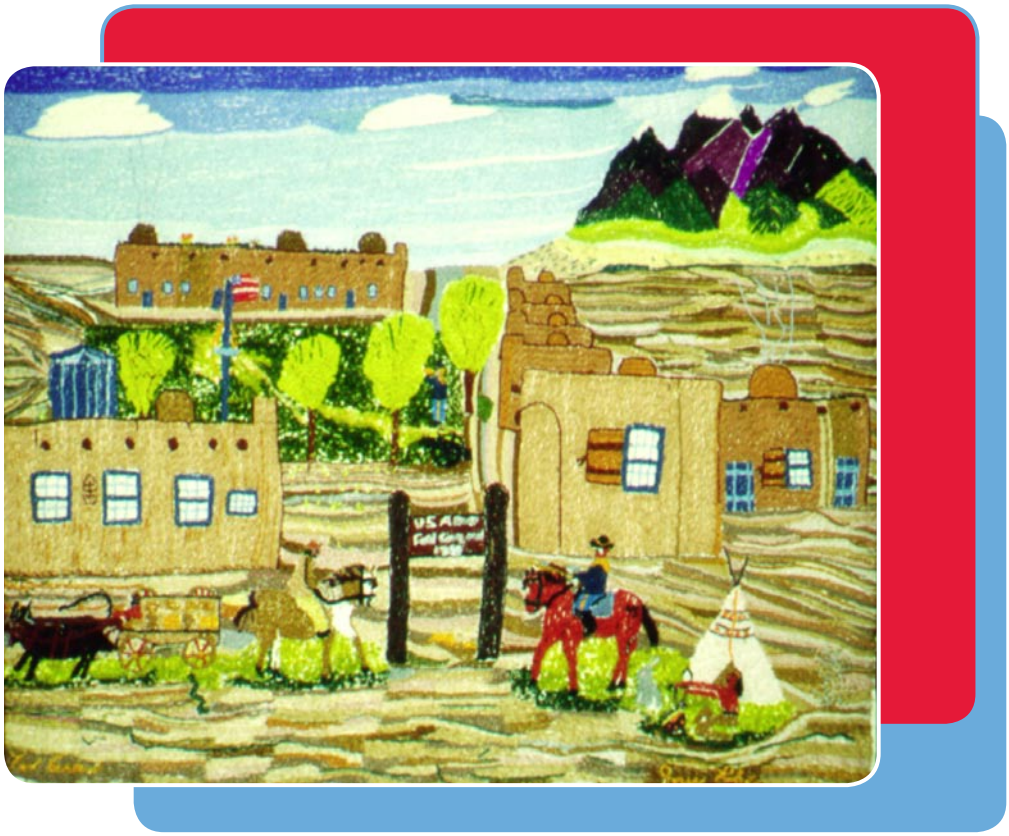

Josephine Lobato's colcha stitchery captures Fort Garland's adobe and log architecture and three of the cultures who interacted there: Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo-American. Note Mt. Blanca in background. Photo by Bea Roeder.

Southern Colorado Cultures

This essay explores the idea that folklore is the artistic expression of individual and community identity. Several examples are presented to explore the relationship between people and place, between history, geography and culture. Traditions of mining, foodways, needlecraft, wood carving and weaving, the significance of a mountain peak and the meaning of architecture--these all help to tell the story of how different culture groups make Southern Colorado home.

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, 6
Geography 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

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

- ***Audio and Video*** segments related specifically to this essay showcase Native American and Latino cultures, life in the San Luis Valley, and weaving traditions (also available in cassette and vhs form from CCA).
- **Lesson Plans** related specifically to this essay include the following: Colcha Embroidery, Latino Cultures, Intro to Folklore Grade 12 AP English.

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

About the Author

Kathleen Figgen prepared this section. Kathi arrived in Colorado in September of 1992 from Bloomington, Indiana to take the position of State Folklorist for Southern Colorado. She holds a Ph.D. in Folklore and a Ph.D. Certificate in Latin American Studies from Indiana University. A native of Southern California, she received her bachelor's degree in Anthropology from UC Berkeley, where she also did graduate work in folklore. Dr. Figgen's research interests include Southern Colorado folk art and culture, Latin American folklore, American popular culture (with an emphasis on Elvis), folk religion, and folk narrative. Kathi has taught anthropology and folklore at Trinidad State Junior College but now works independently for organizations such as the Cowboy Poetry Gathering of the Western Folklife Center and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival as well as for the Colorado Council on the Arts.

