing her bed was scratching her ankles with her toe nails. The accused sister replied, "I'm not scratching you. You're scratching me." Growing tired of her daughters' complaints, the mother finally told the girls, "I don't want to hear another word out of either one of you. You go to sleep now." The next morning, the mother found both girls dead in their bed, having both been fatally bitten by a rattlesnake. This story of a pioneer woman whose daughters died of snakebite reveals much about the hardships of the past, but it is also a warning to tired parents not to ignore their children's complaints, lest "whining" behavior hide a serious problem. Folklore is a traditional means of educating the next generation and passing on important values, whether they relate to child-rearing practices or, as in the second story, concern for human welfare, regardless of race or religion.

Northeastern Coloradoans may tell the folklorist or the student fieldworker heart-warming stories about cowboys who won the hearts of the cooks in the cafes of the plains. They may also hear awe-inspiring accounts like that of a consultant's grandparents who hid some stranded travelers in their home. The travelers needed a hidden place to spend the night because people of their ethnic background were once not publicly welcomed in that town.

The fieldworker should encourage consultants to tell their own accounts of community success stories. The building fifty years ago of Our Lady of Peace Church in Greeley happened as a result of the faith and the labor of members of the Hispanic parish community. Each of the participants in this effort can tell his or her version of this success story. Some raised fields of beets and donated the profits; others made tamales to sell at dances and contributed the proceeds. Collectively, the story of so many people's individual efforts toward a common goal takes on epic proportions. Check out the "Art of Interviewing" **lesson plan** and other Websites listed in the resources section.

Carefully-phrased questions about the folk arts connected with a person's ethnic, regional, or cultural heritage can lead to fascinating interview discussions.

John Fritzler and the Polka Band perform Dutch Hop music for an evening of polka dancing in Windsor, CO (John Fritzler on accordion and Al Dechant on trombone). Photo by Georgia Wier (NE Colorado CCA Folklorist Collection at City of Greeley Museums).

Exploring Ethnic, Regional, and Cultural Heritage

Carefully-phrased questions about the folk arts connected with a person's ethnic, regional, or cultural heritage can lead to fascinating interview discussions. Although the northeastern plains may to outsiders appear to have a homogeneous population, those who make their home in the region know that they come from many backgrounds.

Living in northeast Colorado are some descendants of the native peoples who occupied the region before the several waves of immigration from Mexico, Europe, Asia, and distant parts of the United States. At the annual pow-wow produced in Loveland by the Northern Colorado Intertribal Pow-wow Association, a fieldworker might talk with someone belonging to one of these Colorado plains Indian tribes or might just as easily happen to meet a Navajo person who has recently moved from Arizona because of a job transfer. A Lakota Indian student might interview a family member about the origins of the dance steps used and the costumes worn in the "fancy dance" performed at the pow wow.

Everyone in America not having Indian ancestry has a family history of immigration. For northeast Coloradoans, the personal or family immigration story is often recent enough that many folk arts or cultural traditions from a former home are joyfully practiced and the origins of those traditions are clearly remembered. See Colorado History and Immigration Resources in the Resources section.

When I interviewed three sisters from the "drylands" (non-irrigated farm and ranch country) of Weld County, I learned that their father and many of their relatives by marriage were descended from the group of people who first immigrated to Russia from Germany and much later made their way across the Atlantic and the continent to Colorado. To find out whether German-Russian folk arts had played a part in the sisters' lives I asked, "Do you make special German foods?" and "During your childhoods, did anyone around play music?" I heard about mothers-in-law making noodles for *kugels* and other German dishes.

I also heard about the sisters' brothers, father, and one of the sisters playing "Dutch hop" music on the button accordion, harmonica, and piano while neighbors gathered to "eat and dance." Later, I learned that these family members were practicing a very significant regional music tradition. Read more about Dutch hop music below and check out some other Colorado Folk Music Resources in the Resources section.

