

Canadian Studies Project 2

Focus on Citizenship,
Multiculturalism, Aboriginal Peoples and Diversity.

Sept. / Oct. 2007



Curricula

REPRODUCIBLE INSERT

THE HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION Gross Île: Legacy of Pain

Introduction

Canada, even before it was a country officially, experienced successive waves of immigration. Gross Île is an island in the St. Lawrence river roughly 46 kilometres downstream from Quebec city. Today, Gross Île stands as a monument to suffering and sacrifice, as well as a system that was ill-equipped to deal with the level of immigration it experienced and the difficulties rendered.

Before the advent of commercial flight, would-be immigrants boarded ships and sailed to their new destinations. With the collapse of the slave trade to North America, unscrupulous ship owners found a lucrative alternative in providing commercial passage to those leaving their homelands. The more passengers they could pack in, the more money the ship owners made. The cramped, unsanitary and airless conditions on board the ships provided the perfect breeding ground for disease precipitating a series of epidemics, among the first brought to the shores of North America. Passengers were forced to endure up to 10 weeks of hellish conditions before reaching port.

Given the rising incidence of disease found among passengers traveling on these vessels, Gross Île became a stopgap, a way station before any ships were allowed to sail closer to civilization and any passengers were allowed to disembark.

The event that triggered Gross Île's transformation into a quarantine station was a major cholera epidemic that broke out in 1832 where 51,746 Irish and English immigrants were examined. The disease had spread from Asia by passengers traveling west. Despite the quarantine, the disease managed to spread to Quebec City where 3800 perished and Montreal where 1900 died in the following year. Not much was known about the disease then or how to effectively contain it.

Subjects

Cross-Curricular Subjects
History, Geography, Civics,
English, Language Arts, Visual
Arts, Health and Well-Being

Grade Levels

Grades 10-12

Duration

Four to six classroom periods

Key Issues and Concepts:

Students will uncover the path that many immigrants took to emigrate to Canada by discovering the sacrifices they were willing to make for a better life.

This project has been supported in part by the Canadian Studies Program, Department of Canadian Heritage; the opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of Canada.

www.teachmag.com/canadian_studies_2/index.html



But that was not to be the worst of it. The year 1847 announced the Irish potato famine and droves of Irish immigrants fled starvation, all of which took place during a major typhoid fever epidemic. Ship after ship navigated the waters of the St. Lawrence only to be held back at Gross Île. The medical authorities in charge of the quarantine station had no idea what was sailing their way. After a number of years of relative calm after the cholera crisis had ended in the 1830s, conditions had stabilized and the medical staff and volunteers were well enough equipped to deal with most situations at the time.

As successive ships arrived in the St. Lawrence, none were permitted to go through until they were declared disease-free. Ships with fever cases were required to fly a blue flag. Gross Île soon found itself ill-equipped to deal with the sheer number of cases. Of the affected ships, passengers were required to stay on board for an undisclosed number of days. In some cases, doctors gave perfunctory examinations and allowed infected passengers to leave their vessels to spread the contagion elsewhere.

In relatively normal conditions, healthy passengers would have been kept in quarantine huts on the island while the sick were cared for in hospital. Because of the sheer numbers, this became impossible. Tents were set up as quickly as it was feasible, but many of the sick were left out in the open or stacked on wooden bunks. There was also a water shortage where the risk of dehydration led to a painful death.

In addition to other shortages, the numbers of qualified medical personnel were insufficient. And often, nurses, doctors, volunteers, even priests and clergymen succumbed to the spread of the disease. Most if not all of the afflicted came from the British Isles whereas other emigrants, such as the Germans, arrived healthy and disease-free. Even the so-called healthy passengers suffered from the privation inflicted on them due to the epidemic.

It is difficult to know how many actually perished in the epidemic as some bodies were buried at sea on the voyage over before reaching the St. Lawrence. Of all, Irish immigrants suffered the highest number of casualties. A monument to the Irish dead stands on Gross Île as does a cemetery where some 6,000 Irish men, women and children are buried. The remnants of the quarantine station on the island remain today as evidence of its tragic history. Gross Île is now a national historic site and national park. It is hard to imagine that almost 450 ships carried Irish immigrants to these shores and that medical personnel examined just over 90,000 passengers. At times, there were so many ships waiting to be cleared by authorities, that the line stretched over two kilometers. Some 25,000 immigrants were held on the island at one time while the crisis unfolded.

The quarantine station on Gross Île finally closed in 1937. During the Second World War, secret bacterial research was conducted there and public access was closed off. The island then reverted to a quarantine site but for animals.



In 1983, the Canadian government declared Gross Île a national historic site and it became a national historic park ten years later and operates under the authority of Parks Canada. In 1997, a memorial was erected dedicated to those who died on the island. The largest monument on the island is the Celtic Cross which stands some 15 meters or more in height and is dedicated to the Irish who perished there.