Southern Colorado Cultures

By Kathi Figgen

Introduction

The folklore of southern Colorado, here defined as a political zone bounded by Archuleta County to the west, Pueblo County to the north, and Las Animas County to the east, includes the traditions of many different "folk groups." Whether defined by regional, ethnic, familial, community, occupational, religious, or tribal affiliation, all Coloradoans are members of many overlapping folk groups. A Mormon quilter from Manassa, an Hispanic rancher from Antonito, an Italian stonemason from Trinidad, and a Japanese embroiderer from Alamosa, all represent the rich multicultural fabric that is Colorado.

Folklore offers a personal angle from which to look at the geography and history of a region, a people-oriented perspective unique in its approach. Everyone has folklore, beginning with the "first folk group"—the family. Whether through family recipes handed down through the generations, ancestral tales of "how things used to be," or precious memories pieced into quilts, all families share traditions that set them apart from other families. Yet ironically, these same kinds of traditions are what unite us as human beings and give meaning to our lives, adding an aesthetic element to our existence. Folklore is the artistic expression of personal and communal identity, today and yesterday, then and now. It is about people and place—history, geography and culture.

Mount Blanca

Throughout Colorado, the mountains, lakes and rivers are more than mere geographic pieces in the physical puzzle of a region. In the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado, for example, Mount Blanca means different things to the various populations that enjoy her majesty. Many marvel at the sheer size and dominating presence of one of Colorado's "Fourteeners," a reference to the fact that Blanca Peak reaches over 14,000 feet. Part of an exclusive club, Mt. Blanca is a favorite of Colorado climbers and southern Colorado sports enthusiasts. Stories of her summit, well-kept secrets of special fishing spots, and numerous narratives of UFO sightings, some claiming the existence of mountainous landing pads, all contribute to the folklore of this mysterious and magical mountain.

Weaver Jacqueline Hart's traditionally-dyed wools are displayed with Mount Blanca in view. Photo by her apprentice, Candace Cressman, 1995.

Celebrated artistically in many media, Blanca Peak inspired legendary Christian accounts of how the Sangre de Cristo mountain range got its name. Translated from the Spanish as "The Blood of Christ," local legend has it that a dying Roman Catholic priest, on seeing what was to be his last sunset, said the brilliant red of the sinking sun reminded him of Jesus's ultimate sacrifice on the cross, the shedding of his blood, a narrative that adds a sacred tone to the mountains.

The Ute and Navajo peoples also share the sacred nature of the Sangres. To many Navajo, Blanca Peak is Sisnajini, the "eastern mountain," one of the four most sacred mountains in their belief system. Mountains, to the Navajo, are so personalized that they are classified by scholars as deities, and are included in lists of holy people mentioned in formula and prayer. No Navajo conception of the world, whether in the past or the future, is conceivable without the contemporary arrangement of mountains. The importance of Blanca Peak in the Navajo cosmology reflects their strong interest in geography and deep attachment to place that is present in many of their myths and rituals.

An examination of the folklore of Blanca Peak offers students the opportunity to explain how stories, myths, and other forms of literature and oral traditions reflect the beliefs of cultures and societies (History 6.3); interpret oral traditions and legends as 'histories' (HS 2.2); describe the history, interactions, and contributions of the various peoples and cultures that have lived in or migrated to the area that is now Colorado (HS 3.1); explain how places and regions serve as cultural symbols (Geography 2.3); and analyze how cultures shape the character of a region (GS 4.2).

Architecture

The interactions of people, places, and environments (nature and culture) can be seen throughout southern Colorado in at least two types of housing construction, stonework and adobe. Italian stonemasons and Hispanic adobe makers have left architectural monuments on the land they settled, structures that cannot be separated from the people who made them. The existence of adobe construction signals the presence, past and present, of an Hispanic population, just as the stone-carved building facades represent the legacy of Italian immigrants to the zone. In both cases the land and the people have interacted in such a way that one becomes inseparable from the other. The natural presence of stones, because of the mountains, and the sandy soil to make adobe bricks, because of the desert-like conditions of much of the area, complement the work of the Hispanic and Italian settlers who have forged a bond with the land.

These two examples provide students with a cultural window to explain how the characteristics of different physical environments provide opportunities for or place constraints on human activities (G 5.2); analyze the human and physical characteristics that give a place meaning and significance (GS 2.1); describe how cultures and cultural landscapes change (GS 4.2); and describe important components of the cultural heritage of the United States (H 3.2).