Listen to John Fritzler & his band play Dutch hop music on the recording ***Do Not Pass Me By,*** produced for the radio by David Brose and the Colorado Council on the Arts and Humanities with Harry Tuft narrating. [Vol. I, Side B, #3] Brose explains, "Colorado is one of the few states in the United States that has significant numbers of people who identify themselves as 'Germans from Russia,' 'Russian-Germans,' or 'Volga Germans.' In 1764, Catherine the Great of Russia invited Germans to settle along the fertile shores of the lower Volga River, promising the freedom to have independent governments, churches, and schools. By 1768 over one hundred and four separate villages had been colonized. Nearly a century later the Russian government took away the freedoms promised by Catherine, and these 'Germans from Russia,' as they came to be known, crossed the 'western ocean' to settle in the states of South Dakota, North Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, and northeastern Colorado. Dutch hop bands utilize instrumentation that includes the accordion, hammered dulcimer, bass, and brass instruments such as trumpet and

trombone. Contemporary bands may also utilize electric keyboard, and some Dutch hop bands have included the four-string tenor banjo for rhythm. Colorado has seen the formation of many fine Dutch hop bands in the mid-later 20th century, including John Fritzler and the Polka Band." On ***A Calling Card for Friendship***, you'll also hear the music of John Fritzler's band. [CCF 1A3, CCF 2B7]

Maria Guerrero began to crochet and do embroidery as a young girl in Mexico and has continued to work throughout her 70 years in Greeley. Photo by Georgia Wier (NE Colorado CCA Folklorist Collection at City of Greeley Museums.)

Non-Verbal Clues

If an interview is conducted in a person's home or place of work, the surroundings can give clues about a person's talents and interests. Only family photographs figure more prominently than delicate hand crocheted doilies in the home of a woman who moved from Mexico to the United States as a young girl, and later (in 1931) moved again with her husband to Greeley. The interview with this experienced woman (now a great-grandmother) had been arranged because of the part she and her husband had played in the building of a Catholic Church to serve the Hispanic community. Along with finding out about these activities, as a folklorist I needed to ask, "How did you learn to make these doilies?" Surprisingly, the great-grandmother spoke with pride of learning crochet and embroidery during the one year of school she had been able to complete in Mexico. I also discovered that by examining her own mother's crochetwork, the Greeley resident was able to produce the intricate pinwheel and other doily patterns. See Colorado Latino Resources and Lesson Plans in the Resources section.

> If an interview is conducted in a person's home or place of work, the ***surroundings*** can give clues about a person's talents and interests.

Occupational Arts

In the case of the German-Russian sisters and the Hispanic woman mentioned above, the music, foodways, and handwork have never been connected with their income-producing work. By questioning carefully other consultants in northeastern Colorado, the fieldworker can learn of instances in which some form of artistry evolves from skills practiced on the job. A Sterling man's work on feedlots requires that he be proficient in *welding.* In his off-work hours, however, the feedlot worker uses his metalwork skills to produce candelabras from horse shoes and rose sculpture from sheets of brass. We could call this ingenious man a folk artist.

> Like a professional folklorist, the students should always represent their consultant as he or she would like to publicly appear.

Community Arts

Frequently, folk artists' work gets used or appreciated by those within their communities. By asking the metal artist who had used his decorative candelabra and horseshoe arch (both made available through his sister's flower shop), I learned that the western-themed wedding props had been used not only by his daughter, but also by several other Sterling residents. An artisan from within a community frequently knows best the needs and tastes of his friends and neighbors.

To learn about the prevalence of an art form in a community or a region, it is important that the fieldworker ask consultants, "Who uses the items you make?" or "Who listens to the music you play?" In northeastern Colorado communities, quilts and quiltmaking are clearly in evidence in every stage of people's lives. I learned from Phillips County quiltmaking consultants that all babies born in the hospitals in Holyoke and Haxton are wrapped in quilts or baby blankets made by hand by one of the many groups and individuals who donate them. Lap robes made by piecing and tying (a technique speedier than true quilting) warm the knees and perhaps brighten the spirits of nursing home residents in the county. Some of the patchwork lap robes are brought to the senior citizens by outside community groups; others are made by the nursing home residents themselves.