Objectives/Outcomes

Students will:

- Gain insight into the history of immigration in Canada;
- Work with primary source digital documents, archives and objects;
- Understand the sacrifices immigrants make when they leave their homelands to come to another country;
- Explore the history of Gross Île and compare the immigrant experiences of other groups that came to Canada;
- Understand the reasons people seek to emigrate;
- Appreciate the conditions and hardships immigrants faced;
- Work cooperatively in teams;
- Apply critical thinking techniques and processes; and
- Put themselves in the shoes of new immigrants.

Step One—Teacher-led Discussion

Teachers will lead a general discussion about immigration and immigration issues. If there are those in the class who have family stories or have recently emigrated, then these histories should be shared with the class. Make a list of reasons as to why people leave their land of origin and move to a new place. List these reasons on the board.

Step Two—Research

Students will be divided into teams of three or four. Each team will select a communicable disease that has had serious implications for immigration and immigrants as well as general populations. The teams will research the chosen disease and write a brief report. Choices of diseases include:



- Cholera
- Tuberculosis
- Diphtheria
- Influenza
- Tetanus
- Typhoid Fever
- Chickenpox
- Rubella (German Measles)
- Plague

The report will consist of a history of the disease, impact on the population, effects of the disease, whether it is treatable, how to prevent or avoid infection, and the consequences of not being treated. The report will be handed in to the teacher for evaluation.

Maximum length: two pages.

Step Three—Connecting to History

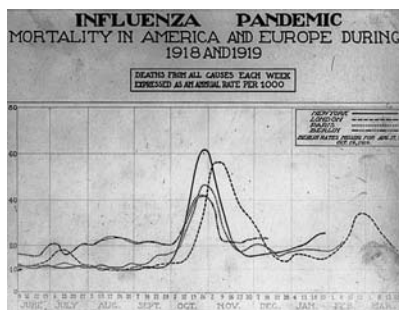
The devastating effects of cholera and typhoid fever were experienced on Gross Île roughly 150 years ago. This was not the worst epidemic in recorded history, however. There are historical reports of the Black Plague or Black Death that swept through Europe and the British Isles



and outbreaks of Bubonic Plague that were devastating. But none of these were the worst. That title belongs to the 1918 Influenza Pandemic known as the Spanish Flu outbreak at the tail end of the First World War. During the War, soldiers and civilians in conflict areas lived through horrific physical conditions but this was not the cause of the pandemic. The massive mobilization of armies and people displaced, however, increased the rate of infection. The Influenza Epidemic is estimated to have affected roughly five percent of the world's population and although no accurate numbers pertaining to the death toll have been recorded, it is thought that up to 100 million people died. There were many anomalies connected to this pandemic. In particular, it severely affected those in age from 20-40, just the opposite of common flu outbreaks that normally target the very

and isolation strategies were ineffective due to the mass numbers infected which included medical personnel and volunteers. The only remedy which appeared to have some positive impact was blood transfusions from recovered flu victims. But this was discovered late in the game and too late to help most who were stricken.

Contemplating such a scene today seems like a science fiction scenario and fodder for alarmists. Yet there have been serious warnings and significant media coverage on recent bird flu outbreaks, most of which appear to have originated in China but have spread to other countries and as far afield as the shores of the UK. Like the SARS crisis of several years ago, the spread of infectious disease can be rapid as we live in a mobile society where the globe can be traversed in less than a day and



young or the elderly whose immune systems are not as resistant to any given flu strain. It has been dubbed the Spanish Flu as it was thought the epidemic originated in Spain, or at least, it was the first area recognized to have been stricken. Since then, however, it is thought that the flu pandemic actually originated on a military base in Kansas where chickens were raised. Just recently, it has been determined by forensic scientists that the flu pandemic has been identified as a type of avian flu that may have jumped from poultry to humans and was spread through direct contact. Given the massive disruption and mobilization of people at the end of the Great War, the disease spread rapidly across Europe, Asia and North America. The impact of the H5N1 avian strain of virus was horrendous and some communities were almost entirely wiped out. Many of those stricken died within hours of exhibiting symptoms. Medical research was in its infancy in those days and not much was known about the disease, how to prevent it or how to treat it. Conventional quarantine

the enclosed ventilation systems of airplanes make for opportune conditions for disease transmission. There was a recent case where an individual with a highly infectious and drug-resistant strain of tuberculosis took several flights between North America and Europe. Hundreds of passengers may have been directly affected through exposure to the disease. The incident raised a media firestorm.

Keeping the same teams, students will research and write a news broadcast where the situation involves the outbreak of a new pandemic. The team needs to convey clear information to their audience detailing what the disease is, its origins, how it can be contained, treated and/or cured while documenting the immediate impact with specific stories or case histories of those affected. The stories should focus on those traveling or emigrating from one country to another as the primary source of transmission and spread of this new pandemic. The news broadcast may be presented live, video or audio taped

and/or storyboarded. The class and the teacher will evaluate the effectiveness of the news broadcasts.