Mining

Another example of the interaction between land and people is the legacy of coal mining in the mountains of Huerfano and Las Animas counties. The mining industry brought hundreds of European immigrants to southern Colorado in search of quick riches and a better life. With the immigrants came their traditions, which combined with the occupational traditions of coal mining, created a unique history that has left an indelible imprint on both the physical and cultural landscape of such southern Colorado towns as Trinidad, Aguilar, La Veta and Walsenburg. Occupational traditions, such as the stories of multicultural "coal camp" life, eyewitness accounts of the "Ludlow Massacre," and the labor songs of miners and railroaders, have left a legacy that continues to permeate the history and geography of the area. Immigrants from Italy, Syria, Austria, Serbia, and Eastern Europe joined rooted Hispanic families to forge another version of the Western frontier, one that is literally carved in stone in the Walsenburg and Aguilar cemeteries.

Through the history of mining and its attendant traditions, students can explore the reasons for major periods of immigration to the United States and describe how different segments of U.S. society reacted and changed (H 3.1); describe the economic reasons why people move to or from a location (HS 4.2); analyze the ways places and regions reflect cultural change (G 2.3); identify the factors that influence the location and distribution of economic activities (GS 4.3); describe how places and environments have influenced events and conditions in the past (GS 6.1); and analyze the fundamental role that places and environments have played in history (GS 6.1).

Foodways

Foodways are an important key to understanding the cultural elements of a region. In the Aguilar area of southern Colorado, for example, Italian-Americans readily reminisce about the days when the rule was "a sausage-maker in every home," and the memory of homemade pepperoni permeates the conversation. Wine-making also was practiced by many local families and that knowledge, though perhaps not the active practice, is still part of the cultural identify of the Italians who are descendants of earlier settlers. Trinidad grocer Leo Bonfadini, whose family-owned market has been in business for over half a century, still provides his customers with homemade Italian sausage, maintaining a link with his ethnic heritage. Festooned with photos of the Bonfadini family, the store has an old-world charm that preserves a piece of the past on the edge of a town that once welcomed presidents.

The study of foodways leads students to give examples of forms of expression that depict the history, daily life, and beliefs of various peoples (H 6.3) and describe important components of the cultural heritage of the United States (HS 3.2).

Colcha Embroidery

The colcha embroidery of Josephine Lobato embodies many of the physical, historical, and cultural characteristics of her native San Luis Valley. Colcha, both a stitch as well as a style, came to southern Colorado from its roots in northern New Mexico. (See Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990 pp. 21, 26-31.) Literally translated as "coverlet," colcha embroidery came to mean the decorative elements, usually simple floral motifs, embroidered in yarn onto the coverlet. Over the years, however, colcha embroidery has become an avenue of expression for Hispanic women of the San Luis Valley, who literally stitch their stories onto muslin canvases, expressing family, culture, and history in yarn.

One of Josephine Lobato's colchas depicts "El Milagro de San Acacio" ("The Miracle of San Acacio"), a local legend that ties the tiny town of San Acacio to the greater story of southwestern conquest by the Spanish over the Native Americans. It also reflects the importance of the Catholic religion to the region's history, a history replete with multicultural encounters. In this one folk art example, history and geography come together, tied by tradition and culture.

Another of Josephine Lobato's colchas, "Mis Christmas" ("My Christmas") inscribes cloth with cultural memories of traditions past, those that "used to be celebrated," but now remain only in the collective memory of the participants. Similarly, her colcha of "Los Penitentes" ("The Penitents") presents past traditions that are inseparable from the cultural identity of a region that stretches far beyond the confines of Costilla County.

Through the folk art of colcha embroidery, students can explain how forces of tradition have acted to maintain elements of social organization throughout history (H 3.2); describe significant events and people which form the foundation of United States history in the chronological context of the history of the Americas and the world (HS 1.1); give examples of the unique art forms that characterize the various ethnic groups in the United States and the religious or philosophical ideas they express (HS 6.3); and interpret oral traditions and legends as histories (HS 2.2). See Colcha Embroidery **Lesson Plan**

Santero Carving

The folk art of santero woodcarving, native to northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, offers many opportunities to explore issues related to religion, culture, history, and geography. Hispanic settlers of the Upper Rio Grande Valley were forced to produce virtually all of their material goods, as trade with the outside world was limited and precarious. Many simple wooden items were produced locally, including benches, tables, trunks and coffins, and woodworkers were important craftsmen in Hispanic pioneer life for both their religious items and furniture. Visual representation of holy figures was and is central to Spanish Catholicism, and again, the settlers had to rely on their own talents to produce these icons. Santeros, or saint makers, carved bultos, or three dimensional figures, and painted retablos, paintings on wood.