When I asked a well-known northeast Colorado quiltmaker and quilt educator whether quilting in the plains was different from quilting elsewhere in the country, the Keota native's reply had to do with the continuation of the tradition rather than with patterns or techniques. A fifth generation quiltmaker herself, the quilter said that the craft never died down on the plains as it did in many other areas. If student fieldworkers discover unbroken quilting or other traditions in their own communities, they might explore the reasons in a class discussion or essay. See Colorado Quilt Resources and Lesson Plans in the Resources section.

A Note of Interest! The Otis Music Gathering was started to provide Colorado plains residents and others the opportunity to explore and enjoy fiddling and other instrumental folk music.

Festivals and Religious Celebrations

Folklore fieldworkers can explore these with their consultants. An annual celebration in Greeley to honor the Virgin of Guadalupe is an opportunity for the youth and adults of five locally-based dance groups to demonstrate their achievements to family and friends. The elaborately-costumed dancers perform dances whose origins go back to pre-Christian times in Mexico.

Foodways

"What foods do you make (or eat) for holidays?" is a question that often reminds people of the times when they expend their greatest effort to prepare favorite dishes using recipes passed down through generations or obtained through networks of friends and neighbors. In northeast Colorado, those dishes might reflect the Scandinavian or the Asian heritage of those whose ancestors immigrated to the region to work on the railroad or tend fields of beets. A Yuma native who for years taught in Joes, Colorado, might decide to use her recipe for *rivles* (a type of pasta passed down to her from her Swedish and Danish grandmother). She might also decide to make "Navajo tacos," a treat from another part of her family for which she is regionally famed.

Aesthetics

Like other artists, folk artists have standards that they seek to achieve. By listening carefully to the performer's or the maker's explanations, the fieldworker can learn how that artist defines excellence. A well-respected but retired Haxton fiddler explained that in his earlier performing days he was able to hear a tune and then pick up his instrument and play it. He also said that he could play flats and sharps as well as "straight keys." By telling me these facts, the man had described two attributes of a competent fiddler. A member of the Wiladel Rattlers, a country-western band based in Otis, identified another necessary qualification for a musician who plays for dances: "You've got to feel the music."

Reporting the Results/ Meeting Communications Standards

After returning to the classroom with their tape recorded interview or their pages full of notes, the students may write a report of what occurred during their fieldwork experience. They may create a complete transcript (recreate the whole interview on paper--word for word) or they may write a summary of each topic discussed. Along with the account of the interview itself, the returning student fieldworkers should include in their reports a description of the surroundings and of everything that happened before, during, and after the formal session (like the serving of refreshments or the children coming home). Finally, the report might include an analysis of the significance to the consultant or to the community of the folk arts or the life events discussed. Like a professional folklorist, the students should always represent their consultant as he or she would like to publicly appear. Taking the consultant a copy of the completed report is a good way to thank that person for the time and effort spent with the fieldworker.

Possible Publication

The students in a school may publish the reports of their fieldwork, following the model of the *Foxfire* project designed by a classroom teacher in Rabun Gap, Georgia. Alternatively, the students might dramatize the stories they heard or begin to learn the basic techniques of some of the folk arts they explored. However they use the findings from their fieldwork, the students will have broadened their understanding of the history and the diverse forms of creativity found within their community and region. They will also have developed more of an understanding of the wide-ranging origins of the many traditions practiced around them.

Classroom Activities

By Bea Roeder

Interview Project

The essay on "Northeastern Colorado Folk life for the Classroom" suggests an interview project that meets the following Colorado Model Content Geography Standard 1. Have students interview an "older" family member, friend, or neighbor. Student interviews can be life story, immigration, family or occupational traditions, or about major events in nature--like dust storms-- and national events— like the Great Depression—which have affected the course of our consultants' lives. Suggestions for locating people to interview:

• Contact your local museum or chamber of commerce for longtime residents or others who are involved with the area's history.

• Contact the local historical society or the historical society of particular cultural groups (see Front Range section for further resources).

• Talk to your local librarian.

• Explore Colorado Culture and Arts Links to find artists or musicians in the area, including those who represent particular cultures.

• Talk to family members or neighbors.