Step Four—Trace the Steps

Like Ellis Island in the United States and later on, Pier 21 in Canada, Gross Île was meant to be a way station or clearinghouse for those wishing to settle in this country. Working in teams or individually, students will research the immigration history of a particular nationality, such as Italians or the Vietnamese. Where possible, bring individual stories to light to make the journey taken more personal. Look for archival materials that document direct experiences (check the Canadian Museum of Civilization Web site: www.civilization.ca). Once the research has been completed, write up a brief report of the findings. Submit the report to the teacher. Maximum length: Two pages.

Step Five—Walk in the Shoes

Drawing on the research that was conducted for Step Four, students, working individually or in teams will create a diary or a journal documenting the journey of an immigrant. The journal can be based on a real person discovered in the course of the research or a fictionalized character created for this activity. The idea is to bring to life the thoughts, perceptions, feelings and observations of an individual going through the life changing event of leaving a homeland and settling in a new country. If desired, the journal can be augmented with sketches, illustrations, even objects or mementos to bring the journal to life. The journal entries do not have to be enormously detailed but should cover a minimum two-week period in the character's life. The journal should also include a biography of the character that details relevant background information (age, gender, education etc).

Step Six—I, the Minister

It is the year 1920. The First World War has recently ended and the devastating flu pandemic has been brought under control. Student teams will take on the role of the Minister of Immigration and the Immigration department. That is, what will the immigration policy for the new, emerging Canada be? Will the country welcome new immigrants or close its doors? Part of the



policy document to be created will set out conditions for qualifying to emigrate to Canada and what sort of future citizens the country requires. For example, will there be an emphasis on farmers or factory workers, does the government want families or single men with a trade? What health screening will be required? Will any government services be provided to new immigrants and if so, what will they be? Once the policy is drafted up, each team will present their document in "Parliament" to the members of the government and the opposition. The government policy must be publicly released to members of the government and the public.

Once the document has been circulated and presented, members of the House of Commons (classmates) will have the opportunity to question aspects of the policy that is being tabled. Typically, new policies are sent off to various committees for discussion and study before



making it through the process that is required to pass a proposed bill into law. The policy needs to be carefully thought out by each team and research completed so answers to questions may be provided. At the end of the discussion, the “parliament” can vote on the policy to determine whether the proposed policy has a chance of making it into law. And the vote will determine how successful the team has been in promoting their immigration policy.

<http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/library/PRBpubs/bp437-e.htm>
<http://www.canadiana.org/eco.php?doc=projgovdocs>
http://www2.parl.gc.ca/Parlinfo/compilations/OfficersAndOfficials/ProceduralOfficersAndSeniorOfficials_Library.aspx?Language=E

Optional Extension Activities

- Write and produce a storybook for younger children that tells the story of a young person’s journey from their homeland to Canada;
- Create an immigration symposium in the school to address specific issues around concerns immigrants have and invite guest speakers from the community;
- Put on a heritage fair in the school or community that focuses on immigrant stories and history;
- Build a public awareness campaign around specific issues of concern to new immigrants and invite the local media;
- Examine current immigration policy and have a debate as to whether this policy serves the needs of the community or not; and
- Invite recent immigrants to the class and have them tell their stories.

Resources

[En.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_flu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_flu)
Virus.stanford.edu/uda (Google search influenza pandemic of 1918)
[En.wikipedia.org/wiki/cholera](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/cholera)
[En.wikipedia.org/wiki/typhoid](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/typhoid)
www.canadianencyclopedia.ca/ (search Grosse Île)
www.moytura.com/grosse-ile.htm
en.wikipedia.org/uk/wiki/Grosse_isle_Quebec
ist.uwaterloo.ca/~marj/genealogy/papers/children1847.html
Island of Hope and Sorrow, The Story of Grosse Île, Anne Renaud, Lobster Press, 2007.

Assessment and Evaluation

- Completed Manifesto using writing guides from 6+1 Traits of Effective Writing. Web link: <http://www.writingfix.com/Traits.htm>

Evaluate the class teams on their oral reports:

Content: was the content/strategy clearly articulated and well thought out? Were the points the team made persuasive?

Presentation: was the presentation well-delivered, easy-to-hear and understand with good vocal quality, gestures, posture etc?

Effectiveness: were the points presented effective? How practical were the suggestions?

Teamwork: did the group work well and effectively together?

Assess students on their written work:

Grammatically correct with sentences properly structured, i.e., use of complex sentence structure and correct verb tenses, spelling and punctuation

Comprehension of the word/phrases—sentences clearly reveal the meaning

Ideas are expressed clearly

Information is well-organized

Evaluate the groups on their presentation work:

Is the information presented clearly?

What have they done to enhance the presentation?

Is the use of oral and visual communication effective?

Evaluate students on their presentation work:

Their contribution to group knowledge

The preparation undertaken for research and investigation

Articulation of goals, devising alternate solutions, selecting best alternatives

- Presentation Rubric: <http://www.ncsu.edu/midlink/rub.pres.html>