Rubel Jaramillo of Mogote, Colorado, began carving wood at a young age, under the influence of his grandfather, a cabinetmaker and santero (see Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990 pp. 32-35). Rubel carves images that he feels reflect both his Hispanic and Apache heritages. Born and raised in the San Luis Valley, Rubel is responsible for much of the resurgence in santero woodcarving that has taken place here in the last ten years. Through Rubel, both the history of an important folk art form and a religious tradition can be learned. He incorporates into his work the natural elements of the local environment, searching for the "right" wood in the river bottoms and mountains of the area. His knowledge of indigenous plant life, for use in the treatment and coloration of the wood, reflects his closeness to nature. Rubel's art literally lives within and around him, as everything in his home that could be carved is carved, including the kitchen sink! Rubel's knowledge of the geography of place, both physical and cultural, make him a unique

repository of what it means to be a traditional Hispanic folk artist with connections in the past and links to the future. Rubel's influence on the santero woodcarving tradition of the San Luis Valley has revitalized an art form that was in danger of being lost—his generosity in passing on all that he knows about this tradition is testament to the importance that one folk artist can have in a community.

Through the tradition of santero woodcarving, students can explain how the characteristics of different physical environments provide opportunities for or place constraints on human activities (G 5.2); recognize that people develop traditions that transmit their beliefs and ideas (H 6.1); use both chronological order and the duration of events to detect and analyze patterns of historical continuity and change (HS 1.3); and describe the ways that humans depend upon, adapt to, and affect the physical environment (GS 5). See Latino Cultures **Lesson Plan**

Weaving

Traditional Rio Grande style weaver Epiphania Archuleta, better known as "Eppie," is another member of the southern Colorado folk art community whose influence goes far beyond the confines of Capulin, an Hispanic hamlet in the southwestern corner of Conejos County, Colorado. Born in 1922 in Santa Cruz, New Mexico, Eppie was destined to become a weaver. As soon as she was old enough to reach the loom, her mother, Agueda Martinez of Medanales, New Mexico, taught Eppie to weave on a treadle loom that had belonged to her grandfather. Agueda's Navajo grandparents both wove, and Eppie's father, Elsedio Martinez, was a professional weaver from Chimayo as well as a schoolteacher and postmaster.

Weaving students in the San Luis Valley hold up the results of their study with Eppie Archuletta, master weaver in the Rio Grande style. Photo by Kathryn Neale.

One of ten children, Eppie began weaving around the age of six. Says Eppie, "We made our living weaving, so we all had to do it. When we were small we would get the wool ready for the bigger ones, but as soon as we could reach the loom we learned to weave. We learned the Indian designs and the Spanish designs. At first they made me do it, but now I just love to weave." In the 1940s, Eppie and her husband Frank moved to the San Luis Valley in Colorado. Together they worked in the potato and lettuce fields to support their growing family, and after the housekeeping chores were done and the eight children in bed, Eppie would weave.

Eppie Archuletta, master weaver in the Rio Grande style, demonstrates weaving at the 2005 Chile Harvest Festival in Denver. She works surrounded by her hand woven creations. Photo by Georgia Wier

"Weaving is part of my soul," she says. "When my boys were in Vietnam, I would pray and pray, but when I was all prayed out, I would go to my loom and weave." In those days the weaving didn't bring in much income, but she enjoyed the challenge of improving her work and developing new creative designs, including tapestries and pictorials.

Today, Eppie is recognized nationwide as a "superlative craftsperson" and teacher. Many San Luis Valley weavers are her former students. Her daughters learned to weave and several grandchildren are now weavers, so the weaving tradition in the Archuleta family spans seven generations (see Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990 pp. 22-23). In 1985, Eppie received a National Heritage Fellowship Award, the highest honor in the folk arts.