Family Folk Arts

Folklore and folk arts are inextricably connected to all of the above. Because both are the artistic expressions people use to communicate with each other, they are very revealing of attitudes and perspectives. A doily crocheted for use in the home indicates the importance of home and family. A celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe suggests the importance of Catholicism and close ties to Mexico's Indo-Hispanic heritage. Have students explore examples of folk art with their families or friends. Who in the family creates folk art (sewing, quilting, knitting, woodwork, ceramics, crocheting, leatherwork, carving, etc.) or participates in folk art forms (dance or music)? What folk art do they create and how do they use it? An alternative to this project would be to have students research and report on various forms of folk art. " (Geography 5, Visual Arts 4)

Application of History Standards

By Bea Roeder

Connecting to Broader Historical Events

Chronological organization of the information students glean from their oral history interviews will help them organize events and people into major eras to identify and explain historical relationships. As a class does oral reports on their fieldwork, the teacher can ask the class to point out some events and people mentioned in each report that are of broader relevance (to a whole ethnic group, town, region, nation, even the world), until the historical connections to the local region become clear.

Connecting to Family History

Oral interviews are one process of historical inquiry and will undoubtedly uncover other resources: family photos; diaries and journals; newspaper clippings such as news, wedding notices and obituaries; family trees, etc. Public records of birth certificates and deeds, old insurance maps showing all businesses in town at different eras, and tombstones, all help establish accurate dates.

Connecting to Stories and Traditions

Students understand that societies are diverse and have changed over time. You as teacher can see that oral interviews include as broad a variety of people as possible: varied in age, occupation, religion, ethnicity, political perspectives, etc. An effective activity is to ask each student to bring something from home that represents a family tradition or story--a story about where one ancestor came from or how the family came to Colorado or got established in this area. Each student shows the object to the class and explains why it is important. Experience suggests this session may be worth video-recording!

Connecting to Material Culture, Science, and Technology

A similar activity, bringing an old, no longer used tool or implement and explaining how it was used, can help students understand how science, technology, and economic activity have developed, changed, and affected societies on the home front.

Connecting to Immigration

A look at past attitudes toward almost any immigrant group, not to mention American Indians, can help students understand how political institutions (such as the War Department/Department of Defense and Bureau of Indian Affairs) and theories have developed and changed over time. Theories related to labor, unions, welfare, and immigration have changed greatly and affect farmers seeking help in the fields and businesses seeking profits. Most oral histories students collect will have references to work and can be used to bring out national as well as local issues of human rights vs. exploitation, equality vs. oppression or discrimination, individual rights vs. government regulation, etc.

Connecting to Religious and Philosophical Concepts

Students know that religious and philosophical ideas have been powerful forces throughout history. Students can do fieldwork on religious traditions in their family or in the wider community. What religious traditions are part of their family life? Saying grace or a parody of grace, a family Bible, Easter and Christmas celebrations or Passover and Hanukkah, prayers on certain occasions, baptisms and other rites of passage can be explored. Religious traditions often have ethnic aspects. Did some ancestor immigrate to escape religious persecution? Caesar Chavez's heroic struggle to unionize mostly Mexican American and Filipino farm workers succeeded in part because of his reliance on Ghandi's philosophy of non-violence, his and the workers' faith in the Virgin of Guadalupe, and his willingness to fast to gain sympathy and support. He also used folk traditions, such as skits and songs, to persuade workers to strike.

To see the types of information a folklore fieldworker discovers by interviewing artists, view the 15-minute video ***Just Plain Art***, produced by the Colorado Council on the Arts (Daniel Salazar, videographer).

To hear parts of interviews with Colorado ranchers and farmers, listen to the following individuals on the recording ***Do Not Pass Me By***:

Baxter Black, cowboy poet then from Brighton [DNP 1A-3]
Lonnie Wilson, Elizabeth [DNP 2A5]
Jim Bollers, Hudson [DNP 2B9]
Nyle Henderson, Hotchkiss, and Baxter Black [DNP 2B10]

Hear three other cowboy poets respond to the folklorist's inquiries on ***A Calling Card for Friendship***:

J. Nathan May [CCF 1B-2]
Nyle Henderson [CCF 1B-2]
Gene Randels [CCF-1B-3]