The folk art of Rio Grande style weaving, named for the region associated with its origin, is also called Spanish Colonial weaving, the two names linking both the geography and history of a region and population (see Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990 pp. 20, 25). An examination of this folk art form describes the important components of the cultural heritage of the United States (H 3.2) and describes the processes of cultural diffusion (G 4.2). Resource: The Museum of Spanish Colonial Art—Textiles http://www.spanishcolonial.org/textiles.shtml

Japanese Culture

The presence of a Japanese population in the San Luis Valley offers an opportunity to learn about the link between landscape and culture. Coming to America for economic opportunity, and settling in the Blanca and Fort Garland areas to raise vegetables, the Japanese brought with them their culture and traditions. One folk art form, origami, a traditional Japanese art of folding paper to form figures such as flowers and birds, was brought by Mrs. Hisayo Kawanabe from Japan to her home in Alamosa, Colorado. Mrs. Kawanabe, also an accomplished practitioner in the traditional Japanese folk art of Bunka embroidery, knows how to make origami lotus flowers, boats, and hats, as well as the traditional Japanese symbol of hope, happiness and long life, the crane. During her husband's prolonged bout with cancer, Mrs. Kawanabe began making a hanging of 1,000 cranes. Sadly, he did not live, though 1,000 cranes still hang over his vacant chair, consistent with the Buddhist belief that 1,000 origami cranes can even symbolize hope after a person has died, the hope that the deceased has found the "pure land" of happiness and is not wandering aimlessly as a ghost.

The Buddhist religion, traditional dance forms, and a variety of food traditions (including foodways such as tea ceremonies, food pickling, and sushi-making) are elements of Japanese and Japanese-American ethnic culture that can be studied through local folklore. Agricultural practices, including the types of crops grown by the vegetable-farming Japanese who settled in the San Luis Valley, were influenced by both the old and new countries, both by cultural practices and the geographical realities of living in an area with bitterly cold winters and a short growing season. How the Japanese pioneers adapted to this zone, and flourished during a period of intense anti-Japanese sentiment in other areas of the United States, illuminates the historical place and cultural solidarity of an important southern Colorado immigrant group.

Studying the folklore of Japanese-Americans in the San Luis Valley will help students to describe the interactions and contributions of the various peoples and cultures that have lived in or migrated, immigrated, or were brought to the area that is now the United States, including African, Asian, European, Latino and Native American, (H 3.1); describe religious traditions of various ethnic groups in the United States (H 6.1); and identify the factors that affect where people settle (G 4.4).

Summary

Cultural performances, "where the values, beliefs and identities of a people are put on display for themselves and others in some sort of bounded frame," take place throughout the summer in southern Colorado in the form of community celebrations. Whether commemorating important religious figures ("La Fiesta de Santa Ana y Santiago") in San Luis, the "oldest town in Colorado," or honoring the historic entrance of the Mormons into the Salt Lake City basin ("Manassa Pioneer Days"), local festivals display a community's sense of self to itself and to "outsiders." Monte Vista, Colorado, celebrates Colorado's oldest rodeo; the Fourth of July celebration in Crestone has a "new age" element missing in other San Luis Valley towns; the Sand Hill Crane Festival of Monte Vista welcomes both birds and bird-watchers; and the annual Labor Day Parade in Trinidad includes representatives of the United Mine Workers Union.

The study of the traditions displayed at community festivals give students an opportunity to describe the relationships and interactions among regions (G 2.2); analyze why places and regions are important to human identity (GS 2.3); give examples of how the beliefs of people are reflected in the celebrations and practices of their community (H6.2); and explain the importance of national celebrations, symbols, and ideas in their historical context (HS 5.1).

Classroom Activities

Colorado "Fourteeners"

Identify Colorado's "Fourteeners" on a map. How do the names of the mountains relate to the history and geography of an area? Have students construct a clay model of the main geographic features of Colorado mountain regions. Create paintings, drawing, poems, and stories about the 14ers. Research the first individuals to reach the summits of our tallest peaks. Research folklore and stories about the 14ers.

Adobe Brick Making

Have students research and construct adobe bricks. Have a school-wide adobe-making project. Assemble the bricks into an horno that can be constructed on school grounds and used for school and community events.

Origami

Explore the folk art of origami. Contact local groups about Japan or Asia for paper-folding artists. Choose simple origami animals to complete in class.

Nature's Art

Ask students to bring to class something from nature that expresses an artistic form, i.e., rocks in the shape of a potato, wood in the shape of a bird, whatever excites the imagination! Use this activity to talk about the artistic elements in daily life.